Metaphor and Imaginative Meaning

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Abstract

To cope with the diverse challenges for a linguistic analysis of metapher it is crucial to distinguish between the metaphorical reading, on the one hand, and the metaphorical interpretation, on the other. An account of metaphor is presented which meets this challenge with an interplay of compositional semantics and pragmatic inferences, and which takes metaphor to be a locution of analogy-based imagination. Key elements are an operator (which employs the metaphorically used expression as argument), the meaning, and the satisfaction condition of the predicate consisting of the operator and its argument.

1 Introduction

The decisive challenge for a linguistic analysis of metaphor is twofold: First, it should specify the difference between the literal reading and the metaphorical reading of a metaphorical sentence in such a way that one can debate the truth of a metaphorical statement in cases where it is obvious that this statement has a truth value by virtue of its metaphorical reading. Second, it should make a clear distinction between the metaphorical reading, on the one hand, and the interpretation of the metaphor, on the other, in such a way that the interpretation can be constructed on the basis of the reading. I will present an analysis of metaphor which meets this challenge with an interplay of compositional semantics and pragmatic inferences, and which takes metaphor to be a locution of analogy-based imagination.

This inquiry focuses on 'living' metaphors, for which there is a clear feeling for the contrast between the primary, literal use of an expression, on the one hand, and its metaphorical use, on the other, as with: *No man is an island* (Donne), *Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines* (Shakespeare, Sonnet 18), *Between my finger and my thumb*/*the squat pen rests.*/*I'll dig with it* (Heaney), *Asia's once-booming tigers have their tail between their legs* ('The Economist'). I am not concerned with so-called dead or literal metaphors like *mouth of a river*, *high quality*, *falling in love*, or *running out of time*.

2 Adequacy conditions

From the rich research on living metaphors, one can extract adequacy conditions for any theory of metaphor. Any analysis of metaphor must deal with the properties of metaphors, in particular, the seven referred to as follows: metaphors are context-dependent, open-ended and indeterminate, propositional, incomplete, literally based, typically analogy-based, and imaginative.

Context-dependency

Metaphors are context-dependent, since the context determines whether an expression is a metaphor or not. This is trivial in cases such as the word *island*, which is used as a metaphor in *No man is an island*, but not in *Sicily is an island*. But whether *sleep* in *Death is sleep* is taken to be literal or metaphorical depends on underlying cultural assumptions – whether or not death is literally considered to be a form of sleep (see Jackendoff and Aaron 1991: 327f.). There is a second sense in which metaphors are context-dependent: One and the same expression can have different metaphorical interpretations depending on the context. *John's a machine*, for example, can mean different things: It can mean 'that John is cold, or efficient, or never stops working, or puffs and blows, or has little in the way of grey matter, or indeed any and all of these' (Levinson 1983: 118).

Open-endedness and indeterminacy

Metaphors evoke an indistinct web of associations, they are open to new interpretations, they are often impossible to paraphrase, and there is no manual for determining the meaning of a metaphor. This has often been remarked upon, but it should be noted that metaphors can be more or less indeterminate. For instance, *the eye of heaven* and *Asia's once-booming tigers* are metaphors with a quite determinate interpretation. Creative poetic metaphors, on the other hand, are often indeterminate to a very high degree.

Propositionality

In many cases it seems possible to assign to a sentence with a metaphorical reading a propositional content differing from the propositional content of the sentence's literal reading. By virtue of this specific content, metaphorical assertions can be judged more or less clearly as true or false. Take the following weather forecast:

> *During the course of the day, the fine weather in Scotland will amble southwards into the North of England.*

'[W]e have no difficulty in determining the conditions under which what the forecaster said would prove true or false' (White 1996: 198).

Metaphorical commands can convey a specific message differing from the propositional content of the sentence's literal reading. When, in *King Lear*, the Earl of Kent tries to defend Cordelia, who has aroused the wrath of her father, King Lear issues this terse warning:

> *Come not between the dragon and his wrath.* (I:1:123)

'On any understanding, Lear is here surely ordering Kent not to interfere in his quarrel with Cordelia. [...] [A]ny account of metaphor which has the consequence that Kent has not been

told any such thing must have gone wrong somewhere' (White 1996: 199).

While many students of metaphor share this view, Donald Davidson in particular strongly opposes the 'cognitivist' view that metaphors have a propositional content differing from their literal reading; he states: '[M]etaphors mean what the words, in their most literal interpretation, mean, and nothing more', Davidson (1978: 32).[1] According to him, open-endedness and indeterminacy preclude the assignment of a specific propositional content to metaphor: '[T]here is no limit to what a metaphor calls to our attention, and much of what we are caused to notice is not propositional in character. When we try to say what a metaphor "means", we soon realize there is no end to what we want to mention' (Davidson 1978: 46).

Proponents of a specific propositional content, thus, have to deal with the tension between the propositional nature of metaphor, on the one hand, and its open-endedness and indeterminacy, on the other.

There is further evidence for a specific propositional content of metaphors: Conditionals with a metaphorical antecedent (and/or consequent) can make sense, which would not be the case if the antecedent (and/or consequent) had no other than the literal reading. Take the following meta-metaphorical conditional as example: *If Achilles was a lion, Ulysses was a fox.*

Incompleteness

Metaphors are incomplete in the sense that a metaphorical sentence' propositional content does not contain the metaphors' interpretation.[2] This property of metaphors can be observed best in so-called closed metaphors. Prime examples are sequences of sentences combined by a particle like the German *denn* or English *as*, for instance: *Achilles war ein Löwe, denn sein Mut war außerordentlich* ('Achilles was a lion, as he was extraordinarily courageous'). The *as*-clause explicates the metaphor contained in the first sentence. The explication indeed makes sense and can be illuminating. However, this would not be the case if we took the literal reading of *Achilles was a lion*. We must assume a metaphorical reading – whatever its nature might be. Closed metaphors not only indicate incompleteness, but propositionality as well.

But what might be the nature of the metaphorical reading, which imparts to a closed metaphor sense and makes it illuminating? Take a variant of the comparison view on metaphor, which claims that the propositional content of the metaphorical reading of *Achilles*

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1 Davidson has softened his verdict since: 'In my essay *What Metaphors Mean* [...] I was foolishly stubborn about the word "meaning" when all I cared about was the primacy of "first meaning"' (1993: 307n4).

2 Cf. Lepore and Stone (2010: 173): '[T]he point a metaphorist uses a metaphor to make is not a property of the metaphor itself.'

was a lion is equivalent to ›Achilles was similar to a lion with respect to his extraordinary courage‹. If this analysis were correct, the closed metaphor *Achilles was a lion, as he was extraordinarily courageous* would have to have the same meaning as *Achilles was similar to a lion with respect to his extraordinary courage, as he was extraordinarily courageous*. But, whereas the closed metaphor we started with provides an explication that makes sense, the last sentence does not – it provides a pseudo-explication. Or take the substitution view on metaphor, which claims that *a lion* in *Achilles was a lion* has the same meaning as *extraordinarily courageous* (or: *an extraordinarily courageous creature*). Once more, with regard to the closed metaphor, a pseudo-explication is the result, namely *Achilles was extraordinarily courageous, as he was extraordinarily courageous*. In both cases, the reason is the same: even a conventional metaphor such as *Achilles was a lion* (or *Ulysses was a fox*) is incomplete, as the conventional interpretation that Achilles was extraordinarily courageous – that is, the state of affairs this metaphor is obviously aiming at – is not identical to the propositional content of the metaphorical sentence. This is incompletness, which is to be distinguished from open-endedness and indefiniteness.

From this perspective, Davidson's critique of cognitivist accounts of metaphor appears to be justified. The theories which assume that a metaphor denotes a category which is different from the category which it literally denotes (for instance the categorizing account of Glucksberg 2001, 2008, or the *ad-hoc* category account of Sperber and Wilson 2008) are all unable to deal with incompleteness. This is also true of Searle's (1979) theory of metaphor, which distinguishes between what the speaker 'says' (often something absurd, obviously false, or patently trivial) and what the speaker 'means'; this theory predicts pseudo-explications in the case of closed metaphors. As the sentence *Sally is a block of ice, as she is an extremely unemotional und unresponsive person* makes sense, *Sally is a block of ice* cannot have its literal meaning. That is, it must mean what the speaker means. Pseudo-explication is the consequence. However, the classic comparison account – in which *like* is being omitted – is compatible with incompleteness (*Sally is (like) a block of ice, as she is an extremely unemotional und unresponsive person*).

Poems are incomplete in the same sense as metaphors are. Of course, they do not contain their interpretation. This is a trivial truth. Even if a poem should self-reflexively contain an interpretation of itself, we must distinguish the interpretation of this poem (as a poem which contains an interpretation of itself) from the interpretation it contains. Not containing the interpretation does not prevent a poem from having propositional content. This content is part of what forms the basis for the interpretation. The situation with metaphors is quite similar.

The three conditions indeterminacy, propositionality, and incompleteness seem to form the borders of a fearsome Bermuda Triangle. One possible way out is to make a distinction between the metaphorical reading, on the one hand, and the metaphor's interpretation, on the

other. The metaphorical reading is propositional in nature and compatible with incompleteness, while the metaphor's interpretation can be more or less indeterminate and open-ended. But before trying out this approach, we must consider three further adequacy conditions.

Literal base

Metaphors are literally based. For one thing, this means that the metaphorical reading is based on the literal or primary meaning of the metaphorically used words. This is uncontroversial. However, that metaphors are literally based also means that the metaphorically used words have no meaning other than their literal meaning. In the discussion above on substitution theory and closed metaphors, we have seen that the metaphorically used words don't have a metaphorical meaning. In addition, meta-metaphorical conditionals show that the literal meaning of a metaphorically used word is an active part of the metaphorical reading. The conditional *If Achilles was a lion, Ulysses was a fox* makes sense only because *lion* has its literal meaning – by comparison, *If Achilles was extraordinarily courageous, Ulysses was a fox* sounds strange. Being literally based means that 'an adequate account of metaphor must allow that the primary or original meaning of words remain active in their metaphorical setting' (Davidson 1978: 34).

Analogy

From Aristotle onwards, it has been observed time and again that metaphors are typically based on analogy (see, among many others, Black 1977 and Bowdle and Gentner 2005).

Imagination

Metaphors have an imaginative aspect. This aspect has been described in various way, as in the following examples: 'Metaphors makes us see one thing as another' (Davidson 1978: 47); '[I]n a metaphor one thing is thought of (or viewed) *as* another thing' (Black 1979: 192); 'The metaphorical statement (in its context) implies or suggests or introduces or calls to mind a (possible) game of make-believe' (Walton 1993: 46); „Suppose I employ a simile to express my belief: I say that the sky is like the ocean. What I have done is imagine the sky *as* the ocean [...]. I think of the sky under an imaginative aspect – rather as I can see an object under an imaginative aspect" (McGinn 2004: 134). It is an open question, however, as to how this imaginative aspect is best dealt with.

I want to add a more technical point. As Danto (1981, 1993) and Stern (1985) remark, metaphors exhibit non-extensionality, i.e., they defy substitution *salva veritate* of coextensive expressions: *Julia is the morning star* is not necessarily the same metaphorical statement as

Julia is the evening star. Even more, metaphors exhibit hyperintensionality, i.e., they defy substitution *salva veritate* of necessary equivalent expressions: *Julia is a perpetuum mobile* is not necessarily the same metaphorical statement as *Julia is a round square* (the predicates *perpetuum mobile* and *round square* necessarily have the same extension in all possible worlds, namely, the null set).

3 The proposal

Before providing an outline of my account, I want to define two terms: *Focus of metaphor* (denoted by the short form: *m-focus*) will be the label for the expression used metaphorically in a sentence (cf. Black 1954/55; 1977). *Topic of metaphor* (denoted by the short form: *m-topic*) will be the label for the expression specifying the objects which the metaphor characterizes (cf. Ortony et al. 1978). Take *Socrates was a midwife* as a simple example. *Socrates* is the topic of the metaphor and *midwife* is the focus of the metaphor. In *Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines* the noun phrase *the eye of heaven* is the m-topic (denoting the sun) and *eye* the m-focus (thus, the m-focus can be part of the m-topic). These applications of the labels must eventually be justified by a suitable theory.

The account I propose can be summarized as follows:

(1) i Focus of metaphor is a simple or complex predicate.

ii The metaphorical reading of a sentence is a function of the literal meaning of its constituents, including a specific additional constituent *X*.

iii *X* is an operator ('META') which (a) takes the m-focus as argument, creating a predicate, and (b) transports with it an open parameter (labelled *theme*).[3, 4]

$$\text{META}^{<theme>}(F)$$

iv The predicate created by the operator (i.e., the 'metaphor') has the meaning ›*x* can with respect to theme *T* be imaginatively conceived as satisfying the m-focus's reference.‹

v The metaphorical reading or what the metaphorical sentence 'says' is complete if the metaphor's theme is contextually inferred.

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[3] In the semantic literature on metaphor it is common to use operators to model the meaning of metaphors. The most prominent example is Stern's (1985; 2000) 'Mthat' Operator. 'Mthat' and 'META' are of quite different nature, however. Unlike 'Mthat', 'META' is an ordinary modifying operator (see Pafel 2024: III.2.4) and is not affected by the criticism raised by Bezuidenhout (2001), Camp (2005) and Wearing (2006) against Stern's approach.

[4] Theme corresponds to 'respect' in similarity statements: *With respect to its hardness, this bread is like concrete* (an example of Ortony's 1979: 5).

vi A metaphor with theme *T* is true of an object (= the referent of the m-topic) iff *T* is an aspect of the object and has a feature which is taken to be characteristic of an aspect *A* of the instances of the m-focus's reference – more generally, the feature of *T* and the characteristic feature of *A* contain the same relation. (We may call *A* the analogue of *T*.)[5]

vii The metaphor's interpretation has the status of inferences on the basis of the metaphorical reading and all sorts of (contextual) assumptions – with the inferences having at least in part the status of conversational implicatures.[6]

I will illustrate this account with the following example:

(2) *Robert is a snail when it comes to his working speed, but Mary a high-speed train.*

The m-focus is *snail* and *high-speed train*, respectively, and the m-topic is *Robert*, as well as *Mary*. The *when* clause delivers the theme. Introducing the operator META (cf. (1iii)), the semantic structure can be roughly sketched as follows:

(3) *Robert is a* META$^{<\text{working speed}>}$(*snail*), *Mary is a* META$^{<\text{working speed}>}$(*high-speed train*)

Interestingly, the theme of the second sentence in (2) has to be identical to the theme of the first sentence. The sentence's metaphorical reading according to (1iv) is:

(4) Robert can, with respect to his working speed, be imagined as a snail, and Mary, as a high-speed train.

The truth condition of (4) according to (1vi) is as follows:

(5) The working speed of Robert and Mary has a feature which is taken to be characteristic of an aspect of snails and of high-speed trains respectively.

On the base of (5) the following inferences suggest themselves:

(6) a. The analogue to Robert's working speed is a snail's prototypical speed of locomotion, and the analogue to Mary's working speed is a high-speed train's prototypical speed of locomotion. [Plausibility considerations]

b. A common feature of working speed and speed of locomotion is the speed level. [World knowledge]

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5 This corresponds to Hesse's (1963: 66) second kind of analogy, where an analogy may be said to exist between two objects whose properties are similar but not identical.

6 In the transformation of a living, active metaphor into a dead, inactive one, these inferences form the basis for the new metaphorical meaning that a word receives.

c. Snails move forward at a rather low speed level with respect to their size, while high-speed trains move forward at a high speed level, compared with other types of trains. [World knowledge]
d. The speed level of Robert's working speed is low, while Mary's one is high. [Inference from (a), (b), and (c)]
e. Robert works slowly, and Mary works fast. [Implicature; follows from (d)]

We might call (6e) the metaphors's 'interpretation', and consider it to be a conversational implicature of sentence (2).

The proposed account views metaphor as a quite normal, regular use of language, there is not deviation from or violation of ordinary usage. Let's assure ourselves that it satisfies the above-mentioned adequacy conditions. Context is decisive, for the recipient, for introducing the META operator, and selecting a theme. The choice of the theme, the analogue, and the characteristic feature is quite straighforward in our example (in particular, in view of the explicit verbalization of the theme), but for a great many metaphors, this is not the case, since the choice is context-bound and possibly quite indeterminate, which opens up several possibilities, and could result in the metaphor being open-ended. The metaphorical reading, according to the account I am proposing, has a propositional content differing from the literal reading's content, and it does not contain the metaphor's interpretation. Therefore, the metaphorical reading is incomplete in this respect, but, via the implicature, enables a debate on the truth of the metaphorical sentence. This approach is literally based, as the metaphorical reading is a function of the literal meaning of its constituents (*META*'s meaning being 'literal', too), and the m-focus has no meaning other than its literal meaning. The approach is analogy-based, as satisfying a metaphor (i.e., the predicate composed of *META* and the m-focus) means to have a feature which is characteristic of an analogue to the metaphor's theme (see (1vi)). Finally, the meaning of *META* introduces the imaginative component – for this reason, the title of this essay contains the initially obscure notion *imaginative meaning*. Including the intentional concept of imagination *META* creates a hyperintensional environment, which explains the hyperintensionality of metaphors.

A theory of metaphor which is based on analogy is *per se* a comparison account. Two 'things' (the referents of m-topic and m-focus) are compared. The account that I am proposing stipulates, as the classic comparison view does (metaphors are elliptical similarity statements in which *like* is being omitted), a silent element: the META operator. But, due to the operator's meaning, metaphors have a much more definite meaning compared with the classic view, and metaphorical statements of the form *A is B* are interpreted as ›A belongs to a certain category related to B‹, but not as a comparison statement. Only with the satisfaction condition for the metapher (1vi) does the comparison come into play.

4 Further applications

I will now review the analyses of various metaphors proposed in the literature, in order to demonstrate that my proposed account can deal with them. First let us consider Black's (1977: § 6) analysis of the statement *Marriage is a zero-sum game*. Black's interpretation of the metaphor is: 'A marriage is a sustained struggle [...] between two contestants [...] in which the rewards (power? money? satisfaction?) of one contestant are gained only at the other's expense' (Black 1977: 443). The theme of the metaphor seems to be the relations between the spouses. The analogue comprises the relations between contestants in a competing game. A characteristic feature of the relations between the contestants in such a game is that it is a kind of conflict between two parties in which an advantage gained by one party poses a disadvantage to the other party. The metaphor's interpretation is the result of applying this feature to marriage, that is, the m-topic's referent.

Socrates was a midwife is a prominent example analyzed by Kittay (1987: 278-287) and Bowdle and Gentner (2005: 196). According to Bowdle and Gentner, the interpretation is: 'Socrates did not simply teach his students new ideas but rather helped them realize ideas that had been developing within them all along.' The theme of the metaphor is Sokrates's specific way of teaching his students. The analogue is a midwife's activity in child birth. A characteristic feature of this activity is to help a mother to deliver a baby which has developed in her womb. We get the feature ›to help a person to produce something which had been developing in that person for some time‹ by generalising with respect to the nature of the participating entities in a midwife's activity.[7] We arrive at the metaphor's interpretation by reading *person* as *student* and *something* as *an idea*. Of course, a rich metaphor like this can highlight more than one characteristic feature, as Kittay makes clear.

Metaphors like *The atom is a solar system* and *The mind is a computer* have as their theme the structure of the atom and the operating mode of the mind, respectively; the characteristic feature is the structure of the solar system (satellites circulating around a central element) and the mode of functioning of a computer as a symbol-manipulating device, respectively.

Sally is a block of ice is interpreted by Searle (1979) as ›Sally is an extremely unemotional und unresponsive person.‹ The theme is something like Sally's emotional intelligence. The analogue is the temperature of a block of ice. The characteristic feature of its temperature is that it has a very low value on a suitable scale. To have a very low value on a scale of emotional intelligence is to be an extremely unemotional und unresponsive person.

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[7] This feature corresponds to the 'system of relations' in Bowdle and Gentner (2005: 196) and the 'common aligned relational structure' in Gentner and Bowdle (2008: 109).

This surgeon is a butcher is, according to Grady et al. (1999: 103), a statement having as 'a crucial element of [its] meaning: the surgeon is incompetent.' The theme is obviously the way the surgeon is treating his patients. The analogue is the way a butcher is treating animals: he kills them and severs their flesh from their bones. A characteristic feature of a butcher's procedure is that he does not act with the aim of keeping the animal alive. Thus we can get as the metaphor's interpretation: ›The surgeon's treatment of his patients does not conform with the aim of keeping them alive.‹ What Grady et al. call a 'crucial meaning element', that is, the fact that the surgeon is incompetent, is not identical to the metaphor's interpretation, but rather, is an inference on the basis of this interpretation; this contention is supported by the clear difference of acceptability of the following two sequences:

(7) a. *The surgeon is a butcher, as his treatment of his patients does not conform with the aim of keeping them alive.*

b. ??*The surgeon is a butcher, as he is incompetent.*

Up to now, we have looked only at metaphorical statements of the type ›subject - copula - predicative‹. It is high time to look at examples of a different type. The interpretation of *Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines* is obvious: ›Sometimes the sun is shining too hot.‹ The m-focus is *eye*, the m-topic the noun phrase *the eye of heaven*, which contains the m-focus and is intended to refer to the sun. In a narrow sense, the reference to the sun is the crucial metaphorical interpretation, which has to be explained. Of course, the 'frame' of the m-focus, that is, *Sometime too hot the __ of heaven shines*, suggests vividly that nothing else other than the sun can be the referent of the noun phrase. Nevertheless, we have to explain how the compositional structure of the noun phrase fits this outcome. Calling the sun the eye of heaven will probably be based on its (round) form and its salience. The meaning of the (m-topic) noun phrase can be given as follows:

(8) the *x* such that *x* is part of heaven & *x* can, with respect to *x*'s appearance, be imaginatively conceived of as an eye

The theme is ›*x*'s appearance‹, the analogue is an eye's appearance in the face, and the characteristic feature the relative size, the more or less round form and its salience. The sun is the most plausible candidate for a referent of the definite description in (8).

When, in *King Lear*, the Earl of Kent tries to defend Cordelia, who has aroused the wrath of her father, King Lear issues this terse admonition: 'Come not between the dragon and his wrath.' This warning is meant to prohibit a defense of Cordelia (see above). Here the m-focus seems to be the verbal phrase *come between the dragon and his wrath*, the m-topic is the silent second-person pronoun. (I interpret *his wrath* metonymically as ›the object his wrath is directed towards‹). The theme is Kent's behaviour in the quarrel between King Lear and Cordelia. What Kent should refrain from can imaginatively be conceived of as an intervention

between a dragon and his prey. The analogue is, therefore, the act of intervening between the dragon and his prey. The relevant feature seems to be the defending of a victim against the offender. Thus, we receive as the interpretation of the metaphorical command: ›Do not defend Cordelia against me.‹ The 'constituents' of the imaginative scene, which is fictive with respect to the fictional reality of the tragedy, have one-to-one correspondencies in the fictional reality: the dragon corresponds to the king, the prey to Cordelia, the act of intervening to the defense.

In Seamus Heaney's poem *Digging*, the lyrical subject, sitting at a table with a pen in his hand and looking out of the window into the fields, imagines first his father, and then his grandfather digging on the field (we can savely identify the lyrical subject with Heaney himself). The poem concludes:

Between my finger and my thumb/the squat pen rests./I'll dig with it.

In the last line we have a relational m-focus: *dig with*. We have two topics, the two arguments of the relation: *I* and *it*. The theme is what the lyrical subject will do with his pen. The analogue is the act of working on the ground by digging into it. The characterizing feature might be the preoccupation with nature. The line says something like ›What I will do with the pen can be imaginatively conceived as digging.‹ And we might interpret it as implicating: ›In my poems I occupy myself with nature, thereby continuing the tradition of my ancestors.‹

5 Concluding remarks

The proposed account seems flexible enough to cover a considerable number of metaphors. But could it be too flexible, by predicting metaphors where there are none, or where they are hardly possible?

Take *Sometime too hot the forearm of heaven shines*, a ruthless distortion of Shakespeare's line. If the intended use is as a metaphor, the result is quite poor, and actually, ridiculous. Can we explain this fact? The theme could be either appearance or function. Can we conceive of the sun with respect to its appearance or function imaginatively as a forearm? Neither a forearm's appearance nor its function seems to exhibit a characteristic feature which would fit the sun. Of course, I cannot preclude that an ingenious mind might find something that which would enable the metaphor to make sense.

There are sentences for which a metaphorical reading is hardy possible, for example, *A lemon is a lime* or *A triangle is a square*. Why? The two types of objects being compared have many properties in common; they are quite similar. Thus, it seems difficult to find a feature which is characteristic for one of them and is simultaneously exhibited by the other one. As the two objects are so similar, a characteristic feature of one of them would automatically exclude the other. To be a citrus fruit is a common feature of lemons and limes,

but not a characteristic one: a characteristic feature of an object must reveal something about the peculiarity or character of the object.[8] A different case is *Triangularity drinks coffee* (Berggren 1962: 240): It is hardy possible to imagine that a characteristic feature of drinking coffee might be a property of an aspect of triangularity.

Questions remain, of course: Can all types of metaphors be accounted for in the proposed manner? Or should we, for instance, mitigate the satisfaction condition for metaphor (1vi) in such a way that the analogy condition is no longer necessary, but only sufficient? Or could it be enough to mitigate the condition in such a way that the feature of the topic's referent no longer needs to contain the same relation which is contained in the characteristic feature of the analogue, so that similarity might be sufficient? Do all metaphors have a theme, which is hardly ever overly expressed? And when there is a theme, how extensive can it be, could it contain a plurality of 'subthemes'?

As we have just seen, the account seems to have the necessary amount of flexibility. What would counterexamples look like? They would have to be metaphors for which we are not able to name a characteristic feature that could enable the metaphor to make sense. A counterexample would be a metaphor for which similarity is not relevant. There is a class of poetic metaphors which could be critical: 'absolute metaphors' as they are called in the German-speaking literary studies since Friedrich (1956) first addressed this topic. Let us consider a metaphor by Else Lasker-Schüler as an example:

(9) *Eine schwarze Taube ist die Nacht.*
'The night is a black pigeon.'

It seems obvious that we have a sentence with a metaphorical reading – it is not the literal reading which is at stake. But it seems hardy possible to form an idea regarding any respect in which the night might be conceiveable as a pigeon, or regarding a characteristic feature that might be involved. Whether or not (9) really is uninterpretable (in case of doubt, another example can be found), there are metaphors for which one is unable to find a theme or a characteristic feature or a topic (inclusive *or*). Absolute metaphors are uninterpretable. But they are metaphors: (9) has a metaphorical reading. It is a well-known fact that often, one does not understand a metaphor, even though one knows that it is a metaphor. That means one knows that there is a metaphorical reading, but one does not know the metaphorical interpretation. It seems that poets can make use of this state of affairs. Even if a metaphor is uninterpretable it can give rise to diverse associations, and it can have aesthetic effects. The existence of absolute metaphors necessitates the distinction between metaphorical reading and metaphorical interpretation.

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[8] A definition of characteristicness would be helpful here. Presumably it should include the stipulation that a characteristic feature must be of diagnostic value.

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