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Imagining metaphors : cognitive representation in interpretation and understanding

Brouwer, E.C.

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Overview

In **Chapter 1** I consider the problem that poetic text poses to theories of linguistic meaning. Interpretation of poetic text involves subjective representations of meaning, that are considered normally to lie outside the scope of a truth conditional semantics, or semantic theories on propositional meaning; hence, the scarce occasions where poetic text is mentioned in semantic theory, usually exclude it from the realm of semantic interpretation. One aspect of poetic interpretation concerns an allegorical, or metaphorical understanding of the text. Since the semantic literature on metaphorical interpretation is abundant, I at first restrain the topic of poetic interpretation to the metaphorical interpretation of poetic text, and consider to what extent theories on metaphor help explain it.

I consider first semantic perspectives, and then cognitive perspectives on metaphor. Throughout the discussion of different theories, I focus on possible implications for the metaphorical interpretation of poetic text. In this discussion, it becomes clear that virtually all the theories discussed relate metaphorical interpretation to the use of imagination, or sometimes more specifically to the work of productive imagination. However, none of the accounts discussed relates the role of imagination in metaphorical interpretation to its possible role in the conceptual understanding of common, non-poetic use of language. Hence, it seems as if metaphors require an entirely different type of interpretation than other utterances. Furthermore, examples can be construed of a metaphorical interpretation of regular utterances in an imaginatively construed context of interpretation. Hence, the process of metaphorical interpretation is not applied to metaphors only, and must then be characterized in another way than as prompted by linguistic or semantic form. Furthermore, if an utterance can be interpreted metaphorically, merely by imaginatively construing a different context, then interpretation would seem to depend on how imagination is used in it. The following chapter focuses first on how metaphorical interpretation may be characterized by a specific role of imagination, and second whether this role can be related to a role of imagination in conceptual understanding.

In **Chapter 2** I consider Kant's theory of imagination as presented in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and in the *Critique of Judgement*. Imagination, in its more mundane, not *a priori* understanding, can take on a productive as well as a reproductive role. When discussing how metaphorical interpretation could be understood as based on productive imagination, I consider how this may similarly be the case for regular, conceptual understanding. Starting with

Gibbons' interpretation of the role of productive imagination in empirical judgements, I engage in a speculation on whether imagination's reproductive role could be understood in terms of its productive role. This speculation, of course, brings the discussion quite beyond the realm of exegesis, and thus should emphatically not be taken as an attempt to reconstruct what Kant had in mind and did not write. Rather, it functions as a preliminary for more elaborate suggestions of a cognitive model in the next chapter. My speculations concern especially Kant's analysis of aesthetical reflection, or more specifically the possibility of forming subjective concepts on the basis of productive imagination. I suggest that this account might be generalized into an account of concept formation. Thus, my suggestions break with the possibility of objectivity, as I envision a model of cognition based on conceptual combination of intuitive presentations and imaginative representations in subjective reflection. Thereby Kant's remarks on how subjective concepts may attain the status of universals through the assumption of common ground, is well kept in mind, to ensure a notion of intersubjectivity of concepts.

In **Chapter 3** I first discuss two theories of concept formation, the first of Renate Bartsch and the second of Lawrence Barsalou. Both in a sense conform to the requirements set up for a model of cognition in the speculations on a generalized faculty of subjective judgement. These include an empirical, and not an *a priori* foundation for concepts, as well as the general cognitive tools of productive imagination for the conceptual combination of representations, namely recognition of similarity and laws of association. The problem I encounter, then, is that to assume that all concepts are produced in imagination, and do not follow *a priori* rules of understanding, entails that the formation of concepts is so radically subjective that common ground in concept formation may no longer generally be assumed. Both models discussed solve this problem by proposing an experiential grounding for the conceptual system, by relating concepts causally to perceptually processed properties of reality.

Nevertheless, such perceptual grounding is unwelcome in the case of metaphorical interpretation. To understand the interpretation of metaphor as *seeing* something *as* something else that hardly bears any perceptual resemblance, entails a different function of conceptually combining representation than the perceptual recognition of similarity between representations can account for. Thus, I develop a different approach, based on imaginative combination of representations in interpretation. In the outlined approach, I use Bartsch's understanding of how concept formation depends on and is furthered by the process of learning language conform to regulated use of language in a speech community, while I rely on Barsalou's account of

cognitive representation. In the outlined model an understanding of conventional use of language is developed as based on using words that are learned to be appropriate in a 'normal' context, while subjective interpretation is based on associations between expressions or perceptual representations on the basis of personal experience. In either case, understanding is based on combining cognitive representations in imagination, on the basis of what is experienced. Hence, every act of conceptualization involves the productive combination of representations in imagination. Conceptual, or routine, understanding and creative, or reflective, interpretation are then considered as the opposite ends of a spectre of acts of conceptualization, where the former is considered to involve familiar combinations of representations, triggered by an utterance in a context, while the latter, creative interpretation involves the new formation of conceptual combinations in reflection. At the end of the chapter, the relation between the proposed approach to conceptualization and Kant's understanding of aesthetic reflection is reconsidered.

In the epilogue I return to the issue of poetic interpretation. Since in the last chapter an understanding of productive imagination is used to characterize all acts of interpretation, there is only one feature left of Kant's description of aesthetic judgement that may still pertain to the interpretation of poetry or art, namely that of objective disinterestedness, which is taken up by many other authors in the identification of the starting point for a free imaginative contemplation of poetic text or art. However, such an attitude is tied to a conventional understanding of what is art. Hence, the use of free imagination can be considered as an idealization of what conventionally is the proper attitude to adopt in a normal context of poetry or art. Hence, free use of imagination is not the reality of poetic interpretation, but rather presents a model for how we are supposed to approach objects that appear in a poetic context.

