



**UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)**

**Metaphor and metalanguage: towards a social practice account of figurative speech**

Leezenberg, M.

*Published in:*

Baltic International Yearbook of Cognition, Logic and Communication

*DOI:*

[10.4148/biyclc.v3i0.24](https://doi.org/10.4148/biyclc.v3i0.24)

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Leezenberg, M. (2008). Metaphor and metalanguage: towards a social practice account of figurative speech. *Baltic International Yearbook of Cognition, Logic and Communication*, 3. <https://doi.org/10.4148/biyclc.v3i0.24>

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

The Baltic International Yearbook of Cognition,  
Logic and Communication

Vol. 3: *A Figure of Speech*

August 2008  
pages 1-24

MICHEL LEEZENBERG  
University of Amsterdam

**METAPHOR AND METALANGUAGE**  
*Towards a Social Practice Account of Figurative Speech*

**ABSTRACT:** This paper consists of two sections: first, I return to the question of precisely which contextual factors are at work in metaphorical interpretation, and of the relation between asserted, presupposed and implied information; the upshot of this will be a renewed emphasis on metaphor as a discourse phenomenon. Second, I sketch a preliminary argument as to what a social practice account of metaphor might look like. Recent explorations of the contextual factors involved in the interpretation of metaphor make crucial use of David Kaplan's Logic of Demonstratives, with its sophisticated treatment of context-dependence, and of the work on assertion developed by Stalnaker and others. All these approaches take contextual factors or parameters like that of speaker, time and place of utterance, etc., as given or primitive. Recent anthropological research, however, suggests that our practices constitute not only the contents of our utterances but also their contexts. Another recent development in linguistic anthropology is an increased attention to so-called language ideologies or metalinguistic beliefs, i.e., folk theories about the character and functioning of language. These insights suggest that metaphor is so thoroughly dependent on variable contextual and metalinguistic factors that it may well dissolve as a natural kind. At the very least, they suggest a shift away from the view of metaphor as a decontextualized sentence- or utterance-level phenomenon occurring in literate practices, which is still tacitly assumed in much literature on the topic.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Returning to a topic after a long absence, one may come across some surprises. Since my book *Contexts of Metaphor* (henceforth *CM*) was published in 2001, I have devoted little sustained philosophical attention to the topic of metaphor; when approaching it with my present preoccupations in mind, I now notice common assumptions in the present-day debate that I might not have seen so clearly otherwise. This is because much of my current research focuses on so-called *language ideologies*, that is, largely tacit and/or inarticulate assumptions about language. The importance of these for the study of metaphor will, I hope, become clearer below.

First a word about my current research concerns. Although I have not been studying metaphor as such, I have in fact been exploring various forms of meaning change; this research has been anthropological and intellectual-historical rather than philosophical or linguistic in character. Thus, I have been looking at vocabulary changes in the modernizing Ottoman empire: for example, in classical Arabic, the concept pair *khâssa* – ‘*amma* denotes the opposition between the educated elite and the illiterate masses; in present-day Arabic, however, it has come to stand for the modern liberal distinction between the private and the public spheres. Likewise, in the course of the nineteenth century, various Ottoman population groups evolved into distinct national identities: both nations and the languages spoken by them came to be seen as organic wholes growing out of a particular soul, maturing over time, and possessing a unique soul or spirit, the purity of which had to be preserved. Thus, entirely new nationalist conceptions emerged of, among others, a Greek nation or race (*ethnos* or *genos*), an Arabic fatherland (*al-watan al-‘arabî*), and an equally language-based Turkishness (*türkçülük*).

Now do these meaning changes of terms like ‘*amma* and *khâssa*, *ethnos* and *watan* involve metaphorical transfers or mappings? I am not sure; they do not simply involve a mapping of languages and nations onto an already existing and structured domain of biology. Rather, *both* domains were radically reconceptualized in organicist and evolutionary terms during the same period.<sup>1</sup> Next to the metaphor, if such it is, of nations and languages as living organisms is another new image, that of a national or cultural awakening. Among Greeks and Arabs alike,

this imagery of national awakening is paired with a more specific image of centuries of slumber, stagnation, and tyranny under Ottoman rule, which increasingly comes to be identified as Turkish.

Even more intriguingly, these changes were accompanied by wholesale changes in the ways in which people used and conceived of language. New public uses, registers, or functions of language, like journalism and drama, emerged in coffee houses and other public spaces; simultaneously, new *ideologies* of language appeared. Most importantly, in this period there appeared what has been called an *expressivist* as opposed to a *representational* view of language.<sup>2</sup> According to this language ideology, languages do not primarily represent states of affairs in the world, but express the inner feelings of both individuals and nations. Changes did not remain confined to usage and ideology: even the very structure of the languages involved underwent major qualitative changes. The classical Arabic of religious learning and the high Ottoman Turkish of the court and administration had been accessible only to the literate elites; in the nineteenth century, however, newly conceived written languages were created, such as Modern Standard Arabic and modern Turkish. These new languages were meant to be understandable by everybody, rather than by a select few, and featured important innovations in grammatical structure and vocabulary. Yet later, languages came to be seen as repositories of tradition, or as expressions of the soul or spirit of distinct peoples; that is, the languages of the region were redefined in the Romantic sense that is often, but wrongly, ascribed to the German Enlightenment philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder.<sup>3</sup>

One thing suggested by these developments is a weakening of the traditionally strict opposition between Enlightenment universalism and Romantic nationalism, and of the widespread assumption that both were purely Western European in origin. Developments in the Ottoman Empire, that is, were not mere imitations of European (specifically, French and German) models; in particular, the Greek national movement actually inspired Western European nationalism rather than the other way around. Likewise, the Baltic States were major centers of the Enlightenment in their own right: they were by no means mere derivatives of other cities. Not only did Immanuel Kant spend his entire working life in Königsberg; the first edition of his *Critique of Pure Reason*

was actually published in Riga. Moreover, Herder lived and worked in Riga for a considerable period, and it has been claimed that it was his becoming acquainted with and studying Latvian folklore traditions that inspired his alleged development of a concept of a national spirit or *Volksgeist* embodied in a nation. In other words, there may be reason to rethink the distinction between a Western European ‘core’ or ‘center’, an Eastern European ‘semi-periphery’ and a non-European ‘periphery’, familiar from Wallerstein’s world-systems theory in economic history, which at times is tacitly projected onto intellectual history as well (cf. e.g., Israel 2006).

But, the reader will probably ask, what is the importance of all this for analytical philosophy, and especially for the study of metaphor? I think the relevance is this: the nineteenth century witnessed simultaneous and interrelated new conceptualizations of language as the expression of a nation’s soul; of poetry as the most expressive form of language; and of metaphor as the prototypically poetic figure of speech. This suggests that we may trace the history of the modern – and ultimately Romantic – concept of metaphor not only in conjunction with that of expressivist views of language, but also with the rise of cultural and political forms of nationalism. In particular, the intimate if not internal connection between poetic and other expressive forms of language and the rise of nationalism may place the positive evaluation of metaphor usually associated with Romanticism in a rather different light.

The nineteenth-century lexical developments I mentioned above also suggest that it is impossible to account adequately for figurative language and meaning change in isolation from their socio-cultural context. Put in more Wittgensteinian terms: one can fully understand neither the phenomenon nor the concept of metaphor in isolation from the changing social practices that demonstrably shape and inform our concepts. Thus, over the centuries, both the role and the status of language have undergone important – and in part politically fateful – changes (cf. Bauman & Briggs 2003). The most relevant nineteenth-century changes with linguistic consequences are, of course, the nation-state as based on popular sovereignty, and the realization of a cultural concept of the nation as defined by shared language, customs, and norms and values.

This and similar historical investigations make it tempting to conclude that the word *language* is not a natural-kind term. That is, there is no fixed, theory-independent class of objects called the languages of the world, conceived of in purely structural terms as consisting of sets of linguistic rules or conventions, and embodied in written grammars, dictionaries and the like. Initially, this might sound similar to Donald Davidson's famous claim (2002/1986) that there is no such thing as a language, i.e., there is nothing corresponding to our intuitive idea of a shared set of linguistic conventions in virtue of which we understand each other's utterances. The motivation and implications of the point I am suggesting here, however, are rather different. First, it is based on a historical-empirical inquiry into Ottoman intellectual and linguistic history rather than on a conceptual-normative argument about how we go about interpreting each other's words. Second, and more importantly, unlike Davidson, I do not deny the existence of languages altogether; rather, the historical evidence suggests that languages in the currently widespread structural sense are a relatively recent development, and that the ideological assumption of languages as sets of shared conventions has actually been partly constitutive of new kinds of linguistic structure (notably, explicitly defined and codified 'national languages') and language use (notably, in new genres like journalism, politics and the modern sciences, and in new normative practices of 'correct' usage), and indeed of new kinds of national identity.

These historical insights may also have important implications for our theorizing about metaphor: if indeed language is not a natural kind term, then it may well be that there is no natural kind called 'metaphor' either. That is, against the implicit assumption in much contemporary research, there may not be a single unitary and universal cognitive process or linguistic phenomenon of metaphor at all. Rather, what metaphor is and how it functions may in part be shaped by our broader beliefs, theories, or ideologies about how language functions more generally.

The theoretical implications of this remain to be uncovered. For a start, one might argue that apparently near-equivalent terms like *metaphora* in Aristotle, *translatio* in Quintilian, *isti'âra* in Jurjânî, and *metaphor* in Locke and Hobbes, may in fact be incompatible, or even incommensurable (cf. Kuhn 1970/1963: ch. 9). That is, the precise

content of the term 'metaphor' varies so much with the widely different theoretical (i.e., conceptual and normative) frameworks within which it figures that one cannot simply compare or evaluate these different uses by appealing to allegedly theory-neutral observational facts of linguistic structure or language usage.

The main implication of all this, I think, is that the study of metaphor, and the study of meaning change more generally, can be analytically enriched, first, by a more systematic attention to broader cultural, social and political practices; and second, by a more systematic attention to what have come to be known as *language ideologies* (Silverstein 1979; cf. Bauman & Briggs 2003). Language ideologies are a particular variety of what has been called *metalanguage*, i.e., a function of everyday language that calls particular attention to the codes being used, the meanings being expressed, or the things being done with words. Unfortunately, I have nothing like a well-developed theory of the role of language ideologies in metaphor; but I think the evidence is intriguing enough to continue thinking about.

## 2. REVISITING CONTEXTS OF METAPHOR

Before I get to the discussion of metalinguistic factors in metaphor, I would first like to restate a few aspects of my earlier work that, at least in retrospect, anticipated this particular focus of attention. The most important features of the approach I defended in *CM* are, I think, first, a principled assessment of precisely what is said or asserted, what is implied, and what is presupposed in the utterance of a metaphor; second, a more systematic attention to and exploration of the actual role of contextual factors in the interpretation of metaphor; and third, an account of the conceptual dimension of metaphorical language interpretation in terms of practices. These features stand to gain from a more systematic focus on practices, and more specifically, from a more detailed attention to metalinguistic factors.

To start with the first point: the idea that metaphorical content belongs to what is suggested or implied, rather than to what is said or asserted, is still very much with us. This view was most influentially stated, of course, by Grice; but authors like John Searle have argued along similar lines. Metaphors like *Sally is a block of ice* or *You are the*

*cream in my coffee*, Griceans and other defenders of a pragmatic approach argue, express obviously or categorically false statements, so it cannot be *these* which are asserted. Rather, they continue, in saying something obviously false, the speaker intends to communicate something else; respectively, an implied opinion that Sally is tough and unemotional, or that the addressee is the speaker's pride and joy.

There are at least two serious problems with this pragmatic approach. For one thing, it has long been known that many metaphors can be or are literally true; and indeed, for both sentences quoted above, it is easy to think of a context in which they are true: respectively, upon finding Sally frozen solid in a cold storage chamber and while picking out one's favorite brand of coffee creamer in the supermarket. Hence, falsehood cannot be a *criterion* for metaphorical interpretation. For another, this line of explanation places a heavy burden on speaker's intentions, and I have never come across a philosophically or even methodologically satisfactory account of this notion. In fact, the social sciences have over the past decades witnessed a steady move away from relying on intentions or conscious deliberations as explanatory concepts.

But even in the terms of Grice's own account, it is not at all clear that metaphor is a case of conversational implicature. As we all know, Grice formulated a number of diagnostic criteria for implicatures; among these are cancellability (the fact that an implicature can be denied without a sense of logical contradiction), detachability (implicatures are detachable from particular propositional content or literal meaning), and being associated with utterances rather than sentences. Now metaphor appears not to match any of these diagnostic criteria unambiguously; or so I have argued in *CM* (2001: 114-118). Thus, metaphors are not as easily cancelable as prototypical implicatures. For example, one cannot simply deny the content allegedly implied by *John is a donkey* without committing oneself to some *other* metaphorically expressed content, as the exchange in (1) suggests:

- (1) - John is a donkey; but he's not stupid or stubborn.  
 - Then what on earth *do* you mean?

Also on other points, metaphors appear to behave differently from canonical cases of implicature, such as irony. For example, it is far easier to indicate explicitly that one is speaking metaphorically than it is to signal that one is being ironical or sarcastic:

- (2a) John is metaphorically a wolf.  
 (2b) ?John is ironically a genius.  
 (3a) Figuratively speaking, my hands are tied.  
 (3b) ?Sarcastically speaking, he is a fine friend.

In the metaphors above, but not in the case of ironical or sarcastic utterances, speaker and hearer can ask for, and provide, an explication of exactly what is communicated in a relatively straightforward manner. That is, the *metalinguistic behavior* displayed by metaphor appears to be very different from that of quality implicatures. I will return to this point below.

One central question that arises from such considerations is whether metaphorically expressed contents are indeed implied, or rather belong to what Grice calls 'what is said.' It is not immediately clear how this question can be settled in a convincing way. Grice himself notoriously fails to characterize the notion of what is said; later authors, like Elisabeth Camp (2006), have proposed to base our conception of 'what is said' on actual speakers' intuitions and beliefs about what a person says, or commits himself to, when speaking. On such accounts, in a way analogous to syntactic intuitions about the grammaticality of particular sentences, we should also take recourse to semantic and pragmatic intuitions about what particular words mean, or what speakers mean in using those words. In doing so, however, we are entering the territory of *folk theories*, or *language ideologies*.

There are two kinds of reasons for not relying on such native beliefs, i.e., on native semantic or pragmatic intuitions, too strongly. The first is that for linguistic anthropologists, language ideologies are interesting and important as raw material, but not necessarily trustworthy as universally valid theoretical notions; such ideologies are often inarticulate, variable over time and across different social groups, and indeed at times highly contested. The second reason is that theory-driven arguments are simply stronger than ones based on imprecise, often partially implicit, and possibly even inconsistent folk beliefs. Thus, as argued above, given the explicit definitions and diagnostic criteria proposed by Grice and others to define conversational implicature, I think one can make a rather stronger case against taking metaphor as a case of implicature on these grounds, rather than one based on an imprecise and

informal notion of ‘what is said’. The upshot of all this is that there are rather good, theory-driven reasons for not treating metaphor as a case of implicature. The question then naturally arises whether metaphorical contents are, instead, perhaps asserted or presupposed.

Here we come to the second main feature of *CM*. It is fortunately possible to *test* whether the information expressed by a sentence or sentence fragment is presupposed or asserted: in order to establish whether a particular bit of information is presupposed, there exist such familiar tests as preservation under negation, modal operators, and embedding in *if-then* clauses. To discuss this question, let me turn to another recently popular theory, one to which I am otherwise greatly indebted, viz., Josef Stern’s (2000, 2006) account of metaphor as involving a kind of context-dependence.

According to Stern, metaphorical interpretations are generated by an underlying ‘metaphorical operator’ *Mthat*, which appears at the deep-structural level of logical form, and which introduces a dependence on the actual context of utterance even where previously there was none. At this level, possible metaphorical readings are generated; in subsequent stages of the interpretative process, the number of possible readings is then reduced. Most of the important work in this process is done by what Stern calls p-presuppositions and f-presuppositions, which play the role of, respectively, producing possible propositional contents, and filtering or constraining these contents. Both sets of presuppositions closely resemble what Max Black (1962) called ‘systems of associated commonplaces’, like the property or attribute of cruelty which is conventionally (though not necessarily correctly) associated with wolves; however, because Stern articulates these in terms of a more general theory of assertion (in particular, Stalnaker 1978), they allow for a more precise and testable result. Yet I think that in a crucial respect they are not quite precise enough. The one point I would like to discuss here is the fact that Stern takes these presuppositions to consist of sets of properties. This may sound plausible, but it leads us into considerable difficulties, especially when trying to account for phenomena such as negation. Take, for example, the famous lines spoken by Democratic vice-presidential candidate Lloyd Bentsen to his Republican opponent, Dan Quayle during a 1988 debate. After Quayle had compared himself to the earlier president John F. Kennedy in his stump speech, Bentsen

retorted:

- (4) Senator, I served with Jack Kennedy. I knew Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you’re no Jack Kennedy.

It is obvious what is going on here: in calling himself a Kennedy, Quayle suggests that he possesses some of the latter’s properties, such as being charming, charismatic, and well qualified for vice-presidency or even presidency. Bentsen’s reply, of course, denies that Quayle possesses those properties. Stern’s account, however, appears unable to deal with such cases in a satisfactory way: it appears bound to assume that Bentsen, rather contradictorily, asserts the negation of what he presupposes; the metaphorical assertion denies just those properties of Quayle that are presupposed of him in the set of p-presuppositions. It is unclear exactly how Stern would solve this problem; but I think that the easiest and most practical solution is to take the sets of presuppositions as denoting propositions rather than properties (for a more detailed formulation of this argument, see Leezenberg 2001: ch. 3.2).

There is another, more important reason for doing so. The more general feature we see emerging here is that metaphorical interpretation appears to survive negation, embedding in modal contexts, and being placed in *if-then* clauses:

- (5) Perhaps Dan Quayle is a Jack Kennedy.  
 (6) If Dan Quayle is a Jack Kennedy, then I am Ludwig Wittgenstein.

In all these cases, as well as in the negation in (4) above, the metaphorical reading is preserved. This suggests that at least *something* about metaphorical interpretation involves presupposed rather than asserted information, insofar as presuppositions also survive negation and embedding in modal contexts and conditionals. In other words, *something* seems to be presupposed here; what remains to be explored is to establish precisely what it is.<sup>4</sup> In *CM*, I suggested that what is presupposed in metaphorical interpretation is the so-called *thematic dimension*, which captures the *kinds* of properties talked about, whereas the specific property expressed in the context characterized by this thematic dimension belongs to what is asserted. Thus, a sentence like *John is a fox* receives a metaphorical interpretation when uttered in a thematic dimension of personality properties rather than in a dimension of biological

properties.<sup>5</sup> By making this distinction between properties and thematic dimensions, one can account straightforwardly for metaphorical assertions, denials, and conditionals. Thus, in

(7a) Juliet is the sun.

(7b) Juliet is not the sun.

(7c) Perhaps Juliet is the sun.

*some* metaphorical reading is preserved: it is not the kind of property but the *particular* property given by the (so-to-speak ‘metaphorical’) thematic dimension that is affected by the operators of negation and modality. In short, the metaphorical content, or proposition, is what is asserted, and the thematic dimension is what is presupposed.

In retrospect, I think that the most important conclusion to be drawn from all of this is that metaphor may be fruitfully treated as a discourse phenomenon. Given this, approaches that systematically explore this kind of context-dependence may bring out more explicitly the precise ways in which metaphors not only *depend* on the context in which they are uttered, but may also *change* that context. This point may sound rather trivial in itself, but it has yet to be taken seriously: the bulk of present-day research on metaphor still appears to rely principally on metaphors of the simple categorical *A is B* type, and on sentences in isolation, at best drawing in a bit of artificially constructed context just as I myself have been doing in the foregoing. By restricting ourselves to such oversimplified cases of isolated sentential metaphors abstracted away from the actual linguistic and practical complexities of real-life language usage, however, we may be missing interesting clues as to the ways in which metaphors work, or in which metaphorical interpretation may be taking place.

### 3. A PRACTICE TURN? CONTEXTS AND CONTEXTUALIZATION

Finally, I would like to turn to the third main feature of *CM*: the account of the contextual and conceptual dimensions of metaphorical language use and interpretation in terms of practices. Semantically, an account of metaphor as dependent on thematic contextual dimensions is broadly analogous to, but not identical with, Stern’s account. It may be argued, however, that by putting such a heavy explanatory burden on thematic

dimensions, we have merely shifted the problem. In a similar way, Stern’s account has been charged with relocating rather than solving the problems involved in recognizing and interpreting metaphor, e.g., by leaving unanswered the question of exactly when the *Mthat* operator is generated in deep structure in the first place. Personally I don’t mind moving around a problem, as long as we move it to a location where it can be solved. My hunch is that the specifics of interpreting metaphor in context and as part of an ongoing discourse may indeed dissolve into more general questions of thematic structure and discourse coherence; but at this stage, this really is no more than a vague feeling. In *Contexts of Metaphor* (2001), I took thematic dimensions as contextual indices, i.e., as more or less primitive notions that were not explained in terms of anything else; I also conflated linguistic practices with the folk theories that inform and shape concepts. I now think that my account should be refined on both these points. Context is not a given variable, it is as much constructed in and by speaker’s exchanges as is the content of the information exchanged. This idea has yet to make its way into theoretical linguistics and the philosophy of language; but in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology (or anthropological linguistics), the situation is quite different. Thus, famously, John Gumperz (1993) has argued that speakers give indications of how they want their words to be taken by giving so-called *contextualization cues*; that is, they actively shape and change the context of utterance. Likewise, the anthropological linguist William Hanks has argued for analyzing reference as a kind of social practice, along the lines formulated by the French sociologist Bourdieu. On such an account, referring to objects (whether individuals, places, or points in time) is only one of the many functions for which deictic expressions are used, and perhaps not even the primary or predominant one. Moreover, Hanks argues, the notions of spatial proximity and distance that are usually thought of as basic to spatial deixis are not really primitive notions or givens at all; rather, they are the result of complex linguistic and bodily practices, in which, in fact, metalinguistic devices turn out to play a crucial role (cf. Hanks 1993).

In other words, one strong argument for a social-practice turn may be the fact that context is not given but appears to be every bit as much constituted in the course of conversation as content. Thus, Hanks (1993) argues that the context of utterance, whether linguistic or situ-

ational, is no more given than the contents expressed in it; but because of the figure-ground structure of the relation between context and utterance, linguists and philosophers have generally tended to gloss over these complex processes of constituting and developing context in and through linguistic practices.

I think such social-practice accounts provide a lot of interesting material for the various perspectives in the philosophy of language that are still based on empiricist assumptions concerning the irreducibility of human intentionality, of spatial and temporal coordinates, and so on. But it is not my intention here to summarize this vast and important field of inquiry, or to extend it to the daunting question of how thematic coherence is achieved. My point is merely that these ways of creating, articulating and developing context are specific forms of *practice*. And, as practices go, they may vary widely, indeed radically, across cultures, subcultures, periods of history, and social groups as distinguished by age, gender, social class, educational background and the like.

Here, I would like to briefly raise the question of what a social practice account of metaphor could look like. Calling attention to social practices would lead to a more dynamic, or so to speak dialectical view of the relationship between speakers, languages, contents, and contexts. So should we then try to formulate a Marxist approach to semantics? This has in fact been tried by Soviet linguists like Voloshin and Bakhtin (who may or may not be the same person), and by scholars working in their wake. Personally, however, I would prefer to suggest a genealogical approach, which explores how factors of power and (linguistic) ideology may actually be constitutive of rather than repressing or distorting successful linguistic communication.

This suggests the following aspects of a practice account. First, a practice approach takes neither conventions nor intentions as given: it takes both conventions and human intentionality as shaped in turn by social and linguistic practices (cf. Leezenberg 2005). Second, practices may be performative; that is, they may involve the creation of social facts by and in their very performance. Thus, saying that e.g. Breton or Bavarian is a distinct language rather than a dialect may in part and on occasion contribute to creating the very fact that such a distinct language exists (cf. Bourdieu 1991).<sup>6</sup> Third, relations of power arguably play an irreducible, and perhaps even constitutive, role in communica-

tive practices (cf. Leezenberg 2002).

#### 4. METAPHORAND METALINGUISTIC USAGE

Here, however, I would like to focus on a different aspect of such a practice approach: the role that metalinguistic factors (in particular, metalinguistic comments and language ideologies) may play in such practices. In recent years, research on such factors has steadily gained ground. Famous self-referential paradoxes like

(8) This sentence is false.

are but one form of metalinguistic usage. Speaking about words, sentences, and utterances is as common a mode or function of language as any; for example, clarifying to a child what a word means, or explaining to a bystander what somebody is speaking about, are both common forms of metalinguistic language usage. Perhaps due to Tarski's demand for a strict separation of object language and metalanguage, however, and due to his structures against 'semantically closed languages' that violate this separation, metalanguage has not commanded much attention from scholars working in theoretical linguistics or in the philosophy of language, if we except the substantial body of work on the Liar paradox, and Cappelen and Lepore's exploratory book on direct and indirect quotation (2007). Recent empirical research suggests, however, that other forms of metalinguistic usage are a pervasive if not central, and perhaps even indispensable, aspect of ordinary language usage. Moreover, the concept of metalanguage does in fact have a venerable pedigree in both linguistic and philosophical theorizing. Most importantly, the Russian linguist Roman Jakobson (1981/1957; 1960) argued for the existence and importance of a distinct metalinguistic dimension or function of language. Thus, he notes that our utterances usually have more than one function at a time: besides referring to the outside world or appealing to the hearer, they often also have what he calls a *metalinguistic* function, which calls attention to the code or language we are using. This function is quite natural, even pervasive; in fact, most speakers – like Molière's Monsieur Jourdain who speaks prose without knowing it – use metalanguage all the time without necessarily being aware of it: for example in using words that express linguistic items or activities,



like *saying*, *asking*, and so on. According to Jakobson, this metalinguistic function may actually even be *prior* to referential and other functions, especially insofar as metalinguistic feedback is vital to children's language acquisition. Jakobson further distinguishes the metalinguistic from the poetic function: according to him, the poetic function, which is broader than the specific genre of poetry, calls attention to the message itself, and perhaps more precisely to its phonological features by factors of rhyme and rhythm, than to the words and meanings involved in the message; but this distinction may be overly strict.

A second author working on metalanguage whose work is directly relevant to the study of metaphor is Michael Reddy (1993/1979) who has called attention to a widespread metalinguistic view of language as a channel for expressing and transmitting our thoughts. This 'conduit metaphor' as he calls it, is pervasive in modern English; but, he argues, it is highly misleading. It actually distorts our thinking about communication and its problems, he suggests, and hence, it should at least on occasion be replaced by another metaphor, that of language as a tool box.

In this description of language as a tool kit, Reddy is obviously indebted to another metalinguistic critic, undoubtedly the most famous of all: Ludwig Wittgenstein. As we all know, much of the latter's *Philosophical Investigations* explores how particular views about the functioning of words lead to various kinds of philosophical problems, or as Wittgenstein himself puts it, how our thinking may be bewitched by our language. Now Wittgenstein still seems to hold that there is a single unproblematic 'correct' way of both using and describing language, viz. in everyday, and specifically non-philosophical and non-academic usage. In other words, he seems to take one particular language game or linguistic practice as a norm or model for others; in particular, philosophical questions and discourse are seen as illegitimate transgressions of the existing boundaries of ordinary language games. There are reasons to think, however, that our beliefs about language – whether or not they are mistaken – play a more irreducible and more constitutive role in our linguistic practices than Wittgenstein allows for.

If one maintains the familiar opposition between conventions and intentions (or, in social-scientific terms, between structure and agency), one is faced with the question of whether metalanguage should be as-

simulated to structure (or semantics) or to matters of usage (or pragmatics). In *Contexts of Metaphor*, I opted for the latter: in suggesting that folk theories are really practical, not necessarily verbalized ways of coping with the world (2001: 290). Thus, my account conflated ideology and usage and reduced folk theories to linguistic practices. Hanks (1996: ch. 10), however, suggests that ultimately ideology may resist assimilation or reduction to either semantic structure or pragmatic usage, and thus constitutes a third autonomous dimension of communication. The resulting reconfiguration is what one might call a *social practice turn*: instead of the opposition between conventions and intentions familiar from the semantics-pragmatics divide, it involves a tripartite distinction among structure, usage, and ideology as three discrete and mutually irreducible axes.<sup>7</sup>

If all this is correct, our folk beliefs about how language functions may thus have a more profound influence on the actual functioning and interpretation of language than we realize. Initially, this may seem to boil down to the familiar Wittgensteinian claim that word meanings, or concepts, become determinate only against a background of practices, or language games. One may extend this claim, however, arguing with genealogists like Nietzsche and Foucault that if, as they hold, practices are themselves power-saturated, then word meanings are not merely shaped by practices, but equally by relations of power. I realize that in pursuing this idea, one is drifting far from analytical-philosophical orthodoxy; but I do think it may be fruitful, if not necessary, to further develop our thoughts along these lines.

To get slightly more concrete on these matters, I would like to sketch a few areas where metalanguage plays an important role. First, Hanks (1993) has argued that metalanguage is especially relevant for the study of demonstrative expressions or deictics. What is 'near' or 'far', he argues, is not a matter of purely spatial proximity, but of the practical construction of space through our linguistic utterances; in these, metalinguistic commentary appears to be crucial. A second area where metalanguage takes on a central role is that of performatives. In saying

(9) I hereby baptize this ship the *Pippi Longstocking*.

the speaker draws attention to the speech situation or indeed to the very fact of a sentence being uttered. It has often been observed that explicit performatives are relatively rare and confined to particular (often ritu-

alized) situations; but both the fact of performativity and the metalinguistic device of drawing attention to the utterance being made or the situation in which it is made are quite pervasive in most if not all natural languages. A third area is that of poetic language. Whether or not one adheres to Jakobson's (1960) strict distinction between the poetic and the metalinguistic functions of language as focusing, respectively, on the phonological form and on the meaning of the message conveyed, the suggestion that poetic language is particularly self-reflexive rather than referential deserves further linguistic exploration.

Intriguingly, on all of these three counts, metalanguage may be of particular relevance for the study of metaphor. First, if the arguments presented by Stern (2000) and Leezenberg (2001) hold, metaphor likewise has an irreducibly demonstrative or indexical – that is, systematically context-dependent – dimension. Second, insofar as the felicitous utterance of novel metaphors may bring about novel linguistic or social facts, metaphor may also be said to have a performative aspect. And third, insofar as metaphor is one of the prime figures, if not the prime figure, associated with poetic language usage, attention to the poetic and metalinguistic (as distinct from the referential or semantic) functions of metaphor may be worthwhile. There is all the more reason, then, to explore the relation between structure, usage and ideology in the case of metaphor.

Here, I can do no more than provide a first rough sketch of such an exploration. Analytically, I would like to make a distinction between metalinguistic usage, which is, so to speak, an on-line comment on one's own or other's use of words; and language ideologies, which would seem to form part of more enduring background assumptions. I suspect that both may play a role in metaphorical interpretation, but these roles are not quite identical.

By providing a metalinguistic commentary, speakers may indicate how they want their words to be taken:

- (10) My hands are tied, so to speak.
- (11) As far as his eating habits are concerned, John is a wolf; in his behavior towards others, though, he is rather a sheep in wolf's clothing.
- (12) Q: Do you know that person?

A: Not in the Biblical sense.

In other words, metalinguistic commentary may in fact play a significant role in clarifying or even determining how an utterance is actually to be interpreted. In (10)-(12), the speakers restrict, or even shift, the possible senses in which their words are taken. Thus, among others, the explicit indication of the thematic dimension, often done by the use of predicate-limiting adverbials like *healthwise* or concerning his eating habits, is not only a semantically real and relevant phenomenon; it may also be treated as a form of metalinguistic commentary on the utterance the speaker is making.

To turn to the other major kind of metalanguage, let us take a brief look at the role of language ideologies in metaphor. In fact, what I refer to as language ideologies or folk theories might also be called 'conceptual metaphors' or 'idealized cognitive models', as George Lakoff and his followers do. There are differences of emphasis and of principle between the two notions, however. Most importantly, language ideologies are not mental but public: they are best treated as social, and hence, as historically and culturally variable, as power-laden, and as contested phenomena. I also hesitate to call them 'metaphorical', or to view them as involving mappings between abstract conceptual domains, because in these cases, the domains involved are themselves so clearly unstable and in a semi-permanent process of change. Indeed, these very domains may well be *constituted* by changing ideologies, as suggested by the Ottoman cases referred to above. Thus, the so-called 'conduit metaphor', i.e., the belief that language is merely a means of encoding and communicating our (independently and antecedently given) thoughts, is one familiar example of a relatively enduring, but variable and contestable, language ideology (Reddy 1993/1979). Lakoff (1993/1979) claimed Michael Reddy as a pioneer or precursor of his and Mark Johnson's cognitive approach to metaphor as underlying and structuring our language usage; but in fact, one of Reddy's main points, stated explicitly in his original article, is directed precisely *against* the mentalist and cognitivist approaches defended by the likes of Lakoff. That is, for Reddy the conduit metaphor is not a conceptual phenomenon but a linguistic ideology.

In concluding this section, I would like to discuss briefly the question of precisely which language-ideological assumptions could be thought

of as prerequisites for a substantial and theoretically significant concept of metaphor. First, and perhaps most importantly, is the ideology of what could be called a *social contract view* of language (cf. Leezenberg 2002). This ideology appears to be widespread in twentieth-century analytical philosophy of language and, by extension, much empirical linguistics and cognitive science. Its importance in the present context is that it introduces a particular kind of normativity into language, and hence, it also enables a specific idea of what ‘non-normal’ language usage amounts to: an actor who does not abide by the contract but who is clearly not opting out of society altogether must have a reason to do so.<sup>8</sup> Second, there is the ideology that languages primarily express and communicate inner mental states of the speaker, and that languages express an entire people’s or nation’s soul, spirit, or inner essence. It is this language ideology that also appears to inform the Romantic belief in poetry as the most expressive form of language, and in metaphor as the most poetic of figures. Third, there is the ideology, or metaphor, of the ‘mirror of nature’ made famous by Richard Rorty’s 1979 book bearing that title. According to Rorty, the idea that the mind, or language, may mirror or represent the world is the underlying figure that has led to the emergence of the core philosophical subdiscipline of epistemology, which explores the adequacy of representations, and combats the perennial skeptical doubts that accompany such a representationalist view; alongside it, new articulations emerged of the oppositions between the inner and the outer, the mental and the physical, and between language and the world.

Obviously, not all of these ideologies are shared by all twentieth century linguists and analytical philosophers writing on metaphor; but taken together, they may explain some of their converging opinions. For example, in combination these ideologies support what authors like Silverstein (1979) have called ‘semanticity’, i.e., the idea of a purely referential, descriptive or cognitive function of language that is both distinct from and logically prior to other functions. In fact, this referential function is not at all given; it was in fact the result of an extended effort of purification carried out by authors like John Locke and some of his contemporaries (cf. Bauman & Briggs 2003: ch. 2). Presuming this and similar purifications, numerous analytical philosophers (e.g., Quine, Davidson, Searle, and Brandom) emphasize the priority of the

semantic, assertive, information-carrying, or propositional, dimension of speech behavior. Some of these views, notably Speech Act Theory as formulated by Austin and Searle, have been subjected to detailed criticism by authors like Silverstein and Bauman and Briggs; but thus far, no alternative theoretical framework has appeared with a comparable appeal to scholars working in theoretical linguistics and the philosophy of language. One practical reason for this may be the well-known descriptive orientation of subdisciplines like the ethnography of speaking and Conversation Analysis, both of which tend to resist theoretical generalizations as premature.

One combined effect of these ideologies, and of the semanticity they inform, is a strict opposition between metaphor and literal language. Whether one evaluates metaphor negatively as a deviation from or abuse of literal and truth-conditional forms of language, or more positively as a particularly poetic or expressive figure of speech (or even as an irreducible aspect of human cognition), most positions clearly proceed from the assumption that there is indeed an important difference between the literal and the metaphorical.<sup>9</sup> Even an author as keen on dismantling conceptual oppositions as Richard Rorty appears to maintain some variety of the literal-metaphorical distinction, arguing that metaphors by definition fall outside any language game (1989: ch. 1). Yet, I think it is no coincidence that Rorty, who rejects the representationalist ideology in particular, ends up without a substantial account of metaphor. In the wake of authors like Quine, Sellars, and especially Davidson, he rejects the ‘mirror-of-nature’ metaphor, and with it the oppositions between the inner and the outer, mind and body, language and world, and so on. Basing himself on Davidson’s account of metaphor as intimating beliefs, rather than expressing specifically metaphorical meanings, he concludes that no theoretically interesting account of metaphor can be given (Rorty 1987). Following Sellars, he then goes on to suggest that metaphors are *causes* rather than *expressions* of particular beliefs, and as such fall outside all language games: instead, they are the main sources of cognitive and moral innovation and improvement (1989: ch. 1). Even while rejecting the idea that metaphors express specific contents, he thus comes close to the expressivist ideology that sees metaphor as the most poetic kind of language usage. In other words, Rorty formulates what one might call a pragma-

tist formulation of the ultimately Romantic view that metaphor is a primarily poetic device, of poetry as a uniquely expressive and innovative genre, and of poets as playing a leading role in initiating human moral and epistemic progress. Surprisingly, however, Rorty wholly ignores the far from trivial role that language plays in constituting both cultural and political nationalism, – a role that is so closely associated with, if not typical of, nineteenth-century Romanticism. A more detailed account of Rorty's views on metaphor, poetry and innovation, and more generally of the different ideologies underlying other influential accounts of metaphor, however, awaits another occasion.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Time to sum up. The idea of a practice approach to metaphor and of a constitutive role for metalanguage in the use and interpretation of metaphor may be relatively novel and still undeveloped, but I hope to have made a case for the further exploration of these lines of thought. A few tentative suggestions that may inspire – or provoke – further research stand out. First, if metaphorical interpretation is indeed context-dependent and informed – or even partly constituted – by metalinguistic beliefs, it may well be that there is no unitary linguistic or cognitive phenomenon to be called 'metaphor'. Put more assertively: neither the word *language* nor the word *metaphor* is a natural kind term. This may sound like bad news for the numerous scholars working in the field of cognitive linguistics; but I should like to think that more attention to such variability amounts to an enrichment rather than a replacement of cognitive perspectives. It should become more plausible in light of the apparently trivial point that the concept of metaphor is as theory-laden as any theoretical notion. This point may have rather more dramatic and radical implications than one might think; for one thing, it raises the question of whether authors as diverse as, say, Aristotle, John Locke and Max Black may have incommensurable concepts of metaphor, and thus of whether or not they are actually talking about the same thing.

Second, a practice approach calls for a more principled attention to the discourse aspects of metaphorical interpretation. Insofar as it involves a presupposed thematic dimension specifying the kinds of property at issue, or (if one adheres to Stern's account) a metaphorical op-

erator *Mthat* creating context-dependence where previously there was none, metaphor depends on the linguistic and non-linguistic context; insofar as it involves assertions rather than implicatures or suggestions, it may also be said to *change* the context. In both respects, metaphor appears to have substantial discourse effects that may be worth exploring more systematically.

Third, an account that treats language usage as practice, and practice as social, invites us to look at the mutually constitutive interrelation between language usage, linguistic structure and linguistic ideology. It also invites us to take power relations in communication as not necessarily disruptive or distorting, but as themselves possibly having a positive role, insofar as they may be constitutive of both structural linguistic facts and, in a sense, even of speakers themselves.

A practice approach, finally, gives us a new look at the still widespread ideologies of languages as expressive of a national soul or spirit, of poetry as the most expressive form of language, and of metaphor as the prototypically poetic figure. The close link between these different expressivist views places the positive evaluation of metaphor, usually seen as typical for romantic views, in a rather different light. Hence, a historicizing or genealogical account of metaphor, one that takes into account the emergence of a more generally expressivist view of language and the rise of the nation-state, may yet yield some surprises for present-day working metaphorologists.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A famous, if at times rather speculative, history of this shift in the nineteenth-century European linguistic and biological sciences is, of course, Michael Foucault's *The Order of Things* (1966).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Taylor 1985, Brandom 2002 for sketchy overviews of the European and American cases; but broadly similar developments occurred elsewhere in the world.

<sup>3</sup> This mistaken, or at least very one-sided view is even reproduced in Bauman & Briggs's otherwise excellent study of the role of changing language ideologies in the constitution of modernity (2003: ch. 5); cf. my forthcoming review article in *Journal of Pragmatics*.

<sup>4</sup> As an aside, I think it is significant that the proper name *Jack Kennedy* is here preceded by an indefinite article: this indicates that this term functions not as a proper name here but as a property expression, that is, as a descriptive rather than a referential term (cf. Leezenberg 2001: 6).

<sup>5</sup> In her review of *Contexts of Metaphor*, Seana Coulson (2003) argued that thematic

dimensions may be shaped, informed and constrained by conceptual metaphors. I think she has a point here; I will return to it in section 4 below.

<sup>6</sup> Silverstein 1979 calls attention to the language-ideological assumptions implicit in the concept of performativity familiar from Austin's and Searle's brands of speech act theory; but I will not discuss these matters here.

<sup>7</sup> In the light of cross-cultural and diachronic evidence, it may actually be problematic to assume these three as given, unproblematic, or universally applicable; but I will leave discussion of these matters to another occasion.

<sup>8</sup> In Leezenberg 2006, I explore the radically diverging language-ideological assumptions in Grice and Confucius.

<sup>9</sup> Actually, Jakobson (1981/1957) preserves the literal-figurative opposition by reproducing Bloomfield's distinction between 'normal' or central and 'marginal' or metaphorical meanings; this assumption may be problematic, but I will not discuss it here.

### References

- Bauman, Richard & Briggs, Charles L.. 2003. *Voices of Modernity: Language Ideologies and the Politics of Inequality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1991. *Language & Symbolic Power*. Polity Press.
- Brandom, Robert. 2002. *Tales of the Mighty Dead: Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Camp, Elizabeth. 2006. Contextualism, metaphor, and what is said. *Mind and Language* 21:280–309.
- Cappelen, Herman & Lepore, Ernest. 2007. *Language Turned on Itself: The Semantics and Pragmatics of Metalinguistic Discourse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Coulson, Seana. 2003. Review of *Contexts of Metaphor*. *Journal of Linguistics* 39:704–706.
- Davidson, Donald. 2002/1986. A nice derangement of epitaphs. In *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1966. *Les mots et les choses: une archéologie des sciences humaines*. Paris: Gallimard. (English translation: *The Order of Things*, Tavistock 1970).
- Gumperz, John. 1993. Contextualization and understanding. In A. Duranti & C. Goodwin (eds.), *Rethinking Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hanks, William. 1993. Metalanguage and pragmatics of deixis. In J. Lucy (ed.), *Reflexive Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hanks, William. 1996. *Language and Communicative Practices*. Westview Press.
- Israel, Jonathan. 2006. *Enlightenment Contested*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jakobson, Roman. 1960. Closing statement: Linguistics and poetics. In T. Sebeok (ed.), *Style in Language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Jakobson, Roman. 1981/1957. Metalanguage as a linguistic problem. In *The Framework of Language*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Kuhn, Thomas S. 1970/1963. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2nd edn.
- Kuhn, Thomas S. 1993/1979. Metaphor in science. In Ortony (1993/1979).
- Lakoff, George. 1993/1979. The contemporary theory of metaphor. In Ortony (1993/1979).
- Leezenberg, Michiel. 2001. *Contexts of Metaphor*, vol. 7 of *CRiSPI*. Elsevier Science.

- Leezenberg, Michiel. 2002. Power in communication: Implications for the semantics-pragmatics interface. *Journal of Pragmatics* 34:893–908.
- Leezenberg, Michiel. 2005. Greek tragedy as impolite conversation: Towards a practice approach in linguistic theory. In S. Marmaridou & M. Drossou (eds.), *Reviewing Linguistic Thought: Converging Trends for the 21st Century*, pp. 191–208. Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter.
- Leezenberg, Michiel. 2006. Gricean and Confucian pragmatics: A contrastive analysis. *Journal of Foreign Languages* November 2006:2–21.
- Ortony, Andrew. 1993/1979. *Metaphor and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd edn.
- Reddy, Michael. 1993/1979. The conduit metaphor: A case of frame conflict in our language about language. In Ortony (1993/1979).
- Rorty, Richard. 1987. Unfamiliar noises I: Hesse and Davidson on metaphor. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 61:283–296.
- Rorty, Richard. 1989. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Silverstein, Michael. 1979. Language structure and linguistic ideology. In P. Clyne et al. (ed.), *The Elements*. Chicago Linguistic Society.
- Stalnaker, Robert. 1978. Assertion. In P. Cole (ed.), *Syntax and Semantics*, vol. 9: Pragmatics. New York: Academic Press.
- Stern, Josef. 2000. *Metaphor in Context*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Stern, Josef. 2006. Metaphor, literal, literalism. *Mind and Language* 21:243–279.
- Taylor, Charles. 1985. Theories of meaning. In *Human Agency and Language (Philosophical Papers, vol. 1)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.