Metonymy at the semantics-pragmatics interface

Markus Egg, Universität Saarbrücken

In a metonymic utterance, an expression does not refer to its usual referent but to another referent that is in some way associated with the first one. This part of the utterance meaning (its *metonymic component*) is not verbalised, but must be recovered from extralinguistic conceptual knowledge. E.g., the metonymic component of (1) is the use of *The Three Tenors* to refer to their recordings. Metonymic utterances need not exhibit semantic mismatches in their literal reading, as illustrated by (1): Its literal reading is semantically well-formed but conflicts with conceptual knowledge about shelves and tenors. However, there is a semantic mismatch for the literal reading of many metonymic utterances, e.g., in (2), where the labelling affects the containers of the wine:

(1)   The Three Tenors are on the top shelf

(2)   The wine was labelled

In this paper, I argue that metonymy is situated right at the semantics-pragmatics interface (SPI). I will expound three arguments in favour of such an analysis. First, it offers an initial *motivation* for metonymy. Second, it yields new insights into the *interaction* of literal meaning and metonymy in the determination of the full meaning of a metonymic utterance. Finally, there are properties of metonymy that can only be explained in pragmatic terms, e.g., the use of *preferences* to choose among different interpretation options for a metonymic utterance, and the influence of metonymy on the *accessibility* of discourse referents.

At a first glance, metonymy seems unmotivated: Hearers must put up with utterances that call for a non-literal interpretation, while for speakers the production of metonymic utterances is complicated in that they must partition the information they want to get across into a part that is to be verbalised and another one that is not.

These apparent problems can be put down to the *conversational maxims* (Grice 1975), the eventual motivation for metonymy. Hearers accept metonymic utterances because they believe that speakers follow the conversational maxims, in particular, the *cooperative principle*. I.e., they regard all utterances of the speaker as adequate. If utterances do not make sense literally, this is seen as a signal for metonymy. For speakers, metonymy optimises the trade-off between *contrary* conversational maxims of manner, which require an utterance to be succinct and clear at the same time: Metonymy allows succinct utterances, as their meanings are verbalised only in part. But conceptual knowledge immediately supplies the non-verbalised part, viz., the metonymic component. Thus, these utterances are clear in spite of their brevity.

This account overcomes problems for purely semantic analyses of metonymy, in particular, for the *Generative Lexicon* theory (Pustejovsky 1995), where only semantic mismatches trigger metonymy. The metonymic component is located in extended semantic entries, which introduce (in so-called 'qualia') additional information, e.g., on the origin or purpose of referents. But such analyses fail for metonymic utterances that fall outside the range of the 'qualia' (like (1) and (2)) or, like (1), show no semantic mismatch in their literal meaning.

The second argument for the SPI perspective on metonymy is that it clarifies the interaction of literal meaning and metonymy in the determination of utterance meanings. Semantic reasoning cannot tell which constituent undergoes metonymy, e.g., whether the subject or the predicate is affected in cases like (1) and (2). Pragmatic reasoning helps here: NPs of the kind *the X* presuppose that in the given context there is only one individual in the extension of *X*. If in a metonymic sentence this uniqueness presupposition still holds for the literal meaning of such an NP, the NP cannot have undergone metonymy. This diagnostic reveals that metonymy may affect different constituents. For (3), the uniqueness presupposition holds for sandwich eaters, but not for sandwiches: There may be several sandwiches, but only one sandwich eater. I.e., metonymy affects the subject, it means 'the ham sandwich eater':

(3)   The ham sandwich wants his check

In contrast, the uniqueness presupposition still holds for the wine in the metonymic (2): There is a unique wine quantity, but there may be several wine containers. Thus, the subject cannot have undergone

metonymy here, hence, it is (perhaps surprisingly) the predicate of (2) that was affected by metonymy. Its meaning emerges as 'have a container that is labelled'.

The examples suggest that the metonymic content is eventually based on a common-sense ontology. But metonymy rarely leads to several equally favoured interpretation options, as *preferences* select the contextually most plausible reading from a set of ontologically equally plausible readings. E.g., the shift from a substance to an object that it constitutes is ontologically as plausible as the shift from the substance to its container. Yet the first interpretation option is not available in (2). This contrasts with the analogous (4); here, the interpretation option that the labelling affects objects consisting of gold (e.g., ingots) is the preferred one:

(4)   The gold was labelled

The pragmatic impact of metonymy also surfaces in the fact that it may affect the *accessibility* of discourse referents. This shows up for the subject metonymy in (3), but not in the predicate metonymy in (2). The former metonymy makes available a discourse referent for the non-literal meaning of the subject and blocks the accessibility of the discourse referent for the literal meaning of the subject. Therefore, (3) can be continued by *He is in a hurry* but not by *It was very tasty*.

This contrasts with the anaphoric potential of (2), which is not affected by metonymy. I.e., metonymy does not introduce an accessible discourse referent for the wine container, neither does it make the referent of the wine inaccessible. This is illustrated by the fact that *It had a long, spicy, slightly confected finish* but not *They were mouth-blown* is a possible continuation of (2).

This interdependence of metonymy and accessibility of discourse referents is related to cases like (5), which are discussed in Grosz et al. (1995): One of their NPs (here, the subject) has two different interpretations. It may refer to the unique bearer of a specific property (whoever that might be) or to a specific individual (who happens to be identifiable as the unique bearer of this property). Nunberg (1993) calls these uses 'attributive' and 'referential'. Depending on the interpretation, these NPs introduce different discourse individuals. E.g., only the attributive interpretation of *the Vice-President of the United States* provides an accessible discourse referent for the anaphor in a continuation like *Historically, he negotiates between President and Congress*:

(5)   The Vice-President of the United States is also President of the Senate

Grosz et al. (1995) note that cases like (5) require a semantic representation formalism that can express partial interpretations of utterances. This holds good for metonymy, too, which suggests modelling metonymy in *underspecification formalisms* like UDRT (Reyle 1993), Minimal Recursion Semantics (Copestake et al. 1997), or Constraint Language for Lambda Structures (Egg et al. 2001). Semantic construction describes the meaning of metonymic utterance only in part. The further pragmatic processing of these utterances then emerges as (monotonic) integration of conceptual knowledge with partial semantic knowledge to obtain full utterance meanings.

References

Copestake, A., D. Flickinger, and I. Sag (1997). Minimal Recursion Semantics. An introduction. Available from ftp://ftp-csli.stanford.edu/linguistics/sag/mrs.ps.

Egg, M., A. Koller, and J. Niehren (2001). The constraint language for lambda-structures. *Journal of Logic, Language, and Information 10*, 457–485.

Grice, P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In P. Cole and J. Morgan (eds), *Syntax and semantics 3: Speech acts*, 41–58. New York: Academic Press.

Grosz, B., A. Joshi, and S. Weinstein (1995). Centering: a framework for modeling the local coherence of discourse. *Computational Linguistics 21*, 203–225.

Nunberg, G. (1993). Indexicality and deixis. *Linguistics & Philosophy 16*, 1–43.

Pustejovsky, J. (1995). *The Generative Lexicon*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Reyle, U. (1993). Dealing with ambiguities by underspecification: construction, representation, and deduction. *Journal of Semantics 10*, 123–179.