Max Black's "Interaction View" of Metaphor

Martin Scherzinger

Max Black analyzes the notion of metaphor in terms of an "interaction" view, which he distinguishes from the "substitution" and "comparison" views of metaphor. Broadly, the "substitution view" holds that a metaphoric expression substitutes for an equivalent literal expression or set of expressions. The meaning of the sentence "He ploughed through the discussion" amounts to a literal substitute for the word "ploughed." Instead of stating plainly, or literally, that the chairman adamantly subdued any deflections from the discussion (or something of that kind), the word "ploughed," whose literal meaning is something different, is used in place of this plainer statement. Thus a metaphorical statement is one in which its proper/literal sense is transformed by a context that foregrounds an improper/non-literal sense. Black calls this context the "frame" of the metaphor. The word(s) being used metaphorically are called the "focus." In the above example, then, "ploughed" is the focus while the rest of the sentence is the frame. For the sake of my following argument, it is already worth noting that the etymologies of all the words used above to spell out the meaning of this metaphor rest on another set of metaphors. For instance, "adamantly" comes from "Adamaster", the Titan who was turned into stone after Zeus deposed Saturn. Similarly, "deflections" involves a spatial metaphor, and so on.

Black rejects this "substitution" view principally because it fails to offer an adequate account of the reasons for substituting metaphorical for plainer prose. Metaphor, in this account, is invoked to provide pleasure by "half-concealing, half-revealing" its meaning, by diverting from the strictly appropriate meaning. Black rejects this essentially stylistic account, metaphor as ornamental, and claims instead that there is more to metaphor than providing pleasure. He mentions another purpose for metaphor under this view. Where there is no literal equivalent for some idea, a metaphor may serve to remedy a lack in the vocabulary. Thus mathematicians in search of a single expression denoting the bounding line of an angle spoke of the "leg" of an angle. This process of imputing new senses to older words is called *catachresis*. If catachresis is a genuine function of metaphor, Black argues, then it must disappear in the moment of its success because the new sense of the word will have become literal. The word "orange" now applies equally non-metaphorically to the color (even if it was once associated to it only-catachrestically) as it does to the fruit.[1] A closer analysis of catachresis might problematize Black's objection to the substitution view. However, by mentioning catachresis earlier in the argument and by emphasizing its auto-annihilation, the impact catachresis may have on his concluding remarks which center on the decorative nature of metaphor on the substitution view

is diminished. I will return to the question of catachresis later.

The "comparison view" of metaphor emphasizes the "transforming function" involved in metaphor which the reader applies (in inverse) to get at the meaning of the expression. Instead of providing the intended meaning, the author provides a *function* thereof based on similarity or analogy. The reader (assisted by the frame) grasps this function and then, through an inverse application, retraces the original meaning. Schopenhauer's statement, "A geometrical proof is a mousetrap," makes a comparison between mousetrap and geometrical proof—both are deceptively enticing and so on—such that the metaphorical statement could, once again, be replaced by a literal statement figured this time as a literal *comparison*. In short, metaphor in this account is a condensed simile, which implies, rather than states, a comparison.

By permitting a literal paraphrase, albeit more elaborate, this "comparison view" falls prey to the same objections raised by Black against the "substitution view," namely that metaphor is an irrelevant decoration giving pleasure to the reader.[2] To this he adds a further problem. If a metaphorical expression is a substitute for a literal one on the basis of *similarity*, the question of "degrees" of similarity arises. It is not the fact that this cannot be tested but that testing for likeness precisely destroys the efficacy of metaphor. For Black, instead of substituting for a formal (antecedently existing) comparison, metaphor, in fact, *creates* similarities.

This insight leads Black to his "interaction view" of metaphor, which holds that the use of metaphor brings together two thoughts of different things which interact to produce a meaning. This meaning can be reduced neither to its literal meaning nor to the meaning of a literal substitute. Rather, an extension of the meaning of the "focus" is demanded by the (new) "frame." Black invokes I.A. Richards to make his point. For Richards, a reader must attend to both the old meaning and the extension thereof in order to grasp the metaphor.[3] Black agrees with this, but disagrees with Richards' account of the mechanism which effects this extension. Richards, by speaking of "common characteristics" between the terms, remains locked into the older debate concerning the paradox of gauging these given similarities. Black emphasizes instead the "dynamic" character of metaphor whereby the two thoughts actively illuminate one another.

As a result, he explains the extension of meaning that occurs in the workings of metaphor in terms of a "filter" that selects and foregrounds certain aspects of the "principal subject" through the "subsidiary subject." In the statement "Man is a wolf," the reader (sufficiently knowledgeable about wolves) will *construct*, through a system of ideas or associated commonplaces about the subsidiary subject (wolf/wolves), a corresponding system of implications about the principal subject (Man). These commonplaces are different from those usually implied by the metaphorical expression. Instead it is "seen through" or organized by the metaphorical expression. Broadly speaking then, in this instance, the principal subject is less a member of the

human race endowed with rationality than s/he is hateful, fierce, a scavenger.

Unlike the substitution and comparison views of metaphor, the interaction view holds that metaphors cannot be replaced by literal translations without a loss in cognitive content. A distinct intellectual operation demands that a system of implications in a "subsidiary subject" organizes and constructs relations in a different field of relations, namely, the "primary subject." Both subjects have concurrently to be kept in mind in this operation. They cannot be reduced to any comparison. In the views that impute equivalence, metaphors do not capture the kind of insight involved in this process. The literal equivalent yields a loss in cognitive content, not a mere loss in charm or style. The literal paraphrase, for Black, "inevitably states too much and with the wrong kinds of emphasis."[4] He likens the implications of a metaphor to the overtones of a musical chord. If the overtones were taken as equally significant and thus played as loudly as the fundamental notes, their crucially subordinate character would be missed.

It might be noted that in describing the system of associated commonplaces applying to the idea of a wolf, Black seems to select those implications that best suit the transfer at hand. By his account, however, these commonplaces should be easily and freely evoked by the "man in the street." Why then are the words "fierce," "treacherous" and "hateful" evoked, while words like "erect-eared," "straight-tailed" or "doglike" are ignored? In fact, is the word "hateful" itself not applied *metaphorically* to wolves? If anything, the latter, more literal words, seem to count as more "commonplace." Two points should be made about this. Firstly, the associated commonplaces in many cases are themselves metaphorical— indeed, if they are to apply to a different field, perhaps they cannot be too unique or too literal.[5] An account of metaphor would have to explain how these implied metaphors that constitute the system of associated commonplaces themselves change when they are transferred. Secondly, the working examples in this essay suggest that the principal subject also "selects," emphasizes, suppresses and organizes" features of the subsidiary subject. "Fierce" is selected, "coarse-furred" is suppressed.

Although Black seems to acknowledge that the "filter" metaphor is a simplification of the process(es) of transfer that take place in a metaphorical encounter, the "musical chord" metaphor is invoked to stave off at least one of the implicit objections. When the "associated commonplaces" of a subsidiary subject are transferred to a principal subject, they undergo metaphorical change. Also, the implication system of the primary subject partly determines the character of the system to be applied. The metaphorical expression "Man is a wolf" not only makes Man appear more wolf-like, but makes wolves appear more human. The filter seems to be working in both directions.

Black argues that these shifts in implication-systems do not amount to full metaphorical changes. Their significance, like the overtones in the chord,

must be weighted. Since the primary metaphor has been analyzed into a collection of secondary metaphors (which also undergo metaphoric change) the account is potentially circular or leads to an infinite regression. However, this pessimistic reading is avoided because the implicit hierarchy between the primary and the secondary metaphors regulates the degree of stress to be placed upon an implication. To reiterate, it is this kind of hierarchy also that governs the kinds of emphasis implied by the associations of a metaphor and thus renders impossible a literal paraphrase.

This does not adequately address the complications. For Black, a literal paraphrase cannot enlighten and inform as the metaphor does, because

The implications, previously left for a suitable reader to educe for himself, with a nice feeling for their relative properties and degrees of importance, are not presented explicitly as though having equal weight. The literal paraphrase inevitably says too much—and with the wrong emphasis. One of the points I most wish to stress is that the loss in such cases is a loss in *cognitive* content; the relevant weakness of the literal paraphrase is... [that] it fails to give the *insight* that the metaphor did.[6]

There is no theoretical reason why a literal paraphrase could not be sufficiently nuanced to account for the differentiation of emphasis inherent in the metaphor. This view of metaphor seems to be suspended precariously between the claim, on the one hand, for a definite cognitive content, which, on the other hand, cannot be explicated in any way. If literal prose, precisely designed to explicate cognitive content, cannot capture the message of the metaphor, how can a cognitive content be fixed?

Some of the implications of Black's discussion of catachresis further complicate the matter. The species of catachresis referred to by Black involves the use of metaphor for some concept or object which has no literal equivalent.[7] Once the cognitive content is assimilated, however, the metaphor disappears. In other words, the metaphor has become literal. It is precisely in this moment of decline that the cognitive content is fixed. This might undermine the "interaction view" insofar as it insists on a cognitive content that does not entail the decline of the metaphor. If grasping the cognitive content has the potential to signal this decline, under what circumstance does the expression remain metaphoric? And when does it become literal?[8] Joseph Margolis, in his introduction to Black's article, mentions that the assimilation of the cognitive "achievement" does not entail the decline of the metaphor.[9] For now, it suffices to suggest that this transmutability of the literal and the metaphoric—inherent in the very possibility of catachresis—argues for a looser distinction between them.

But also, returning to Black's exact formulation, what is this "nice feeling" that the suitable reader gets when she educes the relative priorities of the implications? And how is this different from the "pleasure" ascribed by the substitution view or the "delight" ascribed by Aristotle? Precisely what

has become of the unique cognitive content (whose elaboration is left conspicuously absent in Black's text) if a sufficiently detailed description can, in fact, capture its meaning and if the only loss is that of a nice feeling?

There seem to be some remnants of the comparison view in these and other assertions. For if the primary and the secondary subjects mutually configure each other, something of the primary subject's system of commonplaces seems to play a role in the assignation of feature(s) from the secondary subject. Black echoes Goodman in describing this moment. Goodman states:

Application of a term is metaphorical only if to some extent it is contra-indicated.... Metaphor requires attraction as well as resistance—indeed, an attraction that overcomes resistance.... A metaphor is an affair between a predicate with a past and an object that yields while protesting.[10]

Similarly Black, by way of example, states:

The... implications will *not* be those comprised in the commonplaces *normally* implied by literal uses of 'man'... any human traits that can without undue strain be talked about in "wolf-language" will be rendered prominent....[11]

Questions arise. There seem to be limits on the extent to which the metaphor can organize the principal subject. Yet how are these limits to be understood if they are not predetermined to some degree? And if they are to some extent given, how would one account for those features that transgress the limits? What implications would be far-fetched? How much "strain" is becoming? The principal subject seems to be crucial here. In Black's account implied "wolf-traits" have to correspond in some way to the implied "human traits." This correspondence implies at least some field of possible overlap in the system of commonplaces. Something has to *resemble* something else or, at the very least, something has to be *comparable* to something else.

· But Black rejects Richards' assertion that certain "common characteristics [are] the ground of the metaphor."[12] He argues that this claim which suggests

That in its metaphorical use a word or expression may connote only a *selection* from the characteristics connoted in its literal uses...[is]...a lapse into the older and less sophisticated analyses.[13]

But the principal subject *is* "selective" up to a point. If it were not, there would be no question of "undue strain." Bearing this in mind, metaphor cannot, as Black claims, be said to freely *"create the similarity."*[14]

In some respects then, Black's formulation of the "interaction view" is implicated in a form of comparison after all.[15] Returning briefly to the objections raised by Black against the comparison view in the first place, a

further inadequacy can be discerned. The comparison view holds that a metaphor is essentially an elliptical simile. Black's criticism of this view centers on the problem of vagueness when similarities are understood as objectively given. Likeness, he says, "always admits of degrees."[16] But does a similarity necessarily imply an equivalent literal similarity? Perhaps a metaphor *is* an elliptical simile, in that the simile itself does not imply literal equivalence any more than the metaphor does. At any rate, Black's grounds for rejecting the notion are not sufficient.

Donald Davidson, in his book *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, draws attention to this confusion.

[I]f metaphors are elliptical similes, they say *explicitly* what similes say, for ellipsis is a form of abbreviation, not of paraphrase or indirection. But...Black's statement of what the metaphor says goes far beyond anything given by the corresponding simile.[17]

For Davidson, the very questions asked by Black are inappropriate to the case of metaphor. Analyzing metaphorical meaning or metaphorical truth cannot explain how metaphor functions. The meaning of a literal expression does not exceed its literal meaning, Davidson says, and attention should thus be focussed on how they are *used*. What "gets done" or what is "brought off" by metaphor becomes crucial in this account. Davidson rejects a specific cognitive content, emphasizing instead the effects metaphor has on us: For Davidson, "seeing as is not seeing that."[18]

[A] metaphor *says* only what shows on its face—usually a patent falsehood or an absurd truth. And this plain truth or falsehood needs no paraphrase—its meaning is given in the literal meaning of the words.[19]

What does Davidson mean by "mean"? The account is predicated on a firm distinction between meaning as a "content" to be grasped, on the one hand, and an "effect" of what something makes us notice, on the other. He states,

...what we attempt in "paraphrasing" a metaphor cannot be to give its meaning, for that lies on the surface; rather we attempt to evoke what the metaphor brings to our attention.[20]

But in what way does meaning "lie on the surface"? Is this a reference to literal meaning? Davidson argues that a content cannot be captured by metaphor, firstly because what we notice is not propositional in character, and secondly because there is no limit to what we notice. Davidson invokes Stanley Cavell who notices, for example, that many paraphrases of a metaphor have the words "and so on" appended at the end.[21] Paraphrases thus seem to be a witness to some kind of undecidability. Davidson's initial claim "that metaphors mean what the words, in their most literal

interpretation, mean, and nothing more,"[22] can now be read in two ways. On the one hand, if "what the metaphor makes us notice,"[23] is beyond the scope of "meaning" (construed as propositional and finite), then the role of the literal meaning in the workings of the metaphor (while constraining its "meaning") does not fully account for the effect of the metaphor. In short, the word "meaning," in this reading, does not apply to the case of metaphor. On the other hand, if the literal meaning of the word/s that constitute the metaphor *do* account for that which the metaphor makes us notice, then (since the latter is endless) the possibility opens up that, in some way, there is no limit to what a literal expression may "mean," or make us notice, either.[24]

In other words, to invoke the previous example, it is the literal meaning of "wolf" that provides, for Davidson, "a kind of lens or lattice"[25] to draw attention to "Man." But how is it possible that the literal meaning of "wolf" in this context can be extended at all if it is not inherently endless? Could it not be said that the context in which this particular "wolf" appears simply draws attention to this inherent undecidability? But then, what is "wolf" without a linguistic context? Is it "erect-eared," "four letters," "endangered," "a word" or "alarming"? Indeed, on what "surface" does the meaning lie?

What does Black say about the role of this linguistic context? Without taking up the issues of cultural literacy that accrue to Black's positing of a unified reader (who should be read more catechristically than literally), I will make one final point about Black's understanding of this context with reference to his discussion about translatability. In elucidating the "frame" and the "focus" of the metaphorical expression "The chairman ploughed through the discussion," Black makes the following claim: "If the sentence about the chairman's behavior is translated word for word into any language for which this is possible, we shall of course want to say that the translated sentence is a case of the *very same metaphor*."[26] Is this so? In the Shona language, the sentence "Mbira yangu yatanda vara" means, in the first instance, "Mbira music has become well-known." If it is translated word for word we get "Mbira has grown legs." In English the "literally" translated sentence (about legs) would demand a metaphorical reading which it does not in Shona, where it "literally" means the former sentence (about being well-known). Is the latter sentence (about legs) therefore a "metaphorical" translation or is it "literal"? Can we decide? At the very least, this expression cannot be said to be a case of "the very same metaphor."

I have attempted to indicate that the common distinction between the literal and the metaphorical is less stable than Black's text is prepared to advance. In effect, this renders the distinction between the two less pertinent, or pertinent in a radically different way. This essentially negative claim suggests a differently focused set of questions pertaining to the case of metaphor, which may involve a closer analysis of the workings of the very "literal" expressions against which "metaphorical" expressions are often

defined. Black formulates his "interaction view" of metaphor thus:

...when we use metaphor we have two thoughts of different things active together and supported by a single word or phrase, whose meaning is a result of their interaction.[27]

Can this not be said for "literal" expressions as well? Do "literal" expressions not involve an interaction? Are "literal" expressions not "active together," producing meanings that result from this interaction? Can the "literal" be grasped at all apart from an orientation toward more language, a "second thought," in a linguistic context?[28] By mentioning, albeit indistinctly, that the "filtering" in metaphor operates in both directions—that the metaphor "makes the wolf seem more human"—Black concedes that the pattern of implications is diverse, constantly shifting and that there is nothing *inherently* determinate about the hierarchy of associations. Are "literal" expressions thus only partially identifiable, proceeding inevitably from a broader system of known codes? Is their connection to "the world" posited through a (socio)linguistic network rather than through some privileged access to it? In short, can the difference between the "literal" and the "metaphorical" be *anything*? ⬧

Notes

1 Goodman invokes a similar kind of reasoning when he argues against a strict division between the literal and the metaphorical. "Metaphors, like new styles of representation, become more literal as their novelty wanes." For Goodman this does not only pertain to the case of catachresis. Novelty, albeit of a specific kind, goes some way in distinguishing metaphorical and literal expressions in general. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to the Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Hackett Press, 1976), p. 68.

2 It is worth noting here, that if the paraphrase is more elaborate than the metaphor, then the advantage of the metaphor is not strictly ornamental. It provides the information with fewer words. This could apply to metaphors under the substitution view as well.

3 I.A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (Oxford, 1936), p. 127.

4 Max Black, "Metaphor" in *Philosophy Looks at the Arts*, ed. Joseph Margolis (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), p. 549.

5 In explaining how the system of commonplaces is reached, Black paradoxically invokes the *literal* usage of the subsidiary term. In "Metaphor," p. 544 he states, "Literal uses of the word 'wolf' are governed by syntactical and semantic rules, violation of which produces nonsense or self-contradiction...literal uses of the word normally commit the speaker to acceptance of a set of standard beliefs about wolves (current platitudes)...." "But why are *literal* uses taken to constitute the commonplaces when the commonplaces cited in the working examples are all 'metaphorical?' At the very least, there is no mention here of the potential inapplicability of literal commonplaces.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 549.

7 Catachresis can also be employed to enhance the meaning of a concept, to link one

concept to another by employing a common metaphor, to make a line of verse fit a set meter, etc.

8 How is it even possible to give an example of catachresis (the leg of an angle) if something of its metaphorical dimension has not remained, or cannot be traced? Perhaps we would like to say that "leg" applies to the pole-shaped support of a table less metaphorically than it does to the angle and more metaphorically than it does to the limb.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 532.

10 Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to the Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Hackett Press, 1976), p. 69.

11 "Metaphor," p. 545.

12 Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 543.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 544.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 543.

15 It could be argued that the most meaningful metaphors in works of art "span the greatest distance" without necessarily "corresponding" to their antecedents. Black's insistence on limiting the system of commonplaces, however, can theoretically be justified only in terms of such correspondences. In this way it remains implicitly beholden to a "comparison view."

16 *Ibid.*, p. 542.

17 Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Claredon Press, 1984) p. 254. Italics original.

18 *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, p. 263.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 259.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 262.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 263.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 245.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 262.

24 Davidson suggests this possibility in a footnote. He opposes his position from that of Cavell, for whom the endless character of paraphrase "distinguishes metaphor from...literal discourse," claiming instead that this endless character is "the same for any use of language." *Ibid.*, p. 263. Italics added.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 261.

26 "Metaphor," p. 537.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 537.

28 To this "context" should be added a sense of the variable social inflections, valuations and connotations which are condensed in specific social formations. This cannot be elaborated here.

Music Department
Columbia University