

THE ROLE OF CULTURAL BACKGROUND IN UNDERSTANDING METONYMIC TARGET MEANINGS

Mariana Neagu

Dpt. Of English, Faculty of Letters, Dunărea de Jos University of Galați, Romania

Abstract

According to the standard approach in cognitive linguistics, metonymy is a pervasive and powerful conceptual mechanism, a mapping of knowledge from a source domain to a target domain. In metonymy, the source concept serves as a reference point for attaining the intended target. Brone and Feyaerts (2003: 23) show that reference point reasoning consists of focusing on a salient, easily coded element (the reference point) in order to establish mental access to another, less salient conceptual entity (the target) which is generally harder to code.

As has been shown in cognitive linguistics literature, universal human knowledge and bodily-grounded knowledge are essential for the interpretation of metonymy. However, there are some cases that are much less discussed; these are metonymies where the source concept encodes cultural knowledge that is crucial for the interpretation of the metonymic process. Such cases may require an increased cognitive effort and, if the interlocutor does not possess the necessary background knowledge, he cannot draw appropriate inferences automatically and successful communication may become confusing

The aim of this paper is to investigate the role of cultural background in understanding metonymic target meanings in the literary discourse. The analysis focuses on fragments selected from a famous British contemporary novel and includes instances of exophoric reference, i.e. how metonymy is used to refer to objects and actions taking place outside the text (Littlemore, 2015:82)

The analysis presents various conceptual configurations or Idealized Cognitive Models: PART FOR WHOLE, CATEGORY AND PROPERTY and PRODUCTION) and reinforces the idea that the cognitive principle of relevance (saliency) governs the selection of the original, creative metonymic vehicle. It brings evidence for the need of shared background knowledge (by the reader and the author) where universal, embodied knowledge and cultural knowledge are equally important.

Key words: source concept, target concept, metonymic model, cultural knowledge

1. INTRODUCTION

The present study is motivated by two main factors: first, in fiction, metonymy has received little attention from a cognitive linguistic perspective; secondly, figurative language in Ian Mc Ewan's novels has been a constant concern for me for the last two years (Neagu 2017).

The main aim of the paper is to throw light on metonymic meaning understanding in the literary discourse by discussing types of metonymy and by looking at culture-related aspects of metonymy (section 2).

1.1 Theoretical assumptions on metonymy and metonymy types

The theoretical assumptions on which the present paper is embedded into are derived from the cognitive linguistic approach to metonymy. From this standpoint, metonymy is not restricted to language but is 'a cognitive process in which one conceptual entity, the vehicle, provides mental access to another conceptual entity, the target, within the same idealized cognitive model'. (Radden and Kovecses, 1999: 21)

Idealized cognitive models (ICMs) are the knowledge networks that we have in our heads and encompass both the cultural knowledge people have and their subjective views of a particular concept. ICMs have an encyclopedic, flexible nature and are not necessarily real (this is why they are called 'idealized').

Radden and Kovecses, 1999) argue that ICMs contain conceptual relationships which may give rise to metonymy. They subsume metonymy-producing relationships under two general conceptual configurations: (a) whole ICM and its part(s) and (b) parts of an ICM.

The former configuration is assumed to underlie the following whole and part metonymies, where one part of an entity can represent the whole or vice versa: (1) PART FOR WHOLE (e.g. *a perfect set of wheels*), (2) ENDS FOR WHOLE SCALE (e.g. *young and old alike*), (3) MATERIAL FOR OBJECT (e.g. *use only a 3-wood off the tee*), (4) SUB-EVENT FOR WHOLE EVENT (e.g. *walk up the aisle*), (5) CATEGORY FOR MEMBER OF CATEGORY (e.g. *Fancy coming round for some drinks*) and (6) SALIENT PROPERTY FOR CATEGORY (e.g. *The brothers needed some muscle*).

The latter configuration relates conceptual entities that function as parts with respect to a whole ICM and includes the following types of (part and part) metonymies: (1) TIME FOR ACTION (e.g. *They summered in Cornwall*), (2) THING PERCEIVED FOR PERCEPTION (e.g. *Head not so great/ There goes my knee*), (3) EFFECT FOR CAUSE (e.g. *Because you live on a fast road*), (4) PRODUCER FOR PRODUCT (e.g. *She took out the Hoover/I've got a Ford*), (5) CONTROLLER FOR CONTROLLED (e.g. *Rommel was in retreat*), (6) POSSESSED FOR POSSESSOR (e.g. *He married money and became an MP*), (7) CONTAINER FOR CONTENTS (e.g. *I'll have a glass to celebrate*), (8) PLACE FOR INHABITANTS (e.g. *The whole town is on the verge of starvation*), (9) WORDS FOR THE CONCEPT THEY EXPRESS, (10) MODIFIED FORM FOR ORIGINAL FORM (e.g. *LOL – laugh out loud*)

1.2 Research questions

The methodological questions this paper builds on are the following:

1. Why are there cases when the reader cannot draw appropriate inferences of metonymy in fiction?
2. What is the nature of metonymy like? What are the implications for this?
3. What means of persuasion is metonymy involved in?

In the next section I will first discuss the types of metonymy identified in twenty-one fragments selected from the novel *Nutshell* (2016) by Ian Mc Ewan and I will then focus on culture-related aspects of metonymy found in the same novel.

2. DATA ANALYSIS

The book's title, *Nutshell*, comes from a speech in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*:

“Oh God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space — were it not that I have bad dreams.”

This speech, used as an epigraph by Ian Mc Ewan, metaphorically conveys the idea of both confinement and free space where the yet unborn baby can sneak into other's lives easily. By combining the premises of Shakespeare's “Hamlet” and Amy Heckerling's 1989 movie, *Look Who's Talking*, Ian McEwan has created a smart, funny and captivating novel.

It is a story told by a fetus who is a kind of Hamlet in uterus — “a baby-to-be (or not-to-be, as the case may be)” as the author himself claims. This 1st person narrator, a fetus just two weeks before being born, witnesses an affair between his mother, Trudy, and his uncle, Claude, who are plotting to kill the baby's father, John. The narrator is burdened with the responsibility of how to avenge his father's death..

The fragments we have chosen to analyse are meant to illustrate metonymy types associated with some ICMs proposed by Radden and Kovecses (1999) that we briefly discussed in section 1.1.

2.1 The MATERIAL FOR OBJECT metonymy

McEwan's narrator is a well-spoken, highbrow unborn baby who surprises the reader by his mature, sometimes even solemn tone of his ‘voice’, suggested by the use of words normally heard among

specialists. Actually, the novelist's appeal to field-specific terminology can be noticed in some of his other novels, such as *Enduring Love* and *Saturday*. (See Neagu 2016)

The scientifically literate fetus, preoccupied with his selfhood, is speaking about his genetic inheritance, of his *genome*, i.e. the genetic material present in his organism:

- (1) I also blend John and Trudy in my daydreams — like every child of estranged parents, I long to remarry them, this base pair, and so unite my circumstances to *my genome*. (Ch.2, p.10)

This metonymy, MATERIAL FOR OBJECT, belonging to the Constitution ICM, reinforces the idea that knowledge of the particular meanings attached to language by different discourse communities (e.g. geneticists) is an important prerequisite to metonymy comprehension.

2.2 The PART FOR WHOLE metonymy

Further, the reader finds out more about the narrator's selfhood through PART FOR WHOLE metonymies that add both cohesion and a touch of irony to the text:

- (2) NOW, TO MY father, John Cairncross, a big man, *my genome's other half*, whose helical twists of fate concern me greatly. ... (Ch.2, p.10)
- (3) My uncle - *a quarter of my genome*, of my father's a half, but no more like my father than I to Virgil or Montaigne. (Ch.4, p.33)

In example (3) irony builds on metonymy and simile; the contrast is between the entity involved in the simile and the property ascribed to such entity.

With the development of the story and the unborn baby's growing awareness of the danger around him (his mother and uncle's plan to kill his father), he addresses the better part of his split self:

- (4) Then, *dear future best self*, get yourself to Shoreditch, warn my father, tell him everything you know. (Ch. 6, p.54)
- (5) Then, *kind avatar*, phone Leviathan now, call the police, make them investigate. (Ch. 6, p. 54)

2.3 The PRODUCT FOR PRODUCER metonymy

The narrator has little respect for his uncle, Claude, a banal, cliché-spouting, unpoetic person, and metonymically refers to him as *a man of riffs*, *a dribbling cliché* who strongly contrasts with his father, John, a man who loves literature and writes poems:

- (6) For Claude is a man who prefers to repeat himself. *A man of riffs* (Ch. 1, p. 5)
- (7) I hate her and her remorse. How did she step from John to Claude, from *poetry to dribbling cliché*? (Ch. 12, p.117)

Example (7) is a fine illustration of the principle of extremes that determines the metonymic vehicle choice because 'extreme cases are more likely than cases to be found in the middle of a scale to represent the scale as a whole'. (Littlemore, 2018: 35)

Another character in the novel, Elodie, a pretty young thing who writes poems about owls and a hypothetical lover of John, is referred to by the narrator as *untrustworthy dactyl*, an instance of metonymy which brings further evidence for the idea of domain highlighting involved by the referential use of metonymy (De Mendoza and Perez in Panther and Thornburg, 2003: 46):

- (8) Elodie, scanning poet, *untrustworthy dactyl*. (Ch.17, p.158)

The type of metonymy involved in the description of John (associated with *poetry*), Claude (*a man of riffs*, producing *dribbling cliché*) and Elodie (*the untrustworthy dactyl*) is the PRODUCT FOR PRODUCER, which is the reversed type of PRODUCER FOR PRODUCT, commonly found in the Radden and Kovecses' (1999) classification.

The Production ICM is equally nicely explored by the novelist when the narrator reveals that he enjoys everything that his mother enjoys. He has a degree of hedonism and becomes quite a connoisseur of good wine, too:

(9) I like to share a glass with my mother. [...] *a good burgundy* (her favourite) or *a good Sancerre* (also her favourite) decanted through a healthy placenta. Even before the wine arrives - tonight, *a Jean-Max Roger Sancerre* [...] - But oh, ... *a joyous, blushful Pinot Noir*, or *a gooseberried Sauvignon*... (Ch.1, p.6-7)

Some of the expensive, high-quality products, prestige items enumerated above are instances of the PLACE FOR PRODUCT metonymy: *Burgundy, Sancerre*.

2.4. The TRAIT FOR PERSON metonymy

Earlier in the novel, Elodie is referred to by the narrator as *pale beauty* and *an assured duck's voice* which are TRAIT FOR PERSON metonymies involving the possession ICM:

(10) *Pale beauty* and *an assured duck's voice* are not my allies. But there may be nothing between them, and I like her. (Ch. 7, p.65)

This type of metonymy can also be interpreted as SALIENT PROPERTY FOR CATEGORY which belongs to the Category and property ICM. Following Littlemore (2018: 31) we can explain the switch between these two readings by the flexible nature of metonymy and of the human mind.

2.5 The paragonic use of names

Metonymy is an important tool in creating and understanding irony, as can be proved further by examples where a socially and philosophically literate fetus expresses his views:

(11) Ruthless mother! This will be an undoing, my fall, for only in fairy tales are unwanted babies orphaned upwards. *The Duchess of Cambridge* will not be taking me on. (Ch. 5, p. 43)

(12) Teenagers phone in with problems that would stump *a Plato* or *a Kant*. (Ch.8, p.77)

Actually, the proper names refer to a type of person than an actual person, where the bearer of a property (e.g. *The Duchess of Cambridge*) stands for characteristic property (e.g. caring love for children). This use of a person's name for trait is labelled as the paragonic use of names. A paragon is an individual (or a set of individuals) that "represents either an ideal or its opposite" (Lakoff 1987: 87-88). This ideal is a type of metonymic prototype (e.g. *Plato, Kant*) for a category (elite philosophers).

A prototypical instantiation tends to form the stereotypes that we use to index certain groups of people of a certain nationality (e.g. the English, the Scots, the French) as in the following:

(13) I'll make a version of the womb, for my student days, set aside the Enlightenments of *Rosbifs*, *the Jocks* and *Frogs*. (Ch. 15, p. 146)

The paragonic use of names is related to the evaluative function of metonymy.

2.6 Culture-related aspects of metonymy

A close look at the excerpts selected from the novel also reveals exophoric uses of metonymy, that is, instances when the narrator invokes information outside of the text and the reader may experience some difficulty in getting the exact intended meaning and message.

Thus, the phrase *the thirteenth floor* in the fragments below acts as a linguistic trigger that activates stored encyclopedic knowledge in the broad sense.

The unborn baby worries that once his mother and uncle have murdered his father he might be abandoned to strangers. His fear is rendered by the metonymic shorthand *the thirteenth floor* which can be associated with something not really missing, but something sinister or clandestine:

(14) My solo flight of self-pity settles me somewhere on *the thirteenth floor* of the brutal tower block my mother says she sometimes gazes on sadly from an upper bedroom window. (Ch.5, p.43)

(15) No harpsichord lessons on *the thirteenth floor*. (Ch. 5, p.44)

(16) Give me my go, my afterlife, paradise on earth, even a hell, *a thirteenth floor*. (Ch. 17, p.160)

I consider the phrase is an instantiation of the PLACE FOR EVENT metonymy because the place has probably become relevant through a theme present in popular culture, i.e. movies such as *The Thirteenth Floor*, (the title of a mystery sci-fi thriller released in 1999 which deals with the topic of virtual reality, where the main character is an inventor of a computer-generated reality), *Nightmare on the 13th floor*, the TV series *Babylon 5* (the episode *Grey 17 Is Missing*).

The same phrase also occurs modified by a genitive viewpoint marker (e.g. *my thirteenth floor*), thus showing that the frame is profiled from the experiential perspective of the 1st person narrator:

(17) And blow me upwards, hellwards, to *my thirteenth floor*. (Ch. 7, p.66)

The source of information the narrator has is the radio news and all kinds of podcasts. He unconsciously absorbs the works of scientists and philosophers such as the 17th century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, author of *Leviathan* (1651) and one of the founders of modern political philosophy. This philosopher is invoked when the baby to be or not to be, burdened with the responsibility of how to avenge his father's death, eventually realizes that revenge is dead:

(18) Revenge is dead. *Hobbes* was right, my young friend. The state must have a monopoly of violence, a common power to keep us all in awe.' (Ch.6, p. 54)

According to Hobbes man in nature was a bit of a brute in order to survive in the natural world; man's fear of danger and violent death, the discord among humans could have been solved by a strong social authority that should be directed toward the good of people and could keep peace among them. Hobbes' view is that nothing about humans is divine or even intelligent, that human psychology has nothing to do with morality and that rather than morality, humans are driven by fear of death.

Knowledgeable as he is, the narrator uses the shorthand reference to *Leviathan*, the symbol of the absolute ruler that should restore order and peace, taking into account the mutual relationship between protection and obedience:

(19) There it is again, the slender lifeline of insinuation to support my cowardly hope that The Force-*Leviathan* not I will take revenge. (Chapter 11, p.109)

The idea of the life of man as solitary, poor, "nasty, brutish and short" in this dangerous bleak world is conveyed through this instance of metonymic intertextuality.

(20) Besides, in my confinement I had other concerns: my drink problem, family worries, an uncertain future in which I faced a possible jail sentence or a life in 'care' in the careless lap of *Leviathan*, fostered up to *the thirteenth floor*. (Ch. 15, p. 145)

Another proof of the role of cultural background knowledge in understanding metonymic target meanings is the shorthand reference to the rule of law. The extra-judicial killing that is about to happen gives the author the opportunity to discuss the rule of law. As the narrator cannot protect his father, he turns to Hobbes, who believed that only by vesting all political power in the hands of one political body men can be assured a peaceful life. In the same manner, the fetus has a faith in life after birth as he perceives the chief inspector will restore order and justice:

(21) I'd say the chief inspector is squatting on her haunches... It's wrong of me to dislike her. She's *the rule of law* and I count myself already in the court of Hobbes. (Ch. 19, p.181)

2.7 Findings

The findings discussed in this section refer to each of the research questions and are in relation to previous research on metonymy. Thus, the idea that the indirect nature of metonymy makes it a useful device for vague communication can partly answer the first research question regarding cases when the reader cannot draw appropriate inferences of metonymy. The difficulty in understanding metonymic

target meanings can arise when the source concept encodes cultural knowledge as shown in the paragonic use of names (section 2.5) or in cultural allusions and/or cases of intertextuality (section 2.6).

The findings related to the second research question regarding the nature of metonymy and the implications for this, support the claim that metonymy has a flexible nature (Littlemore 2018) which sometimes makes it hardly distinguishable from metaphor (e.g. *pale beauty, an assured duck's voice*). Hence, the need for further research in the field of methods of metonymy identification.

Relative to the third research question about the means of persuasion metonymy is involved in I have found evidence that metonymy plays a role in *pathos* (it appeals to emotions) and in *ethos* (it involves attitude). The attitudinal/evaluative or positioning function is supported by “the trait for person” metonymy and the paragonic use of names (*Hobbes* is serving as a metonymic paragon for the category of ‘great justice people’)

Besides an evaluative function, metonymy has a playful and creative function. As humour is pervasive throughout the whole novel, the trope we have analyzed seems to serve playfulness well in most of the examples presented. Examples such as *the Duchess of Cambridge, a Plato, a Kant* demonstrate that metonymy is an important tool in creating and understanding irony.

3. CONCLUSION

Metonymy, a basic trope, can combine with the other basic trope, metaphor, a combination resulting in metaphor within metonymy (*joyous, blushful Pinot Noir*). It can also combine with specific tropes like hyperbole (hyperbolic metonymy) and irony (ironic metonymy).

Metonymy can be turned into metaphor when an abstract context, a highly complex entity is introduced: *The thirteenth floor, Leviathan, the court of Hobbes*. Individual differences in representing the meaning of metonymy may appear when they pertain to individuals with different language and cultural backgrounds.

In understanding metonymy, encyclopaedic (universal) human knowledge and bodily-grounded knowledge is crucial but cultural knowledge encoded by the metonymic source concept is equally significant for the decoding of the metonymic process and should be given equal importance in further research.

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