

Interventions / Discussions

Speaker Meaning and Davidson on Metaphor: A Reply to McGuire

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1. Introduction

John Michael McGuire (2001) presents a dilemma for Donald Davidson's denial of metaphorical content in the latter's "What Metaphors Mean" (1978). Probably, says McGuire, Davidson has simply overlooked the possibility that speakers mean propositions when they speak metaphorically. If so, all Davidson is saying is that *expressions* (i.e., word, phrase, and sentence *types*) do not have additional metaphorical meanings. This is so obvious as to make Davidson's paper "insignificant" (McGuire 2001, p. 444). Besides which, McGuire continues, if Davidson intended to *deny* that speakers mean propositions in speaking metaphorically, his view is "obviously false" (ibid., p. 447). This again would make Davidson's supposedly classic paper "insignificant."

As I argue below, I think this harsh verdict of insignificance unwarranted. First, I believe it is quite clear that Davidson did not simply miss the possibility that speakers could mean things in metaphorical talk. Second, I believe Davidson's positive view, including its rejection of speaker meaning in metaphor, is not "obviously false."

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Before moving on I should clarify that, for the most part, I will not be presenting my own views on metaphor in what follows. I wish, rather, to defend Davidson's paper from criticisms which, to my mind, move far too quickly. For the record, however, let me say that I myself suspect that at least some "metaphorical talk" can be explained by appeal to speaker meaning—Davidson does seem to me to have made an overgeneralization. I am thus in partial agreement with McGuire, and with Searle (1979). That said, I doubt that all the things we call "metaphor" can be captured straightforwardly by appeal to speaker meaning, for reasons which I take from Davidson. Indeed, because of this, I frankly suspect what we pre-theoretically label "metaphor" is not a unitary phenomenon.¹

My own views aside, my plaint in the present work will be about what McGuire has and has not shown in his article, rather than with the truth of McGuire's conclusion—i.e., that Davidson's view is ultimately incorrect. Put another way, though I am not personally a Davidsonian about metaphor, I have never found Davidson's position to be "obviously false" or in any other way "insignificant." McGuire has not changed my mind one whit on that score. I hope to explain why.

2. Background: Davidson's Negative Claims, Part I

In what follows, I will try to show both that Davidson anticipated the appeal to speaker meaning, and that his views on metaphorical talk are not "obviously false." But, to situate my arguments, let me quickly sketch the overall structure of Davidson's classic paper. What Davidson does, for the most part, is to reject certain views about *what metaphors mean*, and about *how metaphors are made and understood*. He rejects these views partly because they are open to specific objections, and partly because they do not adequately address the question of *what differentiates metaphor from literal speech*. Below I will consider three of these rejected views. In issuing his criticisms of these views, Davidson highlights along the way several important positive insights into what he considers the true nature of metaphor. Building on these, Davidson eventually introduces "some limited positive claims" (1978, p. 247).

As any reader of "What Metaphors Mean" would agree, two of the views which Davidson rejects are:

View 1: "In metaphor certain words take on a new, or what are often called 'extended' meanings" (Davidson 1978, p. 248).

View 2: "The figurative meaning of a metaphor is the literal meaning of the corresponding simile" (ibid., p. 253).

View 1 essentially says that metaphorical sentences are ambiguous because they contain ambiguous *words*. Davidson's own example is that, in

speaking of Tolstoy as “a great moralizing infant,” the word “infant” takes on its metaphorical meaning. He makes similar remarks about “face” having two meanings. Metaphor thus reduces to lexical ambiguity. Davidson offers at least three objections to this view, which I here briefly summarize. First, saying this, one fails to capture what is genuinely special and different about metaphor; specifically, one misses the difference between metaphor and a new meaning for an old sound-pattern—as when “spat” took on the additional meaning of petty quarrel in North America. This is simply meaning change, not metaphor. A second related problem is that there would, on View 1, be no difference between “dead metaphors” and “live metaphors”—the special meaning of the “live metaphor” should still be there when the metaphor dies (Davidson 1978, p. 253). Yet, patently, something is lost in this transition. Davidson also remarks, third, that an account of metaphor should allow the ordinary meaning of the lexical item to “do its work” even after the metaphorical character of the utterance is recognized; but resolving a lexical ambiguity is not like this (*ibid.*, p. 249).

View 2 is born from the insight (insight number one, if you will) that there are parallels/similarities between simile and metaphor. It differs from View 1 not in positing extra expression meanings—both View 1 and View 2 do that—but in how the “second meaning” arises. For example, according to View 2 the sentence “Christ was a chronometer” has two meanings, one literal, one metaphorical. In its metaphorical sense, goes this proposal, the sentence is synonymous with “Christ was like a chronometer.” Now, though the sentence as a whole has a second meaning on View 2, no particular word in it does. Rather, the second “sentence meaning” is derived by a sentence-level rule: to get the metaphorical meaning, add “like” into the sentence actually spoken, and take the literal meaning of the result. The obvious objection to View 2, so construed, is that metaphors are often difficult to capture; but adding “like” into the sentence spoken is as easy as could be (*ibid.*, p. 254). Noting this, Davidson considers an amended version of View 2, according to which, roughly, the metaphorical meaning includes a specification of the respects in which the one thing is like the other. Thus, the metaphorical meaning of “Christ was a chronometer” would be closer to *Christ was like a chronometer in that both are* _____. The problem with the amended version of View 2 is that now the *literal* meaning of the corresponding simile-sentence, “Christ was like a chronometer,” does not capture the metaphor. In which case, the truly hard part—namely, finding the “respects”—is no longer captured by the proposal (see *ibid.*, p. 255, for this general line of argument). Summing up, the unamended version of View 2 gives the wrong answer to “How are metaphors made and understood?” because it predicts that metaphor interpretation is extremely easy. As for the amended version, it does not really answer this question at all: bringing in simile does not do any work

on the amended version, because in *both* simile and metaphor one is left wondering how the hearer picks out the right “respects.”²

There is another problem as well. Both View 1 and View 2 posit extra meanings for sentences. This opens up both views to a general and powerful objection, viz., that if a meaning attaches to an expression type, rather than merely attaching to tokens of it, then this “extra meaning” is *ipso facto* part of literal meaning. That, after all, is what “literal meaning” amounts to: the meaning attaching to, or deriving from, the type. But then word types can only have literal meanings, and sentence types can only have literal meanings. (N.B.: “dead metaphor” meanings are just a sub-variety of literal meanings. Thus, Davidson’s remark, quoted by McGuire [2001, p. 447], that “dead metaphors rise from the grave as literal meanings.”) Thus, the ambiguity theory utterly fails to capture what differentiates metaphorical speech from literal speech. Essentially for this reason, Davidson says that metaphor must belong exclusively to the domain of use, not to what either the individual words or the whole sentence means (Davidson 1978, p. 247).

3. Against Metaphor as Speaker Meaning: Davidson’s Negative Claims, Part 2

Having rejected View 1 and View 2, but having noted the parallels between metaphor and simile, Davidson considers a third view. The insight behind it (insight number two if you will) is that the literal meaning of the sentence used metaphorically is usually patently and obviously false. For instance, it is simply obvious that Tolstoy the author was no longer an infant. (Metaphorical speech may also be all too patently true, of course: “No man is an island.”) Thus, though Davidson does not put it this way, metaphor bears some resemblance not only to simile, but also to Grice’s (1975) conversational implicature. Seeing the parallel with conversational implicature also allows one to capture a related sub-insight, namely, that, like conversational implicature, metaphor is a work of imagination and “real world knowledge”: there is no manual or algorithm for understanding a metaphor, and there are no special linguistic abilities involved either. Understanding metaphor is not a matter of applying an extra “code” antecedently shared by speaker and hearer, any more than understanding implicature is. Given this, one might suppose—indeed, Searle (1979) does suppose—that metaphor is *very* like conversational implicature. The bizarreness of metaphorical talk triggers the hearer to look for some other proposition, some additional “cognitive content,” which the speaker could reasonably have meant—using, as in the case of conversational implicature, all her powers of imagination, conjecture, and inference. Thus, we arrive at view number three:

View 3: Metaphor has an additional cognitive content which the speaker meant, and which is found not by algorithm or other special lin-

guistic knowledge, but by inferences (in the broadest sense of that word) about what it would be rational/cooperative to have meant.

This is the view of metaphor which McGuire thinks that Davidson has very likely missed. McGuire further suggests that, once noticed, there is a straightforward way to evade Davidson's arguments against "metaphorical content." Indeed, as noted at the outset, the verdict is doubly bad: McGuire maintains that if Davidson accepts View 3, then his results are basically "obvious"; if, on the other hand, Davidson somehow intended to reject View 3—which, McGuire says, is quite unclear—then Davidson's view is "obviously false." Either way, it is "insignificant." I disagree on all counts. In particular, Davidson does consider View 3. It is not true that "What Metaphors Mean" is "certainly guilty" of "neglect of the very concept of speaker meaning" (McGuire 2001, p. 450); nor is it true that "Davidson's classic paper on metaphor is noticeably lacking in any explicit expression or discussion of this distinction [between expression meaning and speaker meaning]" (ibid., p. 445). Moreover, Davidson offers enough compelling arguments against View 3 that it is unfair to call his view "obviously false."

Davidson's complaint about this third view is that, as everyone seems to grant, it is extremely hard to paraphrase a metaphor—even in the case of some of the simplest metaphors. Any attempt to provide an "exhaustive catalogue" of the metaphor's meaning seems to go on without end. Indeed, some think that adequately paraphrasing metaphorical content is impossible, that any paraphrase loses something essential. Yet—and this is the objection—if a metaphor has an additional cognitive content, which the speaker meant, it should not generally be so difficult (or even impossible) to describe that extra meaning.³ Why, Davidson encourages us to wonder, does every paraphrase lose so much if there is simply additional speaker meaning, with additional truth conditions? A closely related point is this: in understanding a metaphorical utterance, "what we notice or see is not, in general, propositional in character" (1978, p. 263). He sums up with a puzzle that arises for all the views he rejects, View 3 included:

There is, then, a tension in the usual view of metaphor. For on the one hand, the usual view wants to hold that a metaphor does something no plain prose can possibly do and, on the other hand, it wants to explain what a metaphor does by appealing to cognitive content—just the sort of thing plain prose is designed to express. (Davidson 1978, p. 261)

The puzzle is especially acute in Davidson's mind, by the way, because he sees thought, talk, and truth-conditions as being so intimately connected. If there is no sentence of natural language which can capture one's purported thought, Davidson will want to say that there was no (proposi-

tional) thought; if no truth-theory can allow one to interpret an utterance, that utterance, for Davidson, cannot have expressed a genuine thought. But then where there can be no *paraphrase*, there can be no *proposition meant*.

Ineffable propositions-meant are patently not a viable solution to his puzzle, as far as Davidson is concerned.⁴ Thus View 3 cannot be saved, on pain of breaking the intimate bonds that Davidson sees between truth, thought, and talk. Moreover, not everything that the interpreter comes to notice is propositional—one can, for example, notice a rose, and its delightful scent. But noticing the rose, and its scent, is not itself noticing-that. (Though it certainly can lead to some noticing-that.) So, for this reason as well, metaphor cannot be reduced to speaker meaning.

Davidson's "negative results" then are two. First, what is universally recognized by readers of "What Metaphors Mean," he concludes that it is a mistake to attach a "second meaning," a second set of truth conditions, to the *expression type* used. This was the result sketched in Section 2, above. Second, and less obviously, he concludes that it is a mistake to add a second proposition, an additional "cognitive content," which the *speaker* intended. As he puts it, "a metaphor doesn't say anything beyond its literal meaning (nor does its maker say anything, in using the metaphor, beyond the literal)" (1978, p. 246). Put otherwise, Davidson considers and rejects the view that metaphor is wholly a matter of communication, in the Gricean (1957) sense of intending to induce thoughts by having one's intentions recognized, and so on—i.e., communication in the sense of conveying truths or falsehoods (Davidson, 1978, p. 246). Metaphorical talk not being communicative explains the datum that it is so difficult to find an expression which precisely expresses the supposed proposition-meant. However, to deny that communication is at issue just is to reject View 3. Or still again, to drive my point home, consider this passage:

The central error about metaphor is most easily attacked when it takes the form of a theory of metaphorical meaning [for expression types?—R. S.], but behind that theory, and storable independently, is the thesis that associated with a metaphor is a cognitive content that *its author wishes to convey* and that the interpreter must grasp if he is to get the message. (Davidson 1978, p. 262; my emphasis)

Crucially for present purposes, then, in saying that we must "give up the idea that a metaphor carries a message, that it has a content" (*ibid.*, p. 261), Davidson clearly has in mind not just that the *sentence* lacks a second propositional meaning, but also that the *metaphor-maker* does not mean anything extra either. This is his third, and most novel, positive insight. Given this, one ought not to say that Davidson somehow misses this obvious approach to metaphorical meaning. To the contrary, he addresses it and rejects it. Nor should one say that appeal to speaker meaning can

straightforwardly evade Davidson's arguments in his "What Metaphors Mean," since Davidson has offered responses to just this maneuver.

Granted, one might not be ultimately convinced by Davidson's arguments: one might think, as I happen to, that at least some of the things we are prone to call "metaphors" can be paraphrased, and, hence, can be captured by appeal to speaker meaning; one might even suppose that there are sometimes genuine propositional thoughts conveyed where no sentence can be found to paraphrase them.⁵ This broader rejection of the interlinking of thought and talk would defang Davidson's argument against View 3 in a more radical way. Nevertheless, whether or not one ultimately agrees with Davidson on all counts, it is unfair to dismiss Davidson's fine contribution as either "obvious, or obviously false."

4. Davidson's Limited Positive Claims

It will be clear already that Davidson did not simply miss the line of response that appeals to speaker meaning. Hence, it is not the case that his article merely makes the obvious point that expression types cannot have additional "metaphorical meanings." But is the resulting positive view "*obviously* false"? I do not think so.

Davidson, as I have noted, spends most of "What Metaphors Mean" attacking three views about what metaphors mean, and about how they are made and understood. These have been surveyed above. In making these negative points, however, he also draws out three insights, which I here paraphrase:

- (i) Metaphor is somewhat like simile in that the hearer is drawn to notice similarities;
- (ii) Metaphor is somewhat like conversational implicature in that the hearer does this noticing partly on the grounds of the absurdity of the literal meaning of the utterance, using her imagination and "real-world knowledge," and not on the grounds of additional expression meanings;
- (iii) But metaphor is also different from simile and conversational implicature because—as in interpreting dreams and drawings—what is "noticed" are not propositions either semantically encoded in the expression used, or meant by the speaker. (Also, the kind of "imagination" involved is rather different.)

This, then, is the overall structure of the article: three (purportedly) incorrect views presented and rejected, with the discussion of these "incorrect views" yielding three core insights. It is these three insights that Davidson builds on, to give a fourth view—his own radical "literalist" conception

of metaphorical content. Putting all of this together, we can understand Davidson's positive view, and see why it strikes him as plausible, and why it is *not* "a source of omission and confusion," as McGuire calls it (2001, p. 451). The positive view is:

View 4: "Metaphors mean what the words, in their most literal interpretation, mean, and nothing more" (Davidson 1978, p. 245).⁶

That is why there can be no adequate paraphrase: because there is no proposition there to paraphrase.

View 4 can seem initially absurd, since it might appear that metaphor can therefore achieve nothing. How, one might ask, can metaphor succeed as well and frequently as it does—not just in literature, but in science and philosophy—if nothing extra is communicated, conveyed, or meant? Indeed, McGuire's attempted deconstruction of Davidson's positive view takes just this form: at one point, McGuire hints that Davidson's non-content view of metaphor cannot be right, is obviously false, because Davidson himself gets across information using metaphor, in particular the metaphor "dead metaphors *rise from the grave* as literal meanings."⁷

But Davidson notes just this general sort of problem (1978, p. 246), and explicitly addresses it by saying that his disagreement is not about what the hearer might recover, but with how such recovery is achieved (when it is) (ibid., p. 262). Specifically, says Davidson, metaphor does not work its magic by communicating some extra proposition; rather, as he says, metaphorical talk nudges the hearer to notice things *out there in the world* (many of which are not propositional). This "nudging" happens because the literal meaning is clearly bizarre, often in the sense of being absurdly false (pp. 257ff.)—this is the parallel with conversational implicature. In particular, this "bizarreness" can nudge the interpreter into noticing some similarities—this is the parallel with simile.⁸ Having been so "nudged," the metaphor interpreter may realize certain things, grasp certain propositions, if one can speak this way. Given this, it is not that surprising that philosophers, Davidson included, can make certain points by using metaphor. Crucially however, these parallels aside, there is for Davidson a key difference between implicature (and thus speaker meaning) on the one hand, and genuine metaphor on the other. The difference is *not* that there cannot be propositions grasped in the latter case; the difference is *how* the propositions come to be grasped, when they are. In particular, it is a mistake "to fasten onto the thoughts a metaphor provokes and to read these contents into the metaphor itself" (ibid., p. 261). Visions and thoughts, true or false, can be inspired by hearing metaphorical talk; similarly for "seeings as." But none of this need be part of the metaphor's content (ibid., p. 257).

Distinguishing what the hearer (or, indeed, Davidson's philosophical reader) comes to think, from what was genuinely meant, provides at least part

of the answer to McGuire's complaint about metaphor's usefulness.⁹ Again, one might not ultimately be convinced. But it is unfair to call this view "obviously false," an "omission and confusion," and "insignificant." Certainly McGuire's arguments do not support such a harsh and dismissive verdict.

In sum, Davidson denies that metaphor is a vehicle for conveying ideas at all—except, of course, for what the expression literally means. To think that thoughts are conveyed is, he maintains, to confuse the effects of the metaphorical speech with the "meaning of the metaphor." His comparison here is clear: a picture or a dream can make us realize things; they can even bring us to grasp things which may be true or false. Thus, pictures and dreams, like metaphors, can achieve fully propositional cognitive effects. But the things we notice are not therefore the content of the picture or the dream—because words, as Davidson says, are the wrong coin to exchange for what pictures (or dreams) encode (1978, p. 263). The propositions grasped are not (typically) part of what the *producer* of the dream or picture wanted to convey either. They typically are not meant at all. The same surely might hold true for much of what we call "metaphor," for all McGuire has shown.¹⁰

Notes

- 1 This no-unitary-phenomenon thesis is expanded upon in Hymers 1998.
- 2 Having introduced simile, Davidson makes another nice point. One does not assume that there is some second, hidden, meaning in simile sentences. For instance, what "Juliet is like the sun" means is just, well, that Juliet is like the sun. But then why expect a hidden word or sentence meaning in the case of metaphor? Nor, to anticipate, is it plausible that the speaker of a simile generally means some extra proposition. Often she simply notes that there exists a similarity, and leaves the hearer to think about what that likeness consists in. See Davidson (1978, pp. 255, 260-61) for discussion.
- 3 "It should make us suspect the theory that it is so hard to decide, even in the case of the simplest metaphors, exactly what the content is supposed to be. The reason it is often so hard to decide is, I think, that we imagine there is a content to be captured when all the while we are in fact focusing on what the metaphor makes us notice" (Davidson 1978, p. 262). See also *ibid.*, p. 260.
- 4 To anticipate, Davidson's own solution to the puzzle is precisely to give up the idea that metaphors have a content at all, either conventionally encoded in the sentence used, or meant by the speaker.
- 5 Elugardo and Stainton (2001) take this line.
- 6 McGuire (2001, pp. 443ff.) takes this claim to be ambiguous, presumably because "meaning" covers both expression/sentence meaning and speaker meaning (see also pp. 449-50). He then argues, in effect, that on the first reading, viz., expression/sentence meaning, the thesis is true but obvious enough; while on the second reading it is patently false. Thus, his conclusion that Davidson's thesis is "insignificant" (*ibid.*, p. 444). A rather more charitable

- reading of Davidson would be, not that Davidson missed an obvious ambiguity, but instead that he choose the broad term “meaning” precisely because he intended to cover both expression meaning and speaker meaning.
- 7 “Davidson’s own metaphorical utterance does convey a meaning other than its literal meaning. More precisely, in producing that utterance, Davidson successfully conveyed a determinate meaning distinct from the literal meaning of the sentence used” (McGuire 2001, p. 448). For further discussion, see the section “Strong Denial Is Obviously False” (ibid., p. 447).
 - 8 “Metaphor and simile are merely two among endless devices that serve to alert us to aspects of the world by inviting us to make comparisons” (Davidson 1978, p. 256).
 - 9 Recognizing that the hearer may consider certain propositions as a result of hearing metaphorical speech, one can also easily make sense of Davidson’s remarks—quoted by McGuire—about “metaphorical truth.” What Davidson surely has in mind are *truths grasped by the hearer because of metaphorical talk*. That he loosely speaks of “metaphorical truth” thus provides no reason to take Davidson to believe that there are truths, meant by the speaker, which are part of the “metaphorical content of the utterance.”
 - 10 I am grateful to Steven Davis, Michael Hymers, Richard Manning, and an anonymous referee for comments on an earlier draft.

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