Why Metaphors have no Meaning: Considering Metaphoric Meaning in Davidson

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Abstract

Since the publication of Donald Davidson's essay "What Metaphors Mean" (1978) – in which he famously asserts that metaphor has no meaning – the views expressed in it have mostly met with criticism: prominently from Mary Hesse and Max Black. This article attempts to explain Davidson's surprise-move regarding metaphor by relating it to elements in the rest of his work in semantics, such as the principle of compositionality, radical interpretation and the principle of charity. I conclude that Davidson's views on metaphor are not only consistent with his semantic theory generally, but that his semantics also depend on these insights. Eventually, the debate regarding Davidson's views on metaphor should be conducted on the level of his views on the nature of semantics, the relationship between language and the world and the possibility that there is something like conceptual schemes.

Sedert die publikasie van Donald Davidson se opstel *What Metaphors Mean* (1978) – waarin hy die berugte stelling maak dat metafoor geen betekenis het nie – is sy sieninge meestal begroet met kritiek, ook van prominente figure soos Mary Hesse en Max Black. Hierdie artikel poog om 'n verduideliking te vind vir Davidson se verrassende skuif aangaande metafoor, deur sy sieninge hieroor te kontekstualiseer teen die agtergrond van elemente uit die res van sy werk in semantiek, soos die beginsel van komposisionaliteit, radikale interpretasie en die beginsel van rasionele akkomodasie (*charity*). Ek kom tot die gevolgtrekking dat Davidson se sieninge aangaande metafoor nie slegs naatloos aansluit by sy algemene sieninge aangaande semantiek nie, maar dat die res van sy semantiese teorie ook afhang van sy sieninge aangaande metafoor. Uiteindelik behoort die debat rakende Davidson se sieninge aangaande metafoor gevoer te word op die vlak van die aard van semantiek, die verhouding tussen taal en die werklikheid en die moontlike bestaan van konseptuele skemas.

Much has been written about Donald Davidson's article "What Metaphors Mean", with most commentators finding themselves baffled by his declaration that metaphors have no meaning and only mean what the literal terms of the expression do. It is possibly only Richard Rorty who supports Davidson's views wholeheartedly and it was in fact Rorty's debate with Mary Hesse on the issue that provided the impetus for this article.[1] I shall maintain that many of the discussions regarding Davidson's views on metaphor exhibit a crucial failing in that they fail to contextualise his views on metaphor in relation to the rest of his work in semantics. I hope to fill this lacuna by systematically re-

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1   *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, (1987), pp 283 – 311.

lating Davidson's thoughts on metaphor to his larger theory of meaning, paying specific attention to the issues of compositionality, radical interpretation and the application of the principle of charity. In the process, I shall attempt to find a reason for Davidson's fairly cryptic declaration regarding the total absence of meaning in metaphor.

I hope to show that for Davidson, (the non-existence of) metaphoric meaning is not a spurious issue, but that it is crucial to the rest of his work, in that his negative statements regarding metaphoric meaning are occasioned by larger concerns. Through his views on metaphor, one can gather much regarding Davidson's views on how language works and on the relationship between language and the world; and it is my opinion that the paper on metaphor provides a handy alternative view-point on (or possible hinge of criticism against) his position on this relationship. Importantly, Davidson's views regarding metaphor do not only consistently link up to the rest of his work, but the rest of his views also *depend* on them. Besides his views on metaphor being consistent with the rest of his work, I hope to show that the existence of metaphoric meaning or metaphoric truth would gravely endanger Davidson's entire semantic project and that it is crucial to that project to keep the idea of metaphoric meaning out.

What Metaphors Mean

In "What Metaphors Mean" Davidson asserts that metaphors have no meaning. This is a bold and surprising claim that he makes and it is perhaps the very boldness of this denial in the face of most current theory that has earned him the chagrin of his contemporaries. A few similar ways in which he states this precise claim though, have not received as much attention – probably as a result. These include the claims that the study of metaphor does not belong to the field of semantics; or that, semantically, metaphor is not an important phenomenon; or that metaphor uses no semantic resources beyond the ordinary (1978:245). Far more palatable claims, certainly and they mean exactly what the first claim does.

Part of the resistance against Davidson's statement that metaphor has no meaning results from the fact that many people, on reading that claim, take him to be denying the *importance* of metaphor. Metaphor, according to Davidson, *does* exist and *has* importance, but precisely what that importance is, is not *meaning*; and how it works is not the business of *semantics*, but should be that of some other field(s) of study. According to Davidson, the central mistake that most theoreticians of metaphor make, is thinking that words in metaphor somehow acquire a *different* sense or meaning than their 'normal' (literal) meanings. This view is commonly held by a number of authors on the subject, such as Richards and Black; and it is due to his vigorous response to Davidson that I shall set up Black as Davidson's archetypical critic. Pre-empting Black, Davidson (in "What Metaphors Mean") contends that metaphor uses *no* semantic resources (and therefore acquires no new meanings) beyond the ordinary (1978:245). It uses exactly the same semantic resources as those on which the ordinary depends; and consequently the words used in metaphoric sentences *mean* exactly what the words in their most literal interpretation mean. This would be the fundamental claim that Davidson makes. What he intends here, I think, but stops just short of saying, is that words acquire meaning in only one way and that is the way which he first outlined in "Truth and Meaning" (1967). The idea that words in metaphor somehow acquire a different sense or meaning is for Davidson "as patently false" as the related

idea that the metaphoric sentence somehow conveys a coded message, which through interpretation needs a de-codification from the side of the hearer (1978:246).

The fact that metaphor appears to be saying something, and that this something cannot be paraphrased, Davidson explains by claiming that there *is* simply no other meaning *there* to paraphrase – to translate back into literal language – in metaphor: the sentence simply means what it does literally (1978:246). What we *do*, in fact, when we unsuccessfully attempt to paraphrase a metaphor, is not translate its metaphoric meaning into a more explicit literal one, but try and evoke what it is that the metaphor *brings to our attention* (1978:258-260). Describing what metaphors make us notice, on Davidson's view, is saying something about the *world* and not about the language that makes up metaphoric sentences. Davidson stresses that metaphor *is* an important phenomenon and not only in literature, but also in science; and therefore agrees with philosophers such as Black and Hesse that metaphor accomplishes much: his disagreement with them lies simply in that he thinks that it accomplishes what it does *in a different way* than especially Black would suggest. In fact, according to Davidson, *removing* metaphor from the study of semantics is the only way in which metaphor can properly be understood; and contrary to what one would expect, such a move should make metaphor a more and not less interesting phenomenon (1978:246). The question becomes: why is that?

1. Meaning isn't conveyed anyway

The crux of the disagreement between Black and Hesse on the one hand and Davidson and Rorty on the other, lies in the former parties' insistence on the *cognitive content* of metaphor, while the latter two deny this. It would be helpful however, to point out that the issue of "cognitive content" bears a much greater weight in Davidson's work than this specific debate assumes; and certainly one of Davidson's strongest arguments against metaphoric meaning has to follow from his insistence on providing an extensional account of meaning and from his simultaneous refusal to reify meaning.[2] Black's theory of metaphor amounts to the thesis that besides the literal meaning of words and sentences, a second (metaphorical) meaning can be acquired through interaction with other words. According to Black's interaction view, a metaphor has two subjects: a primary and secondary one. Between these, an interacting "duality of reference" goes to work, as "...the metaphorical utterance works by 'projecting upon' the primary subject a set of 'associated implications', comprised in the implicative complex that are predictable of the secondary subject..." (1990:59). On a sentential level, Black holds that metaphors are cognitive instruments, capable of being used by a speaker to communicate "... novel views of a domain of reference..." that he possesses, to an audience capable of grasping this communication. In the same vein, he stresses the "representational aspect" of metaphor (1990:74-76). On the level of individual words, also, Black seems to subscribe to a referential account of meaning (at least as far as metaphor goes); and he holds that words can have both literal and extended meanings, the latter of which they acquire through conventional interaction with other words. According to Black, in the context of a particular metaphorical statement, the meanings of the words contained in it, change; albeit only in the minds of the user and interpreter of the metaphor, and only for the moment.

Now, such a view of course depends on words at all *having* and *expressing* certain meanings; and the mere idea that words have anything like independently existing

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2   See, in this vein, "Truth and Meaning", (1967), from which I draw most of this account.

meanings (between which a "duality of *reference*" can go to work), allowing them to interact with each other and to project fragments of cognitive content, is of course a complete anathema to Davidson. The first possible criticism from Davidson's side would therefore be that Black holds a reified conception of meaning. This paves the way for all of the implications of the intensionalist/extensionalist-debate in the philosophy of language, to find its way to discussions of metaphor. For Davidson, words do not have any 'meanings': only sentences (or strictly spoken, *entire languages*) have meaning. And the meaning that sentences have is certainly not of the propositional variety, as Black holds. Doing away with intensional notions such as those Black relies on in his account of metaphor was part of Davidson's strategy in semantics from the outset; and his criticism of the conception of metaphor as "*primarily a vehicle for conveying ideas*" (1978:246) is completely in keeping with this general strategy of his.

Evnine (1991:79) identifies the reasons for Davidson's choice to construct an extensional theory of meaning. In keeping with a general move towards ontological simplicity, Davidson rejects the possible existence of such ill-defined entities as meanings or propositions, contending that philosophy can do equally well – if not better – without them. Davidson asserts that one cannot appeal to 'meanings' in constructing a theory of meaning: one has to explain meaning by appealing to something else (1967:21). And Black's theory not only *does* depend on *words* having meanings and those meanings somehow interacting with each other; it also depends on the notion of meaning in a second sense and that is the one of speakers and audiences grasping meanings and using them to communicate insights regarding the world. The shift that the meanings of words and sentences undergo in metaphor, after all, amounts to "... a shift in the *speaker's* meaning – and the corresponding *hearer's* meaning... ", as Black sees it (1990:60). Of Black, Davidson could rightly demand that he at least appeal to something other than vaguely defined "speaker's meanings" in *explaining* metaphoric meaning.

In keeping with his extensionalist heritage, Davidson himself seeks to *explain all* meaning without reference to intensions or cognitive content: appealing to 'meanings' in a theory of meaning is both confused and of no demonstrated use. Now Black's account of metaphoric meaning depends crucially on the idea that the maker of a metaphor can recognize something (propositional in character) regarding the world and can communicate this to his audience through metaphor. However, such an explanation of the propositional states of individuals as Black appeals to, necessitates giving an account of their beliefs; and, as Davidson has argued in various papers, belief and meaning are so closely connected as to make it impossible to give an account of someone's beliefs without having a *prior* account available as to what the sentences he utters, mean. Appealing to speakers' mental states in giving an account of meaning (as Black does) amounts to putting the cart before the horse, on Davidson's position. Properly, any talk regarding mental states should be reserved for when the process of constructing a theory of meaning has been completed.[3]

The question relevant to this debate, however, becomes: how effective is Davidson's refusal to ground meaning in intensional phenomena as a strategy to deny cognitive

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3   Davidson's strategy of refusing to pay attention to something like speaker's meaning (or any 'meanings', for that matter) in constructing a theory of meaning, forms a cornerstone of his whole semantic project and the force of this refusal should not be underestimated. Evnine, certainly, presents it as the crux of Davidson's disagreement with, for instance, Grice and Searle – or with the whole of a number of theories of meaning dependent on the idea of communication-intention (1991:79).

content to metaphor? The answer probably is: not tellingly, since explaining why metaphoric meaning *cannot* be grounded in word- or speaker's-meanings, does *not* imply that it cannot find a grounding in something else (as literal meaning can). In a number of ways though, the insistence on grounding meaning in extensional evidence *is* relevant and has direct bearing on what follows. Importantly, the *way* in which Davidson chooses to ground literal meaning in extensionality does not allow metaphors to have any meaning. To this I shall turn directly.

2. The principle of compositionality

Black attempts to explain how metaphor *works*. 'Metaphor', he asserts: "... must be classified as a term belonging to semantics ..." (1962:28). He holds that the phenomenon has a "logical grammar" and that its working can (and should) be explained *semantically* (1990:53). How would such a semantic explanation of metaphor run, though? Metaphor, Black claims, works by violating rules; but importantly, he stresses, "There can be no *rules* for 'creatively' violating rules ..." (1990:55). Thus, he seems to claim for metaphor the advantages of being a 'semantic' phenomenon – partaking in the generation of meaning – but without any of the corresponding disadvantages – primarily that its shifts in meaning must be rule-bound. Admittedly, he concedes that not simply anything can be said in metaphor and that the normal rule-bound meanings of the metaphor's frame dictate which characteristics properly could apply to the focus; but in principle, metaphor still works by *violating* the rules of semantics. Davidson would assert that such a view of semantics and metaphor – of metaphor working semantically, but by doing something unguided by semantic rules – is impossible. As far as the application of words goes, the very compositional nature of language (that makes the generation of an infinite number of sentences possible from a finite number of words) makes semantics a rule-bound affair. No meaning can exist without these rules being followed.

How do words ordinarily work in sentences, according to Davidson?[4] Looking at a language empirically (from the 'outside' as Rorty puts it) the whole of the language appears as an infinite range of possible sentences. Each of these sentences can be true or false. Through knowledge of the language and of the world, the language user can come to know (1) which of the sentences from this totality are true and (2) which conditions in the world must hold, given their truth. All of the infinite number of possible sentences in the language is composed of a finite number of words. The key to being able to use language lies in that, from those sentences which we come to know to be true, it is in principle possible to select and compare different sentences in which the same *words* feature; and structurally to deduce the influence which each of these words have on the truth of these sentences. After comparing a great many sentences, for each of the words of the language, one should be able to deduce a semantic axiom that reflects the stable structural influence that the word has on the truth of the sentences in which it appears. Our ability to use language rests on the fact that we can come to know these semantic axioms and are able to apply them to sentences unknown to us, to deduce which conditions in the world must hold, assuming their truth. This is

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4 Here I focus on Davidson's account as given in "Truth and Meaning", (1967), and "Radical Interpretation", (1973). For a good introduction to Davidson's philosophy of language, see: Ramberg, B. (1989) *Donald Davidson's Philosophy of Language* Oxford: Blackwell; or Evnine, S. (1991) *Donald Davidson*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

the principle of compositionality. In the final analysis then, words do not have ideal-ised 'meanings'. All that they have are stable structural influences on the sentences in which they appear. Of course it is possible for a specific word to have more than one structural influence on the truth of the sentences in which it appears (these are offi-cially ambiguous words); but still, these influences that words have, have to be stable and predictable – so stable and predictable that it should (in principle) be possible for all of the structural influences of the word to be contained in a dictionary.

From this last point regarding words, one can deduce another reason why Davidson thinks that words do not change their meanings in metaphoric sentences. As we saw in the previous section, words in the first instance do not have any 'meanings', which can change. Words only have stable structural influences on the sentences in which they appear; which brings me to the second (and most important) point, which is that words exactly have *stable* structural influences on the sentences in which they appear, in Davidsonian semantics. These structural influences are per force *not* subject to surpris-ing change. Davidsonian semantics specifically depends on this characteristic of words, because, if words were liable to change the influence which they have on the truth of sentences in a surprising fashion (as is said to happen in metaphor), this compositional feature of language would fall by the way-side; and language, as de-scribed by Davidson, simply would not work.

It is easy to see the problems that something like Black's theory of metaphoric mean-ing-change would create for Davidson's theory of meaning. For any kind of coherent semantic axiom for a word to be deduced, the word consistently has to influence the truth of sentences in a certain way. For instance: from verifiable sentences such as "man is a bipedal primate mammal of the species *homo sapiens*" and T.S. Eliot wrote a poem called "*The Wasteland*" one should partially be able to abstract the stable se-mantic influences which the words 'man' and 'poem' have on the truth of all of the sen-tences in which they appear. The existence of something like extended, metaphoric meanings for words to assume would, however, imply that words may acquire poten-tially unstable influences on the sentences in which they appear. This is as being con-fronted with the possibility (inherent in the idea of metaphoric meaning) that one may unpredictably have to count a sentence such as "man is the poem of being"[5] – or any sentence really, of that variety – as being true alongside the previously cited sentences regarding men and poems, would seriously hamper one's chances of in fact deducing stable semantic axioms for the words 'man' and 'poem'. Besides their stable semantic functions (which we deduce from all of the true sentences in which they appear), it is said that in metaphor words may end up acquiring a possible infinity of *extra* semantic functions, which are in principle unstable, unpredictable and esoteric. Should words have the potentiality of behaving in such unstable ways, one could not possibly deduce any stable systematic influence for them to have on the truth of sentences; and this is why, for Davidson, a word cannot have a stable semantic influence on the truth of the sentences in which it appears *and besides that* retain the open-ended possibility of ac-quiring other unstable semantic influences along the way, as Black seems to suggest.

The problem that something like "metaphoric meaning" would create for Davidson's theory would also work in the opposite direction. Not only must a stable influence be able to be *deduced* from a range of sentences which the interpreter knows to be true;

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5   This metaphor is from Heidegger.

for one to be able to use the language under investigation, it is also necessary that the axioms so deduced can be *re-applied* to sentences which one does not know and that one is left in a position to derive its truth conditions in a reliable fashion. A speaker of English, when confronted with a sentence such as "the world is a vampire" is easily able to deduce its truth conditions from the standard influences which all of the words contained in it generally have on the truth of the sentences in which they appear. From these influences the truth conditions of this sentence should be deduced to be something like: "our home planet is a bat of the species *Desmodus Rotundus*" – a truth condition that clearly does not hold. For the interpreter at all to be able to deduce what is said to be the "metaphoric truth conditions" of the sentence, however, while using only his knowledge of the semantics of English, would be impossible (something which *is* possible for literal sentences, such as "vampires are found in the South-American jungle"). This is since what a metaphor such as "the world is a vampire" 'means' is always open to re-interpretation; and because it is impossible exhaustively to specify exactly under which conditions this metaphor would be true. Davidson certainly stresses that metaphor is by its very *nature* always subject to re-interpretation when he refers to the "... endlessness of paraphrase ..." in which one becomes caught, as soon as one tries to explicate *exactly* what it is that a specific metaphor brings to our attention (1978:263). Authors such as Hymers (1998) and Engstrøm (1996) furthermore stress the role that an extra-semantic context plays in determining metaphoric meaning; and involving context in this way further tells against the possibility of deducing a metaphor's truth conditions from the theory of truth for the language alone. To the issue of the possible *truth* of metaphors and the issue of the impossibility of exhaustively specifying what their truth-conditions are, I shall return in section 4.

3. Malapropism

Black writes in "More about Metaphor" (and repeating the phrase in "How Metaphors Work") that what the user of metaphor does, is to "... [employ] conventional means to produce a non-standard effect, while using only the standard syntactic and semantic resources of his speech community". Here he seems to support exactly what Davidson says – that metaphor uses no other semantics than the standard. Yet, for Black, "... the *meaning* of an interesting metaphor is typically 'new' or 'creative' [and] not inferable from the standard lexicon" (1990:52). Although using only 'standard semantics', it is therefore possible for metaphor to have non-standard 'meanings', on his view. Now, contrary to what one would expect at this point, Davidson's theory in fact *does* have room for the phenomenon of sentences using standard semantics, but still possessing non-standard meanings. A prime example of this is malapropism.

Both Hymers (1998) and Rahat (1992) considered whether, if linguistic communication still seems to succeed even when the rules of semantics are not being followed, this does not allow metaphor to be incorporated into meaningful language. Davidson's theory in "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" is that it is possible, besides one's fixed semantic theory (*prior theory*) of a language (which will be a list of semantic axioms – one for each word of the language), to have a *passing theory* of the meaning of words, deviating from the prior theory and allowing the interpretation of words not used in compliance with it. Utilising a passing theory enables the interpreter to "... create a new, ad hoc, semantic theory ..." (Rahat, 1992:316) allowing words to undergo meaning-change – either of a simply passing nature, or of a sort that can be integrated into

the prior theory. The question becomes: why can metaphors not simply be accommodated in passing theories (as malapropisms can) and be allowed to regain their status as meaningful sentences of the language in this way? That metaphor should be able to be handled by something like a passing theory, is the view of Hymers and of Kittay, who also set out a context-dependent suggestion for assigning truth conditions to metaphoric sentences (1987:119); and I think an ad hoc "passing theory" of meaning is exactly what Black had in mind with the "extended meanings" which he ascribes to metaphor. Against this view, Rahat argues that there exists a difference in the *manner* in which metaphors and malapropisms seem to call for non-standard interpretations. In order to be able to understand what the user of malapropisms actually wants to communicate, malapropisms require a temporary semantic change to be made by the interpreter. Malapropisms are simply nonsensical, if such changes are not made. Metaphors on the other hand, are sentences which *are* being used in accordance with semantic rules and do make sense – they usually simply express patent falsities. The user of metaphor is *fully aware* of the falsity of what he asserts and he intends and requires that the interpreter first interpret his words according to the standard semantic rules and understands them as they would normally be understood, for him to make any sense of the *metaphor* which is said to be used, or to grasp its point. Thus, the "metaphoric meaning" of an utterance still firmly depends on the literal meaning thereof. "(T)his point", Rahat stresses, "will be lost if one takes the metaphorical utterance as an *irregularity* that calls for some change in interpretation." (1992:321-2)

The difference between metaphor and malapropism then lies therein that, typically, the 'meaning' of metaphors is something more than just what there "is *there* in" the sentence. Metaphor intends to say much more than it does on face value. As Davidson writes "... there is no limit to what a metaphor calls to our attention, and much of what we are caused to notice is not propositional in character." (1978:263). The interpretation of metaphors therefore takes place on a different plane than the interpretation of malapropisms. Whereas malapropisms require only one interpretation and can be said fully to be grasped after the successful construction of a passing theory; metaphor requires a double interpretation, in that first the usual meaning of the phrase needs to be interpreted (using the standard semantic rules), before what is called interpretation of the 'meaning' of the metaphor can take place. This interpretation of the metaphor is then also in principle never complete, as metaphors by their very nature are always open to re-interpretation.

4. The case against metaphoric truth

Thus far, the account of Davidson's attack against metaphoric meaning has focused on why the necessarily stable operation of words in sentences would make a theory of metaphor such as that of Black untenable. Farrell (1987), however, raises an important issue when he accuses Davidson of in fact *deviating* from his general strategy in semantics on the point of metaphor; because he ignores his first premise in semantics: that sentences and not words are the main conveyors of meaning. In "What Metaphors Mean" Davidson tends to focus too finely on why it is not possible for *words* to undergo unpredictable meaning-change, while forgetting that metaphoric *sentences are* in fact candidates for truth, can imply entailments and fit into larger webs of belief. If Davidson had any real empirical commitment in designing his theory of meaning, Farrell argues, he would notice that speakers of the language *do* hold metaphorical sentences to be true and meaningful; and that based on the evidence therefore, he

should strive towards deducing semantic roles for metaphor to play, rather than denying them a position in semantics on a theoretical basis. Davidson should "... adjust his models to the data ..." says Farrell (1987:631) and not the other way around, as he implies Davidson does. A theory of language focusing on sentential aspects should (empirically) take metaphorical sentences to be held to be meaningful, and would endeavour to fit them into relations of entailment to provide a semantic account of 'shared metaphorical schemes', which enables us to relate "whole metaphorical sentences to whole other sentences" (1987:632).[6] At this point, the question that would arise (and moving away from metaphoric *meaning*, for a while) is: can one make sense of something like metaphoric *truth*? Davidson would say no, but at this point it has to be admitted that the idea of metaphoric truth endangers his whole semantic project.

The question of whether metaphoric sentences can be said to be true, depends entirely on whether the propositional contents of a set of true metaphors can be fit into a coherent and rational total set of beliefs. In the context of Davidson's work, the application of the principle of charity forms a pre-condition for the ability to interpret speech. This principle advises one to take the speaker one is attempting to interpret to be largely rational by one's own lights and mostly correct in his pronouncements regarding the world. For radical interpretation to work, furthermore, one also needs to be able to deduce the truth conditions of the speaker's pronouncements by paying attention to the conditions which actually hold in the world at the time of his utterance of it. The problem that exist for the friends of metaphor is that (if a person's beliefs amount to the set of sentences he holds true) the introduction of metaphoric sentences as meaningful truths would introduce a great deal of *inconsistency* and unpredictability in the total set of any person's beliefs. Metaphoric sentences, after all, are known to make wild claims regarding things in the world (for instance that money makes the world go 'round'), that certainly contradict one's more empirical insights (for instance that it is the influence of the sun's gravitational pull that does that). Moreover, metaphors are well-known for their propensity to contradict each other. Consider, for instance, that prudence is a "rich ugly old maid" if one were to believe William Blake, but the "mother of all wisdom" if one paid heed to the folk wisdom. Admitting, finally, that sentences with such a propensity for contradiction can even *change their truth values* at a rapid clip (remember, if metaphors were truths, a sentence could be false the one moment and *true* the next – as soon as it is turned into a metaphor), would clash with Davidson's entire program, as the stability of a group of language users' linguistic interaction with the world, which is in principle necessary for radical interpretation to work, would be lost. Due to the inconsistency that is likely to be introduced into any speaker's total set of beliefs through metaphor, it will be difficult to view him as largely rational and correct in his judgements regarding the world (as the principle of charity requires); and (as we have seen) were one to take metaphoric sentences as truths, it would be impossible exhaustively to stipulate what their *truth conditions* are, leaving one unable to interpret the speaker's language radically. Lastly, even if one were to be able to stipulate what *some* of the truth conditions are of metaphoric sentences, one would be unable to deduce what these are from the speaker's observable interaction with an outside world; as metaphors most commonly are used to hint at the

6   Farrell further criticises Davidson's philosophy in general when he writes that his "specific proposal" for a semantic theory undermines his "general strategy" in semantics. (1987:635) I doubt, however, that Davidson's project can be so clearly divided into two parts: in giving his account of how language works, Davidson remains dependent on the idea of compositionality.

non-obvious or at the abstract similarity that exists between two things. Any inter-preter attempting to make sense of a metaphor without a prior understanding available of its user's language, would simply be left with no clue as to how to interpret it.

One could easily object that an interpreter of metaphor will never *be* a radical inter-preter, approaching the language with no prior understanding of it. This criticism would miss the point, however. Even though radical interpretation does not reflect our actual interpretative practices, on Davidson's view, it has to be possible *in principle* if linguistic communication is to be possible. And admitting that, metaphoric truth is a real and omni-present possibility, *in its very principle of* rules out the possibility of radical interpretation. This is as metaphoric truths will be truths which are likely to contradict many of a speaker's other beliefs (making his total set of beliefs incoherent) and as they are beliefs of which the truth conditions *cannot* be discovered – and cannot be discovered from simply observing the user of the metaphor's interaction with the world.

Thus far, I have taken the line that metaphoric truths necessarily will be contradic-tory truths; and to this line, the objection could certainly be raised that metaphoric sen-tences are really more coherent than I contend. Farrell (1987) is of the opinion that eventually (perhaps through the application of artificial intelligence) one will be able to map out a picture of all of the true sentences of the language – both literal and meta-phorical ones – and their entailments.[7] The idea is that, through the creation of meta-phor dictionaries and the like, it should be possible to map out a complete set of true and coherent metaphors and their entailments. And if a coherent set of metaphors and their truth conditions were available, why could one *not* deduce a workable theory of metaphoric meaning for a language from this? At this point, really, two options are available to the "friends of metaphor" (as Black calls those who would give the phe-nomenon a cognitive explanation) in order to make sense of this idea of a coherent set of metaphors and a description of their entailments. The one option is to see meta-phoric sentences as forming part of one large body of sentences – including both literal and metaphoric sentences – from which one consistent theory of meaning for a lan-guage can be deduced; while the other is to see metaphoric sentences as being consis-tent with other metaphoric sentences and forming a stock of coherent metaphors *be-side a* set of coherent literal sentences. I shall hold that both choices are untenable.

First to the second possibility. If we had a stock of literally true sentences and a stock of metaphorically true sentences, the question would go, could we then not con-sistently deduce a 'literal' theory of meaning for the language – in the form of a set of literal semantic axioms for the words of the language – from the one list; and an 'ex-tended' theory of meaning for the language – a set of figurative semantic axioms – from the other? Surely the resultant axioms need not contradict each other and would be as reconcilable as ambiguities are? Before one could make such a view plausible, however, the following problem will have to be dealt with. First, one would need to be able to tell *which* sentences are the literal and which the metaphorical ones, to know which semantic axioms ('literal' or 'metaphoric' ones) are to be deduced from (or ap-plied to) which. For this, one would need to be able to come up with a test for when a truth is a metaphoric one that does not appeal to the notion of speaker's meaning; as

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7   Lakoff's ongoing project is a prime representative of one in this spirit and aims to show how there exist general principles governing the inferences that are to be drawn from metaphors.

the interconnection between truth and meaning would rule such a test out as circular.[8] Rather, an *empirical* test as to when a sentence is used metaphorically and when not would be needed – a test one could not easily come up with, except if one were to hold that speakers systematically act in certain ways (perhaps by always putting on airs) when uttering metaphors. Accepting such a deep division between literal and metaphorical language, therefore, and realising that one is unable to test which sentences uttered by a speaker belong to which part of the language, one simply could not be in a position to interpret any sentence of the language; due to the uncertainty one would keep on running into of which theory of meaning (literal or metaphorical) to apply in interpreting that sentence.

However, another possibility remains open to the friend of metaphor who holds metaphors generally to be coherent. One could argue that making a distinction at all between metaphoric and literal truths would not be necessary; and that metaphors could fit into one large and coherent set of beliefs, together with all literal beliefs. This argument, of course, would obviate the need for a test for metaphoric truth. It could be argued that from one such a total set of coherent beliefs, a theory of meaning for a language could be deduced without contradiction. Such a move, however, would equate metaphor with a simple form of ambiguity. Engstrøm (1996:7), for one, holds that metaphor exhibits "rampant semantic ambiguity", but he still appeals to extra-sentential context in pointing out or explaining what the ambiguous use of metaphoric words amount to. In this way, metaphor is still to be set apart as a special class of ambiguous expression and can therefore not be called a simple ambiguity. Even so, if metaphor were seen as analogous to ambiguity, the question to ask would be: if metaphoric truths were part of a coherent set of truths including literal truths, would we then not simply be admitting that all language is literal? One probably would have to answer in the affirmative: as Kittay writes "... in order to give a semantic account of metaphor within a truth-theoretic semantics, we are required to reduce metaphor to a literal paraphrase ..." (1987:116). Coming up with a final account of which metaphors are true and which not and what exactly their entailments are (as would be necessary to fit our metaphoric beliefs into one coherent set of all of our beliefs), could be contrary to the very spirit of the metaphoric enterprise, in that it would amount to a mass killing-off of metaphors into paraphrase. At this point, the friends of metaphor seem fast to be running out of options. Yet, one more possibility (besides the idea of reducing all metaphor to literal language) remains open to the friend of metaphor who relies on the view that metaphor need not contradict literal truth: that is to hold that all language is metaphorical – a position held, in fact, by Mary Hesse. To Hesse's position, I shall turn in my discussion regarding the distinction between meaning and use.

Davidson's point, to summarise, is that exactly what is special about metaphor – that it works in a different way than the literal – vanishes, when one attempts to incorporate an explanation of metaphor in semantics (1978:248-249). In this vein, he contends that "There is ... a tension in the usual view of metaphor. For on the one hand, the

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8   As we have seen, without a prior understanding of a speaker's language available, it is impossible to appeal to a speaker's propositional states in order to explain what his utterances mean. As much counts for any theory of language (a point that follows from Davidson's insistence on providing a purely extensional explanation of linguistic meaning). Now, if one wanted to construct a theory of language (from scratch) which would have room for metaphoric meaning as in principle part of language; an appeal to speaker's meaning in explaining any part of that theory of language (explaining when truths are metaphorical, in this instance) would be equally inadmissable.

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 ... just the sort of thing plain prose is designed to express." (1978:261). According to Davidson, a category confusion has occurred and what we need to see is for metaphor to be explained on a different plane than our explanations of literal language.

5. Davidson's theory handles dead metaphor dead easy

Reimer (1996) writes that dead metaphor poses a serious challenge to Davidson. Given that dead metaphor *has* meaning, he asks (as does Hymers) why metaphor has the *specific* meaning that it does. The only explanation that Reimer could find was that the meaning of the dead metaphor must originate from the *meaning* of the live one. Against Reimer, I would contend that because of his empirical approach to language, Davidson's theory handles dead metaphor dead easy; and that dead metaphors rather pose a challenge to a theory such as that of Black than they do to that of Davidson.

On Black's view, meaning can be divided into literal and extended meaning. Now it is commonly held that certain metaphors, when used frequently, 'die'; and in dying, become candidates for literal truth. On Black's view then, in dying, a metaphor has to pass over from the sphere of extended meaning (metaphor) to the sphere of literal language.[9] As we have seen, failing the ability to appeal to speaker's meaning, it will be quite difficult to decide which sphere of language an expression belongs to; yet, at this point another possibility as to how to decide whether a sentence is used literally or metaphorically, suggests itself. Besides tests taking into account the visible behaviour of a speaker when uttering a metaphor, other tests that can be offered involve surprise, or frequency of use, as metaphors are depicted as those truths which are typically novel and innovative. In this way *metaphors* are novel and surprising expressions, whereas *dead metaphors* (for instance), which belong to literal language, are characterised by their frequency of use. Is this an acceptable thesis, however? Can frequency of use make the crucial distinction between metaphor and literal language and save a theory such as that of Black? I doubt it. For one thing: how often must a metaphor be used for it to die? And what is to set metaphor apart from a literal truth that is simply not uttered often?

Davidson's theory on the other hand, handles dead metaphor quite effortlessly. When someone utters a metaphoric sentence, he usually utters a patent falsehood (or obvious truth) prompting the hearer to deduce that in his utterance, the speaker is not making a serious claim to truth. The creator of the metaphor might however, through its inbuilt feature of surprise and ability to point out similarities, succeed in prompting the hearer to realise *something* and the metaphor may be used again – by himself and by other people. Eventually, the metaphoric sentence in question could begin to be used so often and in such predictable ways that the sentence takes on a completely stable role amongst sentences which are literal candidates for truth. In this fashion, at one stage or another in the history of English, it became proper for a narrowing in a road to be called a 'bottle-neck', which could result in "traffic jams". And the words used in these sentences have acquired such stability and frequency of use in their new roles that they have become commonly accepted ambiguous terms and can be given an additional 'meaning' to this effect in a dictionary.

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9   Clearly, I hold Black to be a theorist of metaphor subscribing to the idea of a language split into the literal and the metaphorical.

   The *process* of a metaphor dying, is described exactly the same by Davidson and
Black, but for Black's theory it holds an uncomfortable consequence, whereas for
Davidson it poses no problem. Black postulates *two spheres of meaning* and a meta-
phor, in dying, somehow has to pass over from one sphere into another. Davidson
thinks that there is only one sphere of meaning and nothing needs to pass over: all that
exist are words employed meaningfully in sentences and words not. Davidson views
language empirically and frequency of use in a common role is therefore an entirely
acceptable way for him to indicate that a metaphor has become subsumed in literal
language: a metaphor's death, on this picture, would amount to its *acquiring* meaning.
For Black, however, it would be problematic if frequency of use alone were the only
distinction between living and dead metaphor, for, is there not supposed to be *more* to
metaphor than how often it is used? Much of the defence of the "friends of metaphor"
of the cognitive ability of the metaphor (and the cosy attitude which they assume to-
wards it) rests on their arguments that metaphors are crucial to our way of life in that
they assist us to make sense of our world. This point must fully be conceded, but one
needs to ask: how many of those crucial metaphors are perhaps dead already? Many
metaphors *do* have cognitive content and *can* be explained semantically. Those are the
dead ones. And a lot of what the "friends of metaphor" describe as absolutely crucial
metaphors, which we must hold to be cognitive, can be explained semantically as dead
metaphors. Beginning to admit the death of some metaphors could go a long way in
addressing the problem of explaining what regularly passes as cognitive content in
metaphor.

6. The meaning/use-distinction

Re-capping somewhat, one problem that would exist for any interpreter if it were in
principle possible for sentences at times to deviate in meaning from the standard, is
that she would, when striking upon any sentence awaiting interpretation, always be
faced with the doubt whether *it* is perhaps being used metaphorically, and should be
interpreted according to non-standard semantics. Faced with this doubt, the interpreter
will have to know a way to distinguish between literal and metaphorical uses of lan-
guage, in order to be able to apply the correct semantic theory (literal or metaphorical)
to deduce the sentence's truth conditions; or she will have to err on the side of caution
and accept that the sentence's truth conditions *cannot* be stipulated (because the possi-
bility of metaphor plays havoc with providing the truth conditions of sentences) and
therefore cannot be interpreted. Any semantic account of metaphor first would have to
come up with a fail-safe mechanism to distinguish when words are used metaphori-
cally and when not, for any interpretations of the sentences of the language at all to be
able to be produced; and such a mechanism I do not see any of the "friends of meta-
phor" coming up with.[10] Furthermore, even if one were to come up with a mechanism
able to decide when words are used metaphorically, one would be doomed to a view
of meaning which is radically split in two: the literal and the metaphorical. The only
alternatives to such a split would be to hold that all meaning is literal (as Davidson
does) or to hold with authors such as Hesse and Arbib that all meaning is metaphorical
– a move which one must concede strikes as more problematic, at least on the face of
it. Eventually, Davidson's enemies are stuck with two rather unappetising choices: ei-
ther live with a language wherein nothing can be said to be "true full-stop" (as the sit-

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10 For the moment I forget that, even if one were able to produce some of the truth conditions of a meta-
    phor, they can of course never exhaustively be stipulated.

uation would be, were the argument go Hesse's way), or with a language forever split in two. The only other option is Davidson's. If one finds no other merit in Davidson's views, it at least has to be said that he has a unified view of language; and in this sense his views share more common ground with the other unified view (that of Hesse) than it does with those of Black.

Rorty (1987:285) suggests that Davidson and Black do not only disagree on metaphor but more fundamentally also on the reach and implications of semantics. As much must be obvious by now. Black holds that it is possible for one set of standard semantic rules to express both non-standard (metaphoric) meanings and standard meanings; and therefore seems to hold that meaning and semantics can be two different matters (1990:52). Davidson, on the other hand, holds that there is nothing more to meaning than what is produced by the operation of the standard rules of semantics. In the final analysis, then, the debate between Davidson and Black should really shift away from metaphor and should be redirected to the questions Davidson has been asking regarding the relationship between such elements as 'meaning', 'use', 'semantics' and "the world". For Davidson, of course, there *is* a point to metaphor, but the point is not the *meaning* thereof; the point is something else: it is the *effect* that metaphors have on us. With this statement, he draws a sharp distinction between (1) what words mean and (2) what they are used to do: what words mean, is the business of semantics and what they are used to do, is the business of some other field of study – probably *pragmatics*, as Hymers (1998:270) holds, although Davidson himself never uses the term.[11] Be that as it may, I shall argue that both Davidson's views regarding metaphor and on the relationship between language and the world *depend* on being able to uphold this distinction between *meaning* and *use*.

Hesse, I think, first notices that what is crucial to an understanding of Davidson's views on metaphor is his denial of the possible existence of something like conceptual schemes, which shape our cognition in a significant way. Like Black, Hesse finds much support for her arguments regarding the cognitive aspects of metaphor in linking metaphors with models. Black describes metaphors as working by means of the secondary subject projecting an organising scheme onto the primary subject, highlighting certain features of the primary subject and prompting us to see it organised in a specific way. Metaphor's importance then lies in its unique ability to project an organising *scheme* onto the primary subject in this fashion. Of course Davidson holds an equally negative view regarding conceptual schemes as he does regarding metaphor. As Rorty explains, Davidson would regard Black and Hesse's filter-analogy of metaphor as attempting to find "... something hidden inside the sentence, as opposed to something lying outside it..." which can explain our cognition of the world (1987:296). At least part of the debate regarding metaphoric meaning should therefore turn on whether metaphors can be said to express conceptual schemes.

Hesse attacks Davidson's views regarding the existence of conceptual schemes by expressing her surprise at his "neglect of the patent fact that different theories and different cultures do parcel up the contents of the world differently" (1987:300). This

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11 A number of authors locate an explanation of metaphoric 'meaning', reconcilable with Davidson's views, on the level of viewing metaphor as a form of "seeing *as*" instead of a way of "seeing *that*". In this fashion, what many authors call the propositional content of metaphor can be better explained as an intimation of similarity. In this regard, see Moran (1989) and Hester (1986). Tirrell (1991) holds a more critical view.

"parcelling-up" of the contents of the world is the result of the use of models and ana-
logical frameworks in science and of metaphor (their parallel) in discourse (1987:305).
Both Hesse and Black regard models and metaphors as "... often alternative and
equally adequate ways of explaining the same data ... [which] must be... distinguish-
able from their common empirical content" (Hesse, 1987:308). The sort of debate that
would result here, is clear. Davidson certainly denies that conceptual schemes can in-
here in language and *organize* or *fit a common empirical content* that can be given a
completely theory-neutral description.[12] Just as Davidson holds that no cognitive con-
tent can be conveyed in metaphor, so he holds that conceptual schemes cannot contain
in themselves a cognitive imprint that it stamps on a prior neutral perception of the
world.

Turning to the paper on metaphor, again, Davidson holds that how language *works*
is a different matter from what language is *used to do*; and that metaphor should be
explained in terms of the latter (1978:247). This distinction between meaning and use
that Davidson makes, forces the attitude on him that one can describe what language is
used to do (that is: describing things in the world), *in* language, completely freely from
any considerations of how language itself *works.* Hesse, again, holds that how lan-
guage itself works, influences our descriptions of the world and that meaning and use
cannot be separated in this fashion. Now, Hesse's arguments on the relationship be-
tween meaning and use holds serious consequences for Davidson's position; as arguing
that language itself structures our cognition of the world, commits one to the view that
what we do in language, or *what we use it for* (that is: describe the world) is influenced
by the very language we use to do so. Meaning and use can therefore not be separated
on Hesse's account; and it may be fair to say that *any* theory of language that conflates
meaning and use in this way will also commit one to the notion of language as a force
structuring cognition. Undermining the distinction between meaning and use in this
fashion, undermines Davidson's argument against the possible existence of conceptual
schemes; and this leaves his argument against metaphoric meaning open, due to the
connection already established by Hesse between conceptual schemes and a body of
cognitive metaphors. Finally, undermining the distinction that Davidson makes be-
tween meaning and use could derail his entire semantic project, since showing how
metaphor *cannot* be explained on the level of "what words are used to do" (because
such a level would not exist, according to Hesse) would necessitate finding a seman-
tic explanation of metaphor. And as a semantic explanation of metaphor would clash
with virtually every major element (the compositionality of language, radical interpre-
tation and the principle of charity, at least) of Davidson's semantic theory, this would
put his whole project up for revision. A big challenge to Davidson becomes elaborat-
ing on the curt distinction he makes in "What Metaphors Mean" regarding what words
mean and what they are used to do.[13]

For now, one thing that I would do, is clarify the distinction that Davidson makes
between issues of meaning and issues of use. To my mind Rorty (influenced by Quine)

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12 This denial of his culminates in his attack on the third dogma of empiricism: the dichotomy of organiz-
    ing scheme and neutral empirical content.

13 The meaning/use-distinction clearly has much to do with Davidson's realism. According to *that* position
    there exists a real world that is completely independent of our own ability to describe it. And our lin-
    guistic interaction with this world, again, is a neutral one, that does not influence what we see in it. *How*
    we manage to describe the world and *what it is* that we find in the world, or present in our descriptions
    of it, therefore remain different matters.

sketches an incorrect picture of language when he describes discourse as a wooded area (or *one* area) of which a large part consists of an uncleared jungle of use and a smaller part consists of a cleared area of meaning. On Rorty's view, all of discourse is divided into two areas: a smaller inner area called 'meaning', which would in ordinary parlance be referred to as strictly literal discourse; and an outer area of 'use' which would include all other kinds of language use – emotive language, joking, metaphor... tropical talk. Hesse picks up on this unfortunate point as well and ascribes to Davidson the view that discourse consists of two areas in this way, while he of course would disagree. Rather, the part of language that Rorty designates to hold 'meaning' for Davidson would entail all of language. All of language is literal and as such has meaning; and while metaphoric sentences of course also belong to a language and therefore also have meaning, this is simply the literal meaning of the expression used. As such metaphor is mostly patently false and this is where meaning's (language's or semantics's) account of metaphor ends. Tropical talk exists, but different rules for it to play by do not. What is achieved by such talk, furthermore, should be accounted for on the basis of *what* is achieved and not on the basis of *how* this is achieved. How language works and what metaphors are used to do, are entirely different questions. Properly speaking, by holding that language consists of areas of meaning and areas of use, Rorty was not exactly arguing in the Davidsonian spirit in his debate with Hesse.

Of course all of the argumentation under this heading so far has gone to show how important upholding the distinction between meaning and use is to Davidson's project. At the end of section 4, however, I held that one option does remain for the friend of metaphor intent on finding a semantic explanation for the phenomenon; and that is to deny the possibility of making a distinction between meaning and use and to hold with Hesse that all language is metaphorical. This position, I shall not consider in any detail. However, I do imagine that a typically Davidsonian retort to such an argument would be: "but can one make sense of such a possibility?" Can one really imagine a language that in principle can be contradictory, in which the entailments of expressions are always unclear and changeable and that stands in such a relationship to the world that any observation it ever makes must be a sham?[14] I would suggest that one cannot.

By enlarging cognitive discourse to include metaphor and by according it a central role to play in language, Hesse intended to change our whole conception of such discourse (1987:297). With this move, she aimed at undermining the status of scientific language as a privileged form of expressing knowledge and at reinforcing the cognitive value of more ordinary day-type discourse. It is ironic then, that I think this was one of Rorty and Davidson's aims as well. As I have tried to show, they would hold

that one can *only* achieve this aim by *removing* metaphor from discussions of semantics, by assigning it to a different field of study and (in Rorty's words) *finding some*

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14 If the reader were to object to this description of what a language in which all meaning is metaphorical must look like, consider that a language that shows any more internal consistency and correspondence with a real outside world, simply runs the risk of becoming a literal language. An objection of this nature, therefore, will only serve to prove Davidson's point.

other compliment than "*being meaningful*" to pay to metaphor. Semantics is a rule-bound enterprise: there can be no meaning without rules. And if one would allow for the working of metaphor to be described on the level of semantics, one would make it subject to the same rules and the same predictability – one would, in effect, kill it. One benefit therefore, of drawing a distinction between meaning and metaphor, is that it is a liberating step. Separating discussions of metaphor from discussions of semantics, frees metaphor from needing to meet the requirements concerning the basis of linguistic meaning, allowing those interested in metaphor to go about the business of interpreting them, rather than finding semantic explanations for them. Removing metaphor from semantics frees metaphor to be as whimsical as it needs to be.

Conclusion

Davidson builds his theory of meaning on a pre-theoretical conception of the notion of truth; and as one should turn to truth in evaluating the basis of his semantics, one should also return to truth in evaluating his views on metaphor. The question was posed earlier of whether there can be such a thing as metaphoric truth, to which the Davidsonian answer was that the idea of metaphoric truth requires a prior explanation of the notion of metaphoric meaning, which one cannot provide. It is true, however, that Davidson's notion of meaning rests on a theory of truth which is from the outset assumed to be purely extensional and purely literal; and a notion of truth which is of course *pre*-theoretical – what the 'real' character of truth is, Davidson cannot address in his theory of meaning. The most general question which can be asked regarding Davidson's views on metaphorical meaning then becomes: "is he *correct* in saying that words and sentences derive their meaning in a stable fashion from a stock of literal truths"? The fact that this *is* the most important question then probably only proves how interconnected truth and meaning are. If meanings are stable, there are only literal truths; and if there are only literal truths there are only stable meanings. And if meanings are not stable, there are not only literal truths and vice versa. The inter-connectedness of meaning and truth makes it impossible to say. I would argue that only the first possibility is a real one. The only language of which we could make any kind of sense is one that exhibits the requisite stability; and that it is stable is then what our view on language should be. Regarding the *explanation* of the metaphoric phenomenon, Davidson (1978:247) asserts that most theoreticians have it exactly the wrong way around: "... metaphoric truth does not explain metaphor – metaphor explains metaphoric truth." Regarding the concepts of both metaphoric truth and meaning, one should probably best say that they too are (Davidson's type of) metaphors: they are not themselves forms of truth or meaning, but are simply *like* truth and meaning in some surprising ways.

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