

## *Inferring Content: Metaphor and Malapropism*

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*It is traditionally thought that metaphorical utterances constitute a special—nonliteral—kind of departure from lexical constraints on meaning. Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson have been forcefully arguing against this: according to them, relevance theory's comprehension / interpretation procedure for metaphorical utterances does not require details specific to metaphor (or nonliteral discourse); instead, the same type of comprehension procedure as that in place for literal utterances covers metaphors as well. One of Sperber and Wilson's central reasons for holding this is that metaphorical utterances occupy one end of a continuum that includes literal, loose and hyperbolic utterances with no sharp boundaries in between them. Call this the continuum argument about interpreting metaphors. My aim is to show that this continuum argument doesn't work. For if it were to work, it would have an unwanted consequence: it could be converted into a continuum argument about interpreting linguistic errors, including slips of the tongue, of which malaprops are a special case. In particular, based on the premise that the literal-loose-metaphorical continuum extends to malaprops also, we could conclude that the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure for malaprops does not require details specific to linguistic errors, that is, details beyond those already in place for interpreting literal utterances. Given that we have good reason to reject this conclusion, we also have good reason to rethink the conclusion of the continuum argument about interpreting metaphors and consider what additional (metaphor-specific) details—about the role of constraints due to what is lexically encoded by the words used—might be added to relevance-theoretic comprehension procedures.*

**Keywords:** *Ad hoc* concepts, figurative language use, inferential comprehension procedures, linguistic error, literal language use, literal-metaphorical continuum, loose use, malapropism, metaphor, relevance theory, Dan Sperber, Deirdre Wilson.

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

It has been three decades since Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (1986/1995) first formulated their influential framework for the study of communication: relevance theory. Their paper “A Deflationary Account of Metaphor” (2008) contains the two authors’ most recent position on metaphor. They set out to show that

[t]here is no mechanism specific to metaphors, no interesting generalisation that applies only to them. In other terms, linguistic metaphors are not a natural kind, and ‘metaphor’ is not a theoretically important notion in the study of verbal communication. (Sperber and Wilson 2008: 97)

Accordingly, Sperber and Wilson hold that relevance theory’s inferential procedures for comprehending/interpreting linguistic utterances do not include any metaphor-specific details. In this paper, my primary aim is to reconstruct and assess what I take to be the authors’ central argument—which I will call the *continuum argument about interpreting metaphors*—to the conclusion that there are no interesting metaphor-specific generalizations that a study of verbal communication should include. I will show that in the light of considerations about linguistic errors of various sorts, including malaprops, we have reason, first, to reject the continuum argument about interpreting metaphors and, second, to consider what metaphor-specific details are worth making room for within relevance-theoretic comprehension procedures: details that spell out the status of lexically driven constraints on interpretation. This paper is primarily concerned with setting up the first (negative) project, I will briefly discuss the second (positive) proposal about developing relevance-theoretic inferential comprehension procedures, and plan to explore it further in future work.

Mrs. Malaprop, a character in Sheridan’s (1775) play *The Rivals* had a tendency to make linguistic errors of a special sort: she would describe people as being “the pineapple of politeness” (when she meant *pinnacle*); or “as headstrong as an allegory on the banks of the Nile” (when she meant *alligator*). Such slips of the tongue have since come to be called malaprops. In a framework like relevance theory, how might we characterize the process of interpreting malaprops as opposed to interpreting literal utterances? We will see that addressing this question exposes a challenge for the relevance-theoretic treatment of *metaphorical* utterances.

Within philosophy of language as well as rhetoric the following claims are widely held, considered platitudinous even: the distinction between literal and figurative discourse carries theoretical importance, and metaphorical utterances clearly fall on the figurative side of the divide, constituting departures from literality. Relevance theory calls into question these time-worn claims.

<sup>1</sup> This paper builds on and expands a shorter predecessor (Zvolenszky 2015).

Relevance theory has, since its inception, become a leading research program in pragmatics. Its founders', Sperber's and Wilson's most recent position on metaphorical utterances is that (i) the interpretation/comprehension procedure for metaphors does not require resources beyond those already needed to account for literal utterances (call this the *procedure claim*), and (ii) metaphorical utterances occupy one end of a continuum that includes literal, loose and hyperbolic utterances (call this the *continuum claim*). Relevance theorists seem to regard the continuum claim as one reason to hold the procedure claim; call this the *continuum argument about interpreting metaphors*.

Sperber and Wilson subscribe to this continuum argument:

We see this continuity of cases, and the absence of any criterion for distinguishing literal, loose, and metaphorical utterances, as evidence not just that there is some degree of fuzziness or overlap among distinct categories, but that there are no genuinely distinct categories, at least from a descriptive, psycholinguistic or pragmatic point of view. Even more important than the lack of clear boundaries is the fact that the same inferential procedure is used in interpreting all these different types of utterance. (2008: 111–112, emphasis added)

In this paper, I aim to show that the continuum argument about metaphors, if it were to work, would face an unacceptable consequence: the argument would license a *continuum argument about interpreting malaprops* (and more generally, a continuum argument about linguistic errors):

*Continuum premise for malaprops:* The literal–loose–metaphorical continuum extends to malaprops.

*Procedure conclusion for malaprops:* The relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure for malaprops does not require details beyond those needed to account for literal utterances.

We have good reason to resist the malaprop conclusion: surely, when we manage to interpret Mrs. Malaprop as having meant 'alligator' when she said 'allegory', the fact that the lexically encoded meaning of 'allegory' becomes wholly irrelevant is a detail that is bound to be featured in a full description of our process of interpreting her. And if we want to resist the malaprop conclusion, then we have to find fault with the continuum argument about interpreting malaprops. There are two strategies we could follow: we could fault the premise or fault the argument itself as non-truth-preserving. I will argue that the former strategy is not open to us, so our remaining option is to regard the malaprop argument as non-truth-preserving. But then (I shall argue) we have to say the same about the continuum argument about interpreting metaphors also. Whether the comprehension procedure for interpreting metaphors includes any details specific to metaphor (or nonliteral discourse) therefore remains an open question.

After some background on relevance theory (Section 2) and preliminary considerations about a recurring analogy-based reasoning strat-

egy prevalent in the philosophical literature on metaphor (Section 3), I will formulate the continuum argument as a special instance of the analogy-based reasoning strategy (Section 4). I will then outline my malaprop objection (Section 5) and deflect a counterobjection to it (Section 6), concluding with some remarks on how the inferential comprehension procedure might be supplemented to include metaphor-specific details (Section 7).

## 2. *Relevance theory, the literal–loose–metaphorical continuum, and ad hoc concepts*

Sperber and Wilson's (1986/1995, also, Wilson and Sperber 2012) relevance-theoretic framework outlines an inferential comprehension procedure that hearers follow in arriving at an interpretation of speakers' linguistic utterances. Crucially, the comprehension procedure is delimited and guided by specific assumptions about relevance (i)–(iii), accepted by speakers and hearers alike. (i) Cognition (generally, not just in the case of communication) aims to maximize relevance (this is the *cognitive principle* of relevance). (ii) Linguistic utterances communicate a presumption of their own optimal relevance (this follows from the *communicative principle* of relevance<sup>2</sup>). And (iii) an utterance is *presumed to be optimally relevant* if and only if it is at least relevant enough to be worth the speaker's effort to process it, and it is the most relevant utterance compatible with the speaker's abilities and preferences. The kind of inference involved in the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure is inference to the best explanation (Allot 2013). The concepts encoded by the words the speaker has used on a given occasion are mere starting points for arriving, via inferential steps, at an interpretation of her utterance: her utterance's explicit content (the speaker's explicit meaning) on the one hand, and its implicit content (which consists of implicit premises and conclusions) on the other.

By explicit and implicit content, we mean content that was *intended* as such by the speaker. The hearer's task is to *reconstruct* the explicit content and implicit premises and conclusions that the speaker has intended to communicate. Of course, rarely, if ever do hearers converge on the very same concepts as those that speakers actually meant. Nor is this required for successful communication. It suffices that the concepts reconstructed by the hearer be ones that allow him to draw (nearly enough) the same inferences as those intended by the speaker; it is enough that the reconstructed concepts "activate contextual implications that make the utterance relevant as expected" (Sperber and Wilson 2008: 110).

<sup>2</sup>Our concern here is with acts of *linguistic* communication, but the communicative principle and the relevance-theoretic framework are intended to apply to a broader range of cases: acts of ostensive communication which include, besides linguistic utterances, certain kinds of non-linguistic acts also.

A recurring example of Wilson and Sperber's (2002, see also Sperber and Wilson 2005, 2008) exemplifies *loose use*:

(1) Holland is flat.

uttered in the context of the following conversation: Peter and Mary are discussing their next cycling trip. Peter has just said that he feels rather unfit. Mary replies: "We could go to Holland. Holland is flat." Wilson and Sperber (2002) illustrate the inferential comprehension procedure via which Peter interprets Mary's second sentence as follows.

(a) Mary has said to Peter, 'Holland is flat'.	<i>Decoding of Mary's utterance.</i>
(b) Mary's utterance is optimally relevant to Peter.	<i>Expectation raised by the recognition of Mary's utterance as a communicative act, and acceptance of the presumption of relevance it automatically conveys.</i>
(c) Mary's utterance will achieve relevance by giving reasons for her proposal to go cycling in Holland, which take account of Peter's immediately preceding complaint that he feels rather unfit.	<i>Expectation raised by (b), together with the fact that such reasons would be most relevant to Peter at this point.</i>
(d) Cycling on relatively flatter terrain which involves little or no climbing is less strenuous, and would be enjoyable in the circumstances.	<i>First assumption to occur to Peter which, together with other appropriate premises, might satisfy expectation (c). Accepted as an implicit premise of Mary's utterance.</i>
(e) <b>Holland is FLAT*</b> (where FLAT* is the meaning indicated by 'flat', and is such that Holland's being FLAT* is relevant-as-expected in the context).	<i>(Description of) the first enriched interpretation of Mary's utterance as decoded in (a) to occur to Peter which might combine with (d) to lead to the satisfaction of (c). <b>Interpretation accepted as Mary's explicit meaning.</b></i>
(f) Cycling in Holland would involve little or no climbing.	<i>Inferred from (d) and (e). Accepted as an implicit conclusion of Mary's utterance.</i>
(g) Cycling in Holland would be less strenuous, and would be enjoyable in the circumstances.	<i>Inferred from (d) and (f), satisfying (b) and (c) and accepted as an implicit conclusion of Mary's utterance.</i>

Table 1. Interpretation of Mary's utterance 'Holland is flat'.

As indicated on line (e) (in boldface), the explicit content of Mary's utterance of (1) is 'Holland is FLAT\*'. FLAT\* is an *ad hoc concept* Peter arrived at that is distinct from, broader<sup>3</sup> than the lexicalized concept encoded by the word 'flat' in the given context of utterance: say, FLAT<sub>1</sub>. Unlike FLAT\*, the extension of FLAT<sub>1</sub> doesn't include imperfectly flat surfaces like the Dutch landscape.

Loose use, as in (1), is a type of literal discourse<sup>4</sup> that involves some departure from the lexically encoded concept. While the departure is greater than in many other instances of literal discourse, Sperber and Wilson (2008: 107) stress that the comprehension procedure for *some* literal utterances (to wit: cases of loose use and narrowing) already involves the formation of *ad hoc* concepts. They suggest further that even in literal utterances that do not involve a departure from the lexically encoded concept, the process of disambiguating the expressions used involves inferential steps similar to those in Table 1. For example, Mary's and Peter's idiolect may have (at least) two senses associated with the word 'flat', one of which amounts to, say, "having a smooth, even surface" while the other, to "is in a horizontal position"; Sperber and Wilson (2008: 111) suggest that if Mary uttered

(2) My computer screen is flat,

the process of interpreting her utterance and deciding that she has in mind the first and not the second sense of 'flat' would take a similar inferential procedure as the one seen in Table 1.

Sperber and Wilson (2008) gradually build up a continuum of cases with no clear boundaries in between them. The continuum includes cases of disambiguation like (2), various examples of

- loose use (or broadening), covering a broad range:
  - *Approximation*: 'Holland is flat';
  - *Limited category extension*: 'Here is a Kleenex', said of a piece of non-Kleenex-brand tissue;
  - *Creative category extension*: 'For luggage, pink is the new black';
- *Hyperbole*: 'Joan is the kindest person on earth';
- *Nonpoetic metaphor*: 'Joan is an angel';
- *Poetic metaphor*: 'The fog comes on little cat feet' (from Carl Sandburg's poem *The Fog*).

<sup>3</sup> Alternatively, according to another prominent relevance theorist, Robyn Carston (2002), the formation of *ad hoc* concepts involves conceptual narrowing as well as broadening. My malaprop objection can be straightforwardly adapted to work against Carston's proposal also.

<sup>4</sup> In their early work, Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995: 234) already stress the literal status of instances of loose use:

[i]f someone says, It's 5 p.m., she should not be taken to task if it turns out to be five minutes or two minutes to, unless the relevance of the utterance depends on that kind of exactitude... The examples discussed so far would normally be treated as loose uses of language, but would not be regarded as figurative: there is no temptation to invoke the substitution of a figurative for a literal meaning.

A central claim of relevance theory (besides Sperber and Wilson's work, see also Carston 2002) is that each of the listed cases involves the formation of an *ad hoc* concept, one that—as we go down the list of examples—exhibits a gradually greater degree of departure from the concept lexically encoded by the word used, that is, the concept that serves as one of the starting points for the comprehension procedure. The *ad hoc* concepts are then featured as part of the explicit content attributed to the speaker (as in line (e) in Table 1). The *ad hoc* concepts for the listed examples (except for poetic metaphors, to be discussed in detail in Section 6) are as follows:

- FLAT\*, whose extension includes imperfectly flat surfaces like the Dutch landscape;
- KLEENEX\*, whose extension includes paper tissues that aren't Kleenex brand;
- BLACK\*, whose extension includes (roughly) objects of a fashionable, trendy color, among them pink suitcases;
- KINDEST PERSON ON EARTH\*, whose extension includes people who are very kind, but not even close to being among the kindest;
- ANGEL\*, whose extension includes nonangelic human beings who are very kind.

### 3. *A recurring analogy-based reasoning strategy in the metaphor literature*

Imagine us in the middle of a discussion about Woody Allen's 2005 film *Match Point*; I contribute the following metaphorical<sup>5</sup> utterance:

(3) The film's plot is flat.

It is customary to distinguish the *literal import* of such an utterance (which is quite outlandish: about a non-concrete thing like a story line *literally* having an even surface) and its *metaphorical import* (roughly: that the story line of the film lacks imagination / is banal, prosaic / is predictable and simple-minded / is without complexity, layers or depth).

A recurring motif in theories of metaphor is the following analogy-based reasoning strategy.

<sup>5</sup> Arguably, 'flat' as used in (3) has become a dead metaphor, and the sense of 'flat' as dull and prosaic has become lexicalized over time, reflected in major dictionaries. I use this example to keep it close to Sperber–Wilson's 'Holland is flat'. I ask those readers who think (3) is not a metaphorical utterance but contains a dead metaphor to (a) substitute one of the usual examples in (3)'s place like 'Sam is a bulldozer' or 'My chiropractor is a magician', and / or (b) consider that numerous major dictionaries construe these very uses of 'bulldozer' and 'magician' as dead metaphors also, listing as one of their senses, respectively "an overbearing person, a bully" (American Heritage), and "a person who has amazing skills" (Merriam-Webster).

## ANALOGY-BASED REASONING STRATEGY

Premise 1: Metaphorical import and *X*-type import resemble one another in a theoretically important respect: both are *P*.

Premise 2: *X*-type import is obviously *Q*.

Conclusion: We have good reason to think that metaphorical import is *Q* also.

We can think of *P* predicates as *premise predicates* (featured in Premise 1) and *Q* predicates as *conclusion predicates* that, based on the analogy at hand, are true of metaphorical import. The analogy-based reasoning strategy is of key importance in Grice's as well as Davidson's arguments about metaphor. Let's take a brief look at these to illustrate the strategy at work before considering the role of this strategy in the context of relevance theory.

In the case of Grice's (1975) theory of metaphor, we can substitute the following for *X*, premise predicates *P* and conclusion predicates *Q*:

## ANALOGY-BASED REASONING STRATEGY IN GRICE

*X* = conversational implicature,

*P*<sub>1</sub> = unlike what the speaker has (strictly speaking) said (or made as if to have said)

*Q*<sub>1</sub> = derivable based on conversation-guiding norms (such as the Cooperative Principle and the maxims)

*Q*<sub>2</sub> = propositional, can be characterized in terms of truth conditions (*P*<sub>1</sub>, *Q*<sub>1</sub> and *Q*<sub>2</sub> are illustrations, we could go on and list further instances of premise predicates and conclusion predicates at play.

Also, one might question the sorting of premise predicates and conclusion predicates: in the context of a specific Gricean argument / interpretation thereof. For example, *Q*<sub>2</sub> could be construed as a premise predicate also.)

This way, in the Gricean reasoning about metaphor, conversational implicatures play a central role: what drives Grice's argument is that metaphorical import is like conversational implicatures in certain (theoretically important) respects, so in other respects they are alike also. We can say that Grice's theory of metaphor crucially relies on the analogy between metaphor and conversational implicatures.

In the case of Davidson's (1978) theory of metaphor, the following can substituted for *X*, premise predicates *P* and conclusion predicates *Q*:<sup>6</sup>

## ANALOGY-BASED REASONING STRATEGY IN DAVIDSON:

*X* = the import/purpose/communicative function of a joke

*P*<sub>1</sub> = "can make us appreciate some fact, ... but not by standing for or expressing that fact" (Davidson 1978: 46)<sup>7</sup>

*P*<sub>2</sub> = not propositional, cannot be characterized in terms of truth conditions

<sup>6</sup> This strategy is employed in Lepore and Stone (2010) neo-Davidsonian proposal also.

<sup>7</sup> Notice the similarity between the Gricean and the Davidsonian *P*<sub>1</sub> predicates.



$Q_1$  = cannot be characterized as some sort of meaning or content that is distinct from literal meaning/content

$Q_2$  = is based on the idea that sometimes we use words in such a way that we are relying on their *conventional* meanings in order to make our audience see one thing (for example, a film's plot) as something else (something with an even surface)

( $P_1$ ,  $P_2$ ,  $Q_1$  and  $Q_2$  are illustrations, we could go on and list further instances of premise predicates and conclusion predicates at play. Also, one might, again, question the sorting of premise predicates and conclusion predicates: for example,  $P_1$  could also be construed as a conclusion predicate in specific Davidsonian arguments or interpretations thereof.)

This way, in Davidson's as well as neo-Davidsonian theorists' reasoning (for example Lepore and Stone 2010) jokes play a central role: what drives their arguments is that metaphorical import is like the import or purpose of a joke in certain (theoretically important) respects (particularly  $P_2$ ), so in other respects they are alike also. We can say that Davidsonian theories of metaphor crucially rely on the analogy between metaphor and jokes.

From its inception, Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory has prominently featured the analogy-based reasoning strategy (1986/1995, 1990, 2004, 2005, 2008, also, Wilson and Sperber 2002). And their  $X$  is none other than cases of loose use or broadening, as in (1) ('Holland is flat').

ANALOGY-BASED REASONING STRATEGY IN SPERBER–WILSON, with brief commentary:

$X$  = the import (explicit content) of utterances involving loose use

$P_1$  = propositional, can be captured in terms of truth conditions

$P_2$  = is on the same continuum with other instances of language use traditionally thought to be literal,<sup>8</sup> loose, hyperbolic and metaphorical: it is only a matter of degree to what extent the lexically encoded concept is being broadened to yield the concept featured in the explicit content of the utterance

$Q_1$  = is arrived at via the process of constructing an *ad hoc* concept

- Recall that an *ad hoc* concept is broader than the lexically encoded concept associated with the expression uttered (which is no more than a departure point for the comprehension process).

<sup>8</sup> The upshot of Sperber and Wilson (2008) is that the traditional notion of literal doesn't serve a theoretical purpose in a theory of communication: the category of literal utterances turns out to encompass loose use, hyperbole as well as metaphor (poetic as well as nonpoetic). When they talk about a literal–loose–metaphorical continuum, it would be odd to apply their own sense of 'literal': for then the first label would be an overarching one that covers cases of the other two also: loose use and metaphor. Instead, plausibly, when Sperber and Wilson discuss the 'literal–loose–metaphorical' continuum, they are using 'literal' in the traditional sense instead. This way, literal (in the traditional sense) does not include cases of loose use or metaphor.

- For example, according to Sperber and Wilson, the explicit content of (1) is ‘Holland is FLAT\*’ (as in Table 1), where FLAT\* is an *ad hoc* concept whose extension includes *approximately* flat things also, ones that are not included in the extension of the lexically encoded concept for the given use of flat, say, FLAT<sub>1</sub>. Holland is an example of something included in the extension of FLAT\* but not FLAT<sub>1</sub>.

$Q_2$  = is interpreted via an inferential comprehension procedure that contains only such details that are already needed to interpret literal utterances

$Q_3$  = involves no departure from literal discourse

- Importantly, as we have seen above, Sperber and Wilson consider it evident that (1) (featuring loose use) is an instance of literal language use.

(In what follows, I will set aside  $Q_3$ ; even though it is a prominent claim in Sperber and Wilson’s argument, it doesn’t add to the specific argument of theirs that I am about to examine, which already mentions literality in  $Q_2$ .) Notice that here, again, we could construe differently which predicates count as premise predicates and which as conclusion predicates; for example,  $Q_1$  could be construed as a premise predicate instead.)

#### 4. *The continuum argument about interpreting metaphors*

We are now in a position to formulate in far more depth and detail Sperber and Wilson’s (and other relevance theorists’) central argument about interpreting metaphors.

SPERBER–WILSON’S ANALOGY-BASED REASONING ABOUT METAPHOR

Premise 1: Metaphorical import and the content of loose use resemble one another in a theoretically important respect,  $P_2$ : they are on the same continuum with other instances of language use traditionally thought to be literal (including loose use) as well as hyperbolic, metaphorical language use.

Premise 2: The content of loose use is obviously

$Q_1$  (is arrived at via the process of constructing an *ad hoc* concept),  
and

$Q_2$  (is interpreted via a relevance-theoretic inferential procedure that contains only such details that are already needed to interpret literal utterances).

Conclusion: We have good reason to think that metaphorical import is

$Q_1$  (is arrived at via the process of constructing an *ad hoc* concept),  
and

$Q_2$  (is interpreted via an inferential comprehension procedure that contains only such details that are already needed to interpret literal utterances).

For exposition, let us simplify, relabel and reword things a bit:

THE CONTINUUM ARGUMENT ABOUT INTERPRETING METAPHORS (final version)

*Premise 1. The continuum premise for metaphors:*

All metaphorical utterances (poetic and nonpoetic alike) can be located on a continuum of cases that includes loose use (a kind of literal use) as well as hyperbolic and metaphorical uses.

*Premise 2. Ad-hoc-concept premise for metaphors:*

The process of forming *ad hoc* concepts to arrive at the explicit content attributed to the speaker is all that the inferential comprehension procedure requires in order to capture the process of interpreting instances of loose use.

*Procedure conclusion for metaphors:*

The process of forming *ad hoc* concepts to arrive at the explicit content attributed to the speaker is all that the inferential comprehension procedure requires in order to capture the process of interpreting metaphorical utterances.

The upshot of the procedure conclusion is this: equipped with the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure and the *ad hoc* concept formation tool, both already required for interpreting literal utterances like loose use, we have all the resources needed to describe the comprehension procedure at play during the interpretation of metaphorical utterances. No further details specific to metaphor (or figurative language use) are needed in a comprehensive account of interpreting metaphors.

In Section 5, I will raise an objection that purports to show that the continuum argument about interpreting metaphors is flawed: even if we accepted both of its premises, that is not reason enough to accept its conclusion also. I will motivate this by giving what I think is an entirely parallel argument about malaprops—the *malaprop objection*—with a clearly false conclusion. Someone might then raise a counterobjection: the argument about malaprops has a false conclusion because it has either a false premise or fails to provide a strictly parallel argument. We have two options, the counterobjection goes. (i) We can maintain (as relevance theorists do) the continuum premise for metaphors while resisting its counterpart about malaprops. Or (ii) we can claim that the two arguments are not entirely parallel after all because of the specifics of the *ad hoc* concept tool. In Section 6, I will elaborate this counterobjection and deflect it by showing that (i) the continuum premise for metaphors is no more plausible than its counterpart for malaprops, and (ii) relevance theorists' *ad hoc* concept tool is highly unconstrained and powerful, so nothing about its specifics prevents its extension to malaprops; therefore, the metaphor and malaprop arguments are exactly parallel after all. The upshot: the malaprop objection has traction and there is room to reject the procedure conclusion for metaphors, despite relevance theorists' arguments to the contrary.

## 5. *The malaprop objection*

Once we have accepted the continuum argument about interpreting metaphors, along with its premises and conclusion, we have, I claim, no reason to resist making the same moves with respect to a parallel argument about malaprops (and more generally, about linguistic errors):

THE CONTINUUM ARGUMENT ABOUT INTERPRETING MALAPROPS

*Premise 1. The continuum premise for malaprops:*

All malaprops can be located on a continuum of cases that includes loose use (a kind of literal use) as well as hyperbolic and metaphorical uses.

*Premise 2. Ad-hoc-concept premise for malaprops:*

The process of forming *ad hoc* concepts to arrive at the explicit content attributed to the speaker is all that the inferential comprehension procedure requires in order to capture the process of interpreting instances of loose use. (Same as the previous Premise 2 for metaphors.)

*Procedure conclusion for malaprops:*

The process of forming *ad hoc* concepts to arrive at the explicit content attributed to the speaker is all that the inferential comprehension procedure requires in order to capture the process of interpreting malaprops.

The upshot of the procedure conclusion for malaprops is this: equipped with the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure and the *ad hoc* concept formation tool, both already required for interpreting literal utterances like loose use, we have all the resources needed to describe the comprehension procedure at play during the interpretation of malaprops. No further details specific to slips of the tongue (or more broadly: linguistic errors) are needed in a comprehensive account of interpreting malaprops.

But—the *malaprop objection* goes—there is a flaw in this argument: (a) its conclusion is clearly unacceptable and (b) it remains unacceptable even if we accept its premises. And if we accept all this, we have exposed a flaw in the original continuum argument about interpreting *metaphors*. In the rest of this section, I aim to establish (a), in the next section, (b).

The procedure conclusion for malaprops leads to the following bizarre results:

- *Allegory example.* In interpreting Mrs. Malaprop's utterance "She is as headstrong as an allegory on the banks of the Nile", the explicit content that hearers arrive at involves an *ad hoc* concept ALLEGORY\*, which is constructed by broadening the concept lexically encoded by the word 'allegory' (about a certain kind of trope or figure of speech) in such a way that its extension includes *alligators*. The comprehension procedure is basically the same as that in Table 1, it's just that the degree of departure to

get from FLAT<sub>1</sub> to FLAT\* is not as great as that from ALLEGORY<sub>1</sub> to ALLEGORY\*.

- *Spanking example.* In interpreting George W. Bush's utterance in the context of a speech he gave at a school "I want to spank all teachers" (he meant *thank all teachers*), the explicit content that hearers arrive at involves an *ad hoc* concept SPANK\*, which is constructed by broadening the concept lexically encoded by the word 'spank' (about slapping) in such a way that its extension includes acts of *thanking*. The comprehension procedure is basically the same as that in Table 1, it's just that the degree of departure to get from FLAT<sub>1</sub> to FLAT\* is not as great as that from SPANK<sub>1</sub> to SPANK\*.

As mentioned before, the continuum argument about malaprops is readily extended to linguistic errors of all sorts, including slips of the tongue other than malaprops as well as mistaken translations like the following:

- *Steak example.* In interpreting a German speaker's order in a restaurant "I want to become a steak" ('bekommen' in German means 'get'), the explicit content that hearers arrive at involves the *ad hoc* concept BECOME\*, which is constructed by broadening the concept lexically encoded by the word 'become' in English (about 'turning into') in such a way that its extension includes one thing *getting* another. The comprehension procedure is basically the same as that in Table 1, it's just that the degree of departure to get from FLAT<sub>1</sub> to FLAT\* is not as great as that from BECOME<sub>1</sub> to BECOME\*.

It is bizarre to think that when we manage to interpret successfully the German speaker's request to "become a steak", we are broadening the concept lexically encoded by the English word 'become'. After all, our grasping that he's talking about getting a steak rather than turning into one happens *despite* his use of the English word 'become'. We can say the same about understanding Mrs. Malaprop's and George W. Bush's utterances: it is *despite* the lexically encoded meaning of the words they have used that we manage to interpret them as having said something about alligators and thanking, respectively.

In the light of this, it seems that relevance-theoretic comprehension procedures, as they stand, are missing key details that distinguish malaprops (and more broadly, linguistic errors) from utterances that are literal or metaphorical. To wit: the procedure has to specify that in utterances like 'Holland is flat', 'Joan is an angel' (loose and metaphorical uses alike), the speaker has *not* committed a linguistic error; further, that the speaker (and hearer) takes the lexically encoded concept associated with her words to be in force, and would not retract her words when confronted with the concept lexically encoded by her words. By contrast, in the case of linguistic errors including malaprops, the hearer is rerouting the inference such that he sets aside the lexically encoded

concept entirely, and the speaker, when confronted with the lexically encoded concept, would retract his or her words: “I didn’t mean spanking teachers was desirable, I wanted to talk about thanking them.” “I didn’t mean there were allegories on the banks of the Nile, I wanted to talk about alligators”. But we would have absolutely no grounds for seeking such additional details if we thought the continuum argument about malaprops worked and moreover featured true premises. If, despite the argument about malaprops, we thought the additional details were needed, then we open the door to seeking additional details with which to supplement the comprehension procedure for metaphorical utterances also. And we thereby open the door to rejecting the conclusion of the continuum argument about metaphors.

An analogy helps illuminate what my objection, if successful, shows with respect to Sperber and Wilson’s continuum argument about interpreting metaphors. If you are at Columbus Circle in Manhattan and want to take the subway to the Museum of Natural History (at 81<sup>st</sup> Street), then don’t get on the A train (the 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue Express); despite the fact that you would initially approach your desired destination, eventually, your train would whizz right past the Museum of Natural History, taking you all the way to 125<sup>th</sup> Street in Harlem, far away from your desired destination. Likewise: if you don’t want an inferential comprehension procedure for malaprops (and other linguistic errors) that invokes no more than the formation of *ad hoc* concepts at work in the comprehension procedure you posited for cases of loose use, then don’t apply the continuum argument to metaphorical utterances, for you won’t be able to get off there but will be whisked straight to a place where you don’t want to be: the continuum argument about interpreting malaprops.

## 6. *A counterobjection deflected*

It seems natural to respond to the foregoing objection as follows: a distinguishing feature of linguistic errors, malaprops included, is that the speaker makes a mistake about which *word form* is associated with the lexically encoded concept that he or she wants to express: G. W. Bush has said ‘spank’ even though his intended concept is expressed by the word form ‘thank’; Mrs. Malaprop has said ‘allegory’ even though her intended concept is expressed by the word form ‘alligator’. Proponents of this counterobjection may then claim: of course the swapping of word forms, and the fact that the hearer recognizes the swap and reroutes the inference accordingly, will be part of the comprehension procedure via which he interprets malaprops and the like. We are in no way forced to regard the alligator, spanking and steak examples as cases involving simply the formation of *ad hoc* concepts with extreme degrees of departure from the lexically encoded concepts that had served as starting points for the construction of the *ad hoc* concept. This is how the counterobjection goes.

Someone could maintain this line while holding on to the continuum argument about *metaphors* and its conclusion, by denying either (i) the first premise of the continuum argument about *malaprops* or (ii) the link between the second premise and conclusion of the malaprop argument (without undermining the link in the metaphor argument). This would amount to showing either (i) that—in the context of relevance theory—extending the literal–metaphorical continuum to malaprops (and other linguistic errors) is unfounded, or (ii) that—again, in the context of relevance theory—the tool of *ad hoc* concept construction is such that it is readily applicable to loose use and metaphors but not to malaprops and other linguistic errors (the nature of the tool would then be such that it would license the transition from premises to conclusion in the metaphor argument but not the malaprop argument). In what follows, I will show that neither (i) nor (ii) will work and hence the counterobjection fails. My response consists of two parts:

(i) With respect to malaprops (and other linguistic errors also) we can talk about a continuum of cases ranging from limited to extreme degrees of discrepancy between the intended concept and the lexically encoded one. And the limited-discrepancy cases can be readily placed on the literal–metaphorical continuum Sperber and Wilson had posited.

(ii) In the case of poetic metaphors, the *ad hoc* concept departs greatly from the lexically encoded one, yet Sperber and Wilson (and others) do not doubt that here, too, explicit content is arrived at via the construction of an *ad hoc* concept. If the *ad hoc* concept tool is capable of that, then it is plausibly suited for capturing cases like the allegory, spanking and steak examples also. Meanwhile, the limited-discrepancy cases fit squarely the *ad hoc* concept formation paradigm. To resist these moves, substantial constraints would need to be in place about the *ad hoc* concept formation tool.

I discuss (i) and (ii) in reverse order.

(ii) is in part about poetic metaphors. We've already encountered the example from Sandburg's poem "The fog comes on little cat feet". According to Sperber and Wilson, the explicit content arrived at in the comprehension procedure for interpreting this line of the poem involves the *ad hoc* concept: ON-LITTLE-CAT-FEET\*. What Sperber and Wilson say about this concept signifies that it involves a great degree of departure from the lexically encoded concept: the *ad hoc* concept is supposed to help convey that the fog is spreading in a smooth, quiet, stealthy and deliberate way. Yet it remains quite vague what this *ad hoc* concept is, in what direction it takes off from the lexicalized concept, what does and does not belong in its extension. The authors offer us limited guidance on these matters: ON-LITTLE-CAT-FEET\*...

is the concept of a property that is difficult or impossible to define, a property possessed in particular by some typical movements of cats (though not

all of them—little cat feet can also move in violent or playful ways) and, according to the poem, by the fog. (Sperber and Wilson 28: 122).

As Sperber and Wilson see it, the great distance between lexicalized and *ad hoc* concepts and the vague description of the latter is no obstacle to applying the *ad hoc* concept formation paradigm to highly creative, poetic metaphors. Then comparably great distances and vagueness characterizing ALLEGORY\* (whose extension includes certain reptiles) and SPANK\* (whose extension includes acts of thanking) should be no obstacle to applying the *ad hoc* concept formation paradigm to malaprops (and other linguistic errors).

(ii) is also about examples involving limited-discrepancy between the encoded concept and the intended one. These examples fit squarely within the *ad hoc* concept formation paradigm, comparable to the “Here is a Kleenex” and “For luggage, pink is the new black” type examples.

*Ocean example* (a slip of the tongue involving limited discrepancy). G. W. Bush said once: “I didn’t grow up in the ocean—as a matter of fact—near the ocean—I grew up in the desert. Therefore, it was a pleasant contrast to see the ocean. And I particularly like it when I’m fishing.” In interpreting the first portion of Bush’s utterance, via *ad hoc* concept formation, from the encoded lexical meaning IN-THE-OCEAN<sub>1</sub>, we arrive, by broadening, to IN-THE-OCEAN\*, whose extension includes events and things *near* the ocean.

*Library example* (a mistaken translation involving limited discrepancy). A French speaker says: “There is a library around the corner” to mean that there is *bookshop* around the corner (in French ‘*libraire*’ means bookshop). In interpreting the utterance, via *ad hoc* concept formation, from the encoded lexical meaning of LIBRARY<sub>1</sub>, we arrive, by broadening, to LIBRARY\*, whose extension includes bookshops. (Such an utterance could also exemplify a slip of the tongue involving limited discrepancy.)

In the ocean example, the distance between IN-THE-OCEAN<sub>1</sub> and IN-THE-OCEAN\* is no greater and no less vaguely delineated than that between KLEENEX<sub>1</sub> and KLEENEX\*. The same can be said about LIBRARY<sub>1</sub> and LIBRARY\* also.

The underdefined nature of the process of *ad hoc* concept formation (as observed with ON-LITTLE-CAT-FEET\*) makes it even clearer that much too little is settled about this tool (what it can and cannot do) to prevent its application to the gradually greater departures we find in the examples of linguistic error spanning from the library and ocean examples to the allegory, spanking and steak ones.

Turning to (i): limited-discrepancy examples of linguistic error (like the library and ocean examples) already suggest that we can plausibly construct a continuum of examples spanning from such examples to the extreme-discrepancy ones (like the allegory, spanking and steak examples). Further, the limited-discrepancy examples plausibly fit



right onto the literal–loose–metaphorical continuum. Given all this, the limited-discrepancy examples make clear that considerations about a literal–metaphorical continuum support a literal–metaphorical–linguistic-error continuum also.

This concludes my justification for (i) and (ii), which together show that the counterobjection about swapped word forms does not undermine the malaprop objection I had formulated against the continuum argument about interpreting metaphorical utterances. After all, the limited-discrepancy examples of linguistic error make clear that the continuum premise for malaprops (and other linguistic mistakes) is just as plausible as the continuum premise for metaphors. In addition, the lack of constraints on the *ad hoc* concept formation tool makes clear two things: that nothing prevents its application to gradually greater and less determinate departures from what is lexically encoded and that there is no principled reason for deeming the tool fit to handle highly poetic metaphors but not linguistic errors. We therefore have at hand two entirely parallel arguments, both with true premises, and the one about malaprops boasting a clearly false conclusion. Hence, the other argument, about metaphors, is also undermined: the truth of its premise is no guarantee for the truth of its conclusion.

## 7. Concluding remarks

The continuum argument about interpreting metaphorical utterances is central to Sperber–Wilson’s conclusion that “the same interpretive abilities and procedures” are at play in the case of loose use as well as metaphor (poetic and nonpoetic) (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995: 235, see also their 2008: 97, and Wilson and Carston 2007: 231). My aim has been to show that we need not accept this conclusion given that the continuum argument about interpreting metaphors is flawed, as shown by its application to malaprops (and other linguistic errors).

In the wake of the malaprop objection to the continuum argument, several questions arise.

First, what shall we make of empirical considerations about metaphor processing, according to which, for example, the interpretation procedure for simpler metaphors is similar to that for literal utterances, while interpreting highly creative or novel metaphors involves a markedly different procedure (for example, Gibbs 1994)?<sup>9</sup> The dialectical situation is as follows: such considerations support or undermine, *independently of the continuum argument about interpreting*

<sup>9</sup> More recent experimental results (for example Forgács, Lukács and Pléh 2014) cast doubt on earlier views positing a marked difference in the processing of novel metaphors and literal utterances. Carston (2010), a central figure of relevance theory, parts ways with Sperber and Wilson (2008) and posits two distinct modes of processing metaphorical utterances. Her distinction provides the basis for one way of incorporating metaphor-specific generalizations in relevance-theoretic comprehension procedures.

*metaphors*, the claim that a similar comprehension procedure applies to literal utterances and certain types of metaphorical utterances. The continuum argument doesn't—cannot—provide an objection to or further support for such claims, because (as I have tried to argue, successfully, I hope) if it were to work, it would show too much, so it doesn't work. Therefore the tenability of the claim about a literal–loose–metaphorical continuum and the application of *ad hoc* concept formation in the interpretation of metaphorical utterances will depend on *other* (experimental-data-driven) arguments.

Second, how might relevance theorists maintain the procedure conclusion about interpreting metaphors? They can, in response to the malaprop objection, explore two options. On the one hand, they may fill in various details about the nature of the literal–loose–metaphorical continuum in a way that makes clear why the continuum cannot extend to malaprops. On the other hand, they may fill in various details about and constraints on the process of constructing *ad hoc* concepts in a way that makes clear why this tool is applicable to poetic metaphors but inapplicable to malaprops. By framing the continuum argument and the malaprop objection as a special case of an analogy-based reasoning strategy, I hope to have provided a useful backdrop for clarifying the challenge confronting relevance theorists who are keen on preserving the procedure conclusion.

Third, it is worth considering an alternative approach: what options lie ahead if we decide to give up the procedure conclusion. This involves formulating a positive proposal about how to supplement the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure for interpreting metaphors. I address this question in work in progress (Zvolenszky Ms.), drawing in part on some of the considerations that provide missing details with which to supplement the comprehension procedure for interpreting malaprops and other linguistic errors (these were briefly discussed in Section 5). In the case of metaphorical utterances (but not malaprops), the speaker (and hearer) takes the lexically encoded concept associated with her words to be in force, and would not retract her words when confronted with the concept lexically encoded by her words. “The fog doesn't really walk on feline legs,” someone might challenge the poet. And he might reply: “I was speaking metaphorically. But I stand by my words: The fog does come on little cat feet”. Notice that the poet could not say (instead of: I was speaking metaphorically) “I was speaking *loosely*”; loose use does not license the poem's sort of departure from the lexically encoded concepts at hand. This point gives preliminary motivation for resisting exactly alike treatment (and exactly alike comprehension procedures) for loose use and metaphor. Meanwhile, loose use as well as metaphor are markedly different from malaprops (and linguistic errors): Mrs. Malaprop, when challenged, “There are no such things as pineapples of politeness,” would (likely) respond: “I *retract* my previous words; I meant to speak about a *pin-nacle* of politeness. Some of the commitments my original words had

accrued were *inadvertent* and I now reject them.”<sup>10</sup> Such differences in the response to being challenged about the lexically encoded concepts associated with one’s words—in instances of metaphor, loose use and malapropism—do, I think, offer a promising starting point for the sorts of details that a relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure can incorporate in an account of metaphor. Such an account would part ways with Sperber–Wilson’s stance, claiming instead that there are, after all, interesting details and generalizations specific to metaphors. More generally: within relevance theory (and any theory of communication), the various ways in which lexically encoded concepts systematically constrain speakers’ meaning is a worthy area for in-depth exploration, whether an utterance involves deliberate departure from the lexically encoded concept (as in loose, hyperbolic and metaphorical utterances) or inadvertent departure (as in linguistic errors like malaprops).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See Camp (2008, 2012) about how deniability reveals distinctive features of metaphorical utterances.

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