Justification of Metaphorical Interpretation via Contextual Coherence with a Heterogeneous Context and QUD

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Abstract. In this paper, we propose to place coherence at the centre of questions over what justifies taking a sentence metaphorically, in a given context. Providing such an answer is pressing insofar as many sentences admit both of a metaphorical as well as of a literal interpretation, at least in principle. By way of solving this riddle posed by twice-true and twice-apt metaphors, we offer a particular line of thinking about context and what it takes for an interpretation to cohere with the former. In doing so, we focus on the interpreter’s point of view and suggest that they draw on three different sources of contextual information in assessing candidate interpretations for coherence: previous discourse, perceptual surroundings, and background information. Moreover, candidate interpretations also need to address the topic at issue, which we construe as Questions Under Discussion (QUD), in order to qualify as coherent. Only a fine-grained notion of context such as this one is capable of explaining why, and how, we are justified in taking one and the same sentence sometimes literally, sometimes metaphorically. Or so we argue.

Keywords: Metaphor, Context, Coherence, Interpretation, Twice-True Metaphors, Twice-Apt Metaphors, Questions Under Discussion

1 Introduction

Consider the following sentence:

(1) I need to get out of here, I can’t breathe in here. (Tamara Bach, Marsmädchen)

This sentence can be interpreted literally or metaphorically. In a literal reading, we could consider that the speaker suffers from dyspnoea.
In a metaphorical reading, we could maybe suppose that the speaker feels confined, oppressed, or relentless.

The example suggests that the property of being metaphorical, and incidentally the property of being literal too, is context-dependent. That much has been known for a long time (cf. e.g. Loewenberg 1975).

Against this background, we want to get a better understanding of whether it is justified, in a context, to interpret a particular utterance as metaphorical, rather than, say, literal. The answer we propose has it that the interpreter’s choice is justified to the degree that it is coherent with the context.

In section 2 we introduce the theoretical background of our proposal. In section 3 we define a notion of context that contains the elements needed to account for metaphor. Section 4 presents the notion of coherence and applies it to some schematic examples. In section 5 we show how our proposal can account for twice-apt metaphors.

2 Setting the stage

Let us go back to (1) and its two readings:

(1) I need to get out of here, I can’t breathe in here.
(1a) The speaker suffers from dyspnea (literal reading).
(1b) The speaker feels confined (metaphorical reading).

As mentioned, this sentence can be interpreted metaphorically or literally. Which one is to be preferred depends on the context. If (1) was uttered during a fire in a building by someone trying to get out, it would be natural to take it literally. By contrast, if a teenager who we know is not at ease in her hometown uttered the sentence, we would be more inclined towards a metaphorical reading. As a general rule, the preferred interpretation is the one that is coherent with the context.

This idea has two implications for how our proposal relates to the literature on metaphor. First, and contrary to a long tradition, we focus on coherence rather than on deviance or lack of fit. Second, we endorse a form of cognitivism, pace Davidson (1978). We submit that metaphorical interpretation delivers an output or result that is propositional in nature. Endorsing cognitivism about metaphorical content is a necessary requirement for assessing coherence with context as we do it, given that we conceive of the latter in terms of bodies of information.
However, we do not think that the content we may attribute to metaphors exhausts their expressive power. Rather, we propose to construe metaphorical content in terms of minimal paraphrases. A minimal paraphrase is a partial rendering of what the metaphor expresses.

3 A rich and heterogeneous context

We identify the context with the interpreter’s epistemic state and define it as a rich and heterogeneous body of information. The tradition of conceiving contexts as bodies of information is paradigmatically exemplified by Stalnaker’s (2014) common ground. In contrast to Stalnaker, we restrict our notion to what is available to the interpreter rather than to what is common ground in the conversation. More particularly, we pay attention to three sources of information.

First and foremost, a context includes the information given by previous discourse. This can include two subtypes of information: (the interpretation of) what has been explicitly stated and worked-out presuppositions and implicatures.

Second, and especially important for interpretation in oral exchanges, the context of interpretation includes perceptual information about the conversational setting or about the support on which a written sentence is presented. Some such information may be gathered in the form of propositions the interpreter could express.

Third, interpreters often have recourse to what we will call background information, that is, general knowledge they rely on when interpreting an utterance. That children often make category mistakes, for instance, is a piece of background information (compare the end of section 4 for why that might be important). We would also consider here information about the speaker or writer.

Previous discourse, perceptual information about conversational setting and background information are three types of information that co-exist, so to speak, in the context constituted by the interpreter’s epistemic state. However, different kinds of discourse might impose different hierarchies on them.

Besides these types of information, the interpreter generally has information about the topic under discussion. A tool at our disposal to make this notion more precise is that of Questions Under Discussion (QUD). QUD is a framework to model discourse structure (Ginzburg 1996, 2012; Roberts 2012). The idea is that utterances in a conversation
are interpreted by interlocutors relative to the question they take themselves to be addressing. We think of QUD as a partially ordered set of questions, questions that constitute a “live issue” (from the interpreter’s point of view). Prominence, generality, or chronological order (or a combination of these) are different ways in which one can fix the ordering of QUD. With the idea of QUD as an ordered set, one can for instance define a maximal question in QUD, which represents the most prominent issue currently under discussion. The questions in QUD may be raised by information coming from each and all of the three sources that make up context.

4  **Contextual coherence as a two-step assessment**

As with literal interpretation, identifying a sentence as a metaphor is reasonable or justified insofar as this choice is coherent with the context. This idea is not unprecedented. In linguistics, concerns over coherence drove the development of frameworks such as QUD or rhetorical relations. Using the latter, Asher and Lascarides (2001) proposed a theory of metaphor interpretation based explicitly on coherence. Alas, that is precisely why their account is too narrow. It leaves out all those cases in which part of the reasons for taking an utterance to be metaphorical, or not, are external to discourse. Our more encompassing notion of context compensates for this shortcoming.

For an interpretation to be coherent two conditions must be met. First, it must address the topic under discussion. An interpretation is on-topic if it is an answer to a question in the QUD. Second, it must be externally consistent, that is, the interpretation must tie in with the propositions coming from different sources of information which constitute context. Interpretations must not contradict contextually available information.

These two conditions hold for metaphorical and literal interpretation alike. We leave it open to what extent our proposal can be applied to other figures of speech.

Contextual coherence, on our view, is a relation among contents. When we consider the QUD as a first constraint on coherence, we have a relation between a stack of questions and an answer: does a candidate interpretation constitute an answer to an unanswered question in QUD? When we consider the consistency of the candidate interpretation with the information contained in our heterogeneous context as a second
constraint, we have a relation between one content and other contents available to the interpreter. In order to capture the content expressed by a metaphor we introduced the notion of a minimal paraphrase (section 2). Importantly, it has propositional format, and so can constitute an answer to questions in the QUD and be assessed for consistency with the available information in the context. Since utterances or inscription are typically contributions to some topic, we consider candidate interpretations to be coherent only if they contribute to that topic. While necessary, though, this condition is not sufficient.

By way of illustration, let’s look at a simplified context containing a QUD with only one question:

(2) Moscow is a cold city.

Context 1 for (2):
A: What is the weather like in Moscow?
B: Moscow is a cold city.

An utterance of (2) can be interpreted in (at least) two different ways:
(2a) Temperatures in Moscow are low (literal interpretation).
(2b) People in Moscow are unfriendly (metaphorical interpretation).

Here the literal interpretation of (2) answers the explicit question. By contrast, a metaphorical interpretation of (2) with minimal paraphrase (2b) would be off-topic.

It is easy to imagine a context in which the situation is reversed:

Context 2 for (2):
A: Are people in Moscow friendly?
B: Moscow is a cold city.

In this context, a metaphorical reading with minimal paraphrase (2b) is preferable.

But whether an interpretation gives an answer to a live question in the QUD is not the whole story about contextual coherence. The second aspect of coherence is what we call external consistency, that is, consistency with the information available to the interpreter, which encompasses previous discourse, perceptual information about the setting and background information. Here we have in mind a broad notion of how an interpretation relates to those already accepted in the interpreter’s
epistemic state. An interpretation is externally inconsistent in case of logical inconsistency, material incompatibility (the kind of relation between colour words like “blue” and “green”) or presupposition failure. One may have to add further cases to this list.

Consider yet another context for (2):

*Context 3 for (2):*

A: How did you like Moscow?
B: Moscow is a cold city.

Both the literal and the metaphorical interpretation of B’s utterance (indirectly) answer the question raised by A. But suppose that A knows that B comes from the Russian Taiga, where temperatures are far lower than in Moscow. In this case, A would have reasons for favouring the metaphorical over the literal interpretation.

External inconsistency explains why semantic deviance, or internal inconsistency, paradigmatically in the form of a category mistake, is usually used as a sign or cue that the sentence is to be interpreted as a metaphor. The reason is that it is standardly assumed — thus a piece of background information — that when competent speakers of a language make a category mistake they do not mean their words to be interpreted in the literal sense. Our proposal hence accords semantic deviance a role to play in interpretation. Yet it is coherence, not deviance, that plays the justificatory role when it gets to deciding whether or not to take a particular utterance metaphorically.

How do the two conditions on coherence sum up? Condition 1 is necessary but not sufficient; condition 2 is also necessary but not sufficient, and it is secondary to condition 1. This means that an interpretation might be incoherent either when it does not address at all an issue in the QUD, or when it does but when it is not externally consistent. The two conditions are jointly sufficient.

5 Twice-true and twice-apt metaphors

We have claimed metaphoricity to be property of sentences-in-context, meaning spoken utterances or written inscriptions. Sentences lending themselves to both a metaphorical and a literal interpretation are well documented in the philosophical literature on metaphor. The
phenomenon is commonly referred to as “twice-true metaphors” (Cohen 1976) or “twice-apt metaphors” (Camp 2008).

The term “twice-true metaphors” was coined by Cohen so as to draw attention to a range of cases that serve as counterexamples to deviance theories of metaphor identification (cf. Black 1954; Beardsley 1962). Yet twice-true metaphors such as (1) show no such internal inconsistency. Deviance thus isn’t a necessary feature of metaphor.

Moreover, there are cases in which both interpretations are justified. For these we reserve the label twice-apt metaphors. Twice-apt metaphors are twice-true metaphors for which the following holds: both interpretations (metaphorical and literal) of the relevant sentence are appropriate (or coherent), given the context at hand. Consider an example by Tirrell:

Consider, for example, the case of the company president who looks out the boardroom window at a sky full of stratus clouds just before meeting with the company’s union labor leader. The company president says to her assistant, [(3)] ‘There’s a storm brewing’. There is no incongruity between a literal interpretation of ‘storm brewing’ and this context […]. But the figurative interpretation of ‘storm brewing’ is appropriate as well. (Tirrell 1991, 355–6)

Twice-apt metaphors call into question theories of metaphor identification based on pragmatic lack of fit, such as Grice’s (1989). According to such theories, lack of fit with the context is the signal or cue that the utterance is to be interpreted as a metaphor. Twice-apt metaphors, however, defeat that criterion.

A view based on contextual coherence, instead of semantic deviance or pragmatic lack of fit, is more promising. In particular, the notion of coherence introduced in section 4 can be used to account for cases in which two interpretations (one literal, one metaphorical) are appropriate. With respect to Tirrell’s example above, for instance, we may plausibly assume that two different QUDs are in play, one is answered by taking the sentence literally, the other by taking it metaphorically.

References


