

The Linguistic and Personal Meaning of Metaphorical Speech*

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1. Introduction

I wish to explore the relationship between linguistic meaning and that non-linguistic meaning which is experienced in cultural, aesthetic, and religious contexts: the relationship between the meaning of sentences, on the one hand, and the meaning of gestures, facial expressions, poems, works of art, rituals, and symbols, on the other hand. These latter cases I will characterise in terms of relevant or significant meaning. (The term 'significant' meaning is stipulative, the phenomenon, I hope to show, is not.)

It is one thing to speak of linguistic and non-linguistic meaning, it is another to adequately explain the distinction and relationship between them. Ordinary usage clearly indicates their kinship, for we as easily speak of understanding and meaning with respect to works of art, as we do with respect to the sentences of a language. In commenting on the achievement of analytic philosophy, Roger Scruton has noted that while it has done much to elucidate linguistic meaning, it has not been as successful with what he terms 'intentional' or cultural meaning—where meaning is not semantic, but is embodied and 'immanent in experience'.¹

Like Scruton, I wish to resist the extension of the linguistic model of meaning into non-linguistic contexts, an extension which might be suggested by talk about the 'language' of clothes or colours or paintings, and of 'decoding' cultural symbols, and so on. While such talk may be suggestive, it is of limited explanatory value. By contrast, a narrow, even austere, account of linguistic meaning, creates the needed space in which the distinctive character of the personal, aesthetic and cultural meanings which help to constitute specifically human existence comes into view.

I will illustrate this claim by examining the phenomenon of metaphorical speech. The importance and interest of metaphorical speech, I will argue, lies in the fact that it involves meaning in both

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1 R. Scruton, 'Analytic Philosophy and the Meaning of Music', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 45 (1987): 169.

senses—metaphor is a linguistic act whose use and reception invites comparison with aesthetic appreciation and experiences of cultural and personal meaning: what something or someone 'means to me' (or 'to us'). Metaphors, having no special linguistic meaning of their own, invoke the meaning or significance speakers have for each other. Accordingly, the 'embodied' or significant meaning of metaphorical speech is a distinctive kind of 'personal speech', a touchstone of significance between speakers, and also highlights the 'personal' dimension of all speech.

I begin by broadly characterizing the distinction between linguistic and non-linguistic meaning.

2. Two concepts of meaning.

Perhaps the two most general features of any meaningful phenomenon (whether linguistic or non-linguistic) are first, that it exemplifies some pattern or structure whose repetition can be perceptually recognized, and secondly, that it directs us to 'something' beyond itself. Some-thing has meaning (is a 'signifier') if it 'stands out' from its back-ground which is constituted by a field or context of 'differences', and seems to direct us to something beyond that field of differentiation (to a 'signified').² The sentences of a language clearly exhibit these features, as do ritual gestures, facial expressions and some works of art. The non-linguistic examples are important because they remind us that something may be evocative or expressive, directing us beyond itself, without there being an 'entity', object, or 'content' to which we are referred. A facial expression may be 'intransitive': exhibiting 'a particular expression', without there being anything of which it is the expression.³

H. P. Grice introduced the now famous distinction between 'natural' and 'non-natural' or conventional meaning.⁴ The former is exemplified when smoke means fire, or spots mean measles, and in simple animal signalling devices. Word and sentence meaning is

2 The echoes of structural linguistics are deliberate. However, the scare quotes around 'signifier' and 'signified' are to emphasize my *pre-theoretical* use of these terms. Just how they are to be understood is precisely the issue in the philosophy of language.

3 Scruton, p.173. Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and The Brown Books*, Oxford, 1972, pp.158f.

4 Cf. H. P. Grice, 'Meaning', *The Philosophical Review*, 66 (1957): 377-88; 'Utterer's Meaning and Intentions', *The Philosophical Review*, 78 (1969): 147-177.

obviously not 'natural' in this way; it is conventional. Linguistic meaning is distinguished by the fact that the 'non-natural' (conventional) relationship between 'signifier' and 'signified' can be expressed in disquotational claims of the form 'S' means that p, so that, for example, in understanding a sentence 'S' one understands (grasps the proposition) that p.

The examples of non-linguistic meaning I have mentioned—smiles, rituals, art works—are not entirely 'natural' in Grice's sense, for although they are perhaps founded in 'natural' reactions to sensible impressions, aspects and perceptions, their recognition typically presupposes culturally endorsed patterns of interpretation. Sometimes these non-linguistic meanings amount to nothing more than a conventional, code usage (e.g. stereotypical gestures, a smile or wink as a signal, etc.) which could be given a reductive, disquotational expression. More often, these ('expressive') meanings defy a reductive linguistic formulation because, in our experience of them, 'signifier' and 'signified' (an expression or representation and what is expressed or represented) cannot be separated.⁵ Disquotation is impossible because the understanding of meaning here is, as Scruton puts it, 'immanent in an experience' of the signifier (e.g. in participating in a ritual, seeing a smile, viewing a work of art). Understanding a piece of music is immanent in one's hearing the music. Although the sadness one hears in a piece of music might be related to the use of a minor chord, a disquotational claim such as 'a minor chord means sadness' (like 'a smile means welcome'), however commonly true, is clearly problematic. In this paper when I speak of 'non-linguistic meaning' I will be referring to experiences of meaning which are both non-natural and not reducible to linguistic formulation (a phenomenon to which Grice did not advert).

A paradigmatic instance of non-linguistic meaning in this sense is that of 'what someone or something means to me'.⁶ Meaning in this instance takes the form of 'significance' or 'relevance': certain people, works of art, rituals, gestures, and metaphors, may be 'striking', 'touching', or 'impressive' for certain people and not for others. The 'relevance' one experiences will be reflected in behaviour and speech,

5 Cf. Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*, Cambridge, 1985, pp.219-220.

6 Arnold Burms first drew my attention to this characterization of 'relevant' meaning and to the comparison with linguistic meaning that will be developed. Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, Second Edition, G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (eds.), G. E. M. Anscombe (trans.) Oxford, 1981, p.155: 'A poet's words can pierce us ...' (and cf. p.170).

and in the selection of, and attachment to, some facts rather than others. 'Relevant meaning' is found in personal relationships, and in aesthetic, cultural and 'intentional' experiences more widely.

The distinguishing feature of meaning as relevance is not disquotation, but rather the way in which an already meaningful phenomena comes to possess new relevance or particular significance for someone, e.g. the transition from knowing someone as an acquaintance to falling in love with them, from understanding the rules of a game to grasping its point, and perhaps wanting to play it, from hearing sounds to hearing a variation on a musical theme, and from understanding what an utterance (literally) says, to appreciating its metaphorical point. Wittgenstein in particular noted the links between linguistic and 'relevant' meaning when he likened the transition from sounds to semantic meaning (hearing sounds as language) to discerning the humanity in a man. He also compares understanding language, especially poetry, with understanding music (PG, 41; PI, 527).⁷

Understanding a sentence is much more akin to understanding a theme in music than one may think ... [cf. PG,41]

How curious: we should like to explain the understanding of a gesture as a translation into words, and the understanding of words as a translation into gestures ... [PG,42]

We speak of understanding a sentence in the sense in which it can be replaced by another which says the same; but also in the sense in which it cannot be replaced by any other ...

In the one case the thought in the sentence is something common to different sentences; in the other, something that is expressed only by these words in these positions. (Understanding a poem.) ...

... I want to apply the word 'understanding' to all this [PI,527, 531,532].

There are thus both similarities and differences between the meanings of sentences, and the non-linguistic meaning of gestures, rituals, and art works. The latter presuppose language, but cannot be reduced to disquotational statement; it always involves something 'given' at a prior level of meaning (e.g. as physical sound), and a 'progression' (e.g. to music) which is neither necessitated nor explained by that prior level.

⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Grammar (PG)*, Rush Rhees (ed.), Anthony Kenny (trans.), Oxford, 1974; *Philosophical Investigations (PI)*, G. E. M. Anscombe (trans.), Oxford, 1974.

3. Metaphor as linguistic and significant.

Metaphor, simile, irony, and the figurative use of language, are so all pervasive that it would be perverse to regard them as linguistically unusual or deviant, or requiring special justification. Sober, factual, informative language is, if anything, the exception not the rule of human communication. Nevertheless, metaphorical and figurative speech is typically thought to involve some incongruity, tension or disturbance with respect to our standard expectations as to words mean. Likewise philosophical theories of metaphor typically present it as somehow 'abnormal', as an aberration or complicated extension from an ideal of literal speech which purports to constitute the essence of language. We can identify four different accounts of linguistic meaning, each with its corresponding account of metaphor.

1) Linguistic meaning is explicated in terms of speakers' meanings, of what they intend to achieve by their utterances; the meaning of metaphor or a poem is thence explained as a distinctive kind of speech-act. A speaker says one thing, but ('really') means something else. Thus T. S. Eliot said that poets 'turn blood into ink', he meant that poetic composition is a arduous, heartfelt endeavour, etc...

2) Linguistic meaning is explicated in terms of semantic meanings generated by the words one uses. Words have associations, implications, and semantic fields which speakers may combine in unusual ways, thus generating perhaps new metaphorical meanings. Metaphorical utterances, in themselves, say something special. By combining 'ink' with the transformation of 'blood', Eliot fused their diverse associations and semantic fields to produce a unique new semantic entity.

These two proposals are each a refinement of commonsense ideas about the dependence of language both on speaker's intentions and on the powers of the words one uses. They each provide some insight into the working of metaphorical speech, and each has received sophisticated and impressive development. However, it can be argued that these approaches fail to grasp just how deeply problematic human communication really is. For:

3) Thirdly, one might interrogate the very idea of an utterance having a meaning, of referring or taking us to something beyond itself. In directing us beyond itself, a saying, like every sign, aims to make present something that is, necessarily, absent. It would not remain a sign if what it signified was indeed present. Consequently, according to the 'de-constructionist' strategy associated with Jacques Derrida, there must always be a conflict, a gap, between what is said

and what it is supposed to mean. The linguistic tension evident in metaphorical speech pervades communication; that is to say, all speech is to some extent metaphorical. 'We are always saying, never quite what we mean. And always we mean, never quite what we say'.⁸

This rather abstract statement of a deconstructionist view may be illustrated by considering the way linguistic (and other) signifiers may become 'contaminated' in their subsequent use and in altered contexts, for example when the title of a novel (or a musical theme) is used in a television commercial, or when lines of the Hebrew Scriptures are read in the context of current Middle Eastern conflicts. By emphasizing the exposure of language to subsequent contamination, deconstructionist thought suggests that we can never be sure that what we say will realize what we mean. Language necessarily involves 'iterable' or repeatable sayings, and the possibility of contamination through repetition is ineliminable. Since 'metaphor' is the traditional name for that figure of speech in which words are 'transferred' from a literal to a non-literal application, deconstructionist writers conclude that metaphoricity and 'transference' is a possibility condition of all communication.

This line of thought is believed to have profound consequences for philosophy itself. If all language is metaphorical, then a philosophical inquiry which purports to say clearly what metaphor is will itself be undermined by the 'figural' of its language. Accordingly, deconstructionist writers delight in revealing the inconsistencies between an author's intentions and his language—for example, Locke's inability to explain 'simple terms'—the paradigm of the literal—in a non-figurative way.⁹

While the deconstructionist motif is most persuasive in the case of 'sayings' which, like literary titles and religious expressions, are 'embedded' in special contexts of significance, its applicability to language as a whole is more problematic. Paradigmatically literal sayings, like many mathematical and scientific utterances, seem relatively context-free and immune to contamination. Whatever our uncertainties as to what Eliot meant, or what he was up to, we simply don't have the same doubts about the straightforward meaning of the words he used: he said that poets turn blood into ink.

8 Marjorie Grene, 'Life, Death, And Language : Some thoughts on Wittgenstein and Derrida', *Partisan Review*, 43 (1976): 265-279, 272.

9 See e.g. Paul de Man, 'The Epistemology of Metaphor', *Critical Inquiry*, 5:1 (Autumn 1978): 13-30.

The relative stability of these meanings suggests that the 'deconstructionist turn' does not offer a complete account of linguistic meaning. Contemporary philosophy in fact offers an alternative and, I would argue, complementary account of linguistic meaning and its relative stability. This alternative also suggests that philosophy's use of metaphor need not necessarily undermine its 'rigour'.

4) Thus, with Wittgenstein, we may seek to dissolve or at least neutralize the problematic opposition between what is said and what is meant. Eliot spoke of the poet's pains at turning blood into ink; his utterance means just what it says. It does not generate a special metaphorical semantic meaning; nor is there some determinate propositional content that Eliot wanted to convey. His saying leads us to entertain various thoughts, images and analogies as we respond to it; it will find its place in our critical engagement with Eliot's writings and in our reflection on the task of the poet. It thereby acquires meaning or significance for us—not because of a supposed 'metaphorical speaker- or word-meaning', but rather because of the ways in which we receive it and develop it. The significance of metaphorical sayings resides in their engagement with our thoughts, imaginations and activities, and in the way in which speakers are united through the shared significance sayings have for them. Pace the deconstructionist view, we need not regard metaphorical sayings as unavoidably failing to make their meaning present.

This fourth position accords with the 'no meaning' account of metaphor first proposed by Donald Davidson.¹⁰ I have associated it also with Wittgenstein who, despite the absence from his writings of any explicit discussion of metaphor, examines a number of related phenomena and shows how 'meaning' must 'drop out' if they are to be appreciated rightly. To understand language, music, bodily expression, and human 'forms of life' in general, we must give up the eductive illusion of a meaning which accompanies them, or is hidden behind them, to which they point, and which really 'gives life' to otherwise 'dead signs'. Freed from the illusion of meaning as an 'object', even an absent object, we can appreciate human existence, culture and language for what they are, criticizing them as appropriate, but without invoking the foundational justifications that philosophers have typically sought.

The 'no meaning' account of the linguistic realization of metaphor leaves room for consideration of their non-linguistic significance:

10 Donald Davidson, 'What Metaphors Mean', in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford, 1984.

successful metaphor depends—not on special semantic or speaker-meanings, but—on the meaning, value and significance speakers have for each other. Metaphors—like jokes, slang and works of art—separate those for whom they are striking from those for whom they are not. By denying that metaphors have a distinctive linguistic meaning, the ‘no meaning’ account highlights the dependence of metaphor on our experience of non-linguistic, relevant meaning.

I will briefly outline this ‘no meaning’ account of metaphor, in order to show how metaphorical speech involves the two forms of meaning I have distinguished. Like any utterance, a metaphor has a linguistic or semantic realization; some account must be given of what these words mean. However, if Davidson is right, nothing more needs to be said about the semantics of metaphorical utterances than about the semantics of any other kind of utterances. In no case is ‘meaning’ an explanatory phenomenon, a ‘content’ which stands behind or alongside utterances. Davidson’s model of ‘radical interpretation’ reveals why and how we come to speak of utterances ‘having a meaning’, but also shows why the notion of meaning should ‘drop out’ of our explanations of linguistic practice.

The model of radical interpretation supposes we are trying to understand the speech of those whose language and beliefs are unknown to us. Understanding what they say is one aspect of coming to understand them. The evidence most critical to identifying what they are saying concerns what they hold (and desire to be) true. A theory of meaning for their language, Davidson urges, is best modelled by a Tarski-style truth theory which simply ‘pairs’ utterances with truth conditions, (‘Snow is white’ is true if snow is white), and so tells us what individual sentences say or mean. Metaphor then becomes, in David Cooper’s words, the ‘maverick’ use of a saying since it is not the committed assertion of what it says according to the theory of linguistic meaning which emerges from within the project of interpretation.¹¹ Thus used, metaphors have many effects: prompting thoughts, images and comparisons, setting a mood, triggering insight and emotion, and so on. Metaphorical utterances say and mean what they do, and have their distinctive powers just because they do.¹² Although Robert Fogelin describes Davidson’s essay as merely a ‘gesture’ towards a ‘causal theory’ of

11 Thus, while Eliot said or asserted that a poet turns blood into ink, we do not take him to believe this.

12 David E. Cooper, *Metaphor*, Oxford, 1986, p.105. Page references will be given in the body of the text. My debt to Cooper’s study will be obvious.

metaphor,¹³ Cooper's sustained critique of alternative theories and his detailed elaboration of Davidson's insight, has shown how powerful it is. In short, metaphor, metonymy, hyperbole, etc. are to be taken out of the orbit occupied by the information-giving devices of language and brought into, or close to, the one occupied by songs, poems, myths, allegories, and the like (Cooper, 108).

The chief objection to Davidson's account of metaphor has been that it makes the interpretations, that is, the 'effects', of metaphor as arbitrary and contingent as those of a bump on the head (Davidson's own image). It offers no principled way of distinguishing those ('prompted') thoughts which are plausible interpretations of a metaphor from the idle associations it happens to trigger. Richard Rorty welcomes this conclusion, writing that Davidson 'lets us see metaphors on the model of unfamiliar events in the natural world', that is 'unfamiliar noises' which happen to have all sorts of interesting effects.¹⁴

But Rorty's tendentious reading of Davidson, as well as the worry about the arbitrariness of a metaphor's effects, can be overcome once we recognize the context of 'significant meaning' which metaphors presuppose.

As David Cooper has argued, understanding the purpose of metaphor is the key to understanding its nature (Cooper, 4), and its 'sustaining purpose' is, in Ted Cohen's phrase, 'the cultivation of intimacy' between speakers.

Cooper notes that the social role of metaphor was first perceived by Aristotle when he said it was out of place for slaves to address a ('striking') metaphor to their masters—for slaves ought not 'strike' their masters (*Rhetorica*, 1404b; Cooper, 152-3). The purpose of metaphor, its social function, is evident from the special interpretative competencies, and so the 'intimacy', which it assumes between speakers (an intimacy to which slaves have no right). Cooper identifies two ways in which fresh metaphors presuppose and reinforce intimacy.

First, metaphors are 'extraordinary' utterances in so far as ordinary interpretative competence is insufficient for receiving them. 'Ordinary competence' includes the ability to disambiguate the right semantic reading of an utterance, to recognize its force, to assign referents to indexical terms, and so on. With an extraordinary utterance additional competence is required—just as it is for some

13 Robert J. Fogelin, *Figuratively Speaking*, Yale, 1988, p.71.

14 Richard Rorty, 'Unfamiliar Noises', *PASS*, 61 (1987): 283-296, 289.

slang expressions. An extraordinary utterance will be 'justified' when addressed to a hearer on the reasonable assumption that he will be able to interpret it (cf. the use of esoteric slang in appropriate circumstances)(Cooper, 155). Cooper associates 'ordinary' interpretative competence with 'general intimacy':

the bond, however weak, between those who share not only a basic linguistic competence in the same language, but a common stock of information, and the abilities and intelligence to call upon that information when interpreting one another (Cooper, 156).

'Special intimacy' is presupposed by an extraordinary and justified utterance. This bond unites a particular group within the larger speech community. Whether small or large in number, the group will remain fairly constant with respect to a wide range of utterances; and in practice the intimacy will concern not only utterances, but much else—work, interests, environment, sensibilities, linguistic experience etc., even specialist knowledge in an area (Cooper, 157); so the special intimacy required for metaphor reception 'does not dissolve when the metaphor is put aside', and goes deeper than the shared ability to interpret metaphors (Cooper, 158). Metaphor 'may be viewed as a signal that the speaker takes his hearers to belong to a subset distinguished by a bond of intimacy' (Cooper, 158). Furthermore, hearers will assume that the speaker can also interpret the utterance (it is not just a quote), and can assess their attempts to interpret it; successful interpretation will reinforce the speaker's and his audience's belief that they do indeed belong to a special subgroup (Cooper, 158).

Secondly, the interpretation of metaphor may require the 'intimacy' of appreciating the attitude and motivations of the speaker (Cooper, 161). It is crucial in these instances that the requisite viewpoint or attitude not be identified explicitly. In this way metaphor differs from the explicit invitation to think of A in terms of B (Cooper, 160). For example, a full appreciation of Barthes' saying, 'To think is to sweat', presumes a knowledge of Marxist thought about the relationships between labour and work, manual and intellectual work, and so on (Cooper, 163). The additional intimacy metaphor requires is often 'constituted by that attitude or viewpoint which the speaker must take his audience to share (or appreciate) if his use of the metaphor is to be 'justified' (Cooper, 163).

Beyond the ties of interests, background, sensibility and so on, which a metaphor so often presupposes for its interpretation, there is also the intimacy of attitude or viewpoint which is

presupposed if the utterance of the metaphor, in place of something more explicit, is to be 'justified'(Cooper, 163).

For this reason paraphrase of a metaphor is out of place precisely because it would explicitly mention the requisite attitude. Explicitation undermines intimacy because intimacy is allied with a sense of belonging, with 'in-groups' as opposed to 'out-groups'. 'Compact', implicit metaphor of this kind, like secret symbols and pass-words, must be safeguarded from the knowledge of all and sundry.

Cooper acknowledges that his argument does not yet show that intimacy sustains metaphor, but notes that intimacy, communion, and the sense of being closer to some people than to others, matter universally; moreover, there is no known language which does not employ metaphor (Cooper, 164). Some empirical considerations reinforce his thesis: first, the prevalence of metaphor among those for whom intimacy matters most—e.g. soldiers at war and prisoners¹⁵. Secondly, the most prized metaphors are those whose interpretations require significant degrees of intimacy, e.g. Foucault's 'Knowledge is an instrument for cutting' is only fully appreciated by those with knowledge of the history of different epistemological metaphors (Cooper, 165). Thirdly, we do find, as we should expect on the intimacy thesis, that very many metaphors allude to, emphasise or encourage real or imagined ties between people; for example. there is the use of personification in talk of the nation as a 'Fatherland, and also the 'conduit' metaphors for communication between people (c.g. words carry meaning, ideas come through to me, they move or strike us, tugging at our heart-strings). In the latter case, Cooper suggests, metaphor aims not so much to 'get a handle on' the intangible, as to comfort by portraying the relationship between human minds in terms of physical and concrete intimacy. 'It is rhetoric's way of doing battle

15 Robert Hughes records an extraordinary range of 'gallows argot' among condemned prisoners in 18th century London, and its contrast with the official language of 'paying the supreme penalty' and being 'launched into Eternity'. Convicts 'died with cotton in their ears' (Cotton being the praying sexton); the hangman was 'the nubbing-cove', 'the switcher', 'the sheriff's journeyman'; the gallows was 'the three legged-mare', 'the deadly Nevergreen that bears fruit all year-round'; the noose was 'a horse's night cap'; to ascend the gallows was 'to go up the ladder to bed', 'to be in deadly suspense'; to be hung was 'to dance upon nothing', 'to take the earth bath', 'to ride a horse foaled by an acorn'. Hughes comments: 'This is not the language of a penitent thief. Its brusque, canting defiance reminds one that hanging meant one thing to the judges but another to the poor and the mob'. *The Fatal Shore*, London, 1987, p.33. What it meant to them is embodied in the metaphors they used.

against solipsism'.¹⁶ Cooper claims that the empirical support for his thesis is not so crucial, because it has been shown that intimacy is involved in the two ways mentioned, and people do pursue and value intimacy. 'A practice which nourishes intimacy will at least tend to be sustained simply because this is what it does'(Cooper, 167).

Invitations to interpretation in the shape of metaphors will tend to be reciprocated. By inviting interpretation, the speaker typically gives himself out to be someone upon whom a reciprocated metaphor will not be wasted—one, that is, which requires similar interests, background, etc. for its interpretation to the first. And by evoking an attitude which his hearers are assumed to share or be familiar with, the speaker also shows himself to be someone to whom they can justifiably address metaphors which evoke a similar attitude. Once reciprocity is underway, the pressure is on for it to be sustained, for the refusal by someone to engage in further metaphors of the relevant sort will be perceived abdication from the circle of people with the interests, tastes and attitudes in question(Cooper, 167).

4. Personal speech.

Cooper's 'intimacy thesis' may be re-expressed in terms of the 'significant meaning' of what I will characterise as distinctively personal speech. As W. H. Auden remarked:

Any consideration of the nature of language must begin with distinguishing between our use of words as a code of communication between individuals and our use of them for personal speech.¹⁷

'Personal speech', Auden wrote, is voluntary, between persons, and arises from the desire to disclose ourselves to another; it involves a search for words such that we do not know what we will say till we say it. It will be marked grammatically by proper names, first and second person pronouns, words of summons and command, response and obedience. The meaning of personal speech is 'the outcome of a dialogue between words... and the response of whoever is listening to them ...'¹⁸ Personal speech exemplifies what Charles Taylor terms 'expressive meaning', as opposed to 'designative' meaning in which there is a 'neat separation' between ideas and descriptions, on the one hand, and what those ideas and descriptions are about, on the other.¹⁹ Expressive language does not represent an

16 Cooper, p.166. From the perspective of *significant* meaning, images of *physical attachment* help to evoke our attachment to the physical embodiments of our *personal* attachment to significance, and to one another.

17 W. H. Auden, *Secondary Worlds*, London, 1968, p.104.

18 Auden, p.14.

19 Taylor, p.249.

independently describable reality, for it helps to constitute the relevant 'reality', and above all marks 'the discriminations which are foundational to human concerns, and hence [opens] us to these concerns'.²⁰

Clearly, the 'personal' character of communication comes in degrees. Apologies, confessions, declarations of love, expressions of gratitude, and promises, for example, are strongly personal, and highly specific, forms of personal speech.²¹ So the term 'personal speech' can be regarded as a generalization across these specific forms and many others, just as 'cause' and 'relation' are likewise generalizations across their respective instances.

Personal speech has a *reciprocal* structure: It first requires a speaker to draw attention to himself and to identify with his utterance (e.g. by his facial expression, gestures, tone of voice and choice of words). As will be seen, the necessity for *someone to identify* with something (a gesture, an utterance, a role) not unique to themselves lies at the heart of personal speech and personal existence. A personal utterance is, secondly, only 'completed' through the response of another, a response which is both 'faithful and striking': 'faithful', in as much as it manifests recognition of what the speaker has said and done (made a confession, a declaration, an apology etc.);²² 'striking', in that it evokes in the first speaker a recognition that the other has responded in his own terms, with his own attachment to significance.²³ The response will thus differ somewhat from the

20 Taylor, p.263.

21 Indeed, the structure of personal speech is presupposed in all human communication, *pace* the Gricean structure of looped intentions.

22 The idiom of 'making' confessions, declarations, etc. is suggestive of the point I am arguing—that the significance of these utterances transcends the individual speaker; he does something which constitutes the realization (the 'making') of something more than itself, and not entirely within his control.

23 The idea of a 'faithful addition' was suggested to me by Arnold Burms on the basis of some remarks of Walter Benjamin on translation. Cf. Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator (An Introduction to the Translation of Baudelaire's *Tableau Parisiens*)' in *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt (ed.), Harry Zohn (trans.), London, 1973, pp.69-82. Benjamin's article is often obscure, but includes the suggestions that the translation of a literary work is part of its 'afterlife'; the translatability of a work is inherent in its original significance, and translation expresses the reciprocal relationship between languages. Translation cannot strive for exact reproduction of the original, but is part of that continual transformation and renewal of the 'living' original. Over the centuries the significance of both original and translation is subject to transformation and renewal in their respective languages; translation 'catches fire on the eternal life of the works and the perpetual renewal of language' (74).

original utterance, 'differ' enough for the original speaker to know that the other has taken him seriously and is responding on his own account. The response may well clarify the first utterance, or set it in a new context; it will often be its requisite completion—the *acceptance* of an apology, *forgiveness* after confession, and so on. As a completing *personal response* it will never be mere repetition, never a bland 'I hear what you are saying'. Moreover, the response is not something the first speaker could make entirely his own. Neutral information, e.g. the answer to a question, is public property and could as well be uttered and passed on by its recipient. The acceptance of an apology, however, remains tied to the respondent as his 'faithful addition' to the initial utterance. This structure of the 'faithful addition' is the essence of personal speech.

The reciprocal structure of personal speech is founded in the meaning speakers have for each other. It is of a different order to both 'conversational implicatures' and to the 'standard and natural' responses to speech acts (questions expecting answers, etc.), which concern only information content. Robert Fogelin, defending a speech-act account of metaphor, says that sometimes:

when we perform a speech act, we anticipate the content of.. the standard and natural response, and that response is precisely what we are trying to evoke.²⁴

The personal significance of an utterance, however, cannot be anticipated in the way the response to a rhetorical question, or the 'correction' of an ironic comment, might be,²⁵ for it must to be some extent the 'striking' response of the other.

In personal speech, one is attached to one's utterance, to 'what it says', as the embodiment of one's meaning to another (as seeking forgiveness, as declaring love). One cannot know in advance that the relationship will sustain this significance, or that one's utterance will be received as embodying it. Personal speech is always dangerous because a speaker must identify with 'what he says', an utterance with an independent semantic content, context-free and as such neither unique to the speaker, nor beyond contamination by circumstances outside his control. In making an apology I may inadvertently use words which, as it happens, compound my original offence. Nothing guarantees the other will find my words and gestures the striking embodiment of my significance to him and of the significance of our relationship.

24 Cf. Fogelin, p.7.

25 Fogelin, p.8.

Furthermore, when personal speech is 'successful', it is not because the words uttered are adequate to the significance sought and found. It is simply because speakers continue to be struck by them, to find them apt. In their shared sensibility they 'are in touch with each other'. The model of transparent, linguistic meaning (as developed in standard 'theories of meaning') fosters the tempting idea that adequate words for significance should be available, as if in place of 'I love you' a couple could find the words which expressed (the significance of) just their relationship. However significance is not a 'content' that could be catered for within a semantic theory. Significance resides in 'mutual attachment' to what might easily not embody it: a couple may come to hear their words of love as merely the romantic froth of soap opera.²⁶

So personal speech is inherently 'suspended', awaiting the free response of an other, a faithful but striking response which, like the initial utterance, is in turn exposed to danger. This suspension cannot be avoided, for any definitive, 'invulnerable' response would be either no longer contingent on the initial utterance, or wholly necessitated by it. If I will be forgiven no matter what I say or do, I cease to matter; if I am sure to extract forgiveness, then 'forgiveness' is no longer what I receive.

The reciprocal structure of personal speech is both inescapable, and an ideal to which we often try to approximate. However much our actual conversations fall short of it, if apologies were never received, confessions never followed by forgiveness, and declarations of love never returned, these species of personal speech would not exist. Only in the light of this structure can departures from it can be understood. The bland 'I hear what you are saying' might constitute precisely a refusal to respond in the way the speaker desires, and sometimes has a right to expect.

Some empirical observations support, or at least illustrate, the formal structure that has been identified. For example, the tension between the 'faithful' and the 'striking' aspects of a response differentiates some varieties of psychotherapeutic technique. The 'interpretations' of an analyst highlight the way a 'striking' response may be necessary for increased self-understanding; the 'non-directive' techniques of Carl Rogers, on the other hand, emphasize the 'faithful' response, virtually a repetition but with an affirming expression and

²⁶ Poetry and metaphor attempt to overcome the generalizing tendencies of language, not through the designating of a unique content; but rather in virtue of our attachment to certain images and similarities etc.

tone of voice aimed at helping a client to identify with thoughts and utterances he finds difficult to accept. The 'confrontational' style of some Gestalt therapy perhaps emphasizes the independence and freedom of the person addressed, who refuses to be manipulated by the speaker.

Our everyday experiences of conversation can also be described in terms of the 'faithful yet striking' polarity: fruitful conversation becomes difficult both with people whose responses are insufficiently faithful (they haven't heard what has been said, or don't wish to, or are too busy planning what they wish to say next), and with those whose responses are overly striking (they are too eager to correct, to dispute, to distance themselves from what has been said).

I have argued that personal speech involves a reciprocal structure which transcends the transmission of information. It involves a paradoxical 'suspension' of significance which cannot be resolved by anything an individual speaker might say or do. Personal speech and 'significant meaning' is thus not amenable to the kind of naturalistic account currently fashionable in the philosophy of language. Its intelligibility is rather 'non-natural' in the way Elizabeth Anscombe has argued all language is.²⁷

The non-natural reciprocity (and significance) of personal speech is apparent from that fact that an apology and its acceptance cannot be explained in standard naturalistic terms (e.g. of Grice, Blackburn or Fogelin). An utterance can only be an apology because of its significance within a distinctive kind of 'interaction' between speaker and respondent, and the significance of an apology (i.e. the structure of that interaction) is created by language (and practice); that is to say, 'an apology' is not the name of a pre-linguistic natural phenomenon (e.g. a complex of feelings, intentions, beliefs and desires) which is simply, and subsequently, expressed or signified by some utterance. Of course, saying 'I apologize for doing X' is a conventional way of making an apology, and conventionally expects its acceptance. It may be a matter of convention that this utterance is, other things being equal, received as an apology. However, we need to distinguish between conventions governing the making and accepting of apologies (knowing 'what to say'), and the question of what an apology is (its significance, 'what it means').

An apology is an utterance which helps to restore a valued, i.e.

27 G. E. M. Anscombe, 'Rules, Rights and Promises' in *Collected Philosophical Papers, Vol III, Ethics, Religion and Politics*, Oxford, 1981, pp.97-103.

significant relationship. The utterance both signifies and constitutes a stage in this restoration, and finds its completion in the acceptance of the person addressed. The utterance is not the 'naturally intelligible' sign or expression of a phenomenon independent of the structure of significance which is constituted by the apology and its acceptance. An utterance can only *be* an apology in virtue of this 'non-natural' interpersonal transaction. Neither an expression of apology nor an expression of its acceptance can be adequately understood apart from this reciprocal structure. For example, an apology cannot be understood in terms of the Gricean mechanism, as a special communicative intention that would remain within the control of the speaker. Even if others understand 'I hereby want you to know that I apologize for doing X' as the intention behind my utterance, it would still be appropriate to ask, 'And do you apologize?'. Nor, following Simon Blackburn,²⁸ is making an apology equivalent to making an utterance which is the conventional display of the belief that one wishes to apologize. First, because the 'uptake' one seeks from an apology is its acceptance; it is not sufficient that the audience comes to believe one wishes to apologize. Secondly, because the conventional display of this belief presupposes and so cannot explain what it is for something *to be* an apology.

The reciprocal structure of personal speech transcends both speaker and hearer: each in turn identifies with his own utterance (apology, acceptance) and wants his utterance to be incorporated in the response of the other (so that the acceptance is an acceptance of this apology), while also being transformed by the utterance of the other (whose acceptance it is). *Pace* Fogelin's account of 'standard and natural' responses to speech acts, the speaker cannot, in the sense that matters, 'anticipate' the response he seeks. Anticipation is impossible not because the speaker lacks certain information, or cannot predict what the other will say. Rather, anticipation would undermine the *significance* of the dialogue; it would usurp the response of the other, just as laughing too early at one's own joke undermines its humour and effectiveness.

The reciprocity of personal speech may also be described by saying that each speaker wants to occupy the position of the other, even though it remains essential that neither can do so. Someone apologizing wants to be able to identify with the acceptance he receives (as bearing on his apology). The respondent needs to identify with the apology he is accepting. Each is drawn into the structure of

28 Cf. Simon Blackburn, *Spreading the Word*, Oxford, 1984.

the 'faithful addition'. Both speaker and respondent are united in their attachment to, their attempt to identify with, the other's as well as their own utterances.²⁹

The same structure is illustrated by confession and forgiveness: A husband admits to his wife that he has been out gambling, not working back at the office as he had previously said. His utterance is a 'confession', not the mere retailing of information. He seeks a response from his wife that both acknowledges his fault (and does not deny it), and also expresses forgiveness. He desires a response which indicates that his wife has indeed been 'touched' by his confession, and so her response must be in some way beyond his control, and yet able to touch him in return. It is critical that she forgives him; a forgiveness wholly within his control would be worthless.

It is apparent that the reciprocal structure of significance cannot be explained in terms of the paradigms of semantic- or speaker-meaning mentioned at the outset. Personal speech transcends pragmatic speaker-meaning, while disquotational claims about what its utterances say will be trivial ('I apologize for doing X' is true if and only if the speaker apologizes for doing X). Personal speech depends on the meaning speakers have for each other. *Significant* meaning, like all meaning, is the object of understanding. To understand the meaning of a promise or an apology, is simply understanding what a promise is, what an apology or declaration of love is; it is to understand an 'essence' created by language and practice which bears upon the meaning people have for each other. Adapting Scruton's formulation—if aesthetic meaning is 'immanent in an experience' (of a work of art), so the meaning of personal speech is 'immanent in' an understanding of these reciprocal relationships constituted by language. 'What' is here understood cannot be reduced to a naturalistic phenomenon; nor is it a peculiar intensional entity. The conclusion is simply that, *pace* empiricism, the practices of human intelligence³⁰, the use of language, and the structures of human significance, cannot be explained in (Humean) 'naturalistic' terms, the

29 A further variation on the structure is exhibited by the 'Don Juan' strategy. Asked, 'Will you keep your promise to marry me?', he replies, 'Your beauty demands it'. He has of course not made a promise at all, yet he tries to present the promise as a fact in the eyes of the other. If someone replies to a proffered apology, 'Of course, you deserve to be forgiven', he has not actually accepted the apology. The manipulation consists in the respondent getting the speaker to identify with an utterance, without his being willing to do so himself. I owe this suggestion to Hedwig Schwall.

30 Cf. Anscombe, p.103.

terms of information transfer. Significant meaning presupposes, but is not reducible to, neutral information. Personal speech goes beyond the transmission of information, because it helps determine the *relevance* of information by bringing it within a context of significance. A confession will include information about the speaker's actions; a declaration of love might include descriptions of a person's state of mind, and of desirable features of the beloved; the simple statement that one has had a exhausting day at work may be meant to elicit affirmation and support. But these statements are not just the retailing of information. Indeed, as Cooper has shown, there is no 'standing assumption' that indicative utterances are committed assertions³¹. Personal speech transcends the 'language game of information', just as rituals of hospitality, meals and gift-giving transcend biological needs and utility.

5. Metaphor as 'personal speech'.

Metaphorical speech can now be further illuminated in terms of this model of personal speech. Metaphor is the 'maverick' use of an utterance whose *point* or significance goes beyond its linguistic meaning as a 'saying'. A metaphor-maker combines 'words into unexpected utterances' (Cooper, 187) and takes his utterance out of the realm of sober description or the retailing of information; his 'maverick' saying cannot but draw attention to himself, and to his assumption that his utterance has a point or relevance his audience will appreciate. He invites their cooperative understanding against a background of shared sensibility; he shows that he in turn is one 'on whom reciprocation of metaphor is not wasted' (Cooper, 167). In metaphorical speech speaker and hearer desire to be united through the words they find appropriate. As Wittgenstein noted, agreement over the suitability of words is the crucial reaction which put 'people in touch with one another' (*RPP*, I, 377). Adapting the deconstructionist outlook, one might say that while metaphor-makers and their audience know *what they are saying*, they do not in the same way know *what they mean*'; that is: they cannot fully anticipate the significance their sayings will acquire, nor prevent them failing to be significant; nor, when 'successful', do they fully comprehend the significance, the context of intimacy in which their sayings find relevance. There is a certain 'blindness' in their attachment to their utterances.³²

31 Cooper, p.102.

32 A feature of all rule-governed, meaningful action, according to Wittgenstein (cf. *PI*, 219).

Metaphors invoke the *reciprocal* or dialogical character of all personal speech: it matters to speakers how their metaphors are received. Metaphor reception is a 'cooperative act of understanding', never simply the 'unpacking' of a pre-existing meaning; moreover it allows for interpretation in ways a speaker could not have imagined. Reception and interpretation reveal, not a hidden linguistic meaning, but the background intimacy of the speakers, their sensibilities and attitudes, their *relevant* assumptions and judgments.

The context of intimacy accounts for the 'appropriateness' of metaphor interpretation, and so explains why, for instance, philosophers should make more of Foucault's remark, 'Knowledge is an instrument for cutting', than would readers ignorant of the history of epistemology. The intimacy which metaphor presupposes and reinforces thus functions to 'restrict' its interpretation. Precisely because metaphors have no (special) semantic meaning their reception by a particular group needs to include a restriction, a 'channelling' of their possibly indefinite effects. One might say, a metaphor is only 'received' when it has found its appropriate community, the speakers who—for reasons of 'intimacy'—find it apt.

The use of metaphor thus involves a reciprocity which 'transcends' the individual utterances of which it is composed. What transcends the individual utterances is not a special propositional content, but the context of intimacy within which they find their significance. Accordingly, the response to a metaphor which signifies its reception must recognize the significance that has been invoked. It must both cohere with the initial utterance, and go beyond it. It must be a 'faithful addition' to what was said: 'faithful' yet also 'striking' and somewhat evocative in its turn of the significance both utterances presuppose.

Davidson rashly claimed that just as there are no unfunny jokes, so there are no unsuccessful metaphors, since a metaphor always has some effect or other.³³ However, as Ted Cohen's study of jokes and metaphors makes clear, both are liable to a distinctive sort of failure; the 'uptake' they demand may be unforthcoming. If a metaphor is taken literally, or if a joke is spelled out in paraphrase, it is undermined. Metaphorical speech, like personal speech, is always dangerous. An audience's failure to find a metaphor appropriate (or to laugh at a joke), will rebound on the speaker; his appeal to intimacy has been misplaced. It may well be *he* who is excluded from a certain community of sensibility and practice (e.g., by employing a racist

33 Davidson, p.245.

joke or metaphor). His utterance rebounds as does a declaration of love that is rejected. Metaphors and jokes, as exemplars of personal speech, have the capacity to draw people together (and to drive them apart). In the former case, they involve, in Ted Cohen's words, a 'marvellous reflexivity'³⁴; their uptake (agreement, laughter) is prompted by the utterance, and yet is free; their effects are 'both unforced and fitting' (a 'faithful addition'): 'in laughing we fit ourselves to a joke [in a] relation of self-warranting propriety'...

We find ourselves reflected in a surface which mirrors our dearest and perhaps most human hope: to do well, but not under compulsion.³⁵

In its appeal to intimacy, metaphor involves the same 'suspension' of significance that is at the heart of personal speech. Again the 'deconstructionist' idiom is appropriate: speakers do not know 'what they mean' (to one another), while knowing quite well what they are saying. From that perspective of 'deconstruction', Jonathan Culler's analysis of a joke echoes that of Cohen.

The listener does not control the outburst of laughter: the text provokes it (the joke, one says, made me laugh). But ... the unpredictable response determines the nature of the text [the joke, the metaphor] that is supposed to have produced it. No compromise formulation, with the reader partly in control and the text partly in control, would accurately describe this situation, which is captured, rather, by juxtaposition of two absolute perspectives.³⁶

Davidson thinks jokes and metaphors never fail to be what they are because he overlooks the reciprocal character of metaphor and personal speech, with its suspension of significance between *two* (relatively) absolute perspectives. A metaphor-maker is not entirely in control of his utterance.

Metaphor, like all personal speech, is an 'indirect' style of communication because it leaves room for the person addressed to respond appropriately (e.g. to a confession with forgiveness), to be united in an attitude (e.g. that presupposed by a joke), to adopt a moral stance (e.g. after exhortation or preaching). Whenever personal significance is at stake, forms of speech which strive to be totally compelling—relying solely on logical inference or the accumulation of

34 Ted Cohen, 'Jokes' in Eva Schaper (ed.) *Pleasure, preference and value* Cambridge, 1983, p.136.

35 Cohen, p.136.

36 Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism*, London, 1983, p.73.

information—are likely to be counter-productive. They fail to allow space for the discovery and cultivation of significance which provides the personal context for inference and fact.

6. Conclusion.

I have sought to analyse the structure of 'personal speech', showing how it involves an experience of 'significant meaning'. The successful use of metaphorical utterances relies on this structure, and finds its point or significance in the anticipation of a response which will be its 'faithful addition'; communication involving metaphorical utterances thus defies reductive explanation in terms of semantic and/or pragmatic meanings alone.

It might be objected that the reciprocal structure I have identified is, in varying degrees, presupposed in all instances of communication, including inquiries for straight information which demand little 'intimacy' at all between speakers, and so is not distinctive or explanatory of metaphorical speech. I readily agree that the kind of personal meaning I am concerned with is all-pervasive in human communication.³⁷ Although I have focussed on the significant meaning of personal speech, I could as well have studied the personal significance of all speech. However, particular species of 'personal speech', such as metaphor, highlight the role of 'significant meaning' and allow its structure to be perceived more clearly. The all-pervasive necessity of some degree of 'significant meaning' entails that naturalistic accounts of human language (e.g. in terms of 'looped' Gricean intentions) will be inadequate. These accounts require the supplementary recognition that 'significant meaning' is constitutive of human existence, which is thereby more mysterious than naturalistic explanations would have us believe.

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37 Elsewhere I have criticised the Gricean account for failing to recognize the role of significance in all communication. See my *The Significance of Metaphor: A Study of Linguistic and Personal Meaning*, Unpublished PhD dissertation, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (1989), 55-61.