Metaphor: the power of signification in teaching[1]

Cosimo Laneve[2]

Rosatilde Margiotta[3]

ABSTRACT

This article presents a discussion about the application of metaphors in the meaning of words as an original way of interpreting the world due to the ability of this linguistic resource to adapt to the multiplicity of being, with its different meanings. It was intended to define the concept of metaphor bringing the vision of Aristotle (1987), as well as delimiting the reflexes of the adoption of terms and words for figurative representation. The potential for cognitive abstraction of metaphors that arises from associations is evidenced and ends up enriching and valuing hermeneutic pluralism in everyday expression and also in scientific language.

KEYWORDS: Metaphor. Meaning of words. Teaching.

Metáfora: o poder da significação no ensino

RESUMO

Este artigo apresenta uma discussão a respeito da aplicação de metáforas na significação das palavras como maneira original de interpretar o mundo devido a capacidade deste recurso linguístico de adaptação diante da multiplicidade do ser, com seus significados diversos. Pretendeu-se definir o conceito de metáfora trazendo a visão de Aristóteles (1987), bem como delimitar os reflexos da adoção de termos e palavras para representação figurada. É evidenciado o potencial de abstração cognitiva das metáforas

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[1] English version by Ivan Fortunato. *E-mail*: ivanfrt@yahoo.com.br.

[2] Dean of Faculty of Education University of Bari. Docente di didattica presso Università suor Orsola Benincasa Napoli (Italiy). Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7441-4754. *E-mail:* minonix@libero.it.

[3] Phd student in Mediterranean Rights, Economies and Cultures at Ionic Department-UNIBA-Italia. Cultrice della materia (subject expert/Honorary Fellow) in General Didactics at Department of Education, Psychology and Communication – UNISOB – Italia. Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6185-3563. *E-mail:* tilde.margiotta@gmail.com.

que surge de associações e acaba por enriquecer e valorizar pluralismo hermenêutico na expressão cotidiana e também na linguagem científica.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Metáfora. Significação de palavras. Ensino.

Metáfora: el poder del significado en la enseñanza

RESUMEN

Este artículo presenta una discusión sobre la aplicación de las metáforas en el significado de las palabras como una forma original de interpretar el mundo debido a la capacidad de este recurso lingüístico de adaptarse a la multiplicidad del ser, con sus diferentes significados. Se pretendió definir el concepto de metáfora trayendo la visión de Aristóteles (1987), así como delimitar los reflejos de la adopción de términos y palabras para la representación figurativa. Se evidencia el potencial de abstracción cognitiva de las metáforas que surge de las asociaciones y termina por enriquecer y valorizar el pluralismo hermenéutico en la expresión cotidiana y también en el lenguaje científico.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Metáfora. Significado de las palabras. Enseñanza.

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Introduction

While envisaging a linguistic reform in the Pansophiae Christianae liber III, Comenius invites to clearly fix the meaning of words by using a single name for each thing, so as to restore proper meaning to things. Persons better express their power of representation (description, definition...) when they know how to name living beings and objects, to denominate events, to designate activities and products with their name, the precise term and the right word. This power must not be exercised in order to add a word to a list of artificial signs, but rather to raise oneself to the level of the objective world, the representative (designative, denotative...) one.

Characteristic languages are independent of any relationship with the image, of any element signified by connotation and of the contextual

overdetermination of meanings that dominates common languages: they are syntactic, constructed languages, like an architecture of modular elements that provide a computational structure.

The word-term is constituted by discarding generic procedures and it is often the result of adopting the economic rule of "characteristic" symbolisms (this is the word used by Leibniz to indicate the modern structure of the linguistic systems of the sciences: characteristica universalis).

However, it is not true (or not always) that only the word-terms, decanted from the dross of imprecision, allow us to articulate reality and therefore to reach the world of knowledge and culture, history and the scientific community.

A word is not only a sign to communicate, but it is also something else: it is a heap of ambiguity due to the evocations hidden in its core. The word (especially a name) is never a label, but neither is it a definition: it is a kind of simulacrum, often approximated, we use to communicate.

We write (and speak) referring to signs that are often ambiguous for us, but ambiguity and vagueness allow us to understand each other in any case.

The term is only the shadow of the word: if we identify the word with the term we nail it to a specific and relative meaning; we break its wings, preventing it from flying free in the sky of human consciousness or of signification itself.

The use of metaphors: power of signification

According to Aristotle, the metaphorical transposition[4] must be thought of in terms of appropriateness, of pertinence; and it must be taken as proof of the profound and not alienable bond that names and expressions have with things, even when they transgress their proper use. The goodness of a

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[4] Metaphor, says Aristotle, is "the transposition to an object of the name that is proper to another either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or from species to species, or by analogy" (Poetics, 57b 6-7). A regulated transposition, however (Poetics 58b 15).

metaphor is estimated, precisely, on the pertinence of this transgression, on its being regulated or not. Like any other linguistic device, it must respond to the clarity that it indicates as the virtue of enunciation (Rhet., 1404b 1-3). He explains it as the prerogative of utterance to put things "before the eyes" (Rhet. 1410b 33; see also Poet. 55a 22-34). To put things before the eyes means to show suddenly that "this is that" (Rhet. 1371 8-9), posing as "those who are at the very facts as they happen" (Poet. 55a 25). However, it does so in a different way from how onomata kyria do it - in a direct way; the metaphor, like onomata allotria, "goes against its own use" (Poet.58a 24-5), in an unusual form: in a less direct form, and, in some ways, even more important and effective"(Poet.59a 5-6).

Therefore, another mode of discourse (indeed, other modes) exists, that is by no means poorer in meaning than scientific utterances.

On the contrary, being able to produce metaphors is, according to Aristotle, "much more important" (Poet 59a 5-6). It is more important because being able to put things in front of one's eyes in certain domains (those treated in particular by poetic art) requires a greater effort than the one required by the knowledge obtained through proper names. In fact, the metaphor activates a further cognitive capacity beyond that of simply defining things. It enhances the heuristic function; it constitutes the horizon of intelligibility of new problems. The most abstract forms of knowledge find their roots in the "pre-categorial" prescribing a project, a field of possible projections.

Metaphor anticipates rational clarification, which, on the contrary, proceeds by legitimising it step by step: it favours, it pushes, the immediate relationship between the most distant things, it leads to knowledge without recourse to already given premises. Through the unexpected relationship in which they are placed, words (usual or not) suddenly acquire unexpected meanings: they emerge from the unity of the sentence with their own autonomy and in all their expressive dynamic, they become a living part of a whole.

The importance of metaphor lies in its ability to adapt to the multiplicity of being, to the plural meanings according to which it can be articulated and above all written.

Understood in this way, it shows itself to be an irreplaceable instrument of human knowledge.

A knowledge in which the universal can only be achieved at the price of a cognitive abstraction, whose device is precisely that analogon. The metaphor is a fundamental linguistic species of the latter.

The unity and synthesis of the different "images" do not come about by explanation, but by association, in a sudden vision of similarities. An attitude that is assumed even before any reflective stance is taken. Metaphors arise from associations that are not only a factor in the change of meaning, but a universal mechanism that enriches the languages of the world Three.

The metaphor makes us suddenly recognise the similarity between things that are very distant from each other and in this way allows us to "revalue" our own familiarity with things, never disowning them, but rather broadening and deepening them. A series of relations, of "real attributes" of the entity that already exist on an ontological level, are placed before our eyes. However, without the capacity that metaphor possesses to transpose, to transfer from one level to another, it would not have been possible to identify them.

It is another way of that general capacity of man to somehow approach the truth. That truth that - to paraphrase the Metaphysics (993a) - it is impossible to grasp entirely.

A metaphor constitutes itself as a cognitive alternative to the analytical nature of the episteme, in that field in which universalisation - according to epistemic procedures - would pay the price of abstraction that is too high and therefore not applicable. It is an inchoative, poietic, approximate knowledge and, nevertheless, for this very reason, it results fundamental insofar as it is capable of well adapting itself to the pollachos, to the multiplicity of the meanings of being.

It is an original way of addressing the world, of orienting oneself and directing oneself towards reality.

This is why metaphor should not be confused with a figurativeness, caught in the shallows of a theory of ornamentation, reduced to a synonym of exorbitant delay, of linguistic surplus, of external magniloquence. Metaphors are not mere additional embellishments, inessential additions, external coverings that end up weighing down the writing, but rather constitute true resources of signification: they are ingenious images capable of communicating in a linguistically effective manner. This is true not only in the best-known field of literary and poetic discourse, but also in everyday experience and in scientific language itself.

It is a matter of linguistic figurativeness, that is to say the capacity that man has to construct through analogy with concrete images, original, pleasant, suggestive words and texts, activating those combinatory and creative potentialities of language that play a corrective role with respect to standard, normative, rigid language, often sterilising the innovative generativity of the individual's expression-communication.

Conclusion

Indeed, figures offer the possibility of enriching the significance and expressiveness of language through a continuous rebalancing between elements of novelty, originality, and elements of repetition, reproduction. The meaning of each word can be continually enriched in a process in which the conception of a figure produces an opening of the "space" of the sign-word, generates an enlargement of meaning, tends towards an expansion of the word-sign, an enlargement of meaning, tending towards semantic fullness and sometimes even evocation.

The figure makes the immediate relationship between the most distant things possible, leads to knowledge without resorting to already given premises. Through the unexpected relationship, words suddenly acquire

unexpected and unpredictable meanings and references. Sound is also part of this, as a modulated rhythm that determines the phonetic order and outlines an overall arrangement.

On the didactic level, beyond Aristotle's clear statement that metaphor cannot be taught, as stated in the Poetics ("it is the only thing that cannot be learned from others, and it is a sign of a natural disposition of genius [...] to be able to grasp the similarities of things among themselves" (59b) and in the Rhetoric ("its use cannot be learned from anyone else" (1374, 33)), to which one can add Vico's conviction of the original spontaneity of the metaphorical process, a teaching of metaphor can be considered very valid: From Ivor Amstrong Richards to Howard Gardner, it clearly emerges that the spontaneous production of metaphors is a primary process, followed by understanding and finally the ability to explain the mechanism.

Therefore, it is necessary to teach not so much or only to play with metaphors, constructing strange, poetic, daring images, but also to discover the power of signification, for example: replacing a word with another whose literal sense has some similarity with the literal sense of the word replaced; delineating an object starting from another; "knowing how to see and grasp the similarities of things between them" (Poet.1459); learning to read details, and so one learns to read life; and so on), and in this way realise a knowledge "which did not exist before" (Rhet.1410b).

The didactics of creativity and the willingness to take intellectual risks are therefore of extreme importance. By setting a different look to read what is hidden behind the obvious and the banal, the former favours hermeneutic pluralism, renews the real, redesigns written expressions. Although it is always fraught with doubts and uncertainties of disentangling oneself from the stagnant immobility of ideas and convictions, risk provides mixed feeling of joy due to the freedom it offers.

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