5.

Literal and Figurative Meaning

Abstract:

The distinction between literal and figurative meaning of language and other signs is discussed in terms of semantic domain theory, and finally a case of figurative meaning inherent in literal meaning is briefly analyzed, namely *emblematic* meaning, which is metonymical and often as in this case also *ironic*.

The Eucharist implies a transubstantiation that quite *literally* makes bread into human flesh, namely the body of Christ. However, in the Protestant interpretation this link between bread and flesh is symbolic, that is, *figurative*, and no longer literal.[1] Protestants [2] do not believe that the ritual really makes bread into flesh but think of it as an 'as if' act of commemoration in the 'image' of the Last Supper. They understand the Eucharist as an act of symbolization, not of realization. 'Becoming' flesh here means *signifying* flesh, which is thus a case of non-literal 'becoming' something: coming to *mean* something. Similarly, in Tantra,[3] the 'Five Jewels', and the ritual treatment of the five bodily excretions in the implied or referred sexual practices, are understood either literally or figuratively, that is, metaphorically, depending on hard-core or more spiritual understandings of the way this religious ritual was historically performed, according to the sources. In such cases, it is easy to demonstrate that the literal/non-literal distinction is phenomenologically and culturally active and important.

The distinction between literal and non-literal ('figurative') meaning of words in utterances is real, in the sense that it is made by actual speakers, the same way as performers know and respect the difference between really performing and only signifying an act. Words and clauses used in utterances that are 'meant' non-literally have important cultural functions. These functions are of course only possible when the possibility of having both sorts of meaning exists for a given expression. So, the linguistic

[1] A non-literal transubstantiation is a symbolization. A symbolization — X 'means' something Y that it is not believed to be, though we say: "X is a Y" — is inversely in fact a non-literal transubstantiation. Magritte's famous pipe — "ceci n'est pas une pipe" — is a comment on this deep fact of human cognitive semiology.

[2] The Calvinist position is particularly clear: the function of this ritual is purely commemorative.

[3] Cf. David Gordon White, *The Kiss of the Yogini. "Tantric sex" in its South Asian context*, University of Chicago Press 2004.

question is when indeed expressions have this distinction. My point in this essay will be double:

1) I claim that the distinction concerns *open-class* terms[4] in language, that is, *lexical* terms – including nouns, most adjectives, and most verbs – whereas closed-class elements, that is, morphological entities – including case, number, tense, aspect, and other morphemes; determiners, prepositions, conjunctions, and core adverbs (incl. satellites) – are *not* included and should instead be understood as signifiers of a generically schematic meaning: a meaning that is 'literally figurative' and that cannot be interpreted as either literal or non-literal (figurative). The difference between the category-based semantics of open word classes and the schematic semantics of closed word classes is thus that the former manifests and the latter does not manifest the distinction between literal and non-literal meaning. The distinction is lexicological, not grammatical. The cognitive question is: why should this be so?

2) I claim that a term can only manifest its literal meaning in the semantic *domain* in which it is grounded. So, source terms in metaphor[5] are used non-literally, whereas target terms are used literally. In the metaphor 'This surgeon is a butcher'[6], the term 'surgeon' is used literally, and the term 'butcher' is used non-literally — by the utterer of the metaphor in an appropriate situation. Therefore, is it necessary to study the issue of semantic domains, if we are to clarify the issue of literalness.

Ad 1. Schematic, morphological meaning is invariant under concrete/abstract variation. For example, the meaning of satellite adverbs such as *in/out, up/down* and other orientation-based spatial specifiers is constant through domain variation. Consider the satellite adverb *up* in (1a-d):

(1a) The sun is up.

(1b) The question is up for discussion.

(1c) The temperature has gone up.

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[4] The distinction open/closed class is understood as in Leonard Talmy, *Toward a Cognitive Semantics*, M.I.T. Press 2000.

[5] Here we are concerned with occurring metaphor in language, not with the abstraction called Conceptual Metaphor; but the terms 'source' and 'target' can still be used in the same sense as in CM, whereas the relation between the 'source structure' and the 'target structure' of an occurring and linguistically manifested metaphor may be better modelled as a process of semantic mapping and blending of mental spaces.

[6] Cf. L. Brandt and P. Aa. Brandt, "Making sense of a blend: A cognitive semiotic approach to metaphor", Annual Review of Cognitive Linguistics, vol. 3, 2005.

(1d) Time is up.

In these sentences, it would not help much to say that *up* is literal in (1a) and non-literal in (1b-d), since the semantic variation observed is not binary. In predicative constructions like these, it is instead the nominal subject of the satellite predicate that determines the type of space which further determines the effect of the *up* schema. If this schema can be characterized as letting a certain body or volume rise from a lower position in such a dynamic way that it is moved from rest to unrest, or from a stationary to a mobile presence, then it can be seen that (1a) makes this happen in a meteorological space, and (1b) in a dialogical space. (1c) introduces a space of measurements where values are agonists. Finally, (1d) – e.g.: "Time is up, gentlemen!" – can make a group of persons stand up and move somewhere in order to perform an act they have awaited a signal before initiating. The meaning of *up* is structurally constant through such a series, but the sentences refer to states or events in distinct types of spaces, that is, spaces that belong to distinct types of semantic domains: *sun* is physical; *question* is social; *temperature* is conceptual; *time* is deictic and appears in a speech-act. The schema has a generic, trans-domain body, not in any necessary or basic sense specifically a physical body or the body of a person. In (1d), it is even the body of a chronometrical sign of some sort. – Conjunctions like *and* and *but* are schematic, closed-class expressions; it would therefore be misleading to say that there is a literal *and* as opposed to a non-literal *and*. Consider the following series of clauses including the conjunction *and*:

(2a) Two and two is four.

(2b) Peter and Paul are friends.

(2c) Steak and mashed potatoes.

(2d) Give me the book and I will read you a story.

(2e) There are books and there are books.

(2f) The road continued for miles and miles.

(2a) has an *and* that instructs us to connect the pre-positioned and the post-positioned term (2, 2) and to expect a significant *result* of this operation (= 4) in a conceptual space. (2b) does exactly the same thing in a social space. (2c) offers a combination supposed to make up a plausible meal, which is a result in a physical space. (2d) has a conditional (protasis—apodosis) meaning connecting an imperative and a declaration of intent, the resulting combination – in speech-act space – being a promise. In (2e), the nominal

identity of pre-positioned and post-positioned category yields the idea of an emphatic qualitative difference, again in conceptual space; whereas in (2f) the nominal identity emphatically expresses a subjectively important result, excessive quantity, here in physical space. The *and* schema remains structurally stable under variation of semantic space type, or domain variation.

The challenging problem is how to genetically understand the existence of schematic meanings. Do they emerge by grammaticalization from previously lexical terms and meanings? Or do we have to suppose that grammar, or the grammaticality of schematic meanings, is as cognitively basic as lexicality? It is philosophically hopeless to imagine that all linguistic expressions have an original physical meaning and then acquire a more 'abstract' meaning through history. In the evolution of mankind, speakers were not first physicists; they 'cognized' the world in essentially the same ways as we are now doing, namely by ascribing 'abstract', emotion-based meaning to 'concrete' perception-based experiences right away, interpreting forms in terms of forces of all kinds. The history of human cognition does not lead from concrete to abstract meanings of things, but rather in the opposite direction – from the abstract toward the concrete, from beliefs in all sorts of abstract beings toward the recognition of purely physical causality; and the discipline called 'phenomenology of perception' is a very recent, modern invention. The schematicity of grammatical meanings is the fundamental feature – a Cartesian property, if you will – that makes it possible for us to use the same constructions in a given language for speaking about radically different topics. A language has a semantic capacity to set up similarly structured representations of radically different realities. This capacity of course practically depends on whether the schemas the cognizing speaker mobilizes will make sense in view of the cognized real structures of the things and states of affairs that his utterances refer to. Schemas only work if applied to realities that offer sufficient structural support for the application. But even if they do not make sense, the schemas are there — they may make sense *to the mind* (thus creating expectations, or counterfactual imaginations) without necessarily doing so to the real object of the cognizing mind... So, we are led to consider the very fact that mental contents are schematically structured and structurable. In my view, the neuro-mental origin of the schematic structuring of contents is likely to be found in *the mechanisms of motor imaging and visual completion*: the *figurative* mental

graphics of conceptual schemas would be the component stemming from visual or auditive completion ('hallucinated' lines appearing in the visual or auditive gestalt), and the *dynamic* component would be grounded in motor imaging (the gestual 'planning' that the anticipation of a bodily act requires). Due to its dynamic meaning, human gesture can immediately refer to physical, social, mental (abstractly conceptual), performative and probably many more ideas.

Open-class terms are grounded in the existing, ontologically given set of semantic domains of human experience (cognition).[7] The starting point of this consideration of terms and domains is the following. As mentioned, we do not cognitively live in a purely physical world, and even the macro-physical realm accessible to our senses is only a small part of the reality that our bodily gestures and movements regularly attend to and address. Our bodily interaction with the 'humanly real' is polysemic, it operates on many levels of experienceable meaning, many levels of human reality. The grounding semantic domains are the result of the interactive, 'embodied realism' of our minds.

We indeed address the macro-physical space with our *locomotor* activity, which lets us reinforce mental representations of 3D space and sequential time. Terms 'born' in this domain (here called D1) include nouns such as *place, path, ground; air, wind, water, fire; tree, flower, animal* ... Verbs include many intransitive expressions of basic events in this 'physical domain' (*come*, *go; grow, live, die*...)

Second, we interact bodily with each other in salient transitive activities, such as those involving or producing artefacts: *tools, weapons, adornments, cult objects* ...; verbs of *change, transport, production* and *destruction, conflict, control and ordering* ... belong to this basic 'social domain' (D2). Verbs include an overwhelming amount of divalent transitives.

Third, we recognize inner experiences — during our moments of bodily introspection, attending to proprioceptive states — such as dreams, hypotheses, beliefs (and non-beliefs), memories, expectations, sayings, stories, feelings, mental images ... This 'mental domain' (D3) is linguistically expressed by a smaller, specific group of nouns (ex.: *idea*) and verbs (ex.: *imagine, believe, think* ...).

[7] These grounding semantic 'areas' are therefore explicitly called *ontological domains* in Line Brandt's recent work. The notion involved here is presented in P. Aa. Brandt, *Spaces, Domains, and Meaning*, Bern: Peter Lang, European Semiotics Series, No. 4, 2004.

And forth, our communicative interaction with another person in the framework of face-to-face contact has developed particular motor routines as those manifested by speech gestures and facial expressions. Some adjectives directly express evaluative meanings that basically appear in this framework. The 'expressive domain' (D4) is the grounding life-world location of speech acts; evaluations are thus original versions of the so-called performative modes of meaning.

The external domains (D1, 2, 4) appear to form binary integrations resulting in slightly more 'abstract' domains; concepts of *work, kinship,* and *worship* could be such integrated meaning formations. The principle would be the following:

D1 & D2: territorialized activity and activity-based determinations of physical spaces as social habitats — D5, the work-space domain (terminologically particularly rich); I suggest calling this socio-physical space *polis*.

D2 & D4: notions of collective activity combined with communication-based notions of empathy, shared feelings, etc. — D6, the domain of family relations;[8] I therefore suggest calling it *oikos*.

D4 & D1: notions of intentional, intersubjective and empathic contact as in communication but combined with physical, territorial space determinations, yielding ideas of spiritual presences, cf. notions like that of a *genius loci* and the general phenomenon of a subjectively felt 'atmosphere' and 'spirit' linked to places — D7, the worship domain.[9] The Greek *hieron* would be a suitable name.

Those domains that are the results of an integration of other domains are more 'abstract', less embodied, than those from which they arise. In Brandt 2004 a hypothetical further unfolding of higher-order domains is suggested. The point of this hypothesis is that 'abstraction' can thus be understood as a stepwise process of disembodiment, still within the scope of the human life-world that reinforces each domain as such — whether 'concrete' or 'abstract', whether strongly or weakly embodied — as somehow relevant to the existence, reproduction, and development of

[8] The meaning of the word *father* is literal in D6, but would be non-literal and metaphorical in expressions such as: the *founding fathers* of an institution, etc.

[9] The noun *temple* is literal in D7 but non-literal and metaphorical in expressions like: My beloved is my temple... (If this sentence has a metaphorical sexual meaning, then D6 is the domain framing its type of space; literally speaking, there are no temples in D6).

the human collectivity. Abstraction is not the opposite of embodiment; our body just gets more abstract through the domain integrations.

If the lexical words of a natural language were used only within the domains in which they are literal, that is: where they are *grounded*, then we would probably, in the course of evolution, have developed a specific syntax for each domain, and in the last instance, a full-fledged code or an entire language for each domain of possible experience, equipped with home-based verbs and adjectives for every noun, etc. In that case there would not have been human language as it exists, I claim. Instead, it is evident that all historically given forms of human language involve *cross-domain semantics* and therefore a *cross-domain grammar* allowing us to speak of or take up themes and elements from different domains in the same text and even within the same sentences. However, a sentence does have a referential domain, which determines the specification of its participating complements. There is in principle one and only one state of affairs in some domain that it refers directly to (except in some rare forms of modern poetry); in this sense it has a *literal* meaning (besides all its connotations). Metaphor is a core example of this capacity of using multiple domains and nevertheless obtaining literally interpretable utterances. I claim that the cross-domain semantic constructions are based on a deep-rooted design feature of the human mind, namely its automatic *scenarial* imagery:[10] every sentence 'means' a *scenario* of some kind, and therefore sets up a mental space anchored in a specific domain. And since scenarios have as many windows into other scenarios as it has distinguishable parts, any such part can be imported from other regions of the life world. This process implies holding (keeping) a given scenario in the mind while activating another scenario and 'importing' it as a predicate to some aspect or part of the 'matrix' scenario. Our multi-scenarial mind is therefore constitutively predicative. The meanings of terms imported will appear as the non-literal meanings, predicated about some literally 'meant' entity. By contrast, a literalization of the (source) predicate will cancel the metaphor and lead to a recategorization of the (target) subject.[11]

[10] We apparently think in terms of scenarios as minimal units that resemble scenes in a theatrical play, involving acting characters, a situation, a background, an atmosphere, and the double perspective of personalized viewpoints and impersonal, external audience views. The cognitive compositionality of scenarios probably stems from the equidistal position of an impersonal observer's view rather than from a biased, internal viewpoint.

[11] Thus, a (real) surgeon can simultaneously be a (real) butcher.

Just one example: in a spectacular speech act, someone declares *war on terrorism*. Now, lexicologically speaking, war is an international political event (*polis*), and terrorism is not a national state, a 'country', but rather a method for creating fear in a social community; so, the political term *war* is used non-literally in this declaration. The sentence meaning refers literally to terrorism and then warns us that what will be done to it should in some sense be seen as warfare. War is basically a political phenomenon (D5), whereas 'terror' (terrorism) refers to a violent and brutal style of conflictual behavior that could emerge in any human group (D2). Groups regularly 'terrorize' each other. When *war* is used as a semantic predicate of the anti-terror (and correlatively, the terror) activity in question, this use makes us figuratively and metaphorically see the D2-bound phenomenon through the D5-grounded phenomenon, but it does not make the domains merge: terror(ism) does not now *become* a matter of countries only. In the actual political situation, however, precisely this semantic miracle seems to have happened in some minds! No metaphor anymore: back to literalness! Terrorism became apparently, in the minds of some politicians and public rhetoricians, a real country or system of states — as by a new transubstantiation — and metaphorical warfare became real warfare, but still without a political enemy.

Literalness is, as we see, a dramatical issue.

And there is more.

It is often particularly difficult to analyze the cases where a scenario is both literally considered and taken as *emblematic* of something else — typically something much more abstract. Here, the literal is additionally non-literal! In the political world, this double semantic condition is more common than we may think. Here is an actual example:[12]

"The Iraqi prisoners were effectively being initiated into American culture: they were getting a taste of the obscenity that counterpoints the public values of personal dignity, democracy and freedom."

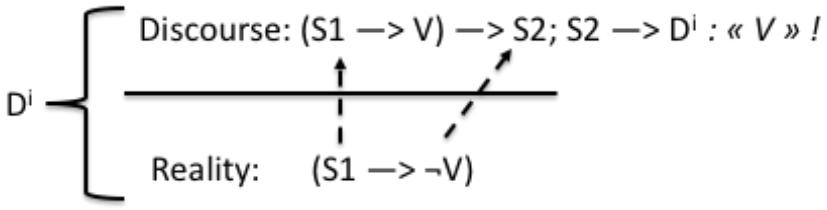
"...in the photos of humiliated Iraqi prisoners, what we get is, precisely, an insight into 'American values'".

Zizek lets the treatment of the prisoners in Abu Ghraib be emblematic of some public values and explains in his article how the contradiction is to be dissolved: obscenity and

[12] Slavoj Zizek, "Between Two Deaths", London Review of Books, 3 June 2004, p. 19.

dignity are schematically polar components of a Rumsfeldian -American value system ruling the *irony* of such emblematic meaning. The intersubjective schema of *critical irony* applies here: 1) there is a *real* situation which is strongly amoral (value ¬V) and due to S1 (Rumsfeld); 2) S1 is also *verbally* a proponent of strong moral values (V); 3) there is an addressee S2 (Zizek) of S1's language who knows about (1), and 4) S2 then repeats S1's discourse ironically (D^i). Meaning: *reality overrules language*.

Fig.1: Schema of critical irony.



This schema, integrated in a semio-cognitive mental space network, will fit as a relevance maker of the inevitable blend of the mental space of a referential *Abu Graib* scenario and the presentational mental space of exemplary *American virtuousness*. The resulting contrastive meaning, D_i *—> hypocritical V discourse*, travels back to base space and feeds into an ordinary metonymy, where *Abu Graib* D_i becomes the signifier of a general American *V—Di* referring to all American V discourse as hypocritical.

In other words, these mental space networks may help us understand what happens to literal meaning when used ironically and metonymically; literalness becomes 'typical' of a referential literalness, the latter however much more extensive than the former, so that the presentational literal items (here: the Abu Ghraib torture and in particular the photos) predicatively come to 'express' the essence or identity of a particular referential literalness (here: Zizek's comments on the vacuity of American values).

Nada más, as they may say in Guantánamo.