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PURSUIING A DIACHRONIC APPROACH TO METAPHOR

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There are two opposite ways of questioning metaphor:

(1) The mind-oriented question: How are metaphors processed by the human brain? This implies a synchronic approach of language. All the more because real-time processing is attended to, that is to say the mental representation of linguistic items as they occur now, at the present moment, and which can be measured via empirical observation such as brain analysis. Cognitive Linguistics is mind-oriented. The well-known experiential grounding (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 17) and embodiment theses (Lakoff, 1987, 367) which are becoming religious dogmas, are rooted in that approach.

(2) The historically-oriented question: Where do metaphors historically come from, that is to say where do the metaphorical source-domains come from? And how have their provenance and history affected their meaning through the ages?

And that's my question for today.

Many metaphors have a precedent in history, therefore they cannot always be understood by online processing. Therefore, It might be advisable to pursue a diachronic perspective on metaphor, which of course will be complementary to the synchronic approach.

An obvious case of precedential notions is constituted by animal metaphors such as MAN IS A WOLF, THE DOORKEEPER IS A GORILLA, THE SNAKE IS A SEDUCTRESS (recently used by Donald Trump with respect to immigrants), JEWS or MUSLIMS ARE RATS (used by the Nazi's and the Alt-right respectively). Nearly all animal metaphors can be traced back to ancient myths, tales, fables or legends. This is most obvious for the case of the wolf, who appeared in Latin fables, which, in turn, have been traded down by the French writer Jean de Lafontaine (17th Century). The same holds for the gorilla which has been discovered around 1860 and whose frightening image has been coined by the many "King Kong"-films. The use of animals as cognitive source domains in metaphorical sentences is restricted. In our collective imagination wolves are always ferocious, snakes always deceitful and lethal. In our metaphorical language they stand for a limited number of slots, that is to say features which can be projected upon the target. They are pre-established by a long tradition (Bisschops 1994, 2018, Abdulrahman 2018). In contradistinction to them a metaphorical source such as "journey" (in "Life is a Journey") can develop a wide range of meanings, having many slots (elements which can be foregrounded). Love can be a journey. Murder (such as in "Kill Bill") can be it too, but then other slots are activated.

I called that kind of source-domains "emblematic". That was in 1994. Recently a researcher named Dr. Abdulrahman pointed to heraldic observing that many animals figure as emblems for families of aristocrats and knights or as logos for firms (such as the lion or eagle).

On the one hand one might say that they are purely lexicalized/conventional, their use is restricted with respect to mapping (they have only few slots available for mapping). On the other, they have much more implications and entailments than a lexeme. They create behavioural expectations and they visualize a behaviour (such as the winding of a snake around her victim, generating lots of entailments such as a long and cruel death).

Their experiential grounding is weak. We have no personal experiences with most animals except when visiting a zoo. We do have experiences with dogs, indeed, and we mostly love them. None the less, calling a person a dog is an insult. Our animal related metaphorical source notions are rooted in emblem-based knowledge, even if we own them as domestic animals. Emblematic knowledge might fall under the category of commonplace knowledge"; I would see it as a sub-category, because commonplace knowledge is not necessarily emblematic.

Let us jump to a more complicated level now. Let us come to exegesis. How do metaphors function in a token text? It might be useful to look after precedents when analysing a metaphor in a literary or Biblical text instead of reading our experiences into it.

Just to provide one example to which I devoted a chapter in one of my books (unfortunately written in German).

"Life is a misprint in a communiqué". It comes from "Under the Volcano" by Malcolm Lowry. It's about an unhappy, alcoholic British consul in Mexico, Geoffrey Firmin, who yearns after his great love and wife, Yvonne, who left him. The story plays out in 1938. We understand immediately that the metaphor is about a failed life and a broken love. But why the source-notion "misprint"? Why the "printing"-metaphor? If we replace "printing" by "writing" and go after possible precedents, we might perhaps find something. To be sure: It's not to be ruled out that we won't find anything.

Malcolm Lowry was steeped in Jewish mysticism which, since the Middle Ages, has been shaped by a mystical movement named "Kabballah" ("transmission"). Lowry himself was not a Jew (his first wife was Jewish). The allusions to Kabballah in Lowry's writings are manifold. There is one which is crucial, which appears in Lowry's letter to the editor: The protagonist, that is to say the Consul, lives in the *Qlippoth*, the lowest and darkest region of Creation, replete with shells which are imprisoning the divine sparks of light.

And what of the "miswriting in the communiqué"? What does the Kabballah say about life and creation? We all know the Biblical tale that God created the world in six days. But how did he achieve that?

In the foundational book of Kabballah, the Zohar (which means "splendour"), we read that God created the world while "writing signs onto the celestial sphere (Zohar I, 15 a)". Creation is writing. And an unhappy world is the result of a writing mistake. If we want to dig further we'll find a passage in Midrash Rabbah (1,1), a rabbinical homiletical writing, where the Torah (Jewish Law) is depicted as the original blue-print of the universe. God had just to apply it. But what, if the Torah contains just one single writing mistake? The results would be frightening. And they are.

To be sure one single metaphor may not cause us to jump to conclusions. We must look for corroborating passages. And there are other passages, indeed, in the same book, where life and writing coincide, such as in the depiction of butterflies as love letters. However, there is one passage which appears to corroborate interpretation which I propose in an unassailable way:

At the end of the novel the Consul visits a brothel out of despair, because his wife (Yvonne) did not show up (which is not astonishing since he preferred the bottle to her embraces in the same afternoon). On the square he saw a corporal sitting at a table writing.

And I quote: "The corporal was still writing at his table; it oddly reassured him." (p. 443).

When the Consul left the brothel, the corporal was still there, sitting at his table, but he was no longer writing (p. 457). Suddenly the consul was surrounded by three fascist agents who believe they have identified him as a Jewish spy. They shoot him and throw his body into an abyss.

The corporal, who has not the slightest function in the narrative, writes the consul's life. He stops writing and the Consul is dead. The Corporal's writing is a sort of continuous creation ("creatio continua").

And therefore, life is written, and a ruined life is miswritten. That's what the metaphor says.

And that's my point for today. The meaning of some metaphors can only be investigated through the retrieval of traditional metaphorical source-domains. In literary studies and in exegesis these metaphors may also signal the spiritual orientation of the author.

Not all metaphors are embodied or experientially grounded, because we all are heirs of a tradition.

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