

• Metaphor and Meaning

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MOST of us remember the metaphor as a kind of literary highball. It is a luxury whose ingredients are readily suspect. Its results, when we use it in moderation, are pleasant enough, but when we are "under the influence," they become offensive. And with metaphors, as with drinks, one warning must be observed: Don't mix them.

The books are positive about that. Moreover, the books all tell us that a metaphor is not a simile. And a simile is an expressed comparison, as when I say, "He had a jaw like a pump handle." But if I suppress the "like" and say that his jaw *was* a pump handle, I have used a metaphor. The books generally drop the matter there.

But metaphors are important, and all metaphors do not work so simply. *The candidate was moving the pump handle up and down fast enough, but he was pumping only air. The pump needed priming.* We still have a metaphor in the implied comparison between the pump handle and the jaw, but the jaw, pump-fashion, has disappeared. "Pump handle" has taken over the work of the other word entirely. With this fact in mind Quintilian long ago noted that a metaphor is a kind of trope; that is, it is the shifting of the meaning of a word from one thing to something else. A metaphor can be understood, then, as an expression employing a word in a transferred sense by means of some comparison—transference being a good literal rendering of the Greek *metaphora*, or the Latin rhetoricians' term for the same thing, *translatio*.

The twisting of a word from one meaning to another presents no particular difficulty to us in ordinary conversation. It is characteristic of words to act this way and we are used to

such behavior. Indeed, it would be impossible for us to use language if words did not lend themselves easily and naturally to a shift in meaning, as is readily seen if we only examine the processes whereby meanings are ordinarily attached to words.

The study of meaning introduces a puzzling problem. It is one thing to attach a concept to a word by a kind of agreement with oneself, but it is quite another thing to make known to others what this concept is. How can this be done? The concept cannot be hauled out and exhibited. The problem is one of communication, a special problem not to be solved simply by looking to the origin of ideas or to the word merely as an arbitrary sign.

The first step in our solution may well be to examine how an infant learns the meaning of a word like "man." The principle is one of pointing. Of course, the first pointing does not mean much, since in pointing at a man I may intend to call attention to him as white, or as tall, or may even be indicating his overcoat. The child has no way of deciding my meaning at first. One instance will not serve to differentiate which of the things in the manifold I refer to. But by subjecting the senses of the infant to a succession of men—white, brown, and black, tall and short, with and without overcoats—the common element in the whole aggregate begins to assert itself, and the meaning of the word "man" comes to be established for the child.

No shift here, it is true. But the process indicated is important. For it is to such a process that we must always come if we are pushed to say what we mean by any word whatsoever—we must point, and let our questioner make the connections himself. Any number of illus-

trations of this fact can be adduced. We speak of the "head" of a firm, hardly noticing the metaphor employed. What is the meaning here of the word "head"? Well, the head is the man who runs the firm. But here we are no better off. We have the word "runs" in a metaphorical sense. We must try again. He is the one who directs the business. And what does "direct" mean? Well, it means . . . to keep in a straight line. (This business seems to be established on a metaphorical basis. It probably distributes metaphorical dividends to metaphorical stockholders.) But what does "keep" mean? Keep? Why it means to hold, to . . . to hold tight, that's it. Like THIS (as we throttle the questioner).

Here we are back to a kind of pointing again. "Like THIS . . ." We start with a word that refers to something that we can somehow point to. There is no other way to start. We get into contact with others through the senses, and we cannot make their abstractions for them nor show them any of ours. After our initial pointing, the metaphorical shift begins. The "head" becomes the head of the board of directors, the head of a line, the head of a bed, the head of wheat, the head of a chapter, the head of one's profession, the head of water, the level head, the cool head, the head of land, the head of beer. Sometimes the word is shifted to something which is itself a material thing and could as easily have had its own proper name (the head of land); sometimes it involves elements not so material (the head of his profession); sometimes it indicates out-and-out spiritual faculties and habits (the level head).

Since all the things that we know come to us somehow through the senses, we could, by passing sensible things across the field of the senses proceed inductively to establish special terms for such things as the "head" of a business without adding another meaning to the original meaning of the word "head," and we could similarly establish even the meanings of

such words as "convertibility" and "inexhaustibility." But it would be almost physically impossible to name everything in this tedious fashion; hence we resort to short-cuts. Metaphor is one of the most convenient of these short-cuts, for if we use words which already mean *something*—"head" (in its first sense), *vertere* (to turn), *haurire* (to draw or pull)—for concepts which have not yet words of their own, we already have a clue to the meaning which we wish to express, a clue strong enough in most cases to enable the context in which the word finds itself to do the rest. For the fact that the new meaning is somehow like the old narrows the possibilities quite conveniently.

In affording a basis for communication, the ways in which metaphor works are devious, and this is no time to trace them out in detail. These ways are bristling with problems of analogy which would only be annoying. It will suffice to point out the importance and value of these routes over which words travel to new meanings. Of the living history of a word the dictionary can be only an imperfect record. It is the motionless chart of something in motion, or often in motion. Everyone knows this, but when we remember it we are likely to cast our eyes up to heaven and sigh. In the very act of admitting that word meanings are constantly shifting, we wish that they were not. There is something to be said for such a wish, but it is a good thing that there is no hope of its fulfilment. The mobility of meaning (which comes largely from metaphor) is thoroughly necessary if we want a language that is usable.

Those who cultivate philosophy and the sciences have learned to fear the shifting nature of words. They cannot be blamed for that. They have every right to shore up their meanings with all the definitions that they can muster. But the literary Philistine should remember that there are ways of using words other than scientific. The poet, for instance, takes words as he finds them. He will call a

spade a spade and not an agricultural instrument. But he does not leave them as he finds them. He works in sympathy with the sports writer who is trying hard to dodge the commonplace with his "pill" and "apple" and "pass snagger" and "shredded the opposing line." The poet, like the scientist, must accept the fact, but, unlike the scientist, he rejoices in it.

This fact is that the whole scaffolding of our language is constructed of multi-jointed timbers. The timbers come that way, and there is nothing we can do about it. Sometimes we must prop up the structure with definition (though the words in the definition are often as multi-jointed as those which they define, we muddle through somehow), but sometimes the structure functions better when we put in more joints. The Philistine may object, even demanding that we alter our present expression. This scaffolding business — "Tilly-vally, tilly-vally! What the good year!" as Dame Alice said to St. Thomas More. But we can ask the Philistine why he does not call a metaphor a "bo" and (say) fluoric acid "bu" and a rhinoceros maybe a "hunky-ba," instead of using words which mean a "with-carry," a "flowing sourness," and a "nose horn." If a rhinoceros is

a nose horn (note that we do not proceed in the Indian fashion to call him a "he-who-carry-horn-on-nose"—which is a poor way of doing it anyhow, because if you cut the horn off, no more rhinoceros!)—if your rhino is a nose-horn, I suppose the scaffolding will be allowed to stand. The scaffolding metaphor actually tells us more than if I had said, "Our language (a word which has a metaphorical derivation anyhow) is composed (metaphorical) of words with many significations (metaphorical word again)."

But the secret of the whole elaborate mechanism of communication involved in the initiation and transfer of meaning remains each one's own. For, if I am forced to explain and then to explain again my explanation, I come to the point where I can only point—that is all. For our conversation (not the origin of our concepts, please) is dependent on pointing, although, fortunately, we are generally corrected of this habit by our fond mothers when it has ceased to be useful and remains as an affectation. Nevertheless, if you push me to say what I mean, I must ultimately say THIS and THIS and THIS—until you find out for yourself.

