Metaphor is the dreamwork of language and, like all dreamwork, its interpretation reflects as much on the interpreter as on the originator. The interpretation of dreams requires collaboration between the dreamer and a waker, even if they are the same person; and the act of interpretation is itself a work of the imagination. So too understand a metaphor is as much a creative endeavour as making a metaphor, and as little guided by rules.

Donald Davidson

1. Introduction

Metaphor has been the subject of such rich and varied investigation that it may be asked why it is necessary to add yet another publication to this stock. Nevertheless, it is hoped that this study is something more than a re-telling of an old story, and that it will be found to direct attention to certain aspects of the subject which have not hitherto received the notice they deserve.

If metaphor is a transference from one domain to another, then, what counts as, or is perceived as, a metaphor will depend upon the categorical framework in terms of which we mark the conventional division of such things, since the notion of transference presupposes an initial mapping of some kind. In this context this means that meanings of words and sentences are transferred from one domain (the ‘literal’) to another (the ‘metaphorical’). It is tempting, of course, to try to formalize (as rules and principles) the relationship between these different domains in an effort to explain the meaning of metaphor, and this temptation to transcend the contextual sense-making activity or strategy is manifested and more or less obvious in different studies (from semantic to pragmatic ones) and lurks behind approaches that do not explicitly subscribe to a global theory of metaphor. This article tries to resist this temptation and describe acts of metaphorizing as instances of interpretation and contextualization.

The contested view of metaphor is discussed in reference to Samuel R. Levin’s, M. C. Beardsley’s, and J. Searle’s theories of metaphorical meaning.
In relation to these theories it is argued that the procedure of constructing a formalized metalanguage to deal with metaphorical meaning is misguided and does not satisfy the requirements of the procedure. My scepticism about the possibility of providing any rigorous theory that would supply a foolproof procedure for identifying metaphors (the ‘trigger’ hypothesis) or any rule-governed function for calculating the meaning of metaphors (the ‘calculation’ hypothesis) depends on the failure of the above mentioned theorists (and of many others) to provide convincing elaborations of these two hypotheses. Therefore, I try to outline a view on metaphor flexible enough to resist formalization, a view which emphasizes that metaphor is part of a dynamic, multi-dimensional process, and that describing metaphor involve describing processes of understanding and production, not of final, finite products. An argument is made against what I call the essentialist approach to metaphor, namely, the idea that a metaphor is a thing, an entity out there in discourse or text, which is reducible to its discrete units and parts. Thus, I am mainly concerned with understanding the way metaphor works in discourse, reducing the essentialist question about the nature of metaphor to the functionalist question of the process through which it is understood.

The majority of approaches to metaphor are consistent with the view that the meaning of a metaphor is not simply identical with or reducible to the meanings of its constitutive parts: metaphor, in order to be meaningful, requires some kind of active construal on the part of the reader. Although there are conflicting accounts as to the actual structure and procedure of construal (whether, for example, it is based on similarity, interaction of features, or other principles), the common position is that the meaning of metaphor is not directly available. But even if one agrees that construal is essential to metaphor, one can disagree with the different ways traditional theories of metaphor try to provide a frame of reference for this construal. Thus, my objections against semantic theories concern their approaches for dealing with this metaphorical meaning construal on the basis of senses of words and/or sentences, without incorporating factors outside this narrow (sentential) context. So, although the nature and structure of metaphor are inseparable from the sense-making process through which a text (a word, sentence, or discourse) is metaphorically understood, it is important to observe that this sense-making activity (both production and reception) is contextual, and, therefore, metaphorical meaning cannot be calculated on the basis of or be reduced to transcendental semantic features (the ‘fixed meaning’ fallacy).