

# A Radical Approach to Metonymy

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## *Abstract*

This paper makes three main claims. First, it points out that scholars involved in metonymy research do not make it sufficiently clear whether they espouse an essentialist position, whereby metonymy is taken to be a Platonic concept. This engenders conceptual and analytical inconsistencies. Second, it argues that scholars do not distinguish clearly between general cognitive abilities (Langacker's reference point ability) and their correlates in language. This obfuscates the importance of form in linguistic analysis. Third, adopting a radical stance akin to Croft's (2001), this paper claims that each "metonymic" example should be analysed in its own right by relying on a variety of parameters that do not necessarily cohere into clear-cut categories, not even prototype-based ones.

*Keywords:* metonymy, essentialism, reference point ability.

## **1. Introduction**

In Cognitive Linguistics, metonymy, as well as metaphor, is regarded not merely as a literary device but, rather, as a conceptual operation that is not restricted to language production and comprehension (see e.g. Lakoff 1987). Another mainstay in Cognitive Linguistics is that categorisation is unlikely to be Aristotelian: it may be impossible to provide a list of necessary and sufficient conditions for category membership. Thus, it may be difficult, if not impossible, to identify the boundaries of categories<sup>1</sup> such as metaphor and metonymy and/or to exclude some overlapping between them. Consequently, continuum – or prototype-based approaches to

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<sup>1</sup> I describe metonymy dynamically as a process and statically as a category or concept (see also Littlemore 2015: 123).

metonymy (and metaphor) have been proposed (see e.g. Barcelona 2011, Peirsman and Geeraerts 2006). However, even in prototype-based characterisations, analysts usually rely on the implicit, but not necessarily unquestionable, assumption that metonymy does exist as a category. In other words, although its structure may be non-Aristotelian, it is assumed that there exists a category “metonymy” whose nature can be “revealed” by identifying for instance more prototypical versus less prototypical members. I refer to this position as the Platonic or the essentialist position.<sup>2</sup>

Although entertained in some strands of Cognitive Linguistics, the radical position that categories may be constructions of the analyst is perhaps not very popular. After all, Cognitive Linguistics itself stresses the importance of our pattern-finding ability (see e.g. Tomasello 2003) and it is quite a small step from perceiving patterns to believing in their objective existence (see e.g. Lass 1992: 148). Within Cognitive Linguistics, in particular in the realm of syntactic argumentation, major proponents of the radical position are Croft and, to some extent, Langacker (see e.g. Langacker 2008). Croft (2001), for example, argues that grammatical categories are not primitives but are construction-specific.

In this paper I argue that metonymy should also not be treated as a basic unit of description. This is a position that, to the best of my knowledge, has never been made quite explicit before. I contend that, by assuming an essentialist position, researchers come up with contradictory claims as to its essence and often rely on arguments that are conceptually questionable. In more detail, I make three claims. First, essentialism should be avoided because it generates conceptual and analytical inconsistencies. Second, agreement as to what counts as a metonymy can only be reached at a very general level, namely when metonymy is used as a synonym for Langacker’s reference point ability (see e.g. Langacker 2009: 46). Third, each specific case should be evaluated in its own right on the basis of “parameters” that do not necessarily cohere into well-defined categories.

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<sup>2</sup> A clear illustration of this is, for example, Littlemore (2015: 194), who, whilst discussing possible future paths in metonymy research, writes that “[o]n a theoretical level, a first concern is that we are still not very good at defining and identifying [metonymy].”

I start by reproducing a very small selection of influential definitions of metonymy (Section 2). In Sections 3 and 4, I tackle the issue of the differences, if any, between metonymy, facetisation, and active zones. In Section 5, I briefly discuss the relation between form and metonymy. Finally, Section 6 draws the conclusions.

## 2. The definition of metonymy

Definitions of what is meant by metonymy abound. For reasons of space, it is impossible to overview even the most significant ones (see Bierwiazzonek 2013 and Littlemore 2015 for two concise attempts). I therefore select a couple which I take as representative of current thinking on the topic. I start with Bierwiazzonek's (2013) definition, as his recent book-length investigation of metonymy and his definition goes back to Kövecses and Radden's (1998) influential study. Bierwiazzonek defines metonymy as "a cognitive process in which one conceptual entity, the vehicle, provides mental access to another conceptual entity, the target, associated with it within the same integrated conceptualisation" (Bierwiazzonek 2013: 16).

Another leading scholar in metonymy research is Barcelona, who recently defined metonymy as "an asymmetric mapping of a conceptual domain, the source, onto another domain, the target. Source and target are in the same functional domain and are linked by a pragmatic function, so that the target is mentally activated" (Barcelona 2011: 52). Barcelona's definition is similar to Bierwiazzonek's, but highlights the asymmetric nature of metonymy in order to distinguish it from metaphor, which is regarded as a symmetric mapping. Barcelona's approach is interesting in its own right because it mixes Aristotelianism with prototypicality. Following Langacker's characterisation of categories such as subject and object as involving both schemas and prototypes<sup>3</sup> (see e.g. Langacker 2008: 363–382), Barcelona contends that his definition provides necessary and sufficient (i.e. Aristotelian) conditions for metonymy identification. His definition thus allows for the identification of purely schematic metonymies at the very least. On top of his

<sup>3</sup> Unlike Croft (2001), Langacker believes that a universal characterisation of these notions is possible.

schematic definition, Barcelona also distinguishes “simply typical” metonymies and “prototypical” metonymies (see e.g. Barcelona 2011: 50). Simply typical metonymies involve a target that is clearly distinct from the source (as in *WHOLE FOR PART*, *PART FOR WHOLE* and *PART FOR PART* metonymies), while prototypical metonymies are equated with referential metonymies. All Barcelona’s types are illustrated in the next section.

Also influential is Ruiz de Mendoza’s approach, which reduces all types of metonymy to part-whole relations. He claims that metonymy is “a cover term for two more basic cognitive operations, domain expansion and domain reduction” (Ruiz de Mendoza 2011: 119) and uses the term *source-in-target* metonymy for instances of domain expansion and the term *target-in-source* metonymy for instances of domain reduction. These are also further illustrated.

As is evident from the previous definitions, the focus in current Cognitive Linguistics research is on conceptual operations rather than the formal correlates of metonymy (an exception is, for example, Brdar and Brdar-Szabó 2014, to which I come back in Section 5). This very limited selection of definitions also shows that, with perhaps Ruiz de Mendoza’s exception, analysts assume that metonymy exists as a category, even though its precise characterisation may be a matter of debate. Further, as I argue, even positions such as Ruiz de Mendoza’s that could be seen as akin to the radical refutation of the essentialist position suffer from conceptual inconsistencies that render such approaches problematic.

### 3. Metonymy and facets

Despite definitional attempts such as those just reported, disagreement as to what examples are metonymic or not involves a variety of well-known cases. Let us consider the two sentences in (1):

- 1) a. This book is a history of Iraq.
- b. This book is very large.

Barcelona (2011) argues that both (1a) and (1b) are metonymic, while – as Barcelona himself points out – Ruiz de Mendoza (2000) would argue that only (1a) is and Croft (2002), who in fact uses *heavy* rather than *large* in (1b), that neither is. In essence, the

disagreement boils down to the notion of “secondary” (sub)domain. Some researchers claim that metonymy involves the activation or highlighting of a “secondary” (sub)domain. As “secondariness” is not part of Barcelona’s general definition, Barcelona regards both examples as metonymic because he argues that both satisfy his definition of metonymy. By contrast, Ruiz de Mendoza (2000) views “secondariness” as relevant to metonymic status and, as he claims that semantic content is a secondary domain for books vis-à-vis size, which is regarded as a primary domain, then only (1a) would count as metonymic in his approach. Finally, Croft views neither content nor size as secondary domains so that neither (1a) nor (1b) would be metonymic in his view.

Unfortunately, the intricacies do not end here. Barcelona (2011) concurs with Ruiz de Mendoza (2000) concerning the secondary nature of the content domain vis-à-vis size, the latter being regarded as primary by both. Consequently, Barcelona distinguishes (1a) from (1b) by claiming that (1b) is a “purely schematic metonymy” because it just satisfies his general definition, while (1a) is a “simply typical metonymy” because the target (the content) is “clearly distinct” (Barcelona 2011: 50) from the source (the physical book).

As this brief summary shows, the presupposition behind examples such as (1) is that metonymy can be defined unambiguously, that is, its reality can be “revealed” thanks to analytical rigour. At the same time, however, recourse is made to analyses that are questionable at best. In the case at hand, to claim that the content domain is secondary is not uncontroversial.

In fact, content and size could be regarded as two facets of the same conceptualisation, which is the case, for example, in Paradis (2004). Facetisation, or the highlighting, of a specific and intrinsic facet of a concept is of a specific and intrinsic facet of a concept is picked up by Geeraerts and Peirsman (2011) in connection with examples such as (2a) and (2b), the latter being obviously a variant of (1a).

- 2) a. The red shirts won the match.  
b. This book is utterly boring.

While (2a) is a typical illustration of what (probably) all scholars would deem a crystal-clear instance of (referential) metonymy – as the nominal *the red shirts* stands for (refers to) “the players in the red

shirts” – (2b) is not regarded as an instance of metonymy by Paradis (2004), who considers it an instance of facetisation instead: content is the facet of the concept BOOK that is accessed or highlighted in this example.

Geeraerts and Peirsman (2011), however, argue that facetisation cannot be distinguished from metonymy. In their view, any detectable differences between the two are not substantive. For example, (2a) and (2b) seem to differ under zeugma (*\*The red shirts won the match and had to be cleaned thoroughly* vs. *This book is thick as well as boring*), but Geeraerts and Peirsman (2011) claim that this difference is related to the fact that (2a) is a source-in-target metonymy (i.e. it involves domain expansion) while (2b), in their approach, is a target-in-source metonymy (i.e. it involves domain reduction). This may well be the case, but it should be observed that Geeraerts and Peirsman (2011) do not make much of the fact that (2a) involves a selectional conflict – the predicate *win* requires an animate subject so that the choice of *shirts* makes (2a) “literally” untrue – while (2b) does not. This is surprising because Geeraerts and Peirsman (2011) rely on selectional conflict to distinguish, for example, between metonymy and active zones (see the next section on this notion). Thus, it is not clear why selectional conflict may not also play a role in distinguishing metonymy from facetisation.

Not only is the relation between Ruiz de Mendoza’s two metonymy types and selectional conflict unclear, but the very essence of the distinction between source-in-target metonymy and target-in-source metonymy deserves further scrutiny. Consider (3) (see e.g. Herrero Ruiz 2011):

- 3) Wall Street is in crisis.

*Wall Street* is the source for the target BANKS/BANKING and (3) is categorised as a target-in-source metonymy in Ruiz de Mendoza’s approach. The crucial issue is: what is the evidence for this type of categorisation? Does *Wall Street* really contain the domain of banking (see also Langacker 1993 on the saliency of concrete over abstract) or is it the other way around (or neither)? The claim that (3) is an instance of target-in-source metonymy seems to be based on viewing the physical landscape of banks located on Wall Street (so that Wall Street “contains” the banks) as a representation of

domains in our mind. The relationship of physical containment does not, however, guarantee that our mental representation of the relation between source (*Wall Street*) and target (BANKS) is also one of containment and, specifically, one of target-in-source containment.

Clearly, if metonymy were to be defined independently of the notion of nesting of domains, such problems would not occur. In other words and more generally, even assuming that essentialism could be maintained, some of the analyses proposed to elucidate the nature of metonymy as a Platonic category are sometimes problematic because they are based on aprioristic statements, viz. the secondariness of the content domain in the case of books and the target-in-source classification of examples such as (3). In particular, the issue of facetisation does not go away, despite Geeraerts and Peirsman's (2011) best efforts to the contrary. Nor is the issue of the plausibility and cognitive reality of the distinction between source-in-target and target-in-source metonymy trivial.

Thus, even the analysis of a very limited number of examples has already led us into a definitional and conceptual quagmire that should alert us to the dangers of the essentialist presupposition. The discussion of another related notion, that of "active zone", illustrates the relevance of this point.

#### 4. Metonymy and active zones

The rather general definitions of metonymy usually proposed also pose challenging questions concerning sentences such as (4), from Langacker (1990: 190), which he discusses under the rubric of the profile/active zone discrepancy.

4) Your dog bit my cat.

Langacker points out that while the nominal expressions *your dog* and *my cat* profile whole entities, only a part of the dog and a part of the cat were involved in the biting event, namely the dog's teeth and, say, the cat's tail. Langacker calls *the dog's teeth* and *the cat's tail* active zones. These are the concepts that "participate directly in a given relation" (p. 190).

Langacker does not draw a clear distinction between active zones and metonymy (or facetisation, for that matter) as he views cases such as *I'm in the phone book* also as instances of the profile/active zone discrepancy, while other scholars argue against this analysis, see e.g. Bierwiazzonek (2013: 41-2). To be sure, examples such as (4) exhibit peculiar features. For example, the active zones in (4) can be named explicitly, alongside the profiled entities *your dog* and *my cat*, by means of oblique phrases (*The dog bit the cat on its tail with its sharp teeth*), which is considered unusual with “proper” metonymies (see Barcelona 2011: 32).

It is also important to observe that some researchers such as Ruiz de Mendoza (2011) claim that active zones, as well as facets, are “highlighted subdomains” (p.107), the difference between the two being that “facets are intrinsically secondary subdomains, while active zones can be either central or secondary” (p. 108). Again, we are stranded in a definitional and analytical quandary. We have seen that not all analysts agree on the existence of facets as an independent phenomenon from metonymy and, in Ruiz de Mendoza’s approach, not only are facets and active zones assumed to exist, but we are even provided with the suggestion that active zones and facets involve the highlighting of a subdomain. The claim that this is so with active zones, however, is disputed by Bierwiazzonek who points out that “good metonymies allow for straightforward, grammatical paraphrases, which is much harder for typical active zones”, cf. *The players in the red shirts won the match* vs. ??*The dog’s teeth bit my cat’s tail* (see Bierwiazzonek 2013: 43-44 and examples therein).

This lack of consensus seems symptomatic of the impossibility of elucidating the presumed Platonic nature of the categories under discussion. Similarly, attempts at unifying various concepts such as metonymy, active zones and facets obliterate important dimensions of variation. “Parameters” such as facetisation, selectional conflicts, degree of activation/highlighting of the alleged target, and paraphrasability of the alleged source should not be neglected. But it is unlikely that such parameters define clear-cut categories or even reflect categories (e.g. metonymy, facets, active zones) that are represented in our mind<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> The point I am making here is similar to the criticism levelled at taking prototype effects as indicative of cognitive representation (see Evans and Green 2006: 269 for a summary).



## 5. Metonymy and form

A recent debate in the journal *Cognitive Linguistics* (Brdar and Brdar-Szabó 2014, Janda 2014) centred around the analysis of morphological derivation as in the case of *baker*. Janda (2011) contends that *baker* should be analysed as a metonymy, *bake* being the metonymic source. Brdar and Brdar-Szabó vehemently reject this analysis. The thrust of their argument is that Janda's approach renders metonymy so encompassing that it becomes a vacuous concept. Brdar and Brdar-Szabó claim that Janda's approach confuses Langacker's reference point ability with metonymy proper. In their view, metonymy occurs only when the same form is used to access both the source and the target concepts. For example, the nominal *the red shirts* in (2a) is used to access both the source concept RED SHIRTS and the target concept PLAYERS IN RED SHIRTS, but this is obviously not the case with *baker* because *bake*, without the suffix *-er*, cannot be used to access the concept BAKER, for which the suffixed form *baker* is needed. It is worth remarking that Brdar and Brdar-Szabó's criticism of Janda could in fact be levelled at other approaches as well. For example, the lack of any reference to form in Barcelona's (2011) definition of metonymy may render a metonymic analysis of *baker* plausible in that approach as well.

Be that as it may, this issue cannot be settled because it all boils down to one's definition of metonymy. To be sure, all analysts would probably agree that whatever they mean by metonymy involves Langacker's reference point ability, but this very general level of analysis is where agreement probably ends. Controversies as to whether a specific example is an instance of metonymy or not say something about the importance of various "parameters" according to which an example can be analysed, not necessarily something about the presupposed Platonic category "metonymy". In particular, the relevance of contributions such as Brdar and Brdar-Szabó's (2014) resides in alerting researchers to the importance of form as one of the parameters involved.

## 6. Conclusions

In this paper, I have made three (related) claims. First, it is not clear in metonymy research whether analysts take metonymy as either

a Platonic concept – no matter what its nature (Aristotelian and/or prototypical) may be – or a useful fictional category set up by linguists. Thus, this paper is, at the very least, a plea for researchers to make it explicit whether they adhere to the essentialist view or not.

Second, the issue of essentialism is compounded by the continuing confusion between general cognitive abilities and their correlates in language. The existence of a general capacity for establishing connections (Langacker's reference-point ability) is beyond doubt. To label it, more or less explicitly, "metonymy" obfuscates the fact that linguists should also go back to focussing on form, not just content. Agreement as to what "metonymy" is can only be reached at a very general level, which is exactly the level of general cognitive abilities. Thus, this paper is also a plea for researchers to bring linguistic form back to the fore.

Third, notions such as highlighting intrinsicness in domains are well-known variables in metonymy studies. Crucially, my contention is that they cannot be used to define clear-cut categories (e.g. metonymy vs. facets vs. active zones) or even a prototypical structure for these categories. As in Croft's approach to syntactic argumentation, each specific case should be assessed in its own right. The best that we can do is highlight the different dimensions of variation that define an intricate network where labels such as metonymy vs. facets vs. active zones are, at best, reflections of our tendency towards categorisation but, probably, not much more than that. Future research should concentrate on trying to sketch this intricate network.

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