

# **'When is a metaphor not a metaphor? - An investigation into lexical characteristics of metaphoricity amongst uncertain cases'**

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## **Introduction**

This paper explores the ways in which language users make sense of metaphoricity when manifest in a variety of ways within the language. In order to do this, the research provides an analysis of the lexical characteristics of a set of keywords - *grew*, *cultivate*, *flame* - in a nineteenth century corpus occurring in potentially, but not clearly identified, metaphoric contexts. The analysis focuses on flexible patterns of meaning and the relationship between metaphor and other aspects of figurative language such as polysemy, metonymy and meronymy. The research follows a larger corpus-driven study which found differences in the lexical behaviour of clearly defined metaphoric and non-metaphoric instances of these items when looking at a large set of collocations, colligations, and semantic, pragmatic and textual associations (Patterson, 2017). These behaviours or patterns are consequently avoided by the non-metaphoric instances of that same item, in order to avoid ambiguity. In the case of more ambiguous or unclear cases of metaphor, this paper aims to determine if these patterns are still visible and the extent to which they signal metaphoricity. Evidence of such patterns would imply that lexical, grammatical, textual and pragmatic manifestations in language play an important role in distinguishing between subtleties in word senses and meanings, even in the case of less obvious metaphoricity. As a consequence, awareness of these behaviours or characteristics (or lexical primings) should be at the forefront of any lexical metaphor theory.

## **Research background and aims**

Research into lexical metaphor, within a range of disciplines, has provided well-documented evidence that calls for a rejection to the dichotomist stance. The introduction of corpus methods has, for instance, led to more usage-driven approaches, addressing the sociolinguistic and interpersonal contexts in which metaphors are used (Deignan & Semino, 2010; Deignan, Littlemore & Semino, 2013). This has led to an increase in research acknowledging varying levels of *conventionality*, *strength* and *salience* (Giora, 2003, Svanlund, 2007; Steen et al., 2010; Deignan, Littlemore & Semino, 2013). However, whilst deriving metaphoric data from corpora is by now well established within the field (for example Partington, 1998; Deignan, 2005, Koller, 2006), its premise of focusing on

repetitive patterns of use means that some cases of metaphoricity are often ignored. Corpus studies concentrate solely on metaphors at either end of a frequency cline. These are the often-repeated, conventional instances (those that conform to the pattern), or the novel and highly creative ones (those that exploit the pattern). In such studies, little focus is placed on the problematic instances, or the types of language of which readers remain unsure or hesitant to clearly identify or label.

The intention of this paper is to focus on levels of metaphoricity in corpus data, not from the notions of *originality* or *conventionality*, but instead from the individual language user and their interaction with individual, problematic instances of metaphor within a given context. The aim is to highlight the importance of lexical, grammatical, textual and pragmatic manifestations of meaning and their role in distinguishing between subtleties in word senses and uses. The hypothesis is that these subtle relationships, such as the collocates a word has in a given use, its grammatical constructions and its pragmatic effects, all help us to determine which sense of a word is being meant in a given context. Furthermore, it argues that this can be extended to ambiguous forms of language, where a distinction between word senses is not clearly defined.

Previous research has documented that a metaphor's ability to violate or bend the limits of linguistic conventions (semantically, lexically, grammatically), provides it with its freedom in language (Deignan, 2005; Philip, 2011; Patterson, 2016; Patterson, 2017). Moreover, the flexibility of figurative language is what gives it its pervasiveness in everyday communication: we are able to manipulate it so well to our own needs. This study aims to investigate the extent of the 'fuziness' around the unsure or problematic cases in order to determine if creative language is as unrestrictive as it claims it to be. The research aims can be formed as follows:

1. Do any of these problematic instances of metaphor share any defining lexical features?
2. What do the results tell us about where metaphoricity exists in the language?
3. What does this mean for our understanding of metaphor?

## **Methodology**

The corpus consists of texts written by English authors between 1800 and 1899. In total, there are 416 texts with a running token size of 45,480,658. WordSmith5 (Scott, 2009) was used to extract the three chosen words for this study from the corpus. An initial Keyword search identified words of unusually high frequency in the nineteenth century corpus in comparison with a more general and contemporary comparator corpus (the BNC\_W). The lexical item approach is the same as the one taken by Lindquist and Levin (2008), and the opposite of the standard approach of many studies on metaphor, "which tend to start from a particular semantic field" (Lindquist and Levin, 2008: 145). This allows for an exploration of all possible uses of an item in a variety of behaviours

and does not single out a particular type of metaphor, based on a single feature or characteristic. Moreover, it accounts for phraseological manifestations of meaning and possible idiomatic uses. Where a key item is singled out methodologically, the analysis will be exhaustive of all the item's occurrences and more importantly, will concern co-textual as well as contextual and text-linguistic features. Each item will be studied primarily within the framework of its concordance line.

The chosen keywords were passed on to a group of raters who identified their use (within their given concordance line) as either *metaphoric*, *non-metaphoric*, or *unsure*. The aim was to acquire two clear-cut groups of metaphors and non-metaphors whose items have all been unanimously decided on, to reduce subjectivity. If raters came to different decisions about instances, these instances were automatically placed in the middle group. This middle group is the focus of this study. The items and their corresponding concordance lines in this unsure, middle group were turned into a mini-corpus for this investigation.

Examples of such *unsure* metaphors include references that are potentially ambiguous:

(1) There was a road there once, perhaps, when Cundinamarca was a civilized and *cultivated* kingdom.

In this example, it is unclear if the instance refers to the physical landscape within the kingdom, or the abstract whole, in which case the meaning would be metaphoric. Other instances are potentially metonymic:

(2) new centres of population *grew up* at a distance from the original village

Here the use of the lexical item *grew up* rather than *grew*, implies a maturing associated with the individuals rather than the physical population size. Other instances are potentially polysemous:

(3) The old gentleman *grew* infirm.

In this example, as with many others, *grew* can be interchanged with *became*. There are also highly conventional metaphors in this middle group:

(4) the shrieks of death that wildly broke through devouring *flame* and smothering smoke.

In this example the decision on metaphoricity rests on the extent to which a flame can *devour* something. This raises questions relating to animacy and animate adjectives in particular, which are commonly associated with a flame, such as *consuming* and *raging*.

## Analysis and results

Unclear or potentially metaphoric instances of the keywords *grew*, *cultivate* and *flame* together with their concordance lines, form three separate sub-corpora. These are then analysed, quantitatively and qualitatively, for evidence of lexical characteristics. The results show the item to behave along a cline of metaphoric behaviour, integrating word senses such as polysemy and metonymy. In this sense, the research works outwards from the language user, in the true sense of corpus-based studies, and draws conclusions both lexically and cognitively, from the individual instances of language. The findings are also compared and contrasted to contemporary and spoken corpora to determine if these patterns of use of dependent on the the time period and text type of the corpus.

The study shows that lexical characteristics were found to be present amongst sets of instances: a finding which has implications on our notion of a metaphoric cline. Whilst metaphoric language remains creative to some extent, identification at the level of the lexis or beyond suggests all types of metaphor to be more formulaic than previously thought. The finding also suggests that metaphoricity can be identified through the presence or absence of lexicogrammatical markers. This impacts on both theories of metaphor identification and metaphor understanding.

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