

Live, Moribund, and Dead Metaphors

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The term ‘dead metaphor’ is an established one, and it denotes vocabulary items that have lost their metaphorical character. The question is however what this means more exactly. In other words: how can members of this category be identified, and distinguished especially from uses that potentially retain their metaphorical quality, even if it is ordinarily not so obvious? The latter can be termed ‘dying’ or ‘moribund metaphors’, and the main aim of this article is to establish how they are different from dead metaphors. Moreover, both dead metaphors and moribund ones are different from ‘live metaphors’, and a further, more general aim is to analyse and describe what definitional characteristics prototypical examples of each of these three categories exhibit, and how they are different from each other.

A natural starting-point in this analysis is how “fully alive” metaphors are constructed and understood. Using the terminology of cognitive semantics, we can describe a live metaphor as a use whose understanding is necessarily dependent on a source meaning, which is usually literal and concrete. More specifically, this exploited source meaning has been metaphorically extended to cover something that is perceived both as similar to and different from its basic denotata. Only some characteristics in the source are used in the metaphor, or mapped on to the target reading, while others are suppressed. Quite generally speaking, some or even many characteristics that are not part of a metaphor can be central ones in its source, and they are also commonly concrete and factually descriptive. More peripheral characteristics, often more abstract or emotive ones, can instead be in focus in the metaphor. To illustrate this we can take the phrase *little vixen* used as a metaphor about a woman or a girl. A large amount of physical characteristics of real vixens are then disregarded, as the metaphor will be taken to highlight behavioural and psychological qualities in a human female that are considered typical of vixens, as well as attitudes towards them, such as being sly or cunning or sexually seductive—even if these may rather be cultural constructs than recurring traits in real female foxes.

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A regular property of metaphors is that they have more general meanings, or fewer distinguishing characteristics than their source senses. This means that in a live metaphor the relation between the target and its source is analogous to that between a superordinate and (one of) its hyponyms. This is why I have described this semantic relation as a kind of fake hyponymy. The difference between actual hyponymy and metaphorisation is, firstly, that the relation between a superordinate and a hyponym, say horse and mare, ordinarily holds between two different lexical items, while a metaphorical target and its source have the same expression side. In addition, a prototypical hyponymic relation is factual, while a metaphorical meaning extension is based on merely perceived or imaginative similarity. (Alm-Arvius 2003: 20–23, 103f)

In the following example from a web page sunshine and rain have incidental metaphorical meanings, even if they can hardly be said to be quite unique nonce uses. At any rate, these uses are not entrenched or generally shared parts of the vocabulary of English. Consequently, they are dependent on the literal source senses of sunshine and rain respectively, because we cannot attempt to understand what they mean without comparing and contrasting them with the literal senses of these nouns. Significantly enough, these instances of sunshine and rain are also interpretatively more open than lexicalised senses of most lexemes or (sets of) word forms.

(1) His laugh was sunshine and his tears were rain. (Michael Mueller web page)

All incidental metaphors are fully alive, as they must be interpreted in relation to the source meanings that they have extended and generalised in an imaginative way. However, there are also a very large number of lexicalised senses of items in natural languages, for instance standard English. Importantly enough, lexicalisation does not just mean that a particular use has become a conventional part of a language system. It also means that a secondary sense has acquired sense relations within the language, and that it will be connected with certain idiomatic constructions. As a result, a lexicalised metaphor tends not to be strictly dependent on its source sense. Instead it is now itself stored in the vocabulary of a language, and directly associated with both particular lexical and grammatical characteristics. The following examples from the *British National Corpus* illustrate such lexicalised polysemous relations in English. The first sentence in each of these three pairs is at least

basically or originally metaphorical, and in the other one the literal, more specific sense is exemplified. The last pair of sentences also exemplifies a metaphorical transfer that denotes a concrete type of object.

- (2) a) “He’s had a cold, hard life and it’s made him cold and hard,”
Hezibah said. (BNC, EFJ 1970) (more abstract impressions)
- b) As he groped his way under his seat, seeking somewhere to stow the paper, his fingers met something cold and hard and sharp. (BNC, ASS 475) (concrete sense of touch sensations)
- (3) a) At the very least, he would have to reckon on the 21 votes in the Cabinet being stacked up against him. (BNC, A5K 331)
(more abstract impressions)
- b) I’d take a stool, stack up coins as high as they’d go, and have the barman bring me a two-bit shot every couple of minutes, removing the price himself, until the tower was gone. (BNC, GVL 2262) (concrete, directly perceptible scenario and activities)
- (4) a) You click on to the icons with a mouse to go from the word processor to a spreadsheet or to send a fax. (BNC, AHT 768) (concrete inanimate gadget)
- b) The little mouse which had run so fast and so far would now sit still in its corner. (BNC, APM 2420) (concrete living creature and its activities)

But even if lexicalisation is a necessary condition for metaphor death, it is not a sufficient one. Instead it is obvious that as long as a use retains a polysemous relation with its source, it can be “revived”; that is, its metaphorical character is at least obvious on closer scrutiny, or when this secondary use is compared to a more basic application of a lexical word or multi-word idiomatic expression. In short, such lexical uses are at the most moribund.

As the examples below illustrate, the metaphorical character of a use need not be obscured even in cases where a once secondary type of metaphorical meaning has become the only generally used one. Three well-known synchronic English dictionaries—Macmillan (2002), Collins Cobuild (1995) and Longman (1995)—only list metaphorical uses of the compound melting pot, given below in a couple of examples from the British National Corpus, although this is obviously a now faded or moribund metaphor usage rather than a kind of literal meaning.

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- (5) Ethnic segregation and ethnic inter marriage [*sic*]: the new American melting pot (*BNC*, HJ1 19839)
- (6) They have struggled since and the promotion battle is now in the melting pot. (*BNC*, K4T 3145)

By comparison, the basic and literal sense of *melting-pot* (spelt with a hyphen) is included in the entry in *COD* (1990), and this is presumably because this dictionary is not just synchronically oriented, since it also gives etymologies of the lexemes it includes. According to *COD* the literal sense of *melting-pot* is “a pot in which metals etc. are melted and mixed”. But even language users who are not familiar with this literal meaning will see that the *melting pot* sense in the examples above is metaphorical, at least if they reflect upon its semantic build-up, because the literal senses of the two free morphemes in this compound, *melt* and *pot*, are also part of the vocabulary of general standard English.

We have now looked at live and moribund metaphors, and we should turn to dead metaphors like *pedigree* or *daisy*. Although the primary senses of these lexemes are not metaphorical in Modern English, we learn that they originate from such constructions when we look at their etymology. In short, a dead metaphor like either of these is no longer connected with a more basic source meaning. Instead it has become ‘literalised’, and its metaphorical origin is only revealed if we look at its history, or etymology. Literalisation of metaphors comes about in at least three different ways.

- The first type of literalisation occurs when the source sense of a use has stopped being part of the vocabulary of most or all users of the language. But it is not so easy to find examples of this, which indicates that the polysemous relation between a secondary metaphorical use and a literal source meaning tends to be quite tenacious.¹ The adjective *silly* may be an example of a concealed transfer of meaning of this kind, because in Old English it meant ‘happy’ or ‘blessed’.² (*Oxford Etymology* 1966)

The Swedish noun *lintott*, which is now used especially about children

¹ Even if metonymic shifts will seem less obviously figurative in the first stage, there are far more examples of them breaking loose from their source. E.g. *Bachelor of Arts*, *CD film*, *electric iron*, *electronically published paper*, *glass marbles*, *cabinet meeting*, *plastic glass*.

² This example was suggested to me by Professor Nils-Lennart Johannesson.

with very blond hair, is however an indisputable example of literalisation. Its source meaning was once ‘tuft of flax’, but it is no longer part of the general vocabulary of Swedish. So the literal sense of *lintott* is now ‘child with blond/whitish hair’, even if the Swedish word for *flax* is *lin* and *tott* means *tuft*. The reason for this is no doubt that few people are now acquainted with the different stages of the production of linen. However, when the etymology of *lintott* is pointed out to speakers of Swedish, they see that it was once a transparent compound. (Alm-Arvius 2003: 46)

- Literalisation can also be a consequence of the merging of the different parts of a compound both at the phonological and the semantic level. *Daisy* is such an *obscured compound*, because in Old English it was composed of two elements that meant ‘day’s eye’ (COD 1990).
- Finally, borrowing a word which has a metaphorical meaning in the contributing language typically results in literalisation in the recipient language. A well-known example is *pedigree*, which appears to have originated from a metaphorical use of the French *ped de gris*, meaning literally ‘foot of a grouse’ (Lakoff & Johnson 1999: 124), or Middle English *pedegru* from Old French *pie de grue*, meaning ‘crane’s foot’ (COD 1990).

The following set of comparatively recent loans from English in Swedish also exemplifies how the metaphorical connection to a source is lost in lexical borrowing. *Bug* and *buggar* (singular and plural) are now used in Swedish about errors in computer programs, and *buggning* is a term for secretly listening to people by means of an electronic device. Significantly enough, users of Swedish do not experience these loans as metaphorically based, not even if their English proficiency is quite high. (Alm-Arvius 1990)

There is thus a cline from live metaphors, which directly and transparently connect to a source meaning, over moribund metaphors, which are so entrenched in a language that they need not be interpreted in relation to their still existent source sense, to dead metaphors, which are no longer connected with their original source reading. The difference between dead metaphors and merely moribund ones is thus that the latter

retain a polysemous connection with some source contents, while this historical semantic link has been erased in dead metaphors.³

Live metaphor . . . moribund metaphor . . . dead metaphor

Lexicalisation is often mentioned as the reason for metaphor death, but things seem in fact to be far more complex. Both moribund and dead metaphors are entrenched parts of a language system, but it is arguable that also lexicalised uses, for instance many idiomatic expressions, can be live or transparent metaphors.

- (7) Hopes of a title hat-trick hang by a thread, but all is not quite lost. (*BNC*, A1N 298)
- (8) For a while there I thought we were going to be up the creek Without a paddle. (*BNC*, HGT 2712)
- (9) The wheel had come full circle since the heady days of expansion after the Robbins Report in 1963. (*BNC*, A66 1239)

In addition, also highly proficient native speakers of a language may sometimes differ as regards their interpretation of metaphors. Although a use may, say, be a moribund metaphor to one individual, someone else may tend to experience it as a live or transparent metaphor. In addition, the metaphorical character of a lexicalised use may be more obvious in certain contexts than others. For instance punning can clearly highlight the metaphorical character of items, and the combination of a number of

³ *Dormant metaphor* and *inactive metaphor* are synonyms of moribund metaphor, and *active metaphor* is a synonym of live metaphor. I prefer however the three terms used above in the main text, because they form a set of naturally contrastive labels of basically metaphorical terms drawing on the same fundamental experiential domain, that of life, dying and death. In addition, it should be clear that I do not use moribund or dying metaphor derogatorily as Orwell seems to have done in his criticism of clichés in political language. (Cf. *Wikipedia*, Metaphors; Goatly 1997: 31–35, 311–322)

metaphorical meanings in an expanded metaphor may also make their figurative status more evident.

- (10) Okay, the book is thick, but so are most of these readers.
- (11) The baker's wife said to her husband: "Just hand me the dough."
- (12) Out of the melting pot, into the mint (*BNC*, FBG 1595)
- (13) ... and they are books which appear to thrive on being seen through – on the transparency of their suggestion that tyrannies, that sycophancy, conspiracy and repression, courts and courtiers, are all on the royal right, and in the bush, and running into the sand. (*BNC*, A05 849)
- (14) Seen through the disapproving eyes of respectable citizens they were nothing but a disorderly and disorganised rabble, dropouts from the social ladder. (*BNC*, A6D 723)

So, all in all, it is reasonable to assume that the categories of live and moribund metaphors overlap in a fluctuating or flexible way, and the same may be true of the categories of moribund and dead metaphors.

Summing up, we can say that even if lexicalisation is a necessary condition both for moribund metaphors and for dead metaphors, only the loss of the connection with a historical source meaning is a sufficient condition for labelling a particular item in a language a dead metaphor.

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