

Fig. leaves.
Metaphor in dictionaries

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Lexicographers are not too sure what to do with metaphor. It makes us nervous. No consensus has built up over the place it should be accorded in the description of language, which suggests that it does not fit very well into the theoretical framework that lexicographers traditionally seek to apply to language.

It is a problem encountered across a wide spectrum of dictionaries of all languages, but I want to look particularly at English dictionaries. The standard American dictionaries tend not to refer specifically to metaphor; every word and meaning in them must qualify for entry on strict denotative grounds or it gets left out altogether. And when you look at the confusion caused by metaphor in British dictionaries, you begin to see some wisdom in their caution.

The note 'fig.' is scattered liberally about the pages of many Oxford and Chambers dictionaries, but it is hard to discern any system behind its use. Most often it is used as a label for a given definition, generally, but not always, following a corresponding 'literal' one from which the metaphor has been transferred, like this one for *button up* in the CONCISE OXFORD DICTIONARY (COD):

button (up) fasten with buttons, (fig.) complete satisfactorily

But the number of *precisely* parallel cases, of literal followed by figurative, where the label 'fig.' is not used, is far greater, and one is at a loss to understand the lexicographer's reason for applying it or withholding it. Certainly the principle is nowhere explained in any introductory material, not even in the copious 'General Explanations' to the OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY (which incidentally also uses the note 'transf.', for transferred meaning, without ever making explicit its differentiation from 'fig.'). In practice, 'fig.' just seems to be inserted whenever it occurs to the lexicographer to do so.

There are some interesting pointers, though, in these dictionaries to the use of a 'fig.' label in a more positive role. Both Oxford and Chambers use the device of a definition followed by the note 'lit. or fig.' Oxford (COD) seems to restrict it to single-synonym definitions:

burden load (lit. or fig.)
cage prison (lit. or fig.)

but Chambers (CHAMBERS CONCISE 20TH CENTURY DICTIONARY) uses it also for full analytical definitions:

go far to go a long way (*lit. and fig.*): to achieve success

A parallel device used by Chambers is 'also fig.' following a literal definition:

grapple to contend in a fight (also *fig.*)

shoot-out a gunfight, esp. to the death or other decisive conclusion (also *fig.*)

Here, the lexicographer is explicitly relying on the user to make the connection between literal and metaphorical meaning. And the gap to be bridged varies in width: 'go a long way' already carries its own freight of figurative connotations, but to metaphoricize 'gunfight' requires something of a leap of the imagination.

I have not yet mentioned Collins and Longman dictionaries because since they follow the American system, most of them do not use the label 'fig.' The one exception is Longman ELT dictionaries, where it is used in a somewhat different way from Chambers and Oxford. And its use is even explained, in the introduction to the LONGMAN DICTIONARY OF CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH (DCE) p. xxvi:

Sometimes a word can be used, with the same meaning and in the same pattern, both for things in the real world and also for things in the mind that cannot be seen or touched. When this happens, the 2 are treated together as 1 meaning, and not as 2 separate uses. An example of figurative use is marked (*fig.*):

fat *adj* 3 thick and well-filled: *a fat book*/ (*fig.*) *a fat bank account*

Here the book and the bank account are *fat* in the same way, though it is only the fatness of the book that can be measured in inches.

This usefully lays down the ground rules for 'fig.' as being in lexicographic terms much more circumscribed than metaphor in general: we are dealing strictly with metaphoric transfer from concrete to abstract. And from this outline we can see that the DCE approach is very close to Oxford and Chambers in that it dispenses with a fully-fledged figurative definition; but it *differs* in offering an illustrative example as a bridge between the concrete and the abstract.

Models of metaphor

So much for what dictionaries actually do. Does this rather motley assortment of treatments offer any pointers to how metaphor could be handled more consistently, and usefully? Certainly the various styles have this in common, that they expect the dictionary user to be well able to cope with metaphoric transfer. And quite reasonably so. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have persuasively argued, metaphor is part of the very fabric of language, and we all use it, interpret it, create it every day. But the problem with this for lexicographers is that the possibilities it presents us with are infinite. Every word in a language is potentially a metaphorical Spaghetti Junction, and dictionaries have to provide signposts to tell the user which of the possible exits have actually been taken by the language. The mouth, for example, among many other attributes, possesses the salient features of being used for eating and speaking. In principle, either could have been

taken as the basis of a metaphor. It just so happens that someone who has a 'big mouth' talks a lot and lets out secrets; but they could equally well have been someone who eats a lot, and clearly any dictionary that simply followed a literal definition of *mouth* with the bald note 'fig.' would be quite useless.

At one end of the scale we have the fact that according to Lyons (1977), many speakers of English are able to quite confidently find a conceptual link between 'ear' used for hearing and 'ear' of corn sufficient to account for a metaphorical transfer from one to the other, even though in fact they are completely unrelated etymologically. And at the other we have the fact that for example a 'buff' (= enthusiast), as in 'film buff', is a metaphorical transfer from 'buff' the colour, but by a route so obscure that no one who did not know of it would ever guess it existed. Somewhere between these two, pseudometaphor on the one hand and dead metaphor on the other, lies the area that we as lexicographers have to cater for more sensitively than we have in the past.

In considering how we might go about this, the model for metaphorical transfer I shall be using is based on prototype theory. Any given word possesses certain prototypical features of meaning. Not all of these features are of equal importance. They form a structured system, so that some are given more weighting than others. When a metaphorical transfer occurs, the prototypical features of the word being used metaphorically are mapped onto those of another in such a way that those which do not match, typically the *more heavily weighted* ones, are discarded, and light ones come to the surface. I can illustrate this with a couple of lines of dialogue taken from a feature film. The first is: "We're a couple of mules," spoken by a woman to a male friend. The viewer is in possession of the information that the *we* referred to are plus human, so in interpreting the metaphor he or she can suppress the more heavily weighted prototypical features of mules, such as that they are minus human, have four legs, belong to the genus *Equus*, are the offspring of a donkey and a horse, etc., and call up a secondary feature, stubbornness. And this interpretation is indeed confirmed by the situation in the film. The second line is: "I'm deaf and blind," spoken by a woman in an apartment block answering the door to someone anxious to escape from the scene of a crime. It may take the viewer a couple of seconds to realize that the fact that she responded to the knock on the door invalidates the weightiest feature of *deaf*, 'unable to hear', and calls up a secondary feature, 'unwilling to hear', and therefore get involved.

Clearly, when the feature or features that gave rise to the metaphor no longer apply to the literal meaning, the metaphor is dead, and can safely be entered in a dictionary as a separate sense. It is no longer semantically productive, so there is no point in doing anything else with it. The only drawback to this neat dichotomy is that precise identification of the moment of death is no easier for metaphors than it is for people. And it is complicated by some inevitable backward reinforcement in commoner metaphors. For example, it is so usual to refer to people as asses that the notion of stupidity feeds back to the animals, even though

they are no longer part of our common daily experience and would probably have lost that reputation if left to their own devices.

But putting dead metaphors to one side, we are left with live ones, which for the lexicographer can be divided into two types: the type in which the prototypical features involved in the transfer, or 'stereotypes', to use Bosch's terminology (1984), *are* part of the analytic information that must be present in a definition to distinguish the definiendum from possible synonyms; and the type in which they are not.

Some practical solutions

The case of metaphors based on defining stereotypes is the one which lexicographers have always been reasonably happy about labelling 'fig.' It is inescapably part of the definition of *tier*, for example, that it is one of a number of rows of seats, etc. that rise one above the other, and this notion of rising one above the other is adopted in the application of tiers to abstractions, such as government. But metaphors based on nondefining stereotypes are usually treated as separate senses, because on the whole lexicographers rigidly exclude from their definitions any semantic features that are not strictly denotative: one cannot handle the metaphorical use of *mule* as 'stubborn person' as a figurative transfer unless one gives the *nondefining* information that such animals tend to be thought of as obstinate.

This approach often leaves the lexicographer with the considerable difficulty of deciding whether metaphor still bounded by such hedges and qualifiers as 'a real', 'literally', or 'something of a' (for example, the metaphorical use of *bachelor*) should be entered as a separate sense (see Ayto 1983). But much more important, in my view, the distinction in treatment for defining and nondefining stereotypes stands in the way of giving accurate, flexible, meaningful descriptions of language, and should be abandoned in favour of an approach that gives *all* stereotypical features of a word their due in a definition.

There are of course problems to be faced up to in actually constructing dictionary entries along these lines. I have already mentioned the difficulty of diagnosing a dead metaphor. But perhaps even more tricky is the actual identification of those often low-weighted prototypical features that lend themselves to metaphor. Lexicographers are used to hunting down new words and concrete meanings, but the search techniques applied to large corpora may not be appropriate for such elusive quarry as potential metaphor. A possible avenue to explore would be experimentation with elicitation techniques. Word association tests could provide valuable pointers. This is a list of the top fifty responses to the word *sheep*, quoted in Postman and Keppel (1970), and I have highlighted the ones that link in with the connotations of *sheep*, as opposed to its more heavily-weighted stereotypic features:

| | | | | |
|----------|--------|--------|---------|--------|
| wool | baa | field | meadow | people |
| lamb | cattle | meat | ranch | skin |
| animal | count | grass | shorn | staff |
| mutton | farm | shear | soft | stray |
| goat | sleep | eat | woolly | wolf |
| dog | flock | fleece | boy | [meek] |
| herd | white | fold | bull | |
| black | fence | follow | calf | |
| pasture | ewe | good | graze | |
| cow | herder | fur | hair | |
| shepherd | dip | horse | lanolin | |

The final word, *meek*, is not actually in the top fifty responses, but illustrates that suggestive material can be gleaned even from relatively rare responses.

Let me finish by giving a possible example of how a dictionary entry catering for metaphorical information might look (*cat* is chosen because it is particularly rich in metaphor and therefore offers a good range of types illustrating the general theme; most entries would not be nearly so long, and so the overall size of the resulting dictionary would not be greatly enlarged). This entry is indeed a semantic roundabout, and the signposts showing how potential metaphor has been actualized are illustrative examples:

cat 1 feline quadruped kept as a pet or for mouse-catching. Cats are often viewed as either soft and docile (see PUSSYCAT) or as aggressive, spiteful, and malicious (see also CATTY, WILDCAT); they are thought of as being very skilful at escaping danger or death, as being able to see well in the dark, and as being aloof and self-contained; they are thought of as moving lithely and gracefully, agilely, and often stealthily (see CAT BURGLAR); they are sometimes taken as a type of non-human understanding and intelligence:

The two girls have never got on; they're always fighting like cats / like cat and dog.

(fig.) *The silly cat* (= malicious woman) *is always criticizing them behind their backs.*

He's had more lives than the proverbial cat. (Cats are said to have nine lives)

The dancer moved with catlike grace.

It would have made a cat laugh. (= was very funny)

Of course it's French: even our cat knows that.

2 animal of the family Felidae

3 cat-o'-nine-tails

4 *slang* fellow [a dead metaphor]

The function of the note 'fig.' in the second example is simply to distinguish full metaphoric transfer from those that fall more into the category of simile, signalled by *as*, *like*, etc.

Some such approach as this is surely vital, particularly in the area of L2 lexicography, where crosscultural differences, subtle and not so subtle, are often not brought out in dictionaries as they should be (for example, to pursue the feline

theme, to call a woman a 'cat' in English invokes maliciousness, but in German the implication is of grace and agility¹). Current dictionaries might with justice be accused of giving their users only the tip of the linguistic iceberg. There is a vast submerged mass of actual and potential metaphor waiting to be explored and expounded; and it would find, I think, a ready usership among those who are prepared to venture a little below the surface of the language they are learning.

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¹ I am indebted to the editor for calling my attention to this.