

METAPHOR IN PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC DISCOURSE: IMPLICATIONS FOR UTTERANCE INTERPRETATION

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ABSTRACT

The difficulty we have in talking about feelings and emotions without making use of metaphorical language is often noted in discussions of metaphor within cognitive linguistics and it has led to interesting claims about how we conceptualise and think about emotions. Yet, these observations have had little impact so far on pragmatic theories of metaphor processing which typically work with more de-contextualised examples of language. This paper examines figurative expressions in two passages from attested psychotherapy exchanges where explicit use is made of metaphor for therapeutic purposes. The elaborated metaphorical utterances found in these transcripts of “emotion talk” are used to assess the explanatory adequacy of a current pragmatic theory, namely the “*ad hoc* concept” account of metaphor proposed within Relevance Theory. In line with Carston (2010), I argue that when interpreting these extended metaphors the literal meaning of the expressions in question is entertained and metarepresented as descriptive of an imaginative conception which represents the utterer’s attempt to understand his/her emotional experience. By focusing and reflecting on this metarepresented literal meaning, the client, together with the therapist, is able to draw out implications that can provide insights into his/her own feelings, reactions and behaviour. The use of psychotherapeutic discourse to support this line of argument confirms the need for pragmatic theories of metaphor to be supported by data from a range of discourses.

KEYWORDS: Metaphor; psychotherapy; emotion; relevance theory; *ad hoc* concept.

1. Introduction

Metaphor scholars are increasingly recognising the need to study metaphorical language as it is used, and to obtain real-life data from a range of discourse domains (Cameron et al. 2009). Such data has already revealed the diverse

communicative functions which metaphor can be used to perform, and in so doing has facilitated the development of more nuanced theory (Steen 2008). Many pragmatic theories of metaphor comprehension, however, continue to be grounded in artificially constructed examples which do not reflect the dynamic manner in which metaphorical language is produced. Authentic instances of metaphor in psychotherapeutic discourse are evidence of this interactional nature of metaphor construction. Not only can this new source of “real world” data provide evidence for the therapeutic function(s) of metaphor, but it can also be used to bear on current and emerging pragmatic theories of metaphor processing.

Psychotherapists have almost unanimously subscribed to the use of metaphor as a means of enhancing therapeutic ends (Lenrow 1966); indeed, metaphor is thought of by some therapists as “the bread and butter of what we do”.¹ In recent years, a growing number of models recommending serious, immersive consideration of metaphors have been formulated (Kopp 1995; Stott et al. 2010). These models of “metaphor therapy” typically adopt one of two approaches. Either they stipulate cases of generalised metaphors to be employed by the psychotherapist, which I call the prescriptive approach (Battino 2005; Stott et al. 2010), or they provide explicit instruction to the therapist, in the form of questioning techniques, seeking thereby to extend clients’ metaphorical articulations, which I call the reactive approach (Kopp 1995; Lawley and Tompkins 2000; Sullivan and Rees 2008). Both approaches to metaphorical language in psychotherapy agree that this figurative mode of expression is essential in the treatment of emotional distress. By creating a shared language between client and therapist, metaphor is said to contribute to the therapeutic alliance relied upon by many schools of practice (Pearce 1996). It is furthermore held in high regard with respect to generating novel perspectives and provoking insight, having been shown to facilitate problem solving (Pollio and Barlow 1975). Crucially, metaphorical utterances in psychotherapy are always worthy of deeply literal consideration since they are said to represent genuine experience and thought.

While linguists have long been interested in the relationship between metaphor and emotion, both pragmatic and philosophical accounts of metaphor comprehension have remained comparatively unengaged with theoretical developments in the field of psychotherapy and with actual psychotherapy practice. Thus far, research has largely focused on the underlying cognitive motivations

¹ Quote taken from an anonymous interview with a psychotherapist; carried out as part of this research project.

governing production of metaphorical language when talking about emotions and feelings (so-called “emotion talk”). A great deal of research has sought to establish the ways in which we conceptualise emotions, with dominant cognitive linguistic theory currently arguing that we can only reason about emotion concepts like “love”, “anger” and “fear” through metaphor (Kövecses 2000). Compelling as this hypothesis is, it offers little insight into the mechanisms by which we process and comprehend metaphorical language used to express emotions and feelings.

In this paper I shall examine the use of metaphor in psychotherapeutic discourse, looking closely at two elaborated instances of figurative speech. The aim of this work is to use these examples of metaphorical language to assess pragmatic theories of metaphor comprehension, just as others have used works of fiction and poetry. In particular, I will evaluate the *ad hoc* concept account of metaphor comprehension proposed within Relevance Theory (Carston 2002; Sperber and Wilson 2008; Wilson and Carston 2007). The relevance-theoretic framework deflates the somewhat elevated, special status that metaphor is often granted, suggesting instead that metaphor lies on a continuum with other loose uses of language, a continuum which ranges from literal uses of language, to approximation, hyperbole and metaphor. The term “loose uses of language” pertains to expressions which exhibit a gap between the encoded linguistic meaning and the meaning intended in a given context. To illustrate, consider the canonical example:

- (1) France is hexagonal.

The word *hexagonal* here is used loosely, in the sense that the intended meaning diverges from the strictly literal, linguistically encoded, sense of the word. In order to be understood, these loose uses of language require pragmatic adjustment of the lexically encoded meaning, a process which results in an *ad hoc* concept. While I concede that this approach offers an accurate depiction of how simpler or more accessible lexical and phrasal metaphors are understood, I argue in favour of an alternative account for many complex or developed metaphorical utterances such as those found in psychotherapeutic discourse. In line with Carston (2010) and other philosophers, I advocate a view on which greater weight is given to the literal meaning of the metaphorically used language in the comprehension procedure.

I begin this article by analysing two examples of metaphorical language which are attested cases from the domain of psychotherapy. Subsequently, in Section 3.1, I outline the standard relevance-theoretic account of metaphor

comprehension within lexical pragmatics, and assess its ability to cope with the aforementioned instances of metaphorical conversation. In Section 3.2, I present a range of alternative but related accounts of metaphor processing which I argue are better suited to the examples under discussion. Finally, Section 4 suggests various avenues for further research, primarily into the empirical validation of the alternative processing route that I advocate.

2. Metaphor in emotion talk: Case studies of psychotherapeutic discourse

Psychotherapy can be broadly defined as:

[...] the informed and planful application of techniques derived from established psychological principles [...] with the intention of assisting individuals to modify such personal characteristics as feelings, values, attitudes, and behaviours which are judged by the therapist to be maladaptive or maladjustive.

(Meltzoff and Kornreich 1970: 4, quoted in Tay 2013: 3.)

Techniques vary across different kinds of psychotherapy, yet all share a reliance on the verbal expression of feelings by the client and on the relationship between client and therapist. While the everyday notion of psychotherapy as the “talking cure” is apt to some extent, it is important to acknowledge that many psychotherapeutic schools of thought rely equally on aspects of non-verbal communication (Bateman et al. 2010). Through communicating we are said to undergo mental exploration of the self which aids us in understanding our feelings and behavioural motivations, in theory enabling us to resolve emotional distress and perhaps alter our behaviour.

Perhaps due to the “rich and disturbingly imaginative metaphoric articulations” generated spontaneously by clients (Pollio et al. 1977: 104), the topic of figurative language in this communicative domain has always intrigued both clinical psychologists and linguists (Lenrow 1966; Ferrara 1994). Nevertheless, it was not until more recently that practical frameworks instructing deliberate use of metaphor came into being (Kopp 1995; Lawley and Tompkins 2000; Sullivan and Rees 2008). These frameworks urge recognition of figurative articulations, and encourage therapists to affirm and develop non-literal language, aiding clients in the construction of personal “metaphor landscapes”.

The exchange below is taken from a transcript of Richard Kopp, one of the great proponents of “metaphor therapy” (Kopp 1995). Kopp’s framework sets out concrete stages for therapists and prescribes simple questioning techniques

which are designed to notice, validate and elaborate the metaphors spontaneously generated by clients. With its focus on client-generated metaphors, Kopp's "metaphor therapy" is very similar to the practice of Symbolic Modelling, which makes use of "Clean Language" (Lawley and Tompkins 2000; Sullivan and Rees 2008). Clean Language is a set of basic questions which, like Kopp's protocol, seeks to affirm and extend the metaphorical articulations of clients. The therapist's language is said to be "clean", as it avoids any metaphorical expression not already introduced by the client. Cleansing one's language in this way is thought to reduce the possibility of unintentionally influencing the client with unwarranted assumptions and interpretations. While the therapist's language is clean, the questions are designed to facilitate clients in developing their personal "metaphor landscapes", thereby making *their* speech markedly "dirty" and metaphoric. These client-focused approaches hold metaphor to be central to the process of change in psychotherapy. The client in the extract below is battling with bipolar illness, and during this session she attempts to express her experience of this mental illness.

- Client: Bipolar illness is like being a balloon. Sometimes the balloon is so full of air that it is about to burst, and sometimes there's no air in the balloon at all, it's limp and not pretty.
- Therapist: What does it feel like to be the balloon?
- Client: It's scary because when I wake up in the morning I don't know if my balloon is going to be inflated or not, and not being stable feels terrible.
- Therapist: If you could change something about this balloon, how would you change it? Do you even want to change it?
- Client: Yes, of course I do. I guess I could tie the knot on the bottom of the balloon tighter, to make sure nothing leaks out.
- Therapist: So then you would be completely stable, with no movement of your thoughts in and out?
- Client: Well... I guess that's not right, I should expect that my moods will be a little different everyday... like normal people, right?
- Therapist: Do you feel that your thoughts should be able to roam freely in and out of the balloon?
- Client: I'd like to have greater control over this process and not just let my thoughts run away with themselves, like they seem to be doing all the time!
- Therapist: So how could you regulate that flow?
- Client: Maybe I could hire a guard to stand at the foot of the balloon and watch to see that the air in the balloon is flowing freely.
- Therapist: You said you would "hire" a guard?
- Client: Well, there's always a price to pay.
- Therapist: Can you afford that price?
- Client: I can't afford *not* to!

- Therapist: So what will the guard be doing?
 Client: I guess she'd stand there and either hold open the end or shut it tight, depending on what was happening.
 Therapist: So who is this guard anyway?
 Client: Um... I don't know.
 Therapist: You said "she"... Is it a female?
 Client: Well, right now it's the medication, but I guess when it comes down to it, the ultimate guard is really myself.

(Kopp 1995: 29–30.)

The client's figurative expressions, which appear in both comparison form (*bipolar illness is like being a balloon*) and categorisation form (*I don't know if my balloon is going to be inflated or not*), are indications of how bipolar illness feels to her; that is, how she experiences her depression (and her manic phases). As such, they assist the therapist in understanding the client's current emotional state. Arguably, they also assist the client in understanding herself, in the sense that she may not have fully grasped her emotions and understood the implications of her thoughts at the moment of expression. Through articulating her thoughts and subsequently working with the therapist on the meaning of her utterances, which is achieved initially by a process of extending and developing the balloon metaphor, both client and therapist attain insight into the client's emotional experiences.

One can see how the initial conception, *bipolar illness is like being a balloon*, evolves over the course of the exchange. At the beginning, the client sees herself (or her mental-emotional life at least) as a balloon; sometimes her mind is so full she feels ready to burst and sometimes she's entirely deflated, *limp and not pretty*. Yet as this metaphorical idea is extended, the client comes to see herself as quite separate from the balloon, no longer identified with it or wholly contained within it; notice how she speaks of *watching* the balloon and later *standing at the foot of the balloon, guarding* it. Insight is apparent when, in the final line, the client says *the ultimate guard is really myself*, realising that she is ultimately responsible for and in charge of her alternating highs and lows. This exchange demonstrates how our conceptions are malleable, and how skilled guidance from a therapist facilitates development and modification of metaphorical meaning, which in its initial state may be the root of maladaptive thinking.²

² For further discussion of metaphor as a dynamically constructed phenomenon, see Cameron et al. (2009).

While the previous exchange from Kopp showed the therapist recognising and reacting to a relatively creative, somewhat novel, figurative expression (of bipolar illness as a balloon), in the following exchange, from Ferrara (1994), the therapist responds to a more conventionalised, “dead” metaphor³. One month prior to the session depicted below, the client whose name is Howard had been dismissed from his term of employment as a hospital orderly. His dismissal was due to a suspicion that he had stolen medication, a charge which the client maintained was false. Though Howard was eventually reinstated at the hospital, the process of confrontation and having to defend himself had left him in a disturbed state that motivated him to seek help through psychotherapy.

Therapist: When you have a problem, what do you do with it?

Client: I usually let it be a problem. I don't usually do anything much. I was thinking about that the other day.

Therapist: Does the problem go away if you don't do anything about it?

Client: No, it gets worse or it just complicates things as you go further down the road.

Therapist: Can you look at your own life, kind of on a continuum? Look down the road of that line and see what that's gonna do in your own life?

Client: Look down the road?

Therapist: Yeah, kinda visualize what your own life will be like if you don't deal with some of it. Your problems. Can you see how it might complicate your life?

Client: It will just continue the way it is.

Therapist: Kind of like a snowball effect?

Client: No no not a snowball. Just kinda floating, floating down the river...

Therapist: [...] What's it like to be floating down the river? Tell me more.

Client: It's comfortable. It's safe. Everything just keeps on an even keel, you know.

Therapist: Mmhmm.

Client: You're just kinda floating.

Therapist: Kind of in a canoe? Going down the river or-

Client: No, more like a great ole big barge. On a great old big river.

Therapist: Barge, very stable, kinda.

Client: Yeah, plenty of room to spread out and sit in the sun. Yeah, and you don't have to worry about falling off the edge.

Therapist: Mmhmm.

Client: And sun, you know, it's kinda hazy. It's not really clear sun. It's kinda hazy.

³ For a discussion of “dead” or “sleeping” metaphors, contrasted with those that are “alive” or “waking”, see Müller (2008).

- Therapist: Mmhmm.
- Client: Kinda half asleep, that's what it's like.
- Therapist: What happens when you kind of come to the falls, the falls that are down there, about two miles down the river?
- Client: Get the hell off the river!
- Therapist: That's certainly one way to handle it. Get out.
- Client: I feel a lot of discomfort. That's what happened just last month. I hit those falls last month.
- Therapist: [...] So that's what happened, this time there was um kind of an external situation that sort of forced you out of your boat...
- Client: It was uncomfortable, but I was, I was pretty, I was enjoying it too. And I didn't want to go back into just floating. It was uncomfortable and I was out, I don't, I been floating a long time.
- Therapist: Mmhmm. Well you've found what works for you, in a sense.
- Client: What works for me?
- Therapist: Floating.
- Client: Because I stay comfortable and-
- Therapist: In a sense, but it may now be inappropriate. It may not be working as well as it did in the past.
- Client: Mm. Yeah, I need a little excitement now and then.
- Therapist: Some rapids.
- Client: Yeah, something I can keep in control of and not drown. But yeah, I think I am bored.

(Full transcript, Ferrara 1994: 139–141.)

As with the previous extract from Kopp, the metaphorical descriptions of emotions in this session are striking. Very early on, the therapist recognises the client's metaphorical conception of his life in the future being *down the road*, she reacts to this metaphorical idea and encourages the client to visualise this road and elaborate what will happen on that road. Together they negotiate his metaphorical descriptions of his feelings: Howard rejects the therapist's proposal that life is like a *snowball effect*, suggesting instead that he is *floating down a river, on a big old barge*, with a *hazy sun* in the background. When asked about what happens when he reaches *the falls*, Howard says he felt a desire to get out of this comfortable, stable barge and off the river – the recent incident at work was, for him, much like reaching these falls (an uncomfortable, but also exciting experience). These metaphors provide clues to how Howard conceptualises and experiences his life, these clues are useful to the therapist, and also provoke insight for Howard – when he realises towards the end of the extract that he now

needs a little excitement in his life. This fresh perspective on life might not have been awakened without the development of metaphorical meaning between the two parties. Thus, we see the value of attending to metaphorical language when talking about feelings and emotions.⁴

Both psychotherapists in these sessions adopt a particular approach to metaphor in psychotherapy. Neither rejects metaphorical utterances, treating them as if they were disguises for (or evasions of) some important truth; instead, they ratify and validate their clients' metaphorical productions, encourage their elaboration, developing detailed metaphorical scenarios.⁵ The metaphor of the balloon becomes conceptually rich, enough to serve as a frame for thinking about the issue of depression. So too with the metaphor of the barge on a river, which structures thoughts about an individual's approach to life. Throughout these exchanges, one can imagine external reality being temporarily suspended, or perhaps a new reality is created, one in which a medical condition (bipolar illness) is an object which can be controlled and the other in which life is a particular type of journey. Providing justification for his serious consideration of metaphorical articulations, Kopp says "the fact that a metaphor is false as a literal statement does not address or pertain to the way in which it is true as a correspondence of similar pattern or organisation" (Kopp 1995: 99). Here Kopp echoes Gregory Bateson's view of metaphor as a phenomenon by which "the whole fabric of mental interconnections hold(s) together" (Capra 1988: 77). For Bateson, and for Kopp, metaphors are logically and literally false, yet at the same time, they are true as a representation of experience. That is, metaphors identify and point to an important structural resemblance between an imaginative conception and a concrete experience ("a correspondence of similar pattern", e.g. between the inflation/deflation of a balloon and the phases of a bipolar illness).⁶

As is evident from these extracts, psychotherapeutic discourse can provide rich examples of metaphorical expressions against which to hold up pragmatic theories of metaphor processing. Though this discourse is undeniably unique,

⁴ For discussion of how metaphor is used to enhance distinct goals in psychotherapy see Cirillo and Crider (1995).

⁵ It is important to note that these two extracts are not intended as a representative sample of communication in the context of psychotherapy. For a more detailed discussion of the treatment of metaphor across different psychotherapeutic schools of thought, see Pollio et al. (1977).

⁶ This view of metaphor as non-linear correspondence mirrors that of Dedre Gentner who "unifies metaphor with processes of analogy and similarity" (Gentner et al. 2001: 199). Gentner and colleagues argue that metaphor comprehension is a process of structural alignment, alignment of relations as opposed to attributes (see Gentner and Bowdler 2008).

with interesting idiosyncrasies to be characterised, many pragmatic accounts of metaphor profess overarching theories which are intended to account for the underlying cognitive mechanisms at play in the interpretation of all metaphorical utterances. They must, therefore, be able to explain not only how we process simple utterances of the form “A is like B” or “A is B”, but also more complex figurative expressions such as those seen above.⁷

3. Pragmatic accounts of metaphor

3.1. The relevance-theoretic approach to metaphor: *Ad hoc* concept construction

Relevance Theory (henceforth RT) claims that we approach utterances with quite specific expectations about the level and kind of relevance they will have for us (Sperber and Wilson 1995). Quite generally, human cognitive processing is geared towards the maximisation of relevance, where the notion of relevance is defined in terms of cognitive effects and processing effort. The greater the positive cognitive effects, the greater the relevance, and the greater the processing effort, the lower the relevance. A positive cognitive effect is defined as something that contributes a “worthwhile difference to the individual’s representation of the world” (Wilson and Sperber 2004: 608). Processing effort is described as “the effort which a cognitive system must expend in order to arrive at a satisfactory interpretation of incoming information” (Carston 2002: 379). According to RT, ostensive stimuli, of which verbal utterances are the paradigm case, are claimed to come with an underlying presumption, which is captured by the Communicative Principle of Relevance: “every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance” (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 158). An utterance is said to be optimally relevant to an audience if and only if:

- (i) It is relevant enough to be worth the audience’s processing effort;
- (ii) It is the most relevant one compatible with the communicator’s abilities and preferences.

(Wilson and Sperber 2004: 612.)

⁷ I briefly consider the special and idiosyncratic nature of communication in psychotherapy in Needham-Didsbury (2012) and will pursue this issue in more detail in my forthcoming doctoral dissertation (University College London). For an analysis on psychotherapeutic discourse within the broader frame of explicit communication see Pawelczyk (2011).

It follows from this principle that, in interpreting utterances, hearers/readers are licensed to follow a procedure of assessing interpretations in order of accessibility and accepting the first one that meets their expectation of optimal relevance. Being qualitative as opposed to quantitative, the numerical values of effect and effort are immaterial; what is important for comprehension is the relative weightings of the two – in this sense, the procedure can be considered as a kind of cost-benefit analysis.

On the relevance-theoretic approach, comprehension of metaphorically used words and phrases is considered within the branch of lexical pragmatics which seeks to explain how linguistically encoded word meanings are modified in use (Wilson 2004). Word meanings can be both broadened, ‘to convey a more general sense’ of the word (Wilson 2004: 344) and narrowed to “convey a more specific sense than the encoded one” (Wilson and Carston 2007: 232). Consider the following, taken from Wilson (2004: 344–346):

(2) At Christmas, the *bird* was delicious.

(3) The water is *boiling*.

Example (2) is an instance of narrowing; the word *bird* is used to refer to a more specific subset of birds, that is, ‘turkeys’ and perhaps other poultry typically eaten at Christmas, and the encoded meaning of ‘feathered animal which flies’ is not a component of the communicated content. Taken as a hyperbolic use of language the expression in (3), on the other hand, demonstrates broadening; the linguistically-specified denotation of the word *boiling* is extended and in this sense the utterance might be taken to indicate that the water was uncomfortably hot (but not actually boiling), with a range of further implicatures. According to RT, lexical-pragmatic processes such as narrowing and broadening apply spontaneously and automatically to fine-tune the interpretation of virtually every word. The processes are relevance driven and result from the mutual adjustment of explicit content, contextual assumptions and cognitive effects.⁸ When a lexically encoded concept undergoes pragmatic adjustment it results in an *ad hoc*, or occasion specific, concept, which is a component of the proposition explicitly communicated.

For Sperber and Wilson, metaphor is a case of the loose use of language, lying on a continuum which ranges from literal uses of language through approx-

⁸ For a more detailed description of lexical-pragmatic processes, in particular the key mechanism of mutual parallel adjustment, see Carston (2002: 323–334) and Wilson and Sperber (2004).

imations and category extensions, to hyperbole and metaphor. Consider the following quote from Sperber and Wilson (2008: 84):

There is no mechanism specific to metaphors, no interesting generalisation that applies only to them. [...] Linguistic metaphors are not a natural kind, and “metaphor” is not a theoretically important notion in the study of verbal communication.

Like other cases of the loose use of language, metaphor meaning is constructed as an *ad hoc* concept which contributes to the proposition explicitly communicated (the “explicature”, in RT terminology), as well as communicating a range of implicatures. So taking the metaphor *my mother is an angel* as an example, the lexical meaning of the word *angel* (i.e. the encoded concept AN-GEL) is merely a clue to the speaker’s intended meaning and is loosened (or broadened) in the given context, resulting in an *ad hoc* concept ANGEL*, roughly paraphraseable as person who is kind in nature, beautiful, pure, innocent.⁹

More recent research, however, has challenged this view of metaphor as continuous with other loose uses. Carston and Wearing (2011) observe that, unlike hyperbole and approximation, metaphors involve both broadening *and* narrowing; a single word may thus express an *ad hoc* concept whose denotation is narrower than that of the lexically encoded concept in some respects and broader in others. Consider the example below:

(4) My thesis is a *marathon*.

The *ad hoc* concept MARATHON* is said to pick out a category of activities with particular characteristics, roughly paraphraseable as ‘long, psychologically demanding and emotionally exhausting’ (Carston and Wearing 2011: 293). The key point is that this will not only include instances of thesis-writing, but it will also include many actual marathons, as well as other activities, such as the process of undergoing psychodynamic therapy, for instance. While the *ad hoc* concept includes many actual marathons, it will not include marathons run effortlessly by extremely fit athletes. Therefore, the word *marathon* is both narrowed and broadened. The same can in fact be said of the *ad hoc* concept AN-

⁹ It is worth noting that this account of metaphor meaning entails that metaphor is wholly distinct from simile, as the *ad hoc* concept account does not apply to the vehicle of a simile, e.g. in interpreting *My mother is like an angel* the meaning of *angel* is taken literally. See Carston (2002: 357–358) for discussion of this point.

GEL*, which is not only broadened, but also narrowed so as not to include fallen or avenging angels like Lucifer.

A bigger challenge, however, comes from the cases of extended and elaborated metaphors that we find not only in literary texts, but also in other domains, most importantly here in the verbal exchanges of psychotherapy. While the *ad hoc* concept approach accounts for a wide range of conversational uses of metaphorical language, it is much less clear that it provides an adequate account of these uses. Recall the example from Kopp's transcript, in which one of his clients described her experience of bipolar illness as being like a balloon. The figurative meanings in this extract became considerably developed over the course of the discussion. It seems unreasonable to maintain that for each of the metaphorically used words in this extract the interpreter must construct an *ad hoc* concept, hence multiple *ad hoc* concepts, one after the other: BALLOON*, FULL-OF-AIR*, ABOUT-TO-BURST*, LIMP* and so on. The rich interaction of the literal meanings of these words, which clearly goes on here, would be lost on an account that adjusts the meaning of each word as it is encountered. In what follows, I shall explore various alternative approaches to metaphor comprehension, all of which maintain a deeper focus on the literal meaning of the language.

3.2. Literal meaning (imaginary worlds) approaches to metaphor

3.2.1. Two routes to metaphor comprehension: Carston (2010)

Consider, as Carston does, this extract from Zoe Heller's novel *The Believers*.

- (5) Depression, in Karla's experience, was a dull, inert thing – a toad that squatted wetly on your head until it finally gathered the energy to slither off. The unhappiness she had been living with for the last ten days was a quite different creature. It was frantic and aggressive. It had fists and fangs and hobnailed boots. It didn't sit, it assailed. It *hurt* her. In the mornings, it slapped her so hard in the face that she reeled as she walked to the bathroom.

(Zoe Heller, *The Believers*, p. 263. Cited in Carston 2010: 309.)

The relevance-theoretic account of metaphor previously outlined posits that we replace each of the literal lexical meanings of *toad*, *creature*, *fists*, *frantic*, etc. with pragmatically constructed *ad hoc* concepts. However, this seems an

extreme, and potentially unnecessary, expenditure of effort and a process which would lead to a loss of the meaning of the whole developed metaphor. The linguistically-encoded concepts are closely related to each other and psycholinguistic experiments have shown us that semantic priming of a mutually reinforcing sort will ensure high activation of the literal meaning (Giora 1999). It is thus proposed that initially hearers “entertain the internally consistent literal meaning as a whole” (Carston 2011) and metarepresent it as descriptive of an imaginary world. This results in the representation of the literal interpretation of the entire passage, in this case of Karla’s unhappiness as a vicious and violent animal contrasted with depression as a slimy sluggish creature. In order to derive the meaning intended by the writer, this representation of literal meaning has to be framed or metarepresented (hence kept apart from factual belief representations) and subjected as a whole to additional reflective inferential processing. Thus, from the patently false representations of depression as a sluggish toad and grief, in contrast, as a vicious animal, we derive implications that can be integrated with our existing beliefs about the kind of negative mental states that humans have. For example, that grief is powerful, that it can make one feel dominated, violated and even out of control. The outcome of this alternative processing route will therefore be an interpretation that consists of an array of implicatures concerning the mental and physical anguish that Karla is experiencing.

I believe that the interpretation of the extensively developed metaphorical articulations in psychotherapeutic discourse is best explained by a similar comprehension process to that described by Carston (2010). As in the Zoe Heller example, construction of multiple *ad hoc* concepts for the metaphors in these exchanges requires an unnecessary expenditure of effort – since the literal encoded meanings are so closely related (recall: *full of air, inflated, stable* etc. and *floating-down-the-river, big-ole-bergs, falls* etc.). On the “alternative” account, the literal meaning in each exchange, and the imagery it evokes, will take over from the relevance-theoretic process of adjusting metaphorically used concepts to derive appropriate “real world” descriptive meanings. Via the literal meaning, a metaphorical world will emerge and the literally false conceptual representations and images making up this imagined world will be metarepresented. Ultimately, in order to derive implications that are relevant to the particular client, this literal interpretation and the imagery accompanying it, will be subjected to more attentive pragmatic processing. In deeply scrutinising these metaphorical worlds in search of meaningful implications, the first client comes to understand that her bipolar illness, although unstable and apparently unpredictable, can be brought within her control, and, the second client (Howard),

comes to see that he has been overly passive for a long time and would benefit from taking a more pro-active approach to his life.

To directly compare this alternative processing route with the *ad hoc* concept route: on the *ad hoc* concept account, the literal meaning of a metaphorical expression merely provides access to the materials for constructing an intended *ad hoc* concept. This *ad hoc* concept is rapidly formed in an on-line local process and contributes to the proposition explicitly communicated, that is, the “explicature”. On the “alternative literal” account, on the other hand, the literal meaning and accompanying imagery does not merely remain idly in the background – it is maintained, developed and represented as material for a reflective pragmatic process that deeply considers it and extracts from it relevant implications (implicatures) that are taken to comprise the metaphor’s meaning.¹⁰

It is suggested that this second processing route is the one taken whenever the effort required by *ad hoc* concept formation is too great or when the literal meaning is overwhelmingly highly activated, thus it will often be employed when interpreting poetic extended metaphors. It is noted, however, that other factors may also trigger this style of processing, for example, a very novel or creative metaphor might cause a shift to this more attentive kind of interpretive process. Individual differences may also govern the choice, as well as the communicative context. On one occasion, in one context, an individual may interpret metaphorical language by constructing *ad hoc* concepts; however, on another occasion, in a different context, that same individual may proceed along the more literal reflective route (theoretically, this could happen for the very same metaphor). This idea is consistent with the general approach of many psychologists, who maintain that there is a significant role for context in figurative language comprehension models and who resist interpretation procedures which specify delimited inputs (products) and outputs (processes) (Gibbs 1993, 1994).

Thinking about how different discourses may affect processing routes, I hypothesise that psychotherapy is a communicative domain in which the inclination to adopt the “alternative literal” processing route may prevail over the *ad hoc* concept construction route. In relevance-theoretic terms, one could say that the expectation of relevance in psychotherapy is calibrated at a higher level, thus ensuring that participants engaged in the practice will be willing to engage in a deeper processing. I suggest that this is due to the very nature of

¹⁰ Note that there is no explicature communicated or recovered on this alternative account, as the speaker is not endorsing the literal meaning (the metaphorical world) as a representation of the actual world (see Carston 2010).

psychotherapy which, at its core, aims to create a space in which people gain understanding of themselves (through verbal expression). Many individuals embarking on courses of therapy will be inherently predisposed to seek new perspectives and insight. Psychotherapists at least hope that these perspectives and insight will result from entertaining and deeply reflecting on the literal interpretations of utterances (that is, from the process of openly constructing imagined worlds from metaphorical language). In psychotherapy, therefore, it may not only be that high activation of literal meaning pushes us down the route of literal interpretation, nor that a barrage of mutually reinforcing and coherent vivid images ensures this route is taken; the very act of entering psychotherapy may already direct our attention to literally non-sensical worlds.

3.2.2. Metaphoric World Construction: Levin (1988)

Another account of metaphor which places a great deal of importance on the literal meaning of the language used and appears equally suited to many aspects of the use of metaphor in psychotherapy is that of Samuel Levin. As well as providing an account of metaphor comprehension, Levin makes suggestions relating to the motivations behind metaphor production.

According to Levin, metaphors arise at a time in which speakers are “conceiving *of*” certain thoughts, thereby generating “conceptions”; a process distinct from “conceiving” something which gives rise to “concepts”. In the former process, that is, in conceiving *of* something, say *x*, (an object or state of affairs), we need only prepare a mental space where *x* might be placed. Thus, rather than having a clear image of *x* as we would if it had been conceived, we simply allow for the possibility of producing an image. Nevertheless, Levin goes on to suggest that in focusing on the “unfilled area” we project schemas and these schemas are taken to be an implicit or at least potential representation of the object or state of affairs in question. A conception is thus defined as “the schema of a possible concept” (Levin 1988: 67).

Speaking in greater depth about the sort of conceptions that give rise to metaphorical utterances, Levin mentions “thoughts that [...] lie too deep for words. They are intimations, promptings of the spirit which enter our consciousness even if they do not crystallise into conceptual constructions” (Levin 1988: 134). Levin directly acknowledges affective experiences as archetypal examples of these intimations. Due to the complex nature of these experiences, ordinary language is ill-suited to their expression and can at best “approximate to such expression by means of deviant sentences” (Levin 1988: xiii). He de-

scribes these conceptions as being of a profound and difficult nature, and interestingly, relates them to conceptions which come about in academic science. To compare, he notes how both sorts of conceptions involve conceiving of states of affairs previously un-thought of. In this sense, Levin says, metaphorical utterances not only involve conceptions which lie beyond conventional notions of how the world is constituted, but perhaps as a result they also involve the creation of “new knowledge” (Levin 1988: 91).

Addressing the issue of how hearers, or readers, tackle and comprehend these metaphorical utterances Levin proposes an account similar to that of Carston (2010). He suggests that when faced with a metaphorical expression, instead of adjusting the meaning of the language used, thereby making it fit to our fixed conception of the world, we construe a metaphoric world – one in which the literal meaning of the expression pertains. He describes this world as being construed by conceiving of the state of affairs that the expression, in its literal sense, depicts. For example, in interpreting the sentence *the trees are weeping*, we do not imagine that the trees are shedding their leaves or exuding sap; rather, we imagine that they are experiencing emotion. As Levin says, we cannot produce a definite understanding of trees literally weeping, despite the fact that the “interpretive imperative impels or urges the process on to completion” (Levin 1988: 21). Though our efforts are ultimately doomed, it is the effort, the process of conception construction, which constitutes comprehension. For Levin, “the crediting of possibility to the state of affairs represents the meaning of the sentence” (Levin 1988: 59).

Levin’s account of metaphor appears wholly compatible with our proposals regarding the figure’s use in psychotherapy, both the circumstances and manner in which it is used by clients, and the approach of literal entertainment adopted by therapists. Levin suggests that metaphorical utterances arise because “our language is not an ideally efficient mechanism” (Levin 1988: 138). This claim mirrors that of Fine et al. (1973) who provide examples of clients in psychotherapy who use metaphor to express the “previously inexpressible”.¹¹ Said to represent a reality, a certain truth, for the speaker, Levin vehemently encourages literal interpretation of metaphorical expressions – the only way in which hearers stand to gain insight into the internal world of their interlocutor. Levin’s account suggests that engaging with the literal meaning of a metaphorically used expression will signal a hearer’s acknowledgement of the speaker’s struggle to express and “concretise” their thoughts, thereby validating their experi-

¹¹ Fine et al.’s research is part of a large body of work which has sought to specify the distinct therapeutic functions of metaphor (see also Cirillo and Crider 1995; Tay 2013).

ence. With psychotherapy in mind, this acknowledgement would no doubt strengthen the relationship between client and therapist which is vital to the therapeutic process. Indeed, analysis of psychotherapy sessions has supported this idea: that a psychotherapist's recognition and response to their client's metaphors is perceived as empathic, thus fostering the importance alliance between the two parties (Fine et al. 1973).

Similarities between Levin and Carston can be noted in the degree to which they advocate suspension of disbelief in the literal content when interpreting metaphorical utterances. However, there are also some important differences. Levin's primary focus and concern is with literary language, that of the poet Wordsworth in particular, so his proposal of metaphorical world construction is devised with the careful reader in mind. That is, the literal interpretation process that Levin proposes essentially operates in order for the reader to grasp and perhaps experience the same sensations and visions as the Romantic poet; *this* is the insight which Levin says we strive to achieve in constructing metaphorical worlds. One can presume that re-emerging into the reality of the actual world, that is, deriving descriptively valid implications from the metaphor, is of little significance in this endeavour. Conversely, for Carston, the process of subjecting the representations of the imaginary world to reflective inferential processing, thereby drawing implications that can be applied to the world in which we all live, is arguably the more important aspect of the interpretation process. In this sense, Carston's approach retains a greater focus on the mind-external world and thus of integrating the interpretation with factual beliefs about the world.¹² Seen in this light, it is Carston's account of metaphor processing that is the more relevant to the manner in which metaphorical language is used in psychotherapy. While Kopp and other "metaphor therapists" are interested in the exploration of elaborated metaphor landscapes, the goal of such a process is always to understand where the metaphorical conceptions have come from and how they can be used to facilitate positive change in the way the client functions in the actual world. That is, to draw out the everyday implicatures which can inform the client's subsequent behaviour. This focus is most evident in Kopp's recommendation for "the therapist [to] invite(s) the client to 'bridge back' to the original situation, asking, 'What parallels do you see between your image of [*the metaphorical image*] and [*the original situation*]'" (Kopp 1995: 11).

¹² The extent to which literal meaning contributes to metaphor interpretation on Levin and Carston's account can be further clarified through comparison with Camp's notion of pretence (2009); see Needham-Didsbury (2012) for detailed discussion.

To conclude this section, consider the interesting (apparent) paradox concerning literal meaning that presents itself in this paper. On the one hand, it is widely suggested by linguists and philosophers that we employ language metaphorically because literal language is inadequate (Carston 2002; Ortony 1975; Sperber and Wilson 1995). On the other hand, on the account of metaphor processing endorsed here, it is claimed that hearers take the metaphorically used language literally. Recall the client in Kopp's extract: "bipolar illness is like being a balloon. Sometimes the balloon is so full of air that it is about to burst, and sometimes there's no air in the balloon at all, it's limp and not pretty" (Kopp 1995: 29). The client could have attempted to express her feelings literally, using language which coincides with the world in which we exist. For example, she could have said "I have bipolar illness. This means that sometimes I have too much energy and do crazy things, and sometimes I have none at all and can hardly move, and it is unpredictable how I will feel from day to day". While such an utterance is probably literally true, it is entirely limited in depicting the emotional state of the client as she experiences (and suffers) it. The point to note here (which resolves the apparent paradox) is the complete lack of correspondence between this literally intended utterance and the literal meaning of the client's actual metaphorical utterance (which is all about the properties of a balloon). What I hope to make clear by this point is that a focus on the literal interpretation of a metaphor does not consist in translating it into something that can be said to be true of the external world. Instead, literal interpretation of metaphors amounts to building imaginative worlds (in the form of metarepresentations), worlds which defy impressions of "literality", worlds in which an illness looks like a balloon, has the rubbery texture and other properties of balloons, and is as vulnerable and unpredictable as a balloon is when pushed to its limits.

4. Future directions and concluding remarks

4.1. Empirical investigation of the "alternative, literal" process

I would like to emphasise that I am not dismissing the *ad hoc* concept account of metaphor entirely. In many situations, this method of processing appears to be the most cost-effective. For creative developed examples of metaphor, however, it seems as though something different is taking place. Arguably, it is these metaphors which are of most value, and therefore interest, in psychotherapy. Intuitively, the literal meaning of these examples seems to play a

greater role in the interpretation process and as such, the approaches suggested by Carston and Levin, which maintain a more intense focus on the literal meaning of metaphorical expressions, appear more akin to the approach taken in psychotherapy. Evidently, however, these intuitions need to be validated with empirical data. Are we as focused on the literal meaning of extended metaphors as Carston and Levin propose?

Evidence from experiments designed to tap online processing indicates that literal meaning is indeed always activated, even in heavily-biased metaphor contexts (Giora 1999). Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that this literal meaning lingers beyond the point at which it is relevant, that is, after the metaphorical interpretation has been recovered; however, it is suppressed at around 1000 milliseconds (Rubio-Fernández 2007). As proposed in Carston (2011), an interesting way of testing the second processing route she proposes would be to employ a similar cross-modal lexical priming experiment to that used in Rubio-Fernández' work. To briefly outline this paradigm, subjects are presented with contexts which bias towards a metaphorical interpretation of the key word, for example *Nobody wanted to run against John at school. John was a cheetah*, priming of target words (*cat*, as a metaphor inconsistent example and *fast* as a consistent example) is then measured at various temporal intervals from the offset of the word *cheetah*.

If the proposed second processing route is right, one would expect that the priming results for the target word in the case of an extended or creative, novel metaphor context will converge with results from a wholly literal passage and be distinguished from the same word used to communicate an *ad hoc* concept, where, as mentioned previously, the literal meaning is suppressed around 1000 milliseconds.

4.2. Conclusion

Through the extracts from psychotherapy cited in this paper, I hope to have demonstrated the therapeutic practice of encouraging clients to extend and develop their metaphorical articulations of their emotional experiences. I have argued that the insightful consequences that these developments and elaborations may achieve are suggestive of an interpretive route of metaphor processing similar to that outlined by Carston (2010). Nevertheless, this literal processing route remains rather under-described, and has yet to be sufficiently backed up with empirical support. Numerous questions remain: *when* is this processing route chosen over the process of *ad hoc* concept construction, and

why? How do factors such as aptness, conventionality and creativity interact with and contribute to the different processing routes? And how does this mode of processing affect the distinction between simile and metaphor, more specifically how does it impact upon the allegedly distinct interpretive effects of these two related figures? Evidently, there is scope for considerably more investigation into the use of metaphor (and simile) in psychotherapeutic discourse and its implications for pragmatic theories of non-literal communication.

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