

Essay

Meaningfulness of Metaphors

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A Response to John Searle's Expressions and Meanings

The use of metaphors has attracted a lot of philosophical interests. Mainly, similes and metaphors are two of the most popular forms of figurative language. While similes use the words 'as' and 'like' to make comparisons, metaphors make indirect comparisons. Searle (1979) questions the significance of the indirect comparison. He argues that there is no logic in using metaphors and that the use of metaphor is not a universal language: some are understandable to everyone, but others are incomprehensible. However, Searle's attempt to downstate the use of metaphors in literary language demonstrates that his understanding of metaphors is relatively standard.

Searle attempts to make metaphors seem meaningless. Searle questions the logicality of a speaker using a metaphor 'S is P' and mean 'S is R' when P does not mean R. Still, he argues that it is not logical for a hearer to understand that the speaker's utterance of 'S is P' means 'S is R' (Searle, 1979). In response to this, he states that "the utterance of P calls to mind the meaning and, hence, the truth conditions associated with R in the special ways that metaphorical utterances have of calling other things to mind" (Searle, 104). Searle, therefore, implies that there is no standard principle on which a metaphor works, making it meaningless.

Further, Searle argues that there are no existing principles that a hearer uses to understand a metaphor. He argues that for communication to take place, the hearer and the speaker must have a standard working principle (Searle, 1979). Consequently, Searle outlines three steps necessary for a hearer to understand a metaphor. One, the hearer must have a strategy that determines the need for interpreting a metaphor. Second, they must have a strategy or a reference principle to compute the possible values of 'R'. Third, there must be a principle or procedure that restricts the range of possible values of 'R' (Searle, 1979). He gives an example of "Sam is a pig". In this case, the first reaction of a hearer is that the utterance is false, and therefore, must look for an alternative meaning. The second response will be to determine the various appropriate meanings basing their reasoning on the existing factual knowledge. For instance, a pig is filthy, greedy, and careless. However, there are other known facts, such as the shape of a pig, and the unique noise they make. Therefore, the hearer goes to the third principle that restricts the qualities of a human being (Sam), which compare to the pig (Searle, 1979). Searle, therefore, calls for a systematic process and set principles that decipher the meaning of a metaphor.

On the contrary, Searle's attempt to illustrate the complexity of understanding metaphors ironically simplifies the understanding of the pragmatic processes of a metaphor. The step-by-step illustration of the transition of meaning from 'S is P' to 'S is R' increases the accessibility to the meaning of the utterance. Concisely, he accounts for the derivation of 'R' into 'P'. The metaphor 'Sam is a pig' requires the hearer to derive the meaning from the knowledge of the only quality that a human being shares with the pig, gluttonous. Similar to his assertion, one word calls to mind another one, satisfying Searle's first principle of making metaphors meaningful. Besides, Searle's argument that the value of 'R' should refer to factual knowledge is valid. For instance, in the metaphor 'John is a gorilla,' the hearer relates to the mythological

understanding of a gorilla; nasty and cheeky. Lastly, the hearer deciphers the meaning of a metaphor using an odd derivation. For instance, in the example 'John is bitter', the hearer uses the scalar association to conclude that 'John has bad feelings'. The metaphors, therefore, have a sensible meaning in utterances.

Searle's attempt to render metaphors as meaningless and uninteresting demonstrates his fair understanding of the famous figure of speech. Searle's 'calling to mind' proposal is evident in the several generalized steps that a hearer relies on to understand their meaning. The first step is to recognize the existence of metaphors. Second, the hearer explores the values appropriate values of 'R' by applying some possible principles. The first principle is to identify the relation of similarity between 'S' and 'P'. In this case, the hearer searches for qualities that 'S' has a similar connection to decipher 'R'. Notably, Searle identifies various principles that can interpret the value of 'R' such as the obvious, salient; 'P' is 'R' and sometimes, the feature of 'P' is 'R'. Metaphors, therefore, maintain their allure, and Searle's argument does not make them uninteresting. Instead, the computation of 'R' value demonstrates the complexity and the exciting nature of metaphors.

References

John, S. (1979). Expression and meaning. *Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts*. Cambridge University Press.



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