

# Metaphor and understanding *me*

Yasemin J. Erden<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract.** This paper explores the role of the metaphor-maker in the construction of meaningful metaphor construction. More specifically, the paper defends the claim that the semantic-language-user is key for the possibility of both meaning and the understanding of metaphor. This takes into account the seemingly contradictory status of two claims: (1) that words can be meaningful without context, intentionality or the presence of, or origin in a language-user, while (2) the expectation of a context, intention or speaker is central to finding meaning in words and particularly metaphors. The apparent contradiction can be resolved if we see that the possibility of meaningful metaphor says as much about our expectation and need for meaning as it does about the language itself. Understanding words is thus as much about understanding the utterer of the words, as about the words themselves. Through exploring Wittgenstein's ideas about metaphor, this idea should become clearer. The paper will then explore what the limitations of computational metaphor might be as a result.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to understand a person through their words? And what do words mean separate from a speaker? These are questions that this paper explores in order to understand the central question: how are metaphors *meaningful*? In this, the aim is not to discuss the meanings of individual words, but rather to explore the very possibility of meaning and to point to the central roles played by context, expectation, experience and embodiment. To do this we begin by looking at a short quotation from Ludwig Wittgenstein, which has puzzled commentators because of its self-referential turn of phrase. The claim is made (or rather, defended, since the claim is not new even if it remains controversial) that to understand the phrase requires that we understand the person, Wittgenstein, as well as the words he uttered in that sentence [2].

Building on this, I argue that the possibility of a meaningful metaphor relies on context within which language is embedded, such as described by Wittgenstein [3] in terms of *language-games*. This does not lead to a strong claim that computational-metaphor is impossible though it does suggest a weaker claim that to be *successful* (which includes indicators such as 'appropriateness' or even 'acceptable') in this area may be tricky. This is partly because what is considered either appropriate or acceptable in ordinary language is already tricky (including where highly creative language-use can muddy the waters of ordinary language substantially). It is also partly because of the role that *expectation of meaning* creates. As I discuss elsewhere [4] [5], meaningful language-games require not only a successful meeting of *rules*, but also a willing on the part of participants to *recognise* other speakers as meaningful language-users. In the case of the words uttered by Wittgenstein, it is precisely because scholars expect meaning to be found, that the search for a meaning is considered worthwhile.

To explore this further, we will also discuss the possibility of non-human (or computational) metaphor construction,

and discuss the likely limitations that may occur where such construction is disembodied and decontextualized. The concept of the language-game will be employed in this discussion, since Wittgenstein offers this as a metaphor for meaningful language use. The metaphor of a *game* is particularly helpful for exploring ideas about participation and mimicry, and thereby how we view the relationship between computational and non-computational approaches to both metaphor understanding and production. Will we accept a metaphor as creative or even useful if we do not believe the person (or program) has any idea (understanding or experience) of the individual components, let alone the comparison being drawn?

Finally, discussion will explore the way that, on the one hand we might measure the *success* of a program (in constructing or interpreting metaphorical language) according to a set of pre-determined rules (even if these can be later amended or more fully altered), while on the other hand, the idea that we can accept or reject metaphors based on issues aside from content, including context and expectation of meaning. An unusual or bizarre comparison might make sense where we look for (or expect) sense, for example from a person who I know uses and *understands* the same language as me, and not where we expect little sense to be found, such as in the babbling of a small infant. The expectation of meaning is an important element in drawing these sorts of comparisons, and can sometimes be unfair in the expectation (or not) of meaning and importantly for this discussion, in what is then accepted as either meaningful or indeed successful.

## 1 UNDERSTANDING ME

In proposition 6.54 of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* [1] (first published in 1921), Ludwig Wittgenstein states of his project: "My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognises them as nonsensical." Understanding what Wittgenstein meant by these simple yet enigmatic words has dominated certain sub-sections of Wittgenstein scholarship. In one particular strand of scholarship, discussion centres on that little word "me" and why Wittgenstein did not instead write, "understands *them*" in reference the propositions of the text, as per the second half of his statement. Understanding why this might be important will have an impact on the arguments of this paper.

This paper picks up this discussion in order (in the first instance) to lend support to the interpretation offered by Cora Diamond [2, p. 151] whereby to understand this statement requires that we understand both Wittgenstein as well as his words. She claims this is a clear indication that Wittgenstein wanted to "draw attention to a contrast between understanding a person and understanding what the person says." This, she says, is pivotal for our understanding of the instruction that Wittgenstein presents in these words, which is that we should recognise the propositions of his text as nonsensical. This seeming contradiction puzzles, delights and infuriates readers

often in equal measure. How can the propositions be taken as nonsense if we can in fact understand them?<sup>1</sup> In following Diamond's solution we dissolve the contradiction since we can accept (if we like) that the *content* of the *Tractatus* is nonsense, while simultaneously acknowledging that we have somehow understood this nonsense because we understand the person. Thus we come to 'understand not the propositions but the author' [2, p.155].

One objection to this view, such as is offered by Priest [6, p. 150], argues that the conclusion of the nonsense uttered (and so-called) in the *Tractatus* results only in a contradiction. Regardless of context, it is clear that we have at some point understood this nonsense—it must have made sense to us—otherwise what did we understand? Yet Diamond's reply to such arguments is that although we have seemingly understood what is later termed *nonsense*—Priest is not wrong in this—this does not mean it is any the less nonsensical. In fact, she holds [2, p. 150] it is not that we understood the nonsense propositions in the first instance, thus generating a contradiction, but rather that "in recognising that they are nonsense, [we] are giving up the idea that there is such a thing as understanding them". She concludes, "What Wittgenstein means by calling his propositions nonsense is not that they do not fit into some official category of his of intelligible propositions but that there is at most the illusion of understanding them". The reason for this approach, she claims, hinges on seeing Wittgenstein's request that we understand *him* as indicative of his personal engagement with those who talk nonsense, something she later describes [2, pp. 157-58] as requiring imagination:

My point then is that the *Tractatus*, in its understanding of itself as addressed to those who are in the grip of philosophical nonsense, and in its understanding of the kind of demands it makes on its readers, supposes a kind of imaginative activity, an exercise of the capacity to enter into the taking of nonsense for sense, of the capacity to share imaginatively the inclination to think that one is thinking something in it. If I could not as it were see your nonsense as sense, imaginatively let myself feel its attractiveness, I could not understand you. And that is a very particular use of imagination.

This recourse to imagination is perhaps surprising (and is not itself uncontroversial or indisputable), but it is helpful for when we consider ideas about analogy, and more specifically metaphor, to which we now turn.

## 2 AN EXPECTATION OF MEANING

The discussion above offers a way in which to begin to see that the possibility of meaningful language and understanding relies on such words having been uttered by a semantic language-user (in the above example, Wittgenstein). In fact, the crux of this paper, where metaphor is concerned, is that people (lay- and scholars alike) would not have been so interested in the enigmatic aphorism noted above if the speaker had not been a person. If Wittgenstein had instead been the name of a complex computational program that uttered such words, it is unlikely the discussion about them would have lasted nearly a hundred years. More simply: if Wittgenstein had been a machine, we'd likely

---

<sup>1</sup> It is important to clarify that the author does not in fact take at face value the nonsensicality of the propositions in Wittgenstein's text, but this argument is outside the scope of this paper.

have ignored the odd turn of phrase, or perhaps described as a superficial error.

This approach to understanding an author over (or at least as well as) her/his words may seem in contrast to Barthes [7] and related post-structuralist ideas about the independence of text from an author (commonly referred to, in reference to Barthes, as *the death of the author*). However, the *death* of an author does not thereby presume *no* author. Instead the argument is a complex response to some traditional notion of the *individual*—the author—as the final locus of meaning. In other words, the authorial voice as judge, authority, "always finally the voice of one and the same person, the author, which delivered his 'confidence'" [7]. As he notes elsewhere, the crux is to do with culture, which is akin to context that I describe above:

We know that a text does not consist of a line of words, releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God), but is a space of many dimensions, in which are wedded and contested various kinds of writing, no one of which is original: the text is a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture. [7]

The text and the author exist *simultaneously* on this account, and in this way, the text has as much authority as the author, the reader, and any other voice in dialogue about the text. "In this way is revealed the whole being of writing: a text consists of multiple writings, issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogue with each other" [7].

While this would seem to stand in tension to the discussion about Wittgenstein's text above—where we should understand Wittgenstein in order to understand the text—in fact we can see the same impetus of the centrality of the reader's voice in Wittgenstein's work also. In the Preface to the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein says, "This book will perhaps only be understood by those who have themselves already thought the thoughts which are expressed in it—or similar thoughts. It is therefore not a text-book. Its object would be attained if it afforded pleasure to one who read it with understanding" [1]. Furthermore, the claim to a singular authorial voice is never made. As he explains a little further along, "How far my efforts agree with those of other philosophers I will not decide. Indeed what I have here written makes no claim to novelty in points of detail; and therefore I give no sources, because it is indifferent to me whether what I have thought has already been thought before by another" [1]. Similar to Barthes, the authorial voice is not to be considered that of an individual in any absolute sense, or a decontextualised authority. Instead we can take Wittgenstein's words, his contribution to the dialogue, as direct engagement with, and an imploring to, the reader to understand. His request at the end of the text that we understand *him* specifically, is as much a part of this collective, contextual engagement, as Barthes' claims that,

the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination; but this destination can no longer be personal: the reader is a man without history, without biography, without psychology; he is only that someone who holds gathered into a single field all the paths of which the text is constituted. [7]

This is not to say that there are no differences between their respective views however, and indeed I will return to this in Section 3 below.

From this we arrive back at the discussion above regarding context, and to this we can add shared experience, culture, history and meaning. For these reasons I offer the claim that the

possibility of a meaningful metaphor relies on a context within which the language is embedded, such as described by Wittgenstein in a later work [3] in terms of *language-games*. A language-game on Wittgenstein's account brings "into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a life-form" [3, §23]. As Monk [8, p. 330] explains, the purpose of language-games is "to free ourselves from the philosophical confusions that result from considering language in isolation from its place in the 'stream of life'".

These descriptions of Wittgenstein's approach reflect a broader polemic against a position that assumes we can somehow view things *sub specie aeterni*. Wittgenstein viewed such perspectives as negligent of one's own, necessarily earth-bound, position. In a note written to Sraffa in 1935, he describes the irritation caused by the thinking of "Cambridge people", that he formulates as follows: "Here are people who try to speak in a queer way 'impartially' about things, they pretend to be able to slip out of their own skins and they speak as though they could understand everybody's feelings, wishes, tendencies etc." [9, p. 235 n. 7]. In line with this perspective, the notion of a language-game evokes a sense in which, understanding language requires some sort of involvement in it. It is the connection with a game that draws this out, for we can only understand a game (how it is played, what its rules are, what significance it has) through engaging with it in some way. We can no more view our language from an objective perspective than we can *slip out of our skin*. This argument provides some basis to the centrality of context for metaphor, because the last metaphor includes translatable qualities (in terms of seeing things from the point of view of another), but it also has other qualities that make sense from the perspective of an embodied person. Simply: if you've never had skin, can you really understand the *ick* factor that comes when you think in more detail about what it would be like to slip out of it. Let alone to slip *into* the skin of another.

Let us consider another example (which formed part of the title for the first incarnation of this paper): *to find your feet*. In a very general sense the metaphor points to the sense of finding one's way around, or getting to know how things work, where things are, or to familiarise yourself with something in either general or specific terms. The literal meaning makes little sense, since someone with feet and legs will find their feet at the end of their legs where they always have been.<sup>2</sup> In this metaphor, I suggest that this *your* is embedded, *meaningful*; and ineliminable. This does not mean that context is limited to a singular subjective experience. As Barthes and Wittgenstein both describe, our (linguistic) experiences are shared. Even in vastly different experiences there can be found many sorts of overlap. For instance, one person's experience of a rare or unusual illness does not preclude another person (who has not experienced that same illness) from understanding *something* about what it is to be ill. Illness is not unique, though of course each illness may engender a different kind of experience. Nevertheless the experience of illness *per se* is important to understanding the qualitative experience of illness, just as the experience of skin adds a particular quality of understanding the metaphor offered above. This is not to say that *all* understanding is impossible without it, but rather that the understanding will be qualitatively different, as well as more difficult.

From this we arrive at the crux of the argument, which is that the capacity for understanding arises from experience, and more

specifically the very possibility of that experience. As Kant explains [10, B137/138],

The synthetic unity of consciousness is, therefore, an objective condition of all knowledge. It is not merely a condition that I myself require in knowing an object, but is a condition under which every intuition must stand in order *to become an object for me*. For otherwise, in the absence of this synthesis, the manifold would *not* be united in one consciousness.

To put this another way, the very possibility of experience is wedded to the possibility of my ability *to* experience. For the purposes of this argument, consciousness here can be replaced by understanding, since the possibility for understanding *metaphor* on this account relies on the condition, or capacity *for understanding*. And understanding, wedded as it is to context, and more broadly experience, is poorer if not embodied and embedded. What this means for computational metaphor is our next concern.

### 3 COMPUTATIONAL METAPHOR

This argument has been offered in defence of a contextual, experiential, semantic understanding of metaphors. We have not, so far, given consideration to the possibility of computational metaphor, and indeed in stating these words my position is already (partly) declared. I do not doubt that there can be such a thing as computational metaphor (just as in [4] I did not doubt the possibility of computational creativity), but once again I offer the caveat that what it would mean to be *successful* in a computational metaphor (hereafter *c-metaphor*) is not going to be simple, and includes indicators such as appropriateness or even what is acceptable, but more than this it includes the issue of judgement.

Returning to Barthes, we have the question of whether a metaphor stands in judgement on its own, or whether we also judge its origin and what we think it represents. For instance, if I write here about the experience I had this morning drinking coffee, and I want to do this because I want you to know that the coffee I drank improved my mood and my experience of writing this paper, then I would do this because I wanted you to know something(s) about me. This includes things about my mood, my preference for coffee in the morning(s), my experience of writing this paper, and of all the combinations that these elements produce. In so doing my primary motive would not be that you should know something about coffee separate to me and to my experience, especially as I as author chose this example purposefully. Instead, I would want you to know something about *me*. This is no different to conversations that happen about coffee outside of an academic paper. Of course, not all use of words either inspires, requires, or expects this sort of meaning (which is why I think that Barthes is right to be suspicious of the individuality of the author-god), but in this case, as in many other cases, the individual here (me) wants the reader (you) to know something about my experience of the world. If I use a metaphor to illustrate this, say, *this morning's shot of coffee*, then I would highlight both the literal size of the coffee (espresso sized, akin to a shot-sized measure of alcohol), as well as the medicinal quality of having my shot of caffeine. In this way I am pointing to my experience of coffee more generally and in a way that I hope would be familiar to you the reader. Nevertheless I would not want to divorce this metaphor, nor the description that came before it, from my own personal experience this morning. Not because I am an egomaniacal author with god delusions, but

---

<sup>2</sup> In exceptional circumstances, for instance because of a neurological disorder, or an impairment of proprioception, we can imagine someone experiencing a sense of not knowing where their feet are (or even that their feet are their own, rather like in *alien hand syndrome*).

because in the use of a personal experience I quite liked the idea you might understand *me* as a result. Which brings us back to Wittgenstein.

The aphorism at 6.54 [1] does in fact end with an analogy about a ladder, and it's worth a little more consideration:

My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright. What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.

What is particularly interesting about this metaphor is that it is preceded by that word *me*. My argument on this is that, rather like my description of the coffee, the metaphor offered by Wittgenstein cannot be divorced from the author. This is not to say that the interpretations that arise from the text must therefore be ordained by the Wittgenstein-god (since this is both unlikely as well as unnecessary), but rather that the experience that Wittgenstein had with the text, and with the ideas and metaphors he offers, should instead be part of the rich interpretative experience that comes from reading those words. This includes the image of the ladder and all that it might represent. Especially if you've read a lot of Wittgenstein.

Which brings us to c-metaphors. While these can of course satisfy some requirements of metaphor, including claims to novelty, utility, new aspects on the familiar, these descriptors are judged according to a context external to the computer's own capacity, and do in fact follow our own values. Added to which, these values (e.g. of novelty) and utility can contrast with other features of success, for instance, understanding what is trying to be communicated. What, for instance, would a program want to communicate and why? What would a program know of coffee, of skin, of ladders?

In simple terms, do we value a novel metaphor if we do not believe a person (or, in this case, a program) has any idea—including understanding or experience—of the individual components, let alone the comparison being drawn? If, for instance, I had offered the metaphor about coffee to you over lunch, and you happened to know me well enough to know I do not in fact drink coffee,<sup>3</sup> then some value of the metaphor may be lost or at least compromised. We expect that metaphors that reflect an experience have at least some basis in the user's experience otherwise they lose their potency as a basis for communication (as opposed to just literary word play).

This follows especially for unusual or bizarre comparisons that make sense where we look for or expect sense, but not where we might expect little sense (for instance in the babbling of a very young infant). Kingsey Amis' description of a hangover in *Lucky Jim* is one such example, and (to my mind) one of the finest:

Dixon was alive again. Consciousness was upon him before he could get out of the way; not for him the slow, gracious wandering from the halls of sleep, but a summary, forcible ejection. He lay sprawled, too wicked to move, spewed up like a broken spider-crab on the tarry shingle of the morning. The light did him harm, but not as much as looking at things did; he

resolved, having done it once, never to move his eye-balls again. A dusty thudding in his head made the scene before him beat like a pulse. His mouth had been used as a latrine by some small creature of the night, and then as its mausoleum. During the night, too, he'd somehow been on a cross-country run and then been expertly beaten up by secret police. He felt bad. [11]

My faith in this description of a hangover is partly borne out by my own experiences, yet had I not had those, then it would be based in a judgement of the author's, or at least the character's own knowledge, and here it requires not only that we understand the words, but that we understand them meaningfully. The above description by Jim is what it is to have a hangover in his view, as perhaps for Amis, and in terms of the rest of the novel, the description is in kilter. We can of course measure the success of a metaphor based on content, or according to any number of rules, whether these are pre or post hoc, amendable, or alterable, but we can also accept as well as reject metaphors based on context and expectation of meaning, which includes both judgement and bias. If the description of the hangover above had come from someone that you knew to be teetotal, you might still accept its accuracy as a measure of success, but again, the value of the metaphor might be compromised.

If this seems arbitrary or even unfair, I would be inclined to agree. But it's no more arbitrary or unfair than the decisions or processes by which terms either become or cease to be colloquial, slang or popular. What is considered either appropriate or acceptable in ordinary language is also tricky, including where highly creative language-use can muddy the waters of ordinary language substantially (not least where profanities are concerned). It is also partly because of the role that *expectation of meaning* creates. As I discuss above and elsewhere [4] [5], meaningful language-games in Wittgenstein's terms require not only a successful meeting of *rules*, but also a willing on the part of participants to *recognise* other speakers as meaningful language-users. In the case of proposition 6.54 above, it is precisely because scholars expect meaning to be found, that the search for a meaning is considered worthwhile.

C-metaphor construction, interpretation, use, and so on, is not impossible or even unlikely. Whether these metaphors are accepted, adopted or even considered worth paying attention to, however, remains to be seen. Even if the c-metaphor is interesting or impressive, this does not strike me as any more meaningful than when a very small child stumbles across a successful metaphor without really understanding the words or the implications of the word order. This is not to say that they absolutely did not understand, but then again, this is easier to resolve with a program than with a small child, since children do become meaningful language-users.

Where language-use is disembodied and decontextualized, the concept of the language-game makes little meaningful sense. Indeed the metaphor of the *game* is particularly helpful, since it points to the ideas of participation and mimicry. Both are key in the learning and using of language in a meaningful way. As a result, we may not accept a metaphor as creative or even useful if we do not believe the person (or program) has any idea (whether meaningful understanding or experience) of the individual components, let alone the comparison being drawn. Just as we might have doubts about the non-coffee drinker's, or teetotaler's use of certain metaphors about either tea or alcohol. This is not to say we'd necessarily reject the metaphor, but only that we may doubt the success of the utterer or even of the uttered as a result.

<sup>3</sup> In fact I do drink coffee, but in a thought experiment anything is possible.

## 4 CONCLUSION

This paper has sketched out an argument about metaphor, which remains in its infancy but which contains a number of propositions. The first is that for metaphor to be meaningful both context and embodied experience is required. These add colour (experience, meaning) to words, through which we come to understand and interpret the words themselves as well as those who utter them. Where this is missing, a crucial element of communication is thereby also missing. The question thus becomes: if you've not experienced colour, then can you really *understand* the metaphor I've offered above?

The author has not sought to suggest that words cannot have a meaning without context. Indeed there are many examples of this in all kinds of places (including on walls). Nor is it the argument that all words that are spoken or written must have an individual intention towards a particular meaning. There is sufficient evidence against such a claim, and Barthes' discussion of the author-god provides some sense of this. The author also finds it acceptable to say that language, at least in terms of signs, can be manipulated without a language-user, though I rather agree with Searle on this point that this can be described in terms of syntax rather than semantics [12].

Instead the author has sought to show that the expectation of a context, an intention, or a speaker is central to finding meaning in words, and particularly in a metaphor or other creative language. I bet you imagined the author as someone who drinks coffee at least once during the reading of this paper, and if you did then you have begun to understand *me*, or at least me as coffee-drinker. Of course this assumes you know about coffee, and have imagination, but I'm happy to assume this about the reader, and to imagine what it might be to be *you*.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to the organisers, reviewers, and participants of the IAS/AISB Joint Workshop 2014: "Figurative language: its patterns and meanings in domain-specific discourse", where I presented the first incarnation of this paper. The constructive feedback both before and during that presentation helped to shape its direction, and it is this revised account that I wish to present at AISB 2015. All mistakes and obsessions with coffee are the author's own.

## REFERENCES

- [1] L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Trans. D. Pears & B. McGuinness). London: Routledge, 1974.
- [2] C. Diamond, Ethics, Imagination and the Method of Wittgenstein's Tractatus. In A. M. Crary & R. J. Read (Eds.), *The New Wittgenstein* (pp. 149-173). London: Routledge, 2000.
- [3] L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell (Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe), 2001.
- [4] Y. J. Erden, Could a created being ever be creative? Some philosophical remarks on creativity and AI development, *Minds and Machines*, 20(3): 349-362, 2010.
- [5] Y. J. Erden, The 'simple-minded' metaphor: Why the brain is *not* a computer, via a defence of Searle, AISB Proceedings, 2013.
- [6] G. Priest, *Beyond the Limits of Thought*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002.
- [7] R. Barthes, The Death of the Author, (Trans. Richard Howard), New York: Hill and Wang, 1977. Available at: [http://ww2.valdosta.edu/~tthompson/ppts/3060/spring2013/death\\_aut\\_horbarthes.pdf](http://ww2.valdosta.edu/~tthompson/ppts/3060/spring2013/death_aut_horbarthes.pdf) (Accessed 20/03/15)
- [8] R. Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*. London: Vintage, 1990.
- [9] B. McGuinness, What Wittgenstein got from Sraffa. In G. Chiodi & L. Ditta (Eds.), *Sraffa or an Alternative Economics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- [10] I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (trans. N. K. Smith), London: Macmillan press, 1933 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.).
- [11] K. Amis, *Lucky Jim*. London: Penguin, 1954.
- [12] J. Searle, *The Rediscovery of the Mind*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1992.