

Relevance Theoretic Comprehension Procedures: Accounting for Metaphor and Malapropism

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Abstract. According to Sperber and Wilson, relevance theory’s comprehension/interpretation procedure for metaphorical utterances does not require details specific to metaphor (or nonliteral discourse); instead, the same type of comprehension procedure as that in place for literal utterances covers metaphors as well. One of Sperber and Wilson’s central reasons for holding this is that metaphorical utterances occupy one end of a continuum that includes literal, loose and hyperbolic utterances with no sharp boundaries in between them. Call this the *continuum argument about interpreting metaphors*. My aim is to show that this continuum argument doesn’t work. For if it were to work, it would have an unwanted consequence: it could be converted into a continuum argument about interpreting linguistic errors, including slips of the tongue, of which malaprops are a special case. In particular, based on the premise that the literal–loose–metaphorical continuum extends to malaprops also, we could conclude that the relevance theoretic comprehension procedure for malaprops does not require details specific to linguistic errors, that is, details beyond those already in place for interpreting literal utterances. Given that we have good reason to reject this conclusion, we also have good reason to rethink the conclusion of the continuum argument about interpreting metaphors.

1 INTRODUCTION

Mrs. Malaprop, a character in Sheridan’s (1775) play *The Rivals* had a tendency to make linguistic errors of a special sort: she would describe people as being “the pineapple of politeness” (when she meant *pinnacle*); or “as headstrong as an allegory on the banks of the Nile” (when she meant *alligator*). Such slips of the tongue have since come to be called malaprops. In a framework like relevance theory, how might we characterize the process of interpreting malaprops as opposed to interpreting literal utterances? We will see that addressing this question exposes a challenge for the relevance theoretic treatment of *metaphorical* utterances.

Within philosophy of language as well as rhetoric the following claims are widely held, considered platitudinous even: the distinction between literal and figurative discourse carries theoretical importance, and metaphorical utterances clearly fall on the figurative side of the divide, constituting departures from

literality. Relevance theory calls into question these time-worn claims.

Relevance theory [1, 2] has become, over the past three decades, a leading research program in pragmatics. Its founders’, Dan Sperber’s and Deirdre Wilson’s [3] most recent position on metaphorical utterances is that (i) the interpretation/comprehension procedure for metaphors does not require resources beyond those already needed to account for literal utterances (call this the *procedure claim*), and (ii) metaphorical utterances occupy one end of a continuum that includes literal, loose and hyperbolic utterances (call this the *continuum claim*). Relevance theorists seem to regard the continuum claim as one reason to hold the procedure claim; call this the *continuum argument about interpreting metaphors*.

Sperber and Wilson subscribe to this continuum argument: “We see this continuity of cases, and the absence of any criterion for distinguishing literal, loose, and metaphorical utterances, as evidence not just that there is some degree of fuzziness or overlap among distinct categories, but that there are no genuinely distinct categories, at least from a descriptive, psycholinguistic or pragmatic point of view. Even more important than the lack of clear boundaries is the fact that *the same inferential procedure is used in interpreting all these different types of utterance*” [3, p. 111–112, emphasis added].

In this paper, I aim to show that the continuum argument about metaphors, if it were to work, would face an unacceptable consequence: the argument would license a *continuum argument about interpreting malapropisms* (and more generally, a continuum argument about linguistic errors):

Continuum premise for malaprops: The literal–loose–metaphorical continuum extends to malaprops.

Procedure conclusion for malaprops: The relevance theoretic comprehension procedure for malaprops does not require details beyond those needed to account for literal utterances.

We have good reason to resist the malaprop conclusion: surely, when we manage to interpret Mrs. Malaprop as having meant ‘alligator’ when she said ‘allegory’, the fact that the lexically encoded meaning of ‘allegory’ becomes wholly irrelevant is a detail that is bound to be featured in a full description of our process of interpreting her. And if we want to resist the malaprop conclusion, then we have to find fault with the continuum argument about interpreting malapropisms. There are two strategies we could follow: we could fault the premise or fault the argument itself as non-truth-preserving. I will argue that the former strategy is not open to us, so our remaining option is to regard the malaprop argument as non-truth-preserving. But then we have to say the same about the continuum argument about interpreting metaphors also. Whether the comprehension

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² Our concern here is with acts of *linguistic* communication, but the communicative principle and the relevance theoretic framework are intended to apply to a broader range of cases: acts of ostensive communication which include, besides linguistic utterances, certain kinds of non-linguistic acts also.

procedure for interpreting metaphors includes any details specific to metaphor (or nonliteral discourse) therefore remains an open question.

2 RELEVANCE THEORY ABOUT THE LITERAL–LOOSE–METAPHORICAL CONTINUUM

Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson’s influential framework for the study of communication, relevance theory [1, 2] outlines an inferential comprehension procedure that hearers follow in arriving at an interpretation of speakers’ linguistic utterances. Crucially, the comprehension procedure is delimited and guided by specific assumptions about relevance (i)–(iii), accepted by speakers and hearers alike. (i) Cognition (generally, not just in the case of communication) aims to maximize relevance (this is the *cognitive principle* of relevance). (ii) Linguistic utterances communicate a presumption of their own optimal relevance (this follows from the *communicative principle* of relevance²). And (iii) an utterance is *presumed to be optimally relevant* if and only if it is at least relevant enough to be worth the speaker’s effort to process it, and it is the most relevant utterance compatible with the speaker’s abilities and preferences. The kind of inference involved in the relevance theoretic comprehension procedure is inference to the best explanation [4]. The concepts encoded by the words the speaker has used on a given occasion are mere starting points for arriving, via inferential steps, at an interpretation of her utterance: her utterance’s explicit content (the speaker’s explicit meaning) on the one hand, and its implicit content (which consists of implicit premises and conclusions) on the other.

By explicit and implicit content, we mean content that was *intended* as such by the speaker. The hearer’s task is to *reconstruct* the explicit content and implicit premises and conclusions that the speaker has intended to communicate. Of course, rarely, if ever do hearers converge on the very same concepts as those that speakers actually meant. Nor is this required for successful communication. It suffices that the concepts reconstructed by the hearer be ones that allow him to draw (nearly enough) the same inferences as those intended by the speaker; it is enough that the reconstructed concepts “activate contextual implications that make the utterance relevant as expected” [3].

A recurring example of Sperber–Wilson’s [3, 5, 6] exemplifies *loose use*: ‘Holland is flat’ uttered in the context of the following conversation: Peter and Mary are discussing their next cycling trip. Peter has just said that he feels rather unfit. Mary replies: “We could go to Holland. Holland is flat.” Sperber–Wilson [5] illustrate the inferential comprehension procedure via which Peter interprets Mary’s second sentence as follows.

(a) Mary has said to Peter, ‘Holland is flat’.	<i>Decoding of Mary’s utterance.</i>
(b) Mary’s utterance is optimally relevant to Peter.	<i>Expectation raised by the recognition of Mary’s utterance as a communicative act, and acceptance of the presumption of relevance it automatically conveys.</i>

(c) Mary’s utterance will achieve relevance by giving reasons for her proposal to go cycling in Holland, which take account of Peter’s immediately preceding complaint that he feels rather unfit.	<i>Expectation raised by (b), together with the fact that such reasons would be most relevant to Peter at this point.</i>
(d) Cycling on relatively flatter terrain which involves little or no climbing is less strenuous, and would be enjoyable in the circumstances.	<i>First assumption to occur to Peter which, together with other appropriate premises, might satisfy expectation (c). Accepted as an implicit premise of Mary’s utterance.</i>
(e) Holland is FLAT* (where FLAT* is the meaning indicated by ‘flat’, and is such that Holland’s being FLAT* is relevant-as-expected in the context).	<i>(Description of) the first enriched interpretation of Mary’s utterance as decoded in (a) to occur to Peter which might combine with (d) to lead to the satisfaction of (c). Interpretation accepted as Mary’s explicit meaning.</i>
(f) Cycling in Holland would involve little or no climbing.	<i>Inferred from (d) and (e). Accepted as an implicit conclusion of Mary’s utterance.</i>
(g) Cycling in Holland would be less strenuous, and would be enjoyable in the circumstances.	<i>Inferred from (d) and (f), satisfying (b) and (c) and accepted as an implicit conclusion of Mary’s utterance.</i>

Table 1. Interpretation of Mary’s utterance ‘Holland is flat’.

As indicated on line (e) (in boldface), the explicit content of Mary’s utterance ‘Holland is flat’ is ‘Holland is FLAT*’. FLAT* is an *ad hoc concept* Peter arrived at that is distinct from, broader³ than the lexicalized concept encoded by the word ‘flat’: say, FLAT. Unlike FLAT*, the extension of FLAT doesn’t include imperfectly flat surfaces like the Dutch landscape.

Loose use, as in ‘Holland is flat’ is a type of literal discourse⁴ that involves some departure from the lexically encoded concept. While the departure is greater than in many other instances of literal discourse, Sperber–Wilson [3] stress that the comprehension procedure for *some* literal utterances (to wit: cases of loose use) already involves the formation of *ad hoc* concepts. They suggest further that even in literal utterances that do not involve a departure from the lexically encoded concept, the process of disambiguating the expressions used involves inferential steps similar to those in Table 1. For example, Mary’s and Peter’s idiolect may have (at least) two senses associated with the word ‘flat’, one of which amounts to, say, “having a smooth, even surface” while the other, to “is in a horizontal position”; Sperber–Wilson [3, p. 111] suggest that if Mary uttered “My computer screen is flat”, the process of interpreting her utterance and deciding that she has in mind the first and not

³ Alternatively, according to another prominent relevance theorist, Robyn Carston [7], the formation of *ad hoc* concepts involves conceptual narrowing as well as broadening.

⁴ Sperber–Wilson [1, pp. 234–235; 3] stress the literal status of instances of loose use.

the second sense of ‘flat’ would take a similar inferential procedure as the one seen in Table 1.

Sperber and Wilson [3] gradually build up a continuum of cases with no clear boundaries in between them. The continuum includes cases of disambiguation like (“My computer screen is flat”), various examples of

- loose use (or broadening), covering a broad range:
 - *Approximation*: “Holland is flat”;
 - *Limited category extension*: “Here is a Kleenex”, said of a piece of non-Kleenex-brand tissue;
 - *Creative category extension*: “For luggage, pink is the new black”;
- *Hyperbole*: “Joan is the kindest person on earth”;
- *Nonpoetic metaphor*: “Joan is an angel”;
- *Poetic metaphor*: “The fog comes on little cat feet” (from Carl Sandburg’s poem *The Fog*).

A central claim of relevance theory (besides Sperber and Wilson, see also Carston [7]) is that each of the listed cases involves the formation of an *ad hoc* concept, one that—as we go down the list of examples—exhibits a gradually greater degree of departure from the concept lexically encoded by the word used, that is, the concept that serves as one of the starting points for the comprehension procedure. The *ad hoc* concepts are then featured as part of the explicit content attributed to the speaker (as in line (e) in Table 1). The *ad hoc* concepts for the listed examples (except for poetic metaphors, to be discussed in detail in Section 4) are as follows:

- FLAT*, whose extension includes imperfectly flat surfaces like the Dutch landscape;
- KLEENEX*, whose extension includes paper tissues that aren’t Kleenex brand;
- BLACK*, whose extension includes (roughly) objects of a fashionable, trendy color, among them pink suitcases;
- KINDEST PERSON ON EARTH*, whose extension includes people who are very kind, but not even close to being among the *kindest*;
- ANGEL*, whose extension includes nonangelic human beings who are very kind.

We are now in a position to formulate in far more depth and detail Sperber–Wilson’s (and other relevance theorists’) argument about interpreting metaphors:

THE CONTINUUM ARGUMENT ABOUT INTERPRETING METAPHORS

Continuum premise for metaphors:

All metaphorical utterances (poetic and nonpoetic alike) can be located on a continuum of cases that includes loose use (a kind of literal use) as well as hyperbolic and metaphorical uses. Further, the process of forming *ad hoc* concepts to arrive at the explicit content attributed to the speaker is a tool that is readily applicable to all metaphorical utterances (not just to instances of loose use and hyperbole).

Procedure conclusion for metaphors:

Equipped with the relevance theoretic comprehension procedure and the *ad hoc* concept formation tool, both already required for interpreting literal utterances like loose use, we have all the resources needed to describe the comprehension

procedure at play during the interpretation of metaphorical utterances. No further details specific to metaphor (or figurative language use) are needed in a comprehensive account of interpreting metaphors.

In Section 3, I will raise an objection intended to show that the continuum argument about interpreting metaphors is flawed: even if we accepted its premise, that is not reason enough to accept its conclusion also. I will motivate this by giving what I think is an analogous argument about malaprops with a clearly false conclusion. Someone might then raise a counterobjection: the argument about malaprops has a false conclusion because its premise is false. So as long as we can maintain (as relevance theorists do) the continuum premise for metaphors while resisting its analog about malaprops, we are entitled to keep the continuum argument about interpreting metaphors and maintain that its conclusion is true because its premise is. In Section 4, I will elaborate this counterobjection and deflect it by showing that the malaprop premise and the metaphor premise are equally plausible. My objection therefore has traction and there is room to reject the procedure conclusion for metaphors, despite relevance theorists’ arguments to the contrary.

3 AN OBJECTION TO THE CONTINUUM ARGUMENT ABOUT INTERPRETING METAPHORS

Once we have accepted the continuum argument about interpreting metaphors, along with its premise and its conclusion, we have, I claim, no reason to resist making the same moves with respect to an analogous argument about malaprops (and more generally, about linguistic errors):

THE CONTINUUM ARGUMENT ABOUT INTERPRETING MALAPROPS

Continuum premise for malaprops:

All malaprops can be located on a continuum of cases that includes loose use (a kind of literal use) as well as hyperbolic and metaphorical uses. Further, the process of forming *ad hoc* concepts to arrive at the explicit content attributed to the speaker is a tool that is readily applicable to all malaprops.

Procedure conclusion for malaprops:

Equipped with the relevance theoretic comprehension procedure and the *ad hoc* concept formation tool, both already required for interpreting literal utterances like loose use, we have all the resources needed to describe the comprehension procedure at play during the interpretation of malaprops. No further details specific to slips of the tongue (or more broadly: linguistic errors) are needed in a comprehensive account of interpreting malaprops.

But—my objection goes—there is a flaw in this argument: (i) its conclusion is clearly unacceptable and (ii) it remains unacceptable even if we accept its premise. And if we accept all this, we have exposed a flaw in the original continuum argument about interpreting *metaphors*. In the rest of this section, I aim to establish (i), in the next section, (ii).

The procedure conclusion for malaprops leads to the following bizarre results:

- *Allegory example.* In interpreting Mrs. Malaprop's utterance "She is as headstrong as an allegory on the banks of the Nile", the explicit content that hearers arrive at involves an *ad hoc* concept ALLEGORY*, which is constructed by broadening the concept lexically encoded by the word 'allegory' (about a certain kind of trope or figure of speech) in such a way that its extension includes *alligators*. The comprehension procedure is basically the same as that in Table 1, it's just that the degree of departure to get from FLAT to FLAT* is not as great as that from ALLEGORY to ALLEGORY*.
- *Spanking example.* In interpreting George W. Bush's utterance in the context of a speech he gave at a school "I want to spank all teachers" (he meant *thank all teachers*), the explicit content that hearers arrive at involves an *ad hoc* concept SPANK*, which is constructed by broadening the concept lexically encoded by the word 'spank' (about slapping) in such a way that its extension includes acts of *thanking*. The comprehension procedure is basically the same as that in Table 1, it's just that the degree of departure to get from FLAT to FLAT* is not as great as that from SPANK to SPANK*.

As mentioned before, the continuum argument about malaprops is readily extended to linguistic errors of all sorts, including slips of the tongue other than malaprops as well as mistaken translations like the following:

- *Steak example.* In interpreting a German speaker's order in a restaurant "I want to become a steak" ('bekommen' in German means 'get'), the explicit content that hearers arrive at involves the *ad hoc* concept BECOME*, which is constructed by broadening the concept lexically encoded by the word 'become' in English (about 'turning into') in such a way that its extension includes one thing *getting* another. The comprehension procedure is basically the same as that in Table 1, it's just that the degree of departure to get from FLAT to FLAT* is not as great as that from BECOME to BECOME*.

It is bizarre to think that when we manage to interpret successfully the German speaker's request to "become a steak", we are broadening the concept lexically encoded by the English word 'become'. After all, our grasping that he's talking about getting a steak rather than turning into one happens *despite* his use of the English word 'become'. We can say the same about understanding Mrs. Malaprop's and George W. Bush's utterances: it is *despite* the encoded meaning of the words they have used that we manage to interpret them as having said something about alligators and thanking, respectively.

In the light of this, it seems that relevance theoretic comprehension procedures, as they stand, are missing key details that distinguish malaprops (and more broadly, linguistic errors) from utterances that are literal or metaphorical. To wit: the procedure has to specify that in utterances like 'Holland is flat', 'Joan is an angel' (loose and metaphorical uses alike), the speaker has *not* committed a linguistic error; further, that the speaker (and hearer) takes the lexically encoded concept

associated with her words to be in force, and would not retract her words when confronted with the concept lexically encoded by her words. By contrast, in the case of linguistic errors including malaprops, the hearer is rerouting the inference such that he sets aside the lexically encoded concept entirely, and the speaker, when confronted with the lexically encoded concept, would retract his or her words: "I didn't mean spanking teachers was desirable, I wanted to talk about thanking them." "I didn't mean there were allegories on the banks of the Nile, I wanted to talk about alligators". But we would have absolutely no grounds for seeking such additional details if we thought the continuum argument about malaprops worked and moreover featured a true premise. If, despite the argument about malaprops, we thought the additional details were needed, then we open the door to seeking additional details with which to supplement the comprehension procedure for metaphorical utterances also. And we thereby open the door to rejecting the conclusion of the continuum argument about metaphors.

An analogy helps illuminate what my objection, if successful, shows with respect to Sperber-Wilson's continuum argument about interpreting metaphors. If you are at Columbus Circle in Manhattan and want to take the subway to the Museum of Natural History (at 81st Street), then don't get on the A train (the 8th Avenue Express); despite the fact that you would initially approach your desired destination, eventually, your train would whizz right past the Museum of Natural History, taking you all the way to 125th Street in Harlem, far away from your desired destination. Likewise: if you don't want an inferential comprehension procedure for malaprops (and other linguistic errors) that invokes no more than the formation of *ad hoc* concepts at work in the comprehension procedure you posited for cases of loose use, then don't apply the continuum argument to metaphorical utterances, for you won't be able to get off there but will be whisked straight to a place where you don't want to be: the continuum argument about interpreting malaprops.

4 A COUNTEROBJECTION DEFLECTED

It seems natural to respond to the foregoing objection as follows: a distinguishing feature of linguistic errors, malaprops included, is that the speaker makes a mistake about which *word form* is associated with the lexically encoded concept that he or she wants to express: G. W. Bush has said 'spank' even though his intended concept is expressed by the word form 'thank'; Mrs. Malaprop has said 'allegory' even though her intended concept is expressed by the word form 'alligator'. Those voicing such a counterobjection may then continue: of course the swapping of word forms, and the fact that the hearer recognizes the swap and reroutes the inference accordingly, will be part of the comprehension procedure via which he interprets malaprops and the like. We are in no way forced to regard the alligator, spanking and steak examples as cases involving simply the formation of *ad hoc* concepts with extreme degrees of departure from the lexically encoded concepts that had served as starting points for the construction of the *ad hoc* concept. This is how the counterobjection goes.

Someone could maintain this line while holding on to the continuum argument for *metaphors* and its conclusion, by denying the premise of the continuum argument about *malaprops*. This would amount to showing either that—in the context of relevance theory—extending the literal–metaphorical

continuum to malaprops (and other linguistic errors) is unfounded, or that—again, in the context of relevance theory—extending the tool of *ad hoc* concept construction to malaprops (and other linguistic errors) is unfounded. In what follows, I will show that neither of these will work and hence the counterobjection fails. My response consists of three parts:

(A) In the case of poetic metaphors, the *ad hoc* concept departs greatly from the lexically encoded one, yet Sperber–Wilson (and others) do not doubt that here, too, explicit content is arrived at via the construction of an *ad hoc* concept.

(B) With respect to malaprops (and other linguistic errors also) we can talk about a continuum of cases ranging from limited to extreme degrees of discrepancy between the intended concept and the lexically encoded one. And the limited-discrepancy cases fit squarely the *ad hoc* concept formation paradigm and can be readily placed on the literal–metaphorical continuum Sperber–Wilson had posited.

(C) In formulating the continuum argument about metaphors, Sperber–Wilson appealed to considerations (about there being a continuum of cases that encompasses various types of loose use, including approximation, limited and creative category extension, along with hyperbole, nonpoetic metaphor and poetic metaphor) based on which there is no reason to deny that the continuum and the process of *ad hoc* concept formation extends to all other examples that (i) themselves form a continuum, (ii) are candidates for being accounted for via the already posited inferential comprehension procedure featuring the formation of *ad hoc* concepts, and (iii) include clear candidates for inclusion on the literal–metaphorical continuum.

In Section 2, I have already given reasons for holding (C). In what follows, I will, in turn, motivate (A) and (B).

(A) concerns poetic metaphors. We’ve already encountered the example from Sandburg’s poem “The fog comes on little cat feet”. According to Sperber–Wilson, the explicit content arrived at in the comprehension procedure for interpreting this line of the poem involves the *ad hoc* concept: ON-LITTLE-CAT-FEET*. What Sperber–Wilson say about this concept signifies that it involves a great degree of departure from the lexically encoded concept: the *ad hoc* concept is supposed to help convey that the fog is spreading in a smooth, quiet, stealthy and deliberate way. Yet it remains quite vague what this *ad hoc* concept is, in what direction it takes off from the lexicalized concept, what does and does not belong in its extension. The authors offer us limited guidance on these matters: ON-LITTLE-CAT-FEET* “is the concept of a property that is difficult or impossible to define, a property possessed in particular by some typical movements of cats (though not all of them—little cat feet can also move in violent or playful ways) and, according to the poem, by the fog” [3, p. 122].

As Sperber–Wilson see it, the great distance between lexicalized and *ad hoc* concepts and the vague description of the latter is no obstacle to applying the *ad hoc* concept formation paradigm to highly creative, poetic metaphors. Then comparably great distances and vagueness characterizing ALLEGORY* (whose extension includes certain reptiles) and SPANK* (whose extension includes acts of thanking) should be no obstacle to applying the

ad hoc concept formation paradigm to malaprops (and other linguistic errors).

Turning to (B), about examples involving limited-discrepancy between the encoded concept and the intended one. Examples like the following form a continuum with the extreme-discrepancy examples about allegory, spanking and becoming a steak. Meanwhile, these examples fit squarely within the *ad hoc* concept formation paradigm, comparable to the “Here is a Kleenex” and “For luggage, pink is the new black” type examples.

Ocean example (a slip of the tongue involving limited discrepancy). G. W. Bush said once: “I didn’t grow up in the ocean—as a matter of fact—near the ocean—I grew up in the desert. Therefore, it was a pleasant contrast to see the ocean. And I particularly like it when I’m fishing.” In interpreting the first portion of Bush’s utterance, via *ad hoc* concept formation, from the encoded lexical meaning IN-THE-OCEAN, we arrive, by broadening, to IN-THE-OCEAN*, whose extension includes events and things *near* the ocean.

Library example (a mistaken translation involving limited discrepancy). A French speaker says: “There is a library around the corner” to mean that there is *bookshop* around the corner (in French ‘libraire’ means bookshop). In interpreting the utterance, via *ad hoc* concept formation, from the encoded lexical meaning of LIBRARY, we arrive, by broadening, to LIBRARY*, whose extension includes bookshops. (Such an utterance could also exemplify a slip of the tongue involving limited discrepancy.)

In the ocean example, the distance between IN-THE-OCEAN and IN-THE-OCEAN* is no greater and no less vaguely delineated than that between KLEENEX and KLEENEX*. The same can be said about LIBRARY and LIBRARY* also. And we can envision a continuity of cases from such limited-discrepancy examples to the more extreme ones like in the allegory, spanking and steak examples.

This concludes my justification for (A)–(C), which together show that the counterobjection about swapped word forms does not undermine the objection I had formulated against the continuity argument about interpreting metaphorical utterances. After all, the limited-discrepancy examples of linguistic error make clear that the continuum premise for malaprops (and other linguistic mistakes) is just as plausible as the continuum premise for metaphors. We therefore have at hand two analogous arguments, both with true premises, and the one about malaprops boasting a clearly false conclusion. Hence, the other argument, about metaphors, is also undermined: the truth of its premise is no guarantee for the truth of its conclusion.

5 CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

The continuum argument about interpreting metaphorical utterances is central to Sperber–Wilson’s conclusion that “[t]here is no mechanism specific to metaphors, no interesting generalisation that applies only to them. In other terms, linguistic metaphors are not a natural kind, and ‘metaphor’ is not a theoretically important notion in the study of verbal communication” [3, p. 97]. My aim has been to show that we need not accept this conclusion given that the continuum

argument about interpreting metaphors is flawed, as shown by its application to malaprops (and other linguistic errors).

In the wake of my objection to the continuum argument, several questions arise.

First, what shall we make of empirical considerations about metaphor processing, according to which, for example, the interpretation procedure for simpler metaphors is similar to that for literal utterances, while interpreting highly creative or novel metaphors involves a markedly different procedure [8]?⁵ The dialectical situation is as follows: such considerations support or undermine, *independently of the continuum argument about interpreting metaphors*, the claim that a similar comprehension procedure applies to literal utterances and certain types of metaphorical utterances. The continuum argument doesn't—cannot—provide an objection to or further support for such claims, because (as I have tried to argue, successfully, I hope) if it were to work, it would show too much, so it doesn't work. Therefore the tenability of the claim about a literal–loose–metaphorical continuum and the application of *ad hoc* concept formation in the interpretation of metaphorical utterances will depend on *other* (experimental-data-driven) arguments.

Second, it is worth considering a positive proposal about how to supplement the relevance theoretic comprehension procedure for interpreting metaphors. I address this question in work in progress [11, 12], drawing in part on some of the considerations that provide missing details to supplement the comprehension procedure for interpreting malaprops and other linguistic errors (these were briefly discussed in Section 3). In the case of metaphorical utterances (but not malaprops), the speaker (and hearer) takes the lexically encoded concept associated with her words to be in force, and would not retract her words when confronted with the concept lexically encoded by her words. “The fog doesn't really walk on feline legs,” someone might challenge the poet. And he might reply: “I was speaking metaphorically. But I stand by my words: The fog does come on little cat feet”. By contrast, Mrs. Malaprop, when challenged, “There are no such things as pineapples of politeness,” would (likely) respond: “I retract my previous words; I meant to speak about a *pinnacle* of politeness”.⁶ Such differences in the response to being challenged about the lexically encoded concepts associated with one's words do, I think, offer a promising starting point for the sorts of details that a relevance theoretic comprehension procedure might incorporate in an account of metaphor. Such an account would part ways with Sperber–Wilson's stance, claiming instead that there are, after all, interesting details and generalizations specific to metaphors. More generally, the various ways in which lexically encoded concepts systematically constrain speakers' meaning in the case of loose, hyperbolic and metaphorical utterances is a worthy area of inquiry within the relevance theoretic framework.⁷

⁵ More recent experimental results [10] cast doubt on earlier views positing a marked difference in the processing of novel metaphors and literal utterances. Carston [9] a central figure of relevance theory parts ways with Sperber–Wilson [3] and posits two distinct modes of processing metaphorical utterances.

⁶ See Camp [13, 14] about how deniability reveals distinctive features of metaphorical utterances.

⁷ I have received many incisive comments in connection with this research project. I thank audiences and organizers at two conferences (Philosophy of Linguistics and Language X, in the Special Session on Dan Sperber és Deirdre Wilson's Philosophy of Language,

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