

Figurative Meaning in Poetry as a Source for Linguistic Analysis

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This paper wants to highlight the importance of poetry informing linguistic analyses of figurative meaning, specifically with regard to its relation to literal meaning: Poetry reveals a yet unobserved connection between the status of literal and figurative meaning and the way utterances are added to the Common Ground (Stalnaker 1978):

In (1), both the literal meaning of the client having poor vision and thus trouble to sign the contract, and the figurative meaning of him not being able to see future advantages of the contract, are part of the utterance meaning. Only the interaction between both meanings makes the utterance funny.

(1) A manager tells a friend about her business meeting with a client. Both know that her client has to wear thick glasses.

Friend: How did it go? Did he sign the contract?

Manager: Well, his short-sightedness made it pretty hard.

(1) is contrasted with (2) where the literal and the figurative meaning of an utterance compete and the actual meaning of the utterance is achieved through disambiguating between the two options:

(2) *I have my heart set on buying this couch.*

Here, only a figurative reading of “heart” as “the seat of feeling, understanding, and thought” (OED) is possible as opposed to the literal meaning of heart meaning the actual organ. Whereas figurative meaning is often considered along the line of cases as (2), the analysis of poetic examples of figurative meaning can help accounting for cases as in (1). In Emily Dickinson’s poem below, similar to (1), both, the literal and the figurative meaning of “heart” are necessary for the interpretation of the text.

(3) *Empty my heart, of Thee –
Its single Artery –*

Once we acknowledge that cases as (3) are within the repertoire of natural language, their analysis can inform the analysis of cases as (1): (3) and (1) are different from (2) in that their communicative intention is not to simply assert something informative and true: In (3), both meanings are part of a complex overall interpretation of the poem whose relevance lies in its relation to the evaluation world of the reader. (1), in addition to asserting something true, aims at asserting something funny. We consider both examples for a formal semantic-pragmatic analysis of utterance meaning that takes into account speech act operators as being responsible for adding information to the Common Ground (Krifka 1995). Whereas “Assert” (see (4)) adds (2) to the Common Ground, previous research has provided the speech act operator “FictionalAssert” (Bauer and Beck 2014, see (5)) that adds fictional utterances to the Common Ground by setting the text in relation to the actual world. We think that operators like these are responsible for disambiguation in one case and keeping both options as part of the utterance meaning in the other. In order to analyse (1), an operator is needed that shares properties with both “Assert” and “FictionalAssert”, in that it asserts something true but also creates a humor-effect. This operator shall be spelled out formally in future research.

(4) [[Assert]] = $\lambda p. p(@) = 1$ (simplified version)

(5) [[FictionalAssert]] = $\lambda T. \forall w [T(w) \ \& \ w \text{ is maximally similar to } @ \text{ otherwise } \rightarrow R(@)(w)]$

Selected References:

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