

Difference and Deferral: a pragmatic definition of metonymy

Abstract

In this paper I will consider metonymy at the point of intersection between cognitive linguistics, philosophy and art practice. I will identify relationships between Derrida's notion of 'différance' – meaning both *to differ* and *to defer*; the cognitive linguistic view which identifies difference, seriality and meaning expansion as key characteristics of metonymy, and interdisciplinary art practice which, through its 'generically disrespectful and promiscuous' approach can offer a new pragmatic view of metonymy (Carter 2004: 9).

I suggest that the linguistic definition of metonymy as a 'stands for' relation within one domain or domain matrix, is not easily applicable to non-linguistic forms of analysis, including visual arts, music, and multimodal forms of expression, where a complex mix of information is being navigated. The 'stands for' definition of metonymy fails to capture two key characteristics of this cognitive process; firstly, the ability of metonymy to highlight difference - as compared with metaphor, which highlights commonalities – and secondly, its tendency to form chains.

I develop this idea with reference to my own art practice, from initial conception of the artwork, through metonymic 'material thinking' in which ideas are developed through close interaction with materials, tools and locality, to the point of presentation and interaction with an audience, where new (unforeseen) meanings are generated.

I consider how this might connect with the cognitive linguistic view of serial metonymy and source-meaning elaboration expressed by Brigitte Nerlich (Nerlich 2001: 245-272), Armin Burkhardt (Burkhardt 1996: 178), and Klaus-Uwe Panther (Panther 2006: 147-185). Finally, I conclude that a pragmatic definition of metonymy as 'a cognitive process of meaning expansion within a domain or domain matrix', has the potential to reveal the true significance of metonymy in cognition.

References

- Carter, P. (2004) *Material Thinking: The Theory and Practice of Creative Research*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- Derrida, J. (1982). Différance. In J. Derrida (Ed.), *Margins of Philosophy*, pp. 3-27. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Burkhardt, A. (1996) Zwischen Poesie und Ökonomie. Die metonymie als semantisches prinzip. *Zeitschrift für Germanische Linguistik* 24(2), pp.175-194.
- Nerlich, B. and Clarke, D. D. (2001) Serial metonymy: A study of reference-based polysemisation. *Journal of Historical Pragmatics*, 2(2), pp 245-272.
- Panther, K-U. (2006) Metonymy as a Usage Event. In: Gitte Kristiansen, Michel Achard, René Dirven and Francisco J. Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez, eds. *Cognitive Linguistics: Current Applications and Future Perspectives* (Applications in Cognitive Linguistics 1), pp 147–185. Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter.