The ambiguity of 'ambiguity': beauty, power, and understanding

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1 The argument: ambiguity is functional

The general thesis of this contribution[1] is that there are far more kinds of ambiguity in language than is generally recognised in linguistics or in literary and cultural studies, and that ambiguity is functional, not a mishap of language, and a necessary component of analogical thinking rather than analytic thinking. The functionality of ambiguity will be discussed in terms of three dimensions: *beauty*, *power*, and *understanding*.

In mainstream structural linguistic approaches, and certainly in technological applications of linguistics, ambiguity appears to be seen as dysfunctional, and indeed, in formal analytical philosophy, as an unfortunate feature of natural language, to be overcome by the creation of an unambiguous artificial language.

But William Empson hits the nail on the head when he introduces the term with the claim (1930:1): "An ambiguity, in ordinary speech, means something very pronounced, and as a rule witty or deceitful." The notorious *double entendre* of British music hall and radio humour is a well known example of the functionality of ambiguity, and at the same time an example of how understanding and potential misunderstanding complement each other simultaneously. Empson goes on to note (1930:48):

> There are three possible scales or dimensions, that seem of reliable importance, along which ambiguities may be spread out: the degree of logical or grammatical disorder, the degree to which the apprehension of the ambiguity must be conscious, and the degree of psychological complexity.

The first of Empson's scales resembles that of mainstream linguistics, in which 'disambiguation' plays an important role in lexicography, in syntax and in semantics, and in which the exponential structural 'garden path' ambiguities of language are a puzzle for formal processing models, but paradoxically not a stumbling block for fluent speakers and their addressees. The physical events of speech itself are

1 This study is dedicated to Lucinda House and Theodor Wolpers, who initiated me into English Studies, and to the memory of my former mentor at King's College, London, the late Ilse Graham, who introduced me to Empson and more.

inherently ambiguous and lead most palpably to processing problems in automatic speech recognition, where, apocryphally, speech recognition software once identified 'it isn't easy to recognise speech' as 'it isn't easy to wreck a nice beach'.
Empson's second scale relates to awareness of ambiguity and its functionality: puns, *double entendre* and metaphor rely on awareness of ambiguity for their effect. It may be claimed that Empson's third scale, psychological complexity, is not only psychological, as he sees it, but also communicatively functional. Indeed, his 'seven types of ambiguity', which will be taken up later, demonstrate this clearly. It is the second and the third dimensions which are focussed in the present contribution.
In the following section, a brief overview of structural, linguistic ambiguities is given, followed by a discussion of the seven types of ambiguity of Empson's eponymous monograph. Metaphors are the topic of the fourth section, and the study concludes with a brief summarising *envoi*.

2 Structural ambiguity

2.1 Ambiguities of language and speech

Ambiguity is pervasive – even 'the cat sat on the mat' is ambiguous, and the supposedly meaningless 'colourless green ideas sleep furiously' has been given many interpretations, one of which translates as 'uninspiring ecological proposals generate hot air'. Ambiguity has been a prime explicandum of language studies from their inception, particularly in structuralist and post-structuralist frameworks. In the adaptation of formal semantics to linguistics by Katz & Fodor in the 1960s, synonymy and ambiguity were postulated as fundamental semantic *explicanda*, and logical empiricism has been characterised as the search for an artificial language for logic which does not have the properties of ambiguity, vagueness and imprecision which characterise natural languages.

One metalinguistic ambiguity, of course, and an occupational hazard for linguists, is that 'linguist' is highly ambiguous in English: one who has skills in multiple languages, or a researcher of language and its uses, or on occasion both. Another striking example is the ambiguity of the word 'language' itself. Linguists are confronted not only with the ambiguity of 'language' and 'a language', but with a variety of dichotomies representing high-dimensional ontological and conceptual spaces. Distinctions are made between spoken *tokens* and written *inscriptions*, following Peircean semiotics, and between these and language as generalised types in the form of lexical words and grammatical sentences, as interaction in discourse, as a faculty of the human mind, as behaviour, as the standardised vehicle of communication in a society, as a set of dialects with family resemblances and a common history. Beginning linguistics students are offered an extreme reduction of this dimensionality to a dichotomy: de Saussure's *langue* and *parole* (but where is *langage*?), or Trubetzkoy's *Sprechakt* and *Sprachgebilde* (1939), or Jakobson's *pattern* or *structure* and *performance* (1960), or Chomsky's *competence* and *performance* (1965), which has surfaced more recently as *I-language* and *E-language*. From Peirce one has come to expect triads of concepts, so where are not only *type* and *token*, but also *tone*? The ambiguities go much further. When is a dialect a language? Is a pidgin a language, or its more stable descendant, the creole? Is a language a code, is a code a language?

Many of these ambiguities, vaguenesses and generalities are due to the independent development of studies of the domain of language in different places, with different terminological preferences. As linguistics matures and interdisciplinary communication between linguists of different persuasions improves on a global scale, so does its terminology tend to become reasonably well standardised, though theoretically motivated variation in detail occurs, even in relatively simple cases such as 'phoneme' or 'morpheme'.

Sometimes ambiguities between technical and everyday language lead to creatively misleading new creations: 'competence' is, technically, knowledge, and, informally, 'authority' (in English perhaps less than its cognates in other languages). In textbooks on teaching methodology, the term 'competence' has come to mean proficiency, i.e. operational performance, and tests (which are linguistically in the

domain of performance) are taken to apply to this notion competence, which would be a true catachresis in linguistics.

However, conventionally it is structural ambiguities which are in the centre of attention. These are well-known, and in this context it will be sufficient to summarise a characteristic selection in tabular form (Table 1).

Table 1: Linguistic ambiguities (selection).

Type	Rank	Ambiguous item	Ambiguities
Homography	Word	*either*, *controversy*, *torment*	/aɪðə/, /iːðə/
	Word prosody	*controversy*, *torment*	/kən ˈtrɒvəsɪ/, / ˈkɒntrəvɜːsɪ/; / ˈtɔːmɛnt/ (noun), / ˈtɔː ˈmɛnt/ (verb)
Homophony	Word	*meat, meet*	/ miːt/
Homonymy	Word	*bank*	financial institution; side of river
Polysemy	Word	*bank*	financial institution; reserve; store
Levels of ambiguity	Morpheme	*bank*	financial institution; side of river
	Compound	*clamprod*	clam prod, clamp rod
	Derivation	*undressable*	able to be undressed, not able to be dressed
	Phrasal	*the old men and women*	the old men and the old women, the old men and the women
	Prosodic	*we didn't come because we were tired*	we didn't come (continuation tone and pause possible after *come*), we came (no pause after *come*, continuation tone at end)

These types of ambiguity generally go unnoticed in face-to-face communication, though they may lead to misunderstandings which in turn, mercifully, may go unnoticed. A particularly interesting category is prosodic ambiguity: prosody (the rhythm and melody of speech) is often treated as a mysterious area of language which readily disambiguates almost any ambiguity. In reality, prosody is a structured sign system with its own components, optionalities and ambiguities, as in the Table.

2.2 Multimodal ambiguity

A form of ambiguity which is very close to prosodic ambiguity is multimodal ambiguity. Multimodal communication is communication using more than one modality; a modality is a combination of human output-input ports, such as mouth-ear, hand-eye (gesture), hand-ear (clapping), mainly in acoustic and visual channels.[2] Spoken language is coming to be understood in a more enveloping sense than the traditional acoustic channel, and to include multimodal face-to-face interaction in which the modalities of facial and manual gesture, posture and relative position of the interlocutors are examined in relation to spoken language (cf. McNeill 2005).

An area like multimodal communication is, of course, intrinsically multidisciplinary and requires not only conventional linguistic training but the ability to cooperate across the boundaries with many neigbouring disciplines, particularly when it comes to visualising visual movements. Starting from the definition of 'pragmatics' as the relations between a sign and its users, multimodal ambiguity is a special case of ambiguity in which semantics and pragmatics overlap.

Multimodal ambiguity is closely related to prosodic ambiguity. An example which requires both of these is focussing for highlighting new, contrastive or emphatic information. Focussing may not only be effected by adverbs ('definitely'), sentence position ('It was Jim who fixed it'), but also by prosody, i.e. accentuation and intonation, as the examples in Table 1 show. But gesture is also involved in face to face communication, and even in teleglossic conversation on the phone: there is a degree of synchronisation of conversational gestures with accentual pitch movements: rhythmic nodding and

2 The term 'multimodal' is to be distinguished from the term 'multimedia', which refers to the simultaneous use of multiple transmission channels or media, rather than multiple human input-output ports (Gibbon 2000).

shaking of the head, raising or narrowing of the eyebrows, blinking of the eyelids, and movements of hands and arms.

Another area of multimodal ambiguity is deixis: the deictic words 'this', 'that', 'here' 'behind' and so on are intrinsically ambiguous and can only be resolved by knowledge of the linguistic or situational context. Pointing itself is ambiguous: depending on the distance from the object pointed to, the denotation is contained in a cone-shaped space with the apex of the cone at the finger and the base of the cone somewhere in the distance, and any object within this cone could be the intended denotation of the pointing gesture (Obwal et al. 2003; see also Figure 1b).

The deictic pointing model is essentially a system of concentric *spheres* (Figure 1a), typically three: the inside sphere is *here*, (more exactly: *ego*, *hic*, *nunc*, 'I', 'here', 'now'), the middle sphere is *there* (often *you*) the outer sphere, which is indefinitely large, is *yonder*, *over there* (i.e. *they*). The *cone* is a *solid angle* within the system of spheres: the sides emanate from the centre of the sphere, and the base intersects with the surface of the sphere. Any object subtended by the cone is a potential referent of the pointing gesture, no matter in which of the deictic spheres it is contained.

(a) 

(b) 

Figure 1: Deictic ambiguities
(a) Concentric spheres of location identity and awareness.
<http://www.oceanofsilence.com/mediac/400_0/media/BubbleMeditation.jpg>
(b)Deictic cone subtending different possible denotations (black chair, table, smilies).
<http://graphics.cs.columbia.edu/projects/SenseShapes/ismar screenshot.jpg> (Obwal & al. 2003).

The ambiguity of gesture extends both to other gestures, and also to other kinds of ambiguity: cross-cultural misunderstanding can easily occur. Pointing at people with the index finger, for example, is taboo in many cultures, and a gesture such as a closed circle with the index finger and thumb, indicating success or optimality in some European cultures, may be an obscene iconic gesture in others.

3 Functional ambiguity

3.1 Seven types of ambiguity

In his classic study, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, Empson (1930, [2]1947) not only introduced a close reading of 'ambiguity', mainly in pragmatic terms. In addition to structural aspects of ambiguity, Empson also examined aspects of ambiguity which in the present context may be termed pragmatic. Empson's study laid the foundations for new paradigms in literary studies, heavily influenced the close reading techniques of New Criticism (though apparently he objected to microscopically close reading), and is of considerable linguistic interest.

But we linguists have not really taken Empson's lessons to heart, and would benefit from doing so. Inherent and contextually disambiguable lexical and syntactic ambiguity, the kinds most familiar to

linguists, are not Empson's topic. Empson is concerned with ambiguity in an 'extended sense', i.e. actual occurrences of ambiguity in texts where no disambiguation in context occurs, that is (risking a neologism) with 'performance ambiguity', rather than 'competence ambiguity', and with explaining the former in terms of the latter.

Going a step further than Empson, the seven types of ambiguity which Empson discusses will be assigned to three overriding pragmatic categories: *beauty*, *power*, and *understanding*. (less so to their antitheses of ugliness, powerlessness and misunderstanding). The seven types of ambiguity will first be introduced, and then assigned to these categories.

Empson's extended sense of ambiguity includes the seven distinctions of the monograph's title (his numerous subdistinctions cannot be enumerated here):

1. a detail is effective in several ways at once: metaphor (*beauty is but a flower*, p. 25), as well as metaphysical conceit, ambiguities of rhythm; dramatic irony;
2. two or more meanings resolved into one, two metaphors at once, e.g. ambiguity of grammar (*Their images I love'd, I view in thee*, p. 52, with *I love'd* either as subject+verb of main clause, or as a relative clause);
3. two ideas connected through context in one word, puns (Samson, on Delilah: *That specious monster, my accomplished snare*, p. 102, e.g. where 'accomplished' simultaneously has two meanings, 'skilled in the arts of blandishment and successful in undoing her husband');
4. two or more disparate meanings in one word indicate complexity (*And yet you will weep*, p. 148, where 'will' simultaneously means insistence or future);
5. ambiguity in writing, a fortunate confusion e.g. creating meaning intermediate between two statements *(Time with a gift of tears / Grief with a glass that ran*, p. 165, with interchanged prepositional phrases);
6. ambiguity in reading, perhaps not intended by author (*Her eyes were a trifle large*, p. 176, where 'trifle' may or may not have been intended negatively or positively);
7. indecision: opposites indicating a fundamental conflict in the author's mind (*In her youth / There is a prone and speechlesse dialect / Such as move men*). , p. 202, where 'prone' has opposite meanings of 'inactive and lying flat' and 'active, tending to', the expression 'speechless dialect' is an overt contradition, and of the formulation *Such as move men* Empson coyly remarks "I feel very indelicate" in explaining its meaning).

Empson's seven types have in common, despite his emphasis on 'logical or grammatical disorder', their emphasis on the *effect* of ambiguity. This applies to metaphor, puns (though humour does not figure strongly in his explanations), or indeterminate meanings. The ambiguous coinage has the power to create something more than logic and grammar, namely an explanatory framework for new insights, aesthetic pleasure, humour, irony, understanding, and, of course, misunderstanding. How could justice otherwise be done to Churchill's famous *double entendre* metaphorical pun 'that utensil' (Black 1962), referring to Stalin – an insult in its own right, but additionally a British slang euphemism for 'tool', one of many synonyms of 'penis', which it would be highly indecorous for a Prime Minister to use. To understand this two-tiered metaphor thus requires culture-specific and, for non-Brits, cross-cultural knowledge.:Lack of such cross-cultural knowledge no doubt prevended diplomatic outrage at the time (and, incidentally, this innuendo was apparently completely missed by Black, an American, and presumably not conversant with British argot). Churchill used the power of this duplicitous metaphor to manipulate the addressee by combining understanding (the contribution of the overt metaphor 'utensil') with potential misunderstanding (a defence against potential accusations of indecorous language).

It is claimed here that Empson's seven types may be further generalised in terms of the three semantic and pragmatic categories of beauty, power and understanding, and that the assignment of the seven types to these three categories may be performed as shown in Table 2. The category *beauty* is taken to refer to a positive experience shared by poet and reader. The category *power* is taken to be a form of manipulation of the reader by the poet. The semantic category of *understanding* refers to the

sharing of meaning by poet or reader, and its antithesis *misunderstanding* (by either poet or reader or both) relates to the structural linguistic concept of ambiguity as a mishap of language. The assignments are tendencies, not hard and fast unique assignments, and are perhaps best thought of as *dimensions of effect*, or in speech act terms *perlocutions*, which all ambiguities may possess to a greater or lesser degree.

Table 2: Categorisation of ambiguity types as beauty, power and misunderstanding.

	Beauty	**Power**	**Understanding**
1	a detail is effective in several ways at once: metaphor, as well as metaphysical conceit, ambiguities of rhythm; dramatic irony;		
2	two or more meanings resolved into one, two metaphors at once, e.g. ambiguity of grammar		
3		two ideas connected through context in one word, puns	
4		two or more disparate meanings in one word indicate complexity	
5		ambiguity in writing, a fortunate confusion e.g. creating meaning intermediate between two statements	
6			ambiguity in reading: perhaps not intended by author
7			indecision: opposites indicating a fundamental conflict in the author's mind

3.2 Crosscultural ambiguity and partial understanding

A poem (Soyinka 1975) by the Ghanaian poet Kwesi Brew, 1928-2007, vividly portrays ceremonial scenarios of death, burial which relate to worship of the ancestors - ‘they’ in the poem - of traditional West African religions.

But how much do we as European readers understand, beyond exotic and partly comprehended allusions, even allowing for the metaphorical character of many? We can pick out two words, *wawa tree* and *cowries* to illustrate. We will very likely not know the word *wawa* and we may happen to know the word *cowrie*. So ‘wawa’ is maximally ambiguous, being completely unspecified but partly disambiguated by the head of the compound, ‘tree’. To comprehend more fully, we need to know not only that wawa trees may be gnarled, and thus presumably grow old, but also that they are a staple material in local economies of the region, being used to make coffins, drums and canoes.

We also need to know that cowries are shells used all over the tropics around the world as a form of money. We also need to know what they look like: they are symbols of fertility, used in ritual and erotic headdress and cache-sexe decoration, with a fancied resemblance not only to facial lips but also to female genital lips. The cowrie is consequently a metaphor for power of different kinds, and perhaps also for beholder-specific beauty.

But this is not all. As Europeans, in general we will not have associations of ritual & erotic decoration for a headdress or a cache-sexe, of a unit of currency, apparently the most widely used currency ever throughout the tropics around the world. Consequently, in our understanding of these

concepts, we introduce our own models for comprehending what we read: insofar as ‘wawa tree’ or ‘cowrie’ are not understood, they are assigned a connotation of ‘unknown’ or ‘exotic’, which is a reader-constructed artefact from the perspective of the original production setting of the poem.

Ancestral Faces (Kwesi Brew)

They sneaked into the limbo of time
But could not muffle the gay jingling
Brass bells on the frothy necks
Of the sacrificial sheep that limped and nodded after them;
They could not hide the moss on the bald pate
Of their reverent heads;
And the gnarled backs of the wawa tree;
Nor the rust on the ancient state-swords;
Nor the skulls studded with grinning cowries;
They could not silence the drums,
The fibre of their souls and ours -
The drums that whisper to us behind black sinewy hands.
They gazed
And sweeping like white locusts through the forests
Saw the same men, slightly wizened,
Shuffle their sandalled feet to the same rhythms,
They heard the same words of wisdom uttered
Between puffs of pale blue smoke:
They saw us,
And said: They have not changed!

Turning to the more formal side, a word like ‘they’ may seem more obviously comprehensible. But, specifically, what does ‘they’ mean in this poem? The deictic personal pronoun ‘they’ is inherently ambiguous, its interpretation being entirely dependent on a specific verbal, situational or cultural perspective. So in this case, since an antecedent is not given explicitly in the text, the word remains ambiguous to the outsider, who grasps the hint in the title. The equally anaphoric ‘saw the same men’ and ‘heard the same words of wisdom’ creates a second group of participants, co-referential with ‘us’ in the penultimate line, with a deictic switch, in which the final ‘they’ in the last line becomes apparently coreferential with ‘us’ in the penultimate line.

So here are two very different kinds of ambiguity and two very different kinds of resolution of the ambiguity: the ambiguity of *power*, manifested in deictic ambiguity; the ambiguity of *beauty*, manifested in metaphor, and the ambiguities of *understanding* (and *misunderstanding*) manifested in our ignorance of other cultures.

4 Comparison, analogy, metaphor, model

4.1 Analogies and other feints

In traditional Aristotelian metaphor theory (Bywater 1984), metaphors are defined as comparisons, and similes only differ from metaphors in containing a preposition such as ‘like’. The Aristotelian definition has three elements: a *comparandum* (that which is to be compared, the *primum comparationis*) and a *comparatum* (that which is compared, the *secundum comparationis*), based on a shared property or *character* (the *tertium comparationis*). A simple example will illustrate the definition: ‘Joe is a wet rag’ is a metaphor, ‘Joe is like a wet rag’ or ‘Joe is as limp as a wet rag’ are similes. In the metaphor theory of Richards (1936), Empson’s academic teacher, the comparandum is termed *tenor*, the comparatum

the *vehicle*, and the tertium comparationis is not taken to be a shared property of the locutions as in the Aristotelian view, but a property which emerges interactively from the context of words and the circumstance of utterance. The Aristotelian definition does provide a useful starting model for discussion, but the examples already given show three limitations of the definition, and to some extent also of Richards' definition.

First, a simile focusses explicitly on similarities, in this case physical properties, which may (or may not) leave the interlocutor wondering what exactly is meant, while a metaphor generates a holistic model of similarities and differences and leaves room for interpretation of the exact properties which are meant.

Second, the differences between tenor and vehicle co-determine and are determined by the verbal contexts and situational circumstances in which metaphors and similes are typically used.

Third, a simile is an explicit comparison, but a metaphor is an implicit comparison with the potential for many kinds of implicitness, and its essence is ambiguity, as Empson noted in his first and second types. A metaphor invokes a comparison, but the statement is a statement of identity or categorisation which creates what might be called a *tertium integrationis*, a new holistic circumstance which not only allows comparison between tenor and vehicle, but also encourages further implicit metaphorical conclusions to be drawn from 'wet rag', in the previous example, such as 'inactive', 'shapeless', 'characterless'.

The explicit simile, on the other hand, suggests that there are explicit conclusions to be drawn, as in the 'like' jokes, here in conjunction with a pun on 'strike':[3]

Q: Why are bagpipers' fingers like lightning?
A: They rarely strike the same spot twice.

The differences between similes and metaphors are not clear-cut, but there is a tendency for similes to have a definitional, explanatory, expository or didactic character, in using a well-understood and helpful vehicle to understand a tenor which was previously not well understood. The metaphor tends, rather, to provide a model for a strikingly novel recreation of the subject.

The metaphor is perhaps the most attentively treated of all figures of speech, and of all types of ambiguity. Like lies and irony, metaphor relies on a discrepancy between conventional literal meaning and intended meaning. Without going into the boundless literature on non-literal figures of speech, useful distinctions can be made on the basis of categories from speech act theory. Particularly useful, to start with, is Searle's sincerity condition for felicitous speech acts (1969), and Austin's distinction between the locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary functionality of speech acts:

1. Metaphors are unlike lies, in which the utterance of a locution deliberately infringes the sincerity condition and is essentially perlocutionary, in aiming for the effect of deceiving the addressee, rather than illocutionary, in establishing a communicative interaction. Metaphors, on the other hand, rely on the premise that the addressee will recognise and attempt to understand the intended meaning.
2. Metaphors are unlike irony, which expresses an often negatively appraisive attitude of non-accepting distance to some person or achievement, may aim at a shared or private perlocutionary humorous effect, and is intermediate in that the addressee is not necessarily expected to grasp the intended meaning. Metaphors, on the other hand, may have positive or negative appraisive connotations and are intended to be as fully understood as possible within the bounds of ambiguity and vagueness, and are often positively appraisive.
3. Sarcasm may include irony but is also associated with hyperbole and a perlocutionary intention to hurt. And (anticipating an explication of the concept of metaphor), proverbs, fables, parables and allegories, which will not be discussed further, are often thought of as extended metaphors with a didactic perlocutionary intention.

3 Anon., from the web.

4.2 Comparison, metaphor, simile

A close reading of the well-known Scots folk-song collected and rewritten by Robert Burns, and often cited as an example of both simile and metaphor, shows a skilful progression from the former to the latter:

My love is like a red, red rose	**Reading**
O my luve is like a red, red rose That's newly sprung in June; O my luve's like the melodie That's sweetly played in tune.	Introductory simile: *comparatum* a rose in summer, *comparandum* 'my luve', *tertium comparationis* physical beauty and youth. Further simile: *comparatum* 'melodie', *comparandum* 'my luve' (perhaps as a metonymy for 'my luve's voice'), *tertium comparationis* 'sweet', perhaps of the sound of the voice.
As fair art thou, my bonny lass, So deep in luve am I; And I will luve thee still, my dear, Till a' the seas gang dry.	Hierarchical simile ('as', 'so'): (1) *comparatum* 'thou', *tertium comparationis* degree 'fair', *comparandum* 'I'; (2) *comparatum* 'fair', *comparandum* 'deep in luve', *tertium comparationis* degree of the first *tertium comparationis*. Finally, 'Till a' the seas gang dry' as *comparatum* for implicit *comparandum* end of the world, implied *tertium comparationis* of long temporal duration.
Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear, And the rocks melt wi' the sun; I will luve thee still, my dear, While the sands o' life shall run.	Second metaphor with *tertium comparationis* 'long period': *comparatum* 'rocks melt wi' the sun' with *comparandum* 'end of the world'. Explicit translation of the two metaphors with 'end of life' as *comparandum*, 'end of the world' as *comparatum*, and a further metaphor of an hour-glass *comparatum* focussing the *tertium comparationis* temporal duration of the *comparandum* life.
And fare thee weel, my only love, And fare thee weel, awhile! And I will come again, my love Tho' it were ten thousand mile.	Classic folk song topos of parting and reunion, perhaps literal, perhaps as a metaphor for death, with 'ten thousand mile' as a *metonym* for the journey.

There is very much more to be said, but the differences in use between similes and metaphors are nicely illustrated by the progression from the simple 'rose' simile, on a physical level (enhanced by the traditional emblematic associations of 'red' and 'rose' with passion and love), through combinations of multiply ambiguous metaphors with metonymy or synecdoche, finally to a near-literal farewell topos. The ambiguity of metaphor synthesises an awareness of an enhanced circumstance, which cannot be fully disambiguated analytically by knowledge of the vocabulary of the language and the verbal and situational contexts in which elements of the vocabulary are used.

A metaphor is evidently not simply a plain and literal comparison. Nor is a simile. A plain and literal comparison is essentially a *generalisation*: a shared property, the *tertium comparationis*, subsumes both the *primum comparationis*, for example wealth, and the *secundum comparationis*, for example the cowrie, in the technical sense of 'subsumption': an implied or actual hyperonym or superordinate term which covers both the primary and the secondary term. 'The wearer of this cowrie headdress is as wealthy as the wearer of that one.' 'The cowrie shell is like a grinning mouth.' These comparisons, formulated in this way, are in no way ambiguous or in any way ambivalent or multivalent, and are characteristic of analytical thinking rather than analogical thinking. 'My love is like a red, red rose' on the other hand, is ostensibly a comparison, but a comparison with an additional functionality which derives from an ambiguity as to what exactly the *tertium comparationis* might be, and this is what distinguishes a simile from a plain and literal comparison.

In the case of 'cowrie' it may indeed be argued that 'wealth' is the hyperonym and that therefore the figure is synecdoche, specifically: *pars pro toto*, rather than metaphor, but to make this taxonomic distinction is to obscure both the structural and functional

A structural characterisation of metaphor needs to be complemented with a functional explanation. Views on metaphor since Aristotle have largely concentrated on structure.

Kwesi Brew's *Ancestral faces* is resplendent with ambiguties which are at once ironic and

metaphors of a decadent grandeur ('the moss on the bald pate', 'the rust on the ancient state-swords'), or else threatening ('frothy necks' - white wolly froth or the red froth of slashed throats? - 'grinning cowries', 'the drums that whisper to us behind...', 'sweeping like white locusts'). The combination of the irony and threat with macabre beauty, together with observational detail ('sneaked', 'gay jingling brass bells', 'limped and nodded', 'shuffled their sandalled feet', 'puffs of pale blue smoke') combines the perlocutionary power of the ambiguities with the aesthetic coherence of the portrayal of the funeral scene. The poem nicely demonstrates the complementarity of structure and functionality of metaphorical ambiguity.

In contexts like the Burns poem, the simile and the metaphor may be seen to be more alike – more Aristotelian – than modern explicators of the concepts may give them credit for: not the structure, but the functionality distinguishes both from the plain and literal comparison.

4.3 The third element

To summarise the basic concepts, metaphors, like explicit comparisons (both plain literal comparisons and similes) are commonly taken to have three components, with varying nomenclature:

1. The first element: the traditional *comparandum* or *primum comparationis* (Richards: the *tenor*, Black: the *focus* or *principal subject*).
2. The second element: traditional *comparatum* or *secundum comparationis* (Richards: the *vehicle*, Black: the *secondary* or *subsidiary subject*).
3. The third element: the traditional *character* or *tertium comparationis* (Richards: *ground*, Black: *frame*).

Unlike the first two elements, whose identity is rather clear, it is third element which is the subject of controversy and which differs in the various approaches to explaining metaphor.

In the Aristotelian approach (Comparison Theory), the third element is a shared property which subsumes the first two elements, with no principled distinction between a explicit plain literal comparison and a metaphor. A is B in respect of a characteristic Y. The functionality associated with the metaphor is the aesthetic function (Decoration Theory). The notion of ambiguity involved in Comparison Theory is a simple one, with the comparandum either being literally classified as the comparatum or with both comparandum and comparatum being assigned as similar members of a third class determined by the shared character. In similes there is no room for ambiguity: a literal meaning is excluded.

For Richards (1936), the third element provides a ground for interaction between tenor and vehicle in contextualising both these componens, and thereby providing a new background understanding the metaphor (Interaction Theory). Richards' Interaction Theory goes well beyond the shared property of Comparison Theory. The notion of ambiguity which underlies Richards' theory is complex: not only is there ambiguity in interpreting the vehicle as a literal classification of the tenor, but the character itself introduces an interaction which gives much freedom for interpretation.

Black (1962) starts with the sophisticated interactive approach of Richards, but introduces a syncretistic concept, the frame which combines a number of traditional functionalities of metaphor. In Black's approach, the frame provides the basis for transforming the understanding of both of the first two terms into something new (Transformation Theory). A metaphor is a filter which selects a specific view of the first element in the context of the second element. The theory goes further, and captures other areas of analogical thought: a *model* is fundamentally an extended metaphor which transforms perception of reality by providing a frame for understanding reality. The functionality of the metaphor is, in Black's approach, based on a mismatch, *catachresis*, in providing an unusual coinage designed to fill a gap in the vocabulary – in a sense, therefore, a special type of concept-formation via word-formation. The emphasis in Black's approach is therefore on the *understanding* function of ambiguity, rather than on the Aristotelian *beauty* function, and perhaps (through Filter Theory) also the *power* function of ambiguity.

The approach to metaphor which is developed by Lakoff & Johnson (1980) takes the *understanding* function further. Lakoff & Johnson go a step further than Black in suggestion that metaphor is pervasive in ordinary language. These metaphors, such as 'argument is war' or 'time is money' define entire metaphorical fields, in which terms which collocate with the *comparatum* are also regularly used in collocations with the *comparandum*: 'win the argument', 'spend time'. The metaphors which Lakoff and Johnson refer to are in general the metaphors found in highly routinised idiomatic expressions and are in general not recognised as metaphors: the analogical thinking which metaphor represents is grammaticised and lexicalised to the extent that it is taken to be analytical thinking. Lakoff and Johnson do not consider the *beauty* function of metaphor, but are concerned with the *understanding* function of metaphor, but also with the *power* functions: choice of a particular metaphor dominates a conceptual field, and constrains discussion in this field towards accepting the proposed interaction between the *comparatum* and the *comparandum*.

The *understanding* oriented approaches to metaphor can be thought of as *semantic theories* of the functionality of ambiguity. In the sophisticated modern approaches, starting with Richards, metaphors are associate with a conceptual field which represents a complex model. The classic example 'homo lupus est', 'man is a wolf', for instance, associates 'wolf' with the entire field of its collocates: from the fierce to the cowardly, from the lone wolf to the sociable pack. In Black's approach, the embedding of metaphor in the same field as models provides a very general solution to procedures of analogical thinking.

Finally, *pragmatic theories* of ambiguity, particularly those which relate to the *power* dimension, are perhaps best represented by Austin's concept of indirect speech act, which has been the subject of countless sociolinguistic studies, including gender-specific and politeness preferences in some cultures. If 'it is rather draughty' is uttered in the frame of an appropriate power structure linking the interlocutors, it may become ambiguous in terms of speech acts: either as a statement of fact, or as a request 'please close the window'. Similarly, the dimension of *beauty* is inferred from a frame in which, initially, conventional connotations of beauty ascribed to the wine of Hafez, to the breasts of Shakespeare's Dark Lady, to Wordsworth's daffodils, to de la Mare's moon and her silver shoon, depending on specific cultural conventions. A complex process of inference involving hypothetical assumptions and analogical thinking is involved.

The pragmatic theories are readily transferable to the use of metaphor: as in the cunning Churchillian 'double *double entendre*' discussed previously, a metaphor may have a dimension of indirectness which can insulate the utterer from the reproach of impoliteness, just as indirect speech acts can insulate from the reproach of being presumptuous.

5 Envoi

The preceding discussion concentrated initially on ambiguity in the traditional linguistic sense, generalised this to a situational ambiguity in the denotation of pointing gestures, and moved away from structural approaches to ambiguity to the interactive, creative semantic and pragmatic functionalities of ambiguity, categorised here in terms of *beauty*, *power*, and *understanding*.

The reach of the concept of ambigutity has been shown to be far broader than is conventionally recognised in linguistics, perhaps also than in literary studies and other semiotic disciplines. The more general subsuming functionality in which each of these three functionalities participate is analogical thinking, as opposed to analytic thinking, an inferential strategy common to the potential ambiguities of similes, metaphors, parables, fables, allegories and, following Black, also models, the simplified representations of the world which we use to interpret our theories.

A starting point for this approach was found in Empson's seven types of ambiguity, which were interpreted as functional types of ambiguity, contrasting with the structural types of ambiguity from lexical ambiguity to deictic ambiguity which are a characteristic subject matter of linguistic semantics.

Another starting point could have been Peirce's category of knowledge acquisition by abduction, rather than by the analytic induction and deduction. But this would be another story.

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