

The Metaphor/Metronym Distinction: A Comment
on Campbell.

In a paper on the use of the metaphor/metonym distinction by Lévi-Strauss, Alan Campbell (1973) expresses his irritation over "the structuralist method which consecrates imprecision and vagueness of terminology as a methodological principle" (p.106).

The alleged imprecision and vagueness of terminology is reflected in the fact that Campbell finds himself able to incorporate under the original distinction between metaphor and metonym a series of 'oppositions' of the most diverse kinds (p.105). Rather than just commenting upon the irritating tendency of certain critics of 'structuralism' to criticize what they believe Lévi-Strauss to be saying instead of trying to understand what he really says, and in what context it is said, I think we should try to determine to what extent distinctions like metaphor/metonym are useful tools of analysis. In other words, to say that the metaphor/metonym distinction has become a trivial one, because a whole range of other distinctions (in some senses and in certain contexts) can be subsumed under it, is just to rely on one's own prejudices and thereby inhibit analysis.

My own opinion (prejudice?) is that the metaphor/metonym distinction is a useful one and far too important to be 'trivialized' by what I take to be misinterpretations of Lévi-Strauss' at places somewhat vague and imprecise statements. I therefore fully agree with Campbell that we should aim at more precise definitions of the terms; but this immediately raises the questions, first to what extent one can ever be 'precise' in the human sciences, and second what we should mean by the word 'definition'. Since social anthropology is no longer a 'natural science of society', we should not expect precision to mean anything like an unambiguous, mathematical-like formulation; we can only hope for 'precision' in the sense that the terms in question aids us in creating a coherent image of the phenomena under consideration.

As for definition, Samuel Butler once remarked that "to define is to surround with a wall of words a jungle of ideas", that is, to create a cultural order (wall) out of natural disorder (jungle). The distinction between metaphor and metonym can indeed be said to be 'walled in' by showing it to be characterized by qualities like resemblance/continuity, to be related to concepts like paradigm/syntagm, synchrony/diachrony and structure/event, to make use of the procedures of classification/segmentation and selection/combination, and in certain respects to characterize phenomena like totemism/sacrifice and myth/ritual.

There is, however, a possibility of obtaining greater precision about the original distinction, and that lies in the interpretation of the binary table set up by Campbell. Two kinds of misinterpretation are possible here, and I suspect that Campbell is to some extent guilty of both. The first is pointed out by Needham (1973) in his treatment of schemes of dual symbolic classification, namely that such a binary table is not about equivalents, but about relations. Just as e.g. the Nyoro diviner is not black, nor odd, nor feminine (p.xxx), one cannot say that totemism is metaphorical; and indeed what Lévi-Strauss says is that "totemism is expressed by means of metaphorical relations" (1969:95), which to my mind is something different.

The second kind of misinterpretation regards the logical status of the concepts of metaphor and metonym themselves. Anthony Wilden has said: "Metaphor and metonym are not entities. They are categories of distinction, not bags to put things in. Neither describes an isolable thing; they describe a relation - which is nowhere" (1972:58). And he continues, "that is to say, this polar distinction itself has signification only in a context, and since everything has everything else as its context, it is up to the commentator to define the context he has decided to talk about. A re-reading of Jakobson's article will surely demonstrate this: if we change perspective, all his metonomies turn out to be metaphors, and vice versa" (ibid.). This latter point was also stressed by Campbell (p.103) who, however, took it as a weakness of the distinction itself.

In order, then, to be still more 'precise', let us look at the distinction as such; that is, the relation between metaphorical and metonymical relations. It is important, I think, to note that "there is....no justification for metonym being taken as the 'polar opposite figure' of metaphor. If anything it is a particular kind of metaphor" (Campbell, p.104). In this connection I find it legitimate to use the concept of polarity (Jakobson's two poles), but the problem lies in the employment of the concept of opposition. Wilden (1972) has, I think rightly, criticized Lévi-Strauss' use of 'opposition' for almost any kind of difference. This criticism has to do not only with the seemingly innocent unawareness of the logical properties of the term opposition, but it is intimately related to the far more serious problem of "the scientific discourse as propaganda", namely that the Lévi-Straussian structuralism "translates a heuristic device into an ontological statement of some supposed fundamental structure of the human mind", that is, by its attributing e.g. the structure of myth to the structure of the mind, 'structuralism' is in effect making propositions about the structure of western scientific ideology (see Wilden 1972:7-12;413-422).

However, to return to opposition as such, Wilden has suggested "that, at least in communications and in semiotics, we ought to learn to cool the potential violence of our own rhetoric by asking ourselves whether by 'binary opposition' we do not in fact mean a 'digital decision', a 'binary relation', a 'binary difference', or a 'binary distinction', and so on" (1972:421), because in contrast to the latter terms, "opposition requires that the terms opposed be of the same logical type" (ibid.:414, emphasis original). The Theory of Logical Types was set forth by Whitehead and Russell in Principia Mathematica, and Gregory Bateson (e.g. 1955, 1964) has applied it with considerable success in the 'behavioural sciences' (Bateson's term), Wilden carrying the Batesonian application still further.

It can be shown, I think, that metaphor and metonym do in fact belong to different logical types. The difference can perhaps best be grasped by noting that metaphor and metonym are relations of paradigmatic/syntagmatic kinds. As pointed out by Ardener (1971a:lxxxviii; 1971b:465-67) paradigm makes use of one further dimension than does syntagm. Furthermore, the higher the logical type, the lower the level of organization (Wilden 1972:239), which is one reason why paradigmatic structures are heuristically superior to syntagmatic ones.

The reason why metonym may still be said to be a particular kind of metaphor lies, as far as I can see, in the fact that in many cases metaphorical relations may relatively easily be transformed into

metonymical ones. (Lévi-Strauss (1966:106) even takes this to be a 'law' of mythical thought). To take one example, the widespread (if not universal) association between sex and eating is metaphorical, (e.g. marry out of your totem group, do not eat your totem). However, by applying the 'pars pro toto' principle, the relationship between the individual and the species is metonymical; and just as food is the prerequisite for individual survival, sex is the prerequisite for the survival of the species.

Finally, a few words on the metaphor/metonym distinction in relation to myth and ritual. It is of course a gross oversimplification to take Lévi-Strauss to mean, as does Campbell (p.105), that myth is metaphorical and ritual is metonymical. Lévi-Strauss does indeed employ the distinction (1971:607-608), but he does so only after it is understood that he takes the difference between myth and ritual to relate primarily to what is thought as distinct from what is lived: "Au total, l'opposition entre le rite et le mythe est celle du vivre et du penser" (ibid:603). It appears, then, that when Lévi-Strauss distinguishes between myth and ritual, he is actually referring to the 'thought aspects' / 'action aspects' of symbolic representations. This is also clear from his comments on the alleged lack of myth among the Ndembu as reported by Turner (Lévi-Strauss 1971:597-598): instead of restricting the concept of myth to apply only to actual narratives, one should also recognize the 'implicit myth' which is present in the form of 'fragmented notes' in various phases of ritual sequences.

Then, according to Lévi-Strauss, 'ritual' should be taken to mean only the 'actual', observable chain of events, and as such it is only susceptible to analysis on the level of syntagmatic (metonymical) relations, whereas 'myth', of both the explicit and the implicit variety permits, and even requires, an analysis of the 'virtual' (and in empirical terms absent) paradigmatic (metaphorical) relations.

It is perhaps therefore after all unfortunate to employ the word metaphor for conceptual relations of a paradigmatic kind, when metaphor in its common usage (i.e. when not employed in connection with metonym) simply denotes a symbolic figure of speech. As such its semantic richness and creative power is indeed a fruitful field for investigation (e.g. Fernandez 1972; Rosaldo & Atkinson 1973), but I think it is by confusing the two usages that one can take the formal analyses of Lévi-Strauss to result in semantic impoverishment. If therefore we abandon the metaphor/metonym distinction in favour of paradigmatic/syntagmatic, or more generally p- and s- (Ardener 1973), it is not because it has become trivial; on the contrary, the principle of distinction is too important to permit any misunderstanding because of terminology.

Jan Ovesen.

References

- Ardener, E. 1971a. 'Introductory Essay'. E. Ardener, ed: Social Anthropology and Language. London: Tavistock. A.S.A. 10.
- 1971b. 'The New Anthropology and its Critics'. Man (n.s.) 6.
- 1973. 'Some Outstanding Problems in the Analysis of Events'. A.S.A. conference paper. In press.
- Bateson, G. 1955. 'A Theory of Play and Fantasy'. G. Bateson: Steps to an Ecology of Mind. N.Y. 1972: Ballantine.
- 1964. 'The Logical Categories of Learning and Thinking'. G. Bateson: Steps to an Ecology of Mind. N.Y. 1972: Ballantine.

- Campbell, A. 1973. 'Tristes Tropes: Lévi-Strauss and the Impoverishment of Metaphor'. JASO 4: 2:100-113.
- Fernandez, J.W. 1972. 'Persuasions and Performances: Of the Beast in Every Body. . . And the Metaphors of Everyman'. Daedalus, winter, pp.39-60.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. 1966. The Savage Mind. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- 1969. Totemism. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- 1971. Mythologiques IV: L'homme nu. Paris: Plon.
- Needham, R. (ed.) 1973. Right and Left: Essays on Dual Symbolic Classification. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rosaldo, M.Z. & J.M. Atkinson. 1973. 'Man the Hunter and Woman: Metaphors in Ilongot Magical Spells'. A.S.A. conference paper. In press.
- Wilden, A. 1972. System and Structure: Essays in Communication and Exchange. London: Tavistock.