

Macalester Journal of Philosophy

Volume 16, Issue 1

2007

Article 6

SPRING 2007

Black & Davidson on Metaphor

Emily Ayoob*

*Macalester College

Copyright ©2007 by the authors. *Macalester Journal of Philosophy* is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress). <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/philo>

Black & Davidson on Metaphor

Emily Ayoob

Abstract

Most theories of metaphor look at what occurs inside a metaphorical phrase and posit a shift in meaning in the metaphorical words. This includes the classic “Models and Metaphor,” by Max Black, who distinguishes between the literal words of the phrase and the metaphorical words. On this view, the two interact in such a way that the meanings of the metaphorical words change. In another view, Donald Davidson takes a radical stance in his “What Metaphors Mean” to assert that the words in a metaphor mean nothing other than their original, literal meaning. Both theories suffer from problems: Black fails to explain how the metaphorical words change in meaning. Davidson, on the other hand, while succeeding in refuting most of the “other meaning” theories, only weakly suggests “use” of metaphor to explain its power. In this paper, I will clarify the two respective theories and attempt to reconcile or fuse them. We will find that Black looks to the language itself and finds a shift in meaning, while Davidson asserts that meaning stays literal, and we must instead look at what occurs between the speaker and hearer. An examination of Davidson’s later theory of interpretation applied to Black’s theory of metaphor will clarify Davidson’s ‘use’ as well as allow for literal meaning to stay in metaphor.

KEYWORDS: Max Black, Donald Davidson, metaphor, interpretation

Black & Davidson on Metaphor

Emily Ayoob

Introduction

Most theories of metaphor look at what occurs inside a metaphorical phrase and posit a shift in meaning in the metaphorical words. This includes the classic “Models and Metaphor,” by Max Black, who distinguishes between the literal words of the phrase and the metaphorical words. On this view, the two interact in such a way that the meanings of the metaphorical words change. In another view, Donald Davidson takes a radical stance in his “What Metaphors Mean” to assert that the words in a metaphor mean nothing other than their original, literal meaning. Both theories suffer from problems: Black fails to explain how the metaphorical words change in meaning. Davidson, on the other hand, while succeeding in refuting most of the “other meaning” theories, only weakly suggests “use” of metaphor to explain its power. In this paper, I will clarify the two respective theories and attempt to reconcile or fuse them. We will find that Black looks to the language itself and finds a shift in meaning, while Davidson asserts that meaning stays literal, and we must instead look at what occurs between the speaker and hearer. An examination of Davidson’s later theory of interpretation applied to Black’s theory of metaphor will clarify Davidson’s ‘use’ as well as allow for literal meaning to stay in metaphor.

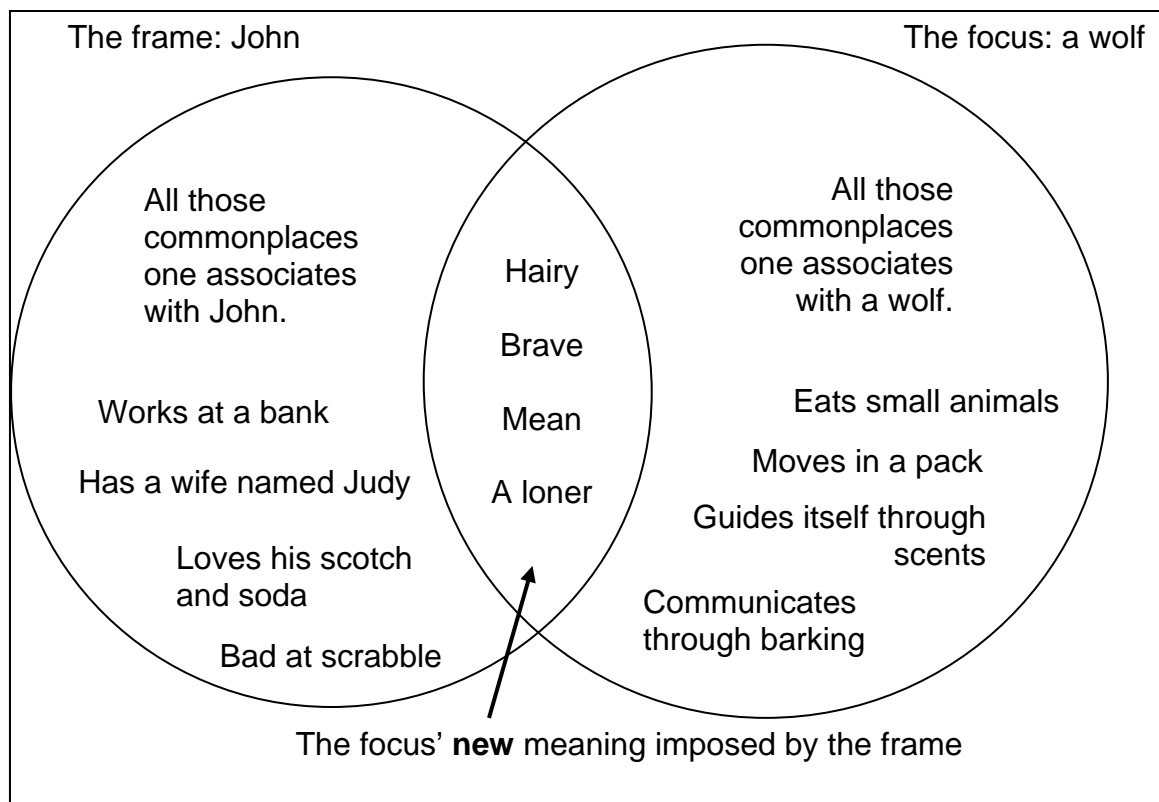
Black’s “System of Associated Commonplaces”

Max Black’s account of metaphor focuses on the “logical grammar” (Black 25) of the metaphor and how this grammar defines what one uses or interprets as a metaphor. He begins by directly positing a grammar of metaphor, distinguishing between the “focus” and the “frame” of metaphor. The focus of a metaphor is the word in a metaphor that is being used metaphorically. “In calling this former sentence a metaphor, we are implying that there is one word that is being used metaphorically” (Black 28). The rest of the sentence (those words which are not being used metaphorically) is called the ‘frame.’ For example, consider the following metaphor: “John is a wolf.” Under Black’s description, “John is” is the frame of the metaphor, and “a wolf” is the focus of the metaphor, which is the word being “used metaphorically.”

Black’s own interaction view of metaphor is “when we use a metaphor we have two thoughts of different things active together and supported by a single word or phrase, whose meaning is a resultant of their interaction” (Black 38). Thus one might say that the two thoughts come from the distinct difference between the focus and the frame of the metaphor, and only because the thoughts or meanings were distinct before the metaphor

may they interact in this context. Yet Black goes further to assert that the focus of the metaphor must acquire a new meaning when put into its new frame. This meaning “is not quite its meaning in literal uses, nor quite the meaning which any literal substitute would have” (Black 39). The extended meaning comes about through what Black calls their “system of associated commonplaces” (Black 40): when one imagines all those ideas one associates with John, and all of the ideas one associates with wolves, unshared ideas fall away, and what remains is the force of the focus, those commonplaces associated with both thoughts. Thus the associated commonplaces work because all those qualities that one thinks of about wolves and about men that come together to give wolf a new meaning. Here is Black’s elucidation:

Suppose I look at the night sky through a piece of heavily smoked glass on which certain lines have been left clear. Then I shall see only the stars that can be made to lie on the lines previously prepared upon the screen, and the stars I do see will be seen as organized by the screen’s structure. We can think of a metaphor as such a screen and the system of “associated commonplaces” of the focal word as the network of lines upon the screen. We can say that the principle subject is “seen through” the metaphorical expression, or, if we prefer, that the principal subject is “projected upon” the field of the subsidiary subject (Black 41).



It is not immediately clear, however, why the focus, and not the frame, of the metaphor should act as the screen that forces non-associated commonplaces to fall away. It is clear that both thoughts have commonplaces that need to fall away in order for them to be “active” together. When we say, “John is a wolf” there are certain attributes to both that must fall away, for example “covered in fur” (maybe not, considering who John is)

or “has a way with words.” Yet Black gives us no reason for understanding why the focus of the metaphor is somehow more primary or accessible and able to make act upon the commonplaces of the frame. One wonders whether or not this problem stems from the fact that we allowed Black the supposition that we know without explanation how to distinguish focus from frame.

Davidson’s “Use” Theory

In What Metaphors Mean (1978), Donald Davidson attempts to show that most philosophical discussion about the nature of metaphors has been greatly mistaken in positing a different, extensional, or “metaphorical” meaning to metaphors. He argues instead that metaphors mean nothing other than their literal sense, and that they gain their effective power through their use. Davidson explains that metaphor must retain its literal meaning through a series of negative arguments against theories that posit a different, new, or extensional meaning. While Davidson’s explanation may clarify many missteps previously made in theories of metaphor, his own theory, as I will show, will suffer from a lack of a positive argument for what he calls “use” of a metaphor.

Davidson’s rejection of previous theories of metaphor takes the form of two kinds of attacks. The first attack argues that positing metaphorical or figurative meanings to metaphor does not do any work to explain metaphors. It is, in fact, blatantly circular. Davidson argues that if one were to attribute a metaphorical meaning to metaphor, the power of explanation would work in reverse: that calling a phrase a metaphor explains why it would seem to have another sense or ‘metaphorical truth.’

...[T]o simply lodge [metaphorical] meaning in metaphor is like explaining how a pill puts you to sleep by saying it has a dormative power. Literal meaning and literal truth conditions can be assigned to words and sentences apart from particular contexts of use. This is why adverting to them has genuine explanatory power (Davidson 1978, 31).

We must remember that the literal meaning of the metaphor must remain somehow part of the meaning of the metaphor. Davidson takes this stance as his second attack: that any new meaning assigned to metaphors would necessarily exclude a relation to the old meaning. This brings us to an unacceptable result, for, he argues, everyone agrees that the literal meaning is necessary in decoding a metaphor. “If we are to think of words in metaphors as directly going about their business of applying to what they properly do apply to, there is no difference between metaphor and the introduction of a new term into our vocabulary” (Davidson 1978, 32). Thus, Davidson argues, if we impose a new or extensional meaning to the metaphorical word, we are instead simply creating a new word in the vocabulary. Without a connection to the original literal meaning of the word, we are simply assigning a new literal meaning and asserting a condition to which this new meaning applies. We are not making a metaphor.

We await a positive argument for how metaphor works. Davidson asserts at the end of his work that metaphor gets its power solely from the *effect* it has on the hearer. Previous theories have made the mistake of defining their goal incorrectly, though *how* they arrive at their conclusions is not so far off. They have tried too hard to make their intuitions that metaphor is different in some way conform to their goal of finding the difference in the language itself. “The common error is to fasten on the contents of the thoughts a metaphor provokes and to read these contents into the metaphor itself”

(Davidson 1978, 43). Therefore, instead of looking inside the metaphor itself, we should be looking at those *using* language to produce *effects* on those listening. The hearer is “nudged,” “incited,” to recognize something, as an effect of the use of the words with their literal meanings. As Davidson pointed out earlier, “Metaphor is the dreamwork of language, and, like all dreamwork, its interpretation reflects as much on the interpreter as on the originator” (Davidson 1978, 29). Davidson’s comment will prove useful when we discuss his theory of “prior” and “passing” theories.

Yet for the moment we still have a few problems to keep in mind. Even if Davidson successfully convinces us that the words in the metaphor have only their literal meaning to propel them, his explanation that use is what gives us a metaphor falls short. If, as he claims, there is “no manual for determining what a metaphor ‘means’ or ‘says,’” (Davidson 1978, 29) we still have no clear idea on how to determine when someone is making a metaphor and when they are making an assertion, or, in fact, simply lying to us. For example, if someone says to us “Joan is a witch,” Davidson does not explain how use could make clear the way we were to take the phrase, for there are circumstances when we are mistaken. Though Davidson wants to say that there is no stateable or assertable message to metaphor, he surely would admit that there was a failure, even when words were “used” in a different way, if the hearer took the sentence to be literal and was “nudged” into noticing something, but believing something else. We will need a more comprehensive account of what Davidson means by “use” if we are to understand his theory, despite his thorough dismantling of all other “extensional,” “different,” or “metaphorical” meaning theories. We will see that his explanation of prior and passing theories can clarify this problem.

Black’s Response & Remaining Problems

Black responds to Davidson in How Metaphors Work: A Reply to Donald Davidson (1979) and points out that though Davidson does a rigorous job of rejecting most metaphor theories, he fails to produce a coherent positive theory of his own. Davidson held that because there is no stateable cognitive content of a metaphor, because similarities go on for infinity, and because any attempt to explain or paraphrase the metaphor necessarily kills it, that the metaphor-maker is not trying to say anything at all, only “nudge” the hearer into noticing something between the two. Because the metaphor means nothing than its literal sense, and the metaphor is patently false, any “facts” arrived at on the part of the hearer are coincidental, and not proposed by the metaphor-maker. It is for this reason as well that Davidson denies metaphorical truth, since there can be no proposition in the metaphor that may have a true or false value. What, then, is the speaker doing when he’s using these words in a certain way? Davidson claims only that the speaker can’t be asserting anything because how he communicates it (metaphor) leaves open the possibilities for interpretation as infinite.

Yet this does not prove that the speaker wasn’t attempting to assert something with his metaphor. Moreover, as Black points out, we do have misunderstanding in metaphor, especially if “nuance and discretion” is needed in interpreting a metaphor, as Davidson asserted earlier. A better route might be a Wittgensteinian interpretation: though metaphors *say* nothing, they are meant to *show* something to the hearer. The speaker uses the literal meanings of the words in a different way to attempt to show an idea to the hearer. I imagine Davidson’s “nudge” to be a sort of Wittgensteinian

“showing:” we literally bump the hearer into the right direction to see something interesting. Yet even still, the speaker has in mind what this interesting thing is before nudging the hearer.

We seem to have arrived at an impasse. Black’s interaction theory gave us little insight into how metaphors work. His focus/frame explanation seems to make common sense, yet we are unable to unpack the theory enough to explain how the focus directs which associated commonplaces are left to fall and which remain in the hearer’s “lens.” Davidson counters Black’s claim and the claims of many others by switching the focus of our study from what content belongs to metaphor to what happens between a hearer and a speaker when a metaphor is *used*. However, Davidson remains vague about what use entails, for use alone cannot accurately describe what happens between speaker and hearer, despite the shift in our descriptive goal.

I would like to propose that Davidson and Black may find their theories closer than they first appear. Black’s theory never denies that the original meaning is required in interpreting a metaphor. Though words retain their original meaning, they are attached to a different idea, presented by the context. It is possible that this is what Davidson means by use, but he fails to make his sense of use clear. What we need from Davidson is a more detailed account of what the conditions about use might be. Moreover, Black’s system of associated commonplaces (all those qualities that one thinks of about wolves and about men that could come together to give wolf a new meaning) does not seem to *change* the definition of “wolf,” as Davidson might claim, but simply bring to the surface those definitions that are in common with man. There isn’t a *new* meaning, but certain parts of the meaning, those which are not in common with “man,” fall away for the moment. In brief, our main problem remains a lack of definition of use, and a suspicion that Black’s system of associated commonplaces may help us in carving out a definition of “use” applicable to Davidson’s theory.

Davidson’s Prior & Passing Theories

For clarification of Davidson’s view on metaphor, we can turn to his assertions made in “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs” (1985), a treatise on interpretation and translation. Though written after “What Metaphors Mean,” Davidson expands on a more comprehensive theory of language he was striking at in the earlier article. He sets out to show that any examination of language will not give us clues for interpretation or meaning. For Davidson, “nothing should be allowed to obliterate or even blur the distinction between speaker’s meaning and literal meaning” [Davidson 1985, 474]. In order to make this distinction, Davidson describes literal meaning, or, as he will now call it, “first meaning,” as first in the order of interpretation. Sometimes sentences or images cannot be understood without the first meaning established, other times, the context of the sentence must be understood before we can choose the first meaning of words. Davidson asserts that the intentions of the speaker make the choice clearer.

Before we may understand the intentions of the speaker to extract his first meaning, Davidson must give some explanation of what occurs between a speaker and interpreter. He suggests the following: Both the speaker and the interpreter have what Davidson calls prior and passing theories. For the speaker, the prior theory is what he believes the interpreter’s prior theory to be, and the passing theory is the theory that he intends the interpreter to use. For the interpreter, the prior theory is the theory that he will

use, established in advance, to interpret the speaker's utterances. The passing theory is the actual theory that he does use to interpret the speaker. Prior theories do not necessarily have to be shared between the speaker and the interpreter, for anything of the prior theory that goes into the passing theory always changes during the linguistic interaction. The passing theory is contingent upon the exact occasion of the interaction. When passing theories do converge, either accidentally or on purpose, it can only be attributed to the constantly changing passing theories, which are not known in advance.

	Prior Theory	Passing Theory
Speaker	What the speaker believes the hearer's prior theory to be.	The theory the speaker intends the hearer to use in his interpretation.
Hearer	The theory the hearer has established in advance to use in interpretation.	The actual theory the hearer does use to interpret the speaker.

I would like to propose that Davidson's account of the prior and passing theories of speakers and hearers provides us with a more comprehensive account of what he means by "use" of metaphor. Our general dissatisfaction with Davidson's claim that "use" constituted metaphor and not change in meaning was that he failed to give a thorough explanation of what occurs between speaker and hearer for there to be any "effect" on the hearer. As Black pointed out in his reply, because metaphors are a sort of speech act, and because they take place between two people, there must be some expected or desired state of interaction. What we require from Davidson is a clarification of how this state, the "effect" on the hearer created through the "use" of the speaker of the words' *literal* meanings, comes to be.

Here is a scenario which might help us apply Davidson's prior and passing theories to what occurs in a metaphor. We will again use the metaphor "John is a wolf" for our scenario. The speaker's prior theory is what he believes the hearer's theory of interpretation will be. Thus the speaker believes the hearer to have certain literal meanings of both "John" and "wolf." The hearer's prior theory is what he *believes* he will use coming into the interaction. Because interactions are context-specific according to Davidson, the hearer cannot postulate in advance any theory other than the literal meanings of "John" and "wolf." However, it is when we attempt to explain passing theories that we run into a few difficulties. The speaker's passing theory is the theory he *intends* the hearer to use. If the meanings of the words in metaphor are none other than literal, the speaker's passing theory cannot be any different from what his prior theory was, since first or literal meaning is established in advance. Thus the speaker would intend "John" and "wolf" to be taken literally as "John" and "wolf," no different from his prior theory above. The hearer's passing theory is what he actually *does* use to interpret the metaphor. But again, the problem shows itself when we realize that, according to Davidson, the meaning of a metaphor is nothing other than the literal meaning, which

was the hearer's prior theory as well. We must find a way to describe a difference in prior and passing theories while retaining only literal meaning of the words in a metaphor.

	Prior Theory	Passing Theory
Speaker	Believes hearer's prior theory to be the literal meanings of 'John' and 'wolf.'	Intends the hearer to use the literal meanings of 'John' and 'wolf' since metaphor is only literal meaning.
Hearer	Has literal meanings of 'John' and 'wolf' established in advance that he intends on using.	Actually uses literal meanings of 'John' and 'wolf' to interpret metaphor.

We know that the speaker's passing theory depends on the context of the linguistic interaction, for as Davidson has claimed, passing theories depend on individual linguistic interactions. As we have seen, "Joan is a witch" could be taken as a metaphor or as an assertion depending on the context. Thus the speaker's prior theory encapsulates all contexts, but his passing theory requires that the hearer recognize (for his theory) that the interaction takes place in a certain context. It is the fact that the speaker has his prior theory (what he assumes the hearer's literal meanings to be) but uses his passing theory (intends that the hearer recognize the literal meanings in a *different* context) to create the "effect" on the hearer: the recognition of literal meanings in new contexts. The hearer's passing theory adapts his prior theory in recognizing the context of the use. This is what Davidson might call the "effect" on the hearer: the recognizance of the new context and the actual adaptation of theory, *not* change in meaning.

We are still a bit suspicious of the shift between prior and passing theories. Though we want to say that the literal meanings in a new context create an "effect" on the hearer, a shift between prior and passing theories, it still sounds like meaning changes between the hearer's prior and passing theories, if not the speaker's as well. Our goal remains to clarify what Davidson means by "use" through his prior and passing theories while allowing the meaning of metaphor to remain none other than its literal meaning.

Systems of Associated Commonplaces in Prior and Passing Theories

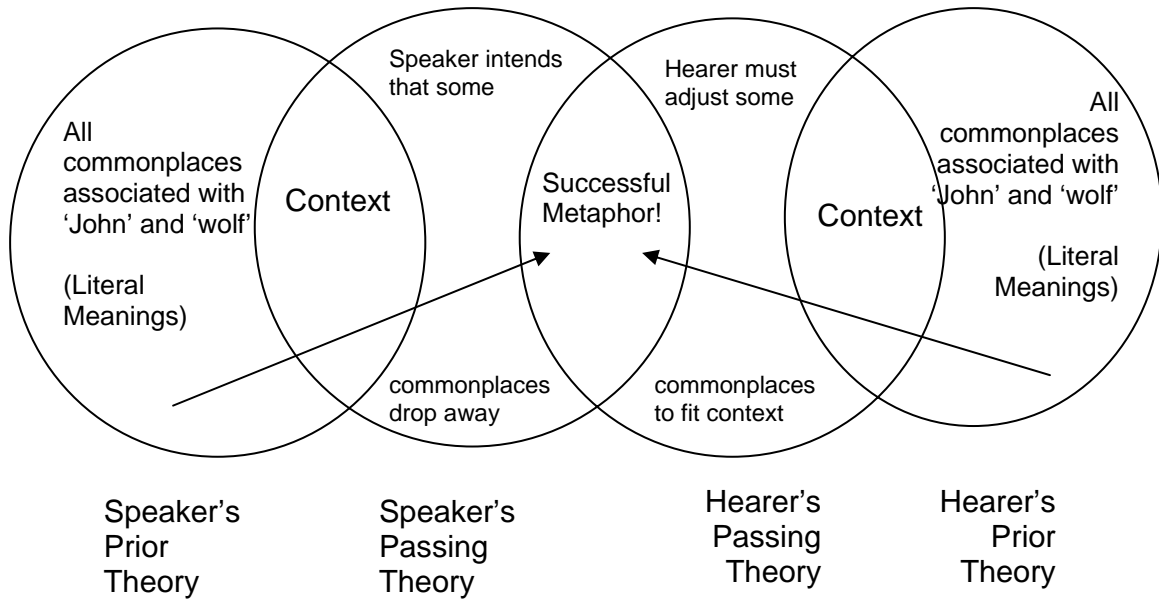
Black's system of associated commonplaces may show us a way in which we may allow metaphor to retain its original meaning between prior and passing theories. Again, this system of associated common places is all those common place associations of the focus of the metaphor (that words or part taken to be the metaphor), and all those of the frame (the words or part taken to be literal). These two pools of common places are reduced down to only those that may apply to both: the focus of the metaphor forces the unwanted commonplaces of both to fall away.

Black's theory provides an interesting interpretation of Davidson's prior and passing theories. The speaker's prior theory is what he expects the hearer's pool of commonplaces to be for both "John" and "wolf." His passing theory, however, *intends* that in recognizing the new context of "John" and "wolf," the hearer will have the

unrelated commonplaces drop away. The hearer himself has his pools of commonplaces associated with both “John” and “wolf” as his prior theory. Yet, in entering into the linguistic transaction, certain commonplaces will fall away according to how he must adapt his theory according to the new context of the words. The important bit to recognize is that the meaning, or pool, of commonplaces associated with “John” and “wolf” does not *change* between the speaker’s, nor the hearer’s prior and passing theories. Certain elements simply drop away due to the new context of their coming together.

	Prior Theory	Passing Theory
Speaker	What he expects the hearer’s pool of commonplaces to be for ‘John’ and ‘wolf.’	<i>Intends</i> the hearer to recognize <i>new context</i> and adapt his theory to make those unwanted commonplaces fall away.
Hearer	Has commonplaces associated with ‘John’ and ‘wolf’ established before the interaction.	Adjusts the commonplaces of ‘John’ and ‘wolf’ to fit in the context of the interaction.

Bringing Black’s system of associated commonplaces into Davidson’s account of prior and passing theories allows metaphor to retain its original meaning while providing a more precise explanation of what occurs between speaker and hearer of metaphor. Davidson’s “use” is the speaker’s prior theory (literal meanings) put in a new context: his passing theory wants certain commonplaces to come together and certain commonplaces to fall away. The “effect” on the hearer is that certain commonplaces *will* drop away when the speaker modifies his prior theory to his the new context, creating his new passing theory. Though the speaker intends for certain commonplaces to fall away and not others, he cannot guarantee that this will happen—as we’ve decided, interpretation of metaphor is never exact or limited. Yet to the extent that passing theories between speaker and hearer converge in a linguistic interaction, or, to the extent that both speaker and hearer let drop more or less the same commonplaces, a metaphor is successful.



Conclusion

The main difference between Black's description of metaphor and Davidson's lies in the fact that Black looks to the language itself and finds a shift in meaning, while Davidson clarifies that meaning stays literal, and we must instead look at what occurs between the speaker and hearer. We found a compromise between the two by looking to Davidson's prior and passing theories of interpretation. The speaker uses the literal meanings of the words in a new context, intending that certain commonplaces fall away, to have a certain effect on the hearer. This effect is that the hearer's adapts his prior theory to the new context, letting certain commonplaces fall away. The literal meanings do not change between prior and passing theories, but the context of the interaction acts upon which commonplaces are interpreted in the metaphor. Thus metaphor relies on both the literal meanings of the words, but gains its power through the effect had upon the hearer by the speaker's use.

Bibliography

- Black, Max. How Metaphors Work: A Reply to Donald Davidson. In *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 6, No. 1. (Autumn, 1979), pp. 131-143.
- Black, Max. Models and Metaphor. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962.
- Davidson, Donald. A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs. From *The Philosophy of Language*, ed. A. P. Martinich (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). 1985.
- Davidson, Donald. What Metaphors Mean. From *On Metaphor*, ed. Sheldon Sacks (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978). 1978.