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Rorty, Metaphor, and Language Games

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Introduction

In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Richard Rorty says: "To have a meaning is to have a place in a language game. Metaphors, by definition, do not" (Rorty, 18). Probably what Rorty wants to say is that a metaphor does not have a special figurative meaning (distinct from its literal meaning) or a kind of cognitive content somehow inhering in it. This I would not dispute. But I think Rorty goes too far in saying metaphors do not have a place in a language game. After discussing Rorty's view of language and metaphor, indicating both the plausibility and the extremity of that view, I will argue that metaphor does indeed have a place in a language game. Under a certain characterization of a language game, I find, both in Rorty's book and in a related essay by Donaid Davidson, reason to believe that metaphors do have a place in a language game. Further, I will argue that Rorty is unfaithful to his Wittgensteinian view of language when he excludes metaphor from a language game. Finally, to avoid a possible charge of quibbling, and also as a matter of personal interest, I will conclude by discussing some of the consequences in Rorty of embracing his extreme view.

Rorty's view of language and metaphor

Rorty's view of language and metaphor, based on the work of Davidson, seems plausible and moderate in many ways. Taking a Wittgensteinian approach, Rorty wants to view language in terms of use rather than meaning. He says Davidson "...does not view language as a medium for either expression or representation" (Rorty, 11). I think this is Rorty's main point: the negative claim that language is a medium neither for expressing inner states nor for representing an external world, that language is not a carrier of meaning, not a medium at all, but rather just a form of life in the Wittgensteinian sense. But Rorty also wants to make positive claims about the way language works, and he does so by discussing the way metaphors work. He says:

> we need to see the distinction between the literal and the metaphorical in the way Davidson sees it: not as a distinction between two sorts of meaning, nor as a distinction between two sorts of interpretation, but as a distinction between familiar and unfamiliar uses of noises and marks (Rorty, 17).

To use words literally is to use them in familiar ways, and to use words metaphorically is to use them in unfamiliar ways. Rorty goes on to say that when words are used in a familiar or literal way, the sentences they form are "truth-value candidates."[1] That is, we can decide whether a sentence is true or false based on the literal meanings of the

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[1] On page 18 Rorty attributes the term "truth-value candidate" to Ian Hacking.

words, so if a sentence uses words literally, it is a candidate for the assignment of a truth-value. But a metaphorical or unfamiliar sentence is not a truth-value candidate. This, as I interpret Rorty, is because a metaphor cannot be taken literally and treated as a truth-value candidate on the surface; and yet neither can a metaphor be converted into a truth-value candidate by paraphrasing it into a literal statement since the unfamiliar use of the words makes them unparaphrasable. The result is that metaphor has no "fixed place" in a language game (Rorty, 18).

However, a metaphor that acquires

> habitual use, a familiar phrase in the language game...will thereby have ceased to be a metaphor--or, if you like, it will have become what most sentences of our language are, a dead metaphor. It will be just one more, literally true or literally false, sentence of the language (ibid.).

To use an example from Davidson, rivers and bottles now literally have mouths, but we can guess that once upon a time they had mouths only metaphorically (Davidson, 252). We can imagine how a metaphor enters a language game, finds a fixed place and becomes a truth-value candidate, by acquiring a literal use.

Rorty's description seems to be a plausible way of viewing metaphor in terms of use rather than meaning. But the plausibility begins to evaporate when we reconsider the distinction upon which his description relies. Distinguishing the literal and the metaphorical as familiar and unfamiliar uses of words is not in itself troublesome, and we remain close to Davidson's view, in which the distinction is not sharp but a matter of degrees (Davidson, 245). But Rorty sharpens the distinction until it seems that we have two mutually exclusive domains of language. He says a metaphor lives outside the domain of a language game, beyond the familiar use of words, until it dies, at which point it may enter the domain of a language game as a familiar, literalized metaphor. What was a helpful distinction seems to have become a hardened dualism.

That metaphors do have a place in the language game

I want to argue that metaphors (live ones) do have a place in a language game. But what is a language game? Robert Fogelin says of the Wittgensteinian notion that "if we ask what a language-game is, we are told that language-games merely form a family of interrelated cases" (Fogelin, 206). Language games maintain only a family resemblance to one another. It is tempting to say that any instance of language is part of a language game, but the possibility of something like a non sequitur provides an immediate counterexample. One characteristic, then, of a language game (most language games?) is that words are used correctly according to some kind of rules, although these rules need not be preestablished or rigid. Moreover, in a language game we are not so much concerned with the meanings of words as with their use.

In *Philosophical Investigations* (#23) Wittgenstein gives guessing riddles as an example of a language game (Wittgenstein 1953, 11). In this game we want to find the meaning of the riddle, not because the riddler wants to communicate that meaning to us, but just because "finding the meaning" is a rule of the game.

Additionally, in order to solve a riddle we need to know how its words are used, but we fail at the riddle game, or even fail entirely to play the game, if we do not view the rules of word usage as flexible. Rules and use are bound up together, and although it would be inappropriate to offer a strict definition of a language game in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions or of any single criterion, I will nevertheless suggest that the rule-governed use of words is an indicator that those words have a place in a language game (leaving the possibility open that some language games might not involve the rule-governed use of words).

Rorty probably would not want to come out and say that metaphors are rule-governed, but he does place them in the context of use. He says, attributing the view to Davidson, that metaphors are like gestures, that

> tossing a metaphor into a conversation is like suddenly breaking off the conversation long enough to make a face, or pulling a photograph out of your pocket and displaying it, or pointing at a feature of the surroundings, or slapping your interlocutor's face, or kissing him (Rorty, 18).

(According to the fortuitous testimony of Wittgenstein [1953, 224], "Something new [spontaneous, 'specific'] is always a language game.") So far we have metaphors, like gestures, appearing in the context of use, in conversation. But where do rules come in?

Rorty continues: "All these [gestures, metaphors] are ways of producing effects on your interlocutor or your reader..." (Rorty, 18). Because they are ways of producing effects, we can see that metaphors are in some sense rule-governed. Here I assume that the metaphor maker is not trying to produce a random effect but an expected one, and although I do not want to advert to the intended meaning of the metaphor maker, I think it can be said that expectation, like prediction, is not possible without some reliance on rules. Even if the expectation is based on the metaphor maker's "feel" for the language, I would say that prior linguistic experiences have taught the metaphor maker, if not a scientific law inductively derived, at least a kind of rule of thumb which informs the feeling. If I am correct, it would seem that metaphors, according to Rorty's own views, involve the rule-governed use of words and so do indeed have a place in a language game.

Dispensing with Rorty as interpretive intermediary, I turn now to Davidson's view of metaphor. In "What Metaphors Mean," Davidson emphatically places metaphor in the context of use, stressing "the *effects* metaphors have on us," "what the metaphor makes us notice" or "*calls* [or *'brings'*] to our attention," and what "we are *led* to see" (Davidson, 261-63; emphasis added except the first). He says: "What distinguishes metaphor is not meaning but use..." (259). He rejects the notion that metaphors have any special figurative meaning or "cognitive content" and asserts that "metaphors mean what the words, in their most literal interpretation, mean, and nothing more" (245). He is not suggesting that metaphors should be taken literally, but that "an adequate account of metaphor must allow that the primary or original meanings of words remain active in their metaphorical setting" (249).

Here is where rules come in. The ordinary or literal meanings of words guide the use of metaphor, its creation and interpretation. In metaphor the ordinary, familiar rules of a language game, whether rigid or flexible, must come into play. This is not to say that the use of metaphor is entirely rule-bound, for Davidson does want to include an artistic element in his account of metaphor. In fact, he says, "all communication by speech assumes the interplay of inventive construction and inventive construal" (245). But metaphor "works its wonders" even as it "runs on the same familiar linguistic tracks that the plainest sentences do" (247, 259).

Surely metaphor has a place in a language game, and I think Davidson surely stands in agreement when he says: "Metaphor is a legitimate device not only in literature but in science, philosophy, and the law; it is effective in praise and abuse, prayer and promotion, description and prescription" (246). It is hard to see how metaphor could be either legitimate or effective if it resided outside a language game.

Objections

At this point I would like to consider some objections to my argument that metaphors have a place in a language game. Neither Rorty nor Davidson would deny that metaphors have uses, but it may be said, contrary to what I have already argued, that metaphors are not rule-governed, that the use of metaphor is rather a creative activity. When Rorty says, "the world does not provide us with any criterion of choice between alternative metaphors...," I agree; but Rorty finishes the sentence by saying, "we can only compare languages or metaphors with one another, not with something beyond language called 'fact'" (Rorty, 20). I answer that the same is true of literal speech, and therefore that the absence of a criterion of correspondence to "fact" does not exclude metaphor from a language game.

Yet Davidson too says that "understanding a metaphor is as much a creative endeavour as making a metaphor, and as little guided by rules" (Davidson, 245). Granted, but being "little guided by rules" is not the same as not being guided by rules at all. I think Davidson carefully and correctly avoids denying outright the role of rules in metaphor use. It may be that metaphor is more, even far more, creative than rule-governed, but I maintain that Davidson's claim that we must rely on the literal meanings of words in a metaphor entails at least some use of rules.

Another objection to depicting metaphor use as rule-governed centers on the ambiguity of saying something is rule-governed. That is, do I suggest that metaphor may be *described* as functioning according to rules? In Newtonian mechanics, for example, it is a descriptive rule that an object falling in the Earth's gravity well accelerates at a rate of thirty-two feet per second. Or, on the other hand, do I suggest that metaphor making and interpreting involve the *employment* of rules? The Newtonian rule of acceleration just mentioned, for example, could be employed to calculate how long it will take an object to reach the Earth from a given height. But the employment of rules is itself ambiguous, for in the case of metaphor use we would have to ask whether or not it is a *conscious* employment of rules. In constructing a sentence, for instance, I might consciously employ the rule of grammar that says a sentence must have both a subject and a predicate; or on the other hand, such a rule might be so habitual that I employ it unconsciously.

In all cases it would seem futile to maintain that metaphor use is rule-governed. The attempt to compile a descriptive list of rules for metaphor use, I grant, leads to no end of difficulties, and to say that metaphor use involves the conscious employment of rules runs contrary to the Wittgensteinian notion of a language game. What remains is the unconscious employment of rules which, it may be said, is an ill-conceived way of referring to a Wittgensteinian practice. It may in fact be the case that metaphor use is just such a practice, neither wholly describable in terms of rules, nor entirely governed by the employment of rules, but simply one more way in which we use language.

But here the objection supplies its own answer. If metaphor use is a Wittgensteinian practice, a linguistic practice, well established and in wide use, then we may call it a language game. This answer, however, seems to abandon the question of rules. But it need not. How do we recognize a linguistic practice? One way, if not the only or best way, is to recognize its involvement with rules. I think a practice can be at least partially described in terms of rules or, whether consciously or not, at least partially conducted by employing rules. If not a condition, then, rules at least serve as an indicator of a linguistic practice and hence of a language game. The rules of grammar, for instance, whether descriptive or employed, and whether employed consciously or not, do serve as an indicator of a linguistic practice, and hence, of a language game. So too with metaphor. To achieve an effect, or to bring the literal meanings of words into play, involves rule use of some kind and so places metaphor in a language game.

As a final objection, I will entertain the notion that I have so far misunderstood or misrepresented Rorty's conception of metaphor. It may be that Rorty wants to distinguish three kinds of metaphor. The first is the dead, literalized metaphor, which is no longer a metaphor at all. The second is what Rorty might call an "elegant variation" on a precursor's language (Rorty, 28).[2] In this case the metaphor maker has failed to do anything really new, but rather has just borrowed someone else's metaphor and maybe "cleaned it up," or made a few changes, or maybe even tried to place it in a new context. In any event, the original metaphor has been "bandied about" and has begun to catch on and become familiar, and so it is already half-dead (Rorty, 18). Such a metaphor is on the verge of having a place in a language game, and it may be suggested that this is the kind of metaphor that I have been discussing all along.

But Rorty, it may be further suggested, is interested in a third kind of metaphor. Rorty may want to view a metaphor as--to borrow a phrase from Wittgenstein--"something really unheard of" (Wittgenstein 1969, 67).[3] A metaphor would be something like a non sequitur. It would have no meaning at all, and so no place in a

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2 The "elegant variation" comes up in Rorty's discussion of self-redescription.

3 The context here is a discussion of the possibility that one's firmly held opinions might be challenged by, say, seeing "trees gradually changed into men."

language game, until someone began to use it. Such a metaphor would be completely original, far removed from all contexts of normal use, and an entirely unfamiliar use of words.

If Rorty is talking about this third kind of metaphor, the non sequitur metaphor (as I shall term it), I answer that it would be difficult to imagine such a thing. But if we do grant the possibility of a non sequitur metaphor, I think we must also say that it can have some meaning. Because a metaphor presumably means something to its maker, it is possible that the metaphor means something (although not necessarily the same thing precisely) to someone else, and so even a non sequitur metaphor has a possible place in a language game.[4] But this defense stretches the imagination as much as the objection, and besides, both rely on possibility rather than practice.

A better response would be to say that a non sequitur metaphor may be a *mistake* in a language game but that making mistakes is part of the practice of a language game. There is no need (and it would be futile) to define what it is to be a mistake in a language game; but rather, it only need be pointed out that we know how to work with mistakes within the context of the game. We ask, "What do you mean?" or assert, "That's gibberish!" and continue our uninterrupted play of the game. We can grant that a metaphor may be "something really unheard of," and maybe this is what Rorty is interested in, but if the metaphor maker goes too far, it will just be a mistake and not a metaphor at all. In either case, whether mistake or metaphor, it has a place in a language game.[5]

That Rorty is unfaithful to his Wittgensteinian view of language

Given that Rorty adopts a Wittgensteinian view of language, his view of metaphor is curiously un-Wittgensteinian. Distinguishing the literal and metaphorical use of words as familiar and unfamiliar is not particularly un-Wittgensteinian; but as I have already indicated, Rorty sharpens the distinction until metaphor no longer has a place in a language game. Such a sharp distinction, insofar as it is an attempt to strictly categorize the usage of words, is, I suggest, antithetical to a Wittgensteinian notion of language. Granting that the literal and metaphorical uses of words are not identical, it would nevertheless seem more appropriate to follow Davidson and look at the difference as a matter of degree, as a shading-off from one to

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[4] This possibility presumes that the metaphor, *if used*, means something to its maker and either (or both/and) that all human language users have a similar biological makeup or that there can be no private language. In the extreme case, this line of reasoning relies on the plausibility of imagining two people who have acquired many (or a sufficient number) of the same idiosyncrasies (and that "shared idiosyncrasy" is not a fatal contradiction in terms).

[5] As a defense against an objector who says that a language game does not involve rules, it might be argued that if mistakes imply rules, and if mistakes are part of the practice of a language game, then so are rules.

the other. There are two ways to see this shading-off at work, one involving the functioning of a metaphor and the other involving the "life" of a metaphor. For both I will use an example from Shakespeare, his Sonnet 73:

> That time of year thou mayst in me behold,
> When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
> Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
> Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
> In me thou seest the twilight of such day,
> As after sunset fadeth in the west,
> Which by and by black night doth take away,
> Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
> In me thou seest the glowing of such fire,
> That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
> As the death-bed whereon it must expire,
> Consumed with that which it was nourished by.
>
> This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
> To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

In the first quatrain of Shakespeare's sonnet, the speaker compares himself to autumn. Clearly autumn is a metaphor for old age, but autumn is more than just a metaphor. Combined with the second and third quatrains in which the speaker compares himself to the sunset and then to a dying fire, the autumn imagery also contributes to the poem's setting (in time and space, which in turn helps establish a mood). The setting is a cold autumn day on which the speaker watches the sunset from his fireside.

Note that the setting is not a metaphor. The speaker does not compare himself to the setting--not to this particular autumn day, this particular sunset, this particular fire--but to elements abstracted from the setting: the season, the time of day, the dying of fire. And yet there is no clear line between the metaphors and the setting. We might say that the metaphors are embedded in the setting. Or shall we say that the setting is embedded in the metaphors? In any case, it is difficult to locate or isolate the metaphors in this sonnet, and it would become even more difficult to isolate the metaphors if we went on to consider all their other extra-metaphorical functions.[6]

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6 Consider the functioning of metaphors within metaphors. Within the sunset metaphor, for example, night is metaphorically called "Death's second self," and within the fire metaphor, the ashes are called a deathbed. Death's second self and the deathbed each stand at two metaphorical removes from the speaker, but each also serves a direct function. They indicate the circumstances of the poem: the impending death of the speaker. Indeed, not only is the speaker old, but we might even imagine him languishing on his deathbed. Again, this circumstance would not be a metaphor.

The point is that we cannot easily say, "This is a metaphor and nothing else," for the metaphors shade off into and serve a variety of functions.

The "life" of a metaphor is also a matter of degrees. Rorty tells us that a metaphor may die and become literal, giving the impression that there is a distinct line between the metaphorical and the literal. But how do we know when a living metaphor has died? Can we check its pulse? No. Metaphors are not pronounced dead according to any criterion, but rather, as Rorty himself says, according to usage. When a metaphor acquires a habitual use, when it becomes familiar, then it is dead. This change does not happen overnight, but gradually, and we have no test for habitual use or familiarity. Returning to Shakespeare's sonnet for an example, I ask, can we determine whether the old-age-is-autumn metaphor is dead? The metaphor is at least four hundred years old. I speak in a very familiar way when I say, "My father is in the autumn of his life." But have I spoken literally? Does the familiarity of my statement tell us that the metaphor is dead? How much familiarity constitutes death?

We can easily paraphrase my metaphorical statement into a literal one: "My father is old." Or is it so easy? Doesn't the paraphrase leave something out, something perhaps about my attitude toward aging, or maybe something about the springtime of my father's life? I would say, in this case, that the metaphor is still alive, since probably everyone still makes associations with the season, as opposed to the dead river-mouth metaphor, which today probably never involves associations with a bodily orifice.[7] But if the old-age-is-autumn metaphor is not yet dead, surely it is in the autumn of its life. I suggest that no one will witness its passing. For it seems plain that the distinction between the literal and metaphorical use of words is a matter of degrees, and if the distinction at the extremes is like day and night, it is nonetheless the case that there is no definite terminator between them, but rather a long dusk.

Inasmuch as a Wittgensteinian would consider it vain to define or categorize parts of speech in an attempt to determine whether they have a place in a language game, Rorty's sharp distinction between the metaphorical and literal use of words undermines his Wittgensteinian view of language. And even if Rorty backs off to the more plausible distinction between literal and metaphorical as familiar and unfamiliar uses of words, which would admit of degrees, he is still in danger of thwarting his position, since Rorty tends to discuss all of language in terms of this single distinction. I assume here that, for a Wittgensteinian, it would be a gross oversimplification of language to view the whole of it in terms of only two modes of discourse, the literal and the metaphorical in Rorty's case. Yet even if Rorty is talking about just these two modes among the many modes of discourse, he again betrays his Wittgensteinian position when he says one mode, the metaphorical, does not have a place in a language game. Rorty says metaphors, by definition, do not have a place in a language game. But a Wittgensteinian needs to say that a mode of

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[7] Is the dead river-mouth metaphor resurrected when its old associations are brought to the fore? It becomes even more difficult to pronounce a metaphor dead when its corpse might yet open its mouth and speak.

discourse, by definition, does have a place in (or is) a language game, and if the use of metaphors is a mode of discourse, then metaphors do have a place in a language game.

Distinguishing sharply between the literal and metaphorical use of words allows Rorty to say that metaphors do not have a place in a language game, but in saying so he abandons his Wittgensteinian view of language. In order to maintain his Wittgensteinian position, he would need to assert a distinction that admits of degrees. As I think my discussion of Shakespeare's metaphors indicates, metaphor is not sharply distinguished from the literal (or other) use of words. From a Wittgensteinian standpoint, then, I think I can conclude again that metaphors do have a place in a language game.

Consequences of Rorty's extremity

Finally I turn to a consideration of what I perceive to be the consequences in Rorty of accepting his extreme position that metaphors do not have a place in a language game. Rather than suggesting necessary connections, I want only to outline some of Rorty's main points as they unfold in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. His dualistic view of language, that metaphor resides or functions somehow outside a language game, seems to run through the entire book.

Working with Harold Bloom's notion of the strong poet, Rorty describes the self as a self-creator. The self-creator invents new language--new metaphors--in a project of self-redescription aimed at overcoming the contingencies of the past with the hope of achieving a kind of autonomy and identity. The project is never entirely completed, however, because mortals can never entirely elude contingency. What the self-creator finds dreadful, in addition to the incompletion forced on her by death, is that her success is also contingent upon the willingness of others in the future to use her new metaphors. If no one uses her metaphors, the metaphors do not die and become literal; rather, they vanish altogether, and so might the self-creator vanish. Thus the self-creator hopes her metaphors will indeed die and, crossing over from the domain of the metaphorical, find a kind of immortality in the domain of the literal.

Rorty carries forward this dualism into his redescription of the self-creator as an "ironist." Much like the poet creates metaphors, the ironist creates a "final vocabulary" which she uses to describe her own life and projects. She may use her final vocabulary, or other vocabularies, in contests of persuasion, and she may even try to persuade others to use her vocabulary, but she cannot insist that the use of her vocabulary, or any other, is rationally justifiable. The point I want to make, the point that Rorty makes, is that the ironist's final vocabulary is unavoidably private, and such a vocabulary is no more justifiable than a metaphor. Paralleling the distinction between the metaphorical and the literal use of words, then, the ironist lives a dual linguistic life, crossing back and forth between the private and public domains, unable to reconcile one with the other.

I find Rorty's views compelling, and I don't see much in them to worry about until, in the political arena, he presents the unbridgeable rift between the private and public domains. Although it may be no more than just some latent universalism in me that finds such a rift repugnant, I am nonetheless motivated to question the necessity or advisability of such a dualism. Does Rorty's view of language, particularly his view of metaphor, somehow necessitate and ineluctably lead us to the

brink of the private/public rift? Or, while still using Rorty's view of language and metaphor as a starting point, can we choose at some later point to veer off the path he marks out and so hope never to arrive at the rift? In either case, if we are the creators Rorty says we are, we might do well to consider the consequences of introducing dualism into our creations.

Conclusion

While I find Rorty's (and Davidson's) view of language and metaphor plausible and interesting, I think Rorty goes too far when he excludes metaphor from a language game. If the characterization of a language game (at least of some language game) as the rule-governed use of words holds, I think both Rorty and Davidson provide reason to believe that metaphor does have a place in a language game. Metaphors obviously involve the use of words, and in order to achieve effects, which Rorty admits they do, metaphors must rely on at least some rules of usage, which in Davidson begin with the literal meanings of the words. Additionally, if Rorty wants to maintain a Wittgensteinian view of language, he cannot distinguish sharply between the literal and metaphorical use of words. But if the distinction is a matter of degrees, as my discussion of Shakespeare's metaphors suggests, it is not easy to isolate or strictly define metaphors, which in turn makes it difficult to exclude metaphors from a language game. Yet if Rorty's distinction reduces to viewing metaphors as a mode of discourse, then from a Wittgensteinian standpoint, metaphors do have a place in a language game. If my argument succeeds, perhaps we can avoid some of the dualistic consequences of Rorty's extreme view. If my argument fails, however, it is my belief that another may well come along to replace it (if there are not others already). This belief, ironically, is fostered by one of Rorty's own images: the coral reef. "Old metaphors are constantly dying off into literalness, and then serving as a platform and foil for new metaphors" (Rorty, 16). The living and the dead organisms together constitute the coral reef, and although each may play a different role, both reside in the same domain. So too with the literal and metaphorical use of words: both have a place in a language game.

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