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Literary Metonymies in Protest Songs

This article is concerned with the definition and analysis of metonymies in literary texts. The goal is to illustrate the poetic potential of metonymies. The study pays special attention to the political protest song as one might not expect to find many forms of indirectness in this genre.

The article begins by offering a cognitivist perspective in the tradition of the theory of conceptual metaphor formulated by Lakoff und Johnson. This theory states that metonymies (and thus also synecdoches) may be understood as linguistic manifestations of the cognitive principle which states that our minds often register and understand a thing metonymically on the basis of its individual aspects. Accordingly, the concept belonging to a metonymic expression grants mental access

to other concepts in the same conceptual area of experience through a process referred to as metonymic mapping. This leads to a one-sided perception of the concept because some of its characteristics are highlighted while others are hidden. Often it is that which is conspicuous or prototypical about a thing which affords this mental access (e.g. the building a government makes its decisions in or a striking piece of clothing on a person). Nevertheless, according to the conceptualist standpoint the metonymy should not only be understood as a highly conventionalised trope limited to inconspicuous examples like »Berlin votes against the USA«. Rather, the conceptual principle also brings new metonymic language usages to the fore as its scope is not limited to conventionalised metonymies. For example, it is possible to present unusual details of an experience which make it more difficult to discern what is actually meant. This is especially true of metonymies in which the allusions for determining the new direction of the metonymic reference remain vague. According to the relevance theory of Sperber and Wilson, this vagueness is what produces the poetic effect of the metonymy: The more vague the metonymic reference is, the more challenging it is for the audience to complete the metonymic mapping and the greater is the poetic effect. This quality of metonymies makes them very productive for interpretations.

Following this theoretical overview of the conceptual metonymy, I formulate a definition of the linguistic metonymy which allows for metonymies which consist of an entire sequence of words rather than just a single word. The definition states that a word or phrase is a metonymy if its actual meaning appears unconventional or inappropriate in the co-text or if it does not refer in a relevant way to a referent in the world of the text or if it is only relevant as part of a larger process or issue. The (ideal) reader is then able to give the reference of the metonymic expression a new direction within the context of the same conceptual domain on the basis of his or her knowledge of the world, assumptions concerning the global context, and assumptions concerning the author's intentions – irrespective of conceptually necessary associations.

In the next section of the article, I apply this definition to literary texts by conducting model analyses of five different protest songs (by Lokomotive Kreuzberg, Peter Schilling, Herbert Grönemeyer, Franz Josef Degenhardt, and Peter Maffay). This provides an opportunity to illustrate the relationship between metonymy and metaphor and between metonymy and ellipsis. The metonymy then appears as a productive form of figurative language which presents things like unusual fragments of reality which invite the recipient to make a connection, thus leaving a poetic impression. More importantly, however, a basic literary principle can be attributed to the metonymy: Whenever we understand a single (fictional) case as a particular in the context of a general, what we are really engaged in is metonymic mapping.

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