

Metonymy: Underspecification and Reduction

Atreyee Mukherjee
Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur
atrejeeb@iitk.ac.in

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Metonymy is a kind of non-correspondence in form and meaning, encapsulated by linguistic reduction, which the present paper aims to discuss. The paper attempts to find the locus of metonymy within several of such reductions. It elaborates on the nature and cognitive-pragmatic underpinnings of the linguistic reduction involved in metonymy and its resolution.

Metonymy is standardly viewed as a figure of speech wherein one expression is used to refer to some referent closely related to that particular expression. The typical cases of metonymy include PART FOR WHOLE, PLACE FOR EVENT, AUTHOR FOR WORK, etc. Some examples of metonymy are as follows:

1. The ham-sandwich left without paying. >> The person who ordered ham-sandwich left without paying

2. Have you read Rabindranath Tagore? >> Have you read Rabindranath Tagore's works?

In the expressions noted as exemplars of metonymy, most of the works, if not all, provide a linguistically expressed meaning of a metonymic expression. One may consider the examples (1-2) which involve shortening; also noted as language reduction by Le Guern (1973). Reduction of a similar sort is characteristic of another linguistic phenomenon called ellipsis which is a constraint-bound omission of obligatory information in a grammatical structure. Gonzalez & Clivillés (2006) note that "the reduction characteristic of metonymy is that of ellipsis..." They also note that the commonality between metonymy and ellipsis is that both need to recover the content of the empty element for meaning determination essentially because these expressions are otherwise ungrammatical. Agreeably so, these two phenomena differ too. Gonzalez & Clivillés (2006) claim the basis of their difference to be "completeness". In case of ellipsis, the expressions are, perceivably, incomplete from the structural perspective; whereas metonymy is complete by virtue of the head-modifier which takes over as the head of the phrase.

In this paper, I argue that metonymy is a result of not the same kind of linguistic reduction found in ellipsis. Consider the following example of ellipsis where the structural gap (denoted by [...]) exists despite the absence of the linguistic form.

3. Megha goes to a public school but Tiya does not.

>> Megha goes to a public school but Tiya does not [go to a public school.]

Metonymy, on the other hand does not exhibit any structural remnant post linguistic reduction. Consider example (1) restated here as (4):

4. The ham-sandwich left without paying.

>> The person who ordered ham-sandwich left without paying.

In this example, although the metonymy resolution seems similar to ellipsis, the reduction that takes place here differs from the one in example (3). In metonymy, the linguistic reduction does not leave a structural gap. Hence in metonymy, the linguistic reduction encompasses the omission of not only the content component but also the structural component of the linguistic symbol.

The paper also attempts to discuss the retrievability of metonymic meaning, which, as an instantiation of underspecification, invokes context-of-utterance. The phenomenon and the retrievability of its meaning calls not just for a syntactic or pragmatic or cognitive explanation alone, rather, mandates an account of the interplay between syntax, pragmatics and cognition, which is discussed in this paper.

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