

Remarks on the literal-metaphorical distinction and lexicalized concepts

Christopher Genovesi (Concordia University)

Abstract:

I explore a recent attempt by Allot & Textor (2022) to preserve the literal-metaphoric distinction without recourse to (lexicalized) concepts. This talk expands upon some ideas discussed in a previous talk by Genovesi & Hesse (2023). The literal-metaphoric distinction reflects the intuitive idea that we routinely identify statements such as “the largest fish in the aquarium is a shark” as literal and “my lawyer is a shark” as metaphorical. We grasp the former by knowing the conventional meaning of the words uttered and the rules for their combination. The latter, however, we grasp by inferring what is meant beyond the conventional meaning. In other words, literal meaning is standard, metaphorical meaning is deviant. However, proponents of lexical pragmatics place metaphor on a continuum with literally loose uses of speech. Here, deviance is the rule, not the exception. This has led some (most notably, Sperber & Wilson, 2008) to abandon the literal-metaphorical distinction altogether. Allot & Textor (2017; 2022) develop and defend a version of the literal-metaphorical distinction that does not rely on lexicalized concepts and conventional word meaning. On their view, non-literal language use is contrasted with “originating use”. The idea is reminiscent of Hobbes' notion of 'ordained' usage. As such, it is open to similar criticisms. Although I generally agree that there is a need to preserve the literal-metaphorical distinction despite the pervasiveness of lexical modulation. I offer some reasons for my disagreement. One major issue is the vagueness of the authors' use of the phrase “originating use”. I canvass several possible candidate criteria for this phrase. I estimate that none are satisfactory for preserving the notion of deviance. I offer a notion of deviance based on a neoclassical understanding of concepts (Leben, 2015).