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UNDERSTANDING METONYMY

Theoretical, Experimental, and Corpus-Based Investigations in Metonymy Research

PHD THESIS

ABSTRACT

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INTRODUCTION

In George Orwell's novel *1984*, the basic concept of the language called "Newspeak" consists of creating a communication system where only strictly necessary words exist, each having a precise meaning: meaning as narrow as possible. Natural languages abound with polysemous words and figurative meanings, reflecting a dangerously flexible and creative way of thinking. The possibility of creating a language like "Newspeak" raises not only the issue of the influence of language on the way we think, but also questions about the nature of linguistic meaning, about the mental representation of the world, and implicitly about human behavior.

One of the most popular current directions in linguistics, **cognitive linguistics**, seeks answers to these questions. As suggested by the Latin term *cognitio* ('knowledge'), cognitive linguistics, as part of the cognitive sciences, does not study language as a system of signs existing somewhere in the external world, but considers it a mental system closely linked to our entire cognitive apparatus. According to cognitive linguists, our image of the world is organized into certain cognitive structures, called **idealized cognitive models**, which allow us not only to categorize objects, phenomena and events but also to use the relationships between them to understand the world around us. This conceptual categorization also influences linguistic categorization, and researchers in this field have concluded that stylistic figures like **metaphor and metonymy** are not just products of poetic imagination or simple rhetorical ornaments, as it was long believed, but fundamental processes of knowledge, thinking, and, implicitly, of action. This reevaluation was initiated by the work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, published in 1980.

Thus, the concept of metaphor has gained a new interpretation and has become one of the most important areas of research in cognitive linguistics. Unlike metaphor, metonymy was long outside scientific interest. Most researchers considered the study of metaphor more interesting and relevant than that of any other trope. However, this attitude has significantly changed in recent decades. Today, some cognitive linguists consider that the role of metonymy in language and thought is as important as that of metaphor. The study of this phenomenon not only provides a better understanding of the nature of language but also of the conceptual and cognitive processes underlying discourse.

In everyday language use, adult speakers almost do not notice when they use or hear metonymic expressions: they easily understand sentences that, interpreted literally, would be

nonsensical. For example, the sentences “I am reading *Dickens*”, “*The car* braked in front of the house”, “*The buses* are on strike”, or “*America* attacked *Iraq”* are easy to interpret, and only jokingly might we react by asking, for the statement “*The buses* are on strike”: "And what do the drivers think about this?"

Unlike adults, children often encounter difficulties in interpreting metonymies correctly. Brigitte Nerlich mentions in a study (Nerlich–Clarke–Todd, 1999) that when her four-and-a-half-year-old son returned from kindergarten with an empty lunchbox, she exclaimed enthusiastically, "Wow, you ate *the whole box*!" and the child started laughing and corrected her: "You said it wrong, mommy! You should say: you ate everything in the box!" (idem, p. 375). I recall a similar example from kindergarten: my children, aged 4-5, found it amusing that a three-year-old girl used to say: *My little nose* is running! (Hung. *Folyik a **nózim**!*). At first, I thought they found the diminutive (*nózi*) funny, but later I realized that what they found amusing was the idea that "the nose is running" like a stream. Nerlich's study also shows that around the age of four, children begin to creatively use metonymies, probably to express themselves more quickly.

What, however, allows us to understand these sentences that, at first glance, might seem nonsensical? And, more importantly, what is metonymy?

The title of my paper thus has a double meaning: on one hand, it aims at a better understanding of metonymy as a cognitive and/or linguistic process, and on the other hand, it analyzes the way metonymic expressions are interpreted and processed by listeners.

In the paper, I will discuss separately the theoretical explanations, including the interpretation of metonymy based on the concepts proposed by cognitive linguists, linguistic approaches within lexical semantics, as well as the results of psycholinguistic experiments and corpus studies. The data obtained suggest that metonymy is a much more complex phenomenon than can be described by a single cognitive principle, and the process of understanding it involves numerous components.

The hypothesis of the paper is that different theoretical approaches highlight distinct aspects of the metonymic process, all of which are essential in interpreting and processing metonymic expressions. The goal is to organize these perspectives into a **coherent model** that explains not only the nature of metonymy but also the discourse activity as a whole. For this, both theoretical analyses and psycholinguistic experiments and corpus studies are necessary, as real-

time analysis of understanding and using real metonymic examples provides much more valuable insights into the nature of metonymy than theoretical speculations based on artificial examples.

CHAPTER 1 explores some aspects of the traditional and cognitive perspectives on metonymy research, offering a view of how, in recent decades, metonymy has evolved from being considered merely a "rhetorical/linguistic tool" to a conceptual process, even a cognitive operation, that significantly contributes to the formation of our mental model of the world. The chapter discusses historical changes in metonymy research and highlights the key questions that have arisen in relation to each approach.

In the traditional view, metonymy was still seen as a linguistic ornament, with an emphasis on classifying based on conceptual relationships, and its treatment as **"substitution of one name for another"** was widely accepted. However, there were interpretations that questioned whether metonymy truly involved a transfer of meaning. For example, Aladár Zlinszky considers metonymic expressions as **sentence reductions** or adherences (Zlinszky 1961), while Bálint Csűry defines the phenomenon as an **"association between mental images based on contiguity"** (Csűry 1929), with the main question being why a certain connection is possible between the elements of metonymic expressions. The explanation lies in the fact that the concepts expressed by these elements, as "conceptual units," belong to the same "conceptual complexes" and, therefore, manifest simultaneously or successively in our experience. This approach already closely resembles the view in cognitive linguistics, as it focuses less on language and more on conceptual aspects. In the cognitive perspective**, "metonymy is a cognitive process in which one conceptual entity, the vehicle, provides mental access to another conceptual entity, the target, within the same domain or idealized cognitive model"** (Kövecses 2005: 149).

When we use a word in a metonymic way, it—as the vehicle—makes mentally accessible the other part of the relationship, the target. In other words, the relevant metonymic relationship is activated in our mind, allowing us to reach the intended meaning. For example, in the sentence "Mary reads Dickens," the word "Dickens" serves as the vehicle for the intended meaning of "the book/novel/work written by Dickens," and this is possible because we have a mental model of authors that includes not only their identity but also many other things we know about them (such as the fact that they wrote novels). Thus, these entities can stand for or substitute one another. The terms "substitution" and "stands for" are used here for simplification because the process is more

complex than a mere substitution. When we use metonymic expressions—as Radden and Kövecses (1999) emphasize—both the vehicle entity and the target entity are present conceptually at the same time, although, in a given situation, one of them may be more prominent (salient) for cognitive or communicative reasons and, as such, may serve as the vehicle or, using Langacker's terminology, as the **"reference point"** to reach the target entity (Langacker, 1993, 2009; see also Panther-Thornburg, 2007).

According to cognitive theories, the main function of metonymy is **referentiality**, and one of its key features is **implicitness**. However, the analysis of "double true metonymies" has shown that implicitness can be interpreted in different ways, and in addition to reference, other speaker intentions, such as directing attention or **focusing**, can motivate the use of metonymy (see also Tolcsvai Nagy 2017b: 262–263).

This chapter is complemented by Appendices I and II, which contain possible classifications of different types of metonymies.

CHAPTER 2 addresses the **linguistic aspects of metonymy**, taking into account the fact that some of the specialized literature argues that before drawing broad conclusions about the conceptual nature of metonymy, we should examine its linguistic nature in more detail. In this chapter, we mainly analyze the linguistic characteristics of **logical metonymies**, as well as the phenomena of **meaning transfer and predicate transfer**, according to Nunberg, and briefly refer to the relationship between metonymy and **systematic polysemy**. The focus of the research at this point will be restricted to noun phrase metonymies, and in the following chapters, I will only discuss those expressions that are noun phrase structures (NP) (in other words, metonymic expressions where the vehicle is a THING).

In analyzing logical metonymies, I come to the conclusion that it is not sufficient to consider only the qualia structure of words for the interpretation of statements. For the speaker to express their thoughts in a specific way, they must be aware of the listener's "knowledge" regarding this aspect, and the listener expects the speaker to formulate their thoughts with this in mind. This mutual collaboration requires a "common knowledge" that both the speaker and the listener share. Therefore, to understand metonymic expressions, not only is the semantic structure necessary, but also knowledge of **pragmatic information**, and even **typological-rhythmic factors**, such as the number of syllables, can influence the naturalness of a metonymic expression.

A merit of Nunberg's theory (1995) is that it emphasizes the dependence of the validity of statements on the context of the utterance in examples explained through meaning transfer. Thus, sentences such as "*The ham sandwich* requires the bill" are called "occasional" metonymies and are distinguished from examples whose use does not largely depend on context, as they have been **conventionalized** through frequent use (e.g., "This museum exhibits three *Van Goghs*").

At the end of the chapter, I conclude that it is much more natural to interpret metonymy not only as a mental operation based on conceptual relationships, but rather as **a procedure or strategy based on a form of abbreviation**. From this perspective, for example, in sentences like "I read *Dickens* over the weekend," we are not talking about systematic polysemy, but—following Jackendoff (2002)—rather about a "productive rule," and in this case, the rule is what is stored in our mental lexicon, not the "book" meaning of the metonymic word "Dickens".

CHAPTER 3 focuses on the study of metonymy as an **elliptical process**, thus approaching the main question, namely the process of creating and understanding metonymic expressions. From the semantic-grammatical rule of deletion to the ellipsis that takes place in the syntactic structure of referential metonymy, we reach semantic-conceptual omission. Since these aspects suggest that we cannot ignore pragmatic factors in understanding the metonymic phenomenon, we also discuss the pragmatics of metonymy here.

The next part of the chapter contains one of the key points of the work: the description of **metonymy as a strategy of "configurational short-circuiting" in discourse activity**.

The idea of **configuration** comes from Szilágyi (2016): discussing some (worrisome) questions related to compound words in the Hungarian language, the author rejects formal rule-based grammar principles and concludes that the particular nature of compound words can only be understood if, in the mind of the language users, we do not imagine rules but a complex neural network, which has the following characteristics: it is primarily analogical (not digital and not rule-based); it is composed of nodes and the relationships between them; these nodes have intensities that are continuous; the network structure is shaped by input models; certain nodes and relationships are activated depending on context, and each activation or change in intensity represents a new state of the network; each state has a different outcome. Starting from this, we can say that, during speech activity, in the speaker's mind, a kind of skeleton of the mental content (the imagistic configuration) is shaped, which, in the process of transformation into verbal

message, develops and shapes under the influence of linguistic characteristics. For this reason, we assume that in the formation of an oral message, there is a level or phase that may be distinct from the mental level but cannot be reduced to any of the linguistic levels: this level I will call **the configurational level**. At this level, the mental contents that exist in our mind must be organized into a message and later into a verbal form before they are actually expressed.

The message and **what must be said** are not identical. In the process of organizing mental content (or, using Bálint Csűry's term: the complex of mental images) into a message, many of the relationships between mental images are eliminated, leaving only the elements necessary for the message, which are not yet arranged in a linear sequence but are presented in the form of a network, thus forming a configuration. When this content turns into a form that must be said, even from this configuration, many things are eliminated or modified that do not need to be said in the context of the speech situation or that need to be said differently, given the previous context. **Thus, the configurational level is, in this sense, the level where what must be said is organized:** that mental content which exists in my mind at a given moment, which I wish to share with another person through a certain language and, in this sense, I try to shape it into a form that corresponds to my communication intent and the knowledge of the speaking partner.

Therefore, the configurational level has at least **three layers**:

1. The layer of mental content or the **imagistic configuration**,
2. The layer of **the message** that is formed based on the communication intent,
3. And finally, the layer formed from this message to become **what must be said**.

In this sense, I offer the following definition of metonymy as a procedure in speech activity: **Metonymy is a configurational short-circuiting of a structural component of the message, based on speakers's intention, which occurs based on a relationship of contiguity between two mental images and is possible if (a) one of the elements of the relationship is, in the discursive context, significant or relevant, and (b) the speaker is sure that the listener will perceive this short-circuiting in the utterance and will seek the complete form of the respective configuration, and will manage to understand it based on context, the relationship between mental images, and the speaker's intent, completing the implicit information and achieving correct understanding.**

• The **mental image** represents the element that is part of the mental content and is more concrete or more "visual" than the "concept." I prefer to use this term because, although in the

cognitive view, metonymy is considered a conceptual phenomenon, the mental image does not exclude the possibility of a preconceptual character.

• The **relationship of contiguity** includes all types of connections between mental images where there is spatial, temporal, material, causal, part-whole, or whole-part contiguity between elements.

• **Configurational short-circuiting** means that, from an important semantic configuration, certain elements are omitted in the organization of the utterance, keeping only those that are necessary for the omitted elements to be evoked during understanding. The term "short-circuiting" is more suggestive than "abbreviation," "deletion," or "ellipsis" because, on one hand, it does not focus attention on the linguistic form and, on the other hand, it contains a meaning suggesting that the omission occurs between two elements.

• **The significant or relevant element** can be a remarkable feature (e.g., Respect *the white hair*!), a functional meaning (e.g., We need many *good brains*.), a significant element in the discursive context (e.g., *The ham sandwich* asks for the bill.), a perceptually significant element (e.g., *The car* braked.), an obvious link (e.g., *I am parked* behind the building.).

• The choice of the significant element also involves cognitive processes such as construction, attention focusing, categorization, or the effect of prototypicality.

• The **utterance** primarily refers to the linguistic form of the significant element (or the vehicle) and the predicate. This often contains a semantic incompatibility, meaning that the predicate does not refer to the inherent semantic structure of the vehicle element but to one of its semantic attributes, which, during interpretation, evokes the other element of the connection, the target. Thus, the predicate is **target-specific**, and the metonymic expression is referential, as it explicitly refers to the target entity. This semantic incompatibility will be indicative for the "good-faith" listener, who will begin to search for the connection between the vehicle and the target and will reconstruct the entire configuration of the message. However, there are also cases where the predicate is ambiguous, meaning it can refer to both the vehicle and the target (e.g., *The car* braked, where the verb "braked" can refer both to the car – which we perceive perceptually – and to the driver – since he is the one performing the action, pressing the brake); there are even cases where the predicate refers more to the vehicle than the target (e.g., *A bald head* appeared at my window, where I only see the head, but I know that this head is part of a person). In this case, the predicate is **source-specific**, and the metonymic expression is **focused**, as it concentrates on the vehicle and

only makes a reference to the target. In this case, the listener does not necessarily have to look for the connection between the two entities, but due to latent connections in the network, the entire configuration may appear during understanding.

• **Context** refers to the experiential and linguistic/discursive context and helps the listener identify what is relevant among the possible interpretation options.

• **The speaker's intention** primarily refers to the concrete (although not necessarily conscious) intention that leads the speaker to apply this configurational short-circuiting strategy to a message. The use of metonymy is not obligatory, and when we use a metonymic expression, we always do so for a specific reason or purpose. In this sense, metonymy is not a rule but rather an option, but with certain usage conditions. The motivations for using metonymy may include more concise expression (saving words), reference, emphasis, focus, irony, suggestion, playful humor, stylistic effect (figurative discourse, artistic expression), etc.

• **Recognizing the speaker's intention** indicates that understanding is not a simple mechanical process, but an active process on the part of the listener. The listener constantly compares what they have heard with their internal models, expectations, and conceptions about the intentions suggested by the speaker. This often happens automatically, intuitively. If the intention is clear, the process is quick and efficient, but if it is vague or ambiguous, the listener must investigate more deeply or ask for clarification.

• **The "understandable" message**, from certain points of view, is the same as the "message to be said." However, since the message is interpreted from the speaker's perspective, we cannot claim that the listener will reach the same conclusion about each detail as the speaker's intent, even though, in the end, they may arrive at the same conclusions.

At the end of the chapter, after analyzing several metonymic examples, I will discuss that not all configurational omissions are metonymies. Metonymy is a "configurational short-circuiting" between two elements, so we can exclude from the category of metonymies simple omission structures, such as those in which unnecessary repetition of parts already stated within a conversation is avoided, given the previous context. For example, in a subordinate phrase with the base noun and the adjective attribute, we omit the base noun if, from the previous context, it is clear what is being referred to:

– Which T-shirt do you want to wear?

– The green one!

In this case, the omission takes place at the configurational level, but it does not create a metonymy.

For this reason, the frequency of certain types of metonymy is often language dependent. For example, subordinate phrases with the base noun can have variants in which the adjective is expressed through a noun. Let's look at the following examples:

• English: *soldiers with blue helmets*

• Romanian: *soldați cu căști albastre* ('soldiers with blue helmets')

• Hungarian: *kéksisakos katonák* ('soldiers with blue helmets')

We can observe that, while in the English and Romanian expressions the attribute is a noun and is linked to the base noun through the prepositions "with" and "cu," in Hungarian, the attribute is an adjective derived from the corresponding noun with the suffix "-s." As a result, while in English and Romanian, by omitting the word *soldiers/soldați* and the preposition *with/cu*, the noun expressions *blue helmets* and *căști albastre* are used to denote the UN soldiers (see also: Negrea 2009), in Hungarian, the noun phrase *kék sisakok* is not used, but rather the adjectival form *kéksisak**os**ok*. Therefore, while the English and Romanian versions are considered metonymies, the Hungarian expression seems to be more of an incomplete phrase with an attribute.

CHAPTER 4 discusses **psycholinguistic studies** aimed at identifying the factors that influence the processing of referential metonymy. The raised questions are related to the long-debated issue of understanding figurative meanings, which are not literal: do we understand figurative expressions as quickly as literal ones? In the case of metonymy, the logical answer seems to be "no", because if additional mental operations are required, this would imply that interpreting these expressions involves an extra processing cost. However, it has been shown that, in the case of conventional types of metonymy, there is no additional processing cost, meaning that, during comprehension, the listener does not derive the metonymic meaning from the literal meaning.

After a literature review, I will present two of my own psycholinguistic experiments in which I studied the understanding of the types of metonymy PLACES–INSTITUTION–PEOPLE. The sentences were similar to the following:

1. **Places (Place)**: The new *theater* was built on the banks of the Danube.
2. **Institution (Inst)**: Last year, the *theater* dismissed two employees.

3. **People related to the location (People)**: The director was greeted with loud applause by the *theater*.

From these experiments, it results that understanding metonymic expressions is influenced not only by conventionality and knowledge of the context but also by other language usage factors such as **frequency, regularity**, and the existence of **linguistic patterns** (e.g., was greeted by the theater vs. *the whole theater*). Thus, not only production processes but also speech comprehension processes can be best explained by connectionist models. Although the process of understanding sentences taken out of context occurs bottom-up, meaning that, in the absence of a speaking partner, the listener starts with the linguistic form and semantic information, various associations, as well as linguistic factors such as frequency or patterns, come into play, determining the strength of connections between elements and thus the speed of their activation. It has been shown that, alongside pragmatic factors, understanding is faster and more accurate because the contextual information is already involved at the beginning of the comprehension process.

Thus, reconstructing meaning does not only involve obtaining the intended semantic meaning but also **reconstructing the intention**: the listener tries to recognize during comprehension the speaker's intention in using metonymy. The speaker may use metonymy for various reasons – to shorten, to increase impact, to focus on a particular feature, or simply due to a lack of information – and the listener must be able to recognize the intention in order to understand correctly what they have heard.

The materials used in the psycholinguistic experiments are presented in Appendices III and IV.

CHAPTER 5 analyzes the role of **the speaker's intention** in comprehension. After examining the use of metonymy based on a corpus, I concluded that referentiality is not always a determining factor in the use of metonymy, as it depends on the speaker's communicative intention. To determine which communicative intention(s) might lie behind the use of metonymy, a corpus-based study was necessary, in which I analyzed **metonymic expressions of the type THING–PERSON** in two types of texts: on the one hand, in the titles of online news portals, and on the other hand, in novels. This study proved useful from several perspectives. I found that in the titles of news portals, institutional-type metonymies dominate, and their main function is conciseness, where the journalist relies on the reader's prior knowledge, especially conceptual knowledge related to institutions. Thus, the main purpose of using metonymy is, on the one hand, more concise

expression and, on the other hand, omission, dissimulation, and keeping the reader in a state of uncertainty and ambiguity, which is achieved by highlighting the whole and downplaying the details. For example:

- *The government* postpones support for the hospitality industry. ("government officials")
- *The Dominican Order* announces a poetry and short story competition. ("members/leaders of the order")

In contrast, in the analyzed novels, in many cases, the main motivational factor seems to be focusing attention on the details and highlighting them. This is because, in literary works, creating a stylistic effect, slowing down the action, emphasizing details, and intentionally creating ambiguities are essential criteria. For example:

- In the bustling crowd of shoppers, *two police helmets* appeared and moved closer to the group.
- The sweating *faces* lit up.

This difference led me to introduce, in addition to referential metonymy, a new type of metonymy: **focal metonymy**. From the perspective of cognitive operations, the speaker selects the most prominent/relevant element from an idealized cognitive model or a conceptual configuration, and from there, shortens the message. The difference from referential metonymy lies in the fact that, while the latter aims to refer to the target entity for the purpose of more concise expression – using the vehicle as a point of entry to reach the target entity – in focal metonymy, the emphasis is placed on the vehicle (e.g., police helmets, faces), and the other elements are pushed into the background.

In this regard, while referential metonymy presents semantic incompatibility in the sentence, as well as an explicit reference to the target entity, focal metonymy does not involve semantic incompatibility but rather a certain "strangeness" in relation to our world knowledge, and an implicit reference to the relationship between the vehicle and the target.

The rest of the chapter analyzes the processing differences between the two types, and in conclusion, I argue that, beyond cognitive and linguistic aspects, for the correct interpretation of metonymic expressions, the listener must recognize the speaker's intention and participate in the "metonymic behavioral game" (Airenti et al. 1993) proposed by the speaker. Finally, I emphasize that even within this "metonymic behavioral game," there can be a degree of variation: in some

cases, knowing the situation is sufficient for correct interpretation, while in others, awareness of the speaker's attitude is also necessary.

In this regard, it may happen that the use of metonymy is not "appropriate," thus affecting comprehension. In many cases, the discursive situation is determined not only by the communicative context but also by the social status of the speaker and the listener. In an informal setting, for example, among a group of friends, it may be considered natural and even humorous to say:

- We get there faster on *four wheels* than on *two*.

But if this sentence is spoken in a formal context, for example, by a village mayor in front of regional financial inspectors, it may seem offensive, and the listener may refuse to participate in the metonymic behavioral game due to the inappropriateness of the expression.

This observation is consistent with the statement by Piñango et al. (2016), according to which the distinction between lexical-semantic operations and pragmatic operations is not a matter of category, but of degree.

Appendices V and VI contain a detailed presentation of the examples used in the corpus-based studies, and Appendix VII includes the test sentences used in the psycholinguistic experiment regarding the understanding of referential and focal metonymy.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS mention that the roots of metonymy as a configurational procedure stretch far back, all the way to our behavioral system, which precedes the conceptual system by a long way, reaching the indexical nature of signaling systems in animals. The ability to recognize cues and establish associative relationships is innate, and on this basis, we ultimately "invented" metonymies in speech. Thus, metonymy has both **(pre)conceptual and linguistic aspects**, and its use in language depends on a number of linguistic-pragmatic factors. This observation is important because, throughout the work, we repeatedly discussed the linguistic specificity of metonymy, often influenced by the structural peculiarities of each language. In the future, it would be worth exploring this issue further, for example, from the perspective of lexicalization, by analyzing whether there are types of relationships in Hungarian that are "more prone" to function as metonymies, and if so, what these relationships are and what factors determine this phenomenon.

Finally, a deeper exploration of certain parts of the work could bring new contributions from a cognitive perspective. For instance, I noticed that the generation of focal metonymy is not only motivated by the desire to express ourselves as concisely as possible, but also by various perceptions—especially visual and auditory—which play an essential role in these linguistic processes. A more detailed analysis of this aspect could contribute to a better understanding of **the nature of perception and its role in language**.

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