

PHIL 332: Philosophy of Language  
Class 34: Theories of Metaphor

1. The naïve simile theory: what a speaker means by a metaphor is a simile.
  - a. By 'Simon is a rock' she means that Simon is like a rock.
  - b. By 'Juliet is the sun' she means that Juliet is like the sun.
  - c. By 'I stepped up to the plate' she means that she did something like step up to the plate.

Issue: does the sentence itself mean the simile?

2. Objections:
  - a. If this is right, then metaphors are literally true; but they are not. (I think this is a bad objection.)
  - b. If this is right, then metaphors ought not seem a bit strange. (I think this is a bad objection.)
  - c. If this is right, then metaphors ought to be easier to paraphrase than they are. (I think this is a bad objection.)
  - d. Similes are uninformative, but metaphors are not. (I think this is a bad objection.)
  - e. If  $x$  is like  $y$  then  $y$  is like  $x$ . So if Juliet is the Sun then the Sun is Juliet. Is there a problem here?
  - f. How is Simon like a rock? It seems that we have not eliminated the metaphor. (This might actually be a good objection.)
3. Similes can be used metaphorically as well: Simon is like a rock. This suggests a modification to the naïve simile theory: what a speaker means by a metaphor is a simile, understood metaphorically.

Problem: this just moves the lump in the carpet.

4. A Gricean account: The speaker says that Simon is a rock, but implicates something else. So the same sort of mechanism that is involved in irony, hyperbole, etc.

Problem: why are they so hard to paraphrase?

5. Davidson: metaphorical speech just causes us to notice some similarity between two things. It is like taking a pill.

Problem: It seems to follow that one cannot be charged with misunderstanding a metaphor – that the audience cannot be blamed for not getting it. Rather, the metaphor should be said not to have worked. This seems counterintuitive.

6. Another possibility: By 'is a rock' in 'Simon is a rock' the speaker means a property that both rocks and Simon do actually have – a property that is more general than the one usually meant by 'is a rock'. Compare: 'I am parked out back', " 'Grass is green' is true."