Metonymy and the Risk of Descriptive Overkill

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1 What it is about

This paper is in fact a not all too friendly critical review of my own (past) lexicographical habits and practises. What gave occasion to it were some doubts rising during my editing of a series of dictionary entries within the context of the Dutch ANW online dictionary project.[1] Two features of this project are relevant here : it aims at a thorough microstructural description and it works thematically, i.e. words are gathered in semantic categories and edited per such category. While revising my work on some noun categories I found that metonymic senses take an unexpectedly large part of most entries. I guess this phenomenon not only pertains to the ANW but to any dictionary product or project aiming at the same depth of description. But what struck me most was the monotony of the lexicographic descriptions, due to an undeniable regularity of the phenomena within each category, and the uncertain grounds on which judgments of metonymy often appeared to be taken. These findings raised both the questions whether metonymic use really must be presented in the way that is common practice now and whether it really deserves the importance we assign it at present.

In what follows I will confine myself mostly to the polysemy of one category: names of musical instruments.

2 Metonymy and regularity

A comparison between the types of metonymy observed in musical instrument entries reveals that they nearly all share the same pattern. With very few exceptions all the names of music instruments can also be used for:

[1] http://anw.inl.nl

a the act of playing on the instrument (*Ik speel piano* 'I play the piano'; *mijn hobby is piano* 'my hobby is the piano / piano playing')[2]

b the technique, ability of playing the instrument (*Ik studeer piano* 'I study the piano'; *een docent piano* 'a piano teacher')

c music written for the instrument (*In de coda zit er wat hobo* 'In the coda there is a bit of oboe')

d music performed on the instrument (*Boven de strijkers kon men een klaaglijke hobo horen* 'Above the strings one could hear a plaintive oboe')

e a player of the instrument, at least during the act of playing it. (*De piano beukte zich boven het orkestrale tutti uit* 'The piano hammered itself above the orchestral tutti')

This observation is not new at all. Moerdijk (1993) has investigated the presence or absence of the above metonymies in common dictionaries of Dutch and concluded that they are all present, albeit irregularly. Neither should anyone be surprised at the fact itself that there are regular patterns underlying metonymic change in general. One can refer for that to Apresjan (1992) where an impressive list of regular metonymic patterns is presented. And of course the idea is much older than Apresjan's work. Even some figures of speech in ancient treatises on rhetoric, like pars pro toto, are in fact generalisations over individual metonymies. Apresjan presents the regularities he found in the form of category shifts (like *container* $\rightarrow$ *content* for cases like *drink a glass, pump 2000 gallons* and so on). One should however notice that these regularities generally do not pervade the whole lexicon. They are confined to specific semantic word categories. So for example the set of metonymies for musical instruments above is not just as easily applicable to the category of working instruments like *hammer* and *chisel*. And even within the category of musical instruments there may be some exceptions depending on the nature and the use of the instrument. To name just two problematic category members: *drum computer* and *player piano*. All this should be common knowledge, but we hardly ever see the consequences of these facts reflected in lexicographical practice. We accept the idea

[2] I am not sure whether the English translation exhibits the same metonymy as the Dutch word. In Dutch no article is used with *piano*, and as such it is to be understood in the same type of activity sense as for example voetbal in *Ik speel voetbal* 'I play football'.

of metonymic regularity and yet continue to treat metonymies as genuine dictionary stuff: as idiomatic phenomena pertaining to single words. In fact if we apply the latter criterion for dictionary incorporation consistently, we should not mention regular metonymy but only the exceptions to it: we should tell the user that *drum computer* does not have the normal metonymic valencies.[3] Speaking for myself, in the course of editing these musical instrument names I caught myself repeating exactly the same set of metonymies for every single entry as if they were some peculiarity of each of them, and finding this practice completely normal. On second thought I tend to wonder whether there is anybody expecting this kind of information presented in this manner. Is it helpful to the common dictionary user? Suppose there is a speaker of Dutch who doesn't know what *hobo* means. He can look that word up in the ANW or any other dictionary and find out that it is used for a wooden wind instrument having the form of a long hollow tube with holes covered by valves lengthwise and ending in a funnel-form bell, and blown by means of a double reed in the mouthpiece. Suppose further that this speaker is well acquainted with meaning and use of *violin, piano, saxophone, clarinet, tuba* and other names of musical instruments. Would it then be a plausible assumption that what he learned from the dictionary would not be sufficient to help him understand sentences like *Hobo is moeilijk* ('difficult') or *De hobo speelde een kwarttoon te laag* ('The oboe played a quarter tone too low'). One could do some expensive research into that but I suspect that the result of that will be clear from before. And if knowing the main sense is sufficient for the common language user to understand also the regular metonymic uses, why then explain them explicitly in the dictionary entry? It is superfluous information to the user and it only damages the readability of the whole entry content. It is right that we find these uses in our corpus but one must be careful not to fall into the trap of some lexicography only for lexicographers. Of course there are also metonymic uses that are not so regularly spread over the members of a lexical category. One example is the sense 'organ register having a sound like …'. That sense obviously only occurs with names of instruments that actually are imitated in an organ register. In such a case it is clear that it makes more sense to mention the metonymic use in every single entry.

The way of presenting metonymical information under discussion here is also unfavourable for the professional linguist who is seeking facts and evidence in

[3] I'm afraid my concern here is not generally shared. In Atkins & Rundell (2008, 292), the criterion of 'systematicity', beside 'frequency' and 'longevity' is stipulated as a condition for incorporation in dictionaries. The degree of systematicity is determined by the answer to the question 'does the metonymy instantiate a recurrent, well-established pattern?'.

a dictionary. The lexicographer withholds him interesting information about some semantic regularities and generalisations that he himself, making an inventory of the whole word stock of a language, or at least a large part of it, is in the best position to offer him. In traditional paper lexicography, when we were all working alphabetically, this went unnoticed and maybe it was inevitable: every entry had to be treated as an island on its own, and unsystematically applied cross-references were the only tools to inform the user about interrelations between different items. But in the electronic age, with all its possibilities to link information, there seems to be no excuse for not putting things where they genuinely belong. If metonymic phenomena happen to be properties of categories that are inherited by the category members, it is simply better to make it a general policy to present these phenomena under the category name (in the case of nouns generally a hypernym, if there is one available) and to make the inheritance explicit in one way or another.

3 Blurred edges – or no edges at all

Dictionaries tend to present instances of metonymy as clear-cut distinct senses and I believe that in most cases lexicographers are really convinced that they are. That might explain our zeal to comb the corpus in search of unassailable examples to illustrate the use, thereby neglecting the fact that many if not most instances of metonymy in our corpuses are not so unequivocal (I speak for my own experience here, but I suppose that the corpuses that my fellow lexicographers use are not so very different from mine). And nevertheless these cases of doubt may lead to some interesting observations and conclusions. A Dutch sentence like *Hobo is moeilijk* can be understood with two different metonymic senses of *hobo* I distinguished: playing the oboe (metonymic sense a above) or mastering the technique of oboe playing (metonymic sense b). Given that a and b are really distinct senses of *hobo*, then the sentence should be ambiguous. But it isn't. No one would ever react to it with the question 'Do you mean playing the oboe or mastering it?'. Or consider a sentence like *Hobo is moeilijk; dat zal je na he conservatorium nog ondervinden bij al je concerten* '(Playing/mastering) the oboe is difficult, even after the conservatory you will experience that at all your concerts'. Here clearly the idea of both senses is present at the same time. Something similar goes for *De hobo plaatste mooie accenten boven de strijkersmelodie* ('The oboe put beautiful accents above the strings melody') that can in fact just convey the same message if hobo is read as 'oboe player' (metonymic sense e),

'music played by the oboe' (metonymic sense d) or as 'music written for the oboe' (metonymic sense c). In *Tim speelt hobo, meestal het Mozartconcerto* 'Tim plays the oboe, most of the time the Mozart concerto' we recognize senses a and c together. So apart from the clear cases selected by the lexicographer to illustrate his metonymic senses, there is a heap of language use that in fact denies the validity of the orderly presentation in the dictionary. This may, as Atkins & Rundell (2008) point out, be the result of a deliberate strategy on the part of the lexicographer, rooted in a tradition of ages, but one cannot say that our common practice does justice to the reality of language use.[4] In fact this practice reveals a sloppy use of the notion of 'sense'. Senses are basically mutually independent concepts, mostly linked by some semantic relation, but sometimes not. The first time most children nowadays encounter the word *keyboard* will probably be as the name of the computer accessory. They can easily grasp that sense of the word without any knowledge of the basic sense 'part of a musical instrument'. A word like *keyboard* can also cause sentence ambiguity: when something is a keyboard1 it can never be a keyboard2, and if it is unclear which one of both is meant in a sentence, genuine ambiguity emerges. This property of mutual independence is completely absent from the *hobo*-metonymies above. (1) It is impossible to use the word in these senses without the thought of a real oboe clearly present in the background, or even in most cases (with the exception of c, maybe) without there being a real oboe involved in what is referred to by the sentence. (2) One can say that *hobo* can be used for 'music written for oboe' or 'oboe player' but these uses do not function fully as senses. To name one restriction: *hobo* cannot unrestrictedly be used as a synonym for *hobomuziek* ('oboe music') or *hoboïst* ('oboe player'). One cannot say *Mozart schreef hobo* ('Mozart wrote oboe') or *Tim is een hobo* ('Tim is an oboe'). (3) As demonstrated above, metonymic uses do not always denote discrete concepts. In one of the examples above it could be understood as naming two semantically incompatible things like music and a person at the same time, and yet leave the sentence in which it occurs unambiguous. In that respect they behave very 'unlexically'. Leaning on this one is entitled to suspect that metonymic change is not the creation of one lexical concept out of another, but is a matter of use and of pragmatics, and that frequent use of a metonymy does not turn it into a lexical unit but just makes it a frequently used pragmatic trick. If this happens to be true, then a dictionary

[4] '...a disconnect between 'dictionary senses' (the numbered meanings into which many headwords are divided in dictionaries) and 'meanings' as they are perceived by language users' (Atkins & Rundell, 2008, 263).

presenting such metonymic uses as senses, in fact uses two different standards for sense-status: something is a sense either if it is 'antagonistic' with other using possibilities of the word within the language system, or if it is something in the 'performance', to use Chomsky's terminology, that has the luck to appear frequently. In our dictionaries, *sense* appears to have two senses.[5]

4 'Dotted objects', metonymic structures and other downsides

Some metonymic word use also exhibits unexpected behaviour in relation to anaphora. In Heyvaert (1984) I drew attention to the fact that sentences like *John's book lies in big heaps in the bookstores but mine is still incomplete on my hard disk* are completely normal, notwithstanding that *book* in *John's book* denotes the physical object and *mine* (=*my book*) denotes the content only. If these are really two distinct senses, then there would be two different concepts 'book' involved and the anaphora in the possessive pronoun would be impossible. It would create a zeugma. But it doesn't. The same phenomenon can be observed – to remain in the realm of musical instruments – in *Contrabas is moeilijk want het is een log instrument* '(Playing) the double bass is difficult for it's a big and heavy instrument', where the same *het* refers forward to the playing or mastering of the double bass and backward to the actual type of instrument itself. Several explanations for this have been put forward, like the introduction of the idea of 'pronouns of laziness', pronouns that express only a partial coreferentiality (see among others Partee (1978). Such an account, however, puts the whole responsibility for the phenomenon on the side of the pronoun and of the user and leaves the noun referred to out of the firing line. (Pustejovsky, 1995, 93ff) offers another explanation by introducing the idea of 'dotted objects', semantic objects that are members of a 'dotted type', a complex type that is a combination of two (or more) other types.[6] So, in the one example above, *book* would belong to a type that unites the type to which the bound collection of paper sheets belongs with the type of texts, *contrabas* to a type that unites types for musical instruments, for music playing and for instrument mastering. But whether these dotted types

[5] 'Antagonism' is a term introduced in Cruse (2004) and adopted in (Atkins & Rundell, 2008, 283), which, to put it in logical terms, indicates that the referential range of one use type of a word is incompatible with that of another and that as a consequence the word has two distinct senses.

[6] A type is a semantic category, comparable to syntactic '(sub)categories.

are understood as conceptual categories or as simple sets of possible referents, they remain categories of noun meanings. And as such, being complex things with different mutually exclusive features (like, in the case of book, being categorised as a concrete heap of paper and an abstract text at the same time, which implies that some concrete things can be abstract) they risk to turn upside down every commonly accepted form of ontology. I think this can be avoided. In Heyvaert (2011) I made an attempt to approach metonymy from the angle of communication and the referential needs involved in it, inspired by what Nunberg (1978, 1979) did with his *hamburger sandwich*. I started from the well-known, 'settled' metonymic relation *school* 'institution' → *school* 'building'. First of all: also this relation is a 'dotted object': *I learned to read and write in the school that was demolished yesterday*. Second: *school* 'building' is generally considered as a 'lexicalised metonymy'. Now what does *school* do in its metonymic sense? Suppose I want to show somebody where I live and I want to do that by situating my place in relation to another building. Depending on the building I can give a successful description by saying *I live next door to [the school, the catholic school, the girls, John's parents, the geraniums, that dooryard full of weed, that constant bass drum sound, that pigsty smell, number 59, Mary Jones, there]*. Each of the expressions between the square brackets is used to identify a building and each of them does that by metonymy. For all of these expressions but one it should be clear that the words in it are used in their proper sense but that it is the whole of the expression, i.e. the noun phrase that is used metonymically. And for most of them the metonymical use is so far away from the lexical meanings and the compositional meaning of the phrase that it is highly unlikely that there is some conceptual change taking place. What underlies these metonymies are just pragmatic-referential strategies to make the hearer understand which house is meant. With this approach there is no problem of ontological inconsistency. What I try to tell my hearer by *I live next door to the geraniums* is that I live next door to that thing that has the property of being a house and the property of having geraniums at the window. There is no inconsistency in that. *Geraniums* does not mean metonymically 'house with geraniums at the window'. The geraniums are just a property of the thing I want to identify and I realise that identification by mentioning exactly that property in the noun phrase I use. Noun phrases refer to things and what are things else than the set of all their properties. The special thing about metonymy in this view is not that words get a meaning change, but that you can simply do with mentioning a property in the noun phrase instead of explicitly expressing the relation of the thing to that property. I guess that this is what the characterisation of metonymy as 'verbal shorthand' really means.

Then why make an exception for *school* and make it a lexical sense? In fact in the multiple choice sentence above it does just the same job as those geraniums. The only difference with the geraniums is that its metonymic use is much more frequent and has a higher degree of commonness. But for the rest there are no indications that it is the noun *school* that is used metonymically and not the noun phrase *the school*. Maybe metonymy is no lexical matter at all.

To finish, I make a brief mention of another phenomenon pointing at the supralexical nature of metonymy. Let us have one more look at the quoted example *De hobo plaatste mooie accenten boven de strijkersmelodie*. We already noticed that it can be read with different metonymical readings of *hobo*, but it can also be read with *hobo* in its literal musical instrument sense, if we understand the verb metonymically, as something like 'is used to put'. A well-known analogous example of this phenomenon is *The tap leaks*, which can be paraphrased either as *The water leaks from the tap* or as *The tap allows water to leak from it*. There is no decisive criterion here to decide whether it is *tap* or *leak* that is used metonymically, and maybe there is not even a good reason to look for it. But dwelling on this would lead us too far within the limited space of this paper. An extensive discussion on this type of metonymic use is to be found in Sweep (2012, 2013).

5 Conclusions?

At the end of this I have no conclusions, only uncertainties. Metonymies – at least metonymies of the type treated here – have some regularities underlying them. To do justice to that fact some system should be developed to link individual instances to that regularity, but I have no idea what such a system should be like. One suggestion would be to incorporate category names, whether they are genuine hypernyms or only hypernymic expressions, in the dictionary as separate entries, not as words but as category names, and summarise in these entries what is inherited by the category members, all of them or most, with some exceptions. And quite some metonymies are to be regarded as a matter of use, not as conventional senses of a word. Also this should be reflected in the dictionary entry by creating a proper way of presenting them. Here too, I have nothing concrete in mind about how this can be done. Maybe this is only a question of entry structure. But it would certainly be an improvement if we can realise such things anyway. Metonymies–at least metonymies of the type treated here–are no stylistic ornaments. They are just common practice in everyday language.

Compare Moerdijk (1989, 1990) for that, or just read one page of a newspaper and try to count the metonymies. You will most probably miscalculate, since a lot of them will pass unnoticed. They will just sound familiar as if you had known that word use for a long time, even if you see it for the very first time. Today's newspaper had as its main headline *Leuven wil tweede zit in juni* 'Leuven wants a second examination session in June'. Leuven is a town in Belgium but what's meant here is not that town, of course, but the *rector magnificus* of the university in Leuven. Would there be any reader who is puzzled by this sentence or even one who has to think twice to grasp what is meant? One fact is that metonymies have some regularities underlying them. But what is the nature of these regularities? Are they rules or are they just strategies for name giving? In the first case metonymic use should be totally predictable out of the language system itself. Something like: if there is a word with meaning or meaning component A, then it must be usable in meaning B too. In strategies there is also some degree of predictability, but without the necessity that a rule has. And this kind of regularities is not rooted in the linguistic system itself but in communication. I have no decisive arguments for one of these two options. But I have to remark that the lexical approach cannot cope with the observation that reference is the main motivation for most metonymic word use. And I can imagine the army of rules that would invade the lexicon. In Heyvaert (2009) I tried to 'predict' metonymy out of the semantic structure of the word (*in casu school* in terms of the ANW-semagram), but I did not arrive at formulating rules. The only thing I could do was offering possibilities for metonymic use. On the other hand, an explanation in terms of strategies has a consequence that could be quite puzzling for many among us: namely that there is a gap between our mental lexicon and the vocabulary that we actually use in our verbal communication. That, when we use a word like *school* in a noun phrase like in 'School begins at 9', we can actually mean something quite different from what we think of when we are asked 'What is a school?'. And so the phenomenon of metonymy in the end leads to the conjecture that the function of the mental lexicon in interpreting sentences might not be as unproblematic as we would wish it to be.

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