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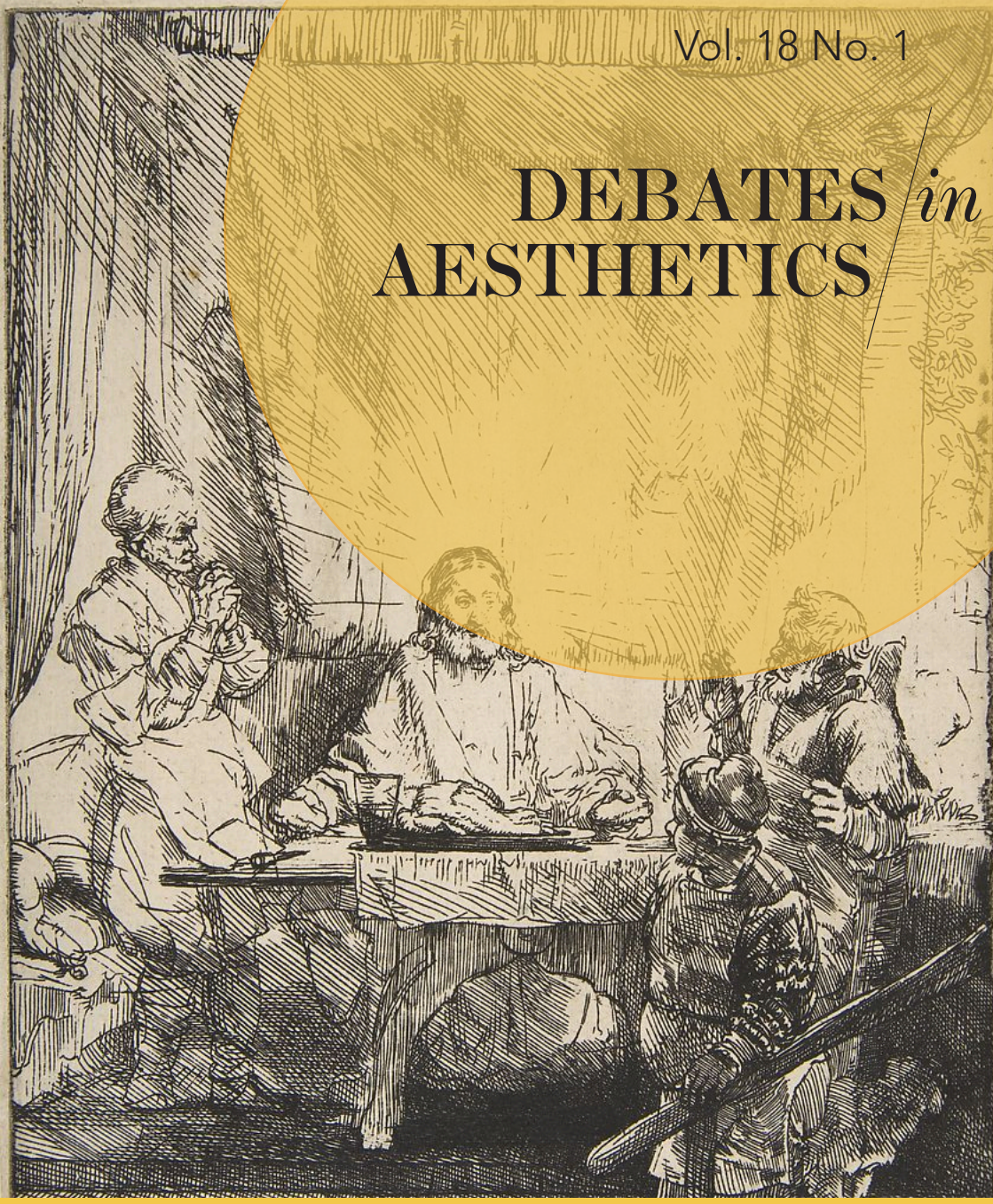

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THE DREAMWORK OF LANGUAGE: DONALD DAVIDSON BETWEEN METAPHOR AND MEANING

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Davidson's insights into metaphor are often treated as an isolated episode, with little regard for his work on semantics. In this paper, I want to reassess ***What Metaphors Mean*** *(1978) in the light of Davidson's theory of meaning to explain why he is convinced that a metaphor lacks cognitive content and is devoid of any meaning other than that conveyed by its words in their literal interpretation.*

1 Introduction

Donald Davidson's position on metaphors' cognitive content can be summarised as follows: metaphors are devoid of any cognitive content in addition to the literal (Davidson 1978, 32).[1] The main goal of this paper is to try to reconstruct, step by step, the argumentation that leads to this conclusion, mainly by contextualizing Davidson's insights into metaphor in the light of his semantics. This contextualization will help to make Davidson's point about metaphor more plausible, because it will allow for a better understanding of his argument.

Davidson's *What Metaphors Mean* (1978) – often treated as an isolated episode and consequently commented on, and criticized with, little regard for Davidson's work on semantics – hides a very precise theoretical

1 Let us consider the metaphor 'my brother is the black sheep of the family'. According to Davidson, it makes no sense to distinguish – as many other scholars do – a literal meaning (i.e. the patent falsity that a metaphor like this one expresses) and a metaphorical meaning (the intended meaning, i.e. the fact that my brother is considered as different, bad, worthless, etc. by the rest of the family). For Davidson, the metaphorical meaning simply does not exist. Metaphors show us something not by conveying a well-defined propositional content but by triggering our imagination through the ordinary meanings of words and sentences. In Davidson, the parameter of the cognitive content of the metaphor is the core of what some critics have called *error theory* (McGonigal 2008). According to the *error theory of metaphor*, metaphorical statements are not meaningless but literally false. McGonigal tries to defend the following position: "if a sentence used metaphorically is true or false in the ordinary sense, then it is clear that it is usually false. […] most metaphors are false" (Davidson 1978, 41). McGonigal's polemical target is the radical alethic pluralism defended by Crispin Wright (McGonigal 2008, 76-80). Davidson's non-cognitivist position is also called *causal theory*, since a metaphor causes a vision "[making] us attend to some likeness, often a novel or surprising likeness, between two or more things" (Davidson 1978, 33). For a general framing of Davidson's theory in the analytical debate on metaphor, see Reimer and Camp (2006, 854-8).

premiss.[2] In this essay, in fact, Davidson discreetly alludes to the theory of meaning to which he refers, and of which he himself was one of the main exponents (Fogelin 1988, 52). This can be seen in some passages scattered throughout the paper, such as:

> Literal meaning and literal truth conditions can be assigned to words and sentences apart from particular contexts of use. This is why adverting to them has genuine explanatory power (for metaphors) (Davidson 1978, 33).

According to Davidson (1978), it is important to distinguish meaning from use, that is, the semantic aspect from the pragmatic aspect.

> My disagreement is with the explanation of how metaphor works its wonders. To anticipate: I depend on the distinction between

2 It is worth summarizing some of Davidson's critics to show that his insights about metaphorical meaning have almost never been framed within his semantic theory. Max Black (1979), for example, defends his own interactionist account of metaphor against Davidson's criticism, but his apologia never really contextualizes the sense of 'meaning' as understood by Davidson. According to Nelson Goodman (1979), instead, metaphor operates through a mechanism of label application: contrarily to Davidson, he believes that a term is taken from its literal use and applied in a novel way to a new object. Among Davidson's critics, Richard Moran (1989) disagrees that the message of a metaphor is difficult to delimit from a verbal point of view. For Moran, grasping the meaning of a metaphor means instead selectively limiting interpretation to the right similarities. Jerrold Levinson (2001) replies to Davidson by comparing metaphors to exclamations: like exclamations, metaphors have meanings in context that go beyond the meanings of their constituent words. This further meaning is partly propositional and non-propositional and can, therefore, be paraphrased. The non-propositional part, characterized by an illocutionary force, can still be described (Levinson 2001). Stephen Davies (1984), on the other hand, largely adheres to Davidson's position, arguing that the truth value of metaphors is linked to their literal meaning, which is the only meaning metaphorical utterances have. Among those inspired by Davidson, at least in terms of their denial of metaphorical meaning and metaphorical truth, see also Lepore and Stone (2010). With other methods and other purposes besides those of this paper, the only work which attempted to contextualise Davidson's insights on metaphor in light of his theory of meaning was Gentile's PhD dissertation (2013).

> what words mean and what they are used to do (Davidson 1978, 33).

Davidson specifies below the type of usage that he considers suitable for metaphorical sentences: "I think metaphor belongs exclusively to the domain of use [as] it is something brought off by the imaginative employment of words and sentences" (Davidson 1978, 33).

Davidson's assumption, then, is that one should not postulate a metaphorical meaning, since metaphors lack one. Instead, one must evaluate them exclusively in the context of their use, i.e. according to the conditions under which they were uttered or written. Davidson is also convinced that "metaphors mean what the words, in their most literal interpretation, mean, and nothing more" (Davidson 1978, 32). But what does this remark exactly mean?

It is clear that Davidson's position revolves around the verb 'to mean'. I, therefore, think that it is necessary to contextualize – and not isolate – *What Metaphors Mean* (1978) in the light of Davidson's programme about what form a theory of meaning should take.

2 Meaning and truth

According to the 'narrow' account,[3] a theory of meaning must be able to explain what it means for an utterance of a language L to be endowed with meaning (Picardi 1999, 13). Let us see, then, the particular declination that this theory assumes within the Davidsonian proposal, where the notions of interpretation, meaning and truth are intimately connected. In what way? During a linguistic communication, the interpret-

3 For Michael Dummett there is *a meaning-theory* and *the theory of meaning*. The former is specific to a specific language: "[it] is a complete specification of the meanings of all words and expressions of one particular language" (Dummett 1991, 22). While the latter has to define what general principles are needed to build the former. The task of the theory of meaning, according to Dummett, is to provide an explanation of how language works, i.e. to explain what happens when a speaker utters a sentence (in a certain language) in the presence of a competent listener (Dummett 1991, 21).

er assigns truth conditions to the utterances produced by the speaker: according to the truth-conditional semantics, giving the conditions under which a sentence would be true is a way of indicating the meaning of that sentence (Davidson 1967, 310).

Davidson develops a theory that he calls *radical interpretation*, since, according to the American philosopher; "[t]he problem of interpretation is domestic as well as foreign [...]. All understanding of the speech of another involves radical interpretation" (Davidson 1973, 313). The question Davidson seeks to answer is: what kind of knowledge must an interpreter possess in order to assign a meaning to each sentence that is uttered by a speaker? If establishing the truth conditions of an utterance is a way of determining its meaning, then what is needed is a theory of truth; i.e. a theory that can answer the question 'what is truth?', or 'what does an utterance need to possess the quality of being true?'. Davidson's (1967, 309) first move is, therefore, to replace the schema:

(T) the sentence *e* means that *p*

With the equivalence scheme:

(T1) the sentence *e* is true if and only if *p*.

The problem with the connective 'means that' concerns the "anxiety that we are enmeshed in the intensional" (Davidson 1967, 309). Such a scheme, in fact, does not respond to the Leibnizian principle of substitution *salva veritate*, since it allows the use of terms that have the same extension but differ in intension. For example, the term 'red' and 'the colour of the Chinese flag' have the same extension, i.e. red. However, let us consider the following sentence:

(T) 'red is a primary colour' means that the colour of the Chinese flag is a primary colour.

It is false because it is not true that the remark 'the colour of the Chi-

nese flag is a primary colour' provides the meaning of 'red is a primary colour' (De Caro 1998, 22).

Here, Davidson calls into question the theses of the Polish logician Alfred Tarski. Tarski's aim is to construct a theory of truth that: (a) is based on the idea that the truth of a sentence depends on its correspondence with reality, (b) does not apply only to certain sentences, (c) is rigorous and therefore scientifically respectable (Caputo 2015, 81). With regard to point (a), the truth-world correspondence can be summarised by the expression 'a sentence is true if it designates a subsistent state of affairs' i.e. if things in the world are actually the way an utterance says they are. However, such expression, is not considered by Tarski to be a satisfactory definition of truth (Tarski 1944, 343). It is much better, then, the following biconditional (Tarski 1944, 344):

(T1) "e" is true if and only if *p*.

Where does (T1) come from? Tarski asks us to consider a sentence, for example *p*, and to give a name to this sentence, for example 'e'. From the point of view of truth conditions, it is clear that 'e' and *p* are equivalent, since 'e' is true only if the conditions described by *p* are fulfilled; e.g. 'the grass is green' is true if and only if the grass has a greenish colour. Moreover, according to Tarski, if the appropriate biconditional is provided for each sentence of a language (L), then each biconditional will constitute only a partial definition of truth. Thus, a general definition of truth for a language (L) will be composed of the logical conjunction of all conceivable biconditionals for the sentences of that language (Tarski 1944, 344). The sentences to be inserted in the place of 'e' are not true or false *per se*, but according to the meaning they have in a given language (L). Thus, the scheme (T1) should be relativised by means of the predicate "true-in-L", where L indicates the language for which the sentence has a truth value (Caputo 2015, 85). The biconditional thus gains the following form, which is the scheme of the so-called *Tarskian Convention T* (where, as it is well-known, 'T' stands for 'truth'):

(T1) "e" is true-in-L if and only if *p*.

Moreover, according to Tarski (1944), to avoid the problems caused by semantic paradoxes, such as the antinomy of the liar, it is necessary to construct the biconditionals using sentences that belong to a semantically open language.[4] A language that is semantically open is one in which there is not the predicate 'true' (or 'true-in-L'). The truth predicate must, therefore, be found outside the so-called object language, which is the one we are talking about and to which 'e' belongs. It will be the task of the metalanguage, i.e. the language in whose terms we want to construct the definition of truth for the object language, to host the term 'true'. Which languages lend themselves to the formulation of a definition of truth? That is, which languages are semantically open? Tarski is convinced that it is not possible to construct a definition of truth for natural languages such as Italian or English because of the risk of running into semantic paradoxes, e.g. the liar paradox. The most suitable languages are, therefore, formalized languages like the ones of mathematics, logic, set theory, and so on (Tarski 1944, 348-351).

Let us come back to Davidson, who directly built his work upon Tarski's. According to Davidson (1967), if providing the truth conditions of a sentence is a way of indicating the meaning of that sentence, then a theory such as the one elaborated by Tarski can represent an excellent model for a theory of meaning applicable to a given language. In this way, an interlocutor, or reader, will be able to use Tarski's biconditionals to interpret the speaker's utterances. Evidently, Davidson does not think that the theory applies only to formal languages but is convinced that the biconditionals can also be constructed with sentences from the natural languages (Davidson 1967, 313). He admits that natural languages are en-

4 Tarski (1944) recalls the liar paradox in this way. Consider the sentence "(a) is not true". Let us give a name to this sentence, calling it (a). The resulting biconditional is as follows: "(a)" is true if and only if (a) is not true. The contradiction is obvious, which is why, according to Tarski, an object language must be semantically open, i.e. it must not contain the predicate "true" (Tarski 1944, 347-348).

dowed with indexicals, such as verb tenses or demonstrative pronouns; i.e. those parts of the sentence whose truth value varies according to the context in which the sentence is uttered. He, therefore, suggests modifying the biconditionals by adding references to time and the speaker (Davidson 1973, 322). The resulting scheme is:

(T1) "e" is true-in-L when spoken by *x* at time *t* if and only if *p* near *x* at *t*.

Davidson assumes a situation where the speaker and the interpreter express themselves in two different languages and where the interpreter does not know the speaker's language. For example, Kurt – a German speaker – utters the words 'Es regnet'. The radical interpreter does not know German, but his first move must involve the so-called Davidsonian *Principle of Charity* (Davidson 1967, 1974), i.e. the interpreter must attribute true and consistent beliefs to Kurt whenever it is permissible, since someone is much more likely to believe things he considers true than those he sees as false (Perissinotto 2002). Moreover, according to the *Principle of Charity* (Davidson 1967), these beliefs cannot be too dissimilar from those of the interpreter since communication can only take place on the basis of a massive agreement between the two parties. The interpreter must, therefore, believe that Kurt believes that 'Es regnet' is true. In that case, the evidence available to the interpreter is also of an extra-linguistic nature and includes, for example, the directly observable behaviour of the speaker, or the environmental conditions, within which such utterances are expressed. The collection and analysis of such data will help the interpreter formulate conjectures about what the speaker is saying but will not be explicitly exhibited by the so-called T-sentences (i.e. the sentences of the form 'e' is true-in-L if and only if *p*). In fact, the right side of the biconditional will merely show the appropriate circumstances under which a speaker expresses the utterance, i.e. the supposed truth conditions for 'e' (Picardi 1992, 248-249). Davidson, for example, assumes that the available evidence for interpreting Kurt's utterance 'Es regnet', is Kurt's membership to the German speech

community, the fact that Kurt believes 'Es regnet' to be true at noon on Saturday, and that it is raining near Kurt at that time and on that day. The appropriate biconditional will have the following form:

(T1) 'Es regnet' is true in German, when spoken by Kurt at noon on Saturday if and only if it is raining near Kurt at noon on Saturday.

Davidson acknowledges that Kurt may be mistaken about the fact that it is raining in his proximity, but the intention is to create a theory that maximizes the agreement between speaker and interpreter, with the speaker being as much in the right as possible (Davidson 1973, 323).

3 Limits of the literal

Is it possible, then, to obtain a truth-conditional theory of meaning for all the utterances of a language? Although Davidson states that he wants to do everything possible to dispel Tarski's pessimism towards the establishment of a theory for non-formalized languages (Davidson 1967, 313), he admits that there are limits. The metaphor represents one of these limitations. From a truth-conditional point of view, a metaphorical sentence is always patently false or true in such an unquestionable way that the interpreter may find identifying its truth conditions superfluous, thus focusing not on the literal meaning but on the speaker's intended meaning. When Davidson claims that "metaphors mean what the words, in their most literal interpretation, mean, and nothing more" (Davidson 1978, 32), he is alluding to what I have tried to summarise, i.e. metaphors, as sentences of a language, can be treated like any other sentence and put within a T-sentence, but such an operation is almost worthless since, from a literal point of view, no condition can satisfy the truth of what lies to the left side of the biconditional.

In *What Metaphors Mean* (1978), Davidson rejects some of the main theses advanced by Max Black (1955) in the context of his interactionist account of metaphor. Contrarily to Black, Davidson does not admit: (i)

that the metaphorizing term – the focus, in Black's terminology – is endowed with a special metaphorical meaning (which is in addition to the literal meaning); (ii) that metaphors have a cognitive content that can be true despite the obvious falsehood of the literal meaning; (iii) that the reason why metaphors cannot be paraphrased lies in their being carriers of another meaning, beyond the normal, literal meaning (Leddy 1983, 64). For what concerns (i), Davidson specifies that what the metaphor conveys to a possible interpreter "depends entirely on the ordinary meanings of those words and hence on the ordinary meanings of the sentences they comprise." (Davidson 1978, 33). This account fits perfectly into his semantic theory and, indeed, in *Truth and Meaning* (1967), where he recalls the principles of compositionality and contextuality and states that:

> we decided a while back not to assume that parts of sentences have meanings except in the ontologically neutral sense of making a systematic contribution to the meaning of the sentences in which they occur. [...]Sentences depend for their meaning on their structure, [...] Frege said that only in the context of a sentence does a word have meaning (Davidson 1967, 308).

Basically, the meanings of sentences depend on the meanings of the words that compose them, but it is only in their context that a word acquires meaning. This circularity is also expressed in Davidson's treatment of metaphors. If at the level of the single word, the only possible meaning is the ordinary, literal one, then this meaning will also be conveyed in the whole sentence, and vice versa. In Max Black's famous metaphor 'man is a wolf', 'wolf' is the focus of the metaphor (Black 1955). The system of clichés associated with 'wolf' and also valid for 'man' suggests that a possible secondary meaning for 'wolf' is 'predatory animal'. Thus the double meaning theory, contested by Davidson, considers

"the key word (or words) in a metaphor as having two different kinds of meaning at once, a literal and a figurative meaning" (Davidson 1978, 35). However, in Davidson's semantic account, the double meaning is not permissible. Davidson's extensionalism stipulates that the reference of 'wolf' is the animal, for which the name stands, and not a connotative description (i.e. an intension) of it since, as we have seen, the instruments adopted by Davidson to indicate the truth conditions of an utterance are constructed with the declared aim of curbing intensionality. Thus, if intensionality is to be contained in a sentence, it is clear that, by the principle of compositionality, this must be done starting from the individual words. That is to say that, in order to avoid intensionality, the meaning of words has to be limited to the ordinary one.

While keeping the metaphor at the centre of our discourse, we now turn our attention to the purpose of Davidson's theory of meaning, namely, the possibility of interpreting the speaker's utterances. Earlier, it was said that the interpreter's first move is governed by the *Principle of Charity* (1974), according to which the interpreter must take the speaker's utterances to be true. Metaphor overturns this practice since it works when it is considered to be false. Davidson himself suggests that "is only when a sentence is taken to be false that we accept it as a metaphor and start to hunt out the hidden implication" (Davidson 1978, 42). The metaphor is false in such a bizarre way (or true in such a trivial way) that the interpreter cannot conceive it as a source of information from a strictly literal point of view, nor can she attribute to the speaker the paradoxical belief for which the metaphor stands. This 'irrelevance' (or non-relevance) of the metaphor (Sperber and Wilson 1986) will then lead the listener to question the real purpose of such an absurd utterance.

4 Conclusion

In conclusion, what the T-sentence succeeds in grasping and evaluating concerns the literal meaning of the metaphor – which is the only kind of meaning Davidson is interested in – and this is exactly what Davidsonian semantics aims at analyzing. It cannot deal with what some critics have called the 'metaphorical meaning', since, by Davidson's own admission, this meaning, if it exists at all, lacks an enunciative form. Through a use of words that involves an imaginative capacity on the part of the interpreter (but also of the speaker), metaphor provokes in the listener or reader a vision, allows for creative elaboration of thoughts, evokes particular connections (Davidson 1978, 47). What a metaphor points out to an interpreter has an extra-linguistic nature that is not verbally delimitable:

> there is no limit to what a metaphor calls to our attention, and much of what we are caused to notice is not propositional in character. When we try to say what a metaphor 'means', we soon realize there is no end to what we want to mention (Davidson 1978, 46).

Essentially, all that a metaphor makes us imagine is external and does not match any further semantic dimension of the metaphorical sentence.

Finally, this brings us to point (ii). Davidson does not deny tout court that a metaphor has a cognitive content, but he denies that it has additional cognitive content to its literal meaning. Here, Davidson's implicit

assumption is that only sentences are vehicles of such content.[5] If what a metaphor brings to the interpreter's attention is not reducible to a propositional form, then Davidson also rules out the possibility of further cognitive content in addition to the literal.

At this point, one could ask why Davidson did not formulate his theory of metaphor more explicitly and closely related to his theory of meaning. The answer is contained in this sentence: "I think metaphor belongs exclusively to the domain of use. It is something brought off by the imaginative employment of words and sentences" (Davidson 1978, 33).

Davidson is not formulating any theory of metaphor. He is trying to say that, if the solution of scholars is to postulate a metaphorical meaning, then this particular kind of meaning does not fall into the realm of semantics and, if it does not fall into that realm, it is not something that can be examined with his theory of meaning. In this respect, Davidson is absolutely right, and what I wanted to show here is that his position on metaphors is perfectly consistent with his semantics.

Nevertheless, Davidson offers some alternatives to truth-conditional semantics. He puts on the table some arguments against metaphorical meanings that do not rely on his semantic theory. For example, postulating a new or extended meaning makes it difficult to explain in what way the metaphorical interpretation starts from the original (or literal) meaning (Davidson 1978, 34). Another point against metaphorical meanings lies in the existence of the so-called dead metaphors: if a new meaning has totally replaced the literal one, it is not so simple to say

5 For a critique of this position see Reimer (2001). Reimer (2001) summarises Davidson's argument as a modus tollens: [(p → q) ^ ¬q] → ¬p. Where: p = a metaphor has a special cognitive content; q = it is possible to provide this (presumed) content through a literal expression. So, Reimer's reconstruction of Davidson's argument sounds like: if a metaphor has a special cognitive content, then it is possible to provide this (presumed) content by means of a literal expression, but it is not possible to provide this (presumed) content by means of a literal expression, so a metaphor does not have a special cognitive content. Reimer disagrees with q; she believes that cognitive content is not the only content that can be expressed verbally (Reimer 2001, 145).

why we no longer consider dead metaphors as metaphors (Davidson 1978, 37-8). Davidson here wants to show that the arguments supporting the existence of metaphorical meanings are weak even when analysed with approaches other than that of truth-conditional semantics.

One of the suggestions offered by Davidson is to compare metaphors to pictures:

> How many facts or propositions are conveyed by a photograph? None, an infinity, or one great, unstatable fact? Bad question. A picture is not worth a thousand words, or any other number. [...] What we notice or see is not, in general, propositional in character (Davidson 1978, 47).

For Davidson, the working mechanism of a metaphor is comparable to the Wittgensteinian seeing-as; we do not *see that* Juliet is the Sun, but rather we *see* Juliet *as* the Sun. Metaphors make us see one thing as another through a certain literal statement that stimulates an imaginative insight (Davidson 1978, 47). This is also the reason why, for Davidson (1978, 32), metaphors cannot be paraphrased (point iii): the mental images they provoke are not verbally translatable.

This last suggestion, about imaginative insight, has been fruitfully picked up and developed in the field of both visual (Carroll 1994)[6] and verbal metaphors (Carston 2010; 2018).

In the end, Davidson's great merit was to heavily influence and direct the debate on metaphor, wrenching it away from semantics and fruitfully delivering it to the fields of pragmatics and cognitive linguistics.[7]

6 For a critical reading of Carroll's account (1994) of visual metaphors, see Cavazzana (2017). For the importance of imagination in the perception of visual metaphors, see Cavazzana (2019), as well as Cavazzana and Bolognesi (2020).

7 I would like to thank the anonymous referees for their precious comments.

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