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What We Can Learn about Category Mistakes from Donald Davidson's Theory of Metaphor

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The commentary on metaphor stretches back all the way to Aristotle (1981). The commentary on category mistakes only goes back to Husserl (2001) and Russell (1903). Can we understand the one in terms of the other? More precisely speaking, what can the study of metaphor tell us about category mistakes? The task in this paper is to take a theory of metaphor and see what we can learn about category mistakes from it. Recently, metaphorical theories have been examined in order to argue that category mistakes are literally meaningful (Magidor 2017; cf. Camp 2004). Surprisingly this conclusion is drawn from a theory of metaphor that holds that sentences used for metaphorical intents are not themselves *metaphorically* meaningful (Davidson 1978). The important point is that there seems to be an interesting path from the understanding of metaphors—and the underlying assumptions—to the understanding of category mistakes. This should not be entirely surprising for there are a class of metaphorical utterances that overlap the class of category mistakes; indeed, the overlap is complete since any category mistake can be read metaphorically. I wish then to examine the aforementioned theory of metaphor in detail and to see just what that detail tells us about category mistakes. The main, but not total, focus in this paper will be on Davidson's theory. The contention is, following precedent (Magidor 2017) and the overlapping relation mentioned, that such an inquiry will allow us to say something interesting about category mistakes. In other places, other theories of metaphor and what they tell us about category mistakes will be explored especially if we are successful in establishing some noteworthy conclusions here.

The paper proceeds by outlining a set of key areas of interest associated with the theory of metaphor in question. A section of the paper is given over to each. Thus, the paper can be read as a non-critical introduction to Davidson's theory. We assume the truth of Davidson's conclusions and try to think about what they mean for the idea of the category mistake. Although, in the section on similes, we briefly touch on an alternative to Davidson's theory in order to see how it affects our understanding. The important areas of interest are as follows:

1. Metaphors and use
2. Metaphors and saying
3. Metaphors and cognitive effects
4. Metaphors and similes
5. Metaphors and ambiguities

Last, I'll note, the discussion below focuses on Davidson's (1978) article *What Metaphors Mean*, and not on other related texts on literary theory that Davidson produced in later years (cf. McGuire 2004; Rahat 1992).

1. Metaphors and Use

We begin quite succinctly with the following. Davidson thinks that metaphors are a species of use. It is clearly stated here:

I depend on the distinction between what words mean and what they are used to do. I think metaphor belongs exclusively to the domain of use (Davidson 1978, p.33).

So understanding metaphor, for Davidson, involves understanding what certain words, expressions, and sentences are *used* to do.

Furthermore, for Davidson literal meaning does not change from context to context. Following McGuire (2004), we identify the key passage with the following excerpt:

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

So, literal meanings are invariant to context, but metaphorical uses, since they depend on what words and sentences do, assuming that the same words and sentences can do different things, vary from context to context.

1.1. Metaphor, Use, and Category Mistakes

One conclusion we can draw is this. If sentences like the following:

- (1) The Earth is a blue marble

have a literal meaning independently of the fact they contain category mistakes, then such sentences are literally meaningful even if they contain category mistakes.

As seen, Davidson has equated metaphor with a certain use. Though we cannot draw the following conclusion directly from Davidson's theory, I think, it is correct to identify a category mistake, like a metaphor, with a certain use. This is viable for the following reasons. We may talk about mistakes being "contained" or "made". Things like words or sentences are *containers* of mistakes—just as *a state of euphoria* is a container of an individual in a sentence like "she is in a state of euphoria" (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). But (as of individuals) this is a metaphorical way of talking about mistakes because words and sentences do not enjoy the three-dimensional physical properties that containers have (e.g. relatively high sides and the like). The second way of talking about mistakes, though, as things that are produced by the actions of a doer, does not seem metaphorical. It seems literal. Mistakes are made by actors. So to identify a use with a mistake is to identify the use with something that somebody does where what is done is done in error. The mistake in contention—the category mistake—is to use, then, a sentence like (1) in a way that is deemed to be in error (however that error is defined).

2. Metaphors and Saying

We will next consider the relationship between metaphor and saying in Davidson's text and aspire to understand how it affects the idea of the category mistake. An important passage can be used to introduce us to Davidson's thinking on metaphor and saying. It reads like this:

I agree with the view that metaphors cannot be paraphrased, but I think this is not because metaphors say something too novel for literal expression but because there is nothing there to paraphrase. Paraphrase, whether possible or not, is appropriate to what is said: we try, in paraphrase, to say it another way. But if I am right, a metaphor doesn't say anything beyond its literal meaning (nor does its maker say anything, in using the metaphor, beyond the literal). This is not, of course, to deny that a metaphor has a point, nor that that point can be brought out by using further words (Davidson 1978, 32).

For Davidson only what is said can be paraphrased. To paraphrase is to say what is said in another way. Metaphors do not *metaphorically* say anything. So there is nothing *metaphorical* to paraphrase. There is, in other words, nothing *metaphorical* to say in another way. At the same time, sentences used for metaphorical purposes do *literally* say something (something which is most often false or absurd, according to Davidson (Davidson 1978, p.43)). In this sense, there is something literal to paraphrase and there is something literal to say in another way. We might sum up, then, by saying: *metaphors say nothing more than what they literally say*. Or borrowing an expression from the philosopher of mind, we might say metaphors say *nothing over and above* what they say literally. However, importantly for us, metaphors make points and these points can be expressed by sentences.

From this we draw three conclusions of interest to us: First, there are two sets of sentences related to the

metaphorical use of a sentence: (a) paraphrases, and (b) sentences that bring out the point of the metaphor. Each set is logically distinct. Last, there are only literal paraphrases of literal meanings.

The first conclusion is easily demonstrated. Consider the following set of sentences:

- (2) She is a gem
- (3) She is someone I hold in great esteem
- (4) She is a precious or semi-precious stone, especially when cut and polished or engraved

The second sentence is metaphorically related to the first sentence in the sense that (3) *brings out the point* that (2) makes. But the third sentence is related to the first sentence in the sense that (4) *says* what (2) *says*—that is the two paraphrase each other.

The second conclusion is also easily demonstrable. The sentences (4) and (2) are symmetrically related. Thus, if (4) *says* what (2) *says*, then the compliment is returned. This is true across all contexts (given Davidson's assumptions about literal meaning). However, (3) and (2) are not symmetrically related. Thus, if (3) brings out the point that (2) makes, (2) does not bring out the point (3) makes. Other logical relations that seem to hold for paraphrasing sentences are transitive relations and Euclidean relations. These relations also seem to fail for point-making sentences.

The third conclusion is drawn in the following way. Suppose *S* is a sentence. Let *P* represent the sentence meaning of *S*, and suppose *S** is a paraphrase of *P*. *P* cannot be *S*'s *metaphorical* meaning because *S*'s metaphorical meaning is empty. So, if *P* is *S*'s meaning, it can only be *S*'s literal meaning. And, thus, *S** since it is a paraphrase of *P*, which is just *S*'s meaning, is the literal paraphrase of *S*'s meaning. On the other hand, *S** cannot be a metaphorical *paraphrase* of *P* because if *S** is metaphorical with respect to *P*, *S** brings out the point *P* makes metaphorically, *not literally*, and this means that *S** does not say the same thing as *P*, and following Davidson this means *S** does not paraphrase *P*. Thus, if *S** is metaphorically related to *P*, then the former cannot be a paraphrase of the later. That is, *S** cannot metaphorically paraphrase *S*'s meaning.

With these three conclusions in hand, we may make our first attempt to say something substantial about category mistakes.

2.1. Metaphors, Saying, and Category Mistakes

Two arguments suggest themselves. The first argument contends that category mistakes are meaningful. The second argument contends that associating a sentence like (2) with a category mistake occludes identifying it with a metaphor, as associating it with a metaphor occludes identifying it with a category mistake.

The first argument goes like this: Consider the sentence (2). The sentence is paraphrased by (4). But if this is so, then (2)'s *literal meaning* is literally paraphrased by (4) since, as we have seen, that is all that there is to be paraphrased. This is so in all contexts of use. Now (2) looks like a sentence that contains or can contain a category mistake. It follows that because (2) has a literal meaning, which is context-insensitive, it is a literally meaningful sentence even if or when a category mistake. Thus, we may draw the conclusion that some sentences that contain category mistakes are meaningful. Since, however, all sentences that we might take to contain category mistakes can be read metaphorically, we may suppose *all* sentences that contain category mistakes are literally meaningful. Thus, on the aspect of Davidson's theory under review, it follows that *all* sentences that contain category mistakes are literally meaningful.

The second argument goes like this: a sentence like (2), when used *metaphorically*, has a set of semantic relations to its paraphrases and it has a set of relations to a set of sentences that bring out the point that it makes. The two sets of sentences are distinct and the relations between the sentences in each set are distinct. A sentence like (2) when used *literally*, has the same set of semantic relations to its paraphrases as it does when used *metaphorically*. But, presumably, the point that it makes is brought out by those very same paraphrases. So, the contention is, when used literally, a sentence like (2) has a set of semantic relations to

its paraphrases and it has a set of relations to the set of sentences that bring out the point that it makes, and the two sets of sentences are identical and the relations between the sentences in each set are identical. The set of sentences, thus, that bring out the point the metaphorical use of a sentence like (2) makes and the set that brings out the point that the literal use of the sentence makes are essentially distinct. The distinction is sufficient to divide the two uses. But it is also sufficient to show that the presence of one use occludes the presence of the other.

In like manner we construct the following argument with respect to identifying the use of a sentence with a category mistake. This time, we assume that identifying the use of a sentence with a category mistake entails identifying the use of that sentence with an attempt to bring out a point represented by its set of literal paraphrases. It is an attempt to *say* something. So it is an attempt to bring out the point that the relevant paraphrases reflect. If so, the identification of the use of a sentence like (2) with a category mistake occludes the identification of the use of such a sentence with a metaphor, and in turn the identification of the use of a sentence like (2) with a metaphor occludes the identification of the use of such a sentence with a category mistake—for each use attempts to bring out a different set of points and each set of points is essentially distinct.

As we shall see, arguments for these two conclusions seem to arise again and again when considering Davidson's theory of metaphor.

3. Metaphors and Cognitive Effects

Davidson says, agreeing with Black (1954) on this point, that metaphors evoke a *cognitive* response (Davidson 1978, p. 45). He even says that they give us certain perceptions (Davidson 1978, p. 45) and that they create visions (Davidson 1978, p.48). Davies (1983) talks of an “imagistic” theory of metaphor when contrasting Davidson's theory to John Searle's (1979) “propositional” theory of metaphor. The uptake is that metaphors produce cognitive effects (like a cognitive image). But what exactly is the logical nature of the relationship between a metaphor and a cognitive effect on Davidson's theory of metaphor? I think it would be correct to say that such cognitive effects are a necessary condition on the metaphorical status of the metaphorical sentence. Davidson provides a number of reasons to think so.

First, Davidson contends, as with similes, metaphors make us attend to a likeness (Davidson 1978, p. 33); they invite a comparison (Davidson 1978, p.40); and they promote sets of analogies and parallels (Davidson 1978, p. 45). We might wonder where all this occurs. If we take them to be cognitive effects, as expressions like “attend to” suggest we should, then we may say metaphors lead to certain cognitive effects (whereby we are cognitively invited to notice similarities and comparisons). This puts the cognitive effect in a necessary relation to the metaphor.

Second, as we've seen, metaphors are associated with non-paraphrasing sentences that bring out the point the metaphor makes or is used to make. Davidson claims that sentences that make a claim to paraphrase a metaphor merely reflect (Davidson 1978, p. 45) or cause (Davidson 1978, p.46) the relevant cognitive effects. It is not farfetched to think that the sentences that bring out the point of the metaphor and the “so-called paraphrases” Davidson is talking about are the same. If so, we may conclude that the sentences that bring out the point of the metaphor in question reflect and cause cognitive effects. But, presumably, since these sentences aim to reflect or inspire the cognitive effect the metaphor was meant to inspire in the first place, we may take the metaphor to have an antecedent and, therefore, sufficient relation to the cognitive effects in question, putting those effects into a necessary relation with the metaphor.

Third, Davidson claims on a number of occasions to remove the cognitive effect is to remove the metaphor (Davidson 1978, pp.37-38). So, for example, when Davidson speaks of dead metaphors we get claims like the following:

What does matter is that when "mouth" applied only metaphorically to bottles, the application made the hearer *notice* a likeness between animal and bottle openings. (Consider Homer's reference to wounds as mouths.) Once one has the present use of the word, with literal application to bottles, *there is nothing left to notice* (Davidson 1978, p.37, my italics).

And now considering the American-English expression “burned up,” we get this oft-quoted passage:

"He was burned up"...is no doubt the corpse of a metaphor, "He was burned up" now suggests no more than that he was very angry. *When the metaphor was active, we would have pictured fire in the eyes or smoke coming out of the ears* (Davidson 1978, p.38, my italics).

So when nothing is *noticed* or when nothing is *pictured*, the metaphorical effect of a sentence is completely worn away. We may suppose noticing and picturing are cognitive effects without too much trouble. This again ties cognitive effect to metaphor in the particular way we have suggested. Thus, I think we may conclude that cognitive effects are a necessary condition for a metaphor and the use of a sentence that conveys the metaphor.

So metaphors produce cognitive effects associated with non-paraphrasing sentences that bring out the point that the metaphor makes. But as Davis (1983) suggests, that's only the half of it. The metaphor cognitively organises or reorganises reality in a certain way, suggests certain presuppositions, and produces a set of related entailments. The same, he suggests, is true for the literal uses of language. We might say, following Davies, and parallel to Davidson's account of metaphor, literal use produces cognitive effects. We may associate these with paraphrasing sentences that bring out the literal point made by the literal use and, further, claim that the literal use in question (re)organises reality in a certain way, is based on certain presuppositions, and produces a set of entailments thereof. So consider the following example:

(5) Malcolm is a wolf

Suppose it is used metaphorically. We are saying, it comes with a set of non-paraphrasing sentences that bring out the point that the user is trying to make. But these are just a reflection of certain cognitive effects. These effects (re)organise reality in a particular way and, based on certain presuppositions, prompt sets of entailments. For example, the belief (perhaps expressed linguistically) that 'Malcolm is morally reprehensible.' But now suppose (5) to be used literally. Paraphrasing sentences partially reflect the associated cognitive effects. These cognitive effects (re)organise the world in a certain way and, based on certain presuppositions, prompt sets of entailments. In this case, for example, the belief (possibly represented by a sentence) that 'Malcolm is *actually* a wild animal,' or the belief that it is wrong to hold Malcolm morally responsible for eating farmer Bean's chickens (however unwelcome). In each case, the cognitive (re)organisation of reality is distinct—and, in fact, if each use points to a truth, reality is distinct.¹

3.1. Metaphors, Cognitive Effects, and Category Mistakes

Let's attempt to see what conclusions about category mistakes can be drawn from all this. We begin by noting, sentences like (5) may be used in two ways, to speak metaphorically or to speak literally. Depending on the use, we differentiate:

- (a) Sets of sentences associated with the point that the sentence makes
- (b) Sets of cognitive effects
- (c) Sets of presuppositions/entailments related to those cognitive effects (e.g. beliefs, etc.)
- (d) A particular version of reality.

The sets are non-identical and, I presume, mutually exclusive along some if not many dimensions. With respect to (5), the aforementioned differences may be represented in a table like this:

¹ Davidson accepts metaphorical truths, so there is nothing inapt about associating this view with Davidson.

	Metaphorical Use	Literal Use
Implied point	“Malcolm behaves immorally.”	“Malcolm is a nonhuman animal that belongs to the class <i>Canis Lupus</i> .”
Implied belief	Malcolm behaves immorally	Malcolm is a nonhuman animal that belongs to the class <i>Canis Lupus</i>
Implied presupposition/entailment	Malcolm is morally responsible for his acts.	Malcolm is not morally responsible for his acts.
Implied reality	It is the case that Malcolm behaves immorally.	It is not the case that Malcolm behaves immorally.

Again, as above, we assume that the use of a sentence associated with a category mistake implies further sentences, cognitive effects, presuppositions/entailments, and realities associated with the literal use of that sentence. This on the basis that, for example, the use of (5) is established as a category mistake only if the point of using (5) is associated with the point, and all that that entails, situated on the rightmost side of the table above. If this is allowed, it follows that a sentence, like (5), used in a way that results in the kind of mistake in question entails a set of further sentences, cognitive effects, presuppositions/entailments, and versions of reality that cannot be associated with the metaphorical use of the sentence in question. On the basis that the set of non-paraphrasing sentences, cognitive effects, presuppositions/entailments, and concordant realities associated with the metaphorical use of the sentence in question, and the set of paraphrasing sentences, cognitive effects, entailments, and consistent realities associated with the use of the sentence that produces the category mistake are inconsistent, a sentence like (5) when associated with the metaphorical use implies the absence of the category mistake as the sentence associated with the latter mistake implies the absence of the former use. Thus, the relationship between metaphors and cognitive effects allows us to draw the same kind of conclusion we came to previously.

4. Metaphors and the Rejection of Simile Theories

We saw in the last section, Davidson associated the work of metaphor with producing a sense of similarity, but Davidson introduces and rejects the simile theory of metaphor. Actually, there are a couple of simile theories, according to Davidson (cf. Tirrell 1991):

The view that the special meaning of a metaphor is identical with the literal meaning of a corresponding simile (however "corresponding" is spelled out) should not be confused with the common theory that a metaphor is an elliptical simile. This theory makes no distinction in meaning between a metaphor and some related simile and does not provide any ground for speaking of figurative, metaphorical, or special meanings (Davidson 1978, p.38).

Thus, we have two simile theories of metaphor. The first theory posits metaphorical meanings, so we know that it must be dismissed. The second theory reduces a metaphor to a simile and takes the meaning of the metaphor to be the literal meaning of the simile. This, we might think, is more to Davidson's tastes. It is, but he dismisses it too.

[The second theory] is a theory that wins hands down so far as simplicity is concerned, but it also seems too simple to work. For if we make the literal meaning of the metaphor to be the literal meaning of a matching simile, we deny access to what we originally took to be the literal meaning of the metaphor, and we agreed almost from the start that this meaning was essential to the working of the metaphor (Davidson 1978, pp. 38-39)

That is, for Davidson, the original literal meaning of a metaphor is essential to the working of the metaphor. But in some way, the simile theory undermines this. But it is not clear why. I will attempt to outline three arguments that make sense of Davidson's claim, here, and follow each by attempting to see what they tell us about category mistakes. I will briefly end this section by assuming Davidson is wrong and the latter simile theory is correct in order to see what this means for a theory of category mistakes.

4.1. The Argument from Patent Truth, Falsity, and Absurdity

We can build an argument to support Davidson's way of rejecting the simile theory in question from the following passages. First, we have:

Generally, it 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. It is probably for this reason that most metaphorical sentences are *patently* false, just as all similes are trivially true. Absurdity or contradiction in a metaphorical sentence guarantees we won't believe it and invites us, under proper circumstances, to take the sentence metaphorically (Davidson 1978, p.42).

This is followed by:

Patent falsity is the usual case with metaphor, but on occasion patent truth will do as well. "Business is business" is too obvious in its literal meaning to be taken as having been uttered to convey information, so we look for another use... (Davidson 1978, p.42).

Literal meaning may be required to understand that a sentence is patently true, patently false, or patently absurd. In turn this may *signal* that we need to take the sentence's use metaphorically. Examples are:

- (6) Business is business (Davidson 1978)
- (7) You are the cream in my coffee (Grice 1989)
- (8) A geometrical proof is a mousetrap (Black 1954)

The first is patently true in the literal sense. The second is patently false in the literal sense. The third, discussed by Black (1954) and Davidson, is held to be patently absurd in the literal sense. Now assume that the association of a sentence with a metaphor requires the original association of that sentence with a literal meaning that entails a patent truth, patent falsity, or patent absurdity. This is required to kickoff the metaphorical process. On the other hand, hand in hand with the simile theorist, we suppose that the association of a sentence with a simile associates the sentence with a literal meaning that is, following Davidson, a trivial truth (Davidson 1978, p.42). On this basis, the literal meaning of such a simile cannot entail a patent absurdity. Nor can it entail a patent falsity. Thus, it follows that, in these cases, the reduction of the literal meaning of the metaphor to the literal meaning of the simile must exclude what was originally taken to be the meaning of the sentence in question. This will at the least show that the reductive theory is not adequate. But, further, we might suppose that what has been said is also true for sentences that are originally associated with literal meanings that entail patent truths. For example, we may suppose that the meaning of a simile provides a truth that, though trivial, is not cognitively insignificant, but that the meaning of a sentence that is patently true in the way (6) is does not. That is, the meaning of (6) is not cognitively significant, but the meaning of, say (9), is:

- (9) Business is *like* business

More would need to be said about that. But we might note, the primary literal meaning of (6) suggests no salience, but the literal meaning of (9) does. In any case, supposing our assumption to hold true, it follows that if a sentence is used metaphorically and originally associated with a meaning that is patently true, false or absurd, it cannot also be associated with a seemingly correspondent simile without erasing its original sense—that is precisely what Davidson will not allow.

At this point, though, it is important to note that Davidson thinks that metaphors and similes do the same thing. Davidson does say that metaphors make us attend to some likeness and says that this is a "trite and true" observation (Davidson 1978, p. 33). Davidson also avers that metaphors belong to the same set of linguistic devices that similes do—in that they both draw attention to comparisons (Davidson 1978, p. 40). Thus, *though* the meaning of a metaphor is not to be reduced to the literal meaning of a correspondent simile, *the point the metaphor makes may be associated with the point the simile makes (which we may, in turn, express by the literal meaning of the simile)*. This, I would suppose, is why authors can readily associate Davidson's theory so closely with a simile theory of metaphor (cf. Tirrell 1991).

4.1.1. The Argument from Patent Truth, Falsity and Absurdity, and Category Mistakes

So what does this tell us about category mistakes? We seem to be able to draw at least one of the conclusions we drew previously. Consider the following sentence:

(10)The first day back at school is a merry-go-round

Next, a simile:

(11)The first day back at school is like a merry-go-round

The first sentence may come to be associated with a category mistake. It can also be used metaphorically. We might try to reduce the literal meaning of (10) to the literal meaning of (11). So the literal meaning of (10) is the literal meaning of (11). But, as seen, this is not to Davidson's taste. There is no reduction of the former's literal meaning to the latter's literal meaning. At the same time, we note, (10) makes a point. Given what we have said previously, the most expedient way of expressing the point might be (11). So (10) makes the same point that (11) expresses literally but the literal meaning of (10) is not reduced to the literal meaning of (11). However, if this is so, it follows that when (10) is identified with a category mistake it cannot make the same point as (11). That is so on the assumption that when (10) is identified with a category mistake, the point it makes cannot be associated with the literal meaning of (11) (i.e. a paraphrase of a simile). It seems more than valid to assume this because it seems more than valid to hold that *no simile of the kind in question—which is trivially true—can result in a category mistake*. If so, this is sufficient to show that a sentence like (10) cannot be used to make a metaphorical point yet result in category mistake on any single occasion of use, and vice versa. And that establishes a conclusion we have already seen established.

4.2. The Argument from Primary and Original Meanings

Here is another attempt at an argument to support Davidson's rejection of the theory in doubt. Davidson says:

Whether or not metaphor depends on new or extended meanings, it certainly depends in some way on the original meanings; an adequate account of metaphor must allow that *the primary or original meanings of words remain active* in their metaphorical setting (Davidson 1978, p.34; my italics).

I will assume "primary" and "original" meanings are context-insensitive meanings, and the kind of meaning that is always associated with a word or word-combinations first and primarily. And in this sense we can assume that Davidson is talking about the literal meanings of well-integrated words or word combinations. So, I think, something like the following principle can be adopted in order to represent the view that "original" and "primary" meanings of words remain active in their metaphorical setting:

(The Literality of Words Principle (LWP)) If a sentence *S* is used or understood metaphorically, then it is composed of well-integrated parts that form words and combinations of words which all actively contribute *literal* meanings to *S*.

But we can come to a stronger principle. We add the following assumption: if a sentence, *S*, is composed of well-integrated parts that form words and combinations of words that actively contribute literal meanings to *S*, then *S* itself is literally meaningful. Thus, we have:

(The Literality Sentence Principle (LSP)) If a sentence *S* is used or understood metaphorically, then *S* is literally meaningful.

Given our principles, Davidson's claim is that the literal meanings of the relevant words, word-combinations, or the literal meaning of the sentence in question is necessary to the metaphorical use associated with a sentence. For example, necessary to the use of a sentence like the following:

(12)Milhous is a square

The simile theories, on the other hand, associate a sentence like (12) with a metaphorical meaning (associated with a corresponding simile) or the literal meaning of a corresponding simile. In both cases, it can be said that the original or primary literal meanings of the words, word combinations, or sentence related to (12), are lost. That is either (LWP) or (LSP) is violated. But, for Davidson, neither must be disposed of for Davidson is committed to the “principle of compositionality” captured by the relationship between (LWP) and (LSP) (Davidson 1967). Thus, the reduction to a metaphorical meaning or the literal meaning of a simile is rejected.

4.2.1. The Argument from Primary and Original Meanings and Category Mistakes

A sentence like the sentences under discussion, those that may be used for metaphorical purposes yet advertised as category mistakes, like (12), will be literally meaningful so far as we accept the principles in hand, as Davidson does. Accepting those principles means that when the aforementioned kind of sentence is read metaphorically, it is still literally meaningful. But more importantly, the aforementioned kind of sentence is literally meaningful even when it appears to be a category mistake. This will extend to all category mistakes just in case all category mistakes can be read metaphorically. And this establishes another conclusion we have already seen established.

4.3. The Argument from Attitudes to Metaphor and Similes

A last argument in support of Davidson’s rejection of associating a metaphor’s meaning with the literal meaning of a simile looks like this. Let’s suppose the kind of simile theory which shuns metaphorical meaning for a reduction of a metaphor to the literal meaning of a simile is correct. As such the meaning of (12) may be reduced to the literal meaning of the following sentence:

(13)Milhous is like a square

Further, let’s assume that the following principle is true:

(Falsity Principle (FP)): To accept that a sentence, *S*, is a metaphor is to take *S* as false

Davidson and others (cf. Martinich 1984) accept something like this principle on the basis that the sentence used for a metaphorical intent is either patently true, false, or absurd. The salient passages in Davidson are cited above.

If we accept that the meaning of a sentence like (12) is the meaning of a simile (like (13)), we accept that a metaphor’s meaning is paraphrased by a sentence that looks like this “*a* is like *b*.” As such, we are committed to the view that there is some respect in which *a* and *b* are alike. This may be paraphrased thus: in some respect, *P*, *a* is like *b* in that respect. To suppose, on the other hand, that the (FP) is true means to suppose a sentence like (12) is false. But given that the meaning of such a sentence is just the literal meaning of a simile (here (13)), this is to suppose that there are no respects in which *a* and *b* are alike. That is the negation of the simile, which is paraphrased like this: in *all* respects, *P*, it is false that *a* is like *b* in those respects. In other words, there are *no* respects in which the one is like the other. Thus, to accept that a sentence like (12) is a simile (like (13)), is to accept that it is paraphrased in way that associates it with a simile because (12) has the meaning of (13); but following (FP), it is to also suppose that there is no similarity in question. This is not only absurd, but the point of the metaphor to simile reduction is lost, which one presumes is to capture the comparative form of the metaphor. One option is introduce a time-lag. A sentence like (12) has a different literal meaning when originally encountered. But when understood metaphorically, the literal meaning associated with (13) is associated with (12). But Davidson has said the original and primary meaning remains active in the metaphorical context (and as we shall see later in a *non-ambiguous* way). So it is that we must reject the reduction of the literal meaning of the metaphor to that of the simile.

As a brief point of interest, one which will help to make a point below, we can expand just a little on the analysis above in order to add a brief a note or two about the simile theory Davidson is rejecting. Consider the following sentence:

(14)Milhous is not a square

Suppose this is a metaphor and that the theory Davidson rejects is actually true. So (15) means what (14) expresses:

(15)Milhous is not like a square

Call (13) a positive simile and (15) a negative simile. Then, we may argue, the following two principles hold:

(Positive Simile Principle (PSP)): There is no negation of a positive simile

(Negative Simile Principle (NSP)): There is no negation of a negative simile

A positive simile is paraphrased thus: in some respect, P , a is like b in that respect. But, if so, it's negation can never be true since its negation says in *all* respects, P , it is false that a is like b in those respects. That is surely false—based on the assumption behind accepting a simile as trivially true. But the same is true of a negative simile. We may paraphrase it so: in some respect, P , a is *not* like b in that respect. If that is so, it's negation says in *all* respects, P , a is like b in those respects. That is surely false—for it would lead to contradictory properties.² Let's consider now what all this has to tell us about category mistakes.

4.3.1. The Argument from Attitudes to Metaphor and Simile, and Category Mistakes

Consider the following set of sentences already tagged above but retagged here for convenience:

(16)Milhous is a square

(17)Milhous is not a square

We may suppose both have a metaphorical use and a literal use. But it is less clear if both result in category mistakes. Consider (16) to be used literally. It seems correct to say the user is making a category mistake. Consider (17) to be used literally. Is this to make a category mistake? Intuitively, I think not (cf. Magidor 2013, pp.12-13). Consider (17) embedded in the following sentence to sharpen the intuition:

(18)It is literally true that Milhous is not a square

That seems true. So it seems at least permissible to think that (17) does not contain a category mistake because it can be embedded in this way. In contrast, consider (16) embedded in a similar way:

(19)It is literally true that Milhous is a square

This still seems to make a category mistake.

We might also suppose the following conversation to occur whilst refraining from attributing to the denying party a category mistake:

² We could interpret a positive simile in the following way: in some respect P_a that a has b is like a in that respect. But the negation would still distinguish a from b in a way that would be too strong. The interpretation of the negation of negative simile interpreted on the same lines would say, in all respects P_a that a has b is like a in those respects. That'd require (NSP) to be recomposed to disenfranchise sentences involving terms that denote identical entities. But for non-identical entities (NSP) would still surely hold.

A: Millhous is a square. And I mean that *literally*.

B: No, you can't mean that literally. Milhous is *not* a square *literally*.

We may suppose person *B* to be rather pedantic here (given "literally" is also used as an intensifier), however, it seems quite intuitive to accept person *B* is not making a category mistake (whereas person *A* may be doing just that if "literally" is used in its most relevant sense). In each case we may say the problem is that the speaker or writer *treats* the problematic sentence as if it is *saying* something true. So let us generalise this in the following way: if one makes a category mistake with a sentence like (16), one treats it as if it were saying something true.

I will now assume that the following sentence is a paraphrase of (17):

(20) It is literally false that Milhous is a square

Now, we have seen Davidson accepts (FP). To use a sentence like (16) for a metaphorical use, one must treat it as if it is saying something false. But now we have reason to think to use a sentence like (16) for a literal use is to make a category mistake *only if* one treats (16) as if it is saying something true (not as if it were saying something untrue as in, for example, (18) or the paraphrase thereof, i.e. (20)). Assuming, then, that one cannot treat a sentence like (16) as if it were both saying something true and saying something false, we can conclude, as we have done on many occasions above, that using a sentence like (16) for a metaphorical intent is distinct from using the sentence for an intent that results in a category mistake on a given occasion of use.

As a digression, it should be fairly obvious that the theory that Davidson opposes leads to a similar conclusion. That this is so is demonstrable in a number of ways. First, if a sentence like (16) is taken metaphorically, it is taken to have the literal meaning the appropriate simile has. But if (16) is taken to be a category mistake *patently* it does not say what the appropriate simile says. And, if it were to say that, it could not be a category mistake—it is difficult to see how any simile could be a category mistake, for they seem to be immune to the disease, as argued above. Second, the negation of a simile, and therefore the metaphor's meaning, denies all likeness, which seems impossible. But the negation of the category mistake obviously does not do this. As we lately mentioned, it rather seems to say something *literally true*. All this, and presumably more, suggests that the alternative Davidson dismisses will strongly distinguish the metaphor from the category mistake so far as a sentence like (16) is concerned. In point of fact, we will no longer be able to say that if the metaphor (16) is literally meaningful, it follows from that that the category mistake (16) is literally meaningful. It doesn't.

5. Ambiguity and Metaphor

Davidson rejects ambiguity of meaning in the metaphorical context, as said. An ambiguity theory of metaphor has it that a sentence like those reviewed, lately (16), take on a literal meaning which is then replaced by a metaphorical meaning. Three different kinds of ambiguity are dismissed. The first ambiguity is introduced below by itself, the second and third together. Again, we want to take what Davidson says about metaphor and ambiguity and apply it to our understanding of category mistakes.

5.1. Ambiguity One

The first version of ambiguity Davidson considers is introduced in the following way:

Perhaps, then, we can explain metaphor as a kind of ambiguity: in the context of a metaphor, certain words have either a new or an original meaning, and the force of the metaphor depends on our uncertainty as we waver between the two meanings. Thus when Melville writes that "Christ was a chronometer," the effect of metaphor is produced by our taking "chronometer" first in its ordinary sense and then in some extraordinary or metaphorical sense (Davidson 1978, pp.34-35).

So the first version of ambiguity that Davidson considers is the kind that holds if a sentence is metaphorical,

then there is some meaningful part of the sentence, either a word or a combination of words that has two meanings: (a) a literal meaning, and (b) an extraordinary meaning. A metaphorical effect is produced when we, first, take the meaning of the relevant word or word combination to be literal; and, thereafter, take the meaning to be metaphorical. The transfer produces the metaphor and the metaphorical effect thereof. However, Davidson rejects the theory in the following terms:

It is hard to see how this theory can be correct. For the ambiguity in the word, if there is any, is due to the fact that in ordinary contexts it means one thing and in the metaphorical context it means something else; but in the metaphorical context we do not necessarily hesitate over its meaning. When we do hesitate, it is usually to decide which of a number of metaphorical interpretations we shall accept; we are seldom in doubt that what we have is a metaphor. At any rate, the effectiveness of the metaphor easily outlasts the end of uncertainty over the interpretation of the metaphorical passage. Metaphor cannot, therefore, owe its effect to ambiguity of this sort (Davidson 1978 p.35).

Davidson's argument is twofold. First, in a metaphorical context, we are supposed to move from the literal meaning to the metaphorical meaning. The key expressions or the sentences in question are ambiguous between the literal meaning and the metaphorical meaning. The ambiguity *requires* one to *hesitate* over the ambiguity. But since there is no hesitating, there is no ambiguity. But then the ambiguity does not explain the metaphor or its effect. Second, allowing for interpretative ambiguity, if there ever is this kind of ambiguity in play, the metaphorical effect outlasts it. So the presence of this ambiguity, too, cannot be necessary to the presence of the metaphorical effect.

5.1.1. Ambiguity One and Category Mistakes

So, we have learned: metaphor does not involve ambiguity; metaphor does not involve hesitation; but metaphor may involve interpretative hesitation, I am going to assume, over the point of the metaphor; and metaphorical effects outlast any such ambiguity. And, now, we ask what does this tell us of category mistakes?

It seems this view of metaphor supports one of the conclusions that we have so often drawn above and that this can be made out in several different ways.

First, consider the following sentence:

(21) Life is a circle

In case we take a sentence like (21) to be metaphorical, as Davidson says, it is not necessarily accompanied by any felt-ambiguity. But, now, suppose that we take (21) literally. The reader is invited to do just that. It is surely accompanied by a felt-ambiguity—it is natural to ask “what could it mean?” and to be just as confused when paraphrased if paraphrased (as if that would be an answer to the question). We may generalise the result. Generally, following Davidson, metaphor does not come with felt-ambiguity. But, following our own experiences, category mistakes do come with felt-ambiguity. We take this to be especially relevant with a sentence like (21) which is both taken to be a metaphor at a time and advertised as a category mistake at another. If we now suppose that it is not possible to experience (21) as ambiguous and not ambiguous, then it follows that the use of a sentence like (21) is either experienced metaphorically or as category mistake but not both at any given time. The two, then, are *phenomenologically* or *affectively* distinct. And that suggests that they are *cognitively* distinct.

Another argument concerns the nature of the interpretative ambiguity. If a sentence like (21) is associated with a felt-ambiguity, it is associated with an interpretative ambiguity. I presume an interpretative ambiguity is an ambiguity revolving around the point that is being made by using the sentence. So, so far as the metaphorical point of (21) is associated with a felt-ambiguity, it is associated with not knowing the point associated with the metaphorical use of (21), which, as Davidson says, can be cleared up by critics and experts. But, arguably, the case is the very opposite when the literal point of (21) is associated with a felt-ambiguity. In such a case, the felt-ambiguity emerges just because we know the point the literal use of (21) makes, which is simply associated with its paraphrasing. It is just *that* that is baffling. Thus, this

knowledge does not abate the ambiguity but deepens it. So, in the one case, *not* knowing the point of the use of a sentence like (21) is necessary for the felt-ambiguity in mind, in the other case, *knowing* the point the use of the sentence brings out is sufficient to the felt-ambiguity. It follows that knowing the point of a sentence like (21) in the metaphorical context entails the absence of the category mistake which may come with (21), and knowing the point of (21) in a context in which it appears as a category mistake rules against the existence of the metaphor.

A third more speculative argument follows. A sentence like (21) in the metaphorical context produces a metaphorical effect. The metaphorical effect is associated with the point the metaphor makes. In this way, the metaphorical effect organises the world. And just when this is so, as a consequence of the resolution of the interpretative ambiguity, any felt-ambiguity fades. So, it's no wonder, like Davidson says, metaphorical effect outlasts any felt-ambiguity. But this isn't the case with a category mistake. A sentence like (21) appearing in a literal context is associated with a category mistake. It is associated with a category mistake just because it produces a literal effect that *disorganises* the world or, even, *prevents* organisation. And, hereof, is the production of the affective ambiguity. So, again, on the basis that the metaphorical effect of (21) outlasts ambiguity, but the literal effect associated with the category mistake generates felt-ambiguity, we distinguish sentences, like (21), when encountered in the metaphorical context from the sentence encountered in a manner that generates the experience of a category mistake, where the presence of the one rules out the presence of the other.

5.2. Ambiguities Two and Three

There is another kind of ambiguity to consider. Davidson introduces it like this:

Another brand of ambiguity may appear to offer a better suggestion. Sometimes a word will, in a single context, bear two meanings where we are meant to remember and to use both. Or, if we think of wordhood as implying sameness of meaning, then we may describe the situation as one in which what appears as a single word is in fact two (Davidson 1978, p. 35).

On either interpretation, according to Davidson, we would need to keep all the words or meanings in mind in order to understand the metaphorical meaning of sentence like (21). Davidson criticises this theory in the following terms.

[Such ambiguity] is a legitimate device, a pun, but it is not the same device as metaphor. For in metaphor there is no essential need of reiteration; whatever meanings we assign the words, they keep through every correct reading of the passage (Davidson 1978, p. 35).

This leads to the third kind of ambiguity Davidson considers with respect to metaphor:

A plausible modification of the last suggestion would be to consider the key word (or words) in a metaphor as having two different kinds of meaning at once, a literal and a figurative meaning. Imagine the literal meaning as latent, something that we are aware of, that can work on us without working in the context, while the figurative meaning carries the direct load (Davidson 1978, p.35).

Davidson suggests that we think of each meaning, literal and figurative, as serviced by a rule that says: in "its metaphorical role the word applies to everything that it applies to in its literal role, and then some" (Davidson 1978, p.36). The theory is associated with Frege's theory of opaque or oblique contexts, contexts created by the use of, for example, propositional attitude verbs and modal expressions. So consider the following:

(22) Your DNA prints a fingerprint

In the literal context, the underlined expression carries its literal meaning. In the metaphorical context, it carries its literal meaning plus a further meaning. In this latter context, this latter meaning takes precedence.

But Davidson perceives a problem with all this. There is a distinction between learning the use of word and

learning something about the world. When a word, for example, “print” is used metaphorically, as it is in (22), the word is not used to and does not teach us something new about how that word is used but it is used to say something (perhaps, new) about the world. But suppose that on such an occasion of use, the extraordinary use of the word is taken as the occasion for learning part of the meaning of the word. Consistently this would occur on every new occasion of metaphorical use. But, if so, the distinction between the literal use of a word and the metaphorical use of that word is lost. Every extraordinary use is just an occasion for learning an extra part of the meaning of the word in question. It doesn’t always matter whether we take a word’s use as literal or metaphorical, we are told. But it is important to think that an extraordinary use of a word like “print” does not have an innumerable number of meanings correlated to an untold quantity of new and extraordinary uses if we want to think that there is a distinction between a literal use and a metaphorical use.

The following passage highlights Davidson’s thinking:

The change [from a literal use to a metaphorical use] may be, in some cases at least, hard to appreciate, but unless there is a change, most of what is thought to be interesting about metaphor is lost. I have been making the point by contrasting learning a new use for an old word with using a word already understood; in one case, I said, our attention is directed to language, in the other, to what language is about. Metaphor, I suggested, belongs in the second category (Davidson 1978, p. 37).

As above, we shall assume Davidson is correct. What then of category mistakes?

5.2.1. Ambiguities Two and Three, and Category Mistakes

Literal uses and metaphorical uses, we have been told, exemplify an important change. This change is a deviation from the use of a sentence to promote a standard context-insensitive meaning. But it is not something that adds any further non-standard context-sensitive meaning. It introduces no new meaning. Rather, the use draws our *attention* to something that the language is about. But this obviously cannot be consistent with the promotion of what the sentence says. Rather, it relates, as we have seen, to cognitive effects related to similarity and comparison and exemplified in sentences that bring out the point of using the sentence in the nonliteral manner. All this supports the same conclusions that we have drawn so many times before.

First, basic units of literal meaning—e.g. words—are literally meaningful in a context-insensitive way. Complex units of literal meaning—e.g. sentences—are composed of these basic units and thus are literally meaningful in a context-insensitive way. Thus, whether a sentence like (22) appears in a metaphorical context or a literal context, the sentence is literally meaningful. And, then, whether or not the sentence is metaphorical or a category mistake, the sentence is literally meaningful. Thus, sentences that are or are used in ways that result in category mistakes *are* literally meaningful.

Second, a metaphorical use of a sentence like (22) directs us to the world. But so does a literal use. The metaphorical use of a sentence like (22) draws our attention to the world in a precise way. That is, it draws our attention to the world in order to promote certain similarities and comparisons. In this way, following Davies (1983), it (re)organises our reality. We may even say the *point* the sentence makes, by being used in such a manner, is (non-reductively) paraphrased by a simile. The literal use of a sentence like (22) draws our attention to the world in another precise way. That is, it draws our attention to the world in order to promote what it *says* about the world. It (re)organises reality in an essentially different way to the metaphorical use. This we have argued for above. The point the sentence used in this way makes is paraphrased by a paraphrase of the sentence in contention. Associating the category mistake with the literal use, on the basis that a category mistake implies that use of the sentence makes a *literal* point that (re)organises reality in a certain way and is not paraphrased by a simile, it follows, yet again, that the metaphorical use of a sentence like (22) and the use of a that sentence that results in a category mistake are inconsistent on the given occasion of use.

6. Conclusion

We have introduced the major features of Davidson's theory of metaphor. We have tried, following the practice of others, and by focusing on sentences that deliver metaphors yet are also advertised as category mistakes, to think about what such a theory can tell us about category mistakes. We have come to two conclusions consistently:

- (a) Sentences that are associated with category mistakes are literally meaningful because such sentences can be read metaphorically and all sentences that can be read metaphorically are literally meaningful.
- (b) Associating category mistakes with the use of a sentence, no sentence used metaphorically results in a category mistake and every use of a sentence that results in a category mistake rules out the metaphorical use.

Whether or not other theories of metaphor lead to the same results is the next line of inquiry. We have already indicated that a simile theory leads to conclusions about category mistakes that overlap in part with the conclusions above. This suggests other theories of metaphor will have more to tell us about category mistakes.

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