

What kind of reasoning mode is metonymy?

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In previous work, we have characterized metonymy as an inferential tool that is crucially involved in meaning construction. But exactly what kind of reasoning mode is metonymy? We explore four options: (i) deduction, (ii) induction, (iii) abduction, and (iv) implicature.

Deductive reasoning can be immediately discarded as a plausible candidate for describing metonymic operations since metonymy is not a logical *modus ponens* or syllogism, but rather is a real-world contingent relation between a source concept and a target concept (Authors 2007). Metonymies are defeasible; deductive “targets” (conclusions), however, hold by definition if their “source(s)” (premise(s)) are true, and are thus not defeasible.

Inductive reasoning, i.e. the inference from some members of a category to a generalizing conclusion about all members of the category, is defeasible and hence meets one criterion for metonymicity. Indeed, a metonymy such as KLEENEX FOR PAPER TISSUE can be regarded as a reflection of inductive reasoning in natural language. However, most metonymies are not based on inductive inference patterns: e.g., EFFECT FOR CAUSE, PRODUCER FOR PRODUCT, and AUTHOR FOR AUTHOR’S WORK rely on non-inductive inferential mechanisms.

Abduction, an inferential mode first suggested by C. S. Peirce, has also been argued to be a “role model” for metonymic inferencing. Peirce contends that an “abductive suggestion comes to us like a flash. It is an act of *insight* although of extremely fallible insight” (Peirce, in Buchler 1955: 151). Paavola (2005: 147) characterizes abductive inferencing as an “associative connection rather than reasoning”. Furthermore, abductive reasoning is possibly fallible, i.e. defeasible. Like abductive reasoning, metonymic reasoning is spontaneous and intuitive, and relies on associative links among conceptual entities. Nevertheless, it is questionable whether metonymy is comparable to abduction in all respects. Abduction has been called an “Inference to the Best Explanation” (Douven 2011), but the term ‘explanation’ does not square very well with what metonymy is assumed to achieve in communication: metonymy is a conceptual-pragmatic tool for constructing and inferring meanings; its purpose is not to provide explanations for how the world functions.

What remains to be checked is the Gricean and Neo-Gricean notion of (conversational) implicature. Implicatures are defeasible without contradiction and they are felt to be non-redundant if explicitly expressed (Levinson 2000). One might therefore be tempted to adopt a Gricean view and subsume metonymy under the general heading of implicature. However, we view metonymy as conceptually more fundamental than implicature. We provide evidence for the claim that metonymies are biologically and/or culturally pre-established associations among conceptual entities that underlie many (though probably not all) pragmatic inferential patterns (implicatures). A conception of metonymy thus understood also accounts for “primary metaphors” in the sense of Grady (1997) and Lakoff and Johnson (1999), which are reducible to more fundamental experientially-based conceptual metonymies.

Keywords: *abduction, deduction, induction, implicature, metonymic inferencing*

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