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# Commentary on Joe Wofford's "Radical Interpretation of Metaphor in Rhetorical Discourse: A pragmatic account"

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Professor Wofford's paper is an interesting and helpful contribution to the study of metaphor. His self-proclaimed pragmatic test of Donald Davidson's account of metaphor is clear, focused and tightly constructed. Professor Wofford's conclusions regarding the nature of metaphor are intriguing and suggestive.

There are a couple of key moves in Professor Wofford's account of metaphor that I find particularly interesting. Drawing upon the pragmatist tradition, Professor Wofford suggests that to fully understand what metaphors *are* we must look not only (or even primarily) at their cognitive content or logical structure, but at how they function or "what they are used to do." (p. 1) According to Professor Wofford, metaphors are best understood and evaluated, not by seeing whether they are true or false propositionally, but by assessing "their usefulness or success" (p. 4) But what is the measure of "usefulness or success"? Apparently it is not pragmatic, at least not in a strictly Peircean sense, for the pragmatic measure of usefulness or success is whether the proposition in question is true or false in the long run. But Professor Wofford has made it clear that the usefulness of metaphors does not lie in their being true or false. To address this question, Professor Wofford turns to the work of Perelman in declaring the measure of success or usefulness to be *adherence* or, more explicitly, the degree of the audience's adherence to the metaphor's claim. However, we need to be careful here, for metaphors are not purported to make any 'claims' in any logical or cognitive sense. Instead metaphorical claims or utterances (or at least the ones that fall under the particular pattern that Professor Wofford is addressing here) are held to be *rhetorical* rather than *logical* in character. (p. 1) I'm not sure how some rhetoricians would react to this distinction, but we'll take it as it appears to be intended. Metaphor (or at least those that fall under the pattern "A 1zə B")

is a radical (non-complex) rhetorical entity—a verbal stimulus—that works by (1) interjection of doubt, (2) inducement to re-notice, (3) alteration of meaning as a consequence of re-noticing, and (4) establishment of a new belief in the mind of the radical interpreter: a willingness to respond in a new way (p. 9).

Rose, P. (2009). Commentary on Joe Wofford's "Radical Interpretation of Metaphor in Rhetorical Discourse: A pragmatic account." In: J. Ritola (Ed.), *Argument Cultures: Proceedings of OSSA 09*, CD-ROM (pp. 1-3), Windsor, ON: OSSA.

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This brings us to our second interesting point, for while the purported purpose of metaphors is to “achieve adherence,” it is not the cognitive content of metaphors that does the work of achieving adherence. Instead, Professor Wofford suggests that metaphors function to bring about adherence by literally stimulating the listener to notice something that might otherwise have been overlooked. To this end, Professor Wofford situates metaphor within the Peircean account of doubt and belief. Put simply, metaphor is said to function in a way analogous to doubt by blocking or disarming some given belief in a way that stimulates or begins a process of inquiry. The adherence (or belief) that results from the inquiry fulfills the original purpose of the metaphor, whose sole or at least primary function is simply to bring about adherence between utter and audience through the inquiry it stimulates.

It is important to note here that in applying his Peircean model of doubt, Professor Wofford states that “Metaphorical utterances operate as a non-complex stimuli; therefore they cannot possibly possess cognitive content.” (p. 8) Thus, in his “paintbrush” metaphor, exposure to the metaphor is said to bring about a situation of doubt that gives rise to a process of inquiry which results (if resolvable) in a cognitive difference in our understanding of paintbrushes. In this process and in the new understanding (or adherence) that results, the “difference we experience, however, is not in the meanings of the terms of the metaphor but in our *understanding* of how paintbrushes work.” (p. 7) In other words, our understanding of how paint brushes work is said to be importantly distinct and different from the meaning of the terms that are used in the metaphor (including, presumably, the meaning of the term “paintbrush”).

Now this is an interesting interpretation of metaphors, but I’m not yet fully convinced that it works. Firstly, if we accept Professor Wofford’s account, then a metaphor of the pattern discussed could only work, function or stand as a metaphor as long as it stimulates inquiry. Once adherence is attained, an expression such as “a paintbrush is a pump” must henceforth cease to be a metaphor (for it no longer fulfills its doubtful, stimulating function). Since such metaphors exist only insofar as they stimulate inquiry, then many of the expressions that currently count as metaphors (including, presumably, “a paintbrush is a pump”) should not be considered metaphors in a proper sense of the term once a sufficient degree of adherence is attained. This seems problematic at some fundamental level and may hint at a *reductio* of the original claim.

Secondly, in reducing metaphor (in the sense discussed) solely to the role of “verbal stimulus,” Professor Wofford seems to assume, somewhat ironically, the correctness of the very structuralist accounts of meaning and cognitive content against which he is pitted. For Professor Wofford seems to treat the *uses* associated with a term (such as paintbrush) as if use (or what a thing does) was superfluous to meaning. I might suggest, however, that part of the problem with the structuralist account of metaphors may lie as much in the fact that they don’t include *use* (or what a thing does) as an essential, constitutive ingredient of meaning. Professor Wofford’s claim that metaphors have no cognitive content seems only to work on a structuralist interpretation of meaning (where the meaning of “paintbrush” lies in its structuralist definition “as a tool consisting of a bundle of organic or synthetic bristles, held in place by a ferule and mounted on a wooden or plastic handle.” Professor Wofford adds that “Perhaps the dictionary definition would inform us that a paintbrush is used to apply paint to surfaces,” but he adds this as if it is superfluous to the structuralist definition of the term. (p. 6) If we

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proceed from a more pragmatic instead of a structuralist account of meaning, however (where the meaning of a term includes its conceivable uses or functions) then the claim that metaphors have no cognitive content seems exaggerated to say the least.

I like Professor Wofford's suggestion that metaphors may work to stimulate inquiry, or more precisely, that they may compel us to look anew at our situation by disrupting "commonsense assumptions." (p. 8) But as suggestive as it is, there are times when his account strains a little at the seams. I have a suspicion that this is due, at least in part, to the Peircean model of doubt that he employs. For the attempt to cast metaphor in the role of stimulus on the model of doubt ends up draining metaphor of all its content, making any content it may have irrelevant to what it does. This is in effect to reduce metaphor to a mere mechanical cause (which is the essential status and role of doubt in the Peircean system), a non-cognitive, experiential mechanism. There may be something of this in the role that metaphor plays, but to reduce metaphor to this contentless function seems a little over the top.

To help supplement some of Professor Wofford's claims while still preserving his initial insights, I want to suggest another Peircean model that might prove to be more fruitful, or at least worthy of further investigation in understanding the role and place of metaphor, namely, the forms of argumentation as such. In particular, I want to suggest that, rather than serving as mere stimulus following the model of doubt, metaphors might be better viewed as an early, almost primitive form of *abduction*, that is, an attempt to gain new understanding about the world by framing it (or at least certain relations within it) in a new, suggestive and hence stimulating light. Viewed as a kind of abduction or primitive hypothesis, metaphor might stand as a kind of guess or undeveloped insight into the nature of things that would indeed prompt us to rethink our assumptions and 're-notice' our "cumulative experience of the world," but in and through its cognitive content instead of removed from it. Viewing metaphor as a form of abduction would satisfy Professor Wofford's demand that it prompt us to, "at least tentatively, hold the truthfulness-in-the-situation of her interlocutor." Viewing metaphors abductively as something that might be pregnant with undeveloped meanings and understandings would also explain how and why metaphors might prompt or stimulate someone to further investigate and test (using the methods of deductive implication and inductive examination against the known facts) the kind of claim being made. An abductive account of metaphor might also go a long way in accounting for failed metaphors, those which appear to be more meaningful and fruitful than they actually are. Viewing metaphor on the Peircean model of abduction might, in other words, satisfy all the things that Professor Wofford wants to say about metaphors while avoiding some of the seemingly problematic implications of his stimulus/doubt model.

Of course the claims and suggestions I am making here would themselves need to be developed and tested, but that is perfectly consistent with Professor Wofford's lovely claim that "argument is less concerned with winning and more concerned with winning over." (p. 5) Such testing is, as Professor Wofford's work here attests, an essential aspect of any attempt to achieve a healthy adherence.

[Link to paper](#)