# Metaphor, hyperbole and simile: A pragmatic approach

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*Abstract*

*According to recent work on lexical pragmatics within the relevance-theoretic framework, grasping the intended meaning of a metaphorically used word requires a process of adjusting the linguistically encoded concept to derive an ad hoc concept whose denotation is broader than that of the lexical concept. Metaphorical uses are claimed to be one kind of loose use of language, on a continuum with approximations, hyperboles and other kinds of meaning extension. The question addressed in this paper is whether this account fully captures the processes involved in understanding metaphors and the kinds of cognitive effects they have. We tackle this question by examining the similarities and differences between metaphors and hyperboles and between metaphors and similes. The upshot of our analyses is two proposals, both requiring further investigation: (a) that a distinction should be drawn between the kind of ad hoc concepts derived for hyperbolic and other loose uses, on the one hand, and metaphorical uses, on the other, and (b) that the understanding of some metaphorical uses, in particular extended and/or novel creative cases, is achieved by a different mode of processing altogether, one which gives much greater weight to the literal meaning.*

*Keywords*
*metaphor, simile, hyperbole, relevance theory, loose use, ad hoc concept, literal meaning*

## 1.    Introduction

The interpretation of metaphorically used language is thoroughly context-dependent: for all but the most conventionalised cases of metaphor, pragmatic inference is essential in order to derive the speaker's intended meaning. This is evident for even such a simple and relatively familiar type of example as the following (where, let us assume, the person referred to is not in fact of royal lineage):

(1)    *My younger brother is a prince.*

A speaker who utters this sentence may intend to convey any of the following distinct assessments of her brother: (a) that he has a noble character and is destined for greatness, (b) that he is privileged, spoiled and demanding, (c) that he is good-looking, charming and popular. Which, if any, of these interpretations the speaker intends can only be resolved by the particularities of the context of utterance and it is quite likely that, in appropriate conversational settings, the utterance could have still other interpretations. This point looks inescapable whatever theoretical position one takes on metaphor, from the view that metaphor is first and foremost a matter of conceptualisation rather than of language, to the view that metaphor is primarily a communicative phenomenon arising from speakers' attempts to express their thoughts and feelings in language, through combination views which maintain that some metaphors are conceptual while others arise in discourse.[1]

   In this paper, we look at metaphor as a pragmatic phenomenon, as a matter of language *use*, of speaker/author meaning, which requires hearers/readers to employ cognitive interpretive capacities that go well beyond the mere decoding of the linguistically given meaning. Our starting point is recent work on lexical pragmatics within the relevance-theoretic approach to interpretation (Carston 1997, 2002; Sperber and Wilson 1998, 2008; Wilson and Carston 2006, 2007, 2008). The aim of this work is to explain how words can be used to communicate distinct (albeit related) meanings in different contexts. The metaphorical use of words is taken to be simply one kind of loose use of lexically encoded concepts, on a continuum with approximations, category exten-

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1.    Advocates of the first view, who fall under the banner of 'cognitive linguistics', include Lakoff and Johnson (1980), Lakoff and Turner (1989), Lakoff (1993), and Gibbs (1998). Supporters of the second view include relevance theorists (for instance, Carston 2002, forthcoming/2012; Wilson 2003, 2010; Sperber and Wilson 1995, 2008), some contextualist philosophers of language (e.g. Recanati 2004), and some psychologists of language (see, for instance, Glucksberg and Keysar 1990, 1993; Glucksberg 2001). A combination view is presented by Evans (2010, In press), who builds on Grady's (1999) distinction between correlation metaphors and resemblance metaphors.

sions and hyperbolic uses. According to this account, there is nothing special or distinctive about metaphorical uses—like loose uses generally, they involve pragmatic adjustment of lexically encoded meaning and result in an ad hoc (occasion-specific) sense or concept whose denotation is broader than that of the lexically encoded concept. Metaphorical uses may involve more radical broadening of encoded meaning than other loose uses, but the comprehension process employs the same pragmatic mechanisms and representation types. In particular, it is claimed that there is no clear cut-off point between hyperbolic and metaphorical uses of a word, e.g. *John is a saint* could be hyperbolic or metaphorical or both (see, in particular, Sperber and Wilson 2008).

Although we endorse much of this view, the worry is that it does not do full justice to the expressive power or the precision of many metaphors, qualities which distinguish them from (non-metaphoric) hyperboles and other loose uses of language. The goal of this paper, then, is to begin investigating more closely the pragmatics of metaphor understanding by examining a number of respects in which metaphors differ from the apparently closely related tropes, hyperboles and similes. While continuing to work within the relevance-theoretic framework (RT), we will argue that these differences support the development of a more fine-grained account of metaphorical language use. This account, which is still only at an early stage here, has two main parts: (1) A refinement of the ad hoc concept account of metaphor which makes a distinction between the concepts derived from metaphorical uses and those derived from (merely) hyperbolic uses; (2) An account of an altogether distinct process of metaphorical interpretation, one which does not involve ad hoc concept construction and gives much greater weight to the literal meaning of metaphorically used language. We hope thereby to give some theoretical substance to the strong intuition that metaphor is in some sense special, a distinctive use of language, not wholly reducible to any other kind of use. Nevertheless, we will not be advocating any special mechanism(s) or principle(s) dedicated solely to the understanding of metaphor, but will argue that metaphor comprehension recruits cognitive processes and mechanisms whose existence is independently motivated (for other kinds of utterance interpretation) although they may be combined in a way that is unique to the interpretive demands made by metaphor.

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, we sketch the standard RT lexical pragmatic account of metaphor comprehension and some of the issues it raises. Sections 3 and 4 examine the relations between hyperbole and metaphor, and simile and metaphor, respectively. In Section 5, we present the hypothesis that a second cognitive route to comprehension is triggered by some cases of metaphor, in particular, extended metaphors. This alternative processing mode impacts on the relation between metaphor and simile understanding, and it also raises a question about how metaphors are related to yet another

trope: allegory. We conclude with some brief thoughts on these age-old cate-
gorisations of different kinds of language use.[2]

## 2.   Metaphors, loose use and ad hoc concept formation

It is widely recognised that word meanings are pragmatically modulated in
context, adjusted so as to provide a meaning that contributes to the content
which can be plausibly attributed to the speaker on that occasion of use.
According to the account of how this process works developed within the RT
approach to utterance interpretation, these occasion-specific word meanings
are known as ad hoc concepts, as distinct from the concepts which constitute
the encoded or standing meaning of words (lexical concepts). They may be
narrower than the lexically-encoded concept on which they are based, e.g. *He's
upset*, where the concept communicated by *upset* in different contexts could
entail distinct kinds and degrees of upsetness, or broader, e.g. *Your endless
nagging is unbearable*, where both *endless* and *unbearable* are very likely to
be loose uses of the lexical meanings, roughly paraphrasable as 'very frequent'
and 'hard to bear', respectively.

On the standard RT account of metaphorical uses, they are cases of loose use
(hence broadening), radical ones certainly, but not essentially different from
any of the other kinds of loose use, including approximations (e.g. *spheres*
and *cubes* in (2a)), hyperboles (e.g. *starving* in (2b)), nominal extensions (e.g.
*xerox* in (2c)) and other cases of superordinate category formation (e.g. *black*
in (2d), which might mean 'fashionable colour for women's evening wear'):

(2)   a.   *She was making Christmas decorations in two shapes: spheres and
            cubes.*
      b.   *Let's go eat—I'm starving.*
      c.   *Could you xerox 50 handouts, please.*
      d.   *Brown is the new black.*

The claim is that there is a continuum from the literal use of a word through
various degrees and kinds of loose use, including metaphorical use, each of
which results in a concept whose denotation is broader than that of the concept

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lexically encoded by the word.[3] Consider the uses of the word *marathon* in the following examples:

(3)   a.   *Mary ran a* marathon *to raise money for charity*.
      b.   *My evening jog with Bill turned into a* marathon.
      c.   *Writing a thesis was a* marathon *Jane didn't want to repeat*.
      d.   *Hart may have won the hundred-yard dash to Georgia but Mondale has what it takes to win the* marathon *to California*.

An utterance of the sentence in (3a) might be intended literally (Mary ran 26 miles and 385 yards) but it might equally well be an approximation, that is, the run was near enough to official marathon length for the differences to be inconsequential in the context: it was a long tough race, required a high level of physical fitness, was a notable achievement on Mary's part, raised an appreciable amount of money, etc. While an utterance of (3b) could also be meant literally or approximately, the kind of context that comes most readily to mind is one in which the word *marathon* would be understood as hyperbolic: the run was longer and harder than the speaker expected or wanted but was nowhere near marathon length. Moving to (3c) and (3d), we clearly have cases of metaphorical use of the word *marathon*, in which it is psychological properties that are at issue: the activities of writing a thesis and of campaigning for election require a high level of commitment and determination, sustained mental effort and, very likely, incur a range of costs at the personal, familial and social levels.

According to the RT account, the comprehension process works in the same way in every case. The lexically encoded concept MARATHON gives immediate access to a set of encyclopaedic assumptions about marathons, including what sort of an event they are and their demands and effects on those who participate in them. This information is variably accessible (activated) and the degree of accessibility of specific items of information relative to others differs greatly from one utterance to the next, being sensitive both to other concepts encoded in the sentence uttered and to the wider discourse context. In the case of (3b), the discussion of 'an evening jog with Bill' (perhaps together with the hearer's knowledge of the speaker's expectations about the jog and of her state of tiredness after it) is likely to make highly accessible the information that marathons

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3.   There is a presupposition here that words (most of them anyway) encode concepts. This is indeed assumed on the standard RT account of lexical pragmatics (see, e.g. Sperber and Wilson 1998, 2008; Wilson 2003; Wilson and Carston 2006, 2007, 2008). However, there are several alternative (non-conceptual) views about the nature of encoded word meanings (Carston 2002, 2010a; Bosch 2007; Pietroski 2008). Naturally, if it turns out that lexically encoded information does not consist of full-fledged concepts, various changes will be required to the existing lexical pragmatic account of how intended word meanings are inferred in context, but such alterations should not affect the main points in this paper.

are long, physically demanding, and very tiring, while assumptions about literal marathons (26 miles long, requiring a lot of preparatory training, events organised by designated authorities, etc.) would be low in accessibility. In (3c), where the topic is thesis writing, it is assumptions about the determination, self-discipline and psychological stamina that marathons require which would be most accessible.

Following the communicative principle of relevance, hearers have more or less specific expectations concerning the relevance of any given utterance, that is, they have expectations concerning the quantity and kind of implications it has and they are licensed to pursue a path of least effort in seeking an interpretation that meets those expectations.[4] What that means for the current discussion is that they derive implications by taking as premises those encyclopaedic assumptions associated with the concept MARATHON that are most accessible to them. So for (3b), the easiest implications to derive include that the speaker found the evening jog with Bill long and hard, that it demanded a lot of effort from her, that she is exhausted from it, etc. For (3c), the most readily derived implications concern the psychological effort and willpower that Jane had to summon in order to write a thesis and the toll it took on her as a social-emotional being. In each of these cases, then, the concept communicated by the word *marathon* is adjusted in different ways so as to license the relevant implications and the upshot is ad hoc concepts, MARATHON*, MARATHON**, etc.,[5] each of which is a distinct broadening of the encoded concept MARATHON.[6] Schematically, the representational levels involved are as follows:

(4)    Sentence uttered:    *Writing a PhD thesis was a marathon*.
       Decoded content:    [X WRITE A PHD THESIS] WAS A MARATHON
       Communicated content:
       Explicature:    [S WRITE A PHD THESIS] WAS A MARATHON*
       Implicatures:    S FOUND WRITING A PHD THESIS A LONG, HARD PROCESS;

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4.   We do not intend or pretend to present here the full relevance-theoretic story about utterance interpretation. For a full and detailed account of the cognitive and communicative principles of relevance, the comprehension procedure that follows from them and their application to cases of word meaning modulation, including cases of metaphorical use, see Wilson and Sperber (2002) and Wilson and Carston (2006, 2007, 2008).

5.   We follow the established notational convention of using small capitals to represent concepts and conceptual representations (as distinct from linguistic forms) and of marking with one or more asterisks those concepts that have been pragmatically inferred (as distinct from those that are lexically encoded).

6.   Throughout the RT work on lexical pragmatics to date, what concept broadening (and concept narrowing) is taken to mean is that the *denotation* of the ad hoc concept is broader/more inclusive (or narrower/less inclusive) than that of the lexical concept from which it was derived. Whether this extensional semantic perspective is fully adequate is open to question (see Textor and Allott forthcoming).

> Completing it took a great deal of determination and mental effort;
> S had to sacrifice a normal emotional and social life in order to do it;
> etc.

When compared with other accounts of metaphorical language use, what is most striking about this one is how deflationary it is. There is no flouting of conversational norms (compare Grice 1975), no metaphor-specific semantic operator (compare Stern 2000), no underlying conceptual metaphor schemas (compare Lakoff 1993), no domain-mapping operations (compare Lakoff 1993; Gentner and Bowdle 2008). Rather, the processes for understanding metaphorical uses are exactly the same as those deployed for all other word uses, that is, they are relevance-seeking processes of forming and testing interpretive hypotheses in their order of accessibility, taking as premises the most highly activated items of encyclopaedic information, deriving implications from them, and stopping once expectations of relevance are satisfied. The only difference between uses designated as 'literal', 'hyperbolic' or 'metaphorical' is, as discussed above for the examples in (3), the particular encyclopaedic assumptions employed in the process of inferring implications, and that is entirely a matter of, first, their accessibility and, second, their efficacy in yielding the expected quantity and kind of implications.

In the next section, we will examine the following direct consequence of this deflationary account: there is no cut-off point or discontinuity between hyperboles and metaphors but rather a continuum of cases, some of which are indeterminate with regard to their status as hyperboles or metaphors.

## 3. Metaphors and hyperboles

There has long been a robust intuition that metaphorical language is special, distinct from other loose and/or figurative uses of language. If the standard RT view of metaphor is right, this folk intuition does not correspond to any theoretical or empirical distinction.

On the face of it, though, there do appear to be discontinuities of a certain sort between the ad hoc concepts derived for metaphorical uses and those derived for the other cases of loose use. Looking back to the uses of *marathon* in (3), the concepts communicated in all cases except for the metaphorical use are concerned with physical movement (running) of a human body over a piece of physical ground. In the metaphorical case, we switch to quite different activities and a focus on the psychological effort they require. A similar point holds for the same range of loose uses of *make sick* in utterances of the sentence, *That film made me sick*: taken literally, approximately or hyperbolically, the

concept communicated concerns degrees of negative physical reaction (from vomiting to nauseous feelings to mere discomfort in the gut), while its metaphorical use expresses a negative psychological reaction. This well-recognised discontinuity, which arises for the range of loose uses of many terms (consider, for example, *raw, flat, dance, fly, put to sleep, cut to the bone*), is what motivates the claim that there are basic conceptual metaphors of the sort <PSYCHOLOGICAL STATES ARE PHYSICAL STATES>, <THE MIND IS THE BODY> (Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

There is a related kind of discontinuity between hyperbolic and other loose uses of *boiling*, on the one hand, and the metaphorical use, on the other, in the following example:

(5)    *The water is boiling.*

On the various loose, including hyperbolic, uses of this sentence, the ad hoc concepts BOILING\*, BOILING\*\*, etc., that are constructed are concerned with the temperature of the water (on the hyperbolic use, although it is not taken to be at boiling-point, it is understood to be hot, in fact, hotter than the speaker expected or desired). On the metaphorical use, by contrast, the content communicated concerns the appearance of the water, its sensory perceptible properties (bubbling, moving about in an agitated fashion, emitting steam or vapour), and also perhaps how it makes the speaker feel (impressed, worried, even scared), supposing, for instance, the utterance is made during a storm at sea. The temperature of the water may be entirely irrelevant. (This example, with these interpretations, is discussed at length in Wilson and Carston (2007), but this difference between the metaphorical use and the others is not remarked on there.) In this case, there is not a shift from the physical to the psychological, but like the previous cases, the metaphorical interpretation moves away from the central domain of the encoded concept (here, temperature). And when the metaphorically used predicate is applied to a human being, as in *John is boiling (with rage),* there is again a move from physical temperature to an agitated psychological state. John's bodily temperature may also be raised (though still far from literal boiling point) but this is caused by his psychological state of 'boiling'.[7]

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7.  What characterises the difference between the two kinds of discontinuity is that, in the first sort of case, a word is being applied to something that cannot have the property it literally encodes (writing a thesis cannot be a literal marathon, John cannot be a literal bulldozer, etc.), while, in the second sort of case, a word is being applied to something that can have the literally encoded property (water can literally boil), so the metaphorical shift is from an essential property to a contingent property (of 'boiling'). A speculative thought on what unifies the kinds of properties that are communicated metaphorically is that, one way or another, they are always concerned with human phenomenal experience and/or subjective impressions.

One way of construing these interpretive discontinuities between hyperbolic and metaphorical uses of words is in terms of a difference in their relation to the literal word meaning: whereas the literal/hyperbolic distinction is an entirely quantitative matter, the literal/metaphorical distinction is qualitative. So while it seems right to place hyperbole on a continuum with approximations and other loose uses, metaphor is not sufficiently characterised by the claim that it too is just another case of loose use, albeit a radical one. We will shortly suggest a more differentiated account of metaphor.

However, in apparent support of the hyperbole-metaphor continuum view, as Sperber and Wilson 2008: 94) point out, it is often unclear whether a particular word use is hyperbolic or metaphoric. Consider the following:

(6)  a.  *You are a saint*.
     b.  *You're a psychopath*.

Suppose (6a) is uttered appreciatively to someone who has done something kind and helpful for the speaker. On the one hand, this may be classified as metaphorical in that what defines the category of actual saints is that they have been canonised by established clerical authorities and this patently does not apply to the addressee of the utterance (there is a domain shift comparable to the one from ordinary person to member of a royal family, as in example (1)). On the other hand, it may be classified as hyperbolic in as much as the person's kindness, although considerable, is unlikely to have been of the self-sacrificial sort associated with saints. The same points hold for an utterance of (6b) in a context where the speaker patently does not believe that the addressee, her close friend let us suppose, is really a psychopath, but wants to express her dismay at some recent bad behaviour of his. This is certainly a hyperbolic use, then, but perhaps it is also metaphorical in that it marks a shift from psychologically normal human beings to those with a particular clinically defined disorder.

These cases clearly resist easy classification as exclusively metaphorical or hyperbolic; instead, it seems most plausible simply to say that they are both. A great many conversational metaphors seem to be simultaneously hyperbolic in this way, especially in their frequent use as devices for blaming/insulting or praising/complimenting:[8]

(7)  a.  *X is a pig/a bulldozer/a boot-licking lapdog/a toe-rag/pond-slime . . .*
     b.  *X is a saint/an angel/a shining star/the sun/pure gold/a diamond . . .*

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8.  See Camp (forthcoming) for a discussion of why metaphors make good insults. They seem to be equally good for the opposite purpose—of expressing strong positive feelings about or towards someone. A discussion of what makes this so is beyond the scope of this paper, but it may be that it lies with our tendency to use language metaphorically when we want to express sensations and feelings, that is, subjective responses to the world rather than objective facts.

No doubt, quite often, these metaphoric uses are registered as hyperbolic, and may occasion such remarks as *You're exaggerating*, or *Don't overdo it, he's not that bad/great*. These, then, are hyperbolic metaphorical uses.

These sorts of cases, however, are compatible with the existence of a significant discontinuity between hyperbole and metaphor. Notice that similes (figurative comparisons) may also be hyperbolic. Any of the similes corresponding to the metaphors just given (*X is* like *a boot-licking lapdog* or *X is* like *a shining star*) might be cases of hyperbolic use, and the hyperbolic quality of some similes is even more evident when the intended feature of resemblance is made explicit:

(8)   a.   *She's as virtuous as a saint*.
      b.   *He has the charisma of a traffic cone*.
      c.   *Her brain is the size of a pea*.
      d.   *They ran like greased lightning*.
      e.   *Lionel stubbed his big toe. The flap of skin opened like a cupboard door*.

(Maurice Gee: *Access Road*, p. 17)

As will be discussed more fully in the next section, similes do not involve loose use (hence broadening) of the vehicle term (*saint, traffic cone, greased lightening*, etc.), so are not to be located somewhere along the loose use continuum. What is significant about this in the current context is that hyperbole, which is a loose use, is co-occurring with a figurative use that is usually thought of as closely related to metaphor, without them being uses on a continuum. Instead, the choice of simile vehicle appears to be what accounts for the presence of hyperbole: it is the loosening of an encyclopaedic property of the literal encoded concept that produces the hyperbolic quality of the utterance. This is especially clear when that property is given explicitly, so, for example, in (8e) the property of opening which cupboard doors have is the point of the comparison and that particular kind of opening is understood as hyperbolic when applied to the flap of skin on Lionel's toe. In deriving the intended implications of the simile, the hearer/reader would access those that can plausibly apply to a piece of skin cut open on a person's toe and either would not access or would reject implications specific to large swinging objects such as cupboard doors.

Just as there are hyperbolic similes without there being any loose use continuum between hyperboles and similes, so, we suggest, there are hyperbolic metaphors without this indicating that there is a continuum between hyperboles and metaphors (the only difference between them being in the degree and/or direction of loosening). In short, the co-occurrence of these figures does not weigh in favour of a hyperbole-metaphor continuum.

Our hypothesis about what accounts for the interpretive discontinuities between hyperboles and metaphors that we observed above is that while a loose

use (concept broadening) story is sufficient for both the approximation and hyperbole cases, metaphorical use inevitably involves *concept narrowing* as well as broadening. So while the denotation of the ad hoc concept communicated by a hyperbolic use is simply more inclusive than that of the original lexical concept, the denotation of the ad hoc concept derived on a metaphorical use either merely overlaps with the denotation of the encoded concept or is entirely disjoint from it (see Figure 1 below, where the circles represent the denotations of the concepts).[9]



| (a) | C* | (b) | | (c) | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
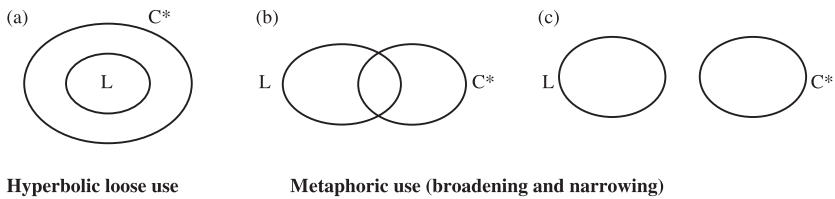
**Hyperbolic loose use**          **Metaphoric use (broadening and narrowing)**

**L** = linguistically encoded concept;  **C\*** = pragmatically-derived concept

Figure 1.   *Lexical concept adjustments (hyperbole and metaphor)*

The hypothesis seems to fit the examples considered so far. The ad hoc concept derived for the metaphorical use of *boiling* includes in its denotation instances of boiling water and instances of water that is not boiling, provided that they all have a certain set of visible, audible and experiential properties (thus it is a broadening of the encoded concept BOILING WATER) and it excludes instances of water that do not have these sensory qualities, so any cases of actual boiling water which lack them (perhaps those at very high altitudes) are excluded (hence it is also a narrowing). The ad hoc concept MARATHON* derived in the process of understanding the thesis-writing example in (3c) denotes instances of activities that have a particular property, roughly paraphrasable as 'long, psychologically demanding and emotionally exhausting'. This would include some instances of thesis-writing, some instances of running an election campaign, some human relationships, and many actual marathons, but not those run

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9.  The possibility of disjoint denotations may only arise over time after many occurrences of a particular metaphoric use of a word, so that eventually a distinct metaphoric sense for the word arises. A set of examples of this sort may be the so-called double function adjectives, e.g. *cold, warm, soft, hard, sharp, blunt, smooth, rough*, etc. for which there seems to be both an established physical sense and a non-overlapping psychological sense (derived by broadening the physical sense so as to include psychological instances and progressive narrowings from which the physical instances are ultimately excluded). For a discussion of these cases, see Asch (1958), and Wilson and Carston (2006, 2008).

by super-fit athletes who perform marathons in a professional capacity (hence it is a narrowing as well as a broadening).

Consider the following set of examples, all of which attribute to Susan a high degree of kindness or virtue:

(9)   a.   *Susan is extraordinarily kind.*
      b.   *Susan is kind beyond belief.*
      c.   *Susan is the kindest person in the world.*
      d.   *Susan is a saint.*
      e.   *Susan is another Mother Teresa.*
      f.   *Susan is an angel.*

Appropriately contextualised, these could all be understood as hyperbolic, that is, as exaggerated ways of expressing how kind Susan is. However, there is a distinction between (9a)–(9c) and (9d)–(9f): the former are simply hyperbolic uses while the latter are hyperbolic metaphorical uses. Note that while the concept KIND is a component of the linguistically encoded meaning of the sentences in (9a)–(9c) and the proposition SUSAN IS KIND is a logical implication in each instance, this is not the case for (9d)–(9f), where the concept KIND is neither encoded nor a logical or defining component, but merely an associated encyclopaedic property of SAINT, MOTHER TERESA, ANGEL, respectively. This is the key difference between the two kinds of hyperbole and it mirrors the hyperbole/metaphor discontinuity noted above in the discussion of the *marathon* and *boiling* examples. Just as the hyperbolic uses of *marathon* and *boiling* involved relaxing the concept they encode (the length of the episode of running, the degree of heat), so the ordinary hyperboles in (9a)–(9c) require a relaxing or weakening of the degree of kindness literally encoded—we understand that Susan is very kind. The comprehension of (9d)–(9f), on the other hand, is rather different: the property that defines the concept in each case (having been canonised, the individuality of Mother Teresa, being supernatural/ethereal/celestial) is dropped and the property that is picked out by the pragmatically inferred ad hoc concept, SAINT*, MOTHER TERESA*, ANGEL*, is a specific quality of kindness or goodness associated with saints, with Mother Teresa, with angels, respectively. It is this property that is felt to be hyperbolic (Susan is very kind but not *that* kind). So while the first three examples are hyperbolic uses of a literal encoded concept, the latter three are metaphorical uses whose derived sense (the ad hoc concept) is hyperbolic.[10] Again, the ad hoc concept formed in

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10.   An interesting question is whether the opposite phenomenon is possible, that is, metaphorical uses of hyperboles. They seem much harder to come by, but the following may fit the bill. Suppose that, after a day on which it has first rained heavily, then been bright and sunny, and finally snowed, someone says *Today we had four seasons in one day*—by her hyperbolic use of the phrase *four seasons in one day*, she communicates that the day's weather was remark-

these metaphorical cases is not only broadened but also narrowed so that it excludes some of what the lexical concept denotes: SAINT\* would not include in its denotation cruel saints like the catholic saint Thomas More, who tortured heretics; ANGEL\* would exclude avenging angels and fallen angels. The MOTHER TERESA\* concept is an exception (it does not exclude Mother Teresa), but this is because the lexically encoded concept denotes an individual and the only way that that individual could be excluded from the denotation of a derived concept based on one of the properties associated with her would be if she did not in fact have this property.

We hypothesise, then, that while both metaphor and hyperbole understanding require concept broadening, only metaphorical uses also require concept narrowing. This difference would explain the discontinuities discussed here between metaphors and hyperboles—the sorts of domain shifts exhibited in the metaphorical cases correspond to a combined broadening and narrowing of the encoded concept's denotation. Of course, more argument is needed to support this hypothesis, but if it is correct, it would be a nice development within the RT account of lexical pragmatics, separating out a distinct natural class of cases within it.

One final observation: metaphors are not intrinsically or necessarily hyperbolic. This point is worth making here (and links to the treatment of metaphor we will suggest in Section 5) because it might seem to follow from the RT claim that there is a continuum of loose uses with metaphors at the farthest extreme that they are inevitably hyperbolic. Consider the following examples (the first two taken from recent novels):

(10)   a.   *A man's heart was a deep pocket he might turn out and be amazed at what he found there.*

(Kate Grenville: *The Secret River*, p. 302)

   b.   *Depression, in Karla's experience, was a dull, inert thing—a toad that squatted wetly on your head until it finally gathered the energy to slither off.*

(Zoë Heller: *The Believers*, p. 263)

   c.   *The fog comes*
*on little cat feet.*
*It sits looking*
*Over harbor and city*

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ably changeable. Note, however, that it is probably impossible for this phrase to be used strictly literally (except perhaps in reference to some planet other than ours). This inherently hyperbolic phrase can then be employed metaphorically: *Cheryl is so moody—I don't think I can take much more of her. She's four seasons in one day.* (Compare Stern (2000: 237) on the impossibility of metaphorical hyperboles.)

> *On silent haunches*
> *And then moves on*.

(Carl Sandburg: *Fog*)

These seem to be thoughtful, considered attempts to find a way of communicating or intimating feelings, impressions or apprehensions that cannot be easily expressed, that are virtually ineffable, and, in so far as they succeed, the meaning that is recovered is rather precise and accurate (not hyperbolic). These examples are literary metaphors, more extended and developed than is typical in rapid face-to-face conversational speech, and it is not clear whether the sort of accuracy they exemplify carries over to more spontaneous spoken cases of metaphor (an extensive corpus study would help here). This talk of literary versus conversational metaphors might seem to imply that there are two importantly distinct types of metaphor and indeed metaphors from the two sources (speech and literature) are often studied separately and given different analyses. In Section 5, we will suggest that there is a distinction to be made, but it is not a distinction between two types of metaphor (the conversational and the literary); rather, it corresponds to two ways in which different metaphors (conversational *or* literary) may be processed, depending on the cognitive demands they make on the hearer/reader.

## 4.   Metaphors and similes

In this section, we consider another consequence of the RT lexical pragmatic account of metaphorical uses of words, which is the rather different account of the corresponding similes that it appears to entail. On the face of it, simple metaphors of the 'X is a Y' sort and their simile counterparts 'X is like a Y' seem to convey very similar messages and in very similar ways. So both an utterance of *Mr Smith is a mouse* and of *Mr Smith is like a mouse* could imply that Mr Smith is timid, quiet, self-effacing and scurries about in the background, and these implications seem to be derived by a process of comparison, that is, of looking for relevant ways in which a man could resemble a mouse. On the RT account, however, the explicatures of the two utterances would be importantly different:

(11)   Explicature of *Mr Smith is a mouse*: MR SMITH$_X$ IS A MOUSE*
      Explicature of *Mr Smith is like a mouse*: MR SMITH$_X$ IS LIKE A MOUSE

In the simile case, it is the lexically encoded concept that occurs in the explicature. It cannot be the ad hoc concept MOUSE* because Mr Smith is not *like* that category of thing, he is a member of that category and so is *like* others members of it, including some actual mice. It seems too that the typical implications of both of these utterances (that he is timid, quiet, etc.) may well be derived

differently in the two cases (though clarity about this awaits a full account of simile understanding within the RT framework): in the metaphor case, the implications are logically implied by the ad hoc concept, while in the simile case they are derived by a process of considering encyclopaedic assumptions about mice and accepting as implicated those that relevantly apply to Mr Smith.

Before assessing this consequence of the RT account of metaphor, let's first briefly consider the phenomenon of similes from a theory-free perspective. Similes come in many forms. Consider the following (which are far from exhausting the full range of possibilities):

(12)  a.  *Nina is like a swan.*
      b.  *Nina moves like a swan.*
      c.  *Nina moves as smoothly and elegantly as a swan.*
      d.  *Nina moves more smoothly and elegantly than a swan.*
      e.  *He set up a terrible hollering as if the devil itself was plucking out his eyes.*
      f.  *The retirement of Yves St. Laurent is to fashion as the breakup of the Beatles was to the pop music scene.*

(adapted from Israel et al. 2004: 125)

      g.  *It is Spring, moonless night in the small town, starless and bible-black, . . .*[11]

(Dylan Thomas: *Under Milk Wood*, line 1)

On the face of it, these all seem to be comparison statements and indeed each of these forms can be used to make what seem to be perfectly literal comparisons (hence not similes):

(13)  a.  *Nina is like an old woman.*
      b.  *Nina moves like an old woman.*
      c.  *Nina is as frail as an old woman.*
      d.  *Nina moves more slowly than an old woman.*
      e.  *He shouted and cried as if he had been fatally wounded.*
      f.  *Don's redundancy is for his wife as Mike's jail sentence was for his mother.*
      g.  *Max's old dog is crow-black—I can hardly see him in the dark.*

An interesting question is what makes a comparison expression a simile or, equivalently, what distinguishes literal comparison statements from non-literal or figurative ones (i.e. similes). Just as any sharp distinction between literal and

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11.  Thanks to Diane Blakemore for pointing out this kind of example, which has no overt marker of comparison (and can thus be thought of as a truly elliptical simile). This is a productive adjectival form: consider *star-bright, stone-cold, bone-dry, sloe-eyed* and *honey-voiced*.

non-literal uses of language quite generally has been eroded in recent years, we might expect there to be no sharp distinction in the case of comparison statements either, even though reasonably clear examples of each kind are not hard to find. Similes deserve intensive study in their own right, but because our interest in them here is confined to their bearing on metaphors, we leave such simile-specific questions for another time.[12]

Just about every conceivable relationship between metaphors and corresponding similes has been held at some time. In accordance with the intuition mentioned at the beginning of this section, they have been widely assumed to be essentially the same from an interpretive and processing point of view. On one version of this position, metaphors are seen as implicit, abbreviated or elliptical similes, so that an account of metaphor interpretation involves recovering the corresponding simile and then carrying out whatever interpretive processes are required for simile comprehension (Fogelin 1988; Miller 1993; Ortony 1993). On a second version, it is metaphor that is basic and similes are simply hedged metaphors so are processed and understood in the same way as metaphors (Glucksberg and Keysar 1990, 1993; Tirrell 1991; Stern 2000). For Glucksberg and Keysar, metaphors are categorisations (class-inclusion statements) and similes are too, albeit implicitly: "Metaphors are not understood by transforming them into similes. Instead, they are intended as class-inclusion statements and are understood as such. When metaphors are expressed as comparisons (i.e. as similes) then they are interpreted as implicit category statements, rather than the other way around." (Glucksberg and Keysar 1990: 16).[13]

A point bearing on both of these attempts to equate metaphors and their corresponding similes is that, once we move away from the simple 'X is Y', 'X is like Y' forms, it seems that not every metaphor form has a corresponding simile form, nor every simile form a corresponding metaphor form:

(14)   a.   *The winter wind gently lifted the lacy blanket.* [where the 'lacy blanket' is a light layer of snow on the ground]

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12.   For ideas on how to distinguish similes (figurative comparisons) from literal comparisons, see Fogelin (1988), Tirrell (1991), Glucksberg et al. (1997), Israel et al. (2004). For discussion of similes as interesting figures with their own unique properties, see Israel et al. (2004), O'Donoghue (2009).
13.   To avoid possible confusion, it is worth noting that the term 'comparison' is being used in two distinct ways throughout the literature: as characterising a linguistic form (e.g. 'X is like a Y') and as characterising an interpretive process. Thus the view that metaphor (the categorical *form*) is more basic than simile (the comparison *form*) may be combined with the view that the interpretive process is one of categorisation (as Glucksberg and Keysar hold (1990, 1993)) or with the view that interpretation is a matter of comparison. A further complication arises if the process of categorising itself involves a sub-process of comparison (of the referents of the metaphor/simile topic and vehicle), as seems quite likely.

b. *The buds of hope and love called out by a day or two of sunshine are frozen again and again until the tree is killed.*
(from Harriet Beecher Stowe: *The True Story of Lady Byron's Life*, cited by Tirrell [1989: 19])
c. *Mary is more fearsome than an avenging angel.*
d. *The windshield wipers made a great clatter like two idiots clapping in church.*
(from Flannery O'Connor: *Wise Blood*, cited by Israel et al. [2004: 129])

The metaphorical forms in (14a)–(14b) do not seem to have any counterparts in simile form and this is true of many other cases, including all referential uses of metaphor (e.g. *That slimy little toad stole my wallet, Let's avoid the wilting violet if at all possible*). The simile forms in (14c)–(14d) do not seem to have categorical counterparts and nor do several of the examples in (12), including the 'bible-black' case. This looks like bad news for theories that seek to explain metaphors in terms of similes or vice versa: at best such theories can apply to only a subset of cases, making it necessary to find some other explanation for the remaining cases, an unsatisfactory situation given that we are clearly dealing with a single phenomenon.[14] (For further discussion of problems for reductive treatments of metaphor and simile, see Tirrell 1991; Israel et al. 2004.)

So we come to those accounts (which include RT), according to which metaphors and (apparently) corresponding similes work differently. There is a growing body of experimental work in psychology in support of this position (see, for instance, Glucksberg and Haught 2006; Roncero et al. forthcoming). We will focus on Glucksberg and Haught's work here because their analysis of metaphors and corresponding similes is very similar to the RT lexical pragmatic view: "The different forms of a metaphor—the comparison and categorical forms—have different referents. In comparison form, the metaphor vehicle refers to the literal concept . . . In categorical form [it] refers to an abstract (metaphorical) category." Glucksberg and Haught (2006: 360).[15]

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14. A third possibility within the 'essentially the same' camp would be that linguistic metaphors and similes are simply different external manifestations of a single underlying phenomenon, so that the absence of across-the-board intertranslatability between categorical and comparison forms is simply a function of the formal constraints of the linguistic medium. The conceptual metaphor stance taken by George Lakoff and other cognitive linguists would be one manifestation of this position, but there are others that would not entail commitment to pre-existing conceptual metaphors.

15. Note that this marks a revision of Glucksberg's earlier view of similes as hedged metaphors such that the meaning of the simile vehicle, like the metaphor vehicle, was taken to refer, non-literally, to a superordinate category (see brief discussion of Glucksberg and Keysar (1990) above).

Glucksberg and Haught (G&H hereafter) have some interesting empirical evidence in support of this position. Instances of the key kind of case used in their experiments are given in (15) and (16). Based on simple metaphors of the 'X is a Y' sort (and their corresponding similes), new sentences were constructed in which an adjective which is applicable to the metaphor topic only is used to modify the metaphor vehicle: *well-paid* is applicable to a lawyer (but not to an actual shark) and *theoretical* is applicable to an idea (but not to a real diamond).

(15)  *My lawyer is a shark.*
    a.    *My lawyer is a well-paid shark.*
    b.   #*My lawyer is like a well-paid shark.*

(16)  *John's new idea is a diamond.*
    a.    *John's new idea is a theoretical diamond.*
    b.   #*John's new idea is like a theoretical diamond.*

G&H ran a series of experiments on the processing of these and other sentences constructed along the same line and they found significant differences in participants' responses to the (a) and (b) cases. They got longer reading times for the similes than for the metaphors and lower comprehensibility ratings for the similes than the metaphors. These results, together with those from a variety of other measures, indicated that, while processing and understanding the metaphor cases was smooth, processing the corresponding similes was consistently less so. In short, the simile cases were found less acceptable than the metaphor cases (as indicated by the hash sign on (15b) and (16b)). This meshes well with the RT view that the metaphor cases are understood in terms of an ad hoc concept which is applicable to the topic and so can be modified by a topic-applicable adjective (SHARKS* can be well-paid), while the corresponding word in the simile cases is understood literally and so is not applicable to the topic and cannot be comfortably modified by a topic-applicable adjective (SHARKS are not well-paid—they are not paid at all).

In a separate experiment, G&H had participants describe their interpretations of the simple metaphors and similes (that is, sentences without any modification of the vehicle term so that both variants were equally interpretable). They found an interesting difference in the interpretations: participants gave significantly many more so-called emergent properties (that is, properties that do not apply to the literal vehicle) for the metaphor forms than for the simile forms. For instance, for the metaphor *Some ideas are diamonds*, properties given included 'insightful', 'creatively unique', 'ingenious', while in the case of the corresponding simile, *Some ideas are like diamonds*, the interpretations tended to be in terms of properties of actual diamonds, such as 'rare', 'desirable', 'valuable', 'shining'. This indicates a difference, not only in the way the

two forms are processed, but also in their resulting interpretive effects. And, again, the difference looks to be in line with the RT position that, while the metaphorically used word is understood as an ad hoc concept, the corresponding word in the simile is understood literally.

However, some provisos are called for. First, all the examples were of the standard 'X is [like] a Y' sort. Given that the aim was to compare the processing of metaphors and corresponding similes, this may well be a matter of necessity, but it could be misleading to generalise from the results for these simple forms to the full range of metaphors and similes, which can come in many different forms, as indicated above. Second, the metaphors used were fairly familiar, conventionalised sorts of cases (*shark, diamond, chameleon, jail*, etc.) and we might wonder whether we would get the same result for more novel or creative cases. Consider the following two examples of unfamiliar metaphors, presented with some preliminary context (as is necessary for interpreting novel uses):[16]

(17)   a.   *My boyfriend is very clingy, always hanging around me; he weighs me down; he's a backpack.*
       b.   *My granny was a harsh old girl. She made us kids behave. She was a real paint-remover.*

The intended meaning of *backpack*, that is, the ad hoc concept BACKPACK\*, can be roughly paraphrased as 'heavy burden which may impede normal activity' and the intended meaning of *paint-remover*, that is, the ad hoc concept PAINT-REMOVER\*, as 'abrasive agent that can remove or correct unwanted things that seem fixed'. Consider now the following examples, which have been set up along the same lines as G&H's experimental materials, that is, with a topic-applicable adjective positioned so as to modify the metaphor/simile vehicle:

(18)   a.   *My boyfriend is a needy backpack.*
       b.   *My boyfriend is like a needy backpack.*

(19)   a.   *She was a tough-minded paint-remover.*
       b.   *She was like a tough-minded paint-remover.*

A controlled test of how these examples are processed and interpreted has not yet been carried out, but most people we have discussed them with find them equally odd. That is, the categorical metaphor forms in (18a) and (19a) seem to be no better, no more interpretable, than the simile forms in (18b) and (19b).[17]

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16.   Example (17a) is adapted from one constructed by Felicity Deamer (Linguistics, UCL) and example (17b) is adapted from one in the novel *The Blackwater Lighthouse* (p. 37) by Colm Tóibín.

17.   There is a tendency to personify the backpack in (18), which seems to increase the acceptability of the examples, but this is not the intended interpretation here.

Trying to extend the method to poetic cases is tricky and may simply not be feasible, given the distortion that comes with decontextualising most poetic or literary metaphors. However, let's try it out with the first line of the poem *Fog* by Carl Sandburg, given in (20a), with its corresponding simile in (20b):

(20)  a.  *The fog comes on little cat feet.*
      b.  *The fog comes as if on little cat feet.*

According to the RT account, the phrase *on little cat feet* expresses an ad hoc concept ON-LITTLE-CAT-FEET* (see Sperber and Wilson 2008: 102), while the corresponding simile, given in (20b), would be understood literally. Constructing sentences in accordance with those in the G&H experiment is not straightforward, but here is an attempt. The modifier is the adverbial phrase *with swirls of rain* which is applicable to *the fog* and should also acceptably modify the ad hoc concept ON-LITTLE-CAT-FEET*. The bracketing is essential in order to block the natural interpretation that it is the fog itself that comes with swirls of rain:

(21)  a.  *The fog comes [on little cat feet [with swirls of rain]].*
      b.  *The fog comes as if [on little cat feet [with swirls of rain]].*

To the extent that this works at all, the two sentences seem to be equally odd, equally hard to interpret. The following example (from a modern novel) is perhaps easier to work with than the 'fog' example and seems to give the same result: (22a) does not seem more readily interpretable than (22b):

(22)  *His life was a skiff with no oar, caught on the tide.*

                                        (Kate Grenville: *The Secret River*, p. 304)

      a.  *His life was an [anguished [skiff with no oar, caught on the tide]].*
      b.  *His life was like an [anguished [skiff with no oar, caught on the tide]].*

The point of interest here is that the difference that G&H find between the processing and interpretation of their relatively familiar metaphor and simile cases may not carry over to more novel and/or poetic cases where the literal meaning of the figuratively used language seems to play a greater role than it does in the more familiar metaphors.[18] The doubt is reinforced by literary and journalistic examples in which similes and metaphors are used together in developing a single figurative conception and the formal differences between them (the presence of *like* or *as* for similes) do not seem to make any difference

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18.  We do not mean to imply that there is necessarily any problem here for Glucksberg and Haught—their findings for the more familiar metaphor/simile cases are unaffected by our observations and stand as counter-evidence to any view that seeks to treat all metaphors as similes or vice versa, as, for example, Fogelin's (1988) account seems to do.

to interpretation. Consider the following poetic example (with formal indicators of similes highlighted):

(23)   *If they be two, they are two **so***
             ***As** stiff twin compasses are two;*
        *Thy soul, the fix'd foot, makes no show*
             *To move, but doth, if th' other do.*

        *And though it in the centre sit,*
             *Yet, when the other far doth roam,*
        *It leans, and hearkens after it,*
             *And grows erect, as that comes home.*

        *Such wilt thou be to me, who must,*
             ***Like** th' other foot, obliquely run;*
        *Thy firmness makes my circle just,*
             *And makes me end where I begun*.
                  (John Donne: *A Valediction Forbidding Mourning*, last three verses)

The poet is addressing his lover from whom he must part and the referent of *they*, established in an earlier verse, is their two souls. As with many of Donne's poems, this one is often described as developing a metaphysical conceit: of the two lovers' souls as the two legs of a mathematical compass ( joined at one end by a pivot). What interests us here is that the figurative language begins with a simile (*they are two **so** as stiff twin compasses are two*), continues with several metaphor forms (e.g. *Thy soul, the fixed foot*), then uses another simile form (*who must, **like** th'other foot*), and ends with a metaphor form (*Thy firmness makes my circle just*). What difference would it make if the similes had been metaphors (e.g. *Our souls **are** stiff twin compasses*), or vice versa? It would clearly make a difference to the syntax and, most importantly, to the scansion of the poem, but any interpretive difference seems negligible. In the detailed development of the figurative conceit of the lovers as a compass, we seem to be brought back repeatedly to the literal meaning (and the visual image of the compass, its parts and their movement) and any attempt to derive superordinate categories (ad hoc concepts), for example, for *fixed foot* or *my circle*, would only interfere with the process of recovering the poet's conception.

   What we are suggesting, then, is that there are some cases of metaphorical use—novel, creative and/or extended ones—that are less susceptible to being understood in terms of ad hoc concepts than the relatively familiar and/or single word cases usually discussed within lexical pragmatics. If this is right, then we should not be trying to choose between accounts of metaphors that treat them as always working in the same way as similes or as always working differently. While the current RT account, according to which metaphor comprehension involves ad hoc concept formation, seems well-supported for a wide

range of familiar cases, there are others for which it is less obviously adequate. In the next section, we propose that there is indeed another way in which the understanding of metaphors can be achieved, one which does not involve forming ad hoc concepts and which seems to bring the processing and understanding of metaphors and similes closer together.

## 5.   A second route to metaphor understanding

The ad hoc concept account of metaphor understanding does not have a great deal to say about the literal meaning of the metaphor vehicle other than that it provides the basis for pragmatically inferring the intended concept. However, there is evidence that it does not just disappear, having done its job, once the ad hoc concept has been recovered, but that it remains activated in the mind of the hearer/reader and that the speaker/author can exploit its presence. One indicator of this is the way in which metaphors can be spontaneously extended across interlocutors:

(24)   [Discussion between two detectives, A and B, about an old criminal enquiry]:
   *A:   Do you remember the Jackson twins case from the 1980s?*
   *B:   Yeah, that one's a dead duck.*
   *A:   Well, it just quacked.*

(25)   [Discussion between Bill and Mary who are on the point of divorce]:
   *Bill:    The seeds were sown when you had that affair with Ron.*
   *Mary:   And you've carefully watered them for the past decade making sure the ugly weeds kept growing.*

Despite *dead duck* being a case of a very conventional metaphor, its literal compositional meaning remains perfectly transparent and is available to the hearer well after he has grasped the intended meaning, so he can access encyclopaedic information associated with that literal meaning and extend the metaphorical use into his own utterance. Similar observations apply to (25), where Mary develops Bill's *seed sowing* metaphor.[19]

A second indication that the literal meaning has significance beyond its function as clue to the intended concept is the following. When a novelist wants to represent the thoughts or feelings of one of her characters, she may choose to do so with a metaphor vehicle whose literal content is particularly tailored to that character as she has developed him. So, for instance, the example in (22), repeated here in (26), expresses a thought attributed to the

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19.   This ongoing activation of literal meaning also explains the jarring effects of mixed metaphors (see Tirrell 1989; Carston 2010b).

novel's protagonist, a middle-aged man who has worked since his youth on boats, first ferrying people across the river Thames and later navigating an uncharted river in Australia.

(26)    *His life was a skiff with no oar, caught on the tide.*
(Kate Grenville: *The Secret River*, p. 304)

Such a view of a man's life—as lacking direction or purpose, flimsy and at the mercy of forces beyond his control—could have been expressed through many other metaphors, including those in (27). But their literal meaning makes them both less appropriate as a means of representing how the boatman might express his dismayed feelings about his life and less rich in the implications and other cognitive effects that they would afford the attentive reader of the novel.

(27)    a.    *His life was a shed with crumbling walls, in someone else's back garden.*
         b.    *His life was a charade, that had fooled no-one but himself.*
         c.    *He was an amateur actor, who had muffed his lines and lost his part.*

In short, the literal meaning (and, crucially, the image it evokes) plays a more extensive role than just providing the materials for constructing the intended ad hoc concept.

Further support for this view comes from recent psycholinguistic experiments designed to tap the on-line processing of metaphors (Rubio Fernández 2007). These studies indicate that literal meaning is always activated initially, even in heavily metaphor-biased contexts and—more significantly—that it remains highly activated well beyond the point at which the relevant, that is, the metaphorical, interpretation has been recovered. As Rubio Fernández points out, this shows that the process of accessing a metaphorical meaning is quite different from the process of selecting the intended sense of a homonym like *coach* or *bug*, where the irrelevant meaning disappears significantly more quickly. The literal meaning of metaphorically used language lingers on and so is available for exploitation by speakers and hearers.

Our hypothesis is that, for some instances of metaphor, the literal meaning of the metaphor does not just remain idly in the background, but takes over from any ad hoc construction process and, together with the imagery it evokes, is maintained and represented as material for more reflective pragmatic processes that scrutinise it and extract from it those intended implications which comprise the metaphor's meaning. This idea is best illustrated with cases of extended metaphors, such as the following:

(28)    *Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player*
        *That struts and frets his hour upon the stage*

*And then is heard no more: it is a tale*
*Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,*
*Signifying nothing.*

(Shakespeare: *Macbeth*, V.v. 24–30)

After the introduction of the topic, 'Life', virtually every word here is used metaphorically. The question is whether we are forming ad hoc concept after ad hoc concept, WALKING-SHADOW\*, POOR-PLAYER\*, STRUTS\*, FRETS\*, HOUR\*, STAGE\*, even UPON\*, and so on, replacing each of the literal lexical meanings in the developing interpretation. The reason this seems very unlikely is that the linguistically encoded concepts are sufficiently closely related that they semantically prime and reinforce each other, to the extent that their activation levels are so high that a literal interpretation unfolds—a description of life as an indifferent theatre performance—a set of representations which together undergo further pragmatic processes of inferring the intended implications about 'life'.

So also for Sandburg's poem, *Fog*, in (10c) above: the literal meaning of the words *on little cat feet*, *sitting looking over harbour and city*, *on silent haunches* (and the imagery they evoke) are mutually reinforcing and form a coherent, albeit patently false, scenario, which then undergoes further pragmatic processing as a whole, from which implications about the movement and feel of the fog are derived. Both the phenomenal experience of reading the poem, including the kind of pleasure it affords, and the psycholinguistic facts about the role of literal meaning suggest that the interpretation process here is not one of pragmatically inferring ad hoc concept after ad hoc concept, but rather one of attending to the literal meaning (and accompanying images) which is meta-represented and reflected on as a whole. (However, see Sperber and Wilson's (2008: 102) ad hoc concept account of this example). The outcome of this second route to metaphor understanding is an interpretation that consists of many weak implicatures and other implications (which may differ to some extent across hearers/readers). There is no explicitly communicated propositional content (explicature) other than the literal meaning itself represented within the mental equivalent of scare-quotes.[20]

This second mode of metaphor processing, where the literal meaning plays a more sustained role than it does in the cases understood via ad hoc concept construction, brings the processes of metaphor and simile understanding closer

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20.  Throughout the discussions of metaphor interpretation in this paper, we mention imagery only in passing. It is, of course, a striking cognitive effect of metaphor and may play a significant role in our grasp of the speaker's meaning. For some discussion of mental imagery within the two-process account of metaphor understanding presented here, see Carston (2010b).

together. In both types of figure, the conceptual content that is communicated is recovered through an exploration of how the literal meaning of the metaphor/simile vehicle and its associated information might bear on the metaphor/simile topic. Thus, for extended figurative conceptions such as that in Donne's poem in (23), the two figures work together and whether the form is categorical (metaphor) or comparative (simile) seems to make little difference to the interpretive process.[21]

We will now briefly consider two of the many questions that this two-process account of metaphor understanding raises: (a) Why not account for all cases of metaphor understanding in terms of the 'second' processing mode? (b) Isn't the second way really an account of the process of understanding allegories rather than metaphors?[22]

In response to the first question: we see no reason to abandon wholesale the lexical pragmatic account of metaphor developed within RT. One of the beauties of this account of lexical adjustment eventuating in an ad hoc concept is the range of cases of context-sensitive word meaning it covers: concept narrowings of various sort, the huge range of kinds of loose use, and cases whose outcome is a combination of the two (ad hoc concepts arising from metaphorical uses are of this sort, if our hypothesis in Section 3 turns out to be right). The central insight underpinning this unified account concerns the disparity between the range of concepts we are able to entertain and think with, on the one hand, and the concepts encoded in our public language systems, on the other hand (see Carston 1997; Sperber and Wilson 1998). We would need some very strong reason to exclude from this account a set of cases that seem to be so well-explained by it. Without such a reason, we continue to assume that hearers/readers adjust word meanings in context whenever they can, resulting in ad hoc concepts that are descriptive of the world (i.e. they denote an actual property or relation) and only resort to the metarepresentation of literal meaning when the pragmatic process of lexical meaning adjustment becomes too demanding relative to the accessibility of the literal meaning.

In response to the second question: there clearly are some strong similarities between extended metaphors and allegories—indeed, allegories have been described by some as being very extended metaphors, metaphors developed

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21. Extended metaphors, similes, or simile/metaphor combinations are by no means exclusive to poetry, but occur in novels, journalism, oratory, and even in conversation (although they require a degree of planning and crafting that make them more likely to occur in texts). See Tirrell (1989) for discussion of a range of cases and Carston (2010b) for an application of the second mode of metaphor processing discussed above to an example from a modern novel.

22. These questions were raised by Gregory Currie and Dan Sperber respectively, at an early presentation of these ideas, which took place at the workshop 'Metarepresentation and Non-Literal Language Use', CSMN, Oslo, June 2009.

over the length of a whole narrative. Still, we think there is a difference between them and that the second account we have given of metaphor understanding is not identical to that of allegory understanding, although again there are considerable similarities. A key characteristic of allegorical tales is that they are entirely coherent at the literal level—they have an internal relevance—which makes them fully interpretable at that level, even though the intended import requires another level of processing. In this respect, allegories differ from metaphors, including the extended ones discussed above. The point is made clearly by Paul Henle:

Thus, an allegory may be considered merely on its literal level and presents a complete account, but there is a deeper meaning, never presented but to be inferred by its parallel to the more superficial meaning. In contrast to this, a metaphor contains some terms which have both literal and figurative meaning . . . and others which have a literal sense only . . . . It is this mixture of literal references to different situations which at once differentiates metaphor from allegory and gives it the impact which psychologically is its distinctive feature. (Henle 1958: 182)

Consider Bunyan's well-known allegorical tale *The Pilgrim's Progress*. In purely literal terms, it presents us with a tale of a young man (Christian) who undertakes a long journey, travelling through various kinds of terrain (including hard narrow pathways, a treacherous boggy area, and beautiful mountains) and encountering along the way a number of individuals of varying characters and behaviours (including Pliable and Evangelist). It could be read as a simple complete story at this level. Of course there are many clues, not least the names of the characters and the geographical areas, indicating that it is to be read at another level also, involving a more or less one-to-one mapping from the physical to the psychological, from which can be constructed an account of a man's spiritual development and his struggles with the vanities and temptations of the material world.

Compare this with the extended metaphors discussed above (e.g. *Life is a poor player . . .* , *The fog comes on little cat feet . . .*). In accordance with Henle's observation, some of the words have both literal and figurative meaning (e.g. *a poor player, little cat feet*) while others have only a literal sense (e.g. *life, the fog comes*). In these cases, a relevant interpretation cannot be achieved until the intended implications have been inferred from the metarepresented literal material, which is then abandoned as part of the intended interpretation. Nevertheless, an account of how the allegory is processed when it is fully understood will no doubt include a phase in which the literal meaning is metarepresented and a further interpretive process undertaken of deriving the parallel deeper meaning. In this respect, it is very similar to the second mode of metaphor processing, as we have presented it, and there is more work to be

done in distinguishing the process of understanding these two closely related phenomena.

A final point about the second route to metaphor understanding, as we envisage it, is the following. It is not only sustained and intricately developed metaphors, those that contain a critical mass of words whose literal meaning is mutually reinforcing, which tip the interpretation process into this second mode. Rather, the idea is that whenever the local processing load reaches a level at which the effort of accessing or constructing an ad hoc concept is too great, the system takes a different (easier, albeit slower) route. So, even certain metaphors that are not particularly lengthy or developed might have this kind of impact on the cognitive system. Consider, for instance, the following:

(29)   a.   *The hourglass whispers to the lion's paw.*

<div align="right">(W. H. Auden: <em>Our Bias</em>, first line)</div>

b.   *His ego is a flyblown globefish.*

The line in (29a) from Auden is highly enigmatic and is only slightly illuminated by the following lines of the poem (all concerned with the nature of time and how we perceive it). Its literal meaning (and the bizarre image it evokes) may remain metarepresented for some time as we try to extract its meaning. The sentence in (29b), perhaps uttered by an angry ex-girlfriend, is probably less difficult to interpret (there are clearly negative implications about 'his ego' being communicated), but is also potentially resistant to the speedy process of ad hoc concept formation, especially by a hearer who may have little encyclopaedic knowledge about globefish to work with. If this is right, then there are two somewhat different ways in which the shift to the second mode might arise, that is, two different causes of on-line ad hoc concept formation yielding to more immediately accessible literal meaning. On the first of these, appropriately relevant concept-adjustment is simply too difficult, takes too much effort (perhaps because the needed encyclopaedic information is not sufficiently accessible). This may be the case with the relatively unextended examples in (29). The second sort of case is where the sustained high activation (hence accessibility) of the literal meaning simply overwhelms any process of ongoing adjustment of metaphorically used encoded concepts. For this sort of case, the literal meaning, as it were, pops out. This seems to be what goes on with the extended/developed metaphors.

In some instances, there may be individual differences with regard to which of the processing routes is taken. Consider the moderately extended metaphor in (30):

(30)   *Memory is a crazy woman that hoards colored rags and throws away food.*

<div align="right">(from Austin O'Malley)</div>

For some readers, it might be easy enough to form several ad hoc concepts on the fly which, composed together, capture a content roughly paraphrasable as 'Memory is an irrational mental faculty that keeps useless bits of unconnected information and discards information that would increase the individual's ability to thrive'. For others, the scenario described by the literal meaning (and the vivid mental imagery that it evokes) may prevail and the second, more reflective, mode of processing will ensue. And an individual might process metaphors of comparable length and complexity in one or other of the two ways at different times depending on his occasion-specific expectation of relevance or the relative shallowness/depth of processing he is willing and able to undertake at the time.

To end this section, we reiterate its main point: the hypothesis presented is that there are two modes of metaphor processing: (a) A process of rapid on-line ad hoc concept formation which is continuous with the kind of context-sensitive pragmatic adjustments to encoded lexical meaning that are made in comprehending a variety of other loose and/or non-literal language uses; (b) A process in which the literal meaning of metaphorically used language is maintained, framed or metarepresented, and subjected to slower, more reflective interpretive inferences.

## 6.   Conclusion

We have made a (very preliminary) case for there being a distinction between metaphors and other cases of loose use, such as hyperbole, and for there being two ways in which metaphors may be processed, depending on a range of factors that affect hearer/reader processing effort. Supposing for the moment that this is right, it should be seen as a finessing of the existing relevance-theoretic account of metaphor rather than any kind of major departure from it. So, among the array of metaphor theories, it still falls on the deflationary side rather than the inflationary side (where we have in mind those accounts that posit domain mappings and/or cognitive schemes specific to metaphor). While more differentiated than the established RT account, the proposals here do not posit any processes or mechanisms for metaphor comprehension that are not involved in the processing of other uses of language: ad hoc concept construction is perfectly general; the metarepresentation of literal meaning and the kind of 're-flective' processing it undergoes are also not specific to metaphor, but apply as well to extended similes (which are often interwoven with metaphors), to other strictly literal uses, such as haiku poetry (where metaphor is deliberately eschewed), and to many non-figurative descriptive passages in novels and short stories.

Finally, it is worth emphasising that although we have used the standard labels for tropes throughout the paper—'metaphor', 'hyperbole', 'simile',

'irony'—we do not mean to imply that the cases of language use that they are pre-theoretically employed to label necessarily form natural classes or are clearly definable. These are folk classifications and they provide a useful way of organising initial intuitions, but just like the intuitive notion of 'literal meaning' (see Recanati 2004), they may well not mesh with the groupings uncovered by theoretical investigation.

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