



Article

The Metadiscoursal Functions of Metaphor in Linguistic Discourse

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Abstract: This study offers a comparative analysis of how metaphor is deployed by leading linguists and explores the metadiscoursal functions of metaphor in linguistic discourse, focusing particularly on its use as a multifunctional and implicit metadiscoursal category. It compares the functions of the metaphorical use of examples and analogies employed in linguistic discourse. Drawing on Hyland (2005) framework of the functions of metadiscourse, the study examines how these theorists utilize metaphors such as language as a mirror, computation, blueprint, and instinct to guide interpretation, facilitate abstraction, and frame linguistic and cognitive phenomena. Metaphor is analyzed not as a literary concept but as a metadiscoursal strategy used systematically in linguistic theorizing. The paper clarifies the source-to-target domain mappings of these metaphors and suggests that metaphor performs functions like framing, explaining and clarifying, asserting claims, and engaging the reader. The study argues that metaphor is a conceptual and rhetorical tool that frames assumptions, guides the reader to the desired interpretation, reinforces theoretical identity and deflects counterargument.

Keywords: Metaphor, Implicit Metadiscourse, Linguistic Discourse

1. Introduction

The present paper focuses on the metadiscoursal functions of metaphor in linguistic discourse. Metadiscourse is defined as “the cover term for the self-reflective expressions used to negotiate interactional meanings in a text, assisting the writer (or speaker) to express a view point and engage with readers as members of a particular community” (Hyland, 2005, p. 37). Because knowledge and experience are metaphorical and conceptual, writers use metaphorical expressions to successfully communicate with the readers. The writer-reader interaction is manifested through discourse which is both a reflection of communication and externalization of writers’ experience. It becomes necessary then to investigate the metadiscoursal functions of metaphor in a naturally occurring discourse. Metaphor is necessary to carry out writer-reader interaction, particularly, when writers draw on everyday life models to communicate their knowledge to the readers. In this respect, metaphor allows writers to reinforce embodied models that facilitate understanding.

Metaphor is particularly important in linguistic discourse because it focuses attention and enables the reader to grasp the meaning (Hyland, 2019). It is a multifunctional concept that contributes significantly to writer-reader interaction by making abstract and complex linguistic concepts accessible. To do that, writers use, besides explicit metadiscourse markers, implicit metadiscourse which operates at subtle and

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context sensitive level of meaning as framing device. Metaphor is, then, can be situated under the rubric of metadiscourse because it functionally contributes to writer-reader interaction. Hyland (2019, p. 28) states that the functional analysis of metadiscourse is concerned with the communicative purposes and whether a stretch of language is “asserting a claim, directing readers to an action or response, elaborating a meaning, posing a question and so on”. Thus, metadiscourse is not identified by form, it is identified by attending to pragmatic and rhetorical factors (Hyland, 2019, p. 28-9). Therefore, much of what seems to be central for the study of implicit metadiscourse (metaphor, analogy among others) have received little attention in the literature of metadiscourse. The present study aims at both: providing an empirical analysis of metaphor in linguistic discourse; bringing a distinctive theoretical framework; situating metaphor under the rubric of metadiscourse as one of the implicit categories of writer-reader interaction and identifying the metadiscoursal (rhetorical and pragmatic) functions of metaphor in linguistic discourse. The study is, therefore, addresses the following questions:

- 1- What are the types of metaphor used in linguistic discourse?
- 2- What are the metadiscoursal functions of metaphor?
- 3- How does metaphor contribute rhetorically and pragmatically to the text?

The study of implicit metadiscourse is a significant change in the literature of metadiscourse since only explicit writer-reader interaction received an extensive study. It stresses the functional nature of metadiscourse that goes beyond text-organization to focus on subtle functions of a ubiquitous phenomenon, namely, metaphor. It shapes understanding of the linguistic reality and represents the identity of certain linguistic theories.

2. Propositional and metadiscourse meanings

Definitions of metadiscourse share the view that it is as a secondary type of discourse that is nonpropositional (Hyland, 2019, p. 21). The propositional meaning is a type of meaning that is used to analyze logico-semantic units. This means that propositional meaning

is workable in a homogenous field like semantics which often includes hypothetical examples. Halliday (1994, p. 70) states when the propositional meaning is used in the “exchange of information”:

becomes something that can be argued about— something that can be affirmed or denied, and also doubted, contradicted, insisted on, accepted with reservation, qualified, tempered, regretted, and so on (Halliday, 1994, p. 70).

This distinction is made at the level of the clause which has definite boundaries. Metadiscourse is a fuzzy category (Hyland, 2005; Adel, 2006) that lacks definite boundaries. This is reflected through the inconsistencies of its classification. For example, Crismore (1989, p. 97-101) and Crismore and Farnsworth (1990, p. 127-29) introduce the term “referential, informational metadiscourse” which refers to Halliday's ideational function of language. Hyland (2005, p.20) comments on this:

So while Crismore and Farnsworth argue for a clear separation between 'primary' and 'secondary' discourse, they seem not to notice that they undermine this distinction by simultaneously admitting the propositional function as part of metadiscourse.

Others like Kopple (2002) provides another explanation by claiming that metadiscourse constitutes a separate level of meaning. This level does not add new information; it elaborates on given ones:

On one level we expand ideational material. On the levels of metadiscourse, we do not expand ideational material but help our readers connect, organize, interpret, evaluate, and develop attitudes towards that material (Kopple, 2002, p. 93).

Again, Vande Kopple's explanation refers back to the propositional and non-propositional distinction. The propositional meaning is distinct from the value-free and non-propositional meaning.

This distinction, in fact, prioritises the propositional meaning as having defined grammar and constitutes a logico-semantic unit that can be assigned truth-value. However, at the level of discourse, it becomes very difficult to dissect the propositional meaning from metadiscourse because at this level forms are multifunctional in which two or more functions co-occur. For example, "He is doing something remarkable" expresses a proposition and comments on it. Thus, claiming that the propositional meaning can be distinguished from the metadiscursive one by virtue of truth-value test is not accurate.

Alternatively, Sinclair (2004) offers a dynamic view of language which is based on two planes: the interactive plane and the autonomous plane. On the interactive plane, we negotiate our affairs with each other which corresponds to the metadiscursive and interpersonal functions, while on the autonomous plane we share our experience which corresponds to the propositional and ideational functions. The autonomous plane is concerned with language per se; it is an internalization of experience. On the other hand, the interactive plane is concerned with the external world; it relates the internal (autonomous plane) to the external (world). Thus, it represents the interface between the two.

This view recognizes the importance of interaction in discourse because propositional meaning arises from and influenced by the immediate interaction. That is, the propositional meaning and metadiscursive meaning co-exist at the same time. Metadiscourse is, therefore, one of the facets of the propositional meaning and not completely distinct from it. This is because discourse is not only transactional but also interactional at the same time.

This position can be justified on the basis that it is difficult to find stretches of discourse that are propositional only, even in scientific writing, Hunston (1993, 1994) and Hyland (2005) argue that the author's aim is to persuade. This shows that metadiscourse is a crucial facet of meaning which ushers the larger communicative goals of the speaker/writer. It is not a secondary or supportive type of discourse; it is one of the planes of discourse.

3. Metaphor as an Implicit Metadiscursive Strategy

Metadiscourse is a functional concept that has fuzzy boundaries that is realised through many syntactic forms and structures. This is evident when attempting to maintain a clear-cut distinction between propositional and metadiscourse meanings because, for most of the part, these two overlap and metadiscourse is expressed implicitly as another facet of meaning. This implicates that there is an implicit metadiscourse which is fused with the propositional content. The fuzziness of metadiscourse led researchers to adopt an operational view of what counts as metadiscourse and what is not. For example, Mauranen (1993) and Adel (2006) perceive metadiscourse in terms of text reflexivity or metatext, while Beauvais (1989) perceives it as marker of explicit illocutionary force such as *I believe that, I stated that*. This may be true if metadiscourse is restricted to explicit markers. Thus, metaphor can realize metadiscoursal functions by examining the context of emergence of metaphor and the writer's reasons and needs to use it in this particular situation.

The use of metaphor as a feature of writer reader-interaction in academic linguistic texts can reveal the underlying conceptual frameworks and the epistemological stance of the writer. For example, metaphors are frequently used to map complex or unfamiliar ideas onto more tangible domains such as "language as a tool", "universal grammar as a blueprint". These metaphors do more than describe; they guide reasoning. For instance, seeing the mind as a computer encourages an understanding of linguistic competence as rule-governed computation. Moreover, metaphor has rhetorical functions. For example,

"poverty of the stimulus" in Chomsky's work is a powerful characterization of the innateness and hardwired capacity of humans to acquire language; it encapsulates a complex argument and persuades by appealing to intuitive understanding. In this sense, metaphor is argumentative tool, shaping both credibility and logic within linguistic texts.

Furthermore, metaphors contribute to the identity of linguistic subfields. For instance, cognitive linguistics relies heavily on metaphor to conceptualize meaning as embodied and experiential, while generative grammar opposes such approaches, preferring more mechanistic logical principles. Thus, the choice of metaphor reflects disciplinary commitments, and their use can signal alignment with or opposition to certain theoretical traditions.

3.1. Language as a Computational System

One of the most dominant metaphors in Chomsky's work is the computational metaphor. The mind is portrayed as a machine or a computer:

The language faculty is a component of the human mind, designated as a computational system (Hauser et al, 2002).

On the other hand, Pinker (1994) in *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* views language as a biological instinct and evolved module that has an adaptation capacity. This metaphor situates language as a biological trait unique to human beings. The metaphor here suggests that language is a specialized mental module designed specifically for humans that enable us to master and recognize complex grammatical rules. The mind here is compared to computer (an information-processing system) which generates and creates rule-governed sentences. This metaphor frames language as part of the human genetic endowment which is patterned similarly to reflexes or immune responses, emergent from natural selection. In Darwinian frame, it positions language and linguistic competence as a biological trait. In this case, both Chomsky and Pinker agree about the biological nature of language but disagree on the role of learning and experience. In other words, Pinker views language as an adaptation shaped by natural selection.

Chomsky leans heavily on computational metaphors (Werry, 2007). He describes language as a "rule-governed, algorithmic, digital" system and as a kind of programming code operating within the mind. Syntax is recursive, systematic, and mechanistic. Language becomes an information-processing system, capable of producing infinite output from finite principles.

Language is, at its core, a system that is both digital and infinite. To my knowledge, there is no other biological system with these properties (Chomsky, 1991, p. 50).

However, as Beaugrande (1991) and Werry (2007) point out, this metaphor eventually turns problematic. Chomsky also insists that language is a biological system, and yet, unlike any known biological system, it is digital and infinite. Beaugrande (1991, p. 433) has also mentioned a number of shifts in Chomsky's paradigm and states that "appeals to determinism and fixity are awkward because they imply that when Chomsky changes his mind the "mind" of humanity changes as well. This hybrid metaphor that describes language as computer and biological organ that is found generates a lot of dispute and conflict. The risk is that metaphor becomes mistaken for reality and the model overtakes the phenomenon it aims to describe. Where critics like George Lakoff reflect on their use of metaphor and analogy, Chomsky tends to treat them as literal truths. Lakoff comments:

Metaphors for the mind, as you say, have evolved over time—from machines to switchboards to computers. There's no avoiding metaphor in science. [...] But no matter how ubiquitous a metaphor may be, it is important to keep track of what it hides and what it introduces (Lakoff, 1999, p. 3).

While Chomsky uses metaphors as a shield against counter-argument, they limit the flexibility of the theoretical model and position alternative voices as opposing the natural

and scientific approach to the study of language. Consequently, it is a position that makes other theorists rail against him. The metaphor, here, engages the reader, confronting alternative voices and begins a fiercely fought debates.

3.2. The Mirror Metaphor

One of Noam Chomsky's most cited metaphors is the idea that language is a "mirror of the mind" (Chomsky, 1986). This metaphor maps the source domain of an optical instrument (mirror) to a target domain of cognitive structure. It conveys the notion that language reflects, rather than constructs mental representation. Accordingly, language serves as a reflection of the underlying structure of human cognition, particularly Universal Grammar (UG).

This metaphor represents the identity of Chomsky's rationalist and nativist orientation and plays a key epistemological role in the formalist paradigm. It frames linguistic enquiry as a means of accessing innate structures that are not directly observable. Grammar, in this case, is the only mean of accessing the architecture of human cognition and considers to be a window into biological nature of language (Chomsky, 2000; Pinker, 2007).

It supports a mechanistic view of language processing, emphasizes the rationalist and formalist orientation and reinforces the ethos of the linguist as a scientist operating within a natural science paradigm.

3.3. Recursive Mirrors and Infinite Regress

Chomsky posits that language is a "mirror of the mind.", however, if language mirrors the mind and the linguist studies language, then the linguist is essentially trying to study the mind. The mind here is both the subject and object of study. It is a recursive project fraught with philosophical perils. Werry (2007, p. 70) notes that this recursive structure introduces an epistemological paradox: How do we know what we know about an object that is itself a form of knowledge?

To resolve this, Chomsky "naturalizes" knowledge. He detaches it from context, society, and history, re-grounding linguistic theory in biology. He portrays the mind as universal, transparent, and logically structured, and casts language as a direct expression of cognitive architecture. This allows him to avoid questions of cultural variation or social use, aiming instead for what Charles Taylor calls a "nomological science" (Cited after Werry, 2007, p. 72). It is a "theoretical description whereby the phenomenon to be explained is completely absorbed by the law or structure which constitutes its explanation".

This reduction, however, has conceptual costs. As Werry notes, by making language a biological certainty, Chomsky intentionally removes it from the realm of society, culture and behaviour in which meaning and knowledge are actively negotiated and contested.

3.4 Universal Grammar as Blueprint, Genetic Code and Growth

Universal Grammar (UG) is often described in metaphorical terms akin to a pre-determined biological structure, part of the genetic endowment of the species. The blueprint metaphor appeals to logos by presenting UG as a logical necessity derived from biological facts that only human beings possess language faculty.

Beaugrande notes how Chomsky reinforces this claim by drawing comparisons between linguistic ability and biological traits. For instance, Descartes' analogy (quoted by Chomsky) equates the innateness of language with the genetic transmission of illnesses like gout or kidney stones. Just as children grow arms and legs by virtue of their biology, so do they grow language as a system that unfolds naturally from within.

Such metaphors elevate linguistic competence to an inevitable consequence of human biology. Language is presented not as a social activity or a learned practice, but as a natural function, predetermined and universal. Chomsky's explanation for how children acquire "rich competence" from "limited experience" is attributed to "inner determinism,"

explained through metaphors of growth: "Language just kind of grows in our minds... the same way we grow arms and legs" or "just as much a part of our nature as the fact that we have arms and not wings" (Beaugrande, 1991, p. 432).

Appeals to biological fixity disguise the ideological nature of Chomsky's arguments. If language is simply part of our biology, then any change in linguistic theory—as happens repeatedly in Chomsky's evolving models—suggests a shift not just in scholarly perspective but in the mind of human nature itself. This implication, while rarely addressed, points to the profound philosophical peril embedded in Chomsky's model of innate language (Beaugrande, 1991, p. 433).

3.5 The Poverty of the Stimulus

Poverty of the stimulus is a central concept in Chomsky's theory of language acquisition. It refers to the argument that the linguistic input (stimulus) children receive is too limited and imperfect to explain their eventual mastery of a complex grammatical system solely through exposure and learning from their environment. The stimulus (linguistic data) is insufficient resource. The mind has to compensate through competence richness, enabling the children to master a complex grammatical system with speed and precision. According to him, this gap between the impoverished input and the rich output strongly supports the existence of innate, language-specific structures in the human mind—what he calls UG.

3.6. Visual Metaphors

Perhaps the most compelling element of Werry's (2007) description is the use of "ocularcentric" rhetoric in Chomsky's theory. Chomsky frequently relies on visual metaphors to explain and defend his ideas from the "mirror of the mind" to likening language to vision, to describing grammar as a mental organ similar to the visual system.

This persistent recourse to vision is rhetorically and pragmatically motivated. The eye, in western philosophy, is the sense most associated with certainty, truth, and immediacy. When Chomsky compares language to vision, he is drawing on a powerful cultural assumption: that seeing is believing, and what one sees is beyond doubt. As such, these metaphors become what Werry (2007, p. 75) calls "an undeniability device" a persuasive strategy that attempts to align Chomsky's work with what is self-evidently true, undeniable, and thus "beyond" argument.

Chomsky's analogies suggest that language like sight is not made, debated, or learned, but simply is found. He writes:

Have we, as individuals, "made" our language? That is, have you or I "made" English? That seems either senseless or wrong. We had no choice at all as to the language we acquired . . . there is no more reason to think of language as "made" than there is to think of the human visual system and the various forms that it assumes as "made by us" (Chomsky, 1980, p. 11).

Language is not made by language users as much as we cannot make our visual system. Concerning the rebuttal to the functional approach to language, Chomsky writes:

"The child does not acquire the rule by virtue of its function any more than he learns to have an eye because of the advantage of sight" (Chomsky, 1980, p. 231).

The eye as an organ preexists prior to the function of eyesight. Similarly, language is predetermined and preexisted before using it. To put it differently, functions are not the cause of language existence. This statement not only reinforces innateness but further separates language from socio-functional perspectives, rendering arguments about context, use, or function as irrelevant or misguided.

4. Discussion

Metadiscourse is a functional concept that refers to aspects of text beyond the propositional meaning to manage writer-reader interaction, the flow of information and communicative meaning of the text. Explicit metadiscourse markers overtly performs to

two functions: guiding the reader through the text and involving the reader into the text. Metaphor performs the two functions. When it is used to explain and elaborate, it guides the reader to the desired interpretation and ensures that the reader grasp the writer's intended meaning. As an interactive metadiscourse category, it functions as a source of evidence, a clarification and explaining tool and framing device. Interactionally, it functions as an assertion device, positioning strategy and engagement. In this sense, it works as interaction-managing tool by engaging the reader through conceptual mapping of complex abstract concepts into down to earth, everyday life experience to facilitate text-processing. The choice of metaphor not only help explain and clarify the writer's intended meaning but also subtly signals stance, difference, and the direction enquiry. It constructs a relationship with the reader through indirect signals.

By framing linguistic knowledge through metaphorical schemas (e.g., language as a "computer," language as "mirror," or UG as a "blueprint, genetic and growth"), linguists ground their theories, engaging the reader and build a credible persona by developing a compelling argument which is reinforced by metaphorical expressions based on logical reasoning. This not only shapes the interpretation of content but also directs the reader's stance towards it. Accordingly, metaphor as an implicit metadiscourse category contributes rhetorically to logos and ethos.

On the other hand, metaphor serves communicative purposes by reducing abstraction, encoding conceptual relations, and shaping thoughts. Thus, it is necessary to recognize and analyse metaphor in linguistic discourse to enhance our understanding of language and linguistic theories.

Therefore, reflections on the use of metaphor is essentially important because metaphor cuts both ways. While they facilitate the readability and accessibility of the text, they can limit and confine the theoretical scope. The use of metaphor, for example, "language as innate" might marginalize, exclude or even eliminate social and cultural aspects or vice versa. In other words, it closes the discourse and limits the potential of further studies that relate language to neighbouring fields. Therefore, a critical reflection on metaphors is essential for theoretical and intellectual openness (Werry, 2007).

In Chomsky's discourse, metaphor extends beyond an individual and subjective understanding, its use affects the study of language and extends to neighbouring fields. The use of metaphor as shield against counterargument and as persuasive rhetorical device without reflecting on its implications confines the scope of what is linguistics and what is not. This shows that metaphors, which entice us 'to understand and experience one kind of thing in terms of another' play a central role in the construction of linguistic reality. What is more important is what follows from using metaphor as framing device (Zinkin and Musolff, 2009) because understanding the implicit functions of metaphor is not the end. What would or should it mean for language to be a mirror, computer, genetic, etc. It generates linguistic wars as described by Harris who further adds that "it was Chomsky's war" (2021, p. 260).

To put it succinctly, the metadiscourse functions of metaphor as an implicit category can be classified broadly as serving the communicative purposes of the writer; persuading the reader and encouraging engagement; facilitating the readability and accessibility of the text by mapping complex and abstract concepts into simple and everyday life experience. However, the use of metaphor carries too much risks and requires careful reflections as Lakeoff comments in *Philosophy in the Flesh: A Talk with George Lakoff*:

But no matter how ubiquitous a metaphor may be, it is important to keep track of what it hides and what it introduces. If you don't, the body does disappear. We're careful about our metaphors, as most scientists should be (Lakeoff, 1999, p. 3).

5. Conclusion

The study argues that metaphor functions as an implicit metadiscourse category. It contributes to the rhetorical and pragmatic functions of text-processing and facilitates the

readability and accessibility of the text by building writer-reader relationship through encouraging engagement, asserting claims, simplifying complex concepts and reflecting the writer's stance.

The study then extends the analysis by comparing Chomsky's metaphorical framing to that of other linguists, for example, Steven Pinker and George Lakoff. Rhetorically, the study shows that the use of metaphor supports a discourse that is primarily logos-driven.

The comparative analysis reveals that metaphor is a window into each theorist's epistemological commitments. While Chomsky uses metaphor to anchor language in biology and computation, Lakoff uses it to show how cognition is embodied and situated and Pinker resorts to evolutionary theory to explain "language instinct". It is central to how theories are constructed, justified, and communicated.

The use of metaphor as an implicit metadiscoursal category by appealing to everyday life experience is pragmatically and rhetorically motivated. It, thus, aims to persuade, guide and engage the reader into the discourse which deepens the reader's grasp of the writer's desired interpretation. It is also used to assert claims, build writer-reader relationship and fend off counter-argument.

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