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Critical Notice 'Imagination and Convention' (Lepore & Stone, 2015)

Diana Mazzarella

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1. Introduction

As Lepore and Stone (henceforth L&S) clearly state, 'this book is first and foremost a philosophy book – its point is not to settle this or that resolution to a particular empirical issue, or to advocate for a specific theoretical framework of discourse interpretation. It is rather to sharpen intuitions and draw distinctions about language use.' (Lepore & Stone 2015: 8). It is thus with this perspective in mind that it is worth discussing their contribution and assessing its unequivocal merits and debatable shortcomings.

The book pursues two ambitious goals: first, to establish the pervasive role of conventions of meaning in communication, and second, to highlight the heterogeneity of the imaginative practices involved in understanding figurative or evocative uses of language. The critical target of this endeavour is represented by bare-bones models of semantics as well as rationality-centered models of pragmatics (which often go hand in hand).

In what follows, I focus on Lepore and Stone's discussion of the centrality of imagination in the interpretative process underpinning figurative and suggestive speech (metaphor, irony, joking and hinting). Specifically, I discuss two features commonly associated with these types of speech, open-endedness and non paraphrasability, and suggest that they do not necessarily lead to a non-cognitivist account *à la* Lepore and Stone. Finally, I discuss the implications of such account for a more general theory of communication.

2. Imaginative practices

In the section of the book 'Varieties of Interpretative Reasoning', L&S present an overview of several language uses which, they claim, (i) fall beyond the domain of linguistic conventions, (ii) require specific processes of imaginative engagement to be understood, (iii) are not characterised in terms of propositional content. While (i) is not controversial, (ii) and (iii) raise some interesting issues.

To begin with, let us consider L&S's claim that there is no unified account to be given of figurative and evocative uses of language as each of them involve a *specific* and *distinct* imaginative practice. To illustrate these distinctive practices, let us focus on the following example proposed by L&S:

(1) That building is a landmark.

Assume that the building that the speaker of (1) is referring to is one of the tallest buildings in the neighborhood of New York City where it was built. Its architecture – it is a fifteen-story, boxy, white brick building – sharply contrasts with the surrounding neighborhood which is mainly comprised of townhouses and tenements that are no more than five stories high. After its construction, the Historical Preservation society in the neighborhood fought for regulations to ensure that no more buildings like it could be built in the area.

An utterance of (1) could be understood at least in four different ways: *literally*, when it conveys the information that the building can be used in order to navigate nearby, *metaphorically*, as the construction of the building marks a turning point in the neighborhood preservation, *sarcastically*, if the speaker intends to make the point that the building is a sort of eyesore, or *humorously*, if the utterance is meant to prompt the appreciation of the reversal of expectations about the kind of buildings that the neighborhood draws its character from.

In discussing these different interpretations of (1), L&S comment: 'recognizing the interpretation means recognizing the particular kind of interpretative engagement that the utterance calls for' (2015: 193). Crucially, they suggest that such a recognition does not follow from mutual expectations about speaker's cooperativeness, nor from expectations that the utterance will satisfy certain standards of relevance. This raises the question of what makes the audience undertaking an interpretative path rather than another. L&S's answer is that this is 'contingent on whether the audience thinks of the utterance as being used literally, ironically, metaphorically, humorously, or in some other way' (2015: 193). For instance, understanding (1) as a metaphor would require recognising its metaphorical status, and consequently engaging in the process of imaginatively developing the analogy evoked and deriving its effects.

This raises the following concern. The appreciation of the figurative or humorous nature of the utterance as such – which might or might not phenomenologically occur - seems to be a side-effect of the interpretative process, rather than its starting point. Routinely, it is not by recognizing that the communicator is speaking figuratively that the process of recovering the figurative interpretation at issue is triggered. While this might be the case in some particular contexts (e.g. while reading poetry and adopting a contemplative stance on it), little evidence is given that such a top-down decision is always involved. As suggested by Wilson & Carston (2007: 244), a full-fledged explanation of the process of interpretation of non-literal uses of language needs to answer the following questions (adapted here to address L&S's own proposal):

a. What triggers a specific process of imaginative engagement (why not simply accept the encoded sense)?
b. What determines the direction that the imaginative process takes?
c. How does the imaginative process work in detail?
d. What brings it to an end?

By raising these questions, I would like indicate the directions in which L&S's proposal that specific imaginative practises are involved in understanding figurative and evocative uses of language needs to be substantiated. While L&S clearly maintains that they do not intend 'to advocate for a specific theoretical framework of discourse interpretation' (2015: 8), it is worth discussing the extent to which the missing elements in the overall framework they propose

undermine their more general endeavour.

Questions a-d have been thoroughly discussed in the context of other theoretical frameworks, among which Relevance Theory. For instance, Relevance Theory suggests that utterance interpretation is driven by expectations of relevance which constrain the interpretative process and determine its stopping point (whenever such expectations are satisfied, or abandoned).

In principle, the appeal to specific imaginative practices is not incompatible with the assumption that general interpretative principles (like the principle of relevance) might regulate these practises by triggering them, as well as sustaining them until the interpretative standards raised by those principles are met. With regard to this, for instance, Carston (2010) shows that recognising that imaginative engagement is essential in the process of understanding metaphorical uses of language does not undermine the overarching role of relevance, which sets the cognitive background against which to explain how the scrutiny of the mental images might proceed. Why should L&S not accept, for instance, that the pursuit of relevance that underpins every interpretative process might prompt the imaginative practices they discuss and constrain the directions in which the evoked images are explored in order to derive relevant inferences?

Indeed, L&S seems to concede this point in passing, while reshaping the explanatory power of general interpretative principles:

> Theorists can perhaps explain how interlocutors recognize that utterances are intended to be interpreted as metaphor, as irony, as hinting, as poetry, or by other interpretative practices, by reasoning about general principles of cooperative conversation. But theorists cannot explain the import of utterances this way. (2015: 191)

In the next section, I will thus focus on the analysis of the *import* of figurative and evocative utterances, and discuss the properties that allegedly make it fall outside the scope of pragmatic theories, as traditionally conceived.

3. Open-endedness, non-paraphrasability and non-propositionality

L&S offer an interesting discussion of several linguistic phenomena, drawing on prior interpretative theories that appeal to distinctive principles to account for them. I will focus on L&S's discussion of metaphor as a paradigmatic case of language use which prompts imaginative engagement. Following Black (1955), Davidson (1978) and Camp (2003, 2008, i.a.), they suggest that metaphor prompts a distinctive process of perspective taking based on analogical thinking. Consider the following metaphor:

(2) Love is a snowmobile racing across the tundra; and then suddenly it flips over, pinning you underneath. At night, the ice weasels come. (Matt Groening)

In order to understand this metaphor, L&S maintain, the audience needs to explore the suggested analogy between romantic relationships and a trip across the tundra on a snowmobile. Groening invites us to imagine the sense of excitement and adventure which characterises the beginning of a romantic relationship, the foolishness of lovers who rush into a new romance,

its dangerously precarious foundations, and the sorrow and pain which inevitably follow the unexpected end of the relationship. Crucially, this analogical endeavour is said to be characterised by the following features:

i. *Holistic nature*: 'The analogy proceeds not constituent-by-constituent, but holistically' (2015: 164)
ii. *Open-endedness*: 'metaphor is productive, allowing speakers and their audience to explore these analogies in open-ended ways' (2015: 163)
iii. *Non-paraphrasability*: 'metaphorical thinking gives us special insights that can't be paraphrased' (2015: 168)

With regard to (i), L&S suggest that active, creative metaphorical uses require the audience to entertain the literal interpretation of the utterance, who serves as a basis to develop the analogy evoked. While dead metaphors are interpreted by accessing the lexically encoded metaphorical sense of the metaphor vehicle, genuine metaphorical uses cannot be understood by composing occasionally-constructed figurative meanings of their component expressions.

Interestingly, a similar approach has been recently advocated within the relevance-theoretic framework by Carston (2010). Carston suggests that particularly creative metaphorical uses, as well as extended metaphors, might be understood by processing the literal scenario as a whole and submitting it for further inferential reflective processing. The literal meaning of the metaphor would thus be metarepresented (in the sense that it would not be taken as a factual or descriptive representation) and further inspected in order to extract implications which are relevant to the point the speaker is trying to make by the use of the metaphor. Carston's suggestion is that the process of local conceptual adjustment of the metaphor vehicles which compose an extended metaphor would be too demanding and effortful given the mutual priming and reinforcement of their literal meanings (but not theoretically implausible as L&S claim). In line with this proposal, Rubio-Fernandez, Cummins & Tian (2016) show some suggestive experimental evidence of processing differences between single and extended metaphors. Specifically, in a series of self-paced reading and eye-tracking during natural reading studies, they observed longer reading times for the metaphor vehicle in the single metaphor condition compared to the extended metaphor and literal conditions. This finding goes in the direction of establishing a prominent role the literal meaning in the interpretation of extended metaphors, in line with Carston (2010), as well as with the theoretical intuitions elicited by L&S: 'It really does seem that what's doing the work here is an ability to understand Groening's sentence literally, and then, to make an analogy between the experience of being in love and the kind of history he describes' (2015: 164). At the same time, though, it casts some doubt on the appropriateness of L&S's proposal with regard to the majority of spontaneous and conversational metaphorical uses of language, whose interpretation is arguably underpinned by a process of local, on-line, concept construction which applies quite generally to the recovery of word meaning in utterance comprehension (see, e.g., Wilson & Carston 2007, Recanati 2004).

Let us now turn to the discussion of (ii) and (iii), that is, the open-endedness and non-paraphrasability of metaphorical effects. According to L&S, the scrutiny of the analogy evoked by the metaphor give rise to a series of insights which are impossible to enumerate and to

paraphrase. Far from being exhausted by a finite list of propositions (e.g., *New romances are characterised by a sense of adventure and excitement*, *lovers may behave foolishly at the initial stage of their relationship*, …), the import of the metaphor seems to escape such an enumeration.

Open-endedness and non-paraphrasability are indeed conceived of as crucial features of the figurative and evocative uses of language which they survey in their discussion on imagination, and not the hallmark of metaphorical uses in particular. This sheds a very interesting light on the pervasiveness of these features in human communication, and highlights their crucial – but often neglected - role in an adequate account of the effects of irony, sarcasm, joking, and hinting.

Importantly, the indeterminacy of the import of figurative and evocative uses of language is seen as a decisive clue to its non-propositional character. Given that in these circumstances there does not seem to be anything specific that the speaker intends to communicate, then - the argument goes - there is no cognitive content which shall be taken as the figurative (propositional) *meaning* of the utterance. Indeterminacy (as evidenced by open-endedness and non-paraphrasability) provides a reason for excluding figurative and evocative uses of language from the realm of speaker's meaning: 'we think it is important to separate these practices, and the insights they prompt, from meaning and grammar' (2015: 161).

L&S recognise that alternative pragmatic approaches do embrace this indeterminacy. Specifically, in their discussion of Relevance Theory and the Theory of the Strategic Speaker (Part I), L&S point out that these psychological approaches to language interpretation conceive of *uncertainty* as crucially associated to inferences about the speaker's intended meaning. Interestingly, this let us appreciate a commonality between the two approaches which is typically overlooked in the literature: they both describe implicitly communicated meaning as being often open-ended and indeterminate. This characterization, in turn, 'blurs the line between the meaning of an utterance and the information the speaker conveys' (p. 80).

According to the Theory of the Strategic Speaker (see, e.g., Pinker et al. 2008), there is a multiplicity of assumptions about the speaker's motives underpinning her communicative act which can be brought into the interpretative process. These assumptions are not limited to those built on expectations of cooperativeness or, more generally, to assumptions about speakers' rational behaviours in conversation. Rather, expectations about predictable but 'irrational' patterns of decision-making as well as social feelings can shape utterance interpretation. Widening the range of assumptions which can be brought to bear on the interpretative process makes it harder to establish which of those are shared by the interlocutors and, consequently, which communicative effects fall under the scope of the speaker's intentions.

Relevance Theory, in particular, has introduced the distinction between *strong* and *weak* communication (Sperber & Wilson 1995, Wilson 2011). Communication aims at changing the cognitive environment of the addressee, that is, at making certain assumptions manifest or more manifest to the addressee (where manifestness is a function of both salience and acceptability). When the relevance of the communicative act relies on the interlocutor recovering some specific assumptions that the communicator has in mind and strongly intends him to recover, such assumptions are strongly communicated. On the contrary, the communicator might have in mind a vaguer range of assumptions and intend the interlocutor to entertain any subset of them. Each of these assumptions is only weakly implicated, and the relevance of the utterance

does not specifically depend on the interpreter recovering any of them in particular. As Sperber and Wilson put it,

> […] there is a continuum of cases, from implicatures which the hearer was specifically intended to recover to implicatures which were merely intended to be made manifest, and to further modifications of the mutual cognitive environment of speaker and hearer that the speaker only intended in the sense that she intended her utterance to be relevant, and hence to have rich, and not entirely foreseeable, cognitive effects. (Sperber & Wilson 1995: 201)

Metaphor interpretation, for instance, might often fall at one end of this continuum and prompt the recovery of a wide range of implications which are only weakly communicated. Groening's metaphor, in (2), would be such a case: it aims at raising the manifestness of a wide range of assumptions (e.g., *New romances are characterised by a sense of adventure and excitement*, *lovers may behave foolishly at the initial stage of their relationship*, …) which are neither individually intended by the communicator nor mentally represented as distinct propositions by the audience.

L&S suggest that 'this move does not help the defender of general pragmatic principles. At the same time, this move comes with substantial costs'. In what follows, I take a complementary perspective and discuss the costs which L&S incur by *not* making this move, that is, the costs of excluding indeterminacy from the realm of speaker's communicated meaning.

As Sperber and Wilson (2015) point out, indeterminacy is a pervasive feature of communication, which invests not only what is usually taken to be the implicitly communicated content of the utterance (its implicatures) but also its explicit meaning. Consider the following example:

(3) *Peter*: We can't afford La Cantina.
Mary: I've got money.

Mary's utterance is characterised by the fact that the expression 'money' is loosely used. If Mary's utterance is to be relevant to Peter, she must mean more than just that she has *some* money. Crucially, there is no determinate proposition which is asserted. Despite this, the implications which Mary intends Peter to derive are fairly clear: for instance, that they can go to eat at La Cantina and that May will pay for it.

Given its pervasiveness, indeterminacy cannot be ruled out from the domain of speaker's meaning without excluding not only figurative and evocative uses of language, but also 'literal' ones like (3). As (3) shows, even the very process of meaning modulation which spontaneously fine-tunes the interpretation of almost every word in context is an important source of indeterminacy in communication.

But what about the risks of endorsing such an indeterminacy envisaged by L&S? According to them, this marks a significant depart from Grice by undermining the *public* nature of communicated meaning. Public meanings are meanings that are shared among participants in a conversation, contents that they can take each other to have asserted, which can be evaluated as true or false or reported to others, on which they can agree or disagree. The publicity of communicated meaning is seen by L&S as the foundation of content sharing, which

represents the ultimate goal of communication. In discussing their position on metaphor, for instance, they claim: 'we think there's surprisingly little evidence to suggest that metaphor ever contributes information – if we understand information in the sense of […] publicly accessible content that supports inquiry' (2015: 170). Importantly, content sharing would require entertaining the *same* thoughts.

As Sperber and Wilson (1997) put it, 'it is an illusion of the code theory that communication aims at duplication of meanings. Sometimes it does, but quite ordinarily a looser kind of understanding is intended and achieved' (Sperber & Wilson 1997: 18). Code theories of communication postulate an identity between the speaker's intended meaning, on the one hand, and the meaning entertained by the addressee, on the other hand, as a result of the interpretative process. Interpretation is seen as a matter of decoding the communicated message by means of a 'code', that is, by means of the grammar of the language (perhaps supplemented by code-like pragmatic rules, e.g. a token of 'I' refers to the person who utters it). The code pairs phonetic representations with thoughts and the decoded message exhausts the communicated meaning. L&S's proposal falls squarely within the domain of code theories, and the 'code' that they rely on is made of the set of meaning conventions to which they devote the first half of their book: 'linguistic knowledge […] associates forms with interpretative constraints which *completely determine* the content of interpretation' (2015: 94, *my emphasis*).

With this in mind, it is possible to fully appreciate L&S's approach of excluding figurative and evocative uses of language from the domain of communicated meaning. Because 'the creative, imaginative endeavor of metaphor escapes not only the conventions of language but the very kinds of meaning that those conventions establish' (2015: 163), the import of metaphorical uses of language falls short of attaining that public nature which would grant it the status of communicated meaning.

The argument goes as follows: indeterminacy inevitably undermines content sharing (in the sense of entertaining the same content), content sharing is the ultimate goal of communication, thus indeterminacy needs to be kept outside the domain of communication. As the discussion of (3) suggests, rather than being the hallmark of figurative and evocative utterances, indeterminacy is pervasive in communication. If L&S's theory of communication aims at excluding indeterminacy tout court, it will not be able to handle many ordinary, 'literal' uses of language too.

A possible way out is to embrace a theory of communication which relaxes the standards for content sharing. Communication can succeed even if duplication of meaning is not achieved. As Sperber and Wilson (1997) suggest, to the extent that the linguistic information (i.e. the words used) points towards the direction intended by the speaker, interlocutors can effectively co-ordinate with each other: 'the type of coordination aimed at in most verbal exchanges is best compared to the co-ordination between people taking a stroll together rather than that between people marching in step' (Sperber & Wilson 1997: 18).

4. Conclusions

As reported in the Introduction, the philosophical aim of L&S is to 'sharpen intuitions and draw distinctions about language use'. Importantly, they propose a clear-cut distinction between language uses which are governed by linguistic conventions, on the one hand, and figurative and evocative uses of language which rely on specific imaginative practices, on the other hand.

By focusing on the latter, my aim was two-fold: first, to point towards the directions in which L&S's proposal need to be further developed (Section 2); second, to assess the risk of excluding figurative and evocative utterances from the domain of a theory of communication because of their open-ended and non-paraphrasable effects (Section 3). The question which arises, and which remains open, is whether the clear-cut distinction between 'conventional' and 'non-conventional' uses of language envisaged by L&S idealizes away some essential features of communication, such as its indeterminacy.

To conclude, I would like to emphasize that several aspects of L&S's proposal set the foundation for further interesting investigation in philosophy, as well as linguistics and cognitive science. In particular, as discussed above, L&S take a decisive step in recognizing the role of imagination and mental imagery in interpreting figurative utterances. In the same vein of works of other prominent researchers in philosophy of language and pragmatics (see, e.g., Green 2017, Carston 2010), L&S suggest that scrutinizing the mental imagery evoked by these uses of language might be a source of insights in recovering the import of different figures of speech. This theoretical proposal is open to empirical investigation in the field of psycholinguistics and represents a fruitful domain where different disciplines might intersect. To the extent that this book provides challenging and insightful theoretical perspectives to elucidate the role of processes such as imagination in conversation, it fulfills the most ambitious project of moving this interdisciplinary debate forward.

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