The Fundamental Role of Metonymy in Conceptualization and Communication

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1. Introduction

Roman Jakobson, in his 1956 essay on aphasia, identifies metaphor and metonymy as fundamental processes in communication; he sees communication progressing along one of two paths, the metaphoric and the metonymic, and claims that "in normal behaviour both processes are continually operative" (Jakobson 1956:90). Metaphor has subsequently been the focus of intense scholarly activity, thanks to the pioneering work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999) and now Metaphor Studies is a discipline in its own right. In contrast, metonymy has received much less notice.

In this paper, I am defining metonymy as the highlighting of relatedness, usually part-whole, between closely-related concepts/words/things. Whether we are concerned with a physical 'part', eg *give me a hand*, a part in the sense of an 'attribute', eg *the small screen*, or a part in the sense of an 'effect', eg *smoke* standing for *fire*, they have in common that they involve relatedness. It is the property of relatedness which distinguishes metonymy from metaphor. Expressed in cognitive linguistics terminology: metonymy involves 'highlighting' between *closely related* domains within a domain matrix, while metaphor involves 'mapping' between *unrelated* or *distantly related* domains, which are not part of the same domain matrix (Croft 1993:348).

It will be argued that metonymy is important in understanding word categories, eg synonyms, hyponyms, prototypes and sense vs reference; it is the mechanism behind the process of 'narrowing' involved in understanding literal language and highlighting/hiding in metaphoric language; it plays a vital role in naming individual entities and complex social practices through the selection of a single salient feature; it is used in discourse to give an 'ultra-realistic' register and to persuade by exemplification. The relationship between an original text and a translation is metonymic, so is the relationship between different varieties of English and between a learner's first and second language.

Metonymy has been overlooked, perhaps because it is less obvious and less colourful than metaphor. This has meant that a hugely important source of linguistic expression has been little researched and under-exploited in applied linguistics, although, being concerned with

'relatedness', it is a resource which is readily to hand, already within the user's grasp.

2. Word Meaning and Categories

2.1 The Vital Role of Metonymy in the language system

Part-whole relations are fundamental to language systems and processes of language use in general. They are inherent in the sense-reference relationship of word meaning, in the relationship between prototypes and exemplars, hyponyms and superordinates, between synonyms, between antonyms, and between core and radial categories.

SENSE AND REFERENCE
The distinction between 'sense' and 'reference' was identified by Frege (1960 [1892]) and explored by later language philosophers, such as Russell and Strawson. The 'sense' of a word is its generic meaning, its definition, eg "A ball is a round object used in a game or sport …"; while 'reference' is the representation of an entity in the real or imagined world, eg "Alex is holding a ball". The relation between general sense and specific reference is part-whole and therefore metonymic (Radden 2008).

PROTOTYPES
A prototype is an idealized example of a category, the 'best fit'. Rosch demonstrated that speakers, when asked to rank exemplars of a category from most to least prototypical (eg for BIRD: *robin, sparrow, owl, eagle, ostrich, emu, penguin* …), were not only able to carry out the task, but all the informants came up with similar lists (Lakoff 1987:44). The relationship between an idealized prototype of a category and real exemplars is metonymic: "metonymic models of various sorts are the sources of a wide variety of prototype effects" (Lakoff 1987:203).

HYPONYMS AND SUPERORINDATES
The relationship between *hyponyms* and *superordinates* is a further example of a part-whole relation. The relationship between *vehicle* and *car*, *bus*, *lorry*, *van* etc is similar to the relation between prototypes and exemplars, in that a hyponym is part of its superordinate whole: "the relationship between hyponymy and metonymy is obvious, since one of the fundamental relations of metonymy is that of signifying inclusion through part-whole relations" (Al-Sharafi 2004:131).

SYNONYMS AND ANTONYMS

The relationships between synonyms are metonymic. Synonym pairs share denotational (core) meaning, but depart with respect to connotational (non-core) meaning (as well as having different colligational and collocational behaviour). Antonyms, whether complementary, gradable or reversive, show a negative overlap of features, a match between features present in one and features absent in the other.

RADIAL CATEGORIES

For Lakoff, 'radial categories' are extensions of a central core concept, eg *adoptive mother*, *birth mother*, *surrogate mother* being extensions of the core concept MOTHER (Lakoff 1987:84). Radial categories are related metonymically to the core category (though Lakoff suggests that metaphoric and image schema relations are also involved) (Lakoff 1987:204): "categorization is essentially a metonymic process because according to Lakoff whenever we see something as a kind of thing, for example a tree, we are categorising. This kinship or associative relation between elements within the same domain is the essence of metonymic signification and has been identified by rhetorical scholars since ancient times" (Al-Sharafi 2004:57).

3. Naming and Finding Salience

3.1 The use of metonymy in naming

Metonymy is a convenient way of identifying entities in the real world which do not have names and is achieved by choosing one aspect of an entity to identify the whole. Metonymy is convenient for naming shops, magazines, products, etc, eg a hairdresser's called *Scissors*, a magazine about wine called *Decanter*, a techie journal called *Click!*. In sign language salient features are used to identify celebrities, eg 'big ears' for Prince Charles, 'an opening trouser zip' for Bill Clinton.

3.2 Intrinsic and extrinsic metonymies

Croft & Cruse distinguish between 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic' metonymies: *intrinsic metonymies* are those in which the feature selected is an essential part of the definition of the entity, while *extrinsic metonymies* rely on features external to the definition of the entity, features acquired from the particular context in which they are found

(Croft & Cruse 2004:217). Examples of intrinsic metonymies are: *small screen* (television), *pay with plastic* (credit card), *bubbly* (champagne), *mouse* (computer mouse). Only a small part of a frame is need to access the whole.

Extrinsic *metonymies*, those relying on external features, are a convenient device for identifying people in situations where their names are not known or where proper naming is not salient. The favourite in the literature is restaurant talk, *Ham sandwich is waiting for his check* (Lakoff & Johnson 1980:35). Other examples are: hospital talk, *The appendectomy is in theatre*; hotel talk, *Room 44 hasn't had her dry cleaning yet*; in companies, *He's sales. She's IT*.

3.3 A small-scale research study on naming across languages

A small-scale study was carried out in which the naming of an entity, the mobile phone, was considered across languages. Ten languages were represented: Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Urdu.

METHOD: Informants, mostly native-speakers, were asked to find a translation for *mobile phone* and give an 'interlinear' translation, ie a very literal explanation of what each 'bit' of the translation meant.

RESULTS: The expressions for *mobile phone* given by the informants fell into three categories: one around the idea of the CELLULAR structure of the network, one around the idea of a mobile phone being PORTABLE, and one around the idea of a mobile phone being SMALL.

CELLULAR	PORTABLE	SMALL
Russian	Greek	German
syotovoy telefon	*kinitó*	*Handy*
honeycomb	mobile	handy
telephone		
	Spanish	Chinese
Portuguese	*móvil*	*shou ji*
celular	mobile	hand machine
cellular		
	French	Italian
Italian	portable	*telefonino*
cellulare	*portable*	telephone little
cellular		

Arabic	Urdu
telephone	*haatif saafaree*
khilyawi	telephone
telephone cellular	travelling

These all indicate metonymic relations between the object, 'mobile phone', and the term used to describe it, as each term selects one aspect of the whole.

3.4 Metonymy: beyond naming

Metonymy is involved in more than just naming. It is also used to emphasize one aspect of an object/concept to give it salience. For example, to say *I have got your details up on screen* emphasizes the idea of information which is visible and directly accessible; the *small screen* emphasizes size and contrasts with the cinema screen, while the *silver screen* has associations of glamour and stardom. These expressions do more than just identify 'computer', 'TV' and 'film', they add information and enrich the message.

Metonymy is especially suited to identifying complex social practices, because such phenomena offer many features which can be used as a 'way in' to identifying the phenomenon. To illustrate this, take the practice of serving refreshments to passengers in trains and planes from a trolley. The term the UK train company Southern Trains happens to use in their announcements is *at-seat service*, but there are many ways to describe this; *refreshment service, trolley service*, *aisle service*, *seat-side service* … which all identify the phenomenon adequately. And, of course, there are many other possibilities which use words other than *service.*

Metonymy is something of a footnote in the metaphor literature, taking up a single chapter if dealt with at all (eg Gibbs 1994, Knowles & Moon 2006, Lakoff & Johnson 1980). The problem with most accounts is that they do not go beyond considering the referential function, eg "Metonymy is about *referring*: a method of naming or identifying something" (Knowles & Moon 2006:54), failing to recognize its many other functions, such as enriching, shortening, focussing and giving spin. Lakoff & Johnson's 1980 account, however, does go beyond referring:

> metonymy is not merely a referential device. It also serves the function of providing understanding", and "which part we pick out determines which aspect of the whole we are focusing on. When we

say that we need some *good heads* on the project, we are using "good heads" to refer to "intelligent people"" (Lakoff & Johnson 1980:36).

Radden labels metonymies which are used for referring, 'referential metonymies', and metonymies which describe events by focussing on one aspect of the action, he calls 'event metonymies' (Radden 2008). Radden compares expressions in Japanese meaning 'to drive' (translated from Song): *I have not ridden wheels recently* emphasizes mobility, while *I have not held a steering wheel recently* emphasizes control; similarly in English *sitting behind the steering wheel* emphasizes the monotony of driving, while *to have wheels* emphasizes mobility and freedom (Radden 2008).

For Esnault, rather than opening up new paths as metaphor does, metonymy "hurries over the stages in paths that are too well worn and shorten the distances so as to facilitate the rapid intuition of things that we already know" (Nerlich et al 1999:362). This 'shortening' has a parallel with the cognitivist understanding of grammatical (over lexical) meaning: that it is 'broad meaning', an economical way of expressing ideas which it would be too tedious and time-consuming to repeat each time (Evans & Green 2007).

4. Linguistic mechanism

Language which is not literal is either metonymic or metaphoric. In this section, I demonstrate that part-whole relations are the common mechanism behind all types of language: metonymic, literal and metaphoric. Part-whole relations, operating below the level of the whole word, allow the expression of all three. If we imagine that each word is stored as an 'encyclopaedic entry', containing all the features of the word, denotational and connotational, then metonymic, literal and metaphoric language are all created by selecting some of the information in the encyclopaedic entry and ignoring the rest: in the case of metonymy, one feature (or a limited number of features) is selected to stand for the whole; in literal language, meaning is narrowed by deselecting certain features which do not apply for that particular context; and in metaphor, features from the connotational end of the encyclopaedic entry are highlighted while the rest are suppressed. This is explained below.

Metonymic language – Any combination of the three elements of the Peircian sign, 'interpretant', 'representamen' and 'object' (concept, word and entity), may be involved when representing a whole by a part;

Kövecses & Radden 1998 provide an analysis of the permutations (Kövecses & Radden 1998). In both *bubbly* to mean 'champagne' and *smoothie* to mean 'a liquidized fruit drink', a part stands for the whole; in both, the 'vehicle' is a single feature of the drink standing for the whole, the concept and word being onto the entity, thus creating a new sign.

Literal language – If we take the word 'red' and use it to qualify different nouns, eg *red carpet*, *red lorry*, *red apple*, in each case, a different quality of RED is understood. A specific meaning is chosen in each case from all the possible meanings of *red* in the mental lexicon. In each case, a process of 'narrowing' reduces the possibilities and excludes meanings which are inappropriate for that context, but which are nonetheless available in the full 'entry' for *red*.

Metaphoric language – With metaphoric language, semantic features are selectively chosen from the encyclopaedic entry of a word/concept. These features are highlighted while other features, often core, are 'hidden'. The difference between metaphor and metonymy is that in metaphor the features selected are from the connotational end of the encyclopaedic entry of the term used metaphorically (the vehicle), while in metonymy the features tend to be from the denotational end. Also, equally significant, in metaphor, the features which are highlighted are mapped onto an unrelated domain, while in metonymy it is a related domain. If we take the concept CHAMPAGNE, we can select features from the connotational end to give conventional metaphors such as *champagne lifestyle*, *champagne socialist*.

In the lexicon, we see a phenomenon whereby three meanings of a lexical item coexist but remain distinct by one being literal, one metonymic and one metaphoric. The metonym is usually achieved either by zero derivation (conversion) or affixation. For example: **bubbly** = with bubbles (literal), champagne (metonymic), vivacious (metaphoric); **smooth** = not rough (literal), fruit drink, ie *smoothie* (metonymic), debonair (metaphoric); **flat** = on one level (literal), apartment (metonymic), not lively, eg *the party was flat* (metaphoric); **thick** = not thin (literal), milkshake, ie *thickie* (metonymic), stupid (metaphoric).

4.2 Taxonomies

Many attempts have been made to classify metonymies. Lakoff & Johnson (1980), Nerlich et al (1999), Radden & Kövecses (1999) and Kövecses (2002) all offer taxonomies. These taxonomies show a variety of metonymic relations and show how heterogeneous 'contiguity' is. They classify metonymies into broad relational categories, such as PART

FOR WHOLE, PLACE FOR THE EVENT, EFFECT FOR CAUSE, CONTROLLER FOR CONTROLLED, PRODUCER FOR PRODUCT, AGENT FOR ACTION. It would be hard to identify this as a list compiled by a traditional rhetorician or a modern day cognitive linguist, because metonymy scholars, unlike metaphor scholars, have nearly always taken a 'cognitive' approach; they have always been concerned with exploring the systematicity of metonymy.

These taxonomies are problematic, though, as they can never be comprehensive. Also, classification gives an artificial sense of categories being clearcut, while utterances often fall into more than one category (eg 'blood' in *We need new blood* is both part and aspect). It is also important to say here that in the approach I am taking in this paper *all* metonymic relations are potentially reversible; so, if a PART standing for the WHOLE relation is metonymic, so is the reverse, the WHOLE standing for a PART.

4.3 Metonymy vs relatedness

The terms 'related', 'contiguous' and 'part-whole' almost interchangeably in the context of this paper, and although distinctions can be made between them, I wish to explore them here. Instead I wish to make a distinction between these overlapping terms, on the one hand, and 'metonymy', reserving 'metonymy' (part-whole relations, contiguity, etc.) plays an *active* role in meaning making, not just when these relationships exist.

Most of the metonymies discussed in this paper have been conventionalized metonymies, that is, uses which are already part of the corpus of the language, those which are reported in dictionaries. These are not really metonymies at all, as such expressions are processed automatically, extracted from the mental lexicon/phraseicon whole without any need to recognize contiguity. They are discussed here by way of convenience for two reasons: they need less contextualizing than novel examples and they present concrete evidence of metonymic processes having taken place.

5. Discourse and Text Metonymy

So far in this paper I have looked at the significance of metonymy in understanding single words and expressions. In this section I turn to the role of metonymy in organizing longer stretches of language. The terms 'discourse' and 'text' are used almost interchangeably in linguistics.

They are used to refer to 'whole' 'real' texts, created for the purpose of communication, whether spoken or written. In this section, I use the terms 'discourse metonymy' and 'text metonymy', but make a distinction between them: I use 'discourse metonymy' to refer to the framing of discourse by adopting a distinct communicative 'voice' or 'register', achieved by focussing on one part of the discourse; and 'text metonymy' to refer to the use of relatedness between lexical items in order to enhance the cohesiveness of the text as a whole. I examine each in turn.

5.1 Discourse Metonymy

Discourse metonymy is a way of framing discourse by changing focus or register. The discourse/text narrows to a particular part or instance, as if the author were responding to a reader's request for exemplification. The result is to make the discourse ultra-real, 'more literal than literal', achieved through the use of powerful physical images or personal testimonies.

Jakobson discusses this phenomenon (referring to it simply as 'metonymy') and extends it beyond language to other semiotic modes, eg art, film and stage (Jakobson 1956:94-96). He contrasts metonymy with metaphor and presents them as the two and only two modes by which discourse may be progressed:

> The development of a discourse may take place along two different semantic lines: one topic may lead to another either through their similarity or through their contiguity. The METAPHORIC way would be the most appropriate term for the first case and the METONYMIC way for the second, since they find their most condensed expression in metaphor and metonymy respectively. (Jakobson 1956:90)

While discourse metonymy allows us to argue by exemplification. In contrast, 'discourse metaphor' allows us to argue by comparison. I use two invented examples to illustrate these two modes of argumentation, one is a politician arguing by exemplification (discourse metonymy underlined):

> The earnings of lower-income workers are just not enough to live on. <u>One of my constituents receives £45 family allowance a week; she works full time, has a weekend job as well as helping out at a butcher's, but is still in debt</u>.;

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the second is a journalist arguing by comparison (discourse metaphor underlined):

> The only criterion for the Think Tank was that its members should have an IQ of over 140. It is a bit like buying a computer, not loading any software and expecting it to do computations for you".

The text below, from a guide to the French city Lille, provides and authentic example of discourse metonymy. This text begins with literal discourse, but then goes into discourse metonymy (from "here you can shop …"):

> the dramatic Centre Euralille shopping mall, this huge business and leisure development is the key to the city's renaissance. Designed to serve more than ten times the population of Lille, here you can shop for essentials or luxuries, attend some of Europe's most talked-about parties, enjoy concerts or even prepare a meal in a rented apartment. (Philips 2000:14)

The noticeable shift in register here indicates to the reader that the underlined passage is to be understood as a list of activities (shopping, attending, enjoying, preparing) which stand for all possible activities. The effect is a more vivid image than a catchall phrase such as "retail and entertainment possibilities" (although, specifying a 'rented' apartment in the text, seems almost to signal a literal recommendation rather than a metonym!).

It is important to note that individual metonymies are not (necessarily) involved in constructing discourse metonymy; in the metonymic passages in the text above, the language is literal. Lodge makes the same point in his analysis of an extract from Forster's *Passage to India*: "[the opening of *A Passage to India*] is metonymic in structure, though it contains no metonymies (and a few metaphors)" (Lodge 1977:98-99).

5.2 Testimonies

Another example of discourse metonymy is the use of testimonies and vox pops. The reader/listener builds up a picture from a series of individual accounts. For example, one unit of a university study guide, describing strategies for dealing with stress at exam time, uses testimonies to summarize the unit. They are effective because the testimonies are engaging and real, eg "I get on the bus and look out of the

window: it makes me day-dream and I feel more relaxed when I get back.", "I put on my headphones, choose something really wild, and turn it up loud. I might even dance along if no-one else is in." (Cottrell 2007:170).

Testimonies are sometimes actively requested by employers, a form of interviewing known as 'Competence Based Interviewing'. In this, the candidate is asked to give specific examples of personal competencies, eg "What achievements in your life are you most proud of?", "Tell me about a time when you were in a difficult situation with a colleague, and how you set about resolving this situation", "Tell me about a time when you contributed proactively to the team in bringing about an improvement in working practices" (Hazel Beale, private communication).

5.3 Text Metonymy

Text metonymy is the use of metonymy to organize longer stretches of text by contributing to cohesion. It differs from 'discourse metonymy' in that it does not involve a change of register/focus/voice, instead it contributes to the 'textual function' in Halliday's sense (Halliday 1996). Al-Sharafi proposes that all six categories of Halliday & Hasan's categorization of cohesion, lexical and grammatical, involve metonymic relations and contribute to text metonymy (which he calls 'textual metonymy') (Al-Sharafi 2004).

Ellipsis and reiteration are particularly significant here. The shortening of *chilli con carne* to *chilli* or *Pret A Manger* (a UK sandwich shop chain) to *Pret* are examples of ellipsis; the relation between the expressions is part-whole. Metonymy is serving a general need for parsimony in language use. Reiteration is one of the categories of lexical cohesion identified by Halliday & Hasan in their account of cohesion (Halliday & Hasan 1976), the other being 'collocation', and includes superordinates, hyponyms, meronyms, synonymy, antonyms etc, all categories which involve relatedness.

The use of reiteration has the effect not only of referring to something again but of progressively enriching meaning as the discourse unfolds. In the text below, synonyms and hyponyms are used to achieve text metonymy. The expressions used for Andrew's coldness towards Gwen are different ways of saying the same thing, but each contributes richness.

Andrew handled his sensitivity and reactivity somewhat differently. Andrew's style was to turn a deaf ear to Gwen. She referred to this as "the deep freeze." He was civil, even polite, but completely unavailable. Gwen had learned it was best to leave Andrew alone

until he was <u>ready to interact</u>. Trying to talk with him when he <u>pulled back</u> was like cornering a fox, which will bite when trapped. It was hard for Gwen when <u>Andrew walled her out</u>. (Schnarch 2002:142)

Although some of the terms are metaphoric, ie *turn a deaf ear*, *deep freeze*, *pull back*, *wall out*, their relationship to each other (and to the more literal terms, ie *unavailable* and *not ready to interact*) is metonymic. Al-Sharafi suggests that "metonymy accounts for the relations of lexical cohesion in a more satisfactory way than the term 'lexical cohesion' itself" (Al-Sharafi 2004:126).

6. Implications

In this paper, I have argued that metonymy plays a vital role in communication and conceptualization. Now I explore the implications of these findings for three categories of language user: the language learner, the editor and the translator/interpreter.

Language Learners – Metonymy plays a role in the production of utterances, but metonymic processing also allows those on the receiving end of learner utterances to compensate for their incomplete knowledge of the language. This applies to linguistic interaction in general: we do not always have the ability to recall the ideal word in everything we say; instead we often rely on words which are the 'next best fit', trusting the 'tolerance of ambiguity' of those we speak to.

Learning in the most general sense is characterized by metonymy. How learning takes place and which environments best promote learning are questions which have long occupied educational theorists. Vygotsky and Miller both associate learning with relatedness: Vygotsky's notions of 'scaffolding' and the 'Zone of Proximal Development' suggest learning takes place when new information is added to a structure of knowledge already existing in the mind of the learner (Vygotsky 1986); while Miller believes "new things are learned by being related to things already known" (Miller 1993:357).

Editors – The process of editing involves the creation of texts which are metonymically related one to the next. In writing this paper, I constantly revised what I wrote, each version being closely related to the previous version (except when major revisions were made or large stretches of new material added). The process of editing often involves deletion, and the versions before and after deletions are related metonymically.

Translators/interpreters – The relationship between a text in one language and its translation in another is clearly not literal, because no two codes/languages correspond exactly. Neither is it metaphorical, even if metaphorical solutions are occasionally used. Instead translators/interpreters constantly engage in the middle ground between literal and metaphorical, searching for words/phrases which more or less correspond in the two languages. Translation is an activity where practitioners expend most of their energies exploring metonymic relationships between languages at different levels within the text, concurrently at the level of word, phrase, clause and discourse.

To achieve this, translators/interpreters engage in a variety of strategies which compensate for 'loss' and 'gain', called translation 'shifts' in the translation studies literature, a term coined by Catford (Catford 1965). The best comprehensive account of this is the classification devised by Vinay & Darbelnet, consisting of seven categories, 'borrowing', 'calque', 'literal translation', 'transposition', 'modulation', 'equivalence' and 'adaptation' (Vinay & Darbelnet 1995 [1958]). The first three, borrowing, calque and literal translation (all types of 'direct translation'), are all minor shifts; 'modulation' is the most obviously metonymic, as it includes 'cause-effect', 'part-whole', 'part-part', 'reversal of terms' and 'negation of opposite'; equivalence is metaphoric and adaptation involves a change in the cultural setting (Vinay & Darbelnet 1995 [1958]).

Metonymy is inherent in the relationship between foreign-language texts and their translations, between a 'bad' translation and a version improved by editing, between language varieties, eg British English and American English, between an individual's L1 and L2, and between languages themselves.

7. Conclusions

I have argued in this paper that metonymy plays a vital role in communication and conceptualization, and that it is important both at the level of individual phrases and at the level of discourse; also, that it is the mechanism behind the creation of literal, metonymic and metaphoric language, because all three involve the selective highlighting of certain features and the suppression of others, and thus part-whole relations. I suggest that a metonymic approach to investigating linguistic communication is a fruitful one. It reveals a commonality between phenomena not usually considered together, suggesting that at the level of processing many phenomena have a common basis.

Why then has metonymy received so much less attention that metaphor? I feel the answer it that metonymy appears at face value to be less exciting than metaphor. Metonymy was overlooked because it is less noticeable and less colourful. The same was the reason that collocation went unnoticed for so long

> Linguists and teachers have traditionally concentrated their attention on the extreme ends of the spectrum: free combinations and idioms. […] The large and complex middle ground of restricted collocations (not generally recognized as a pedagogically significant category) is often regarded as an unrelated residue of arbitrary co-occurrences and familiar phrases. (Howarth 1998:42)

The implications are that the huge expressive potential available to language learners, editors and translators/interpreters through metonymy is not always recognized. It is a resource which, by definition, is to hand, but applied linguists are left to discover it for themselves. The development of a general theory of metonymy offers us a way of redressing the balance.

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