



Aristotle and Paul Ricoeur on the Metaphor: the Rhetoric of Renaming

Alyssa BARNES
Shorter College

Keywords: *metaphor, Aristotle, Paul Ricoeur, rhetoric, poetics, renaming, ethics of rhetoric.*

All words are not created equal: some words are better than others at painting a picture, at describing and convincing. Metaphors – the renaming of one thing as another – are perhaps the royalty of language, for they have a way of structuring everything surrounding them, of making everything else subservient to themselves. “[T]he greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor,” says Aristotle (Bywater 1952, 694), and history has proved him correct. From the “Iron Curtain” and the “Cold War” to the “invisible hand” and the “glass ceiling”, metaphors not only describe reality but they also shape how we think about it. That means that the speaker who determines a guiding metaphor wields great power. Take the following as an example:

A lawyer friend of mine was hired to defend a large Southern utility [company] against a suit by a small one, and he thought at first that he was doing fine. All of the law seemed to be on his side, and he felt that he had presented his case well. Then the lawyer for the small utility [company] said, speaking to the jury, almost as if incidentally to his legal case, “So now we see what it is. They got us where they want us. They just holding us up with one hand, their good sharp fishin’ knife in the other, and they sayin’, ‘you jes set still, little catfish, we’re *jes* going to *gut* ya.’” At that moment, my friend reports, he knew he had lost the case. “I was in the hands of a genius of metaphor.” (Both 2006, 77–78)

Metaphor’s power lies in its ability to isolate characteristics by means of comparison; in isolating only certain features, it necessarily conceals others. In the above example, the metaphor is the following: *The small Southern utility company is a catfish about to be gutted.* What is revealed is the victim status that small often has to big; however, the *typical* values of the courts system, truth and justice, are completely ignored. In other words, the metaphor, in this case, appears to be misplaced; it is one that highlights the relationship between predator and prey rather than between justice and injustice.

We can see by this example, where the small utility company becomes a hooked fish and the big company is the calloused fisherman, knife in hand, that there is a

hidden logic to the metaphor. This is one of the reasons metaphors are so powerful. A metaphor actually carries within itself a leap in logic in which the audience supplies the missing information; Aristotle calls this leap of logic the *enthymeme*. Let us take, for example, the metaphor “Achilles is a lion”. Actually, “Achilles is a lion” is a premise within a logical syllogism that is implicit albeit intuited. The full syllogism could be articulated in the following way:

*Lions are courageous.*¹

Achilles is a lion.

■ *Achilles is courageous.*

In this syllogism, the first premise is a belief assumed to be shared by all humans: “Lions are courageous.” The audience already holds in mind that conviction, silently filling in the syllogism first premise. Skipping over the second premise – the metaphor “Achilles is a lion” – temporarily, we recognize that the conclusion (“Achilles is courageous”) remains unstated. The claim of the metaphor (“Achilles is a lion”) is quickly conceded as such only when the conclusion is anticipated and tacitly provided by the audience. The maker of the metaphor relies upon the enthymematic quality of metaphor to supply what remains unstated. So it is with all metaphors: one might be able to argue that a given comparison is a bad one, but the logic of the compared thing itself is, for the most part, incontestable.

Now we can return to the catfish metaphor, considering the nature of the syllogism existing behind the metaphor of the utility company as a catfish. Again, the syllogism could have the following valid form:

Catfish are gutted.

The small company is the catfish.

■ *The small company is going to be gutted.*

The power of the metaphor lies in what the audience fills in: the victimization. If the speaker were to tease out the connection explicitly, removing the intellect and imagination of his audience, all of the punch of the metaphor – its *oomph* – disappears.

Having considered metaphors’ ability both to emphasize and occlude – to highlight and hide – and in terms of its unspoken logic, we can now turn to twentieth-century philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s theory of the metaphor. The earlier metaphor, “Achilles is a lion”, can serve again as our example. Ricoeur notes that metaphor is something that happens to the noun; in other words, one *thing* (Achilles) is seen in light of some-*thing* else (a lion) (R i c o e u r 1996, 329). Also, says Ricoeur, metaphor is defined in terms of the epiphora – that is, a movement or displacement from thing to thing (Ibid.). Furthermore, metaphor involves not only *deviation* (Achilles is, for a moment, not himself) but also a *borrowing* (Achilles borrows an attribute from a lion).

These features of metaphor – the noun-centrality, the *epiphora*, the deviation, and the borrowing – point to the great power of metaphor and make sense of Aris-

¹ The term *courageous* could easily be replaced with other lion-esque attributes, such as *fierce*, *strong*, or *large*.

totle's words: "[T]he greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor. It is the one thing that cannot be learnt from others; and it is also a sign of genius, since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars" (Bywater 1952, 694). Ricoeur points out that in Aristotle's *Poetics*, a literal translation reveals the use of the term *metaphor* as an action – that is to say, Aristotle uses the word as a verb. Hence, "metaphorizing well" suggests the seeing of resemblances between things (Ricoeur 1952, 335). And here Ricoeur makes his most interesting point thus far: this kind of seeing of resemblances between two unlike things must also be the flipside of the categories themselves. In the above example likening Achilles to a lion, the metaphor arises, according to Aristotle, from one's ability to see the similarity – courage, fierceness, or strength – in these two species of different categories. The metaphor thus technically exists in the transgression of the category. This ability, however, to gather up a bunch of different creatures, all lions but none identical, and create the category of "lion" in the first place is that very same ability. As Ricoeur says, in short, "The 'metaphoric' that transgresses the categorial order also begets it" (Ibid., 336). In other words, creating a category in the first place is the act of making a metaphor. Thus, metaphorizing well is key to organizing reality into language itself.

Having analyzed metaphor proper, Ricoeur then ties metaphor to the project of rhetoric, that is, the art of persuasion. It is here that we get to the heart of Ricoeur's essay, which is his concern for what might be called *liveliness*. One of the most memorable themes in Aristotle's talk on metaphor is "urbanity" – that is, whether the expressions used are lively and elegant – and it turns out that this urbane style is tied to metaphor's ability to be instructive. Aristotle points to the pleasure of the surprise in a good metaphor. As Aristotle says in *On Rhetoric*, "Now strange words simply puzzle us; ordinary words convey only what we know already; it is from metaphor that we can best get hold of something fresh" (qtd. in Ricoeur 1996, 346). This is, of course, why metaphor is preeminent over simile; by being shorter, more direct, and more surprising, metaphors are simply better teachers than similes. Ricoeur then connects the value of metaphor to *lexis*, or language expression, itself. If *lexis* exists in fact "to make the thing appear to the senses", as Aristotle argues in *On Rhetoric* (Kennedy 1991, 225), then metaphor's ability of "bringing-before-the-eyes" is not merely cosmetic or accessory; it is, rather, the very point of speech.

Thus, we can see that metaphorizing is at the heart of swift and lively persuasion – and perhaps even at the core of the human ability to employ language at all. But the way that metaphors function in *poetic* discourse remains at issue. In order to see how they work in imaginative works, we need to look at Aristotle's notion of imitation – what he terms *mimesis* – in the *Poetics*. Ricoeur notes that Plato, Aristotle's teacher, took *mimesis* to have an almost boundless extension; Aristotle, however, limits it to what we might call a "reasoned making", or an "ordered imitation", so that it is both an imitation of reality at the same time that it is "an original creation". That is to say, in the mimetic act, art and reality marry. And fostering this

union of art and reality is the metaphor. Metaphor, in light of such a lofty view of mimesis, has a function far beyond mere deviation from the ordinary word. On these grounds, metaphor falls into a grand project: the project of poetry itself, which is, in Ricoeur's words, the "submission to reality *and* fabulous invention, unflinching representation *and* ennobling elevation" (Ricoeur 1996, 352).

Ricoeur's brilliance shines brightest in the final project of his essay – the teasing out of *mimesis phuseos*, normally translated "imitation of nature" – although Ricoeur might qualify those terms. We have already seen how he understands *mimesis* to be not mere imitation but a selective imitation, a reasoned ordering, or, as in our early discussion, both a hiding and a revealing. Now Ricoeur considers *phuseos*, usually translated "nature". *Phusis*, he argues, would have been understood by the Greek differently than we understand it today. The Greek would not have believed nature to be some "inert 'given'" (Ibid., 354) but something more like raw potency. This potential is reminiscent of the eerie moment before an orchestra begins, that moment of discordant tuning which contains all the notes that make up the potential symphony. And with this take on *mimesis phuseos*, Ricoeur skillfully concludes:

But *mimesis* does not signify only that all discourse is of the world; it does not embody just the *referential* function of poetic discourse. Being *mimesis phuseos*, it connects this *referential* function to the Real as Act. This is the function of the concept of *phusis* in the expression *mimesis phuseos*, to serve as an *index* for that dimension of reality that does not receive due account in the simple description of that-thing-over-there. To present men "as acting" and all things "as in act" – such could well be the *ontological* function of metaphorical discourse, in which every dormant potentiality of existence appears *as* blossoming forth, every latent capacity for action *as* actualized (Ibid., 355).

In other words, language – and in particular metaphor – taps into what would otherwise lie dormant in reality. Or, as rhetorician Scott Crider argues, "Reality needs us" (Crider 2007). It is metaphor's ability to displace language away from the literal that actually opens up another dimension – like being able to see something better in one's peripheral vision than by looking straight at it. The claim is, then, that poetry can reach and even manifest being itself.

To sum up, we should reiterate that metaphors rename things, but they do so selectively. By isolating only certain characteristics through means of comparison, metaphors necessarily hide others. Similarly, metaphors also hide their logic, carrying within themselves a hidden syllogism, and because humans are naturally logical, the verbal leap in logic is powerful. And finally, Ricoeur seems to say that language – and in particular metaphor – taps into what would otherwise lie dormant in reality. If these things about metaphor are true, then the orator who determines a guiding metaphor can actually go so far as to establish the very categories of thought.

But such power invites even further questioning. What, for example, is the orator's ethical responsibility in employing metaphors? Should we seek an ethics of

metaphor? Could such ethics even exist? If we are right about metaphor, then metaphor reveals – which is good, for it allows us to know truthfully. In other words, the metaphor is reliable as a medium of truth. But we have also recognized that the metaphor also hides – which is questionable, at least. The act of metaphorizing, then, is one that obviously can lend itself to abuse, with its potency calling the orator to address such ethical considerations. For the transfer accomplished by some metaphors could allow for a transgression of categories that proves dangerous or at least irresponsible. And if masters of metaphor truly establish the categories of thought, then they hold tremendous sway over their audience. Therefore, the making of metaphors, considered by Aristotle “a sign of genius”, is revealed to be an enterprise both full of promise and fraught with risk.

References

- B o o t h 2006 – Wayne C. Booth, “The Rhetoric of Metaphor”, *The Essential Wayne Booth* (ed. Walter Jost), Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- B y w a t e r 1952 – Ingram Bywater, trans., *Poetics*, by Aristotle, Great Books of the Western World (ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins), Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.
- C r i d e r 2007 – Scott F. Crider, Lectures on Advanced Composition, University of Dallas, Irving, Texas, USA.
- K e n n e d y 1991 – George A. Kennedy, trans., *On Rhetoric*, by Aristotle, New York: Oxford University Press.
- R i c o e u r 1996 – Paul Ricoeur, “Between Rhetoric and Poetics”, *Essays on Aristotle’s Rhetoric* (ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty), Berkeley: University of California Press.

Alyssan Barnes

Aristotelis ir Paulis Ricoeuras apie metaforą: vardo pakeitimo retorika

S a n t r a u k a

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: *metafora, Aristotelis, Paulis Ricoeuras, retorika, poetika, vardo / pavadinimo pakeitimas, retorikos etika.*

„Pats didžiausias pasiekimas iki šiol yra būti metaforos meistrui“, – sakė Aristotelis, ir istorija patvirtina jo teisumą. Nuo „šaltojo karo“ ir „geležinės uždangos“ iki „nematomos rankos“ ir „stiklinių lubų“ metaforos suteikia realybei naują pavadinimą, kartu formuodamos mūsų supratimą apie ją. Išskirdama palyginimo būdu tikrai tam tikrus bruožus, metafora būtinai paslepia kitus. Metafora taip pat slepia savo logiką, turėdama savyje paslėptą Aristotelio vadinamąją *entimemą*. XX a. filosofas Paulis Ricoeuras pažymi, kad metaforos, pagrįstos *epifora*, nukrypimu ir skolinimusi, yra tiek mums pažįstamo pasaulio atskleidėjos, tiek jo formuotojos. Iš tikrųjų metaforos sugebėjimas susieti skirtingas kategorijas arba nepanašius daiktus yra toks pat kaip ir sugebėjimas visų pirma išskirti šias kategorijas. Kitaip sakant, pirminis kategorijos sukūrimas yra metaforos sukūrimo, arba *metaforizacijos*,

aktas. Taigi mokėjimas gerai metaforizuoti yra raktas į realybės organizavimą per kalbą. Be to, metaforos leidžia kalbai įgauti tai, ką Ricoeuras vadina gyvumu (*liveliness*), kas yra daugiau nei paprasčiausias stilius ar sąmojis. Tai reiškia, kad pati kalba įgauna šviežumo, kuris eina kartu su nauju dariniu. Nagrinėjant Ricoeuro ir Aristotelio sąlyčio taškus pastebima, kad kalba, o ypač metafora, panaudoja tai, kas kitaip liktų nepanaudota realybėje. Jei taip yra iš tikrųjų, tai oratorius, nustatantis pagrindinę metaforą, nustato mąstymo kategorijas. O potencialas formuoti auditorijos mintis ar jomis manipuliuoti yra būtent tai, kas verčia mus svarstyti etinius klausimus, ypač susijusius su metaforos sugebėjimu neatsakingai užmaskuoti ar nustelbti skirtumus.

Alyssan Barnes

Aristotle and Paul Ricoeur on the Metaphor: the Rhetoric of Renaming

S u m m a r y

Keywords: *metaphor, Aristotle, Paul Ricoeur, rhetoric, poetics, renaming, ethics of rhetoric.*

“The greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor,” says Aristotle, and history has proved him correct. From the “Iron Curtain” and the “Cold War” to the “invisible hand” and the “glass ceiling”, metaphors rename reality, thus shaping how we think about it. By isolating only certain characteristics through means of comparison, metaphors necessarily hide others. A metaphor also hides its logic, carrying within itself a hidden enthymeme, as Aristotle would call it. The twentieth-century philosopher Paul Ricoeur points out that the metaphors, with their epiphora, deviation, and borrowing, are both revealers and shapers of the world as it is known. In fact, the metaphor’s ability to link diverse categories or unlike things is the same ability that establishes those categories in the first place. In other words, the original creating of a category is the act of making a metaphor, or metaphorizing. Thus, metaphorizing well is key to organizing reality into language itself. Additionally, metaphors allow for the language to regain what Ricoeur calls *liveliness*, which connotes more than mere style or wit. Instead, it suggests freshness that accompanies a new creation begotten by language itself. By considering the intersection of Ricoeur and Aristotle, one finds that language – and in particular metaphor – taps into what would otherwise lie dormant in reality. If this is so, then the orator who determines a guiding metaphor establishes the categories of thought. And that potential to shape or manipulate the audience’s thoughts is one that invites ethical considerations, particularly regarding a metaphor’s ability to mask or obscure differences irresponsibly.

Alyssan BARNES
Department of Humanities
Shorter College
315 Shorter Avenue SW
Rome, GA 30165
USA
[alyssantaylor@hotmail.com]