



Typology of Metaphors: Implications for Translation*

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Abstract:

There are many different kinds of metaphor, with different grammatical, conceptual and semantic properties. Each of them represents specific problems to the translator. The purpose of this article is to draw attention to these different kinds of metaphor and to their properties, and to underline those that could be a challenge for translation.

Key words: metaphor, translation problems, translator choices.

Resumen:

Existen diferentes tipos de metáforas, con diferentes propiedades gramaticales, conceptuales y semánticas. Cada una de ellas representa problemas específicos para el traductor. El propósito de este artículo es llamar la atención sobre estos diferentes tipos de metáforas y sobre sus propiedades, centrándonos en aquellos que podrían representar un desafío para el traductor.

Palabras clave: metáfora, problemas de traducción, decisiones del traductor.

Résumé:

Il existe différents types de métaphores, avec des différentes caractéristiques grammaticales, conceptuelles et sémantiques. Chacune représente des problèmes spécifiques pour le traducteur. Le but de cet article est d'attirer l'attention sur ces métaphores et sur ses propriétés, et de nous centrer sur celles qui représentent un défi pour le traducteur.

Mots clé: métaphore, problèmes de traduction, décisions du traducteur.

* I am grateful to the colleagues and pupils who attended my talk at the Nida School for Translation Studies held in Murcia in June 2010, and in particular to Prof. David Weber for drawing my attention on the tendency to translate metaphors as similes and to Dr. Steve Modugno for providing me with illuminating examples from different English translations of the Bible. I warmly thank Prof. Martha Pulido for the occasion she offered me to publish a paper in the native country of my son Guglielmo. But in the first place I must thank my pupil Nicoletta Spinolo. During my last year in Forlì, she asked me to help her write a dissertation about the ways of dealing with metaphors in simultaneous interpreting, drawing my attention on the topic itself. I am also in debt to my colleague Annalisa Baicchi for reviewing the article for language quality.

Introduction

When I taught at the High School for Translation and Interpreting of the University of Bologna at Forlì, I happened to hear one colleague, a teacher of simultaneous interpreting, tell his students to: “Kill the metaphor”. Owing to the pervasiveness and functional engagement of metaphors in linguistic expression, I think that this idea is absolutely wrong. Contrary to hasty conclusions, however, the main reason for my disagreement does not reside in the cruel verb *to kill*, but rather in the innocent singular form of the direct object – *metaphor*. A simultaneous interpreter, who has a very short *décalage* at his disposal, is often compelled to kill a metaphor in order to cause the least damage (Spinolo & Garwood 2010). The situation of a translator is very different on this point. However, a translator is not bound to reproduce the individual choices made by the author of the source text. Rather, he has to preserve their functional motivations, which are variable according to the type of text (Prandi 2007). To translate a poem is not the same as to translate an instruction booklet. During the translators’ training, the latter kind of translation is mainly taught; it is the one most often required by the market, and therefore the most likely to be handled by graduates entering a profession. Within purely functional texts, it may happen that a metaphor is reformulated without causing negative reactions, and even that the reformulation of a metaphor is a necessity. But the relevant question remains: what kind of metaphor?

As a matter of fact, the real problem with the cruel directive “to kill the metaphore” is the singular form: it is nonsense to speak of ‘metaphor’ in this regard. Indeed, there are many different kinds of metaphor, with different grammatical, conceptual and semantic properties. Each of them creates specific problems for the translator. I am not a translator, and my contribution to the discussion does not lie in explaining how to translate or not to translate metaphors. My purpose is simply to draw attention to different kinds of metaphor, to focus on their different grammatical, conceptual and semantic properties, and to underline those that could be a challenge for translation. This is consistent with my idea that linguistic description can help translation at preliminary stage (Prandi 2007).

1. Metaphor: a general definition

What is absolutely amazing about metaphor is the great number of different and even opposite theories that have been put forward over the centuries. In the history of thought, metaphor has been defined both as a transfer of a word into a strange domain (Aristotle, *Poetics*) and as an extension of word meaning (Dumarsais 1730 (1988)); as a strange substitute for a proper word (Fontanier 1968; Genette 1968; Groupe μ 1970; Todorov 1970) and as a way of putting strange concepts into interaction (Richards 1936; Black 1954; 1967); as a system of shared and non-dispensable concepts at the service of consistent thought (Blumenberg 1960; Weinrich 1958; 1964; Lakoff & Johnson 1980; Lakoff & Turner 1989; Gibbs 1994) and as a textual interpretation of a conflictual complex meaning that challenges consistent thought (Weinrich 1963, 1967; Prandi 1992; 2004). None of these ideas

of metaphor is completely false, and none is altogether true. Each of them is supported by some relevant data; no one is compatible with all of them.

This proliferation of definitions is the consequence of an inadequate perspective on metaphor. The metaphorical process has a unique source, that is, conceptual transfer and interaction, but is open to many different and even opposite issues. If one focuses on the issues, many different and even opposite conceptions of metaphor seem both reasonable and supported by empirical data. Some metaphors are consistent, and others are conflictual; some coincide with meanings of words or expressions, and others with textual interpretations of complex expressions; some stem from conflictual meanings, and some coincide with consistent ones; some are open to substitution, and others are not. On these grounds, each theory that focuses on one issue is condemned to be partial, and therefore to be torn between inadequacy and inconsistency. The idea that metaphors are textual interpretations of conceptual conflicts, for instance, is true when applied to living metaphors, but false if extended to both catachreses and shared metaphorical concepts. Owing to this, it cannot be generalised into an adequate theory of metaphor.

In order to build up a unitary and unifying theory, one has to shift the focus from the issues to the source. If the focus is shifted to the source, metaphor becomes a unitary and consistent process, for any metaphor stems from a conceptual transfer triggering conceptual interaction. On these grounds, the different and even opposite issues are easy to justify on the basis of explicit differential parameters open to empirical investigation.

According to the telling metaphor used by Geoffroy de Vinsauf, a metaphor is a sheep that has jumped over the fence into an alien meadow: “*propria ovis in rure alieno*”. The adventure has one beginning – the jump over the fence – but is open to many issues. It is possible that the intruder, worried about the consequences of its act, will jump back to its own territory. If it decides to remain and face the indigenous beasts, it may submit and negotiate a peaceful hospitality, or fight to impose its conditions, to a lower or higher degree. The same happens with metaphor. At the source of any metaphor, there is the transfer of a concept into a strange conceptual area, which necessarily ends in conceptual interaction between strange concepts. Whereas transfer is one and the same, conceptual interaction is open to different, even opposite issues.

2. Conceptual transfer and interaction

2.1. Transferring words and transferring concepts

The process of identifying, in transfer and interaction, both the essence of metaphor and its distinctive feature faces a huge historical obstacle. In the literature on figures, the transfer is not seen as the specific and distinctive feature of metaphor,

but as a common feature shared by metonymy and synecdoche¹. Against this premise, what distinguishes the different figures is not the presence or absence of transfer, but the nature of the relationship between concepts involved. Although widespread, this idea is based on a misunderstanding dating back to Aristotle and encapsulated in his seminal definition of metaphor.

According to Aristotle (*Poetics*, 57b (21)², “Metaphor is the application of a strange term (*onómatos allótriou epiphorà*) either transferred from the genus and applied to the species, or from the species and applied to the genus, or from one species to another or else by analogy”. Before meaning *metaphor*, *metaphorà* means *moving, transfer*. What Aristotle certainly means by using this term is that a meaningful word is transferred among strange meaningful words. However, the transfer of a meaningful word into a strange frame is a necessary condition for conflict, but not yet a sufficient condition for conceptual transfer. To transfer a concept is only one way of processing a conflict, as an alternative to building a consistent bridge between the conflicting concepts. Insofar as they stem from a conceptual conflict, metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche imply the transfer of a word. However, only metaphor transfers a concept into a strange domain. This point can be illustrated by comparing the metonymic and metaphorical interpretation of such an ambivalent conflict as the one conveyed by *They sleep, the mountain peaks* (Alcman).

The sentence contains a conflicting meaning because the verb *sleep* has been displaced into a strange conceptual frame, documented by its subject, the mountains. This, however, is far from implying that sleeping and its living subjects are transferred into inanimate nature.

If a metonymy is activated, sleep is not applied to the mountains, but to the animate beings that live in them. Owing to this, the concept of *sleep* remains firmly anchored in the realm of living creatures, while mountains remain inanimate things. Metonymy does not involve a transfer because it establishes a consistent relationship between two concepts that, however heterogeneous, remain anchored in their respective conceptual domains: living beings dwell in the mountains. The activation of a consistent relationship between two heterogeneous concepts is incompatible with transfer.

If a metaphor is activated, a concept is really transferred into a strange domain: sleep, for instance, is really applied to the inanimate nature. Owing to this, heterogeneous concepts are made to interact: a consistent state of mountains is seen as if it were a kind of sleeping, and mountains are seen as if they were living beings.

¹ Barcelona (2000:4) speaks even of “conceptual projection” for metonymy.

² Engl. transl. by W. Hamilton Fyfe, *The Poetics*, The Loeb Classical Library, London - Cambridge/Mass. 1973. The noun *metaphorà*, used by Aristotle, does not have our restricted sense, but the general sense of “transfer”. In his Italian translation Lanza uses *traslato* as equivalent for *metaphorà* (Aristotele, *Poetica*, Introduzione, traduzione e note di D. Lanza, Rizzoli, Milan, 1987).

2.1. Conceptual interaction as algebraic magnitude: Reduction, substitution, projection

The best way to approach conceptual interaction is the observation of conflictual figures. The following lines of a poem by the Italian poet Giovanni Pascoli provide an example of conceptual conflict:

A ogni croce roggia
pende come abbracciata una ghirlanda
dove gocciano lagrime di pioggia

From every rust-red cross
Hangs, as if embracing it, a garland
From which drop tears of rain

The passage describes a cemetery in the rain. Within this coherent textual *frame*, the noun *tears* introduces a strange, conflicting concept, which Black (1954) calls *focus*. Raindrops, which are absent from the expression, form the relevant textual topic, consistent with and recoverable from the coherent frame. Once a strange focus is not simply connected to a frame, as is the case with metonymy, but really applied to it, two incompatible concepts are compelled to interact. Interaction can be seen as a competition between two incompatible concepts for determining one and the same thing. When the expression *tears of rain* is used to refer to raindrops, for instance, the concept of *tear* and the concept of *drop* are in competition for determining those aggregates of water falling from sky when it rains. The concept of *drop* is the tenor (Richards 1936); it has the privilege to be the shared and consistent guardian of the conceptual identity of the thing. The concept of *tear* is the subsidiary subject³ (Black 1954), that is, the intruder that challenges this identity.

When a competition takes place, we can imagine two opposite issues and a null balance. So behaves interaction. The balance of the interaction between a subsidiary subject and a tenor is an algebraic magnitude, which is open to a negative, a null and a positive balance.

The positive balance of interaction is projection: the conceptual profile of the tenor is both challenged and reshaped under the pressure of the subsidiary one. As an empirical datum, projection is a graded magnitude. Projection can stop after the first step, as in the case of a stereotyped interpretation, as well as run ahead towards the most unpredictable outcomes. When faced with the conflictual concept of *tears of rain*, for instance, one can simply conclude that raindrops and tears are both made of water and look very similar, and stop there. Recovering a trivial analogy is the most immediate way of stopping projection as soon as it starts. However, one can also go on. If there are tears, one may think, someone is crying. Who?

³ A brief terminological clarification is needed here. *Frame* and *focus* (Black 1954) identify the overt constituents of the conflicting expression, whereas *tenor* (Richards 1936) and *subsidiary subject* (Black 1954) refer to the concepts that interact in metaphor. The two pairs of concepts are not superimposed on one another, because both tenor and subsidiary subject may be covert as well as overt constituents of the expression. Our decision to use the couple *tenor – subsidiary subject*, which picks one term from Richard's pair (*vehicle – tenor*) and the other from Black's one (*primary subject – subsidiary subject*) is based on the same rationale: both *primary subject* and *vehicle* strongly suggest that these concepts are overt constituents of the conflicting expression, which is not necessarily the case.

Probably, Nature. If Nature is crying, there must be some reason. The poem's title, *Il giorno dei morti*, reminds us of All Souls Day. Maybe Nature is sympathetic to the suffering of human beings. In that case, Nature is no longer the cruel stepmother described by another Italian poet, Giacomo Leopardi, but a sympathetic mother, who shares her sons' pain, and so on. The trivial analogy between tears and raindrops we started from looks very far away⁴.

Simple substitution can be seen as a null balance of interaction: in the presence of a substitutive option, interaction is blocked before it starts. If, after realising that the expression *tears of rain* refers to raindrops, the addressee simply restores the tenor at the expense of the subsidiary subject, no interaction is triggered.

Following Black (1954), interaction and substitution tend to be seen as incompatible interpreting strategies for metaphorical utterances. In fact, substitution is one specific outcome of interaction. The null balance is not the same as the absence of interaction. According to Kant (1763(1992: 211)), the null balance of a dynamic interaction between two opposite forces – for instance, the state of rest of a book on a table, where gravitation is counterbalanced by the opposite resistance of the solid surface - is not to be confused with the absence of competing forces. The same can be said of substitution. If the conceptual challenge launched by a subsidiary subject is blocked by the resistance of the tenor, the null balance does not imply that there is neither competition nor interaction. The best way of illustrating this point is to examine a kind of metaphor that, owing to its structure, is open to both projection and bare substitution, that is, the metaphorical noun in referential position⁵.

In the presence of a metaphorical noun phrase in referential position, the tenor coincides with the relevant text referent (Karttunen 1969), which is a covert constituent of the conflict. Accordingly, the first step towards any interpretative strategy is ideally the recovering of the relevant text referent. In the presence of such a noun phrase as *tears of rain*, for instance, the first step is to realise that it refers to raindrops. Once the tenor has been recovered, two paths open up before the

⁴ The actual interpretation of a metaphor in a given text is a pragmatic process governed by the same criterion of relevance that is the same that motivates the interpretation of any utterance (Sperber & Wilson 1986; 1986a; 2008). Contrary to Sperber & Wilson's claim, however, this does not imply that metaphorical projection does not have a conceptual structure of its own. Relevance is a contingent criterion, bound to a given text or situation; as a conceptual structure, projection has a long-lasting structure. As far as consistent metaphorical concepts are concerned, this structure is documented by a shared repository of lexical values; in the presence of conflictual metaphors, the conceptual structure of projection is circumscribed by the consistent conceptual environment of the subsidiary subject.

⁵ The substitutive option is normally criticised for being less interesting and stimulating than the competing projective choice, but its availability has never been called into question. Now, the availability of a substitute cannot be assumed as a matter of course for any kind of metaphor. On the contrary, it is an empirical property of some kinds of metaphor that has to be investigated on the field and justified on structural grounds. Moreover, substitution is never a property of metaphors as figures, but a property that qualifies some kinds of expression in their general use, which is inherited by metaphors when one of these expressions holds as metaphorical focus. The most interesting case is provided by referential noun phrases, which are by definition substitutable in their function.

interpreter. One can either stop there, sticking to the relevant referent and dropping the conceptual bait offered by the subsidiary subject *tears*, or go forward, and ask in what sense and within which limits drops *are* tears. If one stops, there is a bare substitution. If one goes forward, there is projection: the subsidiary subject reshapes the tenor. Both substitution and projection start from the identification of the tenor, which is put into conflict and competition with the subsidiary subject; both substitution and projection are issues of one and the same process of conceptual interaction framed by one and the same paradigm *in absentia*.

The negative balance of interaction gives birth to reduction, documented by the so-called dead metaphor, or lexical catachresis⁶. The subsidiary subject is wholly adapted to the conceptual identity of the tenor. Instead of enriching the tenor under the pressure of the subsidiary subject, a lexical catachresis prunes the subsidiary subject, so to speak, to the point of consistency with the tenor. An instance is the concept of *wing of a building*. Instead of launching the building up into the sky, its metaphorical wings lose the aptitude for flight.

The argument for considering catachresis a step along the path of interaction, though located on the negative side, is that a catachresis is always ready to turn about and follow the path of projection: thanks to its metaphorical wings, a building is always ready to fly. The radical impoverishment of the subsidiary subject that is commonly called the death of a metaphor lacks the irreversibility of real death - like the sleeping girl of the fairytale, a dead metaphor can be raised to new life at any moment⁷. The path one follows backwards is the same as that one can follow forward – the path of conceptual interaction. In the following lines by William Butler Yeats, for instance, the idiom *to be under someone's feet* is revitalised by the co-textual entreaty and therefore put into conflict with the poet's life: *Tread gently, tread most tenderly, / My life is under thy sad feet*.⁸

3. Consistent and conflictual metaphors

A distinction that cuts across our first typology based on the balance of interaction has to do with an essential property of the metaphorical content: there are metaphors that have a consistent content, and there are metaphors that challenge

⁶ The influential French rhetorician Fontanier (1968: 213) names *catachresis* (*catachrèse*) a metaphorical or metonymic meaning extension leading to a new sense of an old word: "Catachresis is the affectation of an already significant word to a new idea devoid of its own expression in the considered language". I find this concept very useful because it allows us to draw a clear distinction between regressive and projective lexical extensions. As we shall see in the following lines, catachreses remain isolated and dead, that is, non-productive, whereas extensions depending on living metaphorical concepts are ready to form rich interconnected networks of new uses of old words.

⁷ On the reactivation of 'dead metaphors' in texts thanks to favouring contexts, see Landheer (2002).

⁸ This lines, belonging to the early poem *Your Pathway* (in W. B. Yeats, *Under the Moon: The Unpublished Early Poetry*, ed. by G. Borstein, Scribner, New York, 1995) foreshadow the famous couplet *I have spread my dreams under your feet; / Tread softly because you tread on my dreams*.

our most deeply rooted conceptual structures.

Consistent metaphors are well integrated in our shared ways of speaking and thinking. When we speak of the wing of a castle or of a wish that is cherished, for instance, we express ourselves in the most natural way. We are hardly aware to use metaphors at all.

Conflictual metaphors are textual interpretations of complex meanings that contain a conceptual conflict: for instance *And Winter pours its grief in snow / When Autumn's leaves are lying* (Emily Brontë). Within our shared natural ontology, winter is not conceived as a human being that can feel grief; besides, grief is not a concrete liquid substance to be poured. In metaphors of this kind, traditionally named *living metaphors* (Ricoeur 1975(1978)) the conceptual conflict is overt – one is fully aware of it. However, the conflict is not felt as a fault, but as a resource and an occasion – the proof that the structure of the expression contains the seeds of conceptual creation.

3.1. Kinds of consistent metaphors

The traditional views on metaphor directly oppose dead catachreses and living, conflictual metaphors. The most explicit statement in this sense is made by Fontanier (1968). If this opposition were confirmed by facts, the distinction between consistent and conflicting metaphors would perfectly superpose to the distinction between regressive and projective interaction. Things, however, are most complex. Beside regressive catachreses, the heritage of consistent metaphors at the disposal of a linguistic community contains an impressive wealth of metaphors that are both consistent and projective. Moreover, a good amount of consistent concepts that circulate in a linguistic community are not anonymous products of a sort of spontaneous generation, but spring out of individual acts of creations based on the linguistic construction of conceptual conflicts.

Catachresis is simply a way of expressing a familiar concept using an alien word. In the presence of catachresis, the tenor is well known independently of its metaphorical label, so that its independent conceptual identity governs the path of metaphorical extension. The absence of any active conceptual pressure on the tenor blocks projection, and therefore condemns the extension to isolation. Isolation and non-productivity, in turn, are a precondition of death.

The most significant instances of consistent metaphors at the disposal of thought are not provided by isolated and dead catachreses, but by shared metaphorical concepts of the kind focused on by Lakoff & Johnson (1980). Unlike catachreses, shared metaphorical concepts are grounded in living and productive schemes of thought, and tend to form active and productive relational networks. As Gibbs (1994: 277) points out, figurative concepts prove that “what is conventional and fixed need not be dead”. As in the presence of conflicting metaphors, projection is not an isolated transfer, but has the structure of a complex conceptual swarm: a whole system of interconnected concepts is ready to provide a conceptual model for categorising a whole target domain.

Unlike catachreses, metaphorical concepts do not require a preliminary identification of well-defined targets, but are ready to shape them thanks to projection itself. In this way, metaphor is not simply a strategy for naming well-known entities, but first of all a strategy for opening unexplored territories to consistent thought and imposing a shape on them.

Combining the swarm effect and the power to shape the target, projective metaphorical concepts are engaged in colonising whole conceptual areas whose structure and contents are neither necessarily nor typically accessible independently of them. The function of metaphorical transfer is not to project a single subsidiary subject onto a single tenor, but to provide a conceptual way of access to a target domain as a whole – a model for categorising the target domain. If passion is fire, for instance, the whole domain of passion is ready to inherit a significant part of the lexicon of fire: it burns, or warms, or is hot; it can be either extinguished or lighted; in the latter case, the victim catches fire and maybe is burnt to a cinder, and so on. This in particular holds for the abstract domains of inner experience, which are normally categorised owing to concrete models belonging to outer experience: “Take *belief*. It is like a child: it is conceived, adopted, or embraced; it is nurtured, held, cherished and entertained; finally, if it appears misbegotten, it is abandoned or given up. The same is true, with less variety, of thoughts, suspicions, intentions and the like” (Vendler 1970: 91).

Consistent and conflictual metaphors do not belong to completely separate domains, but are bridged by a territory of concepts that, though consistent and shared, spring out of acts of individual creation based on conflict. These concepts do not form part of the anonymous repository of the common language, but belong to specialised areas of expression, to philosophy and science in the first place, but also to more down-to-earth terminological repertoires. Before being shared as consistent technical terms, these concepts spring out of conceptual conflicts that challenge both consistency and sharing. Up to the point of consistency, the process of creation and interpretation that leads to these concepts takes the same path as poetic metaphors. If this kind of concept is taken into account, the room for creation spreads far beyond the borders of poetic metaphors, and highlights the strategic role of conflict, and therefore of linguistic expression, in creating consistent thinking.

A good example of consistent concept born out of a conceptual conflict is Kuhn’s idea of *scientific revolution* (Kuhn 1962), belonging to the technical lexicon of epistemology. This metaphor both challenges the traditional assumption of linear progress of scientific research by conveying the conflicting and traumatic idea of political revolution, and encourages us to select, among the most qualifying properties of political revolutions, hints and insights on re-thinking the way sciences develop in history. The conflict is neither avoided, as in catachresis, nor simply kept in the background as a source of useful insights, but intentionally aroused and exasperated as an instrument of discovery. Nowadays, the insights encouraged by conflict and projection have been integrated into a firm and consistent concept accepted by the scientific community, and the metaphor has become one of the

conceptual tools of epistemology as a distinct and technical sense of the word *revolution*.

The case of concepts of individual creation shows that conflict is not confined to poetic imagination but can play a constitutive role within the most sophisticated consistent thinking⁹. In such concepts as *scientific revolution*, consistent thought valorises the same steps to be found in poetic metaphors, that is, individual creativity, conflict and open projection. This is the reason why these concepts, however consistent, share some qualifying properties of conflictual metaphors.

3.2. Relevant differences between consistent and conflictual metaphors

3.2.1. The semiotic regime: meanings and interpretations

A catachresis is one sense of a polysemous word: for instance, *wing* as side part of a building.

Considered in itself, a metaphorical concept is not immediately the meaning of a word or expression, but a structure of thought. However, the availability and active strength of metaphorical concepts is documented by more or less rich swarms of interconnected extended meanings of words and idioms motivated by them. The use of *cherish* with *hope* as direct object, for instance, documents the metaphorical concept of emotions as dear persons. This use is a distinct sense of a polysemous word. Conceptual metaphors also justify the use of complex expressions as idioms: the idea that money is liquid, for instance, motivates both the extended sense of *pour* - *The US continued to pour money into the South to keep it in power* (British National Corpus) - and the idiomatic use of the expression *throw down the drain* with money: *I'm worried about the security situation in Afghanistan and might be money just has been thrown down the drain* (EPIC¹⁰).

The contents of consistent metaphors, both catachreses and senses motivated by metaphorical concepts, are coded and shared meanings of words or phrases, registered as such in dictionaries. Metaphor is encapsulated in these meanings.

The content of a conflictual metaphor is not the meaning of the conflicting expression, but one contingent and reversible message that can be interpreted out of it. Whereas the conflictual meaning of the expression belongs to the symbolic order of long-lasting significant structures, the figure belongs to the indexical dimension of message, bound to a text or an act of communication. The content of the figure is contingent because its relevance can only be assessed against the background of a contingent text or communicative situation. It is reversible because any contingent solution can both lose its relevance in another use of the same expression and be challenged by competing options within the same text or situation. And it is

⁹ This insight underlies Ricoeur's concept of living metaphor ("*métaphore vive*": Ricoeur 1975(1978).

¹⁰ The multi-lingual corpus EPIC was created by a multidisciplinary research group coordinated by Mariachiara Russo at the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies on Translation, Language and Culture (SITLeC) of the University of Bologna at Forlì (Spinolo & Garwood 2010).

indexical because its content is the outcome of an act of inferential interpretation justified within the borders of a given interpretation field (Prandi 2004: Ch. 1). While the solution is a contingent and reversible option, the conflict is an endlessly renewable source of conceptual energy. This point is well illustrated by the behaviour of inconsistent verbal metaphors. Let us go back to Alcman's verse *They sleep, the mountain peaks*.

The meaning of the expression is in no way ambiguous or indeterminate: it univocally attributes the conflictual state of sleeping to mountains and other inanimate beings. Its semantic richness is completely due the impact of the conflict.

Unlike a consistent expression, which builds up a one-level process, the inconsistent saturation of an unsaturated relational term like *sleep* gives birth to a split and two-layered kind of process, and hence to a surplus of structure, including supplementary concepts and relations. The mountains are in competition with the consistent subjects of sleeping, that is, to living beings, while a virtual counterpart of the verb consistent with the actual subject – a conceivable state of the mountains described as a kind of sleeping - is ready to be called on stage.

This complex conceptual structure, intricate and layered but univocal, naturally opens to many different interpretative paths. Some of them are figurative and some are not. Among figurative options, metaphor coexists with metonymy. For all of them the starting point is easy to identify; for some of them, one can foresee the end point; for some others, the outcome is completely out of sight.

The first point to be stressed is that a figurative interpretation, however natural it may seem, is no more than a contingent textual option for a conflictual meaning. Alcman's verse, for instance, could be meant to describe an alien world, governed by a peculiar conceptual lawfulness, crowded with animate mountains. In this case, the expression would not be taken as conflictual, and even less as figurative. In Phaedrus' fables, for instance, animals and even trees do actually speak, which implies that the following discussion between a fly and a mule has to be taken literally:

Musca in temone sedit et mulam increpans
 "Quam tarda es" inquit "non vis citius progredi?
 Vide ne dolone collum compungam tibi".
 Respondit illa "Verbis non moveor tuis".

For a figurative interpretation to be activated, the expression must apply to our shared world, ruled by the conceptual lawfulness we silently share. Among figurative options, as we have already remarked, the expression admits both a metonymic and a metaphorical interpretation. If a metonymic option is chosen, the true experiencers of *sleeping* are no longer the mountains, but the living beings that live in them. If a metaphorical option is chosen, the two conflicting conceptual territories are not bridged by a consistent conceptual link, but face each other as unconnected and conflicting domains. In the absence of a consistent bridge, the conflicting concept of living being is actually transferred into the realm of inanimate nature. Conflict is not avoided but has to be passed through, so to speak.

In our example, the metaphorical focus is a verb. When the focus is a relational concept, and in particular a verb, a metaphor acts on two logically distinct, though interacting, levels. It either achieves a conflictual categorisation of a process – a state of the mountains is categorised as an instance of sleeping – or involves inconsistent kinds of beings into a process: such inanimate beings as the mountains are said to sleep. To say that mountains sleep, accordingly, amounts to authorising two logically distinct and yet interconnected metaphorical transfers: it is either a way of seeing a consistent state of the mountains as a kind of sleep, or a way of seeing the mountains as animate beings allowed to sleep.

Within the borders of either option, the set of paths open to metaphorical interpretation spans from some trivial and ready-made analogy - for instance, the peaceful immobility of the mountains reminds one of a sleeping creature – to the most unpredictable and unexplored issues. It is in this sense that metaphor is to be considered an open conceptual conflict.

Alcman's example is an extreme case, for the different interpretative paths open to its unique meaning and their unpredictable developments are really interchangeable and virtually coexist even against the background of the text they belong to. This is typical of poetic figures, which in fact do not ask the reader to put an end to the conflict, but to keep it open, and to sum up all the available issues into semantic density. In a narrative text, it may happen that the message conveyed by a metaphor marks a relevant step within the thematic progression of the text. In these cases, the conflict imperatively asks for a definite interpretation. In spite of this, it is clear that even the relevant interpretation is no more than one contingent option. This is the case, for instance, with Fielding's passage *At least the Ocean, that hospitable friend to the wretched, opened her capacious arms to receive him*. Within the plot of the novel, the coherent interpretation is "He determined to go to sea". This, however, is only one contingent option. The same conflictual meaning would be equally suitable for a text describing a suicide or a peaceful swim. It would be interpreted as a metaphor in all these cases, but the metaphor would not be the same.

If one meaning can give rise to many metaphors, not to speak of non-metaphorical options, it does not make sense to read the metaphor in the meaning of the expression itself. When one speaks of metaphorical meaning, and more generally of literal, non-literal and figurative meaning, one simply confuses the meaning of the expression with one of its allowed contingent interpretations.

3.2.2. Dependence on the expression

The difference between consistent and conflictual metaphors calls into question the relationship between metaphors and linguistic forms. A first rough formulation of the question could be the following: are metaphors embodied in shared and independent conceptual structures, or are they actively constructed by linguistic expressions?

According to the first hypothesis, the most common conceptual structures contain an essential and non-dispensable metaphorical layer, so that we can conceive of a sort of “spontaneous generation” of figures out of the consistent conceptual ground itself. The role of linguistic forms is simply instrumental, and restricted to expression, stabilisation and social circulation of independent metaphorical concepts (Lakoff & Johnson 1981; Lakoff & Turner 1989; Gibbs 1994).

According to the second, the role of linguistic forms in creating metaphors is active. Thanks to a solid network of grammatical relations, whose structure is insensitive to the pressure of constructed concepts, a sentence has the strength to put together atomic concepts in a creative way, so as to build up inconsistent complex meanings (Husserl 1901(1970)). For this hypothesis to be true, there must be at least some figures that are not conceivable as autonomous consistent concepts but are constructed thanks to the power of linguistic forms of expression to impose a mould on concepts (Black 1954; Weinrich 1963; 1967; Prandi 1992; 2004).

The observation of figures of content, and in particular of conflicting ones, shows that both hypotheses are partial, and therefore true if applied within their limits and false if their scope is the whole field. There are figures that naturally grow out of a conceptual ground which already contains a figurative layer, and therefore behave as autonomous consistent concepts, ready to be expressed in the same way as any consistent concept is; and there are figures whose conflictual semantic support cannot possibly be conceived of in purely conceptual terms, but has to be constructed thanks to the active shaping power of linguistic expressions.

Metaphorical concepts of the kind described by Lakoff & Johnson are consistent conceptual structures¹¹. Like any consistent concept, they are accessible to consistent thought independently of their linguistic expression. They depend on none in particular and can be entrusted to many.

According to Lakoff & Turner (1989), many creative poetic metaphors can be justified on the same ground – they both combine and refine some already shared, independent metaphorical concepts. This kind of creativity is internal to consistent thought, and does not require an active role of linguistic expression.

In the following lines by Henry James, for instance, the consistent metaphor HUMAN INTERACTION IS WAR is both developed into finer implications and combined with other available metaphorical concepts. For an undecided young woman, to be suddenly kissed by her lover amounts both to being invaded by a hostile army and surrendering, to being blown by an autumn wind, and to being struck with a whip: *It [the kiss] affected her like the crack of a whip; The surrender was short; The effect was like the moan of an autumn wind, and she turned as pale as if she had heard of the landing, there on the coast, of a foreign army.*

¹¹ As Jäkel (1999) points out, many ideas made popular by cognitive metaphorology form part of a rich heritage of concepts shared by Continental philosophy and linguistics, in particular among German scholars: see in particular Blumenberg (1960) and Weinrich (1958; 1964).

Observing such instances, we can imagine a continuum, ranging from the plain framing of raw metaphorical concepts in words to more or less sophisticated elaborations and variations. Examples of plain framing are *Love is a spirit all compact of fire; I see, sir, you are eaten with passion* (William Shakespeare); *But life is a transit road* (Aleksandr Blok). The expression *Aquae multae non poterunt extinguere caritatem nec flumina obruent illam* (*Canticum canticorum*) introduces a first consistent development: love's flame is focused on as stronger than its antagonist, expressed by water. In the following English reformulation, love successfully fights against the antagonist water not only as fire but also as a living being flood cannot drown: *Many waters cannot quench love, / neither can the floods drown it* (Ireland).

Metaphors like these, which strain the threshold of consistency without really crossing it, can easily be justified against the assumption of shared metaphorical concepts. However, there is a threshold beyond which even a metaphorical concept cannot be stretched without turning into a conflicting meaning. The idea that time flows, for instance, is a deep-rooted consistent metaphor, but how far can one stretch it? Is it reasonable, for instance, to reduce to a mere outpost of this shared concept such metaphors as William Blake's *time's troubled fountains* or Friedrich Hölderlin's *time's waves*?

Und der Jüngling, der Strom, fort in die Ebne zog,
Traurigfroh, wie das Herz, wenn es, sich selbst zu schön,
Liebend unterzugehen,
In die Fluten der Zeit sich wirft.

While away to the plain journeyed the youthful stream,
Sadly-glad as a heart, which, for itself too fair,
Longing swiftly to perish,
Plunges into the tides of time¹².

If it is true that we share such a consistent metaphorical concept as RELATIONSHIPS ARE PHYSICAL LINKS OR CONNECTIONS (Kövecses (2000: 94), is it reasonable to assume that the metaphor *Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks* (Sylvia Plath) analysed by Semino & Steen (2008:233) simply springs out of this concept in a sort of spontaneous generation? Or that the metaphor *I have supped full with horrors* (Shakespeare) and its consistent development *the taste of fear* simply spring out of such a concept as FEELINGS ARE FOOD? In the presence of metaphors that really cross the critical threshold of consistency, the explicative power of shared metaphorical concepts obviously fails, for thought is tautologically consistent. Thought is certainly creative, but this creativity is retained within the threshold of consistency. Inconsistent creation can only be justified as a choice of an individual language user, who valorises the aptitude of formal syntactic structures to connect concepts in unexpected ways.

A conceptual conflict is not an independent concept entrusted to a linguistic form for passive expression and circulation, but a meaning inseparable from the expression that constructs it. Thanks to a solid network of grammatical relations

¹² Engl. transl. by J. B. Leishman, in *Selected Poems of Friedrich Hölderlin*, The Hogarth Press, London, 1954

insensitive to the pressure of the organised concepts, the core of a sentence has the strength to connect atomic concepts into a conflictual relation (Husserl 1901(1970); Weinrich 1963; 1967; Prandi 1992; 2004). Whereas it is consistent to pour such concrete liquid substances as wine or water, and even metaphorically liquid substances like money, it is not consistent to pour grief: *And Winter pours its grief in snow* (Emily Brontë). Whereas a consistent concept is simply brought to expression by a linguistic form because it is conceivable independently of it, a conflictual concept can only be conceived of as the meaning of a specific linguistic expression.

Beside providing the semantic purport for living metaphors, conflictual meanings shed light on an essential property of linguistic forms, and in particular of sentence nuclei, that is, their aptitude to connect complex meanings in a creative way.

The elective function of formal syntactic structures is the connection of atomic concepts to form complex ones. Their creative power is a form of valorisation of this same primary function. Insofar as they make “infinite use of finite means” (Chomsky 1965: Ch. I), syntactic structures are capable of combining atomic meanings in virtually unlimited and unforeseeable ways - of manipulating concepts in a creative way. When it connects atomic concepts into consistent meanings, the sophisticated network of formal grammatical relations built up within the sentence is not valorised at all. Such a complex meaning as *John poured wine into Ann’s glass*, for instance, simply mirrors a state of affairs that could be conceived of independently by consistent thought. When it connects atomic concepts to form conflictual meanings, on the contrary, the same syntactic scaffolding is valorised at its best. Such an expression as *And Winter pours its grief in snow* constructs a complex meaning devoid of any counterpart in the realm of consistent states of affairs.

4. Some implications for translation

The distinction between conflictual and consistent metaphors has an immediate consequence for translation: whereas a conflicting expression is immediately translated into the target language, neither a metaphorical sense of a polysemous word nor an idiom is. When facing the French conflicting expression *La lune rêve* (Charles Baudelaire), one simply translates it word by word: *The moon dreams*. When facing the combination *ténaillé par le désir*, one cannot translate it literally as *clashed with pincers by desire*, but, for instance, as *devoured by desire*; when facing the idiom *casser la pipe*, one cannot translate it as *break the pipe*, but, for instance, as *kick the bucket*, or simply as *die*. The former option – *kick the bucket* – preserves the metaphor while changing its content; the latter – *die* – kills it, so to speak. Against this premise, it is easy to predict that creative metaphorical concepts are translated on the same conditions as living and conflicting poetic metaphors. The English expression *scientific revolution*, for instance, is translated into French as *révolution scientifique*, into German as *wissenschaftliche Revolution*, into Italian as *rivoluzione scientifica*, into Spanish as *revolución científica*, and so on.

These facts are rather trivial, but their reasons and implications are farreaching.

The aim of translation is to reformulate the meaning of an expression into a different language. Now, the relationship between meaning and figure is not the same for consistent and conflictual metaphors. A consistent metaphor is the meaning of the expression; accordingly, one translates the metaphor when translating the meaning. A living metaphor, on the contrary, is not in the meaning of the expression, but one contingent interpretation of it. Accordingly, one does not translate the metaphor, but its semantic support, that is, the conflicting meaning.

To kill a living metaphor, that is, to reformulate it in non-metaphorical terms, is almost impossible: how to find a non-metaphorical reformulation of *La lune rêve*? But, above all, this move would be nonsensical on functional grounds: why to look for a difficult and ephemeral reformulation when a plain translation of the conflicting meaning, open to any kind of interpretation, is direct and immediate?

In the presence of lexical extensions and idioms, to kill the metaphor is an available option in some cases, and even a necessity in others. Some meanings that are metaphorical in the source language have no metaphorical counterpart in the target language; in this case, to kill the metaphor is the only available option. For instance, the French expression *porte condamnée* and the English *condemned door* have no metaphorical equivalent in Italian; their translation cannot be in turn metaphorical. The metaphor is killed, but insofar as the relevant meaning is translated there is no conceptual loss. In other cases, owing to the pervasiveness of metaphors in consistent thought and expression, to kill a metaphor is an almost impossible task. When translating the French expression *ténaillé par le désir*, for instance, the most accessible options are in turn metaphorical, however not based on the same metaphor: for instance *devoured by desire*. In some cases, the translator faces a real choice, as when one decides whether to translate the French idiom *casser la pipe* as *kick the bucket* or simply *die*. In any case, the decision to kill or not to kill a metaphor is seldom an individual choice. Typically, it is a move constrained by the available options offered by the target language, that is, by the forms and contents of its specific lexical structures.

As the examples show, the most difficult metaphors to translate are not creative, conflictual metaphors, rich in content and typically designed for open-ended interpretation, but consistent, conventional metaphors, documented by extended uses of polysemous words and by idiomatic uses of complex expressions. This does not imply that the translation of conflicting metaphors is free of risks. These risks, however, are of a completely different nature.

The difficulties in translating consistent metaphors stem from the different ways lexical structures are organised in different languages, that is, to anisomorphism. Owing to anisomorphism, the distribution of metaphorical meanings in different languages is not the same even when the same metaphorical concepts are active in all of them. In order to discuss this point, let us consider some metaphorical verbs that co-occur with feelings, and in particular with *wish* and *desire*, in English, French and Italian (Prandi & Caligiana 2007).

On the one hand, it is reasonable to expect that about the same metaphorical concepts are relied upon, for the three linguistic groups belong to a broader cultural

community, which is also a “community of metaphors” (Weinrich 1958). In spite of this, some metaphorical concepts are not shared, and those that are, the most significant indeed, do not licence the same meaning extensions. In the former case, we can speak of non-isomorphic conceptual maps; in the latter, of non-isomorphic semantic maps.

Viewed from the standpoint of its metaphorical categorisation, desire appears as a Janus-like concept: a child or a beloved person to *nourish*, *nurse* and *cherish*, but also a burning flame and a savage beast ready to *seize* and *devour* its victim. These source domains are exploited in all three languages. To English *nourish*, *nurse* and *cherish* correspond *nourrir* and *caresser* in French and *nutrire* and *accarezzare* in Italian. To English *burn*, *seize*, *enslave*, *entangle*, *govern*, *shatter*, *overcome*, *enthral* correspond *brûler*, *enflammer*, *consumer*, *happer*, *posséder*, *habiter*, *tirailler*, *emporter* and *dévorer* in French, and *bruciare*, *ardere*, *infiammare*, *accendere*, *assalire*, *incalzare*, *assillare*, *tormentare*, *torturare*, *impadronirsi*, *divorare* in Italian.

While the source domains are shared, the semantic networks are not exactly isomorphic. For such English verbs as *gratify*, *obey* and *espouse* there is no equivalent in either Italian or French; French *embraser* and English *burn to a cinder* have no equivalent in Italian; Italian has *struggersi* (*melt*), an archaic verb hardly used except to refer to feelings. Yet in Italian the person devoured by desire can *scalpitare* (*paw*) as an impatient horse. The idea of liquid desire is shared by English and French, but the former has *pour* while the latter has *submerger* (*drown*). Outside these core domains, some metaphorical concepts are idiosyncratic. In English, for instance, *desire* is a boat one can *harbour* as to protect it from storms, and can *fuel* action, two ideas unknown in both French and Italian. French *tenailler* (*clasp with pincers*), whose Italian equivalent, *attanagliare*, is used with *paura* (*fear*), has no equivalent in English; *tarauter* (*thread*, told of a screw) has no equivalent in either Italian or English.

The behaviour of idioms is very similar. An idiom that is transparent for a speaker of the source language is likely to be transparent for the speakers of the target language too, for the conceptual humus that feeds metaphorical idioms is shared. Once again, however, the use of idioms is highly language-specific. In English, *one throws money down the drain*; in Italian, money *si getta dalla finestra*, that is, *out of the window*. When the difference is very slight, idioms are even more dangerous. The corpus EPIC documents a translation of *now we can sit back on our laurels* as *ora possiamo forse magari sederci sugli allori* (Spinolo & Garwood 2010). But in Italian the right form is *dormire* – *sleep* – *sugli allori*. The verb *dormire* alone is also used in an extended sense to mean the same, that is, ‘to remain inactive and lose one occasion’, as documented by the proverb *Chi dorme non piglia pesci*: *He who sleeps doesn’t catch fish*.

The translation of living metaphors, in principle, does not meet any difficulty of this kind, that is, connected with the differences among languages in lexical structure¹³. The translation of living metaphors is threatened by a different kind of risk – namely, the risk that the richness of their contribution to the text gets lost in translation.

In the presence of inconsistent living metaphors, we do not translate the content of the metaphorical projection, which is the outcome of a chain of inferences made by the interpreter, but the meaning of the conflicting expression itself. If one translates into English Baudelaire's metaphor *La lune rêve*, one does not give voice to his inferences about the relevant contents of metaphorical projections, but simply and plainly to the conflicting expression itself: *The moon dreams*. The conflict keeps firm and ready to trigger the same projections in spite of the changing expressions, for its conceptual purport is shared far beyond linguistic borderlines. The natural ontology according to which the moon is not a human being allowed to dream rules the practical behaviour of Frenchmen as well as of Englishmen: neither would really address a question, give an order or ask a piece of information to the moon. For the same reason, the addressee will be able to interpret the metaphor, drawing the relevant inferences, no matter the language one speaks.

In case of lexical extensions, the decision to kill or not to kill the metaphor is seldom an individual choice. As we have remarked, it is constrained by the available options offered by the target language, that is, by the forms and contents of its specific lexical structures. To kill a living metaphor, on the contrary, is an individual choice. As a living metaphor is fed by a conceptual conflict, the only way to kill it in translation is to replace the conflictual meaning with a consistent reformulation, that is, with the same option highlighted by substitutive theories. Beside the structural obstacles met by any substitutive option, it is clear that a consistent reformulation would not be a translation of the source meaning but of one contingent interpretation of it. As such, it would lead to a substantial conceptual loss, for the whole swarm of projections backed by the conceptual conflict would be reduced to a limited part.

The real risk that threatens the translation of living metaphors, that is, the translator's tendency to superimpose his own inferences on the conflictual meaning, is only a particular case of a more general tendency of translators to engage in over-interpretation and explicitation (Vinay & Darbelnet 1958; Blum-Kulka 1986; Klaudy 1998). This attitude affects the translation of living metaphors in two ways:

¹³The only conflicts depending on language-specific lexical structures, which therefore are threatened by translation, are the conflicts due to transgressions of lexical solidarities (Porzig 1934). German, for instance, has two verbs for eating: *essen* for human subjects and *fressen* for animals. Owing to these solidarities, such an expression as *Hans frisst* is conflictual and metaphorical in German, but not in its word by word translation into English: *John is eating*. The only way to preserve such a conflict is a reformulation: for instance, *John is eating like a beast*. Unlike true inconsistencies, which break largely shared conceptual structures, lexical conflicts depict consistent states of affairs - both animals and human have access to the action of eating – by an inappropriate lexical choice: humans' eating is not denoted by *fressen* but by *essen*. This implies that the conflict is by definition reversible: the state of affairs may be expressed in a non-conflictual way: *Hans isft* (Prandi 2004: 205-212).

it pushes the translator either to reformulate a metaphor as a simile or to reduce the halo of vagueness that surrounds many conflicting expressions.

The former point – translating metaphors as similes – is largely documented in Bible translations. The following passage (*Proverbs* 11, 22) contains a conflictual metaphorical expression:

ne°zem	zähäb	Bü'ap	Házîr	'iššâ	yâpâ	wüsâ°rat	†ä°am
ring	gold	in-nose	pig	woman	beautiful	and-lacking	taste>
							judgment/discernment

This metaphor, faithfully rendered in the Latin version - *Circulus aureus in naribus suis mulier pulchra et fatua*¹⁴ - is turned into a simile in all the major English translations, from King James' - *As a jewel of gold in a swine's snout, so is a fair woman which is without discretion* – to the NASB version: *As a ring of gold in a swine's snout So is a beautiful woman who lacks discretion*¹⁵.

The following example (*Canticum canticorum* 7, 2) is telling in that it shows that the difference between metaphor and simile tends to be overlooked by translators as if it were irrelevant. The original Hebrew expression contains two metaphors:

šorüräk	'aGGan	hassa°har	'al-yeHsar	hammä°zeg
navel-your:fem:sg	bowl/basin/goblet	roundness	will not lack	the-mixed wine
Bi†näk	'ärëmat	Hi††îm	sûgâ	Başšôšannîm
belly-your:fem:sg	heap	wheat	fenced	in/with-the-lillies

The Latin translation alternates a metaphor and a simile: *Umbilicus tuus crater tornatilis numquam indigens poculis / venter tuus sicut acervus tritici vallatus liliis*. Both King James' version and NASB contain two similes - *Thy navel is like a round goblet, which wanteth not liquor: thy belly is like an heap of wheat set about with lilies; Your navel is like a round goblet which never lacks mixed wine; Your belly is like a heap of wheat Fenced about with lilies* – whereas the other versions faithfully choose metaphors: *Your navel is a rounded bowl that never lacks mixed wine. Your belly is a heap of wheat, encircled with lilies* (ESV); *Your navel is a rounded bowl that never lacks mixed wine. Your belly is a heap*

¹⁴ The Latin examples are quoted from *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam Versionem*, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart, 1969(1983). The sources of the English examples are: *The Bible. Authorised King James Version with Apocrypha*, Oxford World Classics, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997; ESV: *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*, 2001-2007, Crossway Bibles (Good News Publishers); NRS: *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America; NASB: *The New American Standard Bible*, 1960-1995, The Lockman Foundation; NIV: *The Holy Bible: New International Version*, 1973-1984, International Bible Society.

¹⁵ See also ESV: *Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman without discretion*; NRS: *Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman without good sense*; NIV: *As a ring of gold in a swine's snout So is a beautiful woman who lacks discretion*.

of wheat, encircled with lilies (NRS); Your navel is a rounded goblet that never lacks blended wine. Your waist is a mound of wheat encircled by lilies (NIV).

Translators should be aware of the differences between metaphor and simile. In spite of Quintilian's statement - *In totum autem metaphora brevior est similitudo, eoque distat quod illa comparatur rei quam volumus exprimere, haec pro ipsa re dicitur* (Institutio Oratoria: VIII, 6, 8) - metaphor and simile are very different strategies of thought. Simile is the figure of analogy. Living metaphor is not - it is the figure of projection. Of course, it may happen that during a contingent act of interpretation projection is stopped once some analogy is discovered between a tenor and a subsidiary subject. However, this does not imply that projection is the same as analogy.

A metaphor triggers projection by transferring a conflicting concept into an alien conceptual domain. Simile compares different things each rooted in its own conceptual area. In the metaphor *Arise fair sun and kill the envious moon* (William Shakespeare), the verb *kill* is transferred from the realm of living beings into the realm of inanimate nature. In the simile *Sicut lilium inter spinas sic amica mea inter filias* (*Canticum canticorum*), plants are not transferred among human beings, but simply compared to them. Metaphor equates heterogeneous objects and concepts triggering conceptual conflict: *News are squirrels*. Predicating similarity, simile assumes differences, and avoids conceptual conflict. In *The news, like squirrels, ran* (Emily Dickinson), news and squirrels are compared on the preliminary condition that they are different: news *are not* squirrels. The message of simile is roughly the following: "Different things display some similarities; I offer you two different things, compare them and you'll certainly find out some". As "everything is like everything and in endless ways" (Davidson 1978(1984: 254)), and "any two things are similar in some respect or other" (Searle 1979: 95), simile is by definition a consistent statement.

As a figure of heterogeneity, conflict and projection, metaphor admits but does not encourage the specification of a ground (Leech 1969: 151), the *tertium comparationis* of the tradition, which severely narrows down the spectre of projection. As an explicit predication of analogy, simile does not logically require the specification of a ground, but encourages it, and makes room for it within its very structure. This difference is sharp if we compare the most straightforward form of each figure, that is, the copulative link. In metaphor, the subsidiary subject occupies the predicate itself as a conflicting focus, whereas the ground, if ever specified, is confined to a peripheral position, typically at the margins of the metaphorical utterance: *They [men] are all but stomachs, and we [women] all but food; / They eat us hungrily, and when they are full / They belch us* (William Shakespeare). In simile, the figure of consistent analogy, the predicate is occupied by the ground, whereas the subsidiary subject finds its place at the margins: *The moon hung like a silver lantern over the orchard* (Vernon Lee); *The woman started to curse in a flood of obscene invective that rolled over and around him like the hot white water splashing down from the sudden eruption of a geyser* (Ernest Hemingway).

All these differences bear deep consequences on interpretation. As a conflictual utterance, metaphor does not allow for literal interpretation. If the conflictual

utterance is interpreted as referring to an alien world, metaphor disappears. As it frames into words a consistent relation of analogy, a simile behaves as any consistent synthetic predication: however open to contingent non-literal interpretations under the pressure of textual coherence and relevance, it opposes no conceptual obstacle to literal interpretation.

Owing to this, one may wonder whether simile is really a living figure in the strong sense, that is, a semantic structure that does not allow for a literal interpretation. The answer is probably negative, and an illuminating argument is suggested by the observation of metonymy. If an expression frames into words both the tenor, the subsidiary subject and the underlying relationship, metonymy disappears, making room for a consistent description of a complex state of affairs. If instead of *In a few days they* [the birds] *would devour all my hopes* Daniel Defoe had written *In a few days they would devour* the seeds that nourished *all my hopes*, there would be no reason to speak of metonymy and figure. If we focus on its linguistic and conceptual structure, containing a tenor, a subsidiary subject, and the explicit predication of a resemblance between them, a simile looks like a form designed for the direct and consistent expression, delimitation and mitigation of the same interaction between strange concepts that metaphor pushes beyond the threshold of conflict. If simile has been traditionally considered a figure since the Classical Age, it is probably because of its contribution to *elocutio* at the service of literary style, Cicero's *ornatus orationis*.

Let us now turn to the latter point, that is, reducing vagueness. Vagueness is a property of a complex meaning. A complex meaning is a network of conceptual relations; therefore, it has a univocal structure when the content of these relations can be exactly defined, and a vague structure if this content remains uncertain. However conflictual, the meaning of the sentence *The moon dreams* is no way ambiguous or vague: it univocally attributes dreaming to the moon. The meaning of the noun phrase *the shadow of authority* (Jane Austen), on the contrary, is not univocal but vague, because the noun phrase may express at least two different conceptual relations: it can mean 'the shadow cast by authority' as well as 'authority, which is a kind of shadow'. The former interpretation is consistent; the latter is conflictual, and open to metaphor. When a vague expression provides a conflictual metaphor with its semantic purport, its vagueness affects the interpretation of the metaphor in a significant way.

The extended noun phrase, including a head noun and one or more complements, is the most extreme case of vagueness. At noun phrase level, vagueness is almost systematic, because coding is seldom up to drawing a univocal conceptual relation. In ordinary communication the weakness of coding is normally relayed by inference, that is, by consistent reasoning motivated by conceptual contents, so that vagueness tends to remain unperceived. When an addressee hears such an expression as *the flowers' girl*, he generally has at its disposal the relevant data to identify the relevant relation between the girl and flowers. But one resource of poetic texts is to avoid resolution and keep vagueness active, turning it into semantic density. Let us observe an example from a poem by William Blake:

Sweet dreams, form a shade
 O'er my lovely infant's head;
 Sweet dreams of pleasant streams
 By happy, silent, moony beams (Blake).

The last two lines form an inextricable network of possible connections whose interaction *in praesentia* forms a dense labyrinth of sense: the streams can be the content of the dreams, but also their local setting, or even their metaphorical subjects, and in fact all these alternatives coexist; the “moony beams” can be part of either the setting or the content of the dream, or both.

In the presence of such a density, the translator is morally engaged in preserving at best its linguistic support and the whole spectre of admitted options. Once more, this point may bear some interesting consequences on metaphor, but is relevant for any vague complex meaning. Just in order to show how easy it is to break the principle of faithfulness to vagueness, I quote one example by a very fine translator, the colleague and friend Stefano Arduini. In his translation into Italian of *Cantico espiritual* by San Juan de la Cruz¹⁶, there is one significant point where what is translated is not the undercoded meaning of the source but the translator's interpretation: *salí tras ti clamando, y eras ido* (*I followed you crying, and you were gone*) is translated as *uscii dietro di te gridando, ma eri andato* (*but you were gone*). Unlike the conjunction *and* documented in the original text, the conjunction *but* chosen by the translator codes a relation of contrast, weakening the impact on the addressee. Leaving him the task of inferring the contrast, *and* makes the addressee aware that the scandal is, so to speak, in things themselves. Directly coding the contrast, *but* confers on the addressee a purely receptive role.

5. Anisomorphism, motivation and arbitrariness

The difficulties met in translating coded metaphorical meanings of words and idioms suggest some reflections about the relationship between largely shared conceptual motivations and language-specific lexical structures.

Cross-linguistic comparison shows that the sharing of complex conceptual structures, including metaphorical concepts, and conceptual motivation are not incompatible with the idea that “Each language must be thought of as having its own semantic structure, just as it has its own phonological and grammatical structure” (Lyons 1963: 37; see also Saussure 1916(1974: 116); Trier 1932(1973: 98)). This sends us back to the *vexata quaestio* of the relationship between the principle of arbitrariness and the empirical datum of conceptual motivation. Beside occupying a central place in a general theory of language, the question of arbitrariness is relevant for translation. Roughly, conceptual motivation opens a straight path to translation, whereas arbitrariness and its cross-linguistic consequence, anisomorphism, put significant obstacles along that path. This is the

¹⁶ Giovanni della Croce, *Cantico spirituale*, Traduzione e introduzione di Stefano Arduini, Città Nuova Editrice, Rome, 2008.

reason why the concept of arbitrariness and its relationship with conceptual motivation deserve some clarifying remarks.

Since Aristotle, arbitrariness has been considered the constitutive property of the signs of human languages. Whereas indexes (*seméia*) are motivated by perceptual or cognitive reasons, linguistic signs (*sýmbola*) do not depend on external motivations, but are significant insofar, and only insofar as they are shared by a linguistic community: linguistic signs are “sounds significant by agreement” (*phonè semantikhè katà synthéken, De interpretatione*, 16a). The principle of arbitrariness as a ground for linguistic signs, explicitly proclaimed by Locke¹⁷, was made popular by Saussure (1916(1978: 100)): “Le signe linguistique est arbitraire”.

Saussure himself is aware that arbitrariness is somehow in attrition with motivation, but his discussion is limited to the marginal datum of onomatopoeia. The first linguist who really challenges the principle of arbitrariness in the noun of motivation, and in particular of iconic motivation, is Jakobson (1966). Highlighting some random tokens of diagrammatic correspondence between forms and meanings, both paradigmatic – *high, higher, highest* – and syntagmatic – *veni, vidi, vici* – which look iconic *a posteriori* against the background of their coded meaning, he launches a challenge to what he calls “Saussure’s dogma of arbitrariness” (Jakobson 1966: 26). Beyond such random facts, the true challenge to arbitrariness is the plain empirical datum of conceptual, metaphoric and metonymic motivation, which is systematically at work in both meaning extensions and linguistic change, underlined by Cognitive Linguistics. Sweetster (1990: 5) stresses that very point: “Saussure was right, of course, that there is an essential arbitrary component in the association of words with what they mean. For example, in *I see the tree*, it is an arbitrary fact that the sequence of sounds which we spell *see* (as opposed to the sound sequence spelled *voir* in French) is used in English to refer to vision. But, *given this arbitrary fact*, it is by no means arbitrary that *see* can also mean ‘know’ or ‘understand’, as in *I see what you’re getting at*. There is a very good reason why *see* rather than, say, *kick* or *sit*, or some other sensory verb such as *smell*, is used to express knowledge and understanding”. Under such a premise, if arbitrariness were incompatible with conceptual motivation, linguistic research would be condemned to a dramatic alternative: either to ignore the empirical fact of conceptual motivation, or to drop the principle of arbitrariness. But is conceptual motivation really incompatible with arbitrariness? To find a way out of this theoretical impasse, it is enough to look deeper into the concept of arbitrariness.

As defined by Aristotle and Saussure, the principle of arbitrariness would certainly be incompatible with motivation, if motivation itself were taken as a principle, competing with arbitrariness to rule the relationship between signifiers and meanings. But the principle of arbitrariness is not incompatible with the empiric datum of conceptual motivation, provided that the structure of the sign can be

¹⁷ Locke (1689(1975: Book II, Ch. 2, § 1)): “Thus we may conceive how *Words* [...] come to be made use of by Men, as the *Signs* of their *Ideas*; not by any natural connection, that there is between particular articulated Sounds and certain *Ideas*, for then there would be but one Language amongst all Men; but by a voluntary imposition, whereby such a Word is made arbitrarily the Mark of such an *Idea*”.

justified independently of it. Now, social agreement and sharing provide a sufficient ground for the structural stability of linguistic signs: signs are significant and mean what they mean because the members of the linguistic community agree on this point. Against this background, motivation is neither required nor excluded for a sign to hold as a sign: it is simply non-relevant. Viewed from this standpoint, arbitrariness does not imply absence of motivation. It simply implies that motivation, and *a fortiori* awareness of it, that is, transparency, are not required for an expression to code meaning. Arbitrariness is compatible with both motivation and its absence, and, in case of motivation, with both transparency and opacity. Motivation is not an alternative principle, and *a fortiori* a challenge to arbitrariness, but a constellation of empirical data that play a significant role in the historical and social life of signs without accounting for their structure. Once the structure of signs is firmly established on the independent principle of sharing, and therefore of arbitrariness, any theoretical reserve towards conceptual motivation dissolves, and motivation can be explored in both its empirical reality and its limits. Though playing no role in grounding the relationship between signifiers and meanings, conceptual motivation is the protagonist of the social and historical life of signs, which opens the doors of language to the powerful synergy with cognition and consistent thinking. And it is precisely because the structure of the sign is independent of conceptual motivation that motivation becomes an empirical question, so that one can explore any sort of adventures the conceptual content of signs is likely to undergo. It is on the presupposition of arbitrariness, and not against it, that the wonderful story of motivation can be told both in synchrony and in diachrony.

Arbitrariness does not imply that the structure of signs is in no way motivated by underlying conceptual structures. However, it implies that conceptual motivation coexists with unpredictable, language-specific lexical structures. Owing to this, to share a common heritage of concepts, including metaphorical ones, is not a reliable ground for translating lexicalised metaphors and idioms. Conceptual motivation is a one-way path: almost everything may be motivated *a posteriori*, almost nothing can be predicted. This is the reason why almost any metaphorical mapping, at least among languages belonging to the average European type, is cross-linguistically transparent, but this transparency can seldom be relied upon in translation.

6. Conclusions

In this paper, the following points have been stated:

- The translation of metaphors is not a specific problem, but a specific case of more general problems.
- The translation of consistent metaphors, both motivated by very general conceptual structures and rooted in the specific lexical structure of each language, is a specific case of the more general question of anisomorphism highlighted by structural semanticists.

- The translation of living metaphors is a special instance of the more general problem dealt with under the label of explicitation: the translator is morally engaged in asking himself at any stage whether he is translating the content of the expressions belonging to the source text or some personal interpretation of them.

The general criteria are also the same:

- A deep respect for the structures and contents of the languages involved;
- A deep respect for the structures and contents of the source text.

Respect is an empty claim if it is not supported by a deep awareness of the structures and contents of both languages and texts, and awareness is attained by knowledge. This is the reason why I think that a better knowledge of metaphors and of their structural and semantic variety is an essential step toward improving the translator's performance.

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