

Salience as Informativity: A Pragmatic Approach to Metonymy

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Abstract: This paper examines the nature of salience that motivates metonymy and argues that salience is essentially a matter of informativity. Traditional studies proposed some principles about salience such as *whole over part* or *relevant over irrelevant*, which can interact or override each other. I propose instead that metonymy is best analyzed as a form of omission motivated by the low informativity of the target. Informativity is the degree to which a linguistic element satisfies the hearer's informational needs by providing content that is unpredictable and relevant to the immediate topic. This concept is useful for analyzing the contextual factors which motivate metonymy.

Keywords: metonymy, salience, information structure

1. What is Salience

Metonymy is a cognitive or linguistic process in which one linguistic element is used to refer to another element which is conceptually related to it. In (1), *windmill* refers to *blades*, which are actually turning. Similarly, *Proust* in (2) refers to *Proust's works*, which are actually read.

(1) The windmill is turning.

(2) It is hard to read Proust.

This phenomenon has long attracted considerable interest among researchers in cognitive linguistics, because it is compatible with their doctrine that meaning is conceptualization, neither objective, nor truth-conditional. In the reference point model (cf. Langacker 1993), metonymy is taken to reflect a cognitive ability whereby a reference point affords mental access to an intended target. A reference point is characterized as a “salient” element that attracts the hearer's attention, which is assumed to follow the principles outlined below.

Other things being equal, various principles of relative salience generally hold:
human > non-human; whole > part; concrete > abstract; visible > non-visible; etc.

(Langacker 1993: 30)

Similarly, Kövecses & Radden (1998) propose 21 principles of salience. Most of them are based on semantic features such as HUMAN OVER NON-HUMAN, CONCRETE OVER ABSTRACT, INTERACTIONAL OVER NON-INTERACTIONAL, and so on. The rest are two “Communicative principles”: CLEAR OVER LESS CLEAR and RELEVANT OVER IRRELEVANT. Those principles can conflict and override each other.

(3) The ham sandwich wants his check.

In (3), where the *ham sandwich* refers to the customer who ordered it, HUMAN OVER NON-HUMAN is overridden by RELEVANT OVER IRRELEVANT. In this case, the salience of the ham sandwich is motivated by its relevance as Kövecses & Radden (1998) say “To a waitress, the food to be served is a highly relevant attribute of the customer and provides the best reference point for accessing him or her as the metonymic target” (p.70).

While such principles may be involved in metonymy, it remains unclear how these principles come into conflict and override each other. Moreover, so many principles obscure the essence of salience. It is desirable to have a more intuitively understandable account of what salience is. In this paper, I argue that salience can be reduced to a single property, “informativity”, which is ultimately a pragmatic, rather than a semantic property.

2. Informativity and omission

2.1 Metonymy as omission

Since a metonymic source¹ can be paraphrased to a longer form which contains it as in (4) and (5), metonymy can be regarded as a form of omission². Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that metonymy follows the general principles of omission.

¹ In metonymy, the source is explicitly expressed element referring to the target, also called the vehicle.

² Metonymy in broad sense sometimes covers semantic change, synecdoche, or indirect speech act, which cannot be paraphrased in this way. These types of metonymy fall outside the scope of this paper.

(4) The windmill is turning. → The windmill's blades are turning.

(5) It is tough to read Proust. → It is tough to read Proust's works.

In general, linguistic economy predicts that speakers use shorter forms when conveying the same amount of information³. So less informative (easily predictable or accessible) elements are expected to be easily omitted. In the same way, the metonymic target is omitted because of its lower informativity than the source. This argument is examined in Section 3.

2.2 Defining Informativity

Before moving on to the analysis of metonymy, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by “informativity”. This concept can be characterized in terms of information structure. Lambrecht (1994) defines the following three key concepts.

PRAGMATIC PRESUPPOSITION: The set of propositions lexicographically evoked in a sentence which the speaker assumes the hearer already knows or is ready to take for granted at the time the sentence is uttered. (Ibid. , 52.)

PRAGMATIC ASSERTION: The proposition expressed by a sentence which the hearer is expected to know or take for granted as a result of hearing the sentence uttered. (Ibid. , 52.)

FOCUS: The semantic component of a pragmatically structured proposition whereby the assertion differs from the presupposition. (Ibid. , 213.)

Focus can be regarded as the most informative element because it directly contributes to the hearer's acquisition of a new proposition. By contrast, the remaining parts of the sentence, which largely correspond to presupposition⁴, are less informative. However, this alone does not sufficiently characterize informativity because the hearer's concern is not taken into account. No matter how much new information is conveyed, the hearer will not receive it as meaningful unless it fits the context.

³ This is also influenced by factors such as iconic motivation (cf. Haiman 1983), the risk of being misunderstood, and so on.

⁴ Note that linguistic elements constitute a proposition only when combined, and that each of them does not directly correspond to a proposition on its own.

This aspect can be complemented by QUD theory. Roberts (2012) assumes that interlocutors, once they accept a question, set a common goal to find the answer to the question, namely choosing among proffered alternatives. This question becomes the immediate topic of discussion, which is called QUD (question under discussion). Informativity is then defined as the degree to which an element reduces the possible alternatives under the QUD. To summarize, “informativity” can be characterized as follows.

Informativity is the degree to which a linguistic element satisfies the hearer’s informational needs by giving information which is relevant to the immediate topic of discussion and unpredictable to the hearer.

2.3 Argument omission motivated by informativity

Informativity, defined in this way, can account for different types of verb-argument omission. Ruppenhofer (2005) distinguishes two types of verb-argument omission: Definite Null instantiation (DNI) and Indefinite Null instantiation (INI). The difference is whether the speaker (and the hearer) know the exact identity of the omitted referent.

(6) Kim was reading Ø but I don’t know what he was reading.

(7) #Kim donated \$20 Ø but I wonder who she gave it to.

(Ruppenhofer 2005: 3)

In (6), which is an example of INI, the speaker knows that Kim was reading something, but doesn’t need to know exactly what Kim was reading. In this case, the object of *reading* has been omitted because the speaker’s concern is the action itself, rather than the participant involved, which means the object is not relevant to the current topic, or QUD. On the other hand, in (7), which is an example of DNI, the speaker is expected to know to whom Kim donated \$20. In this case, the argument has been omitted because it is recoverable from the context.

Both types of omission can be said to be motivated by the low informativity of the argument. As for DNI, the argument is not unpredictable for the hearer. As for INI, the argument is not relevant to the topic. Those two types of omission can also be observed in metonymy, as shown in a later section.

3. Metonymy motivated by Informativity

3.1. Context-driven metonymy

Some types of metonymy are licensed only in specific contexts. I call these “context-driven metonymy”. The example is (8).

(8) The ham sandwich left without paying.

(9) The customer who ordered a ham sandwich left without paying.

(8) can be regarded as the shorter form of (9), and makes sense when interlocutors are in a restaurant or somewhere like that, and it is easily inferred that the food corresponds to the customer who ordered it. In (8), *ham sandwich* provides the most effective cue for identifying which customer is at issue, because it is shared belief (common ground) between the interlocutors that a certain customer has ordered a ham sandwich. In this context, where QUD is “which customer is at issue”, *ham sandwich* is the most informative element⁵. On the other hand, *customer* is easily recoverable by the context and has low informativity. The principle RELEVANT OVER IRRELEVANT can be reinterpreted this way.

3.2. Lexically-driven metonymy

The other kinds of metonymy are licensed regardless of context, which I call lexically-driven metonymy. This type of metonymy can basically be regarded as a discrepancy between argument and predicate⁶. The following simple sentence is a good example of such discrepancies.

(10) Your dog bit my cat.

(Langacker 1984: 177)

⁵ Strictly speaking, what is most informative for identifying the customer depends on the context. If both interlocutors find the customer wear conspicuous clothing, the clothing may be the most informative element.

⁶ This also includes discrepancy between noun and adjective, between verb and adverb, or between verb and construction like *Pat sneezed the napkin off the table*, which is analyzed as a case of coercion in construction grammar.

Langacker (1984) points out that there are two profile/active zone discrepancies in (10). The first one is between *Your dog* and *bit*, and the second one is between *bit* and *my cat*. Each of them reflects a different kind of metonymic motivation⁷.

3.2.1 Metonymy motivated by predictability

In the former case, the directly participating elements of biting are teeth, jaw, or the operative muscles, but none of them are profiled. The information about the target (active zone) is coded into the verb's lexical semantics, so it does not need to be explicitly stated any more. (1) *The windmill is turning* and (2) *It is hard to read Proust* also belong to this category, where predicate, *turn* and *read*, coded their active zone, *blades* and *text*. This omission is motivated by its predictability of the target just like DNI, and the speaker is expected to know what the target is. Thus, the sentence below is pragmatically unnatural.

(11) #The windmill is turning, but I don't know exactly what is turning.

The predictability of the target is a matter of degree. In cases where the target is completely predictable, it is impossible to distinguish metonymy from literal interpretation as shown in (12)⁸. On the other hand, if the target were completely unpredictable, it would be uninterpretable utterance, and not even be recognized as metonymy.

(12) John ate apple (its edible part).

A similar argument is made by Ioannou (2019), who analyzes metonymy as “a process of frame extension, driven by a criterion of informativity” (p.16) with the following example.

(13) I can hear the piano from very far.

In (13), the target *sound* has syntagmatic relation with the verb *hear* in that it is predicted from the selectional constraints of *hear* whereas the source *piano* has paradigmatic relation

⁷ Originally, this example was introduced to show a discrepancy between profile and active zone, rather than metonymy. This paper makes no distinction between them because they form a continuum.

⁸ Probably you also won't recognize *Your dog* in (10) as metonymy meaning *your dog's mouth*, because *Your dog's mouth bit my cat* sounds unnatural.

to *sound* in that it specifies one option among other possible alternatives. Therefore *sound*, which is predictable, has low informativity, and *piano* has high informativity in that it answers “what sound is at issue”. In his words, “Metonymic vehicle signals an informational threshold that has been surpassed” (p.20).

3.2.2 Metonymy motivated by irrelevance

The second discrepancy in (10) *Your dog bit my cat* is between *bit* and *my cat*, where the exact body part that is bitten is unspecified. The omission of the target is motivated by its irrelevance to the topic. Like INI, the speaker is not expected to know the identity of the target.

(14) Your dog bit his cat, but I don't know what part was bitten⁹.

In (10) and (14), the bitten part is not relevant to the topic at the time when (10) is uttered. Thus, it has low informativity and is omitted.

Naturally, the informativity of an element shifts as the discourse progresses. The question “what part of it is at issue” is likely to be meaningful after “what is at issue” is resolved.

(15) John: His dog bit my cat.

Mary: Where was she bitten?

John: It bit her tail.

In (15), the whole entity, which the speaker assumes the hearer can identify, is introduced first. It is not until the hearer understands that topic, that more detailed information is ready to be added. As observed in John's second utterance, *my cat* is pronominalized. This is because of its predictability, or low informativity¹⁰.

It is natural for humans to be concerned about the identity of whole entities before being concerned about their part. Generally speaking, a part is unlikely to function as meaningful topic unless the whole to which it belongs is identified, because the hearer cannot judge

⁹ I replaced *my cat* in (10) with *his cat*, because it is unnatural for the owner not to know the condition of their own pet.

¹⁰ This element can even be omitted as John simply answers “the tail”.

whether it is relevant to their own concerns. The principle “whole > part” can be reinterpreted this way.

4. Summary

This paper has examined what salience is and how it motivates metonymy and has argued it can be reduced to a pragmatic property "informativity". The main points of the argument are as follows.

- Metonymy is a form of omission motivated by linguistic economy
- In metonymy, the target is omitted because of its low informativity
- Informativity is the degree to which a linguistic element satisfies the hearer's informational needs
- An informative element is one that the hearer cannot predict and that is relevant to the topic.
- The informativity of an element shifts as the discourse progresses
- Some principles about salience proposed so far can be reinterpreted in terms of informativity

At first glance, principles such as "whole > part" appear to be semantically defined. However, even those principles are motivated by informativity, which is rather a pragmatic property.

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情報性としての際立ち： 換喩の語用論的アプローチ

富岡 侑央

本稿は換喩を動機づける際立ちの特性について検討し、際立ちが語用論的な特性である情報性に還元できると主張する。従来の研究では際立ちに関して、相互作用するいくつかの原則が提唱されてきた。本稿では換喩をターゲットの情報性の低さに動機づけられた一種の省略として分析することを提案する。情報性とはある言語要素が聞き手の情報的な需要を満たす度合いであり、これは聞き手にとって予測不可能であり、かつ議論下の疑問に関連する内容を伝達することによる。この概念は換喩を動機づける文脈的要因を分析する際に有用である。