Cultural Dimensions of Metaphorically Used Names
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Abstract

In their primary use names are inherently definite, but they also have various secondary uses where this inherent definiteness is lost. One such use is to identify an individual or place having relevant properties of the bearer of another name (e.g. *We make Singapore the Boston of the East* or *André Lange is the Schumacher of bobsleighing*). The examples make sense only if we know the source referents (*Boston* and *Schumacher*) and then establish a metaphorical relationship with the target referents (*Singapore* and *André Lange*). Thus, names are used as an economical way of referring to the transferred properties which are associated with the name bearer.

Metaphors in general are selective and highlight particular aspects of the source and target referents while hiding others. Based on a survey including examples from multiple sources and informants with different backgrounds, I want to explore some of the issues that metaphorically used names raise. In particular, I show that a cultural dimension is reflected a) in the use of local or non-local source referents and b) in the knowledge about the source referent that is evoked in a given discourse context.

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1. Introduction

Paul Grootboom is well known in Europe as one of South Africa's most important and talked about theatre makers. The media have dubbed him the "Township Tarantino" because of his unapologetic depiction of South African urban life in the Townships. In an interview with a German radio station in 2010 Grootboom complained about this label:

> It actually gets on my nerves. I like Tarantino and especially the fact that despite his background he is so well educated and talented. But I don't want to be compared with him. Tarantino is global, but when you are called the *Township Tarantino*, which is no doubt well meant, it always relates you to the Townships.[1]

This is in fact one of the few occasions where we have direct feedback from the bearer of such a label. Normally people are not asked whether they like being compared with another, perhaps more prominent figure or not.

What Grootboom actually criticises is the fact that the expression *Township Tarantino* serves as a shortcut to his identity, which is rather selective in that it highlights certain characteristics while obviously ignoring or even hiding others. We may therefore speak of a connotative use of the proper name *Tarantino*. The starting-point for such a process is the assumption that the meaning of a proper name is not rigidly fixed in advance and outside the context of language use, but has a descriptive backing. The name is essentially what Langacker (1987, ch.4) calls a point of access to a semantic network. In our case we can thus speak of an online construction of meaning, which is "context- and culture-specific; indeed user-specific in the first instance" (Pang 2010: 1327), as I will argue in this paper.

2. Metonymy and metaphor

In our example the reader or hearer looks for the most optimal and relevant part of the knowledge they have about the referent of the name *Tarantino* in its primary domain in order to (re)construct the implications by the speaker. But at first blush, there is little similarity

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[1] http://www.dradio.de/dkultur/sendungen/thema/1201343/ (accessed November 20, 2010)

between Tarantino and Grootboom. Similarity emerges out of their respective synoptic life-narratives:

- Both were raised by one parent (Tarantino by his mother, Grootboom by his grandmother).
- Both were high school or university (Grootboom) drop-outs.
- Both are very creative and have an immense talent.
- Both are symbols of a new generation of controversial young film and theatre directors.
- Both show thrillers with outbursts of extreme violence.

We can see that only a few specific aspect of our encyclopaedic knowledge of the name *Tarantino* are being foregrounded; other elements of knowledge about him (e.g. age, income, ethnic background) are totally hidden or ignored. This necessarily leads to a somewhat "bleached" or "reduced" conceptualisation. In other words, we have a metonymic process as a first step, in which we activate a stereotypical model of the proper name's referent as a paragon. In George Lakoff's terminology (1987: 87-88) a paragon metonymically stands for a certain category which cannot be directly named. So the name *Tarantino* stands for the category IMPORTANT BUT CONTROVERSIAL FILM/THEATRE MAKER WHO IS OFTEN ACCUSED OF GLAMORISING VIOLENCE. We therefore have a WHOLE FOR PART metonymy, because the personal name *Tarantino* as a metonymic vehicle, normally used to cover all our knowledge about Tarantino, actually comes to mean something much more precise. Which properties or parts are relevant and will be selected depends on the discourse context and the cultural or historical significance that the entity bearing the name might have acquired at some point in the life of a group of people (cf. Marmaridou 1989: 364).

If, for example, we consider the sentence:

(1)   *Mick Jagger over there wants to buy you a drink* [Said by a barman to an attractive female client, referring to an aging hipster at the other end of the bar]

We have an image of a wrinkled Mick Jagger in skin-tight jeans, long scraggly hair, prancing around a stage, which forms the visual gestalt. The real Mick Jagger has lots of other properties, such as the properties of having been married to a fashion model (or two fashion models?), of having several children, of being wealthy, of having once been youthful and wrinkle-free (cf. Bezuidenhout 2007: 13 for more details).

Similarly, the context in the following example (2) from Pang (2010: 1333) makes it clear that only the image or knowledge of Manhattan as a 'city of skyscrapers' comes to mind, and not any of the other things we might also know about it.

(2)   *Shibam's impressive tower-like structures rise out of the cliff and have given the city the nickname of 'the Manhattan of the desert'.*

(3)   *Indeed, IT matters a great deal to a country like Singapore as it has played a significant role in moulding the nation into the 'Manhattan of the East'.*

In (3), however, we have to draw on various pieces of information we have of Manhattan to construct the 'cosmopolitan financial centre' on which the interpretation is probably based. This example makes it especially clear that one and the same name can be used as paragon in different categories (cf. Pang 2010: 1333).

Coming back to the initial example including the names *Grootboom* and *Tarantino*: in the first stage of the comprehension process a paragon is activated, and the next step involves metaphorical mapping. *Tarantino* serves as a SOURCE for the TARGET *Grootboom*.

Metaphorical mapping, generally speaking, implies that one 'meaning' or 'thing' is looked upon in terms of another 'meaning' or 'thing'. The relation is frequently made conspicuous by modifiers of the SOURCE domain, in our example *Township*. But based on our encyclopaedic and stereotypical background information we know that the name *Tarantino* is typically associated with a global context. Grootboom, in fact, grew up in a Township and frequently writes about his own experiences. When someone is said to be a *Township Tarantino* this is a clear case of applying this label to a different, in this case local, domain and thus of reducing its referential scope. In this way the information conveyed by the expression is evaluative and serves primarily to indicate the speaker's attitude towards the referent rather than being intended to help the hearer identify the referent of the name *Grootboom*. What makes this comparison even more evaluative is the fact that the modifier does not follow the name *Tarantino* (which is in fact the most frequently used form), but precedes it. Premodification, especially of names, has a scene-setting and categorising effect and relies heavily on shared regional and cultural knowledge, as it is less explicit. And this type of modification therefore provides the necessary prerequisites for the development of connotations (Bergien 2007).

There is indeed a difference in the degree of categorisation in *Township Tarantino* or the *Tarantino of the Townships*. The question is whether this is intended by the media or not. Speakers and hearers (including Grootboom) obviously have different views as far as the acceptability of this phrase is concerned.

The economical way of identifying and evaluating people or physical objects makes these constructions so interesting for the media. But it is also important to note that the greater the conceptual distance between SOURCE and TARGET, the more useful the explicit mention of the utilised correspondence becomes and the less we can rely on the paragon model.

In the following two examples from Brdar and Brdar-Szabó (2007: 136), less central, additional bits of information as seen from a very subjective perspective are selected.

(4)   *Indeed, this is the Monica Lewinsky of burgers: oversized, juicy, a little messy, a burger that you know you should resist, but you simply can't.*

(5)   *While John Sprung, television executive at Paramount studios said: "this has turned out to be the Monica Lewinsky of digital television. Everybody knows the truth; nobody cares enough to do anything about it."*

In contrast to these examples, repeated usage of certain metaphorical mappings over time may lead to paragons which are conventionally associated with specific meanings to the point where they may be said to have lost their status as paragons and become lexicalised common nouns which are preceded by an indefinite article. In other words, the more conventionalised the SOURCE name is, the more it is used in its classifying function and the less (culture-specific) context is necessary for its interpretation. Examples are:

- *The boss could afford to pay us all more, but he is just an old Scrooge* [a person who is mean with money; from the main character in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*].
- *She is a real Cassandra* [a person whose warnings of misfortune are disregarded; from Cassandra, to whom Apollo gave prophetic power to show his love, though he later decreed that no one should believe her prophecies].

3. Shared knowledge and socio-cultural backgrounds

The final part of this paper will be devoted to two names – *Barack Obama* and *Tiger Woods* − that have hit the headlines in the past months. I want to show how fluid and instable paragons and resulting metaphorical mappings are with regard to their role in society. The following examples are mainly retrieved from Google:

(6)   *Barack Obama – a John Kennedy for our times* (February, 2008)
(7)   *Obama is the next Herbert Hoover.* (January, 2010)
(8)   *Obama is the New King George III.* (April, 2010)
(9)   *Nick Clegg – the British Obama?* (April, *2*010)

In 2008 Obama is compared to John F. Kennedy because "like Kennedy, he combines personal magnetism with a strong appeal to American idealism".[2]

At the beginning of 2010 he is compared to the Depression-era president Herbert Hoover, because, like Hoover, he is highly qualified to be president but can still fail because of the enormity of the challenges he faces and he may thus bring his party down with him.[3]

In April 2010 sentences like *Obama is the new King George III* are published on the Internet. King George III was the King of Great Britain during the time of the American Revolutionary War. Obama's political opponents have now made up lists of the similarities between the actions of the Obama administration and the tyrannies of King George listed by Thomas Jefferson in *The Declaration of Independence*.[4]

During the UK general election campaign in April 2010, the *Guardian* and other British newspapers asked: *Nick Clegg – the British Obama?*[5] In this example *Obama* serves as a SOURCE to characterise the leader of the Liberal Democrats, Nick Clegg. The question is which of Obama's media characterisations is meant here. To interpret this comparison we need more context. In the article we read that the performance of Liberal leader Nick Clegg in the televised debate had an Obama-type impact on the electorate, especially young people. So it is actually Obama's successful election campaign that is being taken as SOURCE information for the comparison.

An interesting example is provided in *newsweek.com* of December 2008 where we read:

(10)   *Why Michelle Obama is not the next Jacky O*.

In the text we learn that Michelle Obama grew up working class, while Kennedy was a child of privilege. Jacky had to give up a promising writing career when she married Kennedy, while Michelle met her husband at the law firm where he was her subordinate. The writer of the article argues that a comparison to Hillary Clinton seems more apt and criticises that Michelle Obama is known primarily for her attire, as if she were a mannequin.[6]

In contrast to these examples, the name *Tiger Woods* dominates the media more as a SOURCE than as a TARGET. Tiger Woods is first of all the well-known and highly successful American golfer. He represents the model of a young, dynamic, good-looking man

from an ethnic group that is normally not so well represented in the respective sport or field in general.

(11)   *Lewis Hamilton: the Tiger Woods of racing?*[7]
(12)   *Phil Ivey – "Tiger Woods of Poker"*[8]

However, the following example links the name *Tiger Woods* to a completely different business field, namely journalism:

(13)   *Is Jeffrey Toobin the Tiger Woods of legal Journalism?*

In the corresponding text we learn that according to the *New York Daily News*, leading legal journalist Jeffrey Toobin – who has been married to a fellow journalist for almost 25 years – has long had a wandering eye. A woman who met Toobin about 15 years ago spoke about rudeness and sex scandals.[9]

This example shows that the paragons and the categories they represent can actually change with the discourse situation. The paragon *Tiger Woods* has obviously become instable. Time and new success will show what connotations will survive.

4. Concluding remarks

I have tried to show that metaphorically used names not only make target meanings accessible but also available for further elaboration and evaluation in discourse. In addition, it can be observed that the use of these expressions is culturally dependent in four different ways:

1. Shared knowledge and socio-cultural backgrounds of the language users are crucial with regard to the identification/interpretation of the SOURCE name.
2. There seems to be a tendency to represent local individuals and institutions in terms of more global players, mainly from the USA. The process of comparison is thus not reversible, in other words, at the moment one simply cannot change *Paul Grootboom – the Township Tarantino* into *Quentin Tarantino – the global Grootboom*.
3. As we have seen, the goal of these comparisons may be to promote or praise a local entity, while still treating the original as being better. Therefore the resulting comparison does mostly not lead to an elevation of the TARGET name. But there is also an increasing use of structures which more openly denigrate the metaphorical TARGET as being a bad version of the SOURCE: e.g. *the poor man's Elvis Presley* or *the poor man's Angelina Jolie*. The question is whether this effect is intended by the speaker/writer or not or whether the interpretation exclusively depends on the hearer's or reader's knowledge, attitude and perhaps prejudice concerning the context of the SOURCE and TARGET names.
4. Finally, a comparison of this phenomenon in English, German, Polish and French contexts has revealed that the media in these countries make especially frequent use of metaphorical names. In Russian there is only a rare occurrence so far, whereas in French their use seems to be restricted to colloquial and more private contexts.

These and other observations may help provide the ground for further investigation.

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[7] http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1609725,00.html (accessed November 20, 2010)
[8] http://www.amazon.com/Phil-Tiger-Woods-Poker-Superstars/dp/1422203751 (accessed November 20, 2010)
[9] http://abovethelaw.com/jeffrey-toobin/ (accessed November 20, 2010)

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