**Beyond the Literal: Unveiling the Second Meanings in Metaphors – A Critique of Davidson's Theory**

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**Abstract (200 words)**

This essay critiques Donald Davidson's thesis in "What Metaphors Mean," which posits that metaphors convey only their literal meanings without hidden or additional layers of cognitive or figurative content. Davidson argues that metaphors function by evoking novel perspectives through the literal meanings of words, without involving any special meanings. This paper challenges Davidson's view by examining the limitations that arise when metaphors are modified or when synonymous terms are substituted, which often results in a loss of metaphorical effectiveness. The proposed theory introduces the concepts of "focus" and "lens" terms, emphasizing the role of cultural resonance in generating secondary meanings in metaphors. The lens term, with its rich cultural and historical associations, interacts with the focus term to produce meanings deeply embedded in cultural understanding. This theory addresses the shortcomings of Davidson's approach, offering a more comprehensive framework for understanding the function of metaphors in language. Future research directions are also suggested, including the exploration of cultural resonance across different cultures, the cognitive processes involved in metaphor interpretation, and the implications for artificial intelligence. This paper underscores the importance of cultural and historical contexts in metaphorical language, providing a robust understanding of the interplay between literal meanings and cultural associations.

In "What Metaphors Mean," Donald Davidson presents a thesis about the nature of metaphors, arguing that metaphors mean exactly what their words mean in the most literal sense, without any hidden or additional meanings (Davidson, 1978). This view contrasts with previous theories that suggest a metaphor's meaning involves an additional layer of cognitive or figurative content. According to him, when we interpret a metaphor, we do not uncover a hidden meaning; rather, we recognize a novel use of the literal meanings of words. This use evokes new perspectives and insights, but these are not part of the metaphor's meaning per se. Davidson writes, "metaphors mean what the words, in their most literal interpretation, mean, and nothing more" (pg. 32). He contends that metaphors are not vessels for conveying special meanings or truths but are instead creative uses of language that prompt us to see similarities we might not have noticed otherwise.

For example, the metaphor ‘Juliet is the sun’ is often interpreted as suggesting Juliet's beauty and radiance, something that a literal paraphrase would fail to capture entirely. However, Davidson argues that this interpretation mistakes the effects of a metaphor with its meaning. He maintains that while metaphors can indeed prompt insights, these insights are not part of the metaphor's meaning, or cognitive content, but instead are consequences of the metaphor's use. He supports his argument by showing how paraphrasing metaphors leads to imprecise restatements that fail to capture the metaphor's impact. He believes, should there be cognitive content to metaphors, it could be paraphrased1. According to Davidson, this difficulty arises because there is no encoded message within the metaphor to decipher. Instead, the metaphor works by utilizing the literal meanings of words in a way that stimulates the imagination and prompts the recognition of novel similarities.

Davidson supports his positive case by drawing a distinction between metaphors and similes to support his thesis. While a simile explicitly states a comparison (e.g., ‘Juliet is like the sun’), a metaphor implies the comparison without stating it outright (e.g., ‘Juliet is the sun’). This is important, as Davidson argues that the implicit nature of metaphors is what allows it to merely highlight similarities as opposed to conveying meaning. He writes, "a metaphor makes us see one thing as another by making some literal statement that inspires or prompts the insight" (Davidson, 47). While a simile directly asserts a comparison, a metaphor prompts us to perceive a similarity without making an explicit comparison, providing the ability to surprise us.

Another key element of Davidson's argument is the distinction between use and meaning. He argues that the literal meaning of words remains unchanged in metaphors; what changes is their use. Davidson uses dead metaphors to illustrate this. For example, 'mouth' in 'the mouth of a river' was initially a metaphor comparing a river's opening to a human mouth. Over time, this metaphor became a dead metaphor, where its figurative nature faded, but the original meanings of the words remain intact. This transition shows that while the metaphorical use of 'mouth' created a new way of understanding the river's opening, it did not change the literal meaning of 'mouth’. Once it became dead, the metaphorical insight no longer existed, but the literal meaning remained. Thus, demonstrating that metaphors rely on innovative use rather than the domain of meaning.

Davidson also critiques the idea that metaphors involve a kind of ambiguity where words in a metaphorical context have both a literal and a figurative meaning. He dismisses this notion by arguing that, unlike the case with ambiguous words, there is no clear rule linking which meaning, whether literal or figurative, should be used in a metaphor. For instance, while the word “bank” can either mean a financial bank or river bank, we know given the context of the sentence which one to use. In contrast, there is no clear rule determining when the linguistic second meaning of a term in a metaphor should be used, such as in “time is a thief”.

In my critique, I will present situations that Davidson’s theories fail to account for, and then provide a theory that may account for these discrepancies. Specifically, I will examine the issues that arise when metaphors are modified or when synonymous terms are substituted, and how these modifications affect the metaphors' effectiveness. Davidson's argument that metaphors are purely literal in their meaning faces significant challenges when we consider these scenarios. Instead, I propose that the second meaning of metaphors do exist, and comes from the interaction between what I call the “focus” and “lens” terms. This interaction requires culturally resonant ‘lens’ terms and produces a second meaning that is deeply embedded in cultural understanding. This approach not only addresses the shortcomings of Davidson’s theories but also provides a more comprehensive understanding of how metaphors function in language.

Davidson's argument that metaphors are purely literal in their meaning faces a problem when we consider modifications to the literal terms of a metaphor. For instance, the metaphor "education is a key" is widely understood and accepted. This metaphor works because "key" is a physical object that opens something, and "education" is an abstract idea of learning that metaphorically 'unlocks' potential or opportunities. However, if we modify the metaphor slightly to "education is a brown key," the metaphor suddenly loses its effectiveness. This change is puzzling because all the properties of a "brown key" are the same as those of a "key". Furthermore, the properties of a key that allow for the connection between education—a key unlocks things, and the thing it unlocks is what education can be used to unlock, namely financial or social opportunities—are not altered or different from a key that just happens to be brown. In this case, the literal meanings do not fundamentally change how the metaphor would theoretically be established, yet the simple alteration loses the metaphoric value. This contrasts with ordinary similarities that Davidson talks about. For instance, if we say “a car is a Toyota,” and we add an adjective to say “a car is a brown Toyota,” the idea is not changed in the way our metaphor was changed. The only difference is the person now knows that the Toyota is brown, but fundamentally, the semantic understanding of the car being a Toyota remains constant. Davidson fails to account for this.

Max Black's interaction theory offers a more comprehensive explanation (Black, 1979). According to Black, a metaphor creates meaning through the interaction between the metaphorical and literal terms, generating new insights. In the case of "education is a key," the metaphor engages our cognitive faculties to see education as something that unlocks potential, akin to how a key functions. Adding the detail "brown" introduces an irrelevant characteristic that disrupts this interaction, weakening the metaphorical connection. While Black's theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how metaphors function cognitively, it does not fully address, however, the cultural and historical dimensions of metaphorical meaning.

Another issue with Davidson's argument arises from the substitution of synonymous terms in metaphors. Many things can be considered synonymous with "key" in the context of unlocking something, such as "passcode," "keypad," "unlock," "gun," and "drill." Presumably, the metaphor "education is a key" works because it allows us to think about the ways a key and education overlap in their function of unlocking potential. Davidson argues that this understanding comes from the literal meaning of "key," which is an object that literally unlocks something. However, substituting "key" with any of its synonyms that also literally unlock things results in metaphors that do not work: "education is a passcode," "education is a keypad," "education unlocks," "education is a gun," and "education is a drill." These substitutions do not just result in somewhat metaphors with partial metaphorical value; rather, these phrases would not be understood as metaphors at all. A listener might very well ask, “what does it even mean for an education to be a drill?” These synonym substitutions fail to convey even a degree of the same metaphorical meaning, despite their literal similarity to "key.”

Paul Ricoeur's theory of metaphor emphasizes the role of imagination and creativity in interpreting metaphors (Ricoeur, 1987). According to Ricoeur, metaphors do not merely substitute one term for another; they create a new semantic space where new meanings can emerge. The metaphor "education is a key" invites us to imagine the potential of education in a novel way, transforming our understanding of both education and keys. The introduction of "brown" or the substitution with synonyms fails because they do not engage the imaginative process in the same way, disrupting the creation of new meaning.

Lakoff & Johnson's conceptual metaphor theory further illuminates the issue with Davidson’s theory. Lakoff & Johnson argues that metaphors are grounded in our bodily experiences and conceptual frameworks (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The metaphor "education is a key" works because it taps into a shared conceptual framework where we understand keys as tools for unlocking potential. This conceptual metaphor is deeply embedded in our cognitive structures. When we alter the metaphor to "education is a brown key" or substitute "key" with other terms, we disrupt this underlying conceptual framework, causing the metaphor to lose its effectiveness.

Davidson's view, therefore, seems insufficient to account for the nuanced nature of metaphors. While he asserts that metaphors are purely literal in their meaning, the issues with modifications and synonymous substitutions suggest that there is more to metaphorical understanding than just the literal interpretation of words. Black's interaction theory, Ricoeur's emphasis on imagination, and Lakoff's conceptual metaphor theory all highlight the complexity and richness of metaphorical language, demonstrating that metaphors create meaning through intricate cognitive and contextual processes that Davidson's literalist approach fails to capture. This indicates a gap in Davidson's theory, where the cognitive and contextual elements of metaphorical language are not fully addressed.

Thus, I would suggest that metaphors do indeed possess second meanings. However, I propose a theory distinct from previous proposals. I argue that meanings emerge from the interaction between the literal meanings of the words used and the new associations that arise when the concepts of each word are brought together within a cultural framework. More specifically, I am suggesting that the second meaning of metaphors comes from how the ‘lens’ term associates with the ‘focus’ term in terms of cultural resonance. I define the ‘focus’ term as the term that is the concept or subject being described. It is the term that we are trying to understand. In “education is a key”, the focus term would be ‘education’, since we are using the idea of a ‘key’ (something that unlocks and opens things) to try to understand the abstract concept of how ‘education’ can also unlock things like opportunity. The focus term can usually be substituted with synonyms without altering the metaphor's fundamental meaning. For instance, the focus term "education" could be replaced with synonyms like "learning" or "schooling" while maintaining the overall meaning (i.e. “learning is a key”). In contrast, the lens term is more abstract. It carries rich, culturally resonant associations that provide the metaphorical insight. This is also the term that cannot often be substituted by literal synonyms or modified with adjectives. This term is crucial for the metaphor's effectiveness, as it evokes a cultural set of associations that enrich the understanding of the focus term. It is the lens term that helps us understand what the focus term is. The lens term ‘key’ cannot be easily replaced with "passcode" or "tool" without losing the depth and resonance of the metaphor. The lens term's cultural and historical significance is integral to its ability to illuminate the focus term in a novel and meaningful way.

Cultural resonance plays a crucial role in the meaning of metaphors, explaining why certain terms like "key" are powerfully metaphorical while others like "passcode" or “brown key” fail to convey the same meaning. It is cultural resonance that creates a metaphor’s second meaning. This resonance is the shared cultural and historical significance the lens term embodies, allowing it to specifically be used as a metaphor device. These lens terms are terms that have a literal materialistic reference, but also act as abstract symbols to represent other ideas. The metaphor "education is a key" is powerful because keys have a long-standing cultural symbolism associated with access and opportunity. These associations are embedded in cultural narratives, and listeners understand these associations well, thus being able to recognize their metaphorical value when they are used as such. In contrast, the term "passcode" lacks the same cultural resonance. A passcode is a modern, technical term primarily associated with digital security, whereas the term ‘key’ has been around for many millennia. The term ‘key’ has been carried over across civilizations, and the cultural symbolism is used over and over again in our lives. This is why there are very few metaphors that involve ‘passcode’, yet you can create endless metaphors with the word ‘key’. For instance, you can say that “Knowledge is the key to success”, or “Patience is the key to happiness”, or “Communication is the key to honesty”. Cultural resonance also explains why we do not have ‘somewhat’ metaphors. A lens term, like ‘key’, is culturally resonant and can be used and replaced in many metaphors. In contrast, a culturally non-resonant term like ‘passcode’, while having a reference to a physical entity that unlocks doors, lacks the linkage to abstract ideas and is therefore almost never seen in metaphors. This is also why “education is a brown key” is not a metaphor. The addition of “brown” removes the cultural resonance that “key” has, eliminating the metaphorical second meaning. Because, although “key” has longstanding cultural significance, “brown key” does not.

This idea of cultural resonance may also challenge one of Davidson's arguments against second meanings, which he bases on the absence of a rule linking the literal and figurative meanings of a metaphor. Davidson believes that this lack of a rule would lead to ambiguity, which is not the case for metaphors, thus evidence against the existence of second meanings. However, just like how cultural resonance allows people to understand metaphors, it also prevents ambiguity. It is true that people almost always understand metaphors as spoken in the way they are spoken; in much the same way they understand sarcasm or irony. However, this is because a metaphor that contains a culturally resonant lens term like ‘key’ is instantly recognized for its figurative meaning and not its literal meaning. Non-culturally resonant lens terms, meanwhile, do not get recognized for metaphors as they lack the cultural context that makes them good for metaphorical insight. Cultural resonance can therefore prevent ambiguity while maintaining dual meanings for a term.

Furthermore, cultural resonance also contributes to a cognitive second meaning through a deeper, structural understanding of the relationship between the lens and focus terms beyond just highlighting novel perspectives. The metaphor ‘education is a key’ does not just tell us about the fact that education can provide opportunity, but it gives us additional cognitive value in the form of a structural framework to understand the focus term. For instance, the metaphor ‘education is a key’ does not just tell us that education unlocks opportunities. Just like how an actual physical lock is meant to be unlocked with a key, it also suggests education is meant to access great potential. The metaphor also suggests how education is essential, just like how a key is essential for opening it’s corresponding lock. The metaphor also suggests how education is individualized, just like how a specific key is uniquely matched to a particular lock. Importantly, this extremely complex structured understanding arises from the cultural framework of what a key is and how it should metaphorically be applied. We don’t draw a connection between education being some kind of metal, despite the fact keys are often made with metal. This is because the cultural framework guides us in determining what connections to make and how to understand those connections. This cultural framework gives us the deeper, multi-layered understanding that is the cognitive second meaning found in metaphors. This is why we cannot paraphrase metaphors. It is not because they lack cognitive second meanings, but instead the complexity the second meanings provide are too layered for us to capture with language or other representations.

This cultural resonance idea, therefore, may refute both the linguistic second meaning and cognitive second meaning critique Davidson proposes. It refutes Davidson’s rejection of linguistic second meaning because certain words have a meaning that allow them to act as ‘lens’ terms in metaphors where other non-culturally resonant terms cannot. Their second meaning is in the connection the physical entity, say a key, has to the more abstract cultural understanding of ‘key’, which does not exist for terms like ‘passcode’. It also refutes Davidson’s rejection of cognitive second meaning in that the associations drawn between the lens and focus terms are not merely a connection of literal meanings. Instead, it is an association that involves the cultural and historical contexts of each term, leading to a deeper, more structural understanding of the metaphor. Therefore, Davidson's criticisms fail to account for the ways in which metaphors function, and the presence of second meanings is both linguistically and cognitively significant.

Davidson's argument that metaphors do not carry second meanings is an important perspective in the philosophy of language. However, it fails to account for the nuances and complexities of metaphorical language. By examining the modifications and substitutions within metaphors, we can see that there is indeed a structured and consistent way in which metaphors convey second meanings. These meanings emerge from the interaction between the focus and lens terms, relying heavily on cultural resonance. This comprehensive approach not only addresses the shortcomings of Davidson's theory but also provides a more robust understanding of how metaphors function. Therefore, while Davidson's criticisms highlight the difficulties in paraphrasing metaphors, they do not successfully negate the existence of second meanings in metaphors. Instead, metaphors remain a powerful linguistic tool that operates through a complex interplay of literal meanings and cultural associations, offering deep and unique insights.

Note: 1Davidson’s argument that metaphors have no second meanings because they cannot be paraphrased faces problems when we see that other forms of human language operate in a similar way to how his metaphors operate, but do not seem to provide readers with an obviously new ‘perspective’ in the way that he suggests. That is, the fact that metaphors cannot be paraphrased should not suggest that there are no second meanings. For instance, consider a case with sarcasm. If someone says “Oh, fantastic! I just love getting stuck in traffic for hours”. The literal meaning is that someone likes getting stuck in traffic. Given Gricean Maxims, we understand this is false, and look for reasons for it. Now, to paraphrase this idea would be difficult, because the context it is spoken includes the tone, the context leading up to the event, the persons personality, and many other factors. And, just like metaphors, the statement is literally false. But, it is hard to see what is the creative or ‘new’ perspective that this sarcastic phrase highlights as Davidson suggests. After all, sarcasm is interpreted in only one way: the opposite of what is literally said. We see that in the case of Sarcasms, it operates in much the same way Metaphors operate, in that sarcastic statements are interpreted very consistently, difficult to paraphrase, and literally false. Yet, there is nothing about them that seems to highlight a new perspective for us in the way Davidson believes happens to us with metaphors.

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