The Use of Metonymy in Business Linguistic Culture

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Abstract: In organisation’s culture, creative and figurative forms of language are frequently used to produce new, coherent representations of organisations and organisational life. There has been a longstanding interest in one particular form of language regarding organisations: how scholars and managers use and interpret metaphorical word combinations or metonymic expressions, and language constructions that are used not only to reference and communicate ideas but also to generate understandings of organisations. Because of the traditionally strong focus on metaphors, the role of other tropes, particularly metonymy within the language about organisations has been largely ignored. Commentaries and empirical research on metonymy to date have been restricted to local and specific uses of metonymies within small samples of managerial or employee discourse. Although insightful, these studies say very little about how often and what kinds of metonymies are used in organisations’ culture. Therefore, this article aims to present a more detailed study of the use of metonymy in the discourse about organisations extracted from on-line business journals.

Keywords: organisation, culture, metonymy, language

Introduction

Metonymy (Greek metonumipa, Latin denominatio) is one of the major figures of speech recognized in classical rhetoric. One of the earliest definitions of metonymy is attributed to the treatise Rhetorica ad Herennium. [1, 140] The anonymous author characterizes metonymy as “a trope that takes its expression from near and close things ['ab rebus propinquis et finitimis'] by which we can comprehend a word that is not denominated by its proper word.” This ancient characterization already points to the notions of contiguity and association that have ever since been criterial in distinguishing metonymy from metaphor. There is a rich tradition of research on metonymy in the historical-philological tradition of linguistics. As pointed out by Geeraerts (1988), the psychological orientation of much of nineteenth-century philology, such as the works of Michel Bréal and Hermann Paul, is theoretically very close to present-day Cognitive Semantics. Furthermore, the study of etymology almost inevitably leads to an interest in the general principles of semantic change including the role of metonymy (and metaphor) in the development of new meanings.

1. Defining Metonymy

The concept of metonymy has remained remarkably constant since antiquity: a typical twentieth-century definition of metonymy that is not essentially different from the one given by the author of Rhetorica ad Herennium is found in Geeraerts: “[Metonymy is] a semantic link between two senses of a lexical item that is based on a relationship of contiguity between the referents of the expression in each of those senses.”[2, 2477]

Traditionally, then, metonymy has been regarded as a stand for relation in which the name of one thing (henceforth, the source or vehicle) is used to refer to another thing (henceforth, the target) with which it is associated or to which it is contiguous. This view can be called the substitution theory of metonymy. A corollary of the substitution theory is that the source and the target are, at some level of analysis, considered to be equivalent ways of picking out the same referent. For example, in the sentence Buckingham Palace issued a statement this morning, the place name Buckingham Palace (source) may be said to stand for the British queen or one of her spokespersons (target). Under this view, the source expression indirectly achieves the same referential purpose as the more direct referring expression the Queen. The substitution theory is, however, too simplistic in at least two respects. First, it typically focuses only on cases of referential metonymy, neglecting evidence that
metonymy is also found on the predicational and illocutionary levels. Secondly, as Radden and Kövecses point out, metonymy involves more than just an operation of substitution. [3,18] For example, in She is just a pretty face, the noun phrase a pretty face is not used referentially but predicatively; as well, it is not just a substitute expression for a pretty person but also highlights the prettiness of the person’s face, from which the prettiness of the person can be inferred. Thus, the above sentence expresses more content than She is just a pretty person.

Most contemporary accounts in Cognitive Linguistics have built on Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) original distinction between metaphor as a cross-domain mapping and of metonymy as a mapping within one cognitive domain. One influential attempt to elaborate Lakoff and Johnson’s characterization is Croft’s proposal that metaphor is “a mapping between two domains that are not part of the same matrix” whereas metonymy is a mapping within one “domain matrix.” [4, 348] Croft defines metonymy as a process of domain highlighting since the metonymy makes primary a domain that is secondary in the literal meaning. Thus, in the utterance The Times hasn’t arrived yet, the noun phrase The Times metonymically highlights a subdomain of the semantic frame it evokes – such as, a journalist writing for the newspaper – which is usually only secondary. This case is contrasted with the interpretation of the definite description this book in This book is heavy, where both subdomains of book as a physical object and as a bearer of content are argued to be of equal importance and therefore nonmetonymic.

Ruiz de Mendoza (2000) proposes that metonymic mappings, which are usually considered to be whole-part, part-whole, or part-part mappings, can be reduced to two kinds: either the source of the metonymic operation is in the target (“source in target” metonymy) or the target is in the source (“target-in-source” metonymy). For example, for The ham sandwich is waiting for his check, Ruiz de Mendoza argues that the contiguity link between ham sandwich and restaurant customer is not a part-part relation in the domain restaurant but rather a source-in-target metonymy where the ham sandwich is conceptualized as being within the target domain the customer. [5, 114-115]

Unlike metaphor, metonymy has always been described in conceptual, rather than purely linguistic terms. In analysing metonymic relationships, traditional rhetoric operated with general conceptual notions such as CAUSE FOR EFFECT, CONTAINER FOR CONTENTS, etc. Still, metonymy was seen as a figure of speech, meaning it was basically thought of as a matter of language, especially figurative language. This view of metonymy is reflected in standard definition, such as for example in Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, which tends to describe metonymy as “a figure of speech that consists in using the name of one thing for that of something else with which it is associated.” These kind of definitions claim that metonymy operates on names of things, involves the substitution of the name of one thing for that of another thing and assumes that the two things are somehow associated.

The cognitive view of metonymy considers it to be not just a matter of names of things, but essentially a conceptual phenomenon. As already pointed out by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metonymy, like metaphor, is part of everyday way of thinking, is grounded in experience, is subject to general and systematic principles and structures our thoughts and actions. The conceptual nature of metonymy is also manifested in the structure of subcategories. A member of a category may stand for the whole category and thereby account for prototype effects. These salient members may not have a name so that the metonymic transfer merely operates at the conceptual level. Our example of the stereotypical category “businesswoman” illustrates this point. We tend to think of the category “woman” in terms of this stereotypical member even if the submember remains unnamed. Since most categories have prototypical structure, we may conclude that all categories have metonymic structure.

The use of metonymic expressions in language is primarily a reflection of general conceptual metonymies and is motivated by general cognitive principles.

The metonymic process consists in mentally accessing one conceptual entity via another entity. Metonymy may be conceived as a reference-point phenomenon in which one conceptual entity, the
The reference point affords mental access to another conceptual entity, the desired target. The reference-point entity is being referred to as the vehicle and the desired target simply as the target. In the example, "Wall Street is back in panic mode after politicians failed to secure a rescue package for the distressed banking sector last night," Wall Street serves as the vehicle to refer to American financial markets and financial institutions as a whole, which represent the target.

The term target is met in most recent studies and often used in cognitive linguistics in order to define metonymy, as in "Metonymy is a mapping in which the source and the target are in the same common domain … it is more accurate, in my view, to regard source and targets as domains in metonymy, bearing in mind that these may be sub domains within the common domain in which the mapping occurs." Other two constant researchers of metonymy define it as such: "Metonymy is a cognitive process in which one conceptual entity, the vehicle, provides mental access to another conceptual entity, the target, within the same ICM."[6, 3]

Mariana Neagu underlines that “… metonymy is a cognitive phenomenon underlying much of our ordinary thinking and … the use of metonymy in language is a reflection of its conceptual status. Until very recently, metonymy has received less attention than metaphor in cognitive linguistics.”[7, 91-92] The opinions are shared by Antonio Barcelona, who says that “Metonymy is a cognitive mechanism whereby one experimental domain is partially understood in terms of another experimental domain included in the same experiential domain.”[8, 2]

Thus, like metaphors, metonymic concepts structure not just our language but our thoughts, attitudes and actions. And, like metaphoric concepts, metonymic concepts are grounded in our experience. In fact, the grounding of metonymic concepts is in general more obvious than is the case with metaphoric concepts, since it usually involves direct physical or causal associations.

A widely accepted definition of metonymy inspired by Langacker (1993) is the one proposed by Radden and Kövecses: “Metonymy is a cognitive process in which one conceptual entity, the vehicle, provides mental access to another conceptual entity, the target, within the same cognitive model.”[9, 21] The notion of cognitive model is taken in its broadest sense, encompassing three ontological realms: concepts, forms (especially linguistic), and things and events in the real world. Over these realms, five potential metonymic relations are defined: 1) the sign relation between form and concept (e.g., the relation between the form house and the concept house); 2) three “referential” relations (Form-Thing/Event, Concept-Thing/Event and the relation between Concept-Form and Thing/Event) (e.g., the relation between the form house or the concept house and the actual referent, i.e., a concrete house or the set of houses), and 3) the relation between one sign (Concept-Form) and another sign (Concept-Form), which they call “concept metonymy” (e.g., bus–bus standing for bus driver–bus driver). To these types, the authors add other relations such as the substitution of one form for another (e.g., euphemisms like shoot for shit, or gosh for God).

Metonymy is a cognitive process that operates within one cognitive domain or domain matrix and links a given source content to a less accessible target content. The source content and the target content of a metonymy are linked by conceptual contiguity. Metonymies that satisfy this criterion are henceforth called conceptual metonymies. Content should be understood in its broadest sense, including lexical concepts (words) but also thoughts (propositional contents). When the source content is expressed by a linguistic sign (a lexeme or a syntagmatic combination of lexemes), one can speak of a linguistic metonymy.

Summarizing the above remarks, an adequate definition of conceptual metonymy should contain at least the following components:

a. Conceptual metonymy is a cognitive process where a source content provides access to a target content within one cognitive domain.

b. The relation between source content and target content is contingent (conceptually nonnecessary), i.e., in principle defeasible.

c. The target content is foregrounded, and the source content is backgrounded.
The strength of the metonymic link between source and target content may vary depending, among other things, on the conceptual distance between source and target and the salience of the metonymic source.

The most common metonymies, presented in *Metaphors We Live By* are the following: (p. 38-39, *Metaphors We Live By*):

**PRODUCT FOR PRODUCER**
I’ve bought a Nokia for just $4.
*Nokia* stands for the name of the company producing cell phones.
He is very fond of this Ford.
*Ford*, the name of the car, stands here for the name of the producer of this type of cars, Henry Ford.

**OBJECT USED FOR USER**
The sax cannot come today. (*Sax* stands here for the one who plays the saxophone)
The strike of the buses caused a traffic jam. (*Buses* refer to the drivers using them.)

**CONTROLLER FOR CONTROLLED**
*Napoleon* lost a very important battle at Waterloo.
A Mercedes rear-ended me.

**INSTITUTION FOR PEOPLE RESPONSIBLE**
“HRE said yesterday it aimed to generate a return on equity after tax of more than 15 per cent”.
*HPE* refers here to the representatives of Hypo Real Estate Holding AG.
*Nissan* is cutting more than a quarter of its staff in Spain in response to what it called “a dramatic decline” in vehicle sales.
*Nissan* refers here to the representatives of Nissan Motor Co. Ltd.
In the process *Time Warner* picked up a further 5m shares to take its stake to 42m shares or 16.1 per cent.
*Sony Ericsson* announced to have recorded its first quarterly net loss in more than five years and said its cost-cutting programme was going according to plan.
*HPE, Nissan, Time Warner, Sony Ericsson* refers here to the representatives of these institutions (Hypo Real Estate Holding AG, Nissan Motor Co. Ltd, Time Warner, Sony, Ericsson)

**THE PLACE FOR THE INSTITUTION**
The White House prefers to keep silent about the matter.
Wall Street fails to reach higher ground.

*Wall Street* struggled to find direction on Wednesday as investors processed comments from Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke and awaited a decision about the bailout plan from lawmakers.

*Pershing Square* admitted it was unable to find another suitor to bid against CVS for Longs, and Advisory Research, another investment fund that had agitated for a better offer, said it would tender its shares in favour of the CVS bid.

**THE PLACE FOR THE EVENT**
Remember the Alamo.
Watergate changed our politics.

As it can be observed from the above examples the most used metonymies in economic texts are THE INSTITUTION FOR PEOPLE RESPONSIBLE and THE PLACE FOR THE INSTITUTION.
Therefore, we shall approach, in the following subchapter, the use the metonymies in the discourse about business organisations.

As in the case of metaphors, the use of metonymy is widespread in economic texts.

2. Metonymy in Business Organisation

In organization’s culture, creative and figurative forms of language are frequently used to produce new, coherent representations of organizations and organizational life. There has been a longstanding interest in one particular form of language regarding organizations: how scholars and managers use and interpret metaphorical word combinations or metonymic expressions, and language constructions that are used not only to reference and communicate ideas but also to generate understandings of organizations. Because of the traditionally strong focus on metaphors, the role of other tropes, particularly metonymy within the language about organizations has been largely ignored. Commentaries and empirical research on metonymy to date have been restricted to local and specific uses of metonymies within small samples of managerial or employee discourse. Although insightful, these studies say very little about how often and what kinds of metonymies are used in organizations’ culture. Therefore we present a more detailed study of the use of metonymy in the discourse about organizations extracted from on-line business journals. We have aimed in this subchapter to identify the incidence of metonymies about organizations and to identify the different kinds or categories of metonymies that people use when talking about organizations.

Metonymy takes the whole (an organization) to be indicated by its parts (e.g., the number of levels in an organization, the size of the body of rules governing procedures, the rates of mobility between and within organizational slots). The whole is thus represented by the parts; the essential features of a whole are reduced to indices.

Another example of metonymy is the idiomatic expression *The manager has his eye on the company targets*. The manager’s eye stands in for his/her entire ability to see and by implication for his determination to orient himself towards the company’s targets. Similarly, in order to imbue an expression with gravitas, a manager might say to a subordinate *The company is unhappy with your work performance*. In this instance, the whole – the company – is invoked as the equivalent of the part – the manager, when the manager is in fact unhappy with the subordinate’s work. The limited research that exists on metonymy has examined how within managerial or employee talk whole-part relationships develop alternative meanings and new patterns of association. Cooren and his colleagues have demonstrated how when we attempt to understand organisations we instantiate them in many concrete ways as collections of concrete “things” such as texts, buildings, machines, people and materials. Such instantiations or “embodiments”, which are situated in a particular context and time frame and happen through metonymic contiguity mappings, allow, as Cooren et al. suggest, for an “emergent” (rather than reductive or reified) and “plurified” understanding of what an organization is. [10, 263-80]

Metonymy also entered into Watson’s study [11, 805-21] of two managers in a telecommunications company deliberating about a personal development program within workplace change. Thus, in these studies, members of organizations use metonymy in everyday talk not only to name and refer to organizations and organizational life (through reference shifts in language), but also symbolically to legitimate their activities, reaffirm status relations, and convince themselves about interpretations of an organizational event.

Although these studies have started to provide rich insights into the role of metonymy in managerial or employee discourse, when taken together they point to an important limitation in our current understanding of metonymies in language within or about organizations. That is, the empirical data on which these studies are based involves local and small episodes of talk (between members of an organization during a reorganization, organizational change, negotiations etc), rather than more broad based corpora of language or text analyzed for metonymies. As a result, the collective understanding of metonymy in organizational discourse is still rather limited.
In this subchapter, I demonstrate the use of a corpus-based linguistic analysis of metonymies in a corpus involving company names. The identification of metonymies in the corpus is focused on company names as company names are a direct embodiment of organizations in naturally occurring discourse. The examples chosen from on-line business journals allow me to address the use of organizational metonymies directly by focusing on metonymies involving such company names. The rationale behind this is that a documentation of how people use metonymic whole-part mappings through the use of these company names provides fundamental insights into how they frame and refer to organizations more generally.

My purpose here is to identify and interpret general linguistic patterns of metonymy use, rather than establishing the full range of potential and contextualized meanings of any particular metonymic expression.

The metonymic patterns identified in this research are presented below:

**ORGANISATION FOR MEMBERS**
Organisation stands for an official who acts for the organisation or all members of the organisation.

1) Last February NASA announced [...] 
2) It’s customary to go to work in black or white suits. [...] Woolworths wear them. 
3) BT can be pleased that it bought into McCaw at a much lower price than today’s going rate. 
4) Barclays Bank announced it is preparing to sack 20% of its domestic employees. 
5) A more likely scenario is that GM and Ford will vie for a strategic yet friendly investment in Jaguar. That would certainly suit the Jaguar management’s book and has less potential for political embarrassment than an unruly hostile bid. 
6) Motor giant Ford has denied there are more plans for more job cuts at the firm’s Halewood plant despite lowering car sales. 
7) Intel vociferously denied to Unigram last week suggestions circulated on the internet by GE’s research and development centre in New York that it has hit a brick wall with its P5 design. 
8) As for NT, Microsoft is back describing it as primarily a server operating system, and acknowledging that vendors are unlikely to bundle it with more than about 10% of the desktop machines they ship.

Here, a company name stands in for members of the organization, in such a way that the metonymy leads to a personification of an entire company as carrying out certain behaviours and as communicating akin to an individual. The result is that in these examples a corporate rhetor is seen to emerge, and indeed the company as a whole is imbued with a certain corporate personality or corporate identity as manifested in its collective behaviours and communications. While the initial motivation for the metonymy may have been primarily referential as shorthand for a relative clause, the use of this kind of metonymy also cues a metaphorical image of a company as a person or human being.

**ORGANISATION FOR PRODUCT**
Organisation stands here for the product it produces.

1) At eleven o’clock the big Volvo appeared at the far end of the hangar and drove slowly towards him, coming to a stop with its engine running forty feet away. 
2) She gulped down the proffered glass of Coca-Cola quickly. 
3) And he hasn’t bought me a Renault [...]

In organization-for-product metonymies, company names reference their products as in examples above. This is perhaps only relevant to those kinds of situations where the company name is badged onto products and services (so-called monolithic and endorsed branding structures), and not to companies where corporate names are disconnected (in branding and communications) from its
products and services (as in the case of, for example, Unilever and Procter&Gamble). However, for those companies to which this metonymic compression applies, it appears that in the minds of managers, consumers and the general public alike it is commonplace to associate products and services with the company that produces them, and, because of the metonymic compression, to substitute these with the company name.

**ORGANISATION FOR FACILITY**

Organisation stands for the facility that houses organisation or one of its branches.
- Details of crunch talks on a Sainsbury planned for Darlington have been revealed by Transport Minister Roger Freeman.
- The last time he had been in Athens the group that called themselves November 17 had hit Procter&Gamble with an anti-tank rocket.
- The opening of a McDonald’s is a major event

In organization-for-facility metonymies, a company name refers to the premises or facilities of the company in question. As such, the usage of this kind of metonymy has a simple referential or dispositional purpose in that it specifies the kind of facilities or the location of these facilities for the organization involved.

**ORGANISATION FOR INDEX**

Organisation stands for an index, like a stock index, indicating the value of the organisation.
- Fiat, which rose as much as 20 per cent last week on market rumours of outside concerns taking a stake, fell some three per cent on the day on the Milan stock exchange.
- Cheery figures from both Tesco and Next put consumer-related stocks on a firm footing from the outset, with J Sainsbury adding 6 to 386p, Kingfisher up 2 to 463p and Argos rising 3 to 234p.
- Barclays slipped 4p to 351p after confirming 3,000 more job losses.

The organization-for-index category refers to the metonymic usage of company names as referencing their stock or shares, and the movements of that stock or shares on an index like the London Stock Exchange. Examples 1) and 2) illustrate this category. The metonymy seems to be centred on a substitution of a company name for stock in order to easily identify and name the stock involved, but it also leads to a general view of companies as moving up and down an index (and as moving up and down in credit ratings). As such, these metonymies are connected to a spatial metaphorical understanding of an index like a stock exchange. Spatial metaphors have as their source domain the distribution of movement or objects (here: company names and the stock they represent) in space (here: an index).

The organization-for-index metonymies may cue a spatial metaphor of companies as moving up and down an index (and as moving up and down in credit ratings) as illustrated with example 3) above and examples 4), 5), 6) below.
- LVMH fell 18 per cent to £101 million, and interest costs rose by 26 per cent to £240 million.
- IBM was the big loser, dipping 14.5% by value and 3.6% in number of units shipped.
- Last time, Shell Transport and Trading came first, Glaxo was second, and Marks and Spencer came third. This year Marks and Spencer has leapt to the top slot, Shell is now second and Glaxo third.

**ORGANISATION FOR NAME**

1) In the computer industry the power of trademarks can readily be seen. IBM, Wordstar, Lotus 1-2-3 and BBC computer have become household names.
2) Despite signs of renewed interest from both Ford and Volkswagen (keen to reestablish itself as the largest car manufacturer in Europe), the British government announced in
March 1988 that it intended to pursue a wholly British solution for the remaining parts of Rover by selling it to British Aerospace (BAE).

The object-for-name category features a metonymic usage where the company name is used as a mere signifier rather than referentially, as in examples 1) and 2). It is a kind of usage where the company name is not used as a substitute for something else (like its products or members) but rather as a signifier or reference point to talk about the company, not directly of it.

ORGANISATION FOR REPRESENTATION

In object-for-representation metonymies, a name refers to a representation (such as a photo or painting) of the standard referent. The logo of an organization, for example, can be regarded as its representation, as in the following example:

*BT*’s pipes-of-Pan motif was, for him, somehow too British. Graphically, it lacked what King calls the “world class” of *IBM*, *Apple Computer*, *Ford*, *Sony*, and *Shell*.

The use of company names as standing in for something else such as its members or products is, it appears from the examples, guided by metonymic compression where the company name features as shorthand for a relative clause or propositional phrase (e.g. *Shell* for *members of Shell*). In other words, these metonymies appear to have an important referential function. Each metonymy features as shorthand for a relative clause or propositional phrase such as *products made by Nokia*. Such clauses or propositions are converted into metonymies in the discourse about business organisations.

**Conclusions**

All the examples above show that metonymies are systematically used by people to refer to organizations and reason about them. This systematic use suggests that metonymies are not arbitrary single expressions but reflect a general way in which people talk about and understand organizations by using one well-understood aspect of a company to stand for the thing as a whole or for some other aspect of it.

It became apparent that the most widely used category of metonymies involving company names is the organization-for-members substitution. Most of the other categories of metonymies are referential in the sense described above, including the organization-for-product and organization-for-facility metonymies. Taken together, the metonymic usage of company names is largely restricted to a few basic and conventional ways, with the identified categories of metonymies suggesting lexicalized base interpretations for company names (when used as metonyms). Indeed, the metonymic reference shifts (e.g. organization-for-product) in these categories occur systematically in relation to company names. One explanation for this systematicity is that metonymies involving company names reflect at least in part lexicalized interpretations (permitting reference shifts) for the noun organization. That is, an organization is typically reduced to salient or typical parts such as products, its members or its buildings and metonymy is therefore a common trope in the business linguistic culture. This is a significant finding as it provides support for the thesis that an important part of how people refer to and understand organizations is through specific metonymies. The use of these metonymies is also conventionalized and entrenched across genres and contexts of language use. This does not mean that people cannot be creative about their use of metonymies or indeed develop metonymies for company names that move beyond the identified conventional metonymic interpretations and reference shifts. However, my corpus analysis does suggest that there are conventional patterns in metonymy usage for company names, and thus conventional ways of talking about and understanding these kinds of organizations. They are conventional, having become part of the lexicon, and are used to refer to a general class of organizations, or to the same organization at a number of times and in a number of contexts of language use, rather than to one specific instance of an organization. These conventional patterns in the use of metonymy led Lakoff to consider the particular use of metonymies as “instances of general principles” of language use as “they do not just occur one by one”[12, 77].

It has been demonstrated here that there are conventional patterns in the use of metonymies in talk about organizations including frequently used categories of metonymies such as organization-for-
product and organization-for-members. In other words, the metonymic reference shifts (e.g. organization-for-product) in these categories occur systematically for company names.

This systematicity suggests that metonymies are not arbitrary single expressions but reflect general principles of metonymy use, where people conventionally use salient and well-understood aspects of a company to stand for the thing as a whole or for some other aspect of it.

References
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