9 Figurative meaning

Summary   9.1 Metaphor. – 9.2 Metonymy.

The interpretation of an utterance is not always derived from the meaning of the single signs. Sometimes, a non-literal interpretation may be involved: those cases are known as figurative meanings.

Well-studied forms of non-literal meanings are metaphors and metonymies. These phenomena are generally identified as poetic devices. However, in recent studies, metaphor and metonymy are also conceived of as broader cognitive mechanisms which are important for the building of everyday life meaning.

In sign languages, metaphors are very frequent since in the visual-gestural channel it is possible to map abstract concepts to concrete concepts. A clear example of this linguistic mechanism is the sign UNDERSTAND in LIS which is realised by the action of grabbing something close to the forehead. In this case, the concrete gesture of grabbing something metaphorically recalls the idea of grabbing a concept.

UNDERSTAND

Metonymy is another non-figurative strategy which creates a relation between two concepts or entities, by considering a specific association or a particular continuity between them. The possible metonymic relationships may involve the substitution of a part for the whole,

a place for an institution, the author for his/her writing, the container for the product, and so forth.

Metonymic processes are not only used as rhetorical strategies, but also as a more common mechanism of word construction in LIS. Some frozen signs have undergone a metonymic process: for example, the sign HOUSE is built upon the classifier for root. In this case, the root, which is a part of the whole entity, becomes the sign for referring to the general concept of the house.

HOUSE

9.1 Metaphor

As stated before, contemporary studies conceive metaphoric expressions as productive cognitive mechanisms which are widespread not only in poetic contexts, but in the expressions used in everyday life. The same holds true for LIS. In the following sections, the cognitive basis of metaphors [PRAGMATICS 9.1.1], the types and the combinations of metaphors [PRAGMATICS 9.1.2], and the metaphors in grammar [PRAGMATICS 9.1.3] are discussed.

9.1.1 Cognitive basis of metaphors

The cognitive process underlying metaphors is a general property which belongs to natural languages. Indeed, many expressions in everyday life are metaphorically derived. Generally, a metaphor is conceived as an abstract concept mapped to and understood through a more concrete concept. The abstract schema through which metaphors are represented is generally X is Y. A common example is the association between the concrete concept of journey and the broader abstract concept of life. Life is often considered as a journey, and consequently other features of the two spheres are combined: for example, the difficulties of life are associated to travel barriers, or the growing process is associated to the process of discovery which is enabled by travelling. Therefore, in the schema below, the X domain (the source) could be interpreted as journey and the Y domain (the target) as life. The internal connections (e.g. x1 – y1, x2 – y2, x3 – y3) can be considered as the associations created between the source and the target domain, as displayed by the figure below.
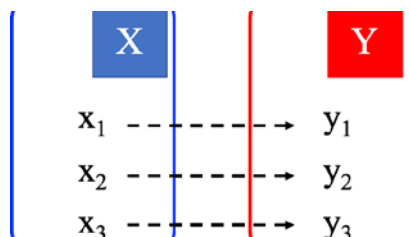
Figure 1 Schema illustrating metaphor mappings (recreated from Quer et al. 2017, 761)

As in other sign languages, some lexical signs in LIS are derived from metaphorical mappings: in these cases, abstract concepts are metaphorically mapped into concrete concepts, which in turns are iconically depicted in signs thanks to the visual-gestural channel.

For example, in the sign CULTURED the dominant hand seems to hold a huge book at the level of the forehead. Therefore, this sign iconically expresses the wide knowledge of someone by representing this knowledge as a big book in the head, as shown in the picture below. The non-manual markers associated with this sign, namely teeth on the lips and squint eyes, are typically used with an evaluative function [PRAGMATICS 2.2.1], enhancing the idea of a wide knowledge.

CULTURED

In this case, a concrete concept (the book) is metaphorically mapped to the abstract meaning of the sign (the fact of being well educated).

9.1.2 Types and combinations of metaphors

Metaphors are also useful for understanding complex meanings since they can map abstract concepts to concrete experiences. Primary forms of metaphors, namely very basic types of metaphors, display an embodied experiential basis. To illustrate, the concept of intimacy is mapped to

spatial closeness, or a great amount or degree is mapped to the high part of the signing space. The example below shows the metaphor intimacy is closeness: in particular, the fact that the signer and his/her friend are placed in close locations in space reflects their close relationship.

> IX$_1$ FRIEND IX$_{a}$ $_1$COMMUNICATE$_{3a}$
> 'I have an intimate conversation with a friend of mine.'

The following example illustrates another metaphoric use of space: the price raise in the housing market is visually represented by the upward movement.

> MARKET HOUSE MONEY MONEY_RAISE
> 'There is a price raise in the housing market.'

Another basic category of metaphors consists in mapping a thought, a feeling or an emotion to a concrete object. In the following sentence, the expression of personal thoughts is metaphorically conveyed through the concrete act of handing something to someone, as shown below.

> IX$_1$ THOUGHT $_1$CL(spread curved open 5): 'give_from_inside'$_2$
> 'I let you know my thoughts.'

Moreover, the fact that signs for emotions (e.g. LOVE) are often placed in the chest, while signs for cognitive processes (e.g. THINK) are located close to the forehead of the signer is another basic use of metaphors.

Lots of metaphors in LIS display this specific connection between an abstract concept, such as a feeling or a cognitive activity, and the place of the body in which people culturally or visually locate these elements. For example, a very common metaphor which has become an idiomatic expression in LIS is the combination of the signs HEART BLACK to mean a negative disposition, shown in the video below.

> HEART BLACK
> 'Mean'

Such expression requires that both signs are produced close to the heart. Note that the sign BLACK is conventionally articulated on the signer's forehead. The fact that in this specific expression it is moved to the heart visually enhances the power of the metaphor. This suggests that metaphoric processes are creative and productive and belong to the dynamic part of language.

A famous expression is PERCEIVE_WITH_MENTAL_EYES. In this case, we can observe the displacement of the sign PERCEIVE, which is generally articulated close to the eyes, in an unusual, but metaphorically

significant location: the forehead. Such displacement indicates that this kind of perception is referred to the mind rather than to the eye. The example of this use is shown below.

PERCEIVE_WITH_MENTAL_EYES
'Perceive something mentally.'

Interestingly, such creative processes do not only concern the poetic domain or idiomatic expressions, but are also used for referring to everyday life. An example is represented by the metaphorical use of the LIS sign UNIVERSITY. In its citation form, this sign is realised with a forward path movement starting from the signer's forehead combined with a closing secondary movement (a). The metaphoric version of UNIVERSITY is realised with the same closing secondary movement combined with a slightly different path movement: at the beginning the hand moves forward, but then it suddenly moves downward (b). This particular form makes reference to a not serious attitude toward academic studies.

a. UNIVERSITY (citation form)

b. UNIVERSITY (metaphoric use)
'Superficial attitude toward university.'

In other cases, a metaphoric use in LIS is the transliteration of an Italian metaphor. For example, the Italian idiomatic expression *avere i capelli dritti* (Eng. 'be surprised or scared', literally '(to) have straight hair'). In LIS, the sign derives from the Italian version, but the idiomatic use has been visually adapted by taking advantage of the visual description of such expression, as shown in the example below.

STRAIGHT_HAIR
'Being scared of something.'

These and many other metaphorical processes in LIS show that signers can resort to metaphor for the creation of new meanings.

9.1.3 Metaphors in grammar

In LIS, as in other sign languages, metaphorical mapping can also be responsible for grammatical features, such as verb agreement. In the example below, the verb HEAD^INFLUENCE is based on the following metaphor: a good or bad influence is something that can be represented as moving from an agent to a patient.

HEAD^INFLUENCE 🖐
'Have an influence on'

Thus, although the specific verb HEAD^INFLUENCE does not refer to a physical transfer, it refers to a metaphorical transfer.

9.2 Metonymy

Similarly to metaphor, metonymy is another cognitive process which was previously applied to the poetic domain, but it is also used in everyday life. In the following sections, we present the relationship between metaphor and metonymy [PRAGMATICS 9.2.1] and the body parts which establish metonymical relations capitalising on the visual gestural channel of sign languages [PRAGMATICS 9.2.2].

9.2.1 Metonymy vs. metaphor

In metonymic processes, entities which are related for some reason are used one in place of the other. The abstract schema through which metonymies are represented is generally X for Y. In metonymy, the relationship between the two associated concepts or objects has to be close. Indeed, differently from metaphors, metonymic relations involve two related concepts included in the same semantic sphere. The picture below schematizes such mechanism.
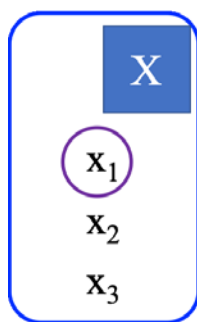
Figure 2 Schema illustrating a metonymic relationship (recreated from Quer et al. 2017, 764)

One of the most common types of metonymy is synecdoche, a relationship in which a part of an object stands for the whole entity. In

this case, as illustrated in the picture above, the macro-domain of an entity or of a concept is decomposed into several smaller sub-components.

LIS, as other sign and spoken languages, displays lots of linguistic uses of this type. For example, in the video below, the signs FACE NEW stands for a new person. Therefore, the signer selects one single aspect (i.e. the face) of the domain to denote the whole entity (i.e. the person).

IX$_1$ SEE FACE NEW
'I see a new face.'

Lots of signs in LIS have been generated by this type of metonymic process, so that many frozen signs are inherently metonymic. For instance, many of the signs derived from handle classifiers [MORPHOLOGY 5.1.3] display a part-whole relationship. An example is shown by the picture below in which the sign for the steering wheel is used to refer to the whole entity, the car.
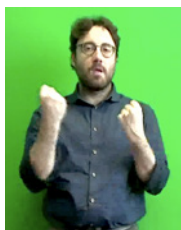
CAR

Similarly, the sign POT derives from the way in which a pot is commonly grabbed, namely by its pot-handles.
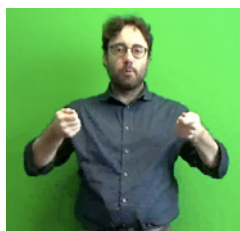
POT

Another type of metonymic relationship is the producer who stands for the product. For example, in the case of movies or books, the name of the director or the author might be employed in substitution of their intellectual product. The example below displays one of

these cases in which the Italian writer Dante is used in place of his well-known poem the 'Divina Commedia'.

IX₁ DANTE IX READ
'I read Dante (Dante's poem).'

A similar case might happen with other types of products, such as the brand of a car which stands for the car itself, as in the example below.

IX₁ MERCEDES IX₁ BUY
'I bought a Mercedes (a Mercedes car).'

Another type of metonymic relationship consists in substituting an institution with the place related to that institution. In the example below, the building which represents the seat of the Senate of the Italian Republic, Palazzo Madama, is used for referring to the Senate itself.

PALACE IX M-A-D-A-M-A LAW APPROVE
'Palazzo Madama (the Senate) has approved the law.'

Metonymy in LIS is also realised in the relationship effect for cause. In the following example, the concept of being weak is realised through the mention of having trembling legs.

BROTHERₐ POSS₁ IXₐ CHARACTER WEAK
'My brother has a weak character'.

Both metonymy and metaphor show a widespread use in LIS discourse. Sometimes, it may be hard to distinguish between the two phenomena. For example, the fact that a verb referring to a feeling such as LOVE is articulated on the signer's chest may be interpreted either as metaphor or metonymy.
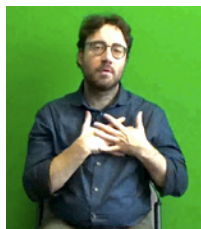
LOVE

This case can be analysed as metaphor if we consider that the chest is metaphorically conceived as the container of emotions. However, it can also be analysed as metonymy as the chest stands for the locus of emotions.

9.2.2 Body as metonymy

Metaphoric expressions involving emotional experiences can also be considered as cases of metonymy. Indeed, physical effects of specific emotions can be conceived as different aspects belonging to the same domain. In LIS, an example of this association can be the sign TEMPERATURE_RAISE used in young signers' slang to refer to the effects of a sexual arousal triggered by signing with a desired person.

WOMAN IX$_1$ $_1$COMMUNICATE$_3$ SIGN IX$_1$ TEMPERATURE_RAISE
'The conversation with the woman turned me on'.

Information on Data and Consultants

The descriptions in these sections are based on the references below and on grammatical judgments. For information on data and consultants see the references. The video clips and images exemplifying the linguistic data have been produced by a LIS native signer coming from the northern part of Italy and involved in the SIGN-HUB Project.

Authorship Information

Chiara Calderone

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