

Why That Metaphor? Steering Deliberate Metaphor to Safer Waters

Gianluca Michelli

LUMSA University; ICP

Abstract

Since the rise of Conceptual Metaphor Theory in the 1980s, metaphor theorists have investigated the diverse effects that metaphor has on cognitive processes. In certain situations—in political speech, for instance—it is noticed that metaphoric expressions are relatively frequent and play a decisive role. Some researchers—most notably, Steen—suggest that metaphors can be intentionally employed *as* metaphors in communication to achieve specific discourse goals. Thus, investigating the role of intentions behind metaphor use would shed light into the general question of why people resort to metaphors in specific contexts. Scholars generally take the utterers' intentions to be individual mental states. In this paper, I examine another possibility. I argue that in the field of discourse analysis—as well as in Natural Language Processing applications—the notion of intention is best understood as a property attributed to linguistic acts. Building on Anscombe's philosophy of intentional action, I conceive intentions as *reasons for speaking* as we do. Within this philosophical framework, I introduce the novel category of *intentional_A* metaphor, which refines existing notions of deliberate and purposeful metaphor. This alternative accounts for the observed asymmetries in production and reception of metaphor, and secures this approach from the most common critiques addressed to Deliberate Metaphor Theory.

Keywords: Metaphor, Intention, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Deliberate Metaphor Theory, Anscombe.

1. Introduction

Metaphor has long attracted the attention of philosophers and, more recently, of cognitive scientists and computational linguists. Far from being the poets' prerogative, metaphors occur in everyday conversations and, according to Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), unconsciously shape our conceptual system (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). A conceptual metaphor is a mapping between two domains: the source and the target. Metaphoric mappings allow to conceptualise the target

(often more abstract) based on prior knowledge of the source (more concrete). For instance, the conceptual metaphor UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING—where UNDERSTANDING is the target and SEEING is the source—allows us to conceptualise the abstract domain of understanding in terms of the more concrete domain of seeing. Thus, we say that one can “see” what their interlocutors mean, they can come to “view” things differently, etc.¹

Despite the pervasiveness of metaphor in everyday language, scholars still debate its precise role in communication. Several authors—Cameron (2003), Musolff (2004), and Steen (2008), among others—have emphasised the multi-faceted role that metaphor plays in communication and highlighted how metaphors may be sometimes used deliberately to achieve specific discourse goals.²

At this stage, deliberateness can be interpreted in an Aristotelian way as “foregrounding a choice” (Aristotle 2004: 59), thus implying some level of awareness, but not necessarily consciousness—cf. picking a particular fruit from a basket of mandarins at the supermarket. A deliberate metaphor minimally requires the existence of potential alternatives, and of reasons that might be provided to explain its selection. The general question of why we use metaphors could then be answered in the case of deliberate metaphors by referring to the speaker’s intentions: if they have certain intentions *in mind*, they would be more likely to opt for certain metaphoric expressions. Importantly, having intentions in mind need not require that one is conscious of them, but simply that one entertains a mental state that directs their linguistic products to the fulfilment of some goals, thereby selecting a particular metaphorical expression over possible alternatives.³ This seems to be the central notion of intention at the basis of the theory developed by Steen and colleagues—Deliberate Metaphor Theory, henceforth DMT—which has attracted the criticisms of scholars in psycholinguistics. Gibbs (2011) argues in particular that we cannot rely on the notion of deliberate metaphor—the intentional use of metaphor *as* metaphor (Steen 2017)—because: (i) no specific linguistic markers distinguish this type of metaphor, and (ii) speakers’ actual intentions cannot be directly observed, and speakers may misinterpret their own intentions.

In this paper, I argue that the dispute is ill-founded. Advocates of CMT aim to identify the causes of our linguistic behaviour. According to CMT, all metaphors we find in language are the result of conceptual metaphors in thought. Linguistic metaphors are hence used because of a general mechanism (conceptual

¹ Throughout the paper, all the occurrences of metaphorical linguistic expressions will be in double quotation marks, whereas the underlying conceptual metaphors are displayed in small caps.

² It should be noted that the different authors mentioned highlight different aspects of deliberateness. Cameron (2003: 100), who focuses on metaphor use in educational contexts, contrasts deliberate metaphors with “metaphors that occurred because that was ‘just the way to say it’”, thereby suggesting a deviation from dominant linguistic conventions. Musolff, on the other hand, does not provide an explicit definition of deliberate metaphor. In his analysis of metaphor use in political discourse, he highlights how metaphors serve a functional role as rhetorical and argumentative tools that can be “employed deliberately to deceive and mislead others” (Musolff 2004: 166). Finally, while Steen’s (2008, 2011) initial definitions of deliberate metaphor relate it to consciousness, more recent works sharply distinguish conscious from deliberate use, the latter requiring just goal-directedness (Steen 2017: 6). More on Steen’s definition of deliberate metaphor in Section 2.2.

³ Here is a definition from the literature that is compatible with the sense of intention as mental state I consider here: “An intention is a mental representation caused by a desire for a goal which itself causes action to bring about that goal” (Gibbs 1999: 80).

metaphor) underpinning our understanding of abstract, complex, or unfamiliar domains in terms of other domains. For proponents of DMT, however, one should focus on intentional agency to explain why speakers resort to certain metaphors in specific situations. If a metaphor was intentionally used as a cross-domain mapping—i.e., if it was deliberate—then it may serve diverse communicative goals, which are often related to the discourse event in which the metaphor is found (Steen 2008). Building on Anscombe's (1957) seminal work on intentional action, I first distinguish between *causes* and *reasons* for acting. Crucially, theories such as DMT and Critical Metaphor Analysis (Charteris-Black 2004) explain why we use metaphors in terms of reasons, and not of causes. To safeguard these and similar approaches from psychological worries, one ought to give up the notion of intention as the utterer's mental state. Moving from a first- to a third-person viewpoint, I take intentions to be properties attributed to linguistic acts. This perspective allows me to account for the observed asymmetries in the production and reception of metaphor, and secures this approach from the most common critiques addressed to DMT. In addition, the present study can serve as a theoretical basis for applications in Computational Linguistics, since it makes no assumption about the cognitive life of metaphor producers and appreciators. Elsewhere, Tong, Shutova, and I propose a taxonomy of intentions most commonly attributed to metaphor, and adopt it to annotate a subset of the VU Amsterdam Metaphor Corpus (Krennmayr and Steen 2017), which collects a variety of metaphors from different genres (fiction, news, conversation and academic prose) (Michelli, Tong, and Shutova 2026).

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, I briefly summarise recent advances in metaphor studies stemming from CMT. I then discuss DMT and the debate that it generated among metaphor scholars. Section 3 is devoted to the notion of intention, as studied in pragmatics. In Section 4, I briefly sketch Anscombe's account of intentional action and show how it can be fruitfully applied to the study of metaphor in language use. I introduce the category of *intentional_A metaphor* as a refinement of deliberate and purposeful metaphor. Finally, Section 5 resumes the results, hinting at main contributions as well as promising directions for future work.

2. Setting the Stage

2.1. Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT)

Between the late 1970s and early 1980s, the emergence of at least two intuitions contributed to a renewed interest toward the study of metaphor. First, it was recognised that metaphor is not a marginal aspect of language but is part of everyday language, and its function is therefore not only ornamental. Second, metaphor is not just a matter of language but also of thought. A seminal paper by Ortony well exemplifies the new spirit, making the link between metaphor and cognitive processes explicit: “metaphors are necessary as communicative device because they allow the transfer of coherent chunks of characteristics—perceptual, cognitive, emotional and experiential—from a vehicle which is known to a topic which is less so” (1975: 53).

While already Black (1954) stressed that *some* linguistic metaphors cannot be paraphrased without loss of cognitive content,⁴ Lakoff and Johnson were the first to recognise that metaphor *as such* is firstly and foremost a cognitive phenomenon. As they put it: “our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” (1980: 3). This means not only that some concepts can be understood in terms of other concepts—for instance, when one explains an unfamiliar notion through a metaphor. Concepts related to complex, abstract activities are metaphorically structured, i.e., their very constitution depends on the diverse metaphors through which we understand them. Paradigmatic cases are abstract concepts such as emotions. As an example, the concept of love is constituted through a number of (culturally-dependent) metaphors, each highlighting some aspects of love: LOVE IS A PHYSICAL FORCE, MADNESS, MAGIC, WAR, and so on.

2.2. Deliberate Metaphor Theory (DMT)

2.2.1. The Rise of DMT

In recent years, several scholars, among which Cameron (2003) and Musolff (2004), have stressed the importance of the communicative dimension in the analysis of metaphor. Steen (2008) introduced the notion of *deliberate metaphor* in particular, stimulating a lively academic debate.⁵ Overall, Steen highlights three basic characteristics of a deliberate metaphor: (1) deliberate metaphor has a specific communicative function, namely changing the addressee’s perspective on a certain topic, (2) deliberate metaphor is an invitation for the addressee to change their perspective on a topic, and (3) deliberate metaphor is intentional—minimally, it is intended to draw distinct attention to the source and target domain. This means that the processing of a deliberate metaphor requires the interpreter to consider the source domain as a separate detail of attention. For instance, in interpreting Shakespeare’s metaphor “Shall I compare thee to ‘a Summer’s day’”, one needs to pay attention to SUMMER as a conceptual domain that is typically distinct from that of a beloved person (Steen 2017: 7).⁶ Only then the metaphorical mapping between the two domains becomes available.

⁴ While paraphrases of substitution- and comparison-metaphors lose just their rhetorical or aesthetic force, a defining feature of so-called interaction-metaphors, according to Black, is that they resist full translation into literal equivalents. As he puts it: “The literal paraphrase inevitably says too much—and with the wrong emphasis. [...] The loss in such cases is a loss in *cognitive content*” (Black 1954: 293).

⁵ The exact definition of deliberate metaphor has been refined through the years; besides the one in the cited seminal paper, slightly different versions can be found in Steen 2011 and 2017, among others.

⁶ In this paper, I adopt the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP). This is a shared framework established by ten metaphor scholars—the so-called Pragglejaz Group (2007). According to the MIP, the surface linguistic difference between simile and metaphor (i.e., the presence of markers such as ‘like’ or verbs such as ‘compare’) is not inconsistent with the presence of a metaphorical mapping between domains.

Typical cases of deliberate metaphors are direct metaphors.⁷ These may consist in simple copula metaphors (*A is B*) or similes (*A is like B*) but can also be extended to different degrees. Here are some examples:

- (1) a. Love is “blindness” (Steen 2008: 225).
- b. You are “like a hurricane”, there’s calm in your eye, and I’m getting blown away (Steen 2008: 225).
- c. Imagine your brain “as a house” filled with lights. Now imagine someone turning off the lights one by one. That’s what Alzheimer’s disease does (Steen 2014: 182).

Building on findings by Glucksberg and Keysar (1990) and Bowdle and Gentner (2005), Steen makes an important departure from CMT: “theoretically defining metaphor as a cross-domain mapping [in thought] does not mean that metaphor must exhibit a cross-domain mapping in all of its processes of use” (Steen 2017: 9). Specifically, non-deliberate metaphors—which constitute the vast majority of metaphors in everyday language—might not be processed as cross-domain mappings but through a process akin to lexical disambiguation (Steen 2017: 9), that is, the (pragmatic) process of selection of a contextually relevant sense in homonyms or polysemes. The explanation goes roughly like this. While encountering a non-deliberate metaphor, competing senses of the metaphorically used expression would be activated in parallel—minimally, a literal and a metaphorical sense. These alternatives are taken to be part of the mental lexicon of the receiver. As sentence processing proceeds, integrating the rest of the context, only the target-related sense is retained, with the source-related meaning playing no further role in interpretation.⁸ On the other hand, deliberate metaphors, according to DMT, would always require the construction of an on-line conceptual mapping: attention to the source domain meaning remains active, allowing for the more cognitively-loaded kind of processing described by proponents of CMT. Yet, given that the bulk of metaphor is non-deliberate, metaphor would not typically be processed via cross-domain mapping, resulting in the so-called “paradox of metaphor” (Steen 2008) that DMT attempts to solve by incorporating the communicative dimension in the analysis of metaphor.⁹

⁷ While being typical cases, direct metaphors need not be deliberate in all cases. In particular, they need to be novel or revitalised in the current context of use. Based on corpus analysis, Steen (2011: 51) maintains that the latter is by far the most common case.

⁸ Various explanations exist in the literature of how exactly one meaning is retained, while the competing alternatives are discarded as metaphor processing proceeds. Gernsbacher et al.’s (2001) Structure Building Framework, for example, considers it just a special case of the general mechanism of utterance understanding, which is based on the cognitive operations of suppression and enhancement of activated memory cells (Gernsbacher and Faust 1991). Their findings support Glucksberg and Keysar’s (1990) theory of metaphor understanding as involving the construction of ad hoc categories. They are also compatible with Steen’s take, restricted to the processing of non-deliberate metaphors.

⁹ One should not be too hasty, however, in opposing lexical disambiguation to the processing of deliberate metaphors. For instance, Rubio provides evidence for a more nuanced picture: in both cases, multiple meanings are activated at first, and while the suppression of contextually inappropriate meanings of a homonym is carried out automatically, the understanding of a novel metaphor—which is always a deliberate metaphor—would require more demanding attentional resources. As she puts it: “metaphor interpretation would be special, but not necessarily more so than lexical pragmatic processes such as

2.2.2. The Debate Over DMT

DMT has stimulated a lively academic debate. Gibbs (2015) advances two main challenges to the theory. First, an objective procedure to identify deliberate metaphors is lacking. Second, the producers' conscious judgments are not reliable as proxies for mostly unconscious processes. Addressing the first challenge, Reijnierse et al. (2018) developed the *Deliberate Metaphor Identification Procedure* (DMIP), which identifies potentially deliberate metaphor uses. For the purposes of the present paper, I shall focus only on the second challenge.

It is generally recognised in psychological research that people have limited access to the causes of their behaviour. More often than not, the mental processes leading to action are unconscious and are hence not open to introspection. Gibbs (2011) briefly discusses a few studies that support such a claim. I will here hint at two. First, Nisbett and Wilson's (1977) analysis of several experiments shows that the causes leading to action might be very different (and shallower) from the ones that agents themselves think. Their conclusions are that people do not have direct introspective access to their higher-order cognitive processes; when they explain their behaviour, they construct plausible stories rather than report actual mental processes. In a famous experiment, for instance, participants were asked to choose among four pairs of identical stockings, whose only observable difference was the linear position from left to right. Results tell that the rightmost pair was preferred about four times more often than the leftmost one. However, once asked why they made their choice, no participant mentioned position as a relevant feature. Moreover, "when asked directly about a possible effect of the position of the article, virtually all subjects denied it" (Nisbett and Wilson 1977: 244).

A second series of studies relates to Libet's (1983; 1985) experiments on the so-called readiness potential. In these experiments, participants were asked to perform a simple voluntary movement (such as flexing their wrist) at a moment of their choosing, while their brain activity (via EEG) and muscle activity were recorded. Crucially, participants also reported the moment at which they became aware of their intention to act, using a fast-moving clock. The results showed that the readiness potential—tracking neural activity in motor-related areas—begins several hundred milliseconds before the reported time of conscious intention. This temporal gap suggests that neural processes leading to action are initiated prior to conscious awareness of the intention to move, casting doubts on the causal role of the latter.¹⁰

All in all, these studies offer support for the claim that subjects are often not aware of the causes of their behaviour, and that introspection cannot straightforwardly be granted a privileged position in causal explanations of (linguistic) action. Consequently, asking producers about their intentions for the use of a particular metaphor is not a reliable method for assessing its deliberateness (Gibbs 2011).

disambiguation or reference assignment, the difference lying merely in the degree of automatization of the cognitive processes involved" (2007: 364).

¹⁰ The experimental paradigm designed by Libet and colleagues has stimulated a vast literature in relation to the alleged challenges it poses to human free will. For more recent developments on both sides of the contention, see Soon et al. (2008), who claim that decision making is encoded in high-level control structures that are activated up to 10 seconds before awareness, and De Caro and Lavazza (2014), who provide a critical counterpoint from a conceptual stance.

While no definition of deliberate metaphor explicitly mentions consciousness, Gibbs stresses a crucial point. In his 2008 paper, Steen sometimes conflates intentional and conscious use.¹¹ Yet the notion of deliberate metaphor can be formulated in a way that avoids this confusion. In later work, the distinction is in fact more sharply drawn: while “one may safely assume that all language use is intentional: i.e., it is goal directed” (Steen 2014: 184), not all language use is conscious—on the contrary, it is typically unconscious (Steen 2017). A metaphor is deliberate if it is “intentionally used *as* a metaphor in communication” (Steen 2017: 6). This, however, does not imply that it was consciously selected and then uttered. More recently, DMT scholars have acknowledged the ambiguity of most (indirect) metaphors, whose interpretation seems often compatible with both a deliberate and a non-deliberate reading.¹² It is suggested that the utterer’s intentions (as mental states) might help disambiguation (Steen 2023a), or that both readings are indeed equally available (Steen 2024).¹³ While the ambiguity hypothesis provides a reasonable explanation for the asymmetries in metaphor production and reception, it is epistemologically questionable to introduce a concept—deliberate metaphor—whose extension is blurred from the beginning. More importantly, a refined version of Gibbs’ scepticism still seems to apply. If conceived as mental states, intentions are as opaque as the causes underlying action in the experiments discussed by Gibbs.¹⁴ Ultimately, the difficulty seems to rely on the under-specification of the notion of intention adopted within the DMT framework. Given the vast existing literature on the topic, it is arguably a task for philosophy to clarify the notion of intention that better suits this academic discussion. In the next Section, I will dive deeper into the notion of intention, arguing that

¹¹ “Not all intentional metaphorical language use is metaphorically deliberate in the sense of *consciously* being selected to achieve a particular communicative, and especially rhetorical, effect” (Steen 2008: 224); “These must all involve the *conscious*, deliberately metaphorical use of the source domain for rhetorical purposes” (2008: 225) [my emphasis].

¹² Ambiguity is a complex phenomenon with diverse uses in the literature. Here, I refer to Steen’s restricted use of the term, marking the systematic possibility of labelling a large class of metaphor uses as both deliberate and non-deliberate. Ambiguity should not be confused with polysemy, which refers to the property of (metaphor-related) words of referring to multiple interrelated meanings—independently of their current context of use. Polysemy, in other words, is a linguistic property, while ambiguity pertains here to the multivalence of metaphors in discourse. According to Steen (2024: 252), the former is a condition for the latter.

¹³ The interlocutors’ intentions are integrated in a refined version of DMT based on the psychological model for comprehension of discourse proposed by Van Dijk and Kintsch (Steen 2023b). According to this framework, the comprehender builds four distinct but interrelated models while interpreting a metaphor: Surface Text, Text Base, Situational Model, and Context Model. The latter in particular includes information on the communicative intentions ascribed to the producer. As will become clearer in the following, the aim of this paper is not to predict what goes on in the interpreter’s head: the attribution of intentions is not treated as a private feature of some mental model, but as a social task shared among language users. Some psychological/cognitive hypotheses are nonetheless formulated in Section 4.3.

¹⁴ That a notion of intention as mental state is still in play is suggested by several passages in a recent work: “Producers of metaphorical utterances may *intend* their addressees to set up a source-domain referent [...] and then they are using their metaphor deliberately [...]. But they may also *not have* such an *intention* at all, and then the utterance may be comprehended as a non-deliberate metaphor [...] Yet listeners also *have intentions* of their own” (Steen 2024: 243) [my emphasis].

one can meaningfully think of intentions in a way that does not rely on speakers' and/or listeners' mental states.

3. On the Quest for Intentions

First of all, one might wonder why it is relevant to investigate the role of intentions in the study of metaphor to begin with. Gibbs, Kushner, and Mills (1991) estimate the impact of an implied author—viz., an intentional agent—on metaphor understanding, challenging the so-called thesis of the *intentional fallacy*.¹⁵ The paper reports the results of three experiments in which subjects performed various tasks on literal, anomalous, and metaphoric comparisons, attributed either to a famous poet or to a computer program. Overall, Gibbs et al. conclude that implied existence of authorial intentions play a decisive role in utterance—and in particular metaphor—understanding, fostering a stronger engagement by interpreters. In this Section, my aim is to better demarcate what one might mean by 'authorial intentions'.

3.1. Intentions in Pragmatics

3.1.1. Communicative Intention: The Received View

The notion of speaker's communicative intention is central in Gricean pragmatics, as well as Speech Act Theory (SAT) and Relevance Theory. In his seminal paper, Grice (1957) first distinguishes between two senses of the word 'meaning': there is, he argues, natural and non-natural meaning (or meaning_{nn}); the latter playing a major role in our linguistic exchanges.¹⁶ In Grice's characterisation of non-natural meaning (1957: 385), one can identify three sub-intentions. According to the received reading of Grice's view, when they want to mean non-naturally something, the speaker intends that: (i) their utterance produces some effect in the listener, (ii) the listener recognises this intention, and (iii) the first intention is fulfilled—at least partly—by its recognition.¹⁷ Communicative intention (CI) can be defined through Grice's characterisation of non-natural meaning: to say that an utterance is made with a CI is to say that some speaker means non-naturally something by it.¹⁸

Austin (1962) famously argued that each utterance can be analysed as involving three kinds of action. First, there is the bare fact of engaging in meaningful

¹⁵ That is, the claim in literary criticism that the interpretation of (literary) texts does not require inference about the authors' actual intentions; see, among others, Brooks (1947) and Wimsatt and Beardsley (1946) for canonical formulations of the view.

¹⁶ Contrast the minimal pair "Those spots *mean* (meant) measles" with "Those three rings on the bell (of the bus) *mean* that the bus is full" [my emphasis, omitting single inverted commas around the that-clause in the second sentence, as per successive reprints] (Grice 1957: 377).

¹⁷ In the first sub-intention, examples of intended effects can be the formation of a belief if the utterance is an assertion, an action or intention to act if it is a command, etc. Note that this widespread interpretation, adopting the utterer's point of view and linking Grice's definition to actual psychological processes, has been challenged in the literature. More on this in what follows.

¹⁸ Recanati suggests calling *Gricean communication* any communicative behaviour that can be explained resorting to communicative intention. In this sense, linguistic communication becomes a special case of Gricean communication, which is thus not restricted to conventional linguistic means (1986: 213, 214).

communication (locutionary act). Second, in uttering a sentence the producer is doing something quite specific with their words—describing a state of affairs, giving a command, promising, reassuring, and so on. This is the illocutionary act. Finally, there are the effects that the utterance has on the receiver (perlocutionary act). With this terminology from SAT, we can now say that in Grice's definition of communicative intention the first sub-intention corresponds to a perlocutionary intention, i.e., "the intention that one's communicative act produces a given perlocutionary effect" (Recanati 1986: 216). Perlocutionary intentions are those defined by their empirical consequences on an audience, such as persuading, convincing, or alarming. Grice's first sub-intention likewise consists in the speaker intending to bring about a particular effect in the listener.¹⁹

3.1.2. Intentions in the Head

There are at least two issues with the standard pragmatic framework. First, since intentions are conceived as pre-formed, individual mental states, this approach cannot account for cases where the utterer might not have all the possible meanings, nor all the possible effects of their utterance, known in advance. Interpretations and goals are often shaped through interaction over the course of a conversation, rather than being fully determined by individual intentions prior to the joint act of communication.²⁰ For this reason, Sperber and Wilson (1986) distinguish implicatures *à la Grice* on the one hand—already intended by the utterer—and contextual implications on the other. Contextual implications account for all those expansions of the intended meaning that the utterer "did not specifically have in mind when they originally framed the utterances" (Gibbs 1999: 59). While implicatures are part of the utterer's CI, who then expects the receiver to work them out, contextual implications are worked out on the receiver's initiative.

Pragmaticians also need to face a second issue, namely the non-accessibility or *opacity* of intentions (Gibbs' second challenge in Section 2.2). The problem is to determine which intentions the producer has before their utterance is uttered. In cases of willing and conscious production, intentions are easily accessible—as long as there are no reasons to suspect the utterer's honesty. However, intentions as mental states are not necessarily open to conscious scrutiny and sometimes people's reports about their intentions for acting and speaking as they do might be wrong (Gibbs 1999: 89). As a result, questioning speakers is not a reliable way of assessing their intentions.

All these considerations motivate a change in our conception of intentions. Leaving behind the notion of intention as a mental state—of which speakers may or may not be aware—and adopting the receiver's point of view instead, intentions can be seen as properties ascribed to linguistic acts. They are hermeneutic tools for making sense of our behaviour and interpreting that of others. A similar idea can be worked out within a revised Gricean framework, as done by Sbisà (2001; 2006),

¹⁹ The parallel is, however, not perfect. Austin's notion of perlocutionary effect includes any effect produced on a listener, regardless of whether they recognise the speaker's intention. By contrast, in Grice's account, the relevant effect must be achieved at least partly via the listener's recognition of the speaker's intention.

²⁰ "Intentional meanings are not fully defined complete entities before they get from the speaker's mind to her mouth. Rather, once they material[ize] into utterances they enter a process of negotiation of meaning where the interlocutor's response plays a crucial role" (Gibbs 1999: 62, quoting Marcelo Dascal).

who promotes a view of non-natural meaning ‘from the other side’—i.e., from the receiver’s side. According to her reading, Grice (1957) should not be taken to lay down conditions on the intentions that an utterer must have in order to mean non-naturally something. On the contrary, the three conditions would “specify the intentions we are bound to ascribe to an utterer whenever we take his or her behavior as having meaning_{nn}” (Sbisà 2001: 73). Similarly, one can interpret the observance of the Cooperative Principle, its maxims and the flouting thereof—loosely speaking, conversational implicatures—not as the objects of the speaker’s actual intentions, but as the products of the receiver’s interpretative attitude (Sbisà 2001: 80).²¹ Consequently, one is not tied to reducing meaning to the utterer’s intentions as mental states (Sbisà 2001: 75), thereby escaping “commitment to counterintuitive claims about the psychological implementation of calculations in the speaker’s mind” (Sbisà 2006: 173).²² One need not make assertions about the speaker’s psychological reality. All that is relevant, at least as far as discourse analysis is concerned, is the listener’s ascription of intentions to the speaker—an ascription that need not itself be thought of as a mental state, say, a belief, on the part of the listener (Saul 2002a: 232)—as well as the speaker’s possibility of justifying their conversational moves by rational arguments.²³

While I sympathise with Sbisà’s overall proposal, and share her concern with reductionist temptations, I would not limit the ascription of intentions to utterers alone. As Gibbs (1999: 71) highlights, attributing intentions is not only necessary for understanding human (linguistic) behaviour as meaningful, but is also a condition for experiencing meaning in non-human behaviour and artefacts (1999: 75–

²¹ Here is another position in the literature reinforcing this reading: according to Grice’s (1989) characterisation, conversational implicatures “are entirely removed from the control (or possibly even awareness) of speakers. What is conversationally implicated is not what the speaker is trying to communicate via the assumption that she is following the Cooperative Principle, but what the audience must assume the speaker to think in order to maintain this assumption” (Saul 2002a: 230). Note, however, that Saul (2002b: 351) still takes Grice’s meaning_{nn}, as opposed to conversational implicatures, to be a matter of speaker’s intentions, which is consistent with her rejection of a determinant role of the audience’s intentions in the determination of what is said: “the above definition [of speaker’s meaning] does not permit the actual state of mind of the audience to impose any conditions at all on what the speaker may mean” (Saul 2002a: 232).

²² Sbisà argues for a reading of Grice in which calculability is best understood as replaceability by argument. She distinguishes argumentative rationality (i.e., the possibility of providing a rational derivation of an implicature), from instrumental rationality, which relates to the actual calculations carried out by interlocutors (Sbisà 2006: 174). Argumentative rationality better fits with Grice’s (1991) later views on the connection between rationality and justification—anticipating some aspects of our discussion of Anscombe in the next Section.

²³ As Sbisà acknowledges, one could argue, against her reading, that Grice at times seems to make predictions on the utterer’s intentions as mental states. As she puts it: “his [Grice’s] own reconsideration of meaning_{nn} in ‘Meaning revisited’ (1982) can be taken to show that he really was interested in making claims about what there has to be *in the utterer’s mind* in order for him or her to mean_{nn} something” (Sbisà 2001: 74). Also, “in his philosophical psychology (1989, 283–303), as well as in his analysis of practical reasoning (2001), Grice makes use of the received folk-psychological connections among belief, desire, and behavior and seems therefore to consider the rationality of behavior as instrumental: an agent behaves rationally if he or she does what he or she *believes* to help the achievement of what he or she desires” (Sbisà 2006: 178) [my emphasis]. This debate, however, pertains to Grice’s scholarship and exceeds the scope of the present discussion.

76). If language as a whole can be seen as a communicative artefact (1999: 53), then the attribution of intentions is likewise required for understanding language—and metaphorical language in particular. Drawing on the Anscombian tradition in the analytic philosophy of action, itself inspired by Aristotle’s practical philosophy, I take intentions to be interpretative categories ascribed to (linguistic) acts, a view I develop in detail in the next Section.

4. De-Psychologising Intentions

Building on Wittgenstein’s (1958: § 293) ‘beetle in a box’ argument from *Philosophical Investigations*, one need not access people’s inner mental life for their choices of words to be meaningful. On the contrary, it may be argued that we make sense of those choices because we perceive intentions in them.²⁴ The attribution of intentions is just part of the ‘grammar’—viz., (tacit) rules of use—of figurative language in general, and of metaphors in particular.²⁵ As it is known, a similar ‘grammatical approach’ was defended by Anscombe (1957) in relation to action and to sensation (Anscombe 1965). Anscombe highlights how a psychological inquiry into the essence of intention—i.e., intention as the agent’s mental state, characterised as such by a certain set of properties—is misleading (Anscombe 1957: § 4, 12). Questions like what makes an action intentional, or with which intention an action is performed, are not subject to the agent’s authority alone. Instead, they are properly addressed only in a social context, where we act following (or not following) a number of (tacitly) shared conventions.

4.1. Anscombe’s Philosophy of Action

4.1.1. Two Senses of the Question ‘Why?’

Anscombe links intentional action to our general practice of asking and providing *reasons for acting*. She maintains that an action is intentional whenever asking the question ‘Why?’, in the relevant sense, is appropriate, namely when it calls for an answer in terms of reasons for acting.²⁶ Reasons for acting can be of different sorts

²⁴ As an anonymous reviewer observes, it is unusual to connect the ascription of intentions to perception. Yet intentions could be perceived in the sense that after continuative training, a skilled attributor—viz., a competent language user—might reach a kind of intuitive and almost automatic ascription process akin to sensorial perception. Think, e.g., of a skilled pianist who can instantly ‘perceive’ a melodic progression. An interested reader might refer to a passage by Aristotle (2004: 156), where the objects of practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) are said to be apprehended only by (a form of intellectual) perception, as opposed to scientific knowledge. In Gricean pragmatics, this may relate to the claim that also “implicature may in fact be ‘intuitively grasped’” (Grice 1989: 31).

²⁵ That we ascribe intentions to other people’s words regardless of our knowledge of their brain’s physiology is to say that we treat them as *Intentional systems* (Dennett 1971). However, I will not push the parallel with Dennett’s influential notion (nor the abundant literature that followed) further since, as highlighted in the previous Section, a desideratum of the account of intention is that it should leave open the possibility of ex-post, joint interpretation. In other words, the focus is not so much on attributing intentions in order to *predict* linguistic behaviour, but to do so with the goal of reaching a shared story of what is being said.

²⁶ “[Intentional actions are those] to which a certain sense of the question ‘Why?’ is given application. [...] The answer, if positive, gives a reason for acting” (Anscombe 1957: § 5).

and they typically take the form of expressions of intention. These are predictions about the future that relate to a chain of an agent's purposes:

- (2) a. "Why are you *X*-ing (e.g., taking the ball)?"
- b. "Because I'm going to *Y* (play with my friends outside)".

In the dialogue above, response (2b.) is an expression of intention, which provides a reason for why the agent performed *X* in the first place. Reasons for acting are justifications of the agent's action, which Anscombe contrasts with reasons for thinking that what a prediction describes will turn out to be true (Anscombe 1957: §9). Consider: "It is going to rain" – "Why?" – "Because the barometer is falling, the sky is overcast, etc." versus: "I'll be at the café at 5pm" – "Why?" – "Because I want to discuss the paper with Sara".²⁷ In the first case, the speaker is not committed to bringing about what they say: if it does not occur, they were simply mistaken. The reason given provides grounds for believing that the prediction will be true, though such evidence is always fallible. In the second case, however, the speaker is justifying an action. If they do not show up, this does not count as a mistake but rather invites further questioning of the form "Why didn't you go? Did you change your mind?". This is because the reason given here provides grounds for acting, situating the utterance within a chain of purposes rather than a body of evidence.

Anscombe introduces a decisive (and controversial) distinction between the *mental cause* of an action and its *motive*.²⁸ According to her definition, a mental cause is "what someone would describe if he were asked the specific question: what produced this action or thought or feeling on your part" (Anscombe 1957: § 11). In this sense, a mental cause need not be a mental entity: it may consist, say, of a knock on the door, which caused the agent to startle. If one wishes, a mental cause can always be considered as a mental entity in the sense of being a perception. Thus, in the example above, the sound of the knock on the door as it is perceived by the agent would be the mental cause—and not the knock itself. Contrary to mental causes, motives are concerned with the interpretation and explanation of an action, rather than the sources of its initiation (Anscombe 1957: § 12). Explaining their doings in terms of motives, the agent puts their action under a certain light that is up to the observer to accept (or resist). A person might explain their startle at a knock on the door in this way: "We were just playing a game, and that was the signal" and that would count as a motive. Within motives, Anscombe includes intentions as forward-looking motives, i.e., motives involving the description of something future.²⁹ Motives, or, more specifically, *intentions*

²⁷ Note that the contrast could also be cast entirely in the first person. Consider, for instance: "I'm going to be ill tomorrow" – "Why?" – "Because I've been shivering all night".

²⁸ That motives can also be causes of an action has been a source of contention in the philosophy of action. As Davidson famously put it "Central to the relation between a reason and an action it explains is the idea that the agent performed the action because he had the reason" (1963: 691). Delving into these issues, however, would take us astray. It will suffice to say that a preference is accorded here to motives, given their role in explaining actions within a social context—more will be said in what follows. While rationalisations in terms of efficient causes and beliefs can indeed count as explanations, motives form an open-ended class that better fits the interactional approach that I defend in this paper with respect to the ascription of intentions, and can clearly be set apart from the interlocutors' mental lives.

²⁹ "I call a motive forward-looking if it is an intention" (Anscombe 1957: § 13).

with which, typically reveal the agent's reasons for acting as they do (Anscombe 1957: § 16).

4.1.2. Acting Under a Description

A typical case in which the question 'Why?', in the relevant sense, is not granted application occurs when the agent is unaware of their doings. This does not happen only in cases of involuntary bodily responses. The intention behind an action in fact depends on the observer's point of view and their available descriptions of what is taking place. As the following example shows, one can fail to recognise their own action as intentional under certain true descriptions of it.

Imagine you take a pen from the desk in front of you because you need to write down some notes.³⁰ Your action of taking the pen is intentional: once asked, you could provide reasons for acting as you did: "I needed a pen to write some notes down". Now it turns out that the pen you are using is Smith's pen, albeit you did not know it. Smith's best friend sees you and asks why you are using Smith's pen. Though this is a true description of your action, you wouldn't recognise it as *your* action. After all, your intention was not to use Smith's pen! Anscombe maintains that 'He is *X*-ing' is a description of an intentional action if and only if: (i) it is true, and (ii) there is such a thing as an answer in the range defined by the question 'Why are you *X*-ing?' (Anscombe 1957: § 23). According to this definition, the action of taking Smith's pen would seem, *prima facie*, intentional: if you were aware of the owner, you could have replied: "I thought Smith wouldn't mind". However, such an answer involves a description of the action that was not known by the agent. The description 'borrowing Smith's pen' is not equivalent to the description under which the agent knows what they are doing, namely 'borrowing a pen'. To sum up, the question 'Why are you using Smith's pen?' does not apply in this context since the agent does not recognise their action under that description. Thus, the action is not intentional.

Similar cases suggest that intentional action should be understood in terms of *attribution*: it is a matter of judgment, not of recognition. To judge an action as an agent's intentional action is to provide a true description of the action available to the agent, and to attribute to it some intention with which it was performed by the agent. This attribution is generally carried out by the observers and can be informed by the agent themselves, e.g., if explicitly asked to provide reasons for their action. While the agent has indeed a privileged position in assessing their intentions, these are not entirely under their control either³¹. There are various signs that can help judging an action as intentional, or as performed with a certain intention, and only in some, rare cases the agent's words are the only available cue (Anscombe 1957: § 25). In this respect, the attribution of intentions to others can be compared to the kind of reports produced by witnesses in law courts

³⁰ The example is adapted from Anscombe (1965: 56).

³¹ "A man's intention in acting is not so private and interior a thing that he has absolute authority in saying what it is" (Anscombe 1957: §22). Within Gricean scholarship, this position resonates with the claim that what is implicated cannot be reduced to what the speaker conversationally implicates: "speakers lack total authority over what is implicated, just as they do over what is said. Some other element has to enter in, and the audience seems a likely candidate" (Saul 2002a: 241). There is, in other words, an unavoidable degree of intersubjectivity always involved both in intention ascription and, arguably, in the understanding of conversational implicatures.

(Anscombe 1957: § 4), an analogy recently taken on and reinforced by Charteris-Black (2012) in relation to metaphorical language.

4.2. Why That Metaphor?

4.2.1. Reasons for Speaking

It is now time to pause and take stock. According to Anscombe's philosophy of action, as expounded in *Intention*, an action is intentional whenever one can ask why, in the relevant sense, the action was performed. To answer this question is to provide reasons for acting. Reasons for acting generally take the form of motives, which in turn are explanations or interpretations of the action. A principled example of motive is an intention with which, i.e., a forward-looking motive, as in example (2). Let us see how Anscombe's account of intentional action can help to shed light on the present inquiry into the use of metaphor.

Adapting Anscombe's fortunate expression, I argue that the general question 'Why do we use metaphors?' is, in each individual case, worked out as the particular question 'Why did you use that metaphor?'.³² The latter, in turn, calls for an answer in terms of *reasons for speaking*. At a lower level of analysis, all metaphor use turns out to be intentional in Anscombe's sense,³³ in accordance also with what is maintained by Steen (2014). Minimally, the reason why we speak metaphorically—as well as literally—is to convey some cognitive content, as in plain assertions. At a higher level, however, there might be reasons for resorting to metaphor other than the simple exchange of information. I have introduced in the previous Section the notion of perlocutionary intention, inspired by the SAT framework. Indeed, to obtain a certain effect on the receiver—beyond the formation of a belief, which, according to Grice (1957), corresponds to assertions—might count as a reason for speaking metaphorically. As CMT tells us, metaphors are first and foremost a cognitive phenomenon with peculiar effects on the way we see things. The *framing effect* of metaphor (Moran 1989), which attracted much attention in the literature, explains how a metaphor highlights some aspects of its target domain while at the same time hiding others. As a result, metaphors are successfully used to foster persuasion, as it has been empirically demonstrated in various studies (Sopory and Dillard 2002; van Stee 2018). Other intentions that have been investigated by scholars in connection to metaphor use are the intention to facilitate understanding in explanations (Cameron 2003; Beger and Jäkel 2015), to make an argument more compelling (Beigman, Klebanov and Flor 2013; Wagemans 2016; Poppel 2021), to be humorous (Oring 2003; Dynel 2009; Attardo 2015), to build intimacy between interlocutors (Cohen 1978; Goatly 1997), and more.

4.2.2. Intentional_A Metaphor

In general, some intentions are attributed more often than others to metaphor use. Metaphors where a core perlocutionary intention other than belief formation is typically attributed may be called *intentional_A metaphors*.³⁴

³² I thereby follow a longstanding tradition in practical philosophy, assigning moral properties only to particulars (Aristotle 2004: 33; Anscombe 1957: § 5, 19, 45).

³³ As she observes, "the formulation of the words is itself an intentional act" (Anscombe 1957: §29).

³⁴ While the notation might be cumbersome, I prefer 'intentional_A' to 'intentional' since the latter expression is already found in the literature, not without some inconsistencies.

A metaphor is *intentional_A* whenever asking the question ‘Why?’, in the relevant sense, is appropriate, namely when reasons for using that metaphor can be provided besides the mere exchange of information.

Conversely, metaphors that are used with no further intention besides the mere exchange of information are *unintentional_A*.³⁵ Consider the two examples below:

- (3) a. You’re “running out” of time (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 8).
- b. Language is nothing like “the prison-house” imagined by the poststructuralist critics. It is more like “a luxury hotel” (Watson 1985: 426).

The first metaphor (3a.) is *unintentional_A*. This linguistic metaphor is used to state a fact, namely that the addressee is late. The sentence may well be linked to further perlocutionary intentions: for instance, to make the addressee hurry up. Yet, that is not the point of using the metaphorical expression, as opposed to, say, a literal paraphrase. Adopting the point of view of CMT, the metaphorical use of “running out” is linked to the underlying conceptual metaphor TIME IS MONEY, thereby framing time (a complex, abstract domain) as a measurable quantity such as money. In Cameron’s (2003: 100) words, the metaphor is “just the way to say it”, that is, it is an everyday way of expressing the message. Hence, the question ‘Why?’ does not naturally apply: no relevant reason is required to explain why the metaphor was preferred over possible alternatives.³⁶ On the other hand, (3b.) contains two *intentional_A* metaphors. These metaphors are found in a passage criticising the poststructuralist claim that language imposes confining limits on thought. There are various ways in which the concept could have been conveyed. However, the author resorted to this contrastive metaphor, the prison *vs.* the luxury hotel, making the concept more vivid and easier to understand. Thus, the metaphor is used not just to convey a propositional content, but with the further perlocutionary intention of making that content easier to understand and memorise for the receiver. These are the reasons why the metaphor was used, instead of, say, a literal paraphrase.³⁷

4.2.3. *Intentional_A vs. Deliberate Metaphor*

It is important at this stage to stress the difference between the categories of *intentional_A* and *deliberate metaphor*. Recall that a *deliberate metaphor* is a metaphor intentionally used *as* metaphor, and here ‘intentionally’ relates to intention as a

³⁵ It is clear that *unintentional_A* metaphors cannot be equated with unintentional metaphors tout court. As noted in passing by Davidson, the question ‘Why did you do it?’ can normally get a default answer, namely ‘For no reason’, which, in turn, means for no further reason besides wanting to do it (1963: 688). Only in this restricted sense, *unintentional_A* metaphors are linguistic acts performed for no reason.

³⁶ In the cited passage, Cameron is talking about conventionalised metaphor, contrasting it with *deliberate metaphor*. *Unintentional_A* and conventionalised metaphor, however, are not the same. While conventionalised metaphors are arguably so regardless of how they are used, the attribution of *intentions_A* to the same metaphoric expression may vary depending on the particular context of use.

³⁷ On a side note, the example also shows that *intentional_A* metaphors need not be creative. Both the prison and the luxury hotel metaphor are *intentional_A* here, but while the latter is creative, the former is in fact quite common, especially in philosophical milieux. Therefore, cases of creative, ‘living metaphors’ discussed by Ricoeur (1975) do not exhaust the category of *intentional_A* metaphor.

mental state having a relevant causal role in explaining the producer's selection of a metaphor to fulfil certain communicative goals. A deliberate metaphor is intended to make its appreciators see the target under the light of the source domain, to draw attention to the latter and map certain relevant features onto the former. It is not clear, in order to recognise a metaphor as deliberate, whether (i) the producer should entertain this kind of intention, (ii) the receiver should infer this intention or (iii) both—though Steen (2023a: 6) seems to be inclined towards the last option. On the other hand, the notion of intentional_A metaphor does not rely on the recognition of anyone's intentions as mental states. Adopting a genuinely public viewpoint, a metaphor use may or may not be judged as intentional_A, and in the former case some intention with which the metaphor was uttered can be attributed to it. This proposal clearly bypasses both worries advanced by Gibbs (2011): no introspection of mental states is required and no markers are necessary to signal out intentional_A metaphors. The attribution of intentions_A is just a step in the understanding of figurative language, which is a shared practice within a given linguistic community.

One might at this point raise an objection. If there is no 'gold standard' (the utterer's intention qua mental state), how can we still agree on attributed intentions? If there is no decisive answer to the question 'Why did you use that metaphor?', how can we be certain that the ascription was in fact *right*?³⁸ The natural response is that it needs not be. The fact that there is no correct answer to seek for in understanding metaphors does not entail that we do not actually converge in most cases to shared interpretations. In other words, we do not need epistemic certainty here, which could even be detrimental to the open-endedness of the hermeneutic process, but simply acceptability. As Leth maintains, "successful communication can be explained [...] by the simple convergence between the speaker's intention and the hearer's interpretation" (2021: 288). The receiver's task would then be to come up with an interpretation that the producer is willing to accept. As he puts it: "agreement, neither correspondence nor correctness, is what ultimately matters" (2001: 289).³⁹

4.2.4. Intentional_A vs. Purposeful Metaphor

I briefly draw attention also to the difference between my proposal and Charteris-Black's (2012) notion of *purposeful metaphor*. First, the author distinguishes different approaches to the study of metaphor, stressing their divergent epistemologies and ultimate goals. While psycholinguistics aims to explain metaphor use in

³⁸ This presents another way of framing a longstanding problem identified by Davidson: namely, the apparent absence of predictive laws linking reasons to corresponding actions, even if reasons are considered causes of the actions (1963: 697).

³⁹ Another possible objection: if intentions_A are defined by perlocutionary intentions other than belief formation, can there really be a space for convergence in interpretation here? After all, which effects are obtained on the receiver is an objective fact that no agreement between participants can change. I believe that one could respond to this challenge by adapting the revised Gricean view defended by Sbisà to the case of SAT. While successful perlocution corresponds indeed to the production of psychological or behavioural effects on the receiver, perlocutionary intentions can be seen as hermeneutic tools in the rationalisation of the producer's linguistic acts. And at this level of argumentative rationality, there is indeed space for (dis)agreement. I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

terms of the psychological or cognitive processes underlying language understanding and production, discourse analysis interprets it with considerations of communicative purpose, among others.⁴⁰ Charteris-Black's purposeful metaphor in particular is "oriented to the intended outcome of a metaphor" and, contrarily to Steen's notion of deliberate metaphor—at least as it emerges from his first papers—"makes no assumption about whether it is conscious or unconscious" (2012: 5). Since the discourse analyst's primary task is to judge language, and not to explain it, the fact that language is purposeful is granted as an assumption (Charteris-Black 2012: 8).⁴¹ However, it is not entirely clear to what extent the purpose of a metaphor is the producer's envisaged goal, or just a feature attributed by the discourse analyst. The category of purposeful metaphor seems to rely still on the producer's intention as mental state: the discourse analyst's task is to *recognise* such intentions in actual metaphor use, based on linguistic as well as contextual cues (Charteris-Black 2012: 13). They would be, in a sense, akin to skilled detectives. On the other hand, the notion of intentional_A metaphor that I have introduced in this paper assumes a genuinely public perspective. To judge a metaphor as intentional_A is a matter of shared agreement in attribution, and not of the expert's evaluation of the speaker's actual intentions as mental states.⁴²

4.2.5. In a Nutshell

I conclude this Section by providing a concise overview of my proposal. Intentional_A uses of metaphor are those for which asking the question 'Why?', in the relevant sense, is appropriate. By 'relevant sense' I mean one which calls for an answer in terms of reasons for speaking and of intentions_A in particular. If we exclude the mere exchange of information, a number of further intentions constitute recurring reasons for resorting to metaphor. I have proposed to reserve the expression "intentional_A metaphor" to such uses, namely the ones in which an intention other than belief formation is typically attributed. Intentional_A metaphors are not recognised as such thanks to some objective, observable features. They are *judged* as intentional_A by members of a linguistic community, based on different contextual cues. There are often various, and equally valid, descriptions of what the utterer is doing while they are speaking but not all of these descriptions are available to them. Thus, discrepancies in attribution of intentions_A between producer and receivers may occur, though typically this does not cause a severe impediment to understanding.

4.3. The Attributions of Intentions

As clarified in the preceding paragraphs, I have considered intentions here not as specific mental states, but as objects of attribution.⁴³ In a broadly Wittgensteinian

⁴⁰ Cf. Anscombe's differentiation between causes and motives of an action discussed above, Section 4.1.1.

⁴¹ For a more detailed exposition of an earlier stage of Charteris-Black's theory, Critical Metaphor Analysis, see Charteris-Black (2004).

⁴² The notion of purpose is, nonetheless, naturally closer to my notion of intention_A. Purposes typically count as reasons for acting (and speaking), and may be known or unknown to the agent themselves. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

⁴³ "Intentionality is a social judgment, not an objective fact about the world" (Gibbs 1999: 22).

sense, understanding (intentional_A) metaphors involves participating in a language game in which speakers may be asked why they used a particular metaphor and are expected to provide answers that count as reasons for speaking.⁴⁴ As Gibbs (1999: 71) highlights, the attribution of intentions is a necessary element for understanding human (linguistic) behaviour as meaningful. In this sense, one might ask whether we genuinely perceive intentions_A in our daily linguistic interactions or if attributing intentions_A is merely a sophisticated yet nonessential interpretative tool. To be sure, this is an empirical question. What follows is therefore speculative, linking the present proposal to current research in metaphor understanding. My argument, however, is independent of the empirical verification of the hypotheses I shall formulate.⁴⁵

Gibbs distinguishes between process and products of linguistic understanding, and between four temporal moments of linguistic understanding (1994: 115, 116): Comprehension, Recognition, Interpretation, and Appreciation. At which level would the process of intentions_A attribution appear? *A priori*, the safe answer is at the level of interpretation.⁴⁶ However, perceived intentions_A might also already affect comprehension.⁴⁷ The already mentioned study by Gibbs, Kushner, and Mills (1991) provides empirical evidence for the claim that attribution of intentional agency to the utterer plays an important role in comprehension (Gibbs 1999: 17). Moving from the utterer to their linguistic products, I suggest that the attribution of intentions_A might be a step in figurative language processing, possibly affecting already the earlier stages of understanding. This hypothesis allows to integrate a key insight from DMT, while at the same time differentiating the present proposal from the latter. Steen (2017: 7) suggests that deliberateness is the discriminating feature that not only would tell us which metaphors are interpreted as metaphors in communication but also which ones are processed as metaphors, i.e., as cross-domain mappings, in understanding—viz., in comprehension. Under this view, the move from a mechanical processing akin to lexical disambiguation of homonyms to an analogical or mapping model *à la* CMT would be based on the listener's evaluation of deliberateness. My proposal is, in a sense, to radicalise a deflationary variant of this approach: the ascription not just of deliberateness to a metaphor use but of perlocutionary intentions beyond belief formation would be the discriminatory factor that fosters a processing by cross-domain mapping. It is not so much about the metaphor being psychologically intended as a

⁴⁴ Emphasising the practice of reason-giving and asking 'Why?', an anonymous reviewer notes a more explicit lineage with Brandom's (1994) inferential model. Yet, as it should be clear, my focus here is not primarily on the normative dimension of utterances, but rather on the interpretive work involved in collective sense-making. In this respect, intentions—understood as a special case of motives in Anscombe's sense—serve as hermeneutic tools for understanding linguistic behaviour.

⁴⁵ On a par with Grice's original project, which can arguably be distinguished from its successive (mis)understanding as a psychological explanation of actual utterance processing (Saul 2002b). Needless to say, the two projects are compatible, as long as their research aims differ—cf. Sbisà's difference between argumentative and instrumental rationality discussed above, fn. 22. In Grice's case, the aim is to provide an account of what is said and what is implicated by an utterance; in my case, it is to provide an account of when a metaphor is judged as intentional_A.

⁴⁶ That is, "the analysis of the early products of comprehension" (Gibbs 1999: 101).

⁴⁷ "[Comprehension] allows listeners/readers to figure out what an utterance means or a speaker/author intends" (Gibbs 1994: 116).

metaphor, as about being judged as uttered with the intention-of-*X*. If that is all that is explanatorily necessary, our account need not rely on the producer's intentions as mental states.⁴⁸

5. Conclusions and Directions for Further Research

In this paper, I have explored the question of why we use metaphors, examining what this question might mean. In actual contexts of use, it becomes the particular question: 'Why did the producer use that metaphor?'. I urge that analysing this question is a crucial step in advancing the debate that originated with DMT. Ultimately, the dispute seems to rely on the under-specification of the notions at play, and most importantly of the notion of intention that is adopted. Inspired by Anscombe's philosophy of action, I have suggested that the question of why we use metaphors does not call for an exploration into the causes underlying our linguistic behaviour (e.g., intentions as mental states) but into the reasons that we provide for speaking as we do (intentions_A). In other words, the kind of answer that is at stake is one which provides motives for metaphor use and not causes. A principled case of motives are the intentions with which the utterance is uttered, which are ascribed in a public and interactional context. Hence, adopting a conception of attributed or perceived intention over intention as a mental state allowed me to introduce the category of intentional_A metaphor. Previous notions such as Steen's deliberate metaphor and Charteris-Black's purposeful metaphor can now be reinterpreted within a coherent theory of intentions that is safe from psychological worries of the kind advanced, among others, by Gibbs.

The present work renews interest in the connection between intentions and metaphor understanding. Nonetheless, redirecting the focus from intention as the utterer's mental state to intention as a feature attributed by the receivers—possibly in cooperation with the producer—initiates a host of questions that remain to be adequately addressed. Here below are two promising directions for future inquiry.

The attribution of intentions in comprehension. As detailed at the end of Section 4, the attribution of intentional agency to the producer of a metaphor has already been demonstrated to play a role in the receivers' understanding of it. However, this has been limited so far to the supposition that the utterer is an intentional agent, and not to the supposition that they speak in order to fulfil specific intentions such as persuading and explaining. Experimental research could thus be carried out testing the following hypothesis: the supposition that the utterer is speaking *with a specific intention* may influence already the earlier moments of metaphor understanding. In other words, the attribution of intentions_A could not just be a matter of slow, *ex-post* interpretation but of fast, online comprehension.⁴⁹

Automatic annotation of intentions behind metaphor use. If we actually attribute intentions_A while understanding metaphors, it is reasonable to think that also Natural Language Processing (NLP) models dealing with metaphor processing and

⁴⁸ The possibility of this extra cognitive load is coherent with Rubio's (2007) already mentioned study, which concludes that metaphors, especially non-lexicalised ones, require more attentional resources than the disambiguation of homonyms: the extra attention would then be put on the recognition of intentions_A behind the metaphor use. This hypothesis is also compatible with a recent suggestion by Steen (2024), who deems language and discourse awareness as influential factors in metaphor understanding, as the phenomenon of metaphor resistance shows.

⁴⁹ Cf. Kahneman's (2011) distinction, explicitly discussed also by Steen (2023a; 2023b).

generation would benefit from doing so. Hence, it is a worth-perusing goal to make the attribution of intentions_A suitable for applications in Computational Linguistics. With this goal in mind, the Anscombe-inspired framework I have sketched in this paper is arguably a promising starting point. Given a sufficiently large, varied and reliable corpus annotated with intentions_A behind metaphor use, artificial models such as Large Language Models could then be evaluated and trained to predict those intentions_A. A first implementation of this proposal is presented in another work (Michelli, Tong, and Shutova 2026).

References

- Anscombe, G.E.M., 1957. *Intention*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Anscombe, G.E.M., 1965. The intentionality of sensation: a grammatical feature. In: A. Nöe and E. Thompson (eds.), *Vision and mind: selected readings in the philosophy of perception*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 55–75.
- Aristotle, 2004 [c. 350 B.C.E.]. *The Nicomachean ethics*. J.A.K. Thomson, H. Tredennick, and J. Barnes (eds.). London: Penguin Classics.
- Attardo, S., 2015. Humorous metaphors. In: G. Brône, K. Feyaerts, and T. Veale (eds.), *Cognitive linguistics and humor research*. Berlin/München/Boston: De Gruyter, 91–110. DOI: 10.1515/9783110346343-005.
- Austin, J. L., 1962. *How to do things with words*. M. Sbisà and J. O. Urmson (eds.). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Beger, A. and Jäkel, O., 2015. The cognitive role of metaphor in teaching science: Examples from physics, chemistry, biology, psychology and philosophy. *Philosophical inquiries*, 3, 89–112.
- Black, M., 1954, “Metaphor”. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian society*, 55, 273–94.
- Bowdle, B.F. and Gentner, D., 2005. The career of metaphor. *Psychological review*, 112 (1), 193–216. DOI: 10.1037/0033-295x.112.1.193.
- Brandom, R.B., 1994. *Making it explicit: reasoning, representing, and discursive commitment*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Brooks, C., 1947. *The well wrought urn: studies in the structure of poetry*. Harcourt: Brace & World.
- Cameron, L., 2003. *Metaphor in educational discourse*. London: Continuum.
- Charteris-Black, J., 2004. *Corpus approaches to critical metaphor analysis*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Charteris-Black, J., 2012. Forensic deliberations on ‘purposeful metaphor’. *Metaphor and the social world*, 2 (1), 1–21. DOI: 10.1075/msw.2.1.01cha.
- Cohen, T., 1978. Metaphor and the cultivation of intimacy. *Critical inquiry*, 5 (1), 3–12.
- Davidson, D., 1963. Actions, reasons, and causes. *Journal of philosophy*, 60 (23), 685–700. DOI: 10.2307/2023177.
- Dennett, D.C., 1971. Intentional systems. *Journal of philosophy*, 68 (4), 87–106. DOI: 10.2307/2025382.
- De Caro, M. and Lavazza, A., 2014. Free will as an illusion: Ethical and epistemological consequences of an alleged revolutionary truth. *Social epistemology review and reply collective*, 3 (12), 40–50.

- Dynel, M., 2009. Creative metaphor is a birthday cake: metaphor as the source of humour. *Metaphorik.de*, 17, 27–48.
- Gernsbacher, M.A. and Faust, M.E., 1991. The role of suppression in sentence comprehension. In: G. B. Simpson (ed.), *Understanding word and sentence*. Amsterdam: North-Holland, 97–128.
- Gernsbacher, M.A., Keysar, B., Robertson, R.R., and Werner, N.K., 2001. The role of suppression and enhancement in understanding metaphors. *Journal of memory and language*, 45 (3), 433–50. DOI: 10.1006/jmla.2000.278.
- Gibbs, R.W. Jr., 1994. *The poetics of mind: figurative thought, language, and understanding*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gibbs, R.W. Jr., 1999. *Intentions in the experience of meaning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gibbs, R.W. Jr., 2011. Are ‘deliberate’ metaphors really deliberate? A question of human consciousness and action. *Metaphor and the social world*, 1 (1), 26–52. DOI: 10.1075/msw.1.1.03gib.
- Gibbs, R.W. Jr., 2015. Does deliberate metaphor theory have a future?. *Journal of pragmatics*, 90, 73–76.
- Gibbs, R.W. Jr, Kushner, J.M., and Mills, W.R., 1991. Authorial intentions and metaphor comprehension. *Journal of psycholinguistic research*, 20 (1), 11–30.
- Glucksberg, S. and Keysar, B., 1990. Understanding metaphorical comparisons: beyond similarity. *Psychological review*, 97, 3–18. DOI: 10.1037/0033-295X.97.1.3.
- Goatly, A., 1997. *The language of metaphors*. London: Routledge.
- Grice, H.P., 1957. Meaning. *Philosophical review*, 66 (3), 377–88. DOI: 10.2307/2182440.
- Grice, H.P., 1982. Meaning revisited. In: N. V. Smith (ed.), *Mutual knowledge*, New York: Academic Press, 223–43. Reprinted in Grice 1989, 283–303.
- Grice, H.P., 1989. *Studies in the way of words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Grice, H.P., 1991. *The conception of value*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Grice, H.P., 2001. *Aspects of reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Group, P., 2007. MIP: A method for identifying metaphorically used words in discourse. *Metaphor and symbol*, 22, 1–39.
- Kahneman, D., 2011. *Thinking, fast and slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Klebanov, B.B. and Flor, M., 2013. Argumentation-relevant metaphors in test-taker essays. *Proceedings of the first workshop on metaphor in NLP*, 11–20. <https://aclanthology.org/W13-0902>.
- Krennmayr, T. and Steen, G.J., 2017. VU Amsterdam metaphor corpus. In: N. Ide and J. Pustejovsky (eds.), *Handbook of linguistic annotation*. Dordrecht: Springer, 1053–71.
- Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M., 1980. *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Leth, P., 2021. Utterance interpretation and actual intentions. *Axiomathes*, 31, 279–98. DOI: 10.1007/s10516-019-09462-x.
- Libet B., Gleason, C.A., Wright, E.W., and Pearl, D.K., 1983. Time of conscious intention to act in relation to onset of cerebral activities (readiness-potential): The unconscious initiation of a freely voluntary act. *Brain*, 106, 623–42. DOI: 10.1093/brain/106.3.623

- Libet, B., 1985. Unconscious cerebral initiative and the role of conscious will in voluntary action. *Behavioral and brain sciences*, 8 (4), 529–39. DOI: 10.1017/S0140525X00044903.
- Michelli, G., Tong, X., and Shutova, E., 2026. A framework for annotating and modelling intentions behind metaphor use. *Proceedings of the 15th joint conference on lexical and computational semantics*. San Diego: Association for Computational Linguistics, 63–82. DOI: 10.18653/v1/2026.starsem-conference.4
- Moran, R., 1989. Seeing and believing: Metaphor, image, and force. *Critical inquiry*, 16 (1), 87–112.
- Musolff, A., 2004. *Metaphor and political discourse: analogical reasoning in debates about Europe*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Nisbett, R. and Wilson, T., 1977. Telling more than we can know: verbal reports on mental processes. *Psychological review*, 84, 231–59. DOI: 10.1037/0033-295X.84.3.231.
- Oring, E., 2003. *Engaging humor*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Ortony, A., 1975. Why metaphors are necessary and not just nice. *Educational theory*, 25, 45–53. DOI: 10.1111/j.1741-5446.1975.tb00666.x.
- van Poppel, L., 2021. The study of metaphor in argumentation theory. *Argumentation*, 35, 177–208.
- Recanati, F., 1986. On defining communicative intentions. *Mind and language*, 1 (3), 213–41. DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-0017.1986.tb00102.x.
- Reijnierse, G. et al., 2018. DMIP: A method for identifying potentially deliberate metaphor in language use. *Corpus pragmatics*, 2, 129–47. DOI: 10.1007/s41701-017-0026-7.
- Ricœur, P., 1975. *La métaphore vive*. Paris: Seuil.
- Saul, J.M., 2002a. Speaker meaning, what is said, and what is implicated. *Noûs*, 36 (2), 228–48.
- Saul, J.M., 2002b. What is said and psychological reality: Grice's project and relevance theorists' criticisms. *Linguistics and philosophy*, 25 (3), 347–72.
- Sbisà, M., 2001. Intentions from the other side. In: M. Sbisà (ed.), *Essays on speech acts and other topics in pragmatics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023, 72–89.
- Sbisà, M., 2006. Two conceptions of rationality in Grice's theory of implicature. In: M. Sbisà (ed.), *Essays on speech acts and other topics in pragmatics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023, 167–80.
- Soon, C.S., Brass, M., Heinze, H.J., and Haynes, J.D., 2008. Unconscious determinants of free decisions in the human brain. *Nature neuroscience*, 11 (5), 543–45. DOI: 10.1038/nn.2112
- Sopory, P. and Dillard, J.P., 2002. The persuasive effects of metaphor: A meta-analysis. *Human communication research*, 28 (3), 382–419.
- Sperber, D. and Wilson, D., 1986. *Relevance: communication and cognition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- van Stee, S., 2018. Meta-analysis of the persuasive effects of metaphorical vs. literal messages. *Communication studies*, 69, 545–66. DOI: 10.1080/10510974.2018.1457553.
- Steen, G., 2008. The paradox of metaphor: why we need a three-dimensional model of metaphor. *Metaphor and symbol*, 23 (1), 213–41. DOI: 10.1080/10926480802426753.

- Steen, G., 2011. The contemporary theory of metaphor – now new and improved! *Review of cognitive linguistics*, 9 (1), 26–64. DOI: 10.1075/rc1.9.1.03ste.
- Steen, G., 2014. Deliberate metaphor affords conscious metaphorical cognition. *Cognitive semiotics*, 5 (1-2), 179–97. DOI: 10.1515/cogsem.2013.5.12.179.
- Steen, G., 2017. Deliberate metaphor theory: basic assumptions, main tenets, urgent issues. *Intercultural pragmatics*, 14 (1), 1–24.
- Steen, G., 2023a. Thinking by metaphor, fast and slow: deliberate metaphor theory offers a new model for metaphor and its comprehension. *Frontiers in psychology*, 14. DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1242888.
- Steen, G., 2023b. *Slowing metaphor down: elaborating deliberate metaphor theory*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Steen, G., 2024. The ambiguity of metaphor: how polysemy affords multivalent metaphor use and explains the paradox of metaphor. *Metaphor and symbol*, 39 (4), 242–59. DOI: 10.1080/10926488.2024.2359406.
- Wagemans, J.H.M., 2016. Analyzing metaphor in argumentative discourse. *Rivista italiana di filosofia del linguaggio*, 10 (2), 79–94.
- Watson, G., 1985. The stacked deck of language. *The Sewanee review*, 93 (3), 412–27.
- Wimsatt, W.K. and Beardsley, M.C., 1946. The intentional fallacy. *The Sewanee review*, 54 (3), 468–88.
- Wittgenstein, L., 1958. *Philosophical investigations*. 2nd ed. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell.