

## Impossible Metaphors or Why 'Beautiful' Can't Be Used Metaphorically

Hanna Kim  
Assistant Professor, Dept. of Philosophy  
Washington & Jefferson College  
60 S. Lincoln St.  
Washington, PA 15301  
(724)223-6555  
[hkim@washjeff.edu](mailto:hkim@washjeff.edu)

Abstract: In this paper, I show that de Clercq's account of the metaphorical uninterpretability of aesthetic terms is flawed. What is required for metaphorical interpretability, on my view, is the joint satisfaction of two conditions: (i) dimension-dependence or multi-dimensionality and (ii) the presence of a default dimension. Aesthetic terms lack metaphorical readings because they fail to satisfy (ii), even though they satisfy (i). The account I offer is preferable to the accounts offered by individual theorists mentioned in the paper as it is a more predictively adequate and uniform account of the phenomenon of impossible metaphors in general.

Word Count: 3,052

## Impossible Metaphors or Why ‘Beautiful’ Can’t Be Used Metaphorically

### 0. Introduction

In his paper, “Aesthetic Terms, Metaphor and the Nature of Aesthetic Properties,” Rafael de Clercq argues that aesthetic terms, such as ‘beautiful’, ‘elegant’, and ‘unharmonious’, etc. defy metaphorical interpretation, because there are no “delineated, unified, and self-standing” categories of things to which they are to be applied. Their domains of application are unrestricted. As a result, it is not possible to use them metaphorically because it is not possible to commit something like a “category mistake” with respect to such terms.

In this paper, I seek to show that de Clercq’s thesis is flawed as an account of both the metaphorical uninterpretability of aesthetic terms and the phenomenon of impossible metaphors in general. I claim that, just as what makes an expression an indexical is its context-dependence, what allows an expression to be metaphorically interpretable is its “dimension-dependence”; that is, it must potentially contribute different meanings along different dimensions or respects. Furthermore, metaphorically interpretable expressions require a default respect or dimension that is conceptually more basic and prior to the others. Generating metaphor then involves striking a balance between being sensitive to a *multiplicity* of dimensions and privileging a *single* dimension as conceptually more basic than the rest. This account is not only more predictively adequate, it uniformly accounts for a diverse range of metaphorically uninterpretable expressions, which includes functional terms (e.g., determiners, tense indicators, modals, auxiliaries,

negation, connectives, complementizers) and predicate-limiting terms (e.g., with respect to  $x$ ).

This paper will proceed as follows. First, I will briefly summarize and critique de Clercq's explanation of the metaphorical uninterpretability of aesthetic terms. Next I will present a dimensional account of metaphorical uninterpretability and show how it better accounts for the metaphorical uninterpretability of aesthetic terms and other "impossible metaphors" including functional categories and predicate-limiting expressions.

## 1. De Clercq's Account

In his paper, "Aesthetic Terms, Metaphor and the Nature of Aesthetic Properties," de Clercq points out that it makes no sense to say that something is beautiful metaphorically speaking, or to say something is metaphorically elegant, metaphorically harmonious, or metaphorically sublime. His explanation is that

"[a]esthetic terms do not have a particular area of application associated with them. There is not a particular kind of object to which they are to be applied. As a result, it is not possible to commit something like a "category mistake" with respect to such terms."

By contrast, terms for animal species such as 'elephant' and 'crocodile', which can be used metaphorically, are to be applied within the animal kingdom; to apply them outside this area is to commit a "category mistake."

This is not to say that metaphorical usage requires an *actual* categorical mistake. 'The brain is the heart of the nervous system' is metaphorical even though there is no actual substitution of one domain of application for another, according to de Clercq. Rather, the

claim is that metaphorical usage requires *the possibility* of a category mistake, which is a condition that is satisfied by ‘heart.’ E.g., Investigators have hit the *heart* of the criminal investigation. And it is precisely this condition that is *not* satisfied by aesthetic terms such as ‘beautiful’, ‘elegant’, and ‘sublime’, for a category mistake for these terms seems in principle impossible.

Two qualifications are necessary. First, though the term ‘elegant’ may only be used literally to describe entities exhibiting lines or movement, the lines or movements themselves need *not* be *literally* present for the term ‘elegant’ to be literally applicable. For example, a line of thought may literally be elegant even though thoughts do not literally have lines.

Second, de Clercq thinks the kinds of categories, which can potentially generate metaphors, must be “delineated, unified, and self-standing”. Hence, the reason why ‘elegant’ cannot be interpreted metaphorically is because the category of elegant objects that literally and figuratively exhibit lines or movement includes wildly disparate entities, including visual objects, auditory events, and nonperceptible entities such as emotional or intellectual progressions. As such, this is not the kind of category that can potentially engender the category mistakes required for metaphor-generation.

### 1. 1. Delineated, Unified, and Self-Standing Categories

De Clercq assumes that an expression is metaphorically interpretable only if it is possible to commit a category mistake with respect to the term, where a category must be a “delineated, unified, and self-standing” set of things brought together by “natural

similarity”. ‘Elegant’ literally applies to a set of wildly disparate objects, which fails to constitute a category in his sense. Hence, the term fails to be metaphorically interpretable.

But this cannot be the reason for the metaphorical uninterpretability of ‘elegant’, for a great number of metaphorically interpretable expressions fail to have unified, self-standing, and well-delineated extensions. That a unified category is not required for metaphorical interpretability can be shown by the fact that metaphorical uses of the term ‘game’ abound.<sup>1</sup> Yet, as Wittgenstein famously noted, the term ‘game’ denotes a wildly heterogeneous category, including some members that do and others that do not involve equipment, scoring, competition, use of leisure time, or turn-taking, etc. The categories in question also need not be self-standing. Chomsky’s tea/water example in his “Language and Nature” paper illustrates that ‘tea’ and ‘water’ are highly socially determined and context-dependent predicates.<sup>2</sup> The same weak tea-like substance is taken to be the denotation of ‘water’ when it comes out of a faucet and the denotation of ‘tea’ when served in a teacup. Yet, socially determined predicates such as these can certainly be used metaphorically.<sup>3</sup> Finally, categories need not be well-delineated in order for their expressions to be used metaphorically. In “Context and Logical Form,” Stanley shows that the loosely delineated extension of ‘water’ includes substances ranging from pure H<sub>2</sub>O to muddy puddle water.<sup>4</sup> Yet metaphorical uses of these terms are prevalent.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> A numbers game; a whole new ball game; a zero-sum game; at your own game; be ahead of the game; be fair game; be game; be new to the game; name of the game; not all fun and games; play games (with someone); somebody has got game, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Chomsky (1995)

<sup>3</sup> In the case of ‘tea’, we have: not my cup of tea, not for all the tea in China, tea and sympathy, etc.

<sup>4</sup> Stanley, J. (2002)

<sup>5</sup> In the case of ‘water’, we have: be dead in the water, be in deep/hot water, be like water off a duck’s back, be like fish out of water, be water under a bridge, blood is thicker than water, could talk under water, keep your head above water, come hell or high water, go through fire and water, not hold water, throw cold water on, test the waters, tread water, etc.

## 1.2. Aesthetic terms have no home domain of application.

A second component of de Clercq's claim is that aesthetic terms lack metaphorical interpretation because they have no home domain of application; that is, there are no categories to which aesthetic terms can, in principle, not be applied. This claim can be analyzed into two further claims: (i) aesthetic terms can in principle be applied to all categories, and (ii) because of this fact, aesthetic terms cannot be metaphorically interpreted.

First, it should be noted that (i) is untrue, for there are categories to which aesthetic terms cannot in principle be applied. 'Graceful' cannot, in principle, truly, literally, and non-fictively be applied to objects which lack a literal or figurative line or movement. Entities that lack intentional design or style cannot, in principle, be said to be 'tacky,' 'edgy,' or 'funky' in their aesthetic senses. And 'beautiful' cannot, in principle, be applied to things which are not perceivable. So if (i) is untrue, it cannot be because of (i) that aesthetic terms are metaphorically uninterpretable.

Interestingly however, if we do apply an aesthetic term such as 'graceful' to an object which lacks literal or figurative lines or movement (e.g., an unbounded and still body of water or a stagnant reservoir of energy), this application inevitably results in a literal but *fictive* or *make-believe* use of the aesthetic term, rather than a metaphorical use of it.<sup>6</sup>

The same is true of all aesthetic terms, it seems. If one uses 'tacky' or 'edgy' to describe something that lacks intentional design or style – e.g., a tacky electron, some edgy produce, etc., the terms appear to automatically default to a fictive reading, e.g., one in

---

<sup>6</sup> Though pretense and metaphor often go together, they are conceptually separable. 'The fairy nibbled on a cookie' is fictive, yet literal. 'Japan is a swamp' is metaphorical and non-fictive.

which the produce becomes animate and starts behaving in an edgy way, rather than a metaphorical one – e.g., one in which the produce is somehow metaphorically edgy.

However there is no reason to think that this automatic switch to a fictive reading rather than a metaphorical one is due to the fact that aesthetic terms can in principle be applied to all categories. Rather, the default switch appears to have more to do with the inherent difference between pretense and metaphor. Consider the following sentence.

(1) The electron is tacky.

The difference between pretending (1) to be true and construing (1) as a metaphor is that, in pretending (1) to be true, we change our conception of the actual world in order to accommodate the fixed, literal meaning of ‘tacky’; whereas in construing (1) as a metaphor, we shift the meaning of the word ‘tacky’ in order to accommodate our fixed conception of the actual world. Another way of putting this point is to say that in pretending that (1) we imaginatively change the content of what an electron is – i.e., by endowing it with properties that tacky things possess and real electrons lack, and erasing properties of actual electrons that tacky things do not have.<sup>7</sup> Pretending hence often involves entertaining wildly counter-factual situations or possible worlds, which we can effortlessly conjure up without restriction.

By contrast, in construing (1) to be a metaphor, we hold our conception of the actual world fixed and shift the meaning of ‘tacky’ to accommodate that fixed conception. Thus, by comparison, one is subject to far more constraints in generating metaphors than in conjuring up fictional worlds in that we are not free to wildly depart from the literal

---

<sup>7</sup> Camp (2009), section 2.

meaning of a term in an attempt to accommodate our fixed conception of the actual world; for if we do, we risk being not understood. So there is a preexisting asymmetry between pretense and metaphor in that the former involves fewer restrictions and is easier to generate than the latter. And this asymmetry is exacerbated in the case of aesthetic terms, because aesthetic terms have no figurative meanings beyond their literal ones. The general asymmetry between pretense and metaphor and the unavailability of metaphorical meanings in the case of aesthetic terms then are why statements like (1) default to a fictive reading rather than a metaphorical one. And this lack of metaphorical meanings for aesthetic terms need not have anything to do with the absence of a home domain of application or the impossibility of being involved in a category-mistake.

## 2. A Dimensional Account

According to my account, metaphorical interpretability has little to do with (i) the possibility of being involved in a category mistake, or (ii) the extent to which a category is unified, self-standing, and well-delineated. Rather it essentially has to do with the presence of a default dimension within multiple dimensions.

A “thematic dimension” is a term introduced by Bartsch (1987) and first applied to the case of metaphor by Leezenberg (2001). The predicate ‘good’ in ‘The soufflé is good’ might be said to denote a pre-property that is in need of thematic specification. ‘Good’ is a pre-property in that, before one specifies that HEIGHT is the dimension along which the term ‘good’ is to be interpreted, it fails to express a property. Thematic dimensions then are contextual parameters in addition to speaker, place and time, which specify the

*respect* in which a pre-property is said to be true of the subject. Once it has been contextually specified that HEIGHT is the dimension along which the term, ‘good’, is to be employed, one can evaluate whether the soufflé belongs to the set of things that are good with respect to height and determine the truth value of the sentence.

Returning to the question of metaphor, a first condition for the metaphorical interpretability of an expression is *multi-dimensionality*; that is, an expression must be interpretable along multiple dimensions. Take the term ‘swamp’ for instance. ‘Swamp’ is multi-dimensional in that something can be a swamp with respect to orderliness, hospitality, inundation, climate, or transparency, etc. A second condition is that a metaphorically interpretable expression must privilege one of its dimensions as more basic and/or original than the rest; that is, it must have a *default dimension*. Interpreting an expression along its default dimension usually results in an expression’s literal meaning. Thus in the case of ‘swamp,’ the default dimension is geology. It is by virtue of simultaneously satisfying these dual conditions that an expression such as ‘swamp’ is metaphorically interpretable.<sup>8</sup>

The problem with aesthetic terms then is that while they satisfy the first condition (i.e., they are multi-dimensional), they fail to satisfy the second (i.e., they lack a default dimension). That is, something can be beautiful or elegant in indefinitely many respects – e.g., precision or imprecision, curvature or angularity, interrelatedness or independence, etc. - yet no single respect stands out as being more basic or primary than the others.

This claim is importantly less restrictive than and hence different from De Clercq’s claim that aesthetic terms lack a unified, self-standing, and well-delineated, extension or

---

<sup>8</sup> “This country [Japan] is a swamp ... more terrible than you can imagine. Whenever you plant a sapling in this swamp the roots begin to rot; the leaves grow yellow and wither. And we have planted the sapling of Christianity in this swamp.” (Shusaku Endo, *Silence*)

home domain of application. Of course, altering the thematic dimension typically results in a corresponding change of extension. But on the favored account, a default dimension need only be recognizably contrastive with respect to the other dimensions; a default dimension need not further determine an extension that is unified, self-standing, or well-delineated. This results in an account of metaphorical interpretability that is more empirically adequate and generalizable to other varieties of impossible metaphors.

### 3. Other Impossible Metaphors

In his paper, “Metaphor and Lexical Semantics”, Michael Glanzberg notes that *functional categories*, including determiners, quantifiers, tense, modals, negation, complementizers, etc., fail to be metaphorically interpretable. Such expressions primarily provide the ‘grammatical glue’ that binds words together into sentences rather than providing the substantial content of a sentence, as nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs do. We can, of course, find functional categories which occur in metaphorical sentences. But in none of these cases can we find anything like a metaphorical interpretation of the functional categories themselves.

**Quantifiers:** Art left the prey of *every* vulgar thief.<sup>9</sup>

**Complementizers:** The pouch feared *that* it would leak.

**Tense/modals:** She *might* stare death in the eye.

**Negation/conjunction:** Juliet is *not* the sun.

The same is true of what Leezenberg calls “predicate-limiting expressions.”

Predicate-limiting expressions are constructions that make linguistically explicit the

---

<sup>9</sup> Shakespeare, Sonnet 48.

thematic dimension or respect in which the dimensionally sensitive (e.g., metaphorical) expression is to be interpreted. An example of a predicate-limiting term in a non-metaphorical sentence would be ‘financially’ in “John isn’t doing so well *financially*.” As Leezenberg points out, such terms cannot themselves be interpreted metaphorically, because it is they that force a metaphorical interpretation of the terms they modify. And if such terms determine metaphorical content, it would be odd if they could be part of that content.

(2) Cambodia has become *Vietnam’s* Vietnam.<sup>10</sup>

Despite a superficial similarity, predicate-limiting adverbials therefore are unlike manner adverbials, which can themselves undergo metaphorical interpretation.

(3) The drums *demurely* wake the sleepers.<sup>11</sup>

While Glanzberg and Leezenberg each offer distinct explanations for why functional categories and predicate-limiting terms, respectively, are metaphorically uninterpretable, I believe that a single dimensional account best captures the phenomenon of impossible metaphors as a whole. First, functional categories lack metaphorical readings because while they may be said to have a default dimension, they are neither multi-dimensional nor dimension-sensitive. Determiners (e.g., *the*), quantifiers (e.g., *every*), tense (e.g., *-ed*), modals (e.g., *might*), negation (e.g., *not*), complementizers (e.g., *that*), etc. play a

---

<sup>10</sup> Boas & Keysar (1993), *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Shakespeare, *Ibid.*, 220.

largely syntactic role and are therefore too semantically impoverished to contribute various meanings along multiple dimensions.

Next, take the predicate-limiting expression, ‘with respect to temperament,’ in ‘Joan is a saint with respect to temperament.’ Here too, ‘with respect to temperament’ cannot be interpreted metaphorically because the predicate-limiting expression as a whole fails to be multi-dimensional. Of course, the expression-type, ‘temperament,’ which is a constituent expression of the predicate-limiting expression, can be metaphorically interpreted in some contexts. But the constituent term inevitably lacks a metaphorical reading when it directly follows a ‘with-respect-to’ operator and when it is placed within the context of a predicate-limiting expression.

To this, one may object: But surely it is possible to ask “In what respect is Joan a saint *with respect to temperament*?” Doesn’t this suggest that ‘with respect to temperament’ can be interpreted along more than one dimension? I deny that the ‘with-respect-to’ operator is iterable or embeddable in the aforementioned way. As a result, I deny that ‘with respect to temperament’ is itself multi-dimensional or dimension-sensitive. At best, we may ask: ‘*In what way is Joan a saint with respect to temperament?*’ But ‘in what way’ is an interrogative phrase which elicits information about manner, not thematic dimension.

Q: In what way is Joan a saint with respect to temperament?

A: Joan is a saint with respect to temperament *in that she is placid*.

A key difference between expressions that denote information about manner (e.g., manner adverbials) and those that express information about dimensions (e.g., predicate-

limiting adverbials) is that, unlike the former, the latter involve presupposed information, which is evidenced by their behavior under operations like negation, modals, or questioning.

- a. John does well *financially*.
- b. John does not do well *financially*.
- c. John does not necessarily do well *financially*.
- d. Does John do well *financially*?<sup>12</sup>

That is, presuppositions and hence content involving dimensions survive operations such as negation, modals, or questioning, whereas assertions and content concerning manner do not. For this reason, we can tell that ‘in that she is placid’ is not a predicate-limiting adsentential expression, but rather a manner adsentential expression in that it fails the presupposition test.

- a. Joan is a saint with respect to temperament *in that she is placid*.
- b. Joan is not a saint with respect to temperament.
- c. Is Joan a saint with respect to temperament?
- d. Perhaps John is a wolf with respect to temperament.

*In that she is placid* does not survive the operations of negation, modals, and questioning, which indicates that it is a manner adsentential expression involving asserted information, rather than a predicate-limiting expression involving presupposed information.

#### 4. Conclusion

To summarize, I have tried to show that de Clercq’s thesis is flawed as an account of both the metaphorical uninterpretability of aesthetic terms and the phenomenon of

---

<sup>12</sup> Leezenberg, 218-219.

impossible metaphors in general. On my view, what is required for metaphorical interpretability is the joint satisfaction of two conditions: (i) dimension-dependence or multi-dimensionality and (ii) the presence of a default dimension. Aesthetic terms lack metaphorical readings because they fail to satisfy (ii), even though they satisfy (i). Functional categories and predicate-limiting expressions cannot be interpreted metaphorically because they fail to satisfy (i), though they may be said to satisfy (ii). The account I offer is preferable to the accounts offered by individual theorists mentioned in the paper as it is a more predictively adequate and uniform account of the phenomenon of impossible metaphors in general

## References

- Bartsch, R. (1987) "Context-Dependent Interpretations of Lexical Items," *Foundations of Pragmatics and Lexical Semantics*, eds. J. Groenendijk a.o., (Dordrecht: Foris) 1-26.
- De Clercq, R. (2005) "Aesthetic Terms, Metaphor and the Nature of Aesthetic Properties", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63:1, pp. 27-32.
- Camp, E. (2008) "Showing, Telling, and Seeing: Metaphor and 'Poetic' Language", *The Baltic International Yearbook of Cognition, Logic and Communication, Vol. 3: A Figure of Speech*, ed. E. Camp, 1-24.
- (2009) "Two Varieties of Literary Imagination: Metaphor, Fiction, and Thought Experiments," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy: Poetry and Philosophy XXXIII*, ed. Howard Wettstein (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell), 107-130.
- Chomsky, N. (1995): *Language and Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1-57.
- Leezenberg, M. (2001) *Contexts of Metaphor* (Elsevier Press)
- Glanzberg, M. (2008) "Metaphor and Lexical Semantics", *The Baltic International Yearbook of Cognition, Logic and Communication, Vol. 3*, 1-47.
- Stanley, J. (2002): "Nominal Restriction", *Logical Form and Language*, eds. Preyer and Peter (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 365-88.
- Walton, K. (1990) *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press.)