

Mimicry in Natural Language⁰

John M. Lawler
University of Michigan

I. Physical Metaphors

*Πολύ δέ μέγιστον τό
μεταφορικόν εἶναι.*

‘By far the greatest thing
is the use of metaphor’

— Aristotle, *Poetics*

This is not a paper about mime or vocal impersonation; this is a paper about metaphor. In particular, it is about the metaphors linguists use in talking about language. I will try to characterize some of the axioms which underlie the metaphor systems of much of modern linguistics, which I will call ‘*Physical Metaphors*’ for reasons which will become clear shortly, and will provide some different metaphors in linguistics.

In criticizing physical metaphors, I do not wish to be understood as denigrating them. They are powerful metaphors and very satisfying in many ways. Nor do I believe that all modern linguistics uses such metaphors.¹ I **do** think they are prevalent and need to be supplemented, not just extended. There are some areas of serious concern to linguists in which physical metaphors can do very little good, at least as they are currently used, and it is precisely those areas that need new metaphors.

Linguists certainly do use physical metaphors in talking about language; that fact is unarguable in a technical semantic sense, and is in fact well-known and much discussed, though more in personal communication than citation form. Some recent work, notably Morgan (1975), Reddy (1979), and Lakoff and Johnson (1979), has addressed this matter (among others) and I wish to associate myself and my remarks with this growing tradition of concern for the proper use of metaphor.

⁰ Among the many people to whom I owe acknowledgement here (most of whom I suspect would prefer to remain anonymous), I wish to thank most especially Charles Pyle, whose ideas are audible throughout this paper, and Ann Borkin, than whom no one could have a finer colleague. I would also like to thank my friends and students, who have suffered through this with me for some time, and whose support and assistance have been invaluable.

¹ In addressing this Society, which has been associated with the history of Generative Linguistics, I am well aware and fully intend that my remarks here will be interpreted within the context **Linguistics = Generative Linguistics**. There are plenty of other traditions in linguistics, however, and I have tried to frame the discussion in ways generalizable to any attempt to study human language and communication with serious purpose. For example, consider the implications of the physical metaphor of *slot/filler*, a tagmemic staple.

