‘Whenever I put a black jacket on, I get dandruff’

On metonymy as a device for constructive argumentation analysis

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Abstract

Mother-tongue teachers teach argumentation analysis. To this end, among other things, they use a stylistic meta-language, i.e. the tropes and figures of style, to analyse arguments as well as more aesthetic communication. The best-known trope is the metaphor. In this article it is argued that a more pragmatic view on the related figure metonymy could sharpen our tools for argumentation analysis. Metaphor is about resemblance or similarity; metonymy is about some kind of contextual togetherness or contiguity, “The White House has decided to decrease the military presence in Afghanistan”. Since the information focus in the metonymy is somewhere other than on the name shift, it makes it a potential carrier of possibly insidious assumptions and attempts to persuade. Such possible instances could be “Prices go up” or “Pensions go down”. The metonymy concept can help us see that pensions do not go down; someone has decided to lower them.

Keywords: metonymy, metaphor, argumentation analysis, rhetoric, teacher education

The mother-tongue subject in the Swedish elementary and high school is a combination of Literature and Scandinavian studies. At university level, literature studies and the study of the Swedish language are normally split between separate departments. Accordingly, trainee teachers will have to study what for most of them will be a single subject at different departments, a solution that might not be the most beneficial. As an attempt to gather researchers with an interest in the overarching goal of identifying how to improve the education of our trainee teachers, and thus to reduce the possible shortcomings of this split, The Network for Research on Swedish as a Didactic Subject (SMDI) was formed in the south of Sweden in 2003. This is not the place to tell the story about SMDI, but it is noted that the network has so far been very successful, including for instance the running of annual well-attended conferences.

The split between the two parts of the mother-tongue subject was of course never complete. One of the bridges that has interested researchers from both fields has
always been the Elocutio part of the so-called Partes model, which survived under the name of Stylistics. The word 'survived' refers to the downfall of Rhetoric starting at the end of the 18th century.¹

Elocutio deals primarily with the level of style, and the tropes and figures of speech. Perhaps the best-known trope is the metaphor. At any university library you will find a number of books on the metaphor. But you will hardly find anything on the metonymy. In this article I try to make the case that a highlighting of the metonymy concept could amount to a substantial contribution to our toolbox for constructive argumentation analysis. Further, I suggest adopting a more pragmatic understanding of the metonymy – one that emphasises the information structure of metonymies compared to metaphors, rather than the different topoi from which to construct a metonymy.

Definition

The standard definition of metonymy usually contrasts this trope with the more familiar metaphor. The difference being that metaphor deals with resemblance: “a visual expression where likelihood or inner resemblances motivates that an entity (vehicle) is being changed to something else (tenor) (my translation from the Swedish National Encyclopedia). “You are a pig” could be a typical example. Metonymy, in contrast, is “a stylistic figure where one expression is changed for another, which stands in a certain relation to the more common expression” (ibid.). A typical example could be “The whole saloon burst into laughter”. There is, in other words, another type of relation than resemblance. It could be cause for effect, part for whole, or closeness in time or space etc.

If you look up Quintilian’s chapter on tropes (Institutio Oratoria Book 8 Ch 6), it starts by stating:

By a trope is meant the artistic alteration of a word or phrase from its proper meaning to another. This is a subject which has given rise to interminable disputes among the teachers of literature, who have quarrelled no less violently with the philosophers than among themselves over the number of the genera and species into which tropes may be divided, their number and their correct classification. I propose to disregard such quibbles as in no wise concern the training of an orator

We see here how Quintilian regards rhetoric as being primarily a productive device, how to choose language as constructively as possible. It is not surprising since his quest is to provide guidelines for the training of an orator. “My aim, then, is the education of the perfect orator” (Quintilianus, 1. Preface.9). But this production focus is at odds with the understanding of rhetoric we find in many ancient Greek sources, where rhetoric was seen just as much as a device for constructive analysis of persuasive communication. See, for example, Aristotle Book 2 Ch 24 where he analyses arguments that, although they might be convincing, we are not to be persuaded by since
they lack some kind of argumentative quality. Throughout Aristotle arguments are analysed in a depth we do not find in Quintilian or other Roman writers.²

**Rhetoric as a meta-reflective device**

As mother-tongue teachers we teach argumentation analysis, and use among other things a stylistic meta-language to analyse arguments as well as more aesthetic communication, i.e. the tropes and figures of style (Rydén et al. 1995: 191 ff; Perme 2000: 242 ff; Wiklund 2009). If we have a production-oriented view on how to use the meta-language that Rhetoric has to offer, we might miss sharp tools that could serve to analyse persuasive communication. The objective of argumentation analysis has traditionally been combined with a negative focus, 'how to avoid being fooled' (for example, see Ejvegård 2005). It should be stressed that argumentation analysis could be just as important when it comes to not missing virtuous influence. The overarching goal with such an activity can be said to be that we should acquire tools that enable us to reflect on how to achieve our communicative intentions, as both senders and receivers: “That we all to a greater extent than before should hold the views we want to entertain, and to a greater extent act according to our intentions” (Sigrell 2011b: 177). This formulation may sound a little provocative, and of course it demands a number of restrictive conditions to be meaningful. One such condition has to do with the indissoluble relation between rhetoric and ethics. The result of a well-executed investigation may morally oblige us to abandon notions and patterns of behaviour that we had been fully satisfied with earlier.

The listener’s responsibility for the communicative act has gained some attention lately (for example, see Adelmann 2009 or Sigrell 2011a). The most fundamental rhetorical assumption is that we choose language. This assumption could take its theoretical starting point in the arbitrariness of language, that there is no logical force obligating us to exercise a specific language choice. We choose completely freely, an enormous freedom, and an enormous responsibility. If we choose completely freely, we are completely responsible for our choice of wordings. Once again we see the relation between rhetoric and ethics. But this is a truth with modification. We choose completely freely, yes, but only from the repertoire we can choose from. *Copia* is the rhetorical term for this repertoire. It follows from this that rhetoric as a didactic subject is there to help us choose as constructively as possible, and to help us enlarge our copia. For the former, Rhetoric offers us a meta-reflective language that can help us reflect on the terms and outcome of the communication situation. For the latter, we have different kinds of rhetorical exercises (for example, the progymnasmata exercises that have gained so much interest lately; for example, see Eriksson 2002 or Sigrell 2003a/b, 2005, 2006). It is worth mentioning that the Latin *copia* gives rise to both the adjective “copious” – that we should strive for as large copia as possible – and the verb “to copy” – that we will enlarge our copia through inspiration from good examples (this, of course, has to be practised, in writing, reading, speaking and listening).
That we choose language comprises how we, as receivers, choose to perceive what
others say, how we listen. To speak is a right, rights entail obligations, responsibility
for what we do with language, and what language does to us. Philip Melanchthon
puts it well in this paraphrased quotation from his *Elementorum rhetorices duo libri*
“Rhetoric is not an art of how to speak well, or even the art of how to teach others
how to speak well; it is foremost an art of how to understand, and thereby be able
to make decisions in difficult matters” (my translation, pp. 22-23). Thus, from the
point of view adopted in this article, rhetoric is an art that can be taught (*techné*,
see Nordkvelle 2002). The meta-reflective vocabulary of rhetoric can be used for
production-oriented as well as reception-oriented teaching. One significant form of the
latter is argumentation analysis, and one significant form of meta-reflective language
is tropes. They are clearly meta-reflective tools that can enable us to articulate what
we do with language, and what language does to us. They are not just topics for how
to formulate and convey a message as constructively as possible, but also devices for
how to understand what thought a sender wants to share with me as a receiver. Now,
it is time to return to one of the master tropes, the metonymy.

**Metonymy**

In spite of his negative understanding of the genera and species of tropes quoted
above, Quintilian sets off to define the major tropes. The definition and formation
of subgroups of metonymy deal with the kind of material that can be used to form a
metonymy. He lists eight different types of relations (Book 8 Ch 6 23-28). They are:
symbol for a thing being symbolised, cause for effect, effect for cause, controller for
controlled, creator for creation, place for activity, container for contained, possession
for possessor, and object used for user. Not all of his examples are immediately clear
to the contemporary reader, containing names of ancient Gods and persons one is
supposed to be familiar with. More current examples could be:

“The old lecturer finally gave up his pointing stick” (he quit teaching, symbol for a
thing being symbolised). “Clinique, the face cream that erases the years” (wrinkles,
cause for effect). “He took a swig of courage” (alcohol, effect for cause). “Bush bombs
Iraq” (US Air Force, controller for controlled). “I love Strindberg” (his writings,
creator for creation). “Kremlin denies all invention in Georgia” (place for activity).
“How about a glass?” (Whisky, container for contained). “The world’s best backhand
has landed” (Söderling, possession for possessor). “The media loves Björn Ranelid”
(journalists, object used for user).

Another example of the effect for cause-type is the title-metonymy of this paper,
“Whenever I put a black jacket on, I get dandruff”. Our thinking is metonymical; if
something happens after something else we tend to assume a causal relationship. This
tendency could be put to argumentative work. The Swedish tabloid *Expressen* once ran
the heading: “Olof Palme [former Swedish Prime Minister] plays tennis with Harry
Schein every Thursday. He is now Governor of the National Bank”. A heading where
no one can deny facts, but nevertheless constituting a very insinuating formulation since nearly everyone will read this as a causal relationship.4

That something questionable is attributed as the cause of something that happens after some event falls within the definition of the post hoc ergo propter hoc-fallacy. “I told you our economy would be disastrous if we got a conservative government, and now look what has happened”. This could be a typical example of the mentioned fallacy since there could be other reasons for a bad economy than the economic policy of the government. From one angle, this could be seen as a clear example of the rhetorical perspectivism telling us that every single entity can be looked at from a number of viewpoints. Every formulation can be rightfully attributed a number of denominations, and even a number of different tropes can be used to denominate the very same expression. This also applies to the subgroups of metonymy. There are no clear-cut lines between them. “The appendix in 3:4 wants an urinal”, could for instance just as well be put under ‘object for user’, in line with “The ham-sandwich wants his bill”, as under ‘possession for possessor’ or even ‘symbol for a thing being symbolised’. The reversed relation is also applicable; a number of different formulations could end up under the same denomination. A couple of the denominations with a clear resemblance to metonymy are worth mentioning here: metalepsis, antonomasia and synecdoche.

Related figures
Apart from metaphor, a number of familiar tropes could fulfil the role of metonymy when it comes to denoting certain formulations. As a concept, metonymy is so vague that it sometimes is tempting to view it as some kind of waste paper category. Yet, some scholars have attempted to pinpoint differences clear enough to warrant a term of their own. Quintilian mentions, among others, metalepsis (Book 8 Ch 6, 37). According to him, it is a figure of speech where one thing is referred to by something else, which is only remotely associated with it. It could be a metonymical substitution of one word for another, which is in itself figurative. Often the association works through a different figure of speech, or through a chain of cause and effects. It could even refer to the combination of several figures of speech into an altogether new one. The material to form a metalepsis from might, for example, be drawn from literary references, resulting in a sophisticated form of allusion (another trope that will not be dealt with here). Quintilian writes that it is a trope by which we claim acquaintance (ibid.). An example could be “I have to catch the worm tomorrow”, alluding to the proverb of the early bird. In “He is such a lead-foot” the chain goes via lead equals heavy, and a heavy foot presses the accelerator, making the car go faster; ending up in the meaning ‘He drives too fast’. Another cause-effect example of metalepsis is “pallid death”, creating a new adjective from what you become after death to describe death itself. Far-fetched cause-effect relations make metalepsis suitable for humoristic effects. An elegant example is Bellman’s Epistle no 23 Alas my mother. The epistle starts with the protagonist lying in the gutter outside a bar early in the morning, cursing
his mother and father for conceiving him (the remote cause) and his troubled life (the
effect). He curses the one who sent the mother to the bed, and even the wood that
the bed was made of. When the bar opens and he gets a couple of drams, the cursing
turns into an encomium over his mother, the father’s capability, and the gifted log
man and carpenter behind the making of the bed.

In the same chapter, Quintilian mentions antonomasia, where one substitutes
a descriptive phrase for a proper name, or substitutes a proper name for a quality
associated with it. “He is a Judas to our cause”, “There is much Cicero in this letter”
eloquence), ”The prince of Peripatetics” (Aristotle). Antonomasia is, in other words,
a metonymy of the first type, a symbol for a thing being symbolised, with a proper
name as the symbol/what is being symbolised. Quintilian also mentions onomatopoeia
in relation to metonymy, and claims that it is really a form of catasthresis, a misused
form of metonymy (Book 8 Ch 6 31-34). This understanding of onomatopoeia is well
at odds with the abovementioned arbitrariness of language (that even onomatopoeia
has some arbitrary traits is shown by the fact that Swedish pigs say ‘nine-nine’ in
French, “nöff-nöff”, while American pigs say ‘oink’). These tropes will not be mentioned
further, but a paragraph on synecdoche is appropriate for several reasons.

Synecdoche, meaning ‘act of taking together’ or ‘simultaneously understanding’, is
one of the master tropes. Like metonymy, it is a figure of substitution. It comes in two
variants, substituting the part for the whole, or the whole for the parts, in Latin pars
pro toto and toto pro parte. Typical examples could be “Sweden played brilliantly
in the second half against the Netherlands” (the part, the national soccer team, is
substituted for by the whole, Sweden). An editorial letter could be signed with “A girl
of 14 springs” (the whole, a year, is substituted for by a part). Most scholars, ancient
as well as more contemporary, see synecdoche as a subgroup of metonymy. Lakoff
& Johnson, for example, in their widely read Metaphors we live by, follow Roman
Jakobson and classify synecdoche as “a special case of metonymy” (1980: 36). The
other way around is also possible. The rhetorician Kenneth Burke considered synec-
doche a basic figure of speech and metonymy “a special application of synecdoche”
(1962: 509) (even though one should mention that it is far from easy to understand
exactly what Burke means here; two pages earlier he wrote that metonymy overlaps
metaphor so likewise it overlaps upon synecdoche…).

The view that synecdoche is one of the master tropes goes back to Giambattista
Vico, the 18th century rhetorician who has gained so much interest lately (see, for
example, the Rhetorica Scandinavica theme issue on rhetoric and didactics, no 38
2006). In his work on rhetorical figures, he found that all tropes could be reduced to
four master tropes, which subsumed all lesser tropes (1991: 409). The other three are
metaphor, metonymy and irony. It could be problematic to tell the difference between
synecdoche and metonymy, as several of the metonymical subgroups mentioned
above could be seen as a part-whole relationship. In 1830, the classical rhetorician
Dumarsais drew a clear distinction between them. With synecdoche the tenor, the
substituted part, forms a whole with the vehicle, the subject it represents; making it impossible to realise one of them without the possible realisation of the other (Davis 2010: 712). With a metonymy, on the other hand, the tenor and vehicle both exist on their own. Suitable examples could be “How about a glass?” The whisky and the glass do exist as separate entities without any forcing connection between each other. The same goes for “The pen (literature) is mightier than the sword (warfare)”. But in the mentioned signing of an editorial letter, “A girl of 14 springs”, we cannot imagine the vehicle ‘spring’ without the tenor ‘a year’. A ‘spring’ requires the concept ‘a year’ (but ‘autumn’ as a poetic symbol for ageing will be an unambiguous metonymy/metaphor). This explanation is seemingly functional. There are evident examples and the distinction will do its job in a classroom, even though it could be somewhat questionable to highlight the part-whole relation as being so specific as to render it the status of a trope in its own right.

The neuro-linguist Sheila Davies presents further arguments for seeing synecdoche as a special trope (1993: 7-38). Empirical evidence from split-brain language studies with aphasic patients suggests that synecdoche and metaphor are processed in different brain halves. Synecdoche is processed in the more literal left hemisphere, where internal details and the breaking up of wholes into parts is necessary for the synecdochic thought. The more holistic and figurative right hemisphere deals with metaphor. This interesting result could provide a starting point for an argument that by combining two disparate realms metaphor adds meaning, while by reducing the whole to a part synecdoche contracts meaning. The point worth mentioning here is that from this the argument could be raised that metonymy works in two steps: first it adds something, like the metaphor, and then it contracts something, like the synecdoche. I will return to this below.

If you start thinking about how to tell the difference between different tropes you will evidently end up in some kind of confusion. Take the proverb “His bark is worse than his bite”. Are ‘bark’ and ‘bite’ metaphors or metonymies? They are not synecdoches such as “The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world”, and not clear metonymies like “Man cannot live on bread alone” or “Not a single soul was visible”.

As we have seen, there can be many different kinds of metonymies, some not mentioned earlier are cause-instrument, agent-activity, activity-affected object, and activity-product. For the purpose of this paper, it is less important to try to enumerate the possible types of contiguity than to acknowledge that contiguity is an experience of a relation, of some kind of ‘togetherness’, where experience is to be understood in the broadest sense. Given this assumption, contiguity can take virtually any form provided speakers construe a relation between the entities involved and take that relationship as communicatively relevant as possible. Accordingly, in spite of the writings of several great scholars, synecdoche and the part-whole relation will be seen as one type of metonymy throughout the rest of this paper. A quotation in support of this stance could be:

‘Whenever I put a black jacket on, I get dandruff’
In classical rhetoric, metonymy became a figure of speech distinct from metaphor. It normally excluded shifts of meaning based on PART-WHOLE relations, which were attributed to synecdoche. Nowadays, shifts of meaning based on PART-WHOLE relations are included in metonymy and are actually regarded as the most basic metonymical relations (Nerlich, Clarke & Todd (1999 p. 362)).

Discussion

Quintilian takes, as we have seen, his starting point in what linguistic material is being used to form different tropes to separate metaphor from metonymy. The same goes for ancient as well as more contemporary scholars in the field. Cicero in *De Oratore* book III 167 and *Ad Herenium* book IV also take this stand. Contemporary Scandinavian scholars like Øivind Andersen (1995), Kurt Johannesson (1998), Jens Kjeldsen (2004), Lennart Hellspong (2011) and Ralph Waldenström (2012) do the same.

As mother-tongue teachers and researchers in this field, language is the focal point of our study, and the same applies to argumentation analysis. Argumentation analysis is a language subject, but its focus is outside language, on the result of language use. Traditionally, one could study linguistic meaning on three levels, the semantic, syntactic and pragmatic level (Lyons 1991). Argumentation studies will typically be placed on the third level. If we shift the focus from a more semantic view of the differences between metaphors and metonymies to a more pragmatic view, another striking difference will appear. In the typical use of a metaphor the sender’s communicative intention is to highlight the similarities between the tenor and vehicle: “My darling, you are a rose”, “You are a pig”. With the typical use of metonymy the contiguity, the ‘togetherness’, that provides the ground for the change is pushed to the background. “The White House has decided to decrease the military presence in Afghanistan” is about US military activity and not about where the decision-makers are located. The same goes for the vast majority of examples mentioned in this paper. The name-shift is seen as something so obvious that it would be a communicative waste of energy to pay any special attention to it. In using the metaphor you want the receiver to pay attention to similarities. “Cicero in not the name of a man, but of eloquence itself”, as Quintilian puts it (*Institutio Oratoria* Book 10, Ch 1, 112). The information focus in using the typical metaphor is on the similarity between the tenor and vehicle, while when using the typical metonymy the information focus is somewhere else. This indicates that it follows a communicative pattern to question a metaphor, which is not the case with the use of metonymy. The contiguity behind the metonymy is not the information focus, where to question it would not follow a communicative pattern. Such a pragmatic view would end up with several metaphors being redefined as metonymies. “The market loves Volvo” (headline after the Geely-Volvo business operation, a metonymy of the agent-place category). Information focus is on investor’s predilection for a certain company. The possibly righteous questioning of this anonymous personification of these investors as ‘the market’ would not follow a communicative pattern. The metaphor “Money investors are the market” is implicit and taken for granted.
None of the abovementioned researchers have, as far as I can understand, taken this more pragmatic view on metonymies, but instead have a more semantically-oriented view. There are researchers who see the possible persuasive effects from metonymy contrasted with metaphor. The Norwegian scholar Einar Eggen is one of them. In his article “Metafor og metonymi” (1976) he writes: “It seems to be central to the metaphor that it establishes a new semantic union, often by surprising unifications, while metonymy and synecdoche only represent movements within the same context, where the associations are on the whole run-in and well known” (p. 10, my translation from Norwegian). “The metaphor is punctate, illogical, lifted above time and space, while metonymy always moves within a logical, temporal or spatial setting” (p. 16, my translation). But his conclusion from this is not a pragmatic one. The conclusion is for scholars of literature: “Poetry is punctate and therefore metaphorical. Prose on the other hand is advancing, linear, and therefore metonymical” (p. 16).

Metonymies are not just studied by rhetoricians or linguists. Thanks to the so-called linguistic turn in most fields of research, metonymies are studied in organisational research for instance. One example is Gill Musson and Susanne Tietze’s “Places and spaces: The role of metonymy in organizational talk” (2004). They believe that metonymies are under explored thanks to the “fundamentally conventional nature of the trope in use, which express ideas, values and relationships that seem natural, normal and routine but which are culturally bound” (p. 1301). Their aim could be seen as a task in a similar vein as the present paper: “[A]nalysing metonymies (and related metaphors) enables exploration of taken-for granted cultural relationships and meanings” (p. 1308). Even if their analyses of office-conversations are no doubt interesting, they too have a more semantic view on metonymies. They ground their view on the difference between metaphor and metonymy on the material from which to form the tropes: “Perhaps metonymies are more powerful in their effects precisely because they shift meaning between signs in the same meaning domain” (p. 1307). Such a more semantic view also seems to be the prevailing one in the cognitive approaches to metonymy that we meet in anthologies such as *Metaphor and Metonymy at the Crossroads* (2000, ed. Barcelona) and *Metaphor and Metonymy in Comparison* (2003, eds. Dirven & Pörings).

In her article “Manoeuvring strategically with metonymy in the confrontation and argumentation stages of a discussion” (2008), Francisca Snoeck Henkemans has a different understanding from the present paper of the role metonymies play in an argumentative setting. With references to well-known scholars like Lakoff & Johnson, Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca and Radden & Kövecses, she sees metonymies as a way to highlight the name-change, not putting it in the background as is proposed in the more pragmatic view taken here: “metonymies allows us to focus more specifically on certain aspects of what is being referred to” (p. 70), “[metonymies] is a way of drawing attention to a particular characteristic... This function seems to coincide with the function of high-lighting or focussing” (p. 71). There are examples that could support
such a view on metonymies, e.g. “Nixon bombs Hanoi” (controller-controlled). Even if the information focus is somewhere else than on the name-change, it is easy to see that this metonymy focuses on highlighting Nixon as someone personally responsible for the actions undertaken; the reinforced negative pathos that follows could be understood to be in line with the communicative intention behind such an expression. In contrast, in all the examples mentioned above, and below, the metonymy is put in the background – not focused, highlighted or drawn attention to – in line with the abovementioned Eggen and Musson & Tietze understanding of metonymies. That Snoeck Henkemans has a different view is also shown by her examples. According to a more pragmatic view, some of them would be seen as metaphors, e.g. “Sugar is energy by nature” (end-means). “This-is-this” is the typical basis formula for the metaphor. To make it a metonymy one would have to put the name-change in the background, for example by re-phrasing the advertorial: “Energy by nature is good for you. The Sugar Company”, a reformulation that puts the name-change in the background.

One could, of course, find a number of sound ways to look at the tropes in general and metonymy in particular. Like many rhetorical terms the tropes could instead be seen more constructively as perspectives from which to look at a communicative act. What would we see if we look at an expression as a metonymy, a metaphor or an irony? Here it is argued that a more pragmatic view, contrasted with a more semantic ditto, on the metonymy could help us detect possibly insidious uses of the trope. Even if Snoeck Henkemans and the present paper perhaps see metonymies differently, our purposes are in the same vein. For example, she finds part-whole metonymies as possibly evading the burden of proof fallacy. And her conclusion is: “By using metonymies, arguers can present their standpoint in such a way that they become easier to defend and they can make their argumentation seem stronger and less open to criticism” (p. 76).

A more pragmatic view, it is argued, could provide better help when it comes to teaching argumentation analysis by means of our tropes. But why should it be more constructive to see e.g. the mentioned “The Market loves Volvo” as a metonymy compared to seeing it as a metaphor? The tropes in our argumentation analysis toolbox are not etiquettes used to label different aspects of the arguments; they are here to help us recognise aspects that would have risked passing us by unnoticed. Recently during the economic turbulence an economic journalist on television was heard saying “The Swedish crown is floating” (cause-effect). The information focus is on the decreasing value of the Swedish crown compared to other currencies. The metaphor that tells us that the persons and organisations behind the decisions leading up to this situation can be seen as the personified subject ‘the Swedish crown’ is pushed to the background. This makes the metonymy particularly suitable for conveying implicit messages. The origin of this article was a train ride back to Sweden from Denmark. On the train the public train company had fixed commercial posters advertising its service. Across one of the posters there was a banner saying: “Now also tax-free!”.
The banner bothered me; there is something strange about a public company running commercials claiming to have a tax-free service, but I could not quite understand why it bothered me. Suddenly it struck me that the banner could be understood as a metonymy of the part-whole type. The word ‘tax-free’ is a part of a whole. The whole is about the process by which we acquire and use common belongings. The word tax-free denotes that in this process there is a negative force, the State, that takes our money, and that it is good if that could be avoided – to be free from taxes. Other wordings could have given other connotations, for example “We all subsidise the ticket-fares to make them as low as possible”.

Here is the answer why it could be constructive to sharpen metonymy as a tool in our argumentation analysis toolbox. Metonymies signal a relation between tenor and vehicle that is supposedly obvious and not to be questioned, which could be used for insidious attempts to persuade. The headline “Prices go up”, or preferably “Pensions go down” could be used to hide the responsibility for those responsible for the decision to lower pensions. In its Swedish election 2010 posters, a right-wing populist party (the Swedish Democrats) used the slogan: “Give us Sweden back”. This whole-part metonymy forces the reader who wants to understand the message to fill several gaps, what is Sweden, what has been taken, who took it? This kind of implicit message conveying has the possibility to be effective, among other reasons for the fact that if a receiver fills the several gaps they could come to the conclusion that this is something I have found out myself, not something someone else has told me to think/believe (further, see Sigrell 2011b). In xenophobic argumentation this type of part-whole metonymies seems to be frequent (see e.g. Reisigl and Wodak 2001). The two types of part-whole metonymies can be both particularising (pars pro toto) and generalising (totum pro parte). Examples of the former from the same party could be “Non-Western immigrants are behind virtually all assault rapes”, “Immigrants cost money that ought to go to our pensioners”. An example of the latter is what the party Secretary of the Swedish Democrats posted on Facebook shortly after the Swedish victory in the Eurovision Song Contest in May 2012 by the second-generation immigrant Loreen: “Sweden?”. The question mark clearly indicates that there is a whole, and that the party Secretary is sceptical as to whether Loreen is supposed to be seen as a part of that whole, thanks to her immigrant background.

A more pragmatic view on metonymy can, as mentioned, sharpen the device in our argumentation toolbox. A significant example is the Swedish local politician and academic rhetorician, José Ramirez, who participated in a debate with a Union leader. Ramirez was very critical of him, and after a while the Union leader exclaimed, “Are you attacking the union?”. Ramirez saw the metonymy (part-whole) and answered, “No, I am attacking you” (personal communication with José Ramirez March 2012).

Argumentation can be seen as an attempt to establish connections between different entities. That is what the everyday use of syllogisms, deduction and induction is about. With a starting point in something held to be plausible, a connection is established
with a claim made. We have different models for argumentation analysis to study these connections, like the pro et contra model, the Toulmin model, Black’s persona, neo-Aristotelian models, Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, the Pragmadialectic, informal logic... [(see for example, Foss (2009) or Kuypers (2009)]. But it is not only different matters of fact in syllogistic propositions that establish connections. Metaphors and metonymies do that too, like all tropes and figures of style (including the rhyme°).

One important point about the metaphor-metonymy connection that follows from what has been said so far is that, from a rhetorical argumentation-analysis didactic perspective, the metaphor will always be an integral part of metonymy. Every scholar would agree that “The Kremlin denies any intervention in Georgia” is a metonymy. And most scholars would agree that “Putin is the Kremlin” is an effective metaphor (or Medvedev, or the Russian government, or all three are the Kremlin). Viewed this way, the metaphor is a prerequisite for these types of metonymies, but the one who uses the metonymy has other communicative intentions compared to the metaphor user. This could be an important aspect in our teaching of how to use the tropes for argumentation analysis.

With this particular viewpoint taken, we can return to the abovementioned cognitive processing of the metonymy. To process metonymy we must first understand the metaphor behind it, an expansion of the denotations of the actual wording, and then reduce that meaning (the Kremlin is not just the buildings in Moscow, it is the place where Russian foreign policy decisions are made, therefore you can see the Kremlin as Russian decision-makers when it comes to foreign policy). After that, the name-change operation is put in the background. This places the metonymy in the background as something so obvious and uncomplicated that it is not worth highlighting. As demonstrated, this move might for example be used to evade responsibility.

How could this way of looking at the metaphor-metonymy be helpful when it comes to fulfilling the goals of our mother-tongue teaching? From one point of view rhetoric is, as mentioned, nothing but a meta-reflective language that can help us reflect on the terms and outcome of a communicative situation. Tropes in a pedagogical setting are there to help us recognise language-reality relations that could otherwise have risked passing us by unnoticed. The more and the sharper the tools we can equip our future teachers with, and thereby their pupils/students, the better off we are when it comes to reflecting on what we do with language, and what language does to us. A more pragmatic understanding of metonymy in line with what has been stated above could be such a sharpening of the tool metonymy as a device for argumentation analysis.

**Conclusion**

Definitions of metonymy often see it being contrasted with metaphor, the latter being about some kind of resemblance or similarity, while the former is about some kind of contextual ‘togetherness’ or contiguity. All our lexica and encyclopaedia, as well as ancient and contemporary scholars in the field referred to in this paper, entertain
this quasi-semantic view on the difference. This is no doubt a coherent and functional way of looking at these master tropes. If we are to analyse persuasive communication, it could help us label some expressions as metaphors and some as metonymies. But there could also be other ways of looking at them. In this article, a more pragmatic view has been advocated. The typical metaphor has its information focus on the resemblance between the tenor and vehicle, “You are a rose”. The communicative intention is to make the receiver aware of this resemblance. On the other hand, the typical metonymy has its information focus somewhere else, “The White House has decided to decrease the military presence in Afghanistan” is about military presence and not the name-shift. This makes the metonymy a potential carrier of possibly insidious assumptions and attempts to persuade, since it does not follow a communicative pattern to question the name-shift behind the metonymy, but receivers are assumed to accept it as something granted. The abovementioned examples “Pensions go down” and “Are you attacking the Union?” “No, I am attacking you” could be such possible instances. Accordingly, it has been argued that – when coming across a message containing a transferred meaning with an information focus on something else than on making the receiver aware of this – the metonymy concept understood from a more pragmatic point of view can help us detect more or less conscious attempts to implicitly convey conceptions about our reality. A quest that is anything but unimportant for our mother-tongue teaching.

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Notes

1 The downfall of Rhetoric in Sweden, beginning in the late 18th century and thriving into the end of the 20th century, has been the topic of a successful research project led by Otto Fischer and Ann Öhrberg, Department of Literature, Uppsala University; see, for example, Fischer 2011. For the claims that stylistics is a survivor of the elocutio step in the partes model, that unites scholars from Literature and Scandinavian studies in a Scandinavian context, for Scandinavian speakers see for example Peter Cassirer’s Stil, stilistik och stilanalys 2003 or Birger Liljestrand Språk i text 1983.

2 The Roman development of Rhetoric, with Cicero and Quintilian arguably being the brightest names, hardly contributed anything substantial to rhetorical theory. Put somewhat simply, one could say that they systematised the terminology, and made distinctions in a rhetorical vocabulary that for the Greeks was used on a more personal level. The reason for the changed view on rhetoric as also being a device for argumentation analysis in Rome is a subject for another paper. Here I settle for a quote from M. D. Hazen: “When the Roman republic evolved into the despotism of the Roman Empire, a concern for argument disappeared and the study of rhetoric was largely confined to style” (1995: 211). One fitting example of the mentioned systematisation of the rhetorical terminology is exactly the distinction between metaphor and metonymy. When Aristotle used the term metaphor, he understood both these concepts (for more, see Ramirez 2000).

3 The Melanchthon quotation is translated from Volkhard Wels’ edited and commented translation into German. Since neither my Latin nor my German are particularly brilliant, I wrote to Dr Wels. He replied: “Your quotation is more a paraphrase than an exact quotation. Melanchthon is making this point all over his preface to the Elementa. Anyway, your quotation is definitely from the core of Melanchthon’s intentions” (personal correspondence, Feb. 2012), hence the wording “paraphrased quotation”.

4 That we assume a causal relationship if two statements are placed after each other can be explained with the help of the Gricean maxims, preferably the relevance maxim (see Grice 1975). But the foundation for these maxims rests on the cooperation principle that has to be subordinated to another principle that could be called ‘the principle of the sense of the action’. That we assume, until we have reason to the contrary, that there are some meaningful reasons for a person to act one way or another, otherwise everyday life would be very tricky. And why would someone, like in this case Expressen, mention Schein’s new position in connection with tennis playing with the PM, if there were no causal relation? It is also possible to see the Gricean notion of ‘conversational implicature’ as being metonymically motivated; for the sake of understanding you have to substitute one expression with another.

5 Davis’ reference to Dumarsais is from Theresa Enos (ed.) Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition (2010). It would have been preferable to quote the original source but, to my knowledge, Dumarsais’ Les Tropes (1830) is not translated into a language that I am able to quote from. What makes this reference even more questionable is that Davis spells his name Du Marsais, which I have not seen anywhere else, and moreover that an article like “Distinguishing Metonymy from Synecdoche” by Ken-ichi Seto (1999) does not mention this distinction (the claim of Seto’s linguistic article is that in our folk view on the question we tend to equate taxonomies (kind of relations) with partonomies (part of relations), and if synecdoche is to be a consistent category it should only take taxonomy and leave partonomy to metonymy). Seto does not provide any references to Dumarsais, but Andreas Blank does in his article “Co-presence and Succession. A Cognitive Typology of Metonymy” in the same volume as Seto, alas without mentioning the distinction made in Davis’ article. The reason that I, in spite of the insecurity of this reference, still use it, is that Enos’ Encyclopedia is regarded as a trustworthy source, and above all that the distinction made is the most clear and comprehensible I have come upon.

6 Jeffrey Walker has an interesting line of argument in his “The Enthymeme in Perspective” (1984), where he claims rhyming arguments are more valid than non-rhyming ones: All argumentation is about establishing connections, and no claim is valid without its premises. We remember rhyming premises better than non-rhyming ones; therefore they are more valid.
‘Whenever I put a black jacket on, I get dandruff’

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