

Metonymic Target Identification: In Search of a Balanced Approach

Piotr Twardzisz, University of Warsaw

Abstract

The article concerns metonymy observed in certain proper names used in specialist contexts. The names under consideration primarily designate places of international prominence (e.g., *the United States, Washington, the White House, Iran, Tehran*, etc.). The identification of a metonymic target is the metonymy researcher's primary goal. The first part of the article reviews and critically assesses several analyses in which authors intuitively search for metonymic targets. In the second part, a passage concerning international relations is scrutinized for the use of the name *Iran* and other related names. As a whole, the article attempts to demonstrate that metonymic target identification escapes rigorous methodology.

Key words: metonymy, target, reference point, proper name, international relations

1. Introduction

The revival of interest in metonymy, or more precisely conceptual metonymy, has led to numerous proposals for increasingly more detailed metonymic targets. As metonymy is seen as a conceptual process by cognitive linguists, the mere 'stand-for' or 'refer-to' relationship between the metonymic source and its target is regarded as insufficient. Rather than the source 'standing for' the target, the former is argued to 'provide mental access' to the latter. As the provision of mental access leaves the exact 'mental address' undefined, metonymic target identification becomes a priority in conceptual metonymy research. The majority of researchers assume the reference point/source to be a more salient entity than the target. As much of the research on metonymy focuses on target identification, it is the less salient target that is in constant need of attention. In the case of proper names, which by definition do the naming, the target search and its identification are not less important than in the case of common nouns.

Paradoxical as it sounds, proper names designating places do not name places, but constitute sources or reference points for more fine-tuned, though less salient, targets. A place name is, then, a point of

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entrance from which a search begins for an entity that is better equipped to function as the designation of this name. In cognitive linguistics, there have been several inquiries into the 'target-ness' of place names, notably Kövecses and Radden (1998: 50), Radden and Kövecses (1999: 31), Gibbs (1999: 65), and others. A review of the relevant literature shows that proper names of internationally known places lead to arbitrarily assigned targets which fit particular argumentative frames. One observable, though unsurprising, fact is that there is no one definitive target for a given source name. While different contexts may require variation in target assignment, significantly different targets are postulated for names used in similar environments. The impression that one gets is that either there is over-specification in target identification, with multiple fine-tuned sub-domains considered, or there is arbitrary target designation. Proposals of targets at different levels of semantic accuracy prompt questions about the level of semantic accuracy expected of such targets. If the semantic fine-tuning of metonymic targets can be so freely adjusted, then it can be also questioned as either too detailed or too general.

Most of Section 2 deals with the arbitrariness of metonymic target selection. In Section 3, an alternative position to the widespread metonymy view is proposed for proper names. A special case is studied in which the distribution of the name *Iran* and related names is analysed. Two possibilities are considered. One of them is that the author of the passage uses related, but different, names for stylistic manoeuvring aimed at avoiding mundane repetition of the same name. Under this alternative, all the different names would necessarily lead to the same metonymic target. The other option assumes the diversification of the names employed as reflecting the author's diverse objectives in the passage. In other words, the use of related names carries with it related, but different, targets associated with these names. Either option seems impossible to prove tangibly. The analysis of the various names is meant to show the weakness of one solution imposed on supposedly unimpeachable grounds.

2. Conceptual metonymy

Intensive research in conceptual metaphor has prompted similar studies in conceptual metonymy. A large part of research hinging on

both types of conceptual processes focuses on possible interactions between the two viewed as separate mechanisms (see, for example, Croft 1993: 336; Panther and Thornburg 2002: 283; Croft and Cruse 2005: 193; and others). This has led to a dilemma pervading the current literature, namely the choice between conceptual metaphor and conceptual metonymy as the mechanism responsible for a given linguistic phenomenon. In pre-cognitive approaches, metonymy was claimed to involve the substitution of the name of one thing for that of another, typically coded by means of the 'x stands for y' formula (see, for example, Kövecses and Radden 1998: 38; Panther and Thornburg 2004: 95). Though considered traditional and pre-cognitive, the 'stand-for' relationship can also be found in cognitive descriptions of metonymic relationships (cf. Gibbs's 1999: 65 discussion of Wall Street as 'standing for' 'salient institutions located at that place'). The 'stand-for' relationship is often collapsed with metonymy's other traditional aspect, namely its 'referring' function. Thus, metonymy can take place between two entities which are contiguous. One of such entities 'refers to' the other entity (cf. Nunberg 1978). As a figure of speech, metonymy has been assumed to involve mere shifts in or transfers of meaning.

Cognitive linguistics has revived interest in metonymy. However, it has come to be studied not as a figure of speech, which is often dubbed as a 'mere' linguistic phenomenon, but as a conceptual phenomenon (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 39). Metonymy is a cognitive process, operating within an idealized cognitive model (ICM) (cf. Lakoff 1987) or within one domain. Its operation solely on words has been sidelined, if not bypassed, and its substitution function has been considered largely inadequate in cognitive linguistics (see, for example, Kövecses and Radden 1998: 38-39; Radden and Kövecses 1999: 18-19; Barcelona 2002b: 207; Panther and Thornburg 2004: 96). The priority of the conceptual aspect of metonymy has been frequently stressed (see, for example, Feyaerts 2000: 59; Panther and Thornburg 2004: 92). Conceptualizing one thing in terms of something else opposes the traditional view of metonymy which boils down to one thing standing for or referring to another thing. To conceptualize one thing in terms of another, the reference point/source is claimed to 'provide mental access' or 'direct attention' to its target (see, for example, Kövecses 2002: 144). To use Barcelona's (2002b: 208)

wording, “[a] metonymy is a mapping, within the same overall cognitive domain, of a cognitive (sub)domain, called the source, onto another cognitive (sub)domain, called the target, so that the latter is mentally activated”.

The metonymic target corresponds to the entity to which our attention is mentally directed. However, the target’s existence is implicit rather than explicit. It remains unmentioned, but the assumption is that the entity (reference point/source) spelled out funnels our attention towards it. As metonymic, ‘it’ is not explicitly named. Thus, it remains an unanswered question what ‘it’ *really* is. A large part of contemporary metonymy research has focused on identifying metonymic targets. The following section deals with this topic.

3. Metonymic target identification

Although metonymic targets remain latent, there have been numerous and intense attempts at their identification. Metonymic relationships are claimed to involve two entities, one more and the other less salient conceptually. For Langacker (1993), metonymic relationships are based on reference-point phenomena, where the reference point is more salient than the target. The reference point corresponds to a noun which is coded more easily than the target and, what is more important, it is evoked almost effortlessly (see, for example, Langacker 1993: 30). This presumably prevailing view is countered by an account of metonymy in which “the target meaning is conceptually more prominent [...] than the source meaning” (Panther and Thornburg 2004: 91). Despite some disagreement over which of the two metonymic entities is more salient, it is the identification of the metonymic target that has taken centre stage in much of current metonymy research. Several accounts have concentrated on the identification of a possible target or targets of names characteristic of domestic politics and international relations, such as *Washington*, *the White House*, *the Pentagon*, and *Wall Street*. Let us review some of these proposals.

3.1 Degrees of target-ness

Proper names such as *Washington*, *the US*, *Wall Street*, and a few others, whenever used in texts are automatically assumed to provide mental access to other entities, typically understood to be less salient. In other words, *Washington*, *the US*, and *Wall Street* are entrance points to domains within which less prominent, but more detailed, targets are to be found. The name of the capital city *Washington* forms the reference point within “the common domain of the capital city of the United States”, as proposed in Barcelona (2002a: 215). Furthermore, this overarching domain hosts several sub-domains, such as: (1) “the city itself as a location”, (2) “the political institutions located in it”, and (3) “the people that make the decisions in those political institutions (the President, the department secretaries, the senators and congressmen, etc.)”. Depending on the context in which *Washington* is used, a sub-domain more compatible with this context is highlighted, serving as the target of the reference point. The other sub-domains whose specifications are not compatible with the details of the sentence become backgrounded at the same time.

Another classic example of a reference point in the domain of politics is *the White House*. Several authors have proposed targets whose specifics carry noticeable differences. On one occasion, Radden and Kövecses (1999: 27) propose that the target of *the White House* be ‘the executive branch of the US government’. A page later, the target of *the White House* is assumed to be ‘the American government’ (see, Radden and Kövecses 1999: 28). According to Barcelona (2002a: 237), the target of *the White House*, as in the sentence *The White House did not intervene*, is claimed to be ‘the US government’. A different interpretation of the target of *the White House* has been offered in Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez and Díez Velasco (2002: 497-498), namely ‘some officials who work in the White House’, which is considered a sub-domain of *the White House*. At first sight, the above targets look nearly the same. However, on closer inspection, they are sufficiently different to cause semantic attrition. The four targets of *the White House* proposed are:

- (1) (a) ‘the executive branch of the US government’
- (b) ‘the US government’
- (c) ‘the American government’

(d) 'some officials who work in the White House'

The phrase in (1d) designates unspecified individuals, a group of officers employed in the White House, and in this it is different from (1a), (1b), and (1c), which all assume a comparable level of semantic generalization. Thus, the first three taken together are distinctly different from the last one, to begin with. The two different levels of semantic specification present in (1a-c), on the one hand, and (1d), on the other, do not seem to be problematic for metonymy theorists who have identified them as targets of the same reference point/source *the White House*. Besides sufficient discrepancy between the targets in (1a-c) and the one in (1d), there is a more tenuous semantic effect embedded in the proposed targets in (1a) and (1b).

While the targets in (1a) and in (1b) look sufficiently similar to each other, technically, they differ markedly. Both phrases employ the noun *government* preceded by the acronym *US*, standing for 'the United States', which, in turn, is the abbreviated form of the full name of the republic 'the United States of America'. Bypassing the contribution of the name of the actual country, let us focus on the noun *government*. The suffix *-ment*, no longer productive in modern English (see, for example, Marchand 1969: 332; Bauer 1983: 76; after Szymanek 1989: 144), is hardly recognizable on the key noun in its contemporary use. According to the information available on the US government's official web portal,¹ as worded in the footnote, the so-called 'government agencies' are divided into: (1) 'federal government', (2) 'state government', (3) 'local government', and (4) 'tribal government'. Accordingly, there is no single and distinguishable entity that can be labelled by means of the term *government*. Judged by the information provided, the term *government*, as used in (1a) and (1b), must stand for *federal government*. Terms such as *the government of the US* and *the US government* are used in official documents to represent, refer to, or stand for *the federal government*. Also, in spoken English, *the federal government* is in circulation. Given this, there are further considerations to be made. The (Federal) Government of the United States, as defined on its official website, consists of three branches: the

¹ <http://www.usa.gov/> (accessed: 17 April 2013).

legislative branch (the Congress: the Senate and the House of Representatives and agencies that support Congress), the judicial branch (the Supreme Court of the US and several other courts), and the executive branch (the President, the Vice-President and the Executive Office of the President with several offices and councils). Under the executive branch there are 15 Executive Departments and a few dozen independent agencies and government corporations, as well as numerous boards, commissions, and committees. Extending our search for a more precise target of the reference point *the White House*, it should be noted that ‘the executive branch of the US government’ in (1a) approximates the expected specification in the best way thus far. However, the phrase in (1a) still abbreviates ‘the executive branch of the federal government of the United States’ to ‘the executive branch of the US government’. Moreover, the phrases in (1b–d) say nothing of the type of the government in focus, not to mention this specific branch to the exclusion of the legislative and judicial branches.

Given that the reference point is *the White House*, why is *the White House* not the target at the same time? It is true to say that in common usage *the US*, *Washington*, and *the White House* are metonyms of the federal government. If so, are they all metonyms carrying exactly the same contextual meaning, that is that of ‘the federal government’, despite their different forms? One cannot deny that (1a) and (1b) may convey the same general meaning if need be, but they may also convey different specific meanings if other aspects are stressed. Having reviewed several interpretations of *the White House* that are available, it is reasonable to assume that one overarching target suggested in (1a) and in (1b) may not be sufficient. Depending on the level of semantic precision required in a particular context, a slightly different semantic fine-tuning of *the White House* may be more suitable.

The network of potential targets delineated above becomes more acceptable in the light of the theoretical distinction between the contextual meanings implied in (1b) and in (1c). The phrases differ only in the adjectival names preceding the noun *government*, though one might assume that both *the US* and *American* have exactly the same referents. However, there is an argument expressed in Radden and Kövecses (1999) to the effect that the ‘whole thing for a part of the thing’ metonymy operates on cases such as *America* for *the United*

States. Interestingly, cases such as *England* for *Great Britain* are claimed to be illustrative of the ‘part of a thing for the whole thing’ metonymy. Kövecses and Radden (1998: 50) maintain that “[i]n speaking of *America* when we want to refer to the United States (as part of the whole continent), we are making use of the WHOLE-FOR-PART metonymy [...]” (also see Radden and Kövecses 1999: 31). If this assumption is true, speakers must be aware of distinct referents that the two names are claimed to evoke at the time of speaking, namely *America* ‘continent’ and *the United States* ‘name of country’. However, it is not certain whether such distinctions are made and maintained by speakers in everyday communication. The utterance of the phrase *the American government* in (1c) would have to involve traversing a mental path from the reference point/source *America* ‘continent/whole’ to its target *America* ‘name of country/part’. Elsewhere (2013), I argue that the name *America* does not have to lead to the target ‘continent/whole’ initially, which, in turn, gives mental access to the target ‘country/part’. The ‘whole thing for a part of the thing’ metonymy, as applied to a case such as (1c), does not sound realistic, as speakers evoke the target ‘country’ when using *America* without resorting to the initial referent ‘continent’. In other words, the metonymic relationship ‘whole thing for a part of the thing’ does not come into play here at all and *America(n)*, as in (1c), already relates to ‘(of) country’, rather than to ‘(of) continent’. This assumption makes *the US* and *American* fully synonymous in (1b) and in (1c). In practical terms, the name *America*, as the derivational base in (1c), may be the shorthand form for *the United States* or the clipped form of the *United States of America*.

The rigorousness of the expectation of the ‘whole thing for a part of the thing’ metonymy operating on *America* is also partly reflected in a different proposal. In the sentence *Wall Street will never lose its well-deserved prestige*, the proposed target of *Wall Street* is ‘a financial institution’, according to Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez and Díez Velasco (2002: 512). The proposed target ‘financial institution’ is claimed to entail a target-in-source metonymy whereby the ‘financial institution’ constitutes ‘a very prominent subdomain of our knowledge about this street’ (p. 513). Given this, the assumption is that speakers’ knowledge of *Wall Street* (‘financial institution’) depends on their (prior) knowledge of *Wall Street* (‘name of street’). As in the case of

America, the knowledge of *Wall Street* in the sense of ‘a street in the southern section of Manhattan in New York’ (p. 513) may not be something that is unanimously shared by speakers at large and resorted to instantly whenever the name *Wall Street* is activated. In other words, speakers may be aware of *Wall Street* as a ‘financial institution’ without either being aware of its being a ‘street’ or necessarily resorting to this target provided it is known.

The necessary participation of the reference point/source *Wall Street* ‘street’ in the sentence *Wall Street is in panic* is even more doubtful. This occurrence is claimed to require a second metonymy, which follows the initial ‘place for institution’ metonymy, namely the ‘institution for people’ metonymy (Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez and Díez Velasco 2002: 513).² One cannot deny the fact that the target ‘people’ *can* be mentally accessed via the reference point/source ‘institution’, which, in turn, *can* be mentally arrived at via the initial reference point/source ‘street’, all corresponding to the name *Wall Street*. However, it can also be assumed that both targets ‘people’ and ‘institution’ *may not* require the initial reference point/source ‘street’. In other words, the stipulated initial reference point/source ‘street’ may not be an indispensable element in the conceptualization of either target. At any rate, either postulate, necessitating or excluding the reference point/source ‘street’, is hard to prove without leaving any doubt.

In this section, it has been shown that there are easily compiled hierarchies of metonymic targets exhibiting degrees of semantic fine-tuning. Such telescopic instantiations of increasingly more detailed specifications can, at least theoretically, be further extended and new, more fine-grained targets can be established. With such nests of interrelated targets, it is unfounded to claim only one particular instance out of the entire chain of targets to be the ultimate target of a given reference point/source. The problem is that the precise determination of the target is not possible, as there may be many of them and their semantic specifications may differ significantly. Therefore, the targets proposed in various metonymy accounts can always be questioned as there will always be other targets found which

² Similar proposals can be found in Goossens (2002: 32), where the double metonymy ‘place for institution for people’ is postulated, and in Bartsch (2002: 73), where chains of metonymic transfers are posited.

seem more appropriate to other theorists as interpretations of their reference points/sources. With some degree of semantic indeterminacy ubiquitous in language expressions, as noted in Langacker (2009: 50), targeting the 'right' target either may not be achieved at all or may not be desirable.

3.2 Arbitrariness in target designation

The pinpointing of a metonymic target does not appear to involve the same procedure in every case. For example, the use of certain names of politicians is considered to involve the 'controller for controlled' metonymy. In a sentence such as *Nixon bombed Hanoi*, the personal name *Nixon* is automatically analysed as someone who is in control of the action in question. The issue of 'control' is usually further interpreted as 'responsibility' for the action carried out, as implied in Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 38-39), or as 'causation', as proposed in Panther and Thornburg (2004: 108). These interpretations differ from those resulting from cases such as *David blinked/swallowed/etc.*, which are analysed under active zones (see, for example, Langacker 1984, 1987: 271-274, 1991, 1993, 2009: 50). While *Nixon bombed...* receives the 'causer/controller' interpretation instantly, the likes of *David blinked...* come under the rubrics of active zones, which trace the ultimate body part which performs a given activity.

One may wonder why those facets of *Nixon* that directly and crucially participate in the profiled process do not become highlighted as in the case of *David*. Or, in other words, why are these two cases treated differently? Why is it that in the *David* case the analysis centres on David's eyelid that does the actual blinking, while in the *Nixon* case no such analysis is proposed? Hypothetically, it is possible to break *Nixon* down further to active zones which are more directly and crucially involved in a given profiled relationship. However, it is the 'causer/controller' account that is immediately resorted to while *Nixon*'s active zones are not even considered. The fact that *Nixon* is the name of a well-known leader with all that this implies and *David*, here, corresponds to any person named *David* influences our understanding of the two clauses to some extent only. Undoubtedly, it is the verb used that causes the automatic switch in interpretation.

Should *Nixon* be combined with *blink*, the ‘causer/controller’ interpretation would not be taken into account.

Metonymy researchers frequently analyse the use of state names from the point of view of their metonymic behaviour. Here as well, the designation of the metonymic target of a given name depends on unpredictable factors. The arbitrariness of the sense designated as the target is a clear result of the theorist’s subjective interpretation of the reference point/source in a particular context. Thus, names of states such as *America* and *Israel* undergo interpretation as they ‘can be argued’ to refer to individuals and groups holding power in the two states in a given period of time (Semino 2008: 102). The designation of the targets of *America* and *Israel* goes much further than the assignment of the general label ‘government’. The proposal that it is ‘individuals and groups holding power’ that are referred to by *America* and *Israel* differs significantly from that of the mere gradation of more or less detailed entities (e.g., government, ministry, minister, departmental director, office staff, etc.). The implication that it is ‘individuals and groups holding power’ results from the theorist’s imposition of a ‘power’ frame on the discourse under consideration. Depending on the researcher’s viewpoint, a different frame can be imposed and a different interpretation can be proposed.

It is common to assume that the predicate following the metonymic name determines the designation of the metonymic target. For example, in:

(2) Denmark shot down the Maastricht treaty.

the sentential subject *Denmark* has been considered the reference point/source of the metonymic target ‘the voters of Denmark’ (Croft 1993). This interpretation of the metonymic target is claimed to result from its combination with the predicate *shot down*, which is assumed to be a metaphorical reading of ‘cause to fail’ (Croft 1993: 335). Whereas *Denmark* in (2) is claimed to be instantly interpreted as ‘the voters of Denmark’, the state names in the sentences below are claimed to refer to ‘national governments’ (Croft 1993: 353, 2002: 184-185):

(3) (a) Germany pushed for greater quality control in beer production.

- (b) The United States banned tuna from countries using drift nets.
- (c) Myanmar executed twenty Muslim activists.

The predicates used in (3) are believed to instantiate ‘the actions of national governments’, which makes the targets of *Germany*, *the United States*, and *Myanmar* ‘national governments’. If the difference in target identification between the sentences in (2) and (3) is determined by the kinds of predicates involved, then the semantics of these predicates must be significantly different. However, it is hard to uphold the view that there is an essential difference between *shoot down*, on the one hand, and *push*, *ban*, and *execute*, on the other. If the distinctive features of the predicates in (2) and (3) cannot be pinned down, there must be either something else that causes different interpretations of the names in (2) and in (3), or the different interpretations of these names are not sufficiently justified. The question that arises is: what sanctions the two different interpretations of *Germany* (*pushed...*), *the United States* (*banned...*), and *Myanmar* (*executed...*), on the one hand, and *Denmark* (*shot down...*), on the other? It is Croft’s (2002: 187) stipulation that the semantics of the predicate highlights relevant aspects of the encyclopaedic profile of the subject. However, it is hard to accept the two distinct interpretations of the above names as determined by their respective predicates solely. If the distinct interpretations of these names do not result from the distinct semantics of their predicates, where else can they result from? Undoubtedly, all elements of these sentences need to be taken into account. Though, one should keep in mind that the expectation of a ‘full’ understanding of a given name and its targets may not be attained.

The two different proposals of metonymic targets, ‘national governments’ and ‘the voters of a country’, constitute only some approximation of many other possible targets. However, these two only are distinct enough to be puzzling. If such comparable contexts have generated two quite distinct targets, there may be many more targets identified in other related contexts. Targets are selected arbitrarily and the degree of arbitrariness grows increasingly in political contexts.

The idea of metonymic target identification is to sharpen the semantic specification imbued in the prominent though general

reference point/source. Therefore, the pattern that emerges from these endeavours is the following: general > less general/more concrete, for example, a country (in general) > (its) government. However, the target proposed can always be questioned as not being concrete enough. Problems with the insufficient accuracy of the target identified have been noted in the literature (see, e.g., Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez and Díez Velasco 2002: 513-514). Despite such occasional reservations, the entire idea of pinpointing metonymic targets is based on the elusive goal of achieving accuracy. Arriving at accurate targets when accuracy can be established only partially is a futile task from the outset. Even in a rigorously determined domain, the choice of potential targets is virtually unlimited.

4. Stylistic manoeuvring with names

Some kinds of discourse can be particularly saturated with names that display conceptual metonymy effects. The discourse of international affairs is believed to host such conceptual phenomena. International contexts, in particular, press articles on world affairs, are replete with sentences such as *Washington is negotiating with Moscow*, etc. The opinion that both *Washington* and *Moscow* stand for, refer to, or provide mental access to other entities is probably unanimous. Both names are claimed not to refer to the respective capital cities, but to the respective governments located in the two cities (see, e.g., Kövecses 2002: 144). Both, *Washington* and *Moscow*, and numerous other occurrences of these kinds, only aid speakers and listeners in directing attention to other entities or provide mental access to those other entities.

The above laboratory case illustrates a possible semantic relationship that cannot be denied. Not only is the relationship between *Washington* and 'the American government', on the one hand, and *Moscow* and 'the Russian government', on the other, possible, but highly probable. Both names, *Washington* and *Moscow*, designate capital cities in which the respective governments have their seats and from which they carry out their operations. A few questions arising at this point ought to be addressed. Given the undisputed relation between *Washington* and 'the American government', on the one hand, and *Moscow* and 'the Russian government', on the other, is the

provision of mental access by the former to the latter in both cases necessary for the proper understanding of the sentence *Washington is negotiating with Moscow*? The idea of one entity providing mental access to another underlies conceptual metonymy. However, it seems unfounded to assume that one cannot sufficiently comprehend this sentence as it stands without gaining mental access to ‘the American government’ and ‘the Russian government’, respectively. The sentence *Washington is negotiating with Moscow*, and numerous other occurrences of the same type, are perfectly understandable without ever evoking ‘government’ entities. Needless to say, a ‘government’ entity may not be the only and ultimate entity to which some kind of mental access is provided by either *Washington* or *Moscow*. Various other targets can be multiplied and claimed to serve as entities appropriate to be mentally accessed if the circumstances are right. Besides, the very idea of one entity, say *Moscow*, ‘providing mental access’ to another, for example, ‘the Russian government’ remains rather vague. It is not certain at all whether, and if so how, ‘the American government’ is ‘mentally accessed’ via *Washington* while the sentence *Washington is negotiating with Moscow* is being processed. The fundamental misconception begins when the source and target senses are deliberately established.

4.1 A case of Iran and related names

Instead of dissecting individual sentences with metonymic names, let us consider a randomly selected passage saturated with numerous occurrences of names clustered around one international entity. In his book entitled *Does America Need a Foreign Policy?*, Henry Kissinger (2002: 196-200) devotes several passages to different countries, one of which being Iran. In a passage, approx. 1,500 words long, he employs a wide selection of names and phrases co-functioning alongside the name *Iran*. There are 51 occurrences of such names embedded in either one- or multiple-word phrases in this passage.

The most common means of reference to Iran in this text is the name *Iran* itself which assumes a few grammatical forms and functions. As the name of a country, *Iran* appears in prepositional phrases, which locate this country in some relation with respect to another political entity. Altogether, there are ten occurrences of *Iran* in

prepositional phrases. The prepositional phrase headed by the preposition *in*, metaphorically designating *Iran* as a container, is represented by the following two cases:

- (4) (a) America's interest in Iran
- (b) the rulers in Iran

The preposition *with*, resulting in *Iran* being located in some abstract relation to another entity, is used three times:

- (5) (a) relations with Iran [twice]
- (b) a 'critical dialogue' with Iran

The preposition *of*, the most abstract of all spatial relations, is used once only in a phrase designating a portion of the country as such:

- (6) large parts of Iran

Other kinds of locative relations or directionality are reflected in prepositional phrases headed by the prepositions *between*, *to* and *vis-à-vis*:

- (7) (a) hostility between Iran and the United States
- (b) with respect to Iran
- (c) agreed diplomatic overtures vis-à-vis Iran

A more dynamic sense of *Iran* is present in the sole prepositional phrase with *by*, making *Iran* an active participant of this relation:

- (8) willingness by Iran to move toward

The name *Iran* is used seven times in the Saxon genitive, resulting in the reading of *Iran* as a kind of abstract possessor:

- (9) (a) to preserve Iran's independence
- (b) Iran's northwestern province of Azerbaijan
- (c) Iran's geography
- (d) moderating Iran's policy

- (e) Iran's human rights violations
- (f) Iran's transgressions
- (g) Iran's acquisition of missiles

The syntactic role of the sentential subject and/or object is assumed by *Iran* nine times. The name in the subject position of an active voice sentence is recorded five times, whereas in the subject position of a passive voice sentence it is used twice:

- (10)(a) Iran helped resist Soviet pressure on Afghanistan.
- (b) Iran continues to provide reasons.
- (c) Iran does its utmost to undermine Middle East peace diplomacy.
- (d) Iran provides substantial financial support to Hamas and the Palestine Islamic Jihad.
- (e) Iran will prove far more threatening.
- (f) Iran is destined to play.
- (g) Iran will be prepared to take the concrete policy actions.

In the position of an object of an active voice sentence, the explicit name *Iran* is found once, while its stylistic substitute *the country* is also found once:

- (11)(a) interest in dominating Iran
- (b) dismembering the country [=Iran]

Once only does *Iran* appear in a compound, whose sense makes Iran an active participant (instigator) carrying out the sponsoring of another entity, or a passive participant if the entity *groups* is in focus:

- (12) Iran-sponsored groups

The adjectival derivative form *Iranian* appears 9 times, one of these is the pronoun *it* co-referring with the phrase *the Iranian regime*. The following occurrences of *Iranian* have been recorded:

- (13)(a) assassinated by Iranian agents
- (b) the Iranian ayatollahs have pronounced a death sentence

- (c) The Iranian regime is now building long-range missiles
- (d) rigid Iranian policies help or hinder
- (e) relations with the Iranian Islamic regime
- (f) Iranian President Mohammad Khatami
- (g) Iranian hostility
- (h) Iranian moves
- (i) It is developing a clandestine nuclear capability [it=the Iranian regime]

The adjective *Iranian*, though a derivative of the state name, indirectly leads to various aspects of the state itself, for example, its rulers, its regime, its functionaries, and its numerous abstract qualities. 36 out of 51 various references to Iran bear the derivational stem *Iran*. The remaining 15 references to Iran bear different other names. The name of the capital city *Tehran* is used three times on its own in prepositional phrases or as the subject of an active voice sentence:

- (14)(a) organizations financed and supported from Tehran
- (b) Tehran is the patron of Hezbollah
- (c) the rush to Tehran

Tehran also appears attributively preceding the noun *regime* twice, and once covertly as it corresponds to *the Tehran regime*:

- (15)(a) the Tehran regime provided the main support to groups
- (b) the nature of the Tehran regime
- (c) it is closely linked with and also finances camps in Sudan [it=the Tehran regime]

The noun *regime* is preceded by *ayatollah-based* twice, one of these being the pronoun *it* used co-referentially with *the ayatollah-based regime*:

- (16)(a) the ayatollah-based regime has engaged in a series of actions
- (b) it held fifty American diplomats hostage [it=the ayatollah-based regime]

The name *Tehran* combines with the noun *government* twice, either pre-modifying it attributively or post-modifying it:

- (17)(a) the Tehran government has ‘distanced’ itself from it
[it=pronouncement]
(b) the government in Tehran

The remaining five cases involve either personal names or the title of a ruler formerly governing Iran, constituting in this way the country’s representative aspects. One of these uses is the personal pronoun *he*, which contextually corresponds to *Khatami*:

- (18)(a) the Shah’s support of the United States
(b) Khatami is seeking to implement more moderate domestic policies
(c) Khatami will be permitted to execute a change
(d) Khatami has publicly identified himself
(e) He will purchase maneuvering room [He=Khatami]

The instantiations listed from (4) to (18) display a selection of alternative names, all corresponding to some aspect of the country itself and carrying a varying degree of semantic accuracy. The state name *Iran* and its adjectival form *Iranian* constitute a majority of all these terms. Less than 30 per cent of all occurrences recorded are other names directly referring to the capital city, the government, its particular form – regime, and prominent political representatives. If all of them, despite their diverse semantic specifications, are reference points/sources providing mental access to one unique target, what is this target? The author may quite deliberately manoeuvre through his/her text, resorting to different labels, which refer to the same target, to merely avoid repetition. This strategy, though possible and to some extent unavoidable, cannot be held responsible for the totality of *all* occurrences listed above. While some deliberate navigation among alternative names is expected to reduce repetitiveness, the purposeful use of *several* different reference points/sources suggests the variability of different targets intended.

There are certainly different reference points/sources employed throughout from (4) to (18). The choice of one particular reference

point/source cannot be purely incidental. *Iran* in *America's interest in Iran*, as in (4a), must be different from the hypothetical alternative variants *America's interest in the Iranian ayatollahs/regime*, *America's interest in Tehran*, or *America's interest in Khatami*. The name *Iran* bears as much, or as little, semantics that is relevant at this level of specificity/generality and makes this semantics available to interpretation. The label *the Iranian ayatollahs* designates individuals, made definite at the time of producing this sentence, who are different from the name *Iran*, which primarily designates an inanimate political entity. The personal name *Khatami* designates an even more definite entity, namely an individual person singled out for a particular purpose. Further hypothetical statements, such as *America's interest in Tehran* and *America's interest in the Tehran government*, also differ from the one in (4a).

The passage under consideration does not seem exceptional as far as the repertoire of names used is concerned. It resembles many other texts on foreign affairs in which the author resorts to various labels co-existing in a given domain. The domain of *Iran*, as it can be tentatively termed, constitutes only an example of an open-ended spectrum of politically-motivated domains. The stylistic avoidance of repeating the same name can be held responsible for the application of other names in some cases only, but certainly not in all. One cannot deny the influence of more profound motivation behind the use of either diverse combinations involving *Iran* itself or various phrases hosting other names.

As the overarching name of a state, *Iran* evokes a broader spectrum of possible interpretations than, say, *Tehran*. While both *Iran* and *Tehran* may also be interpreted as 'the Iranian government', there is an occurrence which does it more straightforwardly, namely *America's interest in the Tehran government*. It is only when the 'Iranian government' interpretation is suggested or insisted on, some of the above instances with *Iran* are thought of as compatible, for example (5b), (7c), (8), (9d-g), (10a-g), and (12). When no such suggestion is made, some of the above expressions with *Iran* will be instantly interpreted as locations or locative relations, for example, (4b), (6), (7b), and (9b-c). The name *Tehran*, due to its frequent combination with the pejorative noun *regime* or the neutral noun

government, will be interpreted as ‘the Iranian government’ more freely than *Iran*.

4.2 Metonymic target identification escapes rigorous methodology

The establishment of a single target, common to all names employed, looks appealing as it offers a semantically neat solution, but is hard to defend as it is a semantically unrealistic solution. It is easy to imagine claims to the effect that all three, *Iran*, *Tehran*, and *the Tehran government*, metonymically provide mental access to one and the same target, namely ‘the government of Iran’. This seems to be a desirable solution to the apparent problem of target identification for names displaying metonymic effects. The identification of a single target that serves a number of source names may not only be arbitrary, but also misguided. In some contexts, such semantic approximations of targets can be attempted, but the collapsing of innumerable possible extensions in one target cannot be maintained as a general principle regulating ad hoc all uses of the above names.

The name *Iran* in the phrase *America’s interest in Iran* designates what it actually says, though possible interpretations of what the phrase says are naturally innumerable. *Iran* in the above phrase may lead to a never-ending list of interpretations such as: ‘one of the world’s oldest civilizations’, ‘the Islamic Republic’, ‘the country’s geopolitical significance’, ‘a regional power’, ‘the country’s large reserves of petroleum and natural gas’, ‘Iranian identity’, ‘Persian culture’, and so forth. However, there is no one interpretation that can be claimed as the undisputed target of *Iran* in the above occurrence. More contextual information may ease the choice and gravitate towards a particular contextual meaning. With no further contextual specification *Iran* provides access to a very general area of knowledge about the country with its multifarious facets. This general sense of *Iran* is sufficient though for the processing of the general statement *America’s interest in Iran*.

The name *Tehran* in *America’s interest in Tehran* may be argued to evoke what the state name *Iran* evokes, if this can be established with any degree of certainty at all. Though more straightforwardly *Tehran* may be interpreted as: ‘the city of Tehran’, ‘Metropolitan Tehran’, ‘the seat of a theological government’, and so on.

Unfortunately, no list of potential targets of names such as *Tehran* can be made complete. Even if the target ‘the city of Tehran’ is selected for the occurrences in (19),³ one must note that somewhat different aspects of the ‘city-ness’ of *Tehran* are revealed. In (19a), any cultural attractions of Tehran are elevated to prominence. In (19b), one particular type of cultural attraction of Tehran is potentially highlighted. In (19c), it is the contemporary aspect, cultural or otherwise, of the attractiveness of Tehran that is exposed.

- (19)(a) Tehran, as Iran’s showcase and capital city, has a wealth of cultural attractions.
- (b) Tehran is also home to the Iranian Imperial Crown Jewels.
- (c) Contemporary Tehran is a modern city featuring many structures.

Although the target ‘the city of Tehran’ can be claimed to also serve the occurrences in (20),⁴ certain other aspects of the city are made more conspicuous, different from those in (19):

- (20)(a) Tehran features a semi-arid, continental climate.
- (b) Although compared with other parts of the country, Tehran enjoys a more moderate climate.

It is not difficult to find other occurrences, which comply with the general target ‘the city of Tehran’, or such like, but they may also trigger unlimited sub-portions of the general meaning of *Tehran*.

- (21)(a) Broader international cooperation also became a central theme of the negotiations at Tehran.⁵
- (b) She studies at Tehran.
- (c) In 2008, Tehran was the least expensive capital in the world.⁶

³ [Http://www.modares.ac.ir/en/Conferences/IKNW2012/abt](http://www.modares.ac.ir/en/Conferences/IKNW2012/abt) (accessed: 10 May 2013).

⁴ [Http://www.modares.ac.ir/en/Conferences/IKNW2012/abt](http://www.modares.ac.ir/en/Conferences/IKNW2012/abt) (accessed: 10 May 2013).

⁵ [Http://history.state.gov/milestones/1937-1945/TehranConf](http://history.state.gov/milestones/1937-1945/TehranConf) (accessed: 10 May 2013).

⁶ [Http://worldcitieschess.com/iran-tehran/](http://worldcitieschess.com/iran-tehran/) (accessed: 10 May 2013).

- (d) Experts warn that Tehran sits on at least 100 faultlines.⁷
- (e) Most recently, Tehran was the centre of mass street protests.⁸
- (f) I love Tehran.⁹

Tehran in (21a) will be associated with a meeting taking place in this city, where negotiations on international cooperation were held. Though not directly stated, this occurrence may be further associated with the Tehran conference in November/December 1943. *Tehran* in (21b) may be related to the University of Tehran. The one in (21c) relates to the cost of living in the city. *Tehran* in (21d) is linked with tectonic conditions underneath it. The name in (21e) alludes to the place's centrality as the locus of street protests. *Tehran* in (21f), with its allusion to the original slogan *I love NY*, may relate to any aspect of the place viewed as positively as it can be. Though these are highly probable interpretations, they cannot be guaranteed as necessarily evoked targets. A certain degree of semantic fine-tuning can be posited only hypothetically, but it cannot be proved beyond doubt. It is the metonymy researcher's insistence on providing a definitive metonymic target that creates the necessity for a 'more accurate' phrasing.

5. Conclusion

The identification of targets mentally accessed via source names has formed the staple of metonymy research in cognitive linguistics. The use of names of international actors seems to open up an unlimited spectrum of other names that are 'more concrete' and therefore better suited for interpretation. It is becoming increasingly more evident that finding and establishing such more concrete targets will lead to inconsistencies in the choices made as well as arbitrary decisions in target identification. As seen above, different entities have been proposed by different researchers as targets of source names accommodated in almost identical contexts. Various degrees of precision in semantic descriptions of targets have been attempted.

⁷ [Http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/nov/01/tehran-iran-capital](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/nov/01/tehran-iran-capital) (accessed: 10 May 2013).

⁸ [Http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/nov/01/tehran-iran-capital](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/nov/01/tehran-iran-capital) (accessed: 10 May 2013).

⁹ [Http://www.ilovetehran.com](http://www.ilovetehran.com) (accessed: 10 May 2013).

However, the expected degree of accuracy in target identification can hardly be gauged and spelled out. Thus, the expectation that a metonymic relationship establishes an indelible link between an entity that accurately directs the addressee's attention to the intended target cannot be upheld. The reason for this is that, in the case of names of international actors, there is no such thing as one 'intended' target which can be understood from the source name due to some contextual features. Any finely designated target can be questioned as not accurate enough and further fine-tuning may be always required. This is always done intuitively as metonymic target identification escapes rigorous methodology.

It is proposed here that, in most cases, metonymic targets of names of international actors must remain unnamed. The source name is sufficient for the comprehension of the message conveyed. It is unfounded to assume that the comprehension of a given name is hindered without gaining mental access to the name's more accurate target. In the majority of uses, names of prominent international entities designate either locations for events to take place or some abstract do-ers of activities ascribed to them. These two rather general specifications are sufficient for the successful comprehension of proper names used in political contexts.

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