Letter to the Editor

Fass and Wilks (1983) propose the use, in a preference semantics parser, of Van Eynde's "polysemy rules" to distinguish a reading containing a metaphor from other readings involving preference violations. The example they give is

(1) Condition *certain environmental data, such as:*
A is the AGENT of a template and B is an action in the ACTION slot of the same template. Subject preference of B = ANIMATE. Head primitive of A = VEHICLE.

Assignment: Head primitive of A := ANIMATE.

The "condition" part of this rule is used in interpreting the sentence

(2) That chopper drinks gasoline.

to recognise the reading containing the "helicopter" (as opposed to "axe") sense of "chopper" as metaphorical. The "assignment" part removes the preference violation so as to bring about the eventual acceptance of the "helicopter" reading. The last part of the paper discusses alternative strategies for removing such violations once a metaphorical reading has been recognized.

I would like to point out that, no matter how sophisticated the strategies used in their "assignment" parts, rules with narrowly semantic "conditions" like that of (1) cannot be generally adequate as a means of *recognising* metaphors, and that recourse to a richer source of knowledge like Wilks's pseudo-texts is necessary in many cases. Thus, given the sentence

(3) The chopper bit into the log.

rule (1) would incorrectly cause the reading containing the "helicopter" sense of "chopper" to be recognised as a metaphor and accepted, under the reasonable assumption that "bite", like "drink", prefers an animate subject. Neither can a version of (1) whose "condition" places more detailed semantic restrictions on the formulas for A and B to be adequate; the sentence

(4) The chopper bit into the runway.

describes (to me at least) a helicopter crash rather than a chopping action. The "condition" part of a polysemy rule capable of correctly recognising the metaphorical readings of (2), (3), and (4) would require at least as much information as a pseudo-text.

The implication of these examples is indeed not merely that narrowly semantic criteria are generally inadequate for metaphor recognition and that recognition requires pseudo-text or similar world knowledge. If the only reliable way to identify a metaphor is to identify the event or state it describes, as exploiting pseudo-texts for recognition implies, it follows that recognising a metaphor is in fact determining what the metaphor is, and not merely noticing that some metaphor is occurring. Thus recognising and characterising a metaphor may be much less separable than the form of rule (1), and the particular representation strategies of Fass and Wilks, would suggest. In any case, even if they are separable, the fact that pseudo-text or similar knowledge is required for recognition suggests that the assumption by Fass and Wilks that the characterisation of metaphors subsequent to recognition can be achieved by simpler semantic, rather than by more complex pseudo-text, strategies will not hold.

David M. Carter
University of Cmabridge
Computer Laboratory
Corn Exchange Street
Cambridge CB2 3QG UK

References

Fass, D.C. and Wilks, Y.A. 1983 Preference Semantics, Ill-formedness, and Metaphor. *American Journal of Computational Linguistics* 9(3-4): 178-187.