

**CONTRIBUTION TO: FRIEDRICH MAX MUELLER AND THE ROLE OF
PHILOLOGY IN VICTORIAN THOUGHT**

Max Müller's Cultural Concept of Metaphor

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Abstract:

This paper analyses Müller's concept of metaphor, which he expounded in the eight of his second series of *Lectures on the Science of Language* (1863). It highlights the central role that metaphor played in Müller's theory of mythology, as well as his critical appraisal of the latter as a form of "diseased language". This critical 'deconstruction' of metaphors and mythology was, however, no end in itself but an application of the comparative, "historical" philology, which had clarified the 'genealogical' relationships of (Indo-European) languages and was now to be applied to cultures. Müller's position in the history of metaphor theory is that of an outsider but his emphasis on the role of metaphor-reinterpretation in cultural history remains a challenge for philosophy and linguistics.

Keywords:

etymology, Indo-European, metaphor, misunderstanding, mythology

1. Metaphor as language's "accident" and as its "engine"

For a philologist ('lover of logos/language') who has been credited with having "devoted his life to the humanities",¹ Max Müller could be quite dismissive of language (as well as sexist) in his *Lectures on the Science of Language*. Even though, as he patronisingly conceded, language was by and large "a very good housewife to her husband, the Mind"², she could also become "diseased" or suffer "mythological accidents", "forget" herself and lead her users/victims into the "abyss of Metaphysics".³ Metaphors play a crucial role in these moments of weakness or seduction when language acts as a "Siren voice".⁴

No wonder then, one might surmise, that Müller started his lecture on "Metaphor", the eighth of his 1863 series, with a fulsome praise for the philosopher of language who is considered by some to be one of the worst detractors of metaphor, i.e. John Locke.⁵ Müller praised Locke for "insist[ing] on watching the influence of words on thought";⁶ however he then relativized Locke's stance on the relationship of thought and language by disqualifying him, together with the bulk of 17th and 18th century language philosophers, as being "mere theorizers" in comparison to what he called the "Historical School of the 19th century", which had started to "penetrate into the real and actual life of the fathers of the human race, and thus to learn how both in our thoughts and words we came to be what we are".⁷ It is this inductive historical research

¹ Lourens Van Den Bosch, *Friedrich Max Müller: A Life Devoted to the Humanities*. Leiden, 2002.

² F. Max Müller [1864], *Lectures on the Science of Language: Delivered at the Royal Institution of Great Britain in 1861 and in 1863* [hereinafter cited as Müller, *Lectures*], Cambridge, 2013, vol. 2, p. 253.

³ Müller, *Lectures*, vol. 2, pp. 358, 367, 580, 576.

⁴ Müller, *Lectures*, vol. 2, p. 526.

⁵ Müller, *Lectures*, vol. 2, p. 334. For cognitive linguists' views of Locke as an 'metaphor-basher' see e.g. Mark Johnson, 'Introduction: Metaphor in the Philosophical Tradition', in *Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphor*. Minnesota, pp. 3-47 (p. 13), and Andrew Goatly, *Washing the brain* (Amsterdam, 2007), p. 13; for a critique of this interpretation see Nicolaas T. O. Mouton, 'Metaphor, Empiricism and Truth. A fresh look at seventeenth-century theories of figurative language', in: *Tropical Truth(s). The Epistemology of Metaphor and Other Tropes*, ed. Armin Burkhardt and Brigitte Nerlich, Berlin, 2010, pp. 23-49.

⁶ Müller, *Lectures*, vol. 2, p. 333-4.

⁷ Müller, *Lectures*, vol. 2, p. 337.

into the “Palaeontology of the human mind”, carried out by the likes of “*Wolf, Niebuhr, F. Schlegel, W. von Humboldt, Bopp, Burnouf, Grimm and Bunsen*”⁸ that informed his own perspective on the history of semantic change and metaphor’s role in it. He even went so far as to reinterpret Locke ‘against’ the explicit wording of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* by speculating that its third book (*Of Words*) would have been “cancelled” by Locke himself had he known the results of the Historical Schools’ research. In that same part of the *Essay*, Locke had condemned all “the artificial and figurative application of Words Eloquence hath invented” as a “perfect cheat” and useful “for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the Passions, and thereby mislead the judgement”,⁹ which is often considered to express a radical anti-metaphor stance.¹⁰ In Müller’s reading, however, Locke, despite his ‘shortcomings’ as a “theorizer”, had already put forward the “fact that all words expressive of immaterial conceptions are derived by metaphor from words expressive of sensible ideas”.¹¹

Müller was probably well aware of the tenuous character of his reading between the lines of Locke’s treatise, and he considered in some detail alternative Locke-interpretations.¹² Altogether there are seventeen pages worth of printed text before he comes out with his own definition of metaphor, i.e. as “one of the most powerful engines in the construction of human speech”, without which “we can hardly imagine how any language could have progressed beyond the simplest rudiments”.¹³

Metaphor generally means the transferring of a name from the object to which it properly belongs to other objects which strike the mind as in some way or other participating in the peculiarities of the first object.¹⁴

This seemingly mundane restatement of Aristotle’s definition of metaphor in the *Poetics*¹⁵ may appear hardly deserving a 17 page prolegomena reinterpreting Locke’s

⁸ Müller, *Lectures*, vol. 2, p. 337-8 (italics in the original).

⁹ John Locke [1689], *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Oxford, 1979, Book 3, § 34, p. 508.

¹⁰ See note 5 above.

¹¹ Müller, *Lectures*, vol. 2, p. 338.

¹² Müller, *Lectures*, vol. 2, pp. 338, 351.

¹³ Müller, *Lectures*, vol. 2, pp. 351.

¹⁴ Müller, *Lectures*, vol. 2, pp. 351.

Essay, let alone support the hyperbolic praise and blame that metaphor is given in the chapter devoted to it. So why did Müller make such a meal of it? Why did he link the concept of metaphor to questions of the language-thought relationship and of the history of language? Why, indeed, did he present its conceptualisation as the core insight resulting from the work of his beloved “Historical School”? The following sections explore these questions with the aim of elucidating an original and, arguably, still relevant view of metaphor.

2. Metaphor and misunderstanding

One of the problems in reconstructing Müller’s views on various scientific topics is that after introducing a theoretical concept or category in a highly specified and often strongly evaluative perspective, he quickly relativizes that same perspective. His treatment of metaphor is no exception. We have seen his ambivalent and figuratively elaborated stance in his blaming metaphor for causing language’s “accidents” whilst also praising it as language’s “engine” of development. The above-quoted definition of metaphor as a “transfer of a name” is followed by a motley list of illustrative examples from classic Sanskrit to contemporary English, but then introduces two further category distinctions that cut across most of the examples just given.

In the first place, Müller distinguishes *radical* from *poetical* metaphors. The *radical* type involves the etymological derivation of “names” for abstract entities from roots that designated originally a concrete activity or attribute, which, though perfectly transparent in itself, may later be subjected to fallacious reification. As an example of such a “mythological” misunderstanding he presents a supposed equivocation in the words derived from the root *ark/arch*, meaning ‘to be/make bright’ in Sanskrit and other Indo-European (in his terminology: “Aryan”)¹⁶ languages, which was applicable both to the

¹⁵ Aristotle, *Poetics*, Book 21, 1457b. Ed. and transl. Malcolm Heath, London, 1996 (pp. 34-5).

¹⁶ Müller used the terms “Aryan“ and “Indo-European” as synonyms, see e.g. *Lectures* vol. 1, p. 221 and passim, and separated his usage of the former in a strictly linguistic sense from ethnological senses (see *Biographies of Words and the Home of the Aryas*, London, 1888). On the debate about Müller’s position in amongst linguistic v. ethnological v. racist definitions of *Aryan* see Stefan Arvidsson, *Aryan Idols: Indo-European Mythology as Ideology and Science*.

brightness of stars and that of the fur of bears and thus informed the naming of the star constellation *Ursa major*.¹⁷ According to Müller, it was applied in the form of the lexeme *riksha* first to the *Ursa major* star constellation because of its brightness but then reinterpreted as referring to the concept ‘bear’ as such, so that this became a secondary metaphor for the well-known star constellation, which spread in European languages. In a further re-interpretation specific to Hindu culture, the *Bear-Stars* were personified into the notion of the *seven Rishis/seven Sages* who had further mythical fables attached to them.¹⁸

Poetical metaphor, on the other hand, involves the transfer of “a noun or verb, ready made and assigned to one definite object or action [...] to another object or action”, e.g. “when the rays of the sun are called the hands or fingers of the sun, the noun which means hand or finger existed ready made, and was, as such, transferred poetically to the stretched out rays of the sun.”¹⁹ This notion of ‘golden-handedness’ of the deified concept ‘sun’ was, Müller alleges, misinterpreted in the myths of Ancient Germanic and Indian Gods (*Tyr* and *Savitar*, respectively) as ‘literally’ one-handed figures, i.e. as lacking one natural hand, which was then replaced by an artificial golden one.²⁰

The *radical-poetical* distinction is linked to a second dichotomy, i.e. that between what Müller calls *homonymous* and *polyonymous* “tendencies” in lexical history, i.e. the use of one expression for several concepts and its ‘reverse’, i.e. the use of different expressions for one and the same concept.²¹ The former leads to “mythological” misunderstandings of *radical* metaphor, such as the case of the etymon ‘ark/arch’ expressing brightness and leading to the mix-up in mythical categorization: “There was

Chicago, 2006; Christopher Hutton, *Linguistics and the Third Reich. Mother-tongue fascism, race and the science of language*. London, 1999, pp. 272-3, and ‘Rethinking the history of the Aryan paradigm’, *History and Philosophy of the Language Sciences*, available at: <http://hiphilangsci.net/2013/07/24/rethinking-the-history-of-the-aryan-paradigm/> (accessed 25 March 2016); Philipp Krämer, Markus A. Lenz and Markus Messling (eds.) *Rassedenken in der Sprach- und Textreflexion. Kommentierte Grundlagentexte des langen 19. Jahrhunderts*. Munich, 2015, pp. 325-62; Thomas Trautmann (ed.), *The Aryan Debate*, Oxford, 2005 (pp. 100-1).

¹⁷ Müller, *Lectures*, vol. 2, pp. 358-65.

¹⁸ Müller, *Lectures*, vol. 2, pp. 362-3.

¹⁹ Müller, *Lectures*. vol. 2, p. 355.

²⁰ Müller, *Lectures*, vol. 2, pp. 378-9.

²¹ Müller, *Lectures*, vol. 2, pp. 355-7. In current linguistic terminology, *homonymy* and *polysemy* would be the relevant categories (see Paul J. Hopper and Elizabeth Closs Traugott, *Grammaticalization*. Cambridge, 1993, pp. 69-72).

one point of similarity between the *bright* bear and the *bright* stars to justify the ancient framers of language in deriving from the same root the names of both. But when the similarity in quality was mistaken for identity in substance, mythology became inevitable”.²² The *polyonymous* trend lends itself to poetical applications in the invention of many names for one concept, such as calling the “day that dawns in the morning [...] the twin of the night that follows the day, or all the days of the year might be called brothers, or so many head of cattle which are driven to their heavenly pasture every morning and shut up in the dark stable of *Augeias* at night”.²³

For Müller, both tendencies whilst being present in language continuously,²⁴ are exploited particularly strongly in what he calls the “mythic” or “mythological period” of the history of language and thought.²⁵ Original metaphorical concepts that involve the earliest known “root” words became obscure as regards their underlying comparisons (whether radically or poetically established) and were reinterpreted by later generations through folk etymologies that replaced their primary semantic motivation with arbitrary mythological explanations and narratives:

Whenever any word, that was at first used metaphorically, is used without a clear conception of the steps that led from its original to its metaphorical meaning, there is a danger of mythology; whenever those steps are forgotten and artificial steps put in their places, we have mythology, or, if I may say so, we have diseased language, whether that language refers to religious or secular interests.²⁶

Müller’s stance on metaphor is thus deeply ambivalent: on the one hand, in its “radical” incarnation, he credits it with enabling the development of abstract notions through the figurative use of “root names”, which originally denoted only concrete concepts or what

²² Müller, *Lectures*, vol. 2, p. 376.

²³ Müller, *Lectures*, vol. 2, p. 356.

²⁴ See discussion of contemporary examples in *Lectures*, vol. 2, pp. 367-8, 376-8.

²⁵ Müller, *Lectures*, vol. 2, p. 357.

²⁶ Müller, *Lectures*, vol. 2, p. 358.

he calls “sensible ideas”.²⁷ On the other hand, the “poetical” reification or ‘re-concretisation’, as it were, of names for ancient Gods, whose etymology was forgotten, leads to the emergence of mythical narratives (“fables” and “legends”) that have little or nothing to do with the primary conceptualizations. They attach suggestive stories to either the ‘incorrect’ reference from a set of homonyms (e.g. ‘brightness’ associated with bear fur instead of that associated with stars) or to the diverse aspects of “polysemous” concepts (e.g. days as ‘brothers’ or ‘cattle’). In labelling both the *radical* and the *poetical* forms of figurative speech “metaphor”, Müller sets up an ambiguous – critically, one could call it confusing – category that complicates the seemingly simple ‘metaphor-as-transfer’ definition.

It also remains partly unclear why Müller labelled the effect of metaphor-based meaning change “diseased language”. The two main factors in this process that he highlights, i.e. homonymy and polysemy, are ubiquitous cases of the form-meaning relationship of linguistic expressions and there is nothing ‘defective or ‘diseased’ about them as semantic phenomena. By comparison, his identification of “diseased language” with “mythology” seems more transparent as the expression of a rationalist bias that views myth/mythology as a defective form of thought. Language gets blamed, as it were, for a weakness or deficiency that pertains in fact to humanity’s ‘savage mind’ (Levy-Strauss),²⁸ in its “mythological period”.²⁹ Müller’s efforts thus appear to be aimed at taming this savage form of thought by showing, through metaphor analysis, “how much that has hitherto been a riddle in the origin and spread of myths becomes intelligible if considered in connection with the early phases through which language and thought must necessarily pass”.³⁰

²⁷ Müller, *Lectures*, vol. 2, p. 338.

²⁸ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage*. Paris, 1962.

²⁹ For Müller, the mythological period reaches up to his “own” time, which he characterizes as “perhaps the least given to metaphor, poetry, and mythology” (*Lectures*, II, p. 357).

³⁰ Müller, *Lectures*, vol. 2, p. 357.

3. Metaphor and mythology

Müller's critical view of mythology as "diseased language" (and thought) was thoroughly denounced in the next generation of philosophical anthropology by Ernst Cassirer and Susanne K. Langer, who caricatured his position as alleging that mythology was a mere "by-product of language", a "monstrosity", and the result of "verbal errors".³¹ Viewing myth as a "symbolic form" on a par with language, art and science, Cassirer and Langer denounced Müller's approach to the "riddle in the origin and spread of myths" as a refusal to recognize their epistemological and social function in archaic society. To Cassirer, Müller also appeared to denigrate language itself as "[u]nable to describe things directly" and "[resorting] to indirect modes of description", whose misinterpretations laid the foundation for myths.³²

Some of Müller's ambiguous formulations in the *Lectures* are indeed vulnerable to such criticism, as indicated above; however, Cassirer's and Langer's objections seem to me to miss one *methodological* aspect of his philological critique of myth and metaphor. As we saw, Müller's metaphor concept was two-fold, with one aspect, *radical* metaphor, being in fact praised as an originally well motivated and transparent, hence rational, form of meaning transfer. Even its *poetical* form is not condemned on the grounds of prejudiced assumptions about peoples in their "mythological period" (or "primitive man", as Cassirer would still say 50 years *after* Müller³³). After all, Müller himself emphasised that ancient Sanskrit or Greek were "in reality very modern", fully developed languages.³⁴ What mainly qualified Sanskrit and Greek metaphors as data for Müller's studies was the fact that these languages had been shown to be genealogically related by William Jones and the "Historical School" of comparative philology.³⁵ It was the 'proven track-record' of this comparative approach that provided the decisive

³¹ See Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man. An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*. New Haven, 1978 [1944], pp. 109-10 and Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key. A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art*. Cambridge, MA, 1957, p. 183, note 11.

³² Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*, p. 110, see also *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, vol. 2 (*Das mythische Denken*), Darmstadt, 1977 [1924], pp. 28-29 and 'Sprache und Mythos', in *Wesen und Wirkung des Symbolbegriffs*, Darmstadt, 1983 [1925], 71-167 (pp. 75-8).

³³ Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*, p. 110.

³⁴ Müller, *Lectures*, vol. 2, p. 356.

³⁵ Müller, *Lectures*, vol. 1, pp. 150-200; vol. 2, pp. 337, 402, 408.

motivation for Müller to attempt a critical synopsis of diverse mythologies within the Indo-European paradigm with the aim of deriving the basic set of their “root” words through metaphor analysis.

He took as his model the achievement of linguistic research, namely that after “the languages spoken by the Brahmans of India, by the followers of Zoroaster and the subjects of Darius in Persia; by the Greeks, by the Romans; by Celtic, Teutonic, and Slavonic races” had all been shown to be “mere varieties of one common type”,³⁶ it was no longer possible to derive etymologies in one language without comparing them with etymologies in all other Indo-European languages and reconstructing pre-historical proto-forms. Likewise, Müller argued, the “names and fables of the Greek gods” should no longer be explained with sole reference to ancient Greek culture but had to be accounted for by taking the “collateral evidence supplied by Latin, German, Sanskrit and Zend mythology” into consideration.³⁷ His aim was thus not so much the debunking of mythology, but a critical comparison of all myths within their wider “Aryan” cultural context, in order to be able to distinguish their core elements from any “mythological” ornamentation that had encroached upon them over time.³⁸ Arguably this was more important for him than the content of his hypotheses concerning specific cases of homonyms or polysemy, many of which were in fact couched in hedged or hypothetical formulations.³⁹

At the centre of Müller’s hypothesised common Indo-European culture lay the figure of the *Sky-* or *Sun-*deity, for whom Müller cited the cognates *Dyu/Dyaus* in Sanskrit, *Zeus* in Greek, *Jovis* and *Jupiter* in Latin, *Tiw* in Anglo-Saxon, *Tyr* in Old

³⁶ Müller, *Lectures*, vol. 2, p. 404.

³⁷ Müller, *Lectures*, vol. 2, pp. 406-7.

³⁸ Müller, *Lectures*, vol. 2, pp. 413-4. A corollary of the comparative approach, which Müller advertised to his late Victorian audience, was to find a satisfactory explanation and solution for the “wonderment” that “the native genius of Hellas”, which had “invented and perfected almost every style of poetry and prose” and had “laid the lasting foundations of the principal arts and sciences”, produced a “religion” that mainly consisted of “crudities and absurdities”, which, as he hyperbolically alleged, “would make the most savage of the Red Indians creep and shudder” (*Lectures*, vol. 2, p. 385).

³⁹ Occasionally, Müller even conceded the possibility of alternative explanations, see e.g. the “appendix” to his metaphor lecture, *Lectures*, vol. 2, pp. 381-3.

Norse and *Zio* in Old High-German.⁴⁰ The transfer between the notion of (sky- or sun-generated) ‘brightness’ and the concept of God was to him the foundation metaphor of Indo-European culture. Müller left it open whether this metaphor was a “radical” or a “poetical” one;⁴¹ what mattered to him was that his method of metaphorical myth-interpretation allowed him to read many famous texts of Western mythology as its extensions. He thus endeavoured to ‘back-translate’ the story of Europa’s abduction to Crete by Zeus into Sanskrit accounts of how “the strong rising sun carries off the wide-shining dawn”, or the siege of Troy in Homer’s *Ilias* into a “repetition of the daily siege of the East by the solar powers that every evening are robbed of their brightest treasures in the West”.⁴²

Such interpretations were by no means proven and were contested by contemporary researchers, as Müller admitted occasionally admitted himself,⁴³ but they express an original notion of “metaphor” as a dynamic principle in cultural history. The basic assumption of this methodology was the contention that the foundational metaphors of Indo-European vocabulary were initially nothing but transparent meaning transfers based on perceived similarities. Subsequently, they had been subjected to speculative, reifying interpretations which, in the form of popular narratives transformed into myths about deities etc., or, as Müller put it, “names have a tendency to become things, *nomina* grew into *numina*, *ideas* into *idols*.”⁴⁴ Müller on occasion lapses into *kulturpessimistisch* sounding complaints that such developments represented a kind of intellectual decline. Still, this takes nothing away from his recognition of the power of metaphor to facilitate cultural change, and of the power of comparative philological analysis to reconstruct its earliest forms and their further conceptual history.

Notwithstanding its matter-of-fact introduction as “the transferring of a name” metaphor was accorded the role of the core principle that drives conceptual change in Müller’s *Lectures*. Once the semantic reach of the “Aryan” ancestor culture’s root

⁴⁰ Müller, *Lectures*, vol. 2, p. 425.

⁴¹ Müller, *Lectures*, vol. 2, p. 446.

⁴² Müller, *Lectures*, vol. 2, pp. 444, 471.

⁴³ See *Lectures*, vol. 2, pp. 407. For a detailed critique of Müller’s ubiquitous search for solar myths see Eric Csapo, *Theories of Mythology*, Oxford, 2005, pp. 23-27.

⁴⁴ Müller, *Lectures*, vol. 2, p. 447.

vocabulary had started to expand through (radical) metaphor, it was liable to be reinterpreted in its ‘descendants’ on account of obscured comparisons and endowed with new meanings, leading to homonymic mix-ups and polysemy, which in turn engender reifications and fanciful narrative reinterpretations. The history of thought and language thus becomes a succession of re-‘mythologised’ comparisons that can be followed back to the earliest vocabularies of the known language families, or at least the Indo-European one, which was, after all, at the centre of Müller’s interest.⁴⁵

4. Metaphor, philosophy and cultural history

Today, Müller’s influence on philosophy after the “linguistic turn” (Rorty)⁴⁶ has started to be acknowledged, especially as a source for Nietzsche’s denunciation of “truth” as a “sea” of archaic, forgotten metaphors in *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinne*.⁴⁷ Via Nietzsche, one can pursue further influences on Hans Blumenberg’s, Paul Ricoeur’s and Jacques Derrida’s concepts of metaphor and myth as central problems of epistemology.⁴⁸ In linguistics, on the other hand, he is mainly referenced as a populariser

⁴⁵ Besides Indo-European, Müller posited only two other main language families, i.e. the “Semitic” and “Turanian” ones (the latter with a ‘North-South’ sub-division), see Müller, *The languages of the seat of war in the East. With a survey of the three families of language, Semitic, Arian and Turanian*. London, 1855, and *Lectures*, vol. 1, chapters IV-IX and appendix. In later life, he seems to have weakened his claims regarding Turanian, see Georgina Müller, *The Life and Letters of Right Honorable Friedrich Max Müller*. 2 vols. London, 1902 (vol. 1, p. 141), for critical discussion see Tomoko Masuzawa, ‘Our Master’s Voice: F. Max Müller after a hundred years of solitude’, in *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 15 (2003), 305-28 (pp. 322-4).

⁴⁶ Richard Rorty (ed.), *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method*, Chicago, 1992.

⁴⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke*, ed. Karl Schlechta, Berlin: Ullstein, 1976, vol. III, 1017-30 (pp. 1022-3). For detailed analyses see Benedetta Zavatta, ‘Die in der Sprache versteckte Mythologie und ihre Folgen fürs Denken. Einige Quellen von Nietzsche: Max Müller, Gustav Gerber und Ludwig Noiré’. *Nietzsche-Studien*. 38 (2009): 269-98 (pp. 274-92) and ‘Nietzsche and Linguistics’, in *Handbuch Nietzsche und die Wissenschaften*, ed. Lisa Heller and Helmut Heit, Berlin, 2013, 265-298 (pp. 272-9).

⁴⁸ See Hans Blumenberg, *Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie*, *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte*. Band 6 (1960), 5-142 and *Arbeit am Mythos*. Frankfurt am Main, 1979; Jacques Derrida and F. C. T. Moore ‘White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy’, *New Literary History*, 6/1 (1974), 5-74; Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor. Multi-disciplinary studies of the creation of meaning in language*. Translated by Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello, SJ. London, 1977; Angus Nicholls, *Myth and the Human Sciences: Hans Blumenberg's Theory of Myth*, New York, 2015, pp. 57-9, 63, 148, 175.

of Indo-European comparative philology and as an opponent of Whitney and Darwin, with some debates still raging about racialist associations connected with the concept of an “Aryan” language and culture.⁴⁹ Today his statements on metaphor are hardly mentioned in historiographical studies of theories of figurative speech.⁵⁰ One of the reasons may be the synchronic bias of much of cognitive studies of metaphor, especially in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), as developed by Lakoff, Johnson and others since the 1980s.⁵¹ Even on the few rare occasions where proponents of this school have acknowledged historical precedents of currently used metaphors such as NATION-AS-FAMILY, NATION-AS-BODY, WORLD-AS (GREAT) CHAIN-OF BEING,⁵² the main explanatory emphasis has been on their synchronic motivation on the basis of experience-based conceptual mappings. Over the past two decades, however, a number of criticisms against this bias have been raised,⁵³ as it renders CMT unable to model long-term

⁴⁹ See Jean Aitchison, *Language Change: Progress or Decay?* Cambridge, 1991; Stephen G. Alter, *William Dwight Whitney and the Science of Language* Baltimore, 2005; Arvidsson, *Aryan Idols: Indo-European Mythology as Ideology and Science*; Christopher Hutton, 1999. *Linguistics and the Third Reich. Mother-tongue fascism, race and the science of language*. London, and ‘Das philologische Paradigma in der Krise’, in *Rassedenden in der Sprach- und Textreflexion*, ed. Philipp Krämer, Markus Lenz and Markus Messling, Munich, 2015, 335-362; Robert H. Robins, *A Short History of Linguistics*, London, 1979.

⁵⁰ Olaf Jäkel mentions Müller briefly in ‘Kant, Blumenberg, Weinrich. Some forgotten contributions to the cognitive theory of metaphor’, in *Metaphor in Cognitive Linguistics*. ed. Raymond W. Gibbs and Gerard Steen, Amsterdam, 1999, 9-27 (pp. 10-11). Brigitte Nerlich, in ‘The evolution of the concept of ‘linguistic evolution’ in the 19th and 20th century’, *Lingua* 77 (1989), 101-112, and *Change in Language. Whitney, Bréal and Wegener*, London 1990, contrasts Müller’s views on language change with those of Schleicher and Whitney but disregards the role of metaphor.

⁵¹ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors we live by*, Chicago, 1980, and *Philosophy in the Flesh, The embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*, New York, 1999, Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The Way we Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind’s Hidden Complexities*. New York, 2002.

⁵² See e.g. George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: What Conservatives Know That Liberals Don’t*. Chicago, 1996, p. 153; George Lakoff and Mark Turner, *More than Cool Reason. A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*. Chicago, 1989, pp. 167-168.

⁵³ See Kathryn L. Allan, *Metaphor and Metonymy: A Diachronic Approach*. Oxford, 2009; Dirk Geeraerts and Stefan Grondelaers, ‘Looking back at anger: Cultural traditions and metaphorical patterns’, in *Language and the Cognitive Construal of the World*, ed. John R. Taylor and Robert E. MacLaury, Berlin, 1995, pp. 153-179; Cornelia Müller, *Metaphors Dead and Alive, Sleeping and Waking: A Dynamic View*. Chicago, 2008, Andreas Musolff, ‘Metaphor and conceptual evolution’, *metaphorik.de* 7 (2004), pp. 55-75, and ‘Is there such a Thing as Discourse History? The Case of Metaphor’, in *Cognitive Linguistics in Critical Discourse Analysis: Application and*

diachronic metaphor change and variation and to explain what used to be called “dead” metaphors (i.e. conceptualizations whose etymology reveals them to have once been metaphors but which have since been forgotten or become non-transparent). Revised cognitive approaches to metaphor have tried to accommodate historicity and to explain the ‘re-literalization’ of metaphor through “semantic drift”,⁵⁴ but only at the expense of resuscitating the discredited organismic imagery of meaning change as a “life history”, within the context of a neo-“Darwinistic” approach to culture that de-emphasizes its hermeneutic dimension, i.e. its dependence on acts of deliberate interpretation by interacting subjects.⁵⁵ It is precisely this hermeneutic dimension that is highlighted in Müller’s view of metaphor in the history of language and thought – as an “engine” of *radical*, creative meaning constitution in its earliest phase and as a facilitator of subsequent *mythological* misunderstandings in later stages.

From an exclusively CMT-oriented perspective, metaphor misunderstanding seems to be a non-topic. Successful metaphor understanding is assumed to be automatic and unconscious,⁵⁶ and a “dead” metaphor such as a foreign language etymon whose figurative status has been forgotten is seen as not being a metaphor at all on account of

Theory, ed. Christopher Hart and Dominik Lukes, Newcastle, 2007, pp. 1-27, Richard Trim, *Metaphor and the Historical Evolution of Historical Mapping*, Basingstoke, 2011.

⁵⁴ See William Croft and D. Alan Cruse, *Cognitive Linguistics*. Cambridge, 2004, pp. 204-5.

⁵⁵ For critical discussions of the neo-memetic approach to cultural and conceptual history see Dan Sperber, ‘An objection to the memetic approach to culture’, in *Darwinizing Culture. The status of memetics as a science*, ed. Robert Aunger, Oxford 2000, pp. 163-173; Andreas Musolff, ‘Metaphor and conceptual evolution’, pp. 55-8 and ‘Metaphor in discourse history’, in *Historical Cognitive Linguistics*, ed. Margaret E. Winters, Heli Tissari and Kathryn Allan. Berlin, 2011, pp. 70-90. For the historical background of organismic imagery in diachronic linguistics see Anna Mopurgo Davies, *History of Linguistics, IV: Nineteenth-Century Linguistics*. London, 1987, pp. 83-97 and Henry M. Hoenigswald and Linda F. Wiener (eds.), *Biological Metaphor and Cladistic Classification. An Interdisciplinary Perspective*. London, 1987.

⁵⁶ CMT and psycholinguistic research inspired by it state that at least conventional metaphorical mappings are as quickly understood as literal language and work on a common ‘embodied’ neurophysiological basis, see Raymond W. Gibbs, *Embodiment and Cognitive Science*. Cambridge 2005; George Lakoff, ‘The neural theory of metaphor’, in *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought*, ed. Raymond W. Gibbs, Cambridge, 2008, pp. 17-38; for critique see Gerard J. Steen, ‘The paradox of metaphor: Why we need a three-dimensional model of metaphor’, *Metaphor and Symbol* 23/4 (2008), 213-41, and ‘Deliberate metaphor affords conscious metaphorical cognition’, *Review of Cognitive Linguistics*, 5 (2013), 179-97

its lacking an inter-domain mapping.⁵⁷ But if misunderstanding a metaphor is impossible, how can its understanding be theoretically modelled at all? Max Müller's 'critical' approach to metaphor understanding, which almost prioritises its problematic side or failure over its successes seems to me to offer at least the basis for regaining a perspective that allows one to formulate the question of how metaphors can be 'misunderstood' in the course of conceptual history. *Synchronically*, the phenomenon of metaphor misunderstanding – in the sense of either the recipient misunderstanding an intended metaphor as literal or giving it a figurative sense that had not been intended by the speaker – is well attested, e.g. in foreign language acquisition, translation and intercultural communication research.⁵⁸ Hence, its *diachronic* manifestation should not be impossible to model, even though it may well involve more than the misapprehension of homonyms and polysemous terms, which Müller saw as the main factors of mythological metaphor misunderstanding.

In addition, Müller's negative and prescriptive bias in his talk of 'misunderstood' metaphorical concepts needs fundamental revision and reformulation in terms of a perspective that views conceptual changes as re- rather than mis-interpretations of precedent metaphors, before his approach could be re-operationalized. Nevertheless, the project of rereading lexicalised metaphors as conceptual "fossils" of previous thought systems,⁵⁹ which point to shared cultural legacies, is not invalidated in principle by such corrections (but might in fact be liberated by them). Müller's answers to etymological problems involving metaphor in the *Lectures* may be out-dated, but his questions on the

⁵⁷ See George Lakoff, 'The Death of Dead Metaphor', *Metaphor & Symbolic Activity*, 2/2(1987), 143-147; for critical discussion see Cornelia Müller, *Metaphors Dead and Alive, Sleeping and Waking: A Dynamic View*, pp. 178-209.

⁵⁸ See Jeannette Littlemore, Phyllis Chen, Almut Koester and John Barnden, 'Difficulties in metaphor comprehension faced by international students whose first language is not English', *Applied Linguistics*, 32/4(2011), 408-29; Anna Idström and Elisabeth Piirainen (eds.), in cooperation with Tiber F.M. Falzett, *Endangered Metaphors*. Amsterdam, 2012; Claudia Förster Hegrenæs, 'Conceptual Metaphors in Translation: A Corpus-Based study on Quantitative Differences between Translated and Non-translated English', in *Metaphor and Intercultural Communication*, ed. Andreas Musolff, Fiona MacArthur and Giulio Pagani, London, 2014, pp. 73-89; Ning Yu, 'Embodiment, culture, and language', in *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Culture*, ed. Farzad Sharifian London 2015, pp. 227-39.

⁵⁹ Müller, *Lectures*, vol. 2, p. 379.

intra- and intercultural transmission and understanding of metaphor still pose a challenge to philosophical and linguistic metaphor theories.