

**“Has she got a mouth?”
Metonymy, salience, and experience in a child’s speech***

Maria Theodoropoulou
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki
mtheod@lit.auth.gr

Περίληψη

Πρόκειται για μελέτη περίπτωσης στην οποία αναλύεται η παραγωγή μιας μετωνυμίας κατά τη διάρκεια ψυχοθεραπευτικής συνεδρίας. Η ανάλυση εκμεταλλεύεται την πληροφορία που παρέχει το συμφραστικό πλαίσιο για να διερευνήσει το είδος της μετωνυμίας καθώς και τις συνθήκες που κινητοποιούν την παραγωγή της, αναδεικνύοντας τον βιωματικό καθορισμό του προέχοντος χαρακτηριστικού με βάση το οποίο επιλέγεται το μετωνυμικό όχημα.

Λέξεις-κλειδιά: ανάπτυξη μη κυριολεκτικής γλώσσας, παραγωγή μετωνυμίας, προέχον χαρακτηριστικό

1 Introduction

In the study of figurative language development, metaphor has received the lion’s share (for a review, see Falkum 2019a), whereas only a few studies have examined metonymy. These studies either focus on metonymy comprehension on its own (e.g., Köder and Falkum 2020) or compare metaphor comprehension with that of metonymy (Rundband and Annaz 2010, Van Herwegen et al. 2013). Metonymy production has been slightly explored through approaches that draw from different paradigms (e.g., Relevance theory, e.g., Falkum et al. 2017; cognitive linguistics, e.g., Rundband and Annaz 2010) and is based mainly on observations of spontaneous speech registered in the researchers’ diaries. However, its special importance has been recognized as it has been argued that children’s metonymy production can provide evidence for the distinction of metonymy from metaphor (Falkum 2019b) – regardless of the unanimous agreement on the emergence of the comprehension of both figures around age 3 (Falkum 2019b). Be that as it may, the children’s early referential strategies that make use of salient associative relations such as iconic gestures (Acredolo and Goodwyn 1988), as well as onomatopoeias (Falkum 2019b), have been discussed in the literature as precursors to metonymy. Additionally, a kind of overextension of reference “based on spatio-temporal or functional contiguity” has also been suggested as such (Nerlich et al. 2002: 366).

The development of metonymy has been linked to the development of children’s cognitive abilities or to attempts to cover-up gaps in their lexicon. For example, Nerlich et al. (1999: 367-369) distinguish between *compelled metonymies* and *creative metonymic shrinking*: the former covering up gaps in children’s limited lexicons; the latter “usually produced in order to communicate new ideas with the

*I would like to express my wholehearted gratitude to Dr Eleftheria Avramidou for giving me the permission to use the material I present here. I am also highly indebted to Dimitra Kati for her comments. Finally, I would like to express my warm thanks to Theodoros Xioufis for participating as an independent researcher to the video transcription process.

least verbal effort”, although –interestingly– the child has already acquired conventional words or grammatical constructions.

To the best of our knowledge, the only experimental study of metonymy production (by children aged 2.9-5.9) has been conducted by Falkum et al. (2017), who argue that “children’s ability to deal with metonymy starts to emerge early on, with some ability to understand, produce, and explain metonyms already established by age three” (op.cit.: 116). These researchers make use of two basic features of metonymy as discussed in the literature, its referential function and the fact that the choice of metonymic vehicle is determined by a salient property of the referent, to conduct two semi-structured elicitation tasks. They conclude that preschoolers produce referential PART FOR WHOLE metonymies with a shorthand function instead of a more syntactically and conceptually complex description. In this sense, use of metonymy is related to the relatively limited expressive and lexical skills of preschoolers. They also use PROPERTY FOR INDIVIDUAL metonymies to name animate beings based on a salient property of these entities. In both cases they adopt metonymy as a referential strategy when they lack the conventional term.

Highlighting reference as the primary function of metonymy is one of the founding stones of the contemporary Conceptual Metonymy Theory, according to Bierwiazzonek (2013: 7). This was first argued by Nunberg (1978) (“metonymy is a deferred reference”) but also by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) who see the referential function of metonymy primarily as serving comprehension, just like metaphor is assumed to do. Although more recent literature has spotted additional functions of metonymy (Bierwiazzonek 2013, Littlemore 2015) the referential function is taken as the primary one.

Because of this primacy, the connection of the referential function with salience is no surprise. As Schmid (2007: 120) states, *ontological salience* has to do with “an inherent and consequently more or less permanent property of entities in the real world”, while *cognitive salience* has to do with a “temporary activation state of mental concepts.” The basic idea is that some entities attract our attention because they inherently bear a certain property, which is more salient than other perceived elements. Ontological salience is considered to be decisive for the choice of metonymic vehicle and, according to Panther and Thornburg (2007: 242), one of the factors determining the strength of the metonymic link. In Kövecses and Radden’s (1998: 63) approach, salience is the factor that determines the default metonymic cases as well as the cognitive principles that function while choosing a metonymic vehicle.

The current study attempts to contribute to the recent discussion about metonymy production by preschoolers, focusing on the choice of the metonymic vehicle on the basis of salience. This is accomplished through a case study with merely a single production of a metonymy. Certainly, a case study has obvious limitations, but its value lies, for one, in offering spontaneous speech data which cannot be extracted in experimental conditions, but also data which can be analyzed via rich information on the context of its production.

The data is drawn from a videotaped therapeutic session lasting 30 minutes. The video transcription has been checked by an independent researcher to assure the precision of the elements cited below.

2 The data

Dimitri, aged 4.7 at the recording of the session, had been brought for therapeutic intervention since the age of 3.2 to the “0-3: Early Intervention” Program of Papageorgiou Hospital in Thessaloniki with issues of incomprehensible speech. Thus, the particular session takes place one and a half years after the start of therapy. We will exploit crucial elements of the subject’s case history below in the analysis of the metonymy under study. Diagram 1 shows the setting wherein the therapeutic sessions took place, as it is essential to our analysis.

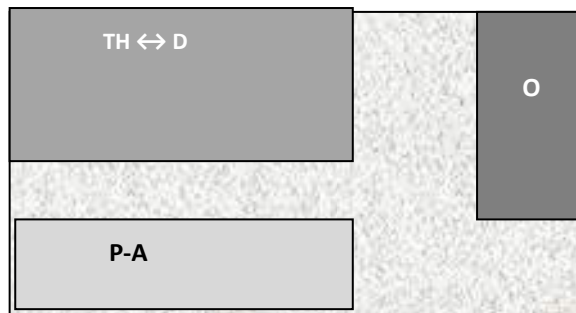


Diagram 1 | The setting of the therapeutic session

As can be seen in the diagram, there is what we may call a main space of interaction, that between the TH(erapist) and D(imitri). However, there is also here an O(bserver) to the right of the child taking notes and the P(sycho)A(nalyst) sitting behind him.

The largest part of the video, lasting about 20 minutes, captures a free game between the Therapist and Dimitri, in a place with a special two-layered toy-construction but also some small toys such as a table and chairs as well as male and female dollies. For reasons of space, only an excerpt of this play session is presented.

....

D: (he addresses the brown-haired dolly): *Daddy...* (the brown-haired dolly says:) *Let's sit down.*

Th: *We can sit in peace as [the wolf] is not here...*

D: *I want it to sit here* (he is placing the blond dolly into the toy-construction while holding the brown-haired dolly).

Th: (while holding a girl-dolly and showing it to him) *Where do I sit?*

D: *Sit here* (on the toy-table).

Th: *On the table?*

D: *Yes.*

Th: (She is placing the girl-dolly on the toy-table). *Here.*

D: *No, here.* (while showing the toy-chair) *Here ...* (he is taking the girl-dolly and tries to make it sit on the toy-chair).

Th.: *I want to sit on the chair.*

D: *Sit there.* (while holding the dolly on the chair) *Mommy!*

Th: *Yes????*

D: *What does it want... what do we want, Mommy?...* [question unfinished] *Mommy!*

Th: *Yes????*

D: *Mommyyyyy!*

Th: *Yes????*

D: ... *What does it want...* [question unfinished] (while trying to make the girl-dolly sit. The girl-dolly fell) *Why...* [question unfinished] *Mommy, Mommyyy...*

Th: *Oops, it fell.*

D: *Daddy, I'll ... I want to hug you* (he has the dollies hug each other).

Th. (with a different voice): *Give a big hug [...]* to daddy (a few seconds pass and then she continues).

Th. *Where will you go now, the two of you together?*

D: *We'll go for a walk.* (He changes his voice and repeats) *We'll go for a walk? [...]* *yessss, yeaaaae, you'll give a hug, right?*

Th: *I'm giving a big hug to daddy* [verbalizing what is played by the dollies].

D: *And you, let's go to the doctor. Aahh* (he hits the dolly on the table and places it on the tallest level of the construction with his right hand and with his left he takes the other dolly away and says:] *Bye-byeeee.*

Th: (with a deep voice, moving forward her dolly) *Hi, what are you doing down there?*

D: (he lowers his and shouts) *aaaahhh* (as if in danger).

Th: *What's wrong? Are you OK?*

He lifts it again and starts yelling sharply *eeeeee* as if in danger.

Th: (She runs to help him with her dolly) *Give me your little hand. I'll hold it. Come, come. I'm holding you*

The second part of the interaction is of particular interest to us, when the conditions of the play have changed. Both participants have to place as many little frogs as possible into the belly of a big frog. Each has chosen a little frog of a different color for him/herself. Dimitri repeatedly tries to achieve this goal, while the therapist supports him by repeating rhythmically *one, two, three*.

Th: *Wanna go again? One, two, three* (she pushes the little frog which goes away).

Th: *Where did it go?* (she sees it, she stretches her hand to catch it).

D: *Now go... one, two, three* (on three, he pushes the little frog).

Th: *I'll try... one, two, three* (she pushes it, she fails): *Ooooh! I couldn't.*

D: *One, two* (he pushes it, he fails, he laughs; while laughing he turns his head to the right – where the Observer is sitting. He turns again to the game).

D: *one, two* (he fails; he turns again to the right).

Th: *one, two* (she fails).

Th: *one, two, three* (he fails; he turns again to the right).

Th: *Here Dimitri* (she attempts to attract his attention because his head is still turned to the right).

D: (talking to himself) *She has got the mouth* (while he continues to look at her).

D: (addressing the therapist) *She.... She What is this?* (while pointing).

Th: *Mrs Natassa* (while making a gesture to invite him back to the game).

D: *A! What is this Mrs Natassa?*

Th. *Here!* (showing him the game) *One, two...*(he does not play; she pushes her little frog and succeeds). *Ooooh! I put it* [in the big frog's belly].

D *Me too, me too* (he returns to the game). *One, two...* (he pushes his little frog and succeeds).

Th. *Bravo! Bravoo!*

D. *I did it.* The therapist talks simultaneously: [We have succeeded] *together.*

D: (he starts another round) *Which one do you want?*
 Th: *The pink one.*
 D: *the oran... the pink one* (he chooses the little pink frog as well).
 Th: *Dimitri wants the pink one as well* [she verbalizes the child's mental state].
 D: *One, two...* (he tries again, he fails; he turns his head again to the right).
 D: *This is Mrs Natassa... what is she doing* (a semi-question)... *Is she the one who writes?*
 Th: *She is the one who writes. Come* (she tries to make him return to the game).
 D: *What? **Has she got a mouth?*** (while looking at the therapist for the first time) and he turns again to the right. Then he returns to the game.
 D: *One* (he pushes the little frog).

3 Analysis

The metonymy we analyze in this study is *Έχει στόμα*; 'Has she got a mouth?' We consider it an instantiation of the metonymic pattern BODY PART FOR ITS FUNCTION. For reasons explained below, we prefer this reading of what it instantiates rather than the instantiation pattern of INSTRUMENT FOR ACTION, even though the latter has been found in thirty-two languages (Hilpert 2007: 88) and adopted in previous literature for metonymies using the *mouth* as their vehicle (Hilpert op. cit., Littlemore 2015: 29). Why do we connect the meaning of this utterance to speech, given that the mouth inherently has the dual function of food reception and speech? In Greek, for example, there are fixed expressions denoting either the first or the second meaning: e.g., *στόμα έχει και μιλιά δεν έχει* '(S)he has got a mouth but (she) doesn't talk' used to denote a quiet person, as well as *μπουκιά δεν έβαλε στο στόμα του* '(S)he didn't even put a bite into his/hers mouth' for a person who ate nothing. We connect the meaning of *Has she got a mouth?* to speech because the context is that of verbal interaction (no earlier mention or action connected to food). In fact, the interpretation of metonymies via the key role of the context has been pointed out in many ways (e.g., Bierwiazzonek 2013, Littlemore 2015).

The second issue that needs to be pointed out is that this particular metonymic use does not have a clearly referential function. For one, obviously Dimitri does not refer to the Observer using an expression like *The mouth "sits down first"* (cf. Falkum et al. 2017). The child picks a body part out to say something about an Observer's function (who is the WHOLE); in this sense, this is a PART FOR PART metonymy. However, as the metonymic vehicle is embedded into a question arguably it is used as a point of reference (Langacker 1993) for the question to be formulated. On the other hand, the choice of the mouth as metonymic vehicle suggests a kind of construal because it is an Observer's specific function (see below) that has attracted his attention attributing salience to the mouth. As Littlemore (2015: 73) states, metonymy "foregrounds the information that is most important to the speaker". Furthermore, this particular utterance seems to be a case of 'creative metonymic shrinking' (Nerlich et al. 1999), since the use of metonymy can clearly be assumed that it does not cover up some lexical gap. Moreover, the child's choice of a verbal phrase, i.e., *Has she got a mouth?*, where the metonymy is placed in the position of the direct object (instead of *Μιλιάει*; 'Does she speak?' where a verb is used), renders the metonymic vehicle even more salient (Littlemore 2015: 149). In other words, this metonymy has been produced by choice, as a result of construal,

and not for covering a lexical gap or avoiding a syntactically and conceptually more complicated description, as is the case in the Falkum et al.'s (2017) study mentioned earlier.

This metonymy seems in fact a complex one, when examined as to its kind. At first, we could identify it as a propositional metonymy (Warren 1999): *if* she has a mouth *then* she speaks – interestingly, truth conditions are not violated in this kind of metonymy according to Warren. However, this propositional metonymy is embedded into a question, as mentioned above. If we ask ourselves what the child is really asking about, we realize that he cannot literally be asking about the possible lack of a mouth, because it is obvious that he can perfectly see the Observer's mouth. In other words, a literal interpretation of the question does not make sense. Thus, we are prompted to *infer* that the 'real' meaning of the utterance is 'Why isn't she speaking?'. This further complicates the metonymy because it is an illocutionary one involving pragmatic inferencing (Panther and Thornburg 1998), into which a propositional metonymy is embedded.

There are additional questions about the conditions under which this metonymy is produced that need to be answered. A first question is why Dimitri says what he says at this specific point of the session, i.e., about 3 minutes after the second game started. To answer this, one needs to take into consideration the context, and more specifically, the difference between the two games played. In the first game the child improvises freely, he is "the master of the game" being completely devoted to it; the therapist participates in the framework set up by the child, as she occasionally promotes the game by suggesting something (cf. *Where do I sit?*). The second game is more equalitarian as to the participants, a kind of turn-taking, with predicted movements and unpredictable outcomes. Due to the equal status of the participants as well as the time allotted between turns, this game *allows for space* for something else (such as a feeling or a thought) to emerge. Comparing the child's concentration on the ongoings of the first game with his increasing glances to the right – where the Observer is sitting – during the second game suffices to support our claim.

So, what is it that essentially motivates the question asked by the child? We believe that it is the *contrast* between a highly interactional context (i.e., both the child and the Therapist) and a human presence, who does not participate in the interaction. If one considers the principles determining the vehicle choice according to Kövecses and Radden (1998: 64-65), in this case THE INTERACTIONAL OVER THE NON-INTERACTIONAL, the choice of the 'mouth' as the metonymic vehicle highlights both the speech as the very carrier of the interaction and its lack thereof. It is in this sense that "metonymy highlights or foregrounds the target and backgrounds the source" (Panther and Thornburg 2008: 242) – the target being foregrounded to highlight the NON-INTERACTIONAL through the evocation of the contrasts. It is indicative that although Dimitri has started his utterance by *She*, his final question is *What is this?*; this indicates an objectification of the Observer in conformity with the nature of the NON-INTERACTIONAL.

Our analysis could finish at this point. However, there is an issue concerning the salient feature on the basis of which the metonymic vehicle has been chosen. For the choice of the metonymic vehicle has not been determined by perceptual factors, but arises instead as a "discordance" or a kind of lack. If one enriches the analysis by exploiting aspects of the therapeutic condition, one can find out that the "lack" the child experiences during the therapeutic interaction reflects another, psychologically critical, lack, the mother's non-participating in an active and close relationship with him. The P-A's intervention at this point of the interaction is in fact critical for the

therapeutic intervention, as she names this critical lack. She addresses the child as follows:

P-A: *Has your mommy got a mouth?*

Dimitri turns to her, after he turns up front and plays nervously with the little frog; his head is bowed. He stays silent.

Th: *He thinks about it.*

P-A: *Dimitri, has mommy got a mouth?*

Dimitri is keeping up playing nervously with the frog with his head bowed. He remains silent.

Th: *Hasn't she?*

He remains silent and then:

D: *She has got a mouth, she has got a mouth* (with an uncertain voice), while hitting the big frog aggressively with the little frog.

P-A: *Do you ask?*

D: (addressing the Therapist) *Will we play little frogs?*

Th: *Mrs Eleftheria has asked you something.*

He turns back (where the P-A is sitting), he glimpses at her; the little frog drops from his hand; he looks down to find it.

D: *Where is the little frog?* (while having bent down looking for it).

P-A: *Has daddy got a mouth?*

D: *Yes* (immediate response).

So, daddy for sure has got a mouth, whereas mommy has got “silence”. On the basis of this evidence, we can now rethink what motivates the choice of the metonymic vehicle. On a first level, it is the contrast between an intense interaction and the complete lack of it. Initially, the child’s attention is attracted to this contrast because of another contrast, that of the interactional nature of two games: in the first game, a highly interactional condition, the therapist (a parental figure) responds to *Mommy*, or participates constantly satisfying the child’s needs; all these are withdrawn in the second more equalitarian game. It is the feeling that arises from this lack of response that makes Dimitri turn to the Observer; because the Observer *reifies* this lack. But as the therapeutic intervention has shown, the lack of this interaction invokes a psychologically more profound lack, the child’s immediate interaction with his mother. This also becomes evident if one pays attention to his embarrassment when the Therapist responds immediately to his calling *Mommy* during the first game – he cannot complete his questions. One has the feeling that he is gratified by repeating the word *Mommy* and receiving a response to it.

In essence, the mouth has been chosen as the metonymic vehicle because it is the embodied sign of the mother-child interaction and relationship, the very medium through which the child is connected with the mother in two ways: bodily, by receiving food from the start of his life when experiencing his mother in a symbiotic way; and verbally, because the language emerges after the child has acquired motor skills, or his ability to move away from her; At the same time, the language is the medium through which the child can be reunited with her as the oral message bridges the physical distance between them (Christidis 2007). It is for this reason that the metonymic pattern BODY PART FOR ITS FUNCTION has been chosen as fitting the particular metonymy: it highlights the bodily basis of this particular metonymy simultaneously signaling the great importance of the mouth for the psychological and social development of the child. The alternative pattern INSTRUMENT FOR

ACTION predominating in previous literature is de-bodyfying as it instrumentalizes the body.

4 Conclusion

Our analysis has attempted to show that the choice of the salient feature in the production of the metonymy *Has she got a mouth?* has not been determined by perceptual factors but instead experiential ones. These experiences are motivated by the context of the therapeutic session and invoke experiences outside it, which have to do with the child-mother's relationship. Furthermore, the results of this study could contribute to the discussion of two theoretical issues posed in the literature. The first one has to do with the question of whether salience is embodied. Giora (2003: 29) argues that "salience cannot be explained on grounding, nor is it overridden by it." On the other hand, Littlemore (2017) makes the case that metonymy is embodied if it is approached in the framework of an extended definition of embodiment, as "shaped by one's physical and social environment as well as one's personal and social history." It has become apparent that the personal and social history (the relationship with others; in this case, the mother) has determined the choice of the metonymic vehicle.

The second issue concerns the question of whether metonymy is viewpointed (Dancygier and Sweetser 2014). What the analysis of this case study shows is that the choice of the metonymic vehicle is imbued by subjectivity. As Lakoff & Johnson (1980: 36) stated very early, "Which part we pick out determines which aspect of the whole we are focusing on" – and of course where we focus also depends on our emotional state at that moment. Or, as Littlemore (2017) points out, "When we survey our environment, some features will inevitably stand out more than others. This can be because of their distinct physical features ... or because they have particular relevance to us". This study attempted to highlight this "hidden" aspect of salience, even at a very early age.

References

- Acredolo, Linda, and Susan Goodwyn. 1988. "Symbolic gesturing in normal infants." *Child Development* 59: 450–466.
- Bierwiazzonek, Boguslaw. 2013 *Metonymy in Language, Thought and Brain*. Sheffield: Equinox.
- Christidis, Anastassios-Fivos. 2007. "The nature of language." In *A History of Ancient Greek: From the Beginnings to Late Antiquity*, edited by Anastassios-Fivos Christidis, 27–64. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dancygier, Barbara, and Eve Sweetser. 2014. *Figurative Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Falkum, Ingrid Lossius. 2019a. "Pragmatic Development: Learning to use language to communicate." In *International Handbook of Language Acquisition*, edited by Jessica Horst and Janne von Koss Torkildsen, 234–256. London, New York: Routledge.
- Falkum, Ingrid Lossius. 2019b. "Metaphor and metonymy in acquisition: A relevance-theoretic perspective." In *Relevance, Pragmatics and Interpretation*, edited by Kate Scott, Billy Clark and Robyn Carston, 205–217. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Falkum, Ingrid Lossius, Recasens, Marta, and Eve Clark. 2017. "The moustache sits down first": On the acquisition of metonymy." *Journal of Child Language* 44(1): 87–119.
- Giora, Rachel. 2003. *On Our Mind: Salience, Context, and Figurative Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hilpert, M. 2007. "Chained metonymies in lexicon and grammar: a cross-linguistic perspective on body part terms." In *Aspects of Meaning Construction*, edited by Günter Radden, Klaus-Michael Köpcke, Thomas Berg and Peter Siemund, 77–98. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Köder, Franziska, and Ingrid Lossius Falkum. 2020. "Children's metonymy comprehension: Evidence from eye-tracking and picture selection". *Journal of Pragmatics* 156 (January):191–205.
- Kövecses, Zoltán, and Günter Radden. 1998. "Metonymy: Developing a cognitive linguistic view." *Cognitive Linguistics* 9(1):37–77.
- Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. 1980. *Metaphors We Live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Langacker, Ronald. 1993. "Reference-Point Constructions." *Cognitive Linguistics* 4:1–38.
- Littlemore, Jeanette. 2015. *Metonymy: Hidden shortcuts in Language, Thought and Communication*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Littlemore, Jeanette. 2017. "On the role of embodied cognition in the understanding and use of metonymy." In *Metaphor: Embodied Cognition and Discourse*, edited by Beate Hampe, 160–178. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nerlich, Brigitte, Clarke, David and Zazie Todd. 1999. "Mummy, I like being a sandwich": Metonymy in language acquisition". In *Metonymy in Language and Thought*, edited by Klaus-Uwe Panther, and Günter Radden, 361–383. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Nunberg, Geoffrey 1978. *The Pragmatics of Reference*. Bloomington: Indiana University Linguistics club.
- Panther, Klaus-Uwe and Linda Thonburg. 1998. "A cognitive approach to inferencing in conversation." *Journal of Pragmatics* 30:755–769.
- Panther, Klaus-Uwe and Linda Thonburg. 2007. "Metonymy". In *Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics*, edited by Dirk Geeraerts and Hubert Cuyckens, 236–263. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rundblad, Gabriella, and Dagmar Annaz. 2010. "Development of metaphor and metonymy comprehension: Receptive vocabulary and conceptual knowledge." *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* 28:547–563.
- Schmid, Hans-Jörg. 2007. "Entrenchment, salience and basic levels". In *Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics*, edited by Dirk Geeraerts and Hubert Cuyckens, 117–138. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Van Herwegen, Jo, Dimitriou, Dagmar, and Gabriella Rundblad. 2013. "Development of novel metaphor and metonymy comprehension in typically developing children and Williams syndrom". *Research in Developmental Disabilities* 34(4):1300–1311.
- Warren, Beatrice. 1999. "Aspects of referential metonymy". In *Metonymy in Language and Thought*, edited by Klaus-Uwe Panther and Günter Radden, 121–137. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.