THE SPATIAL METAPHORICS OF AMBIGUITY IN ROMAN CULTURE

William Michael Short

This chapter takes a somewhat different approach to the topic of ambiguity in Latin literature from the others in this volume. Taking as a given that Latin speakers were mindful of the capacity of some words, phrases, and even whole sentences to convey multiple different meanings, other chapters examine a range of literary settings where lexical or syntactic ambiguities appear to be exploited deliberately by Latin authors for imaginative aims. I equally assume an awareness of ambiguity on the part of Latin speakers, but in this paper I interrogate how they conceived of this and other types of multiplicity of meaning.[1] In other words, I look at how Latin speakers went about representing ambiguity to themselves and how they understood ambiguity as part of their experience generally. I start by showing that Latin speakers' conventional understanding of ambiguity is delivered metaphorically via the image of PATHS DIVERGING. I also show, however, that in certain technical contexts the image of CENTRALITY is used, permitting the delineation of two different kinds of ambiguous meaning relations. I go on to argue that what provides the motivation for, and thus makes sense of, these twin images is Latin's regular conceptualization of "meaning" itself in terms of a linear spatial metaphor. I conclude by suggesting that Latin's spatial metaphorics of ambiguity anticipate certain aspects of contemporary linguistic theory – but also more than this: that it constituted a feature of Roman society's signifying order, contributing to the valuation of this phenomenon in the culture.

1. Spatial metaphors of ambiguity in Latin.

The perspective of an embodied semantics reveals that Latin speakers' ways of talking about, conceptualizing, and reasoning about ambiguity were entirely metaphorical. By an "embodied" semantics I mean a view of language like the one developed in cognitive linguistics, which posits that much of people's ability to make sense of, and communicate about, their experience depends on the nature of human bodily interaction with the world. Rather than treating the meanings of words as mental lists of "necessary and sufficient" features expressed in the form of propositions similar to dictionary definitions, cognitive linguists propose that many words are instead understood "image schematically," that is, in terms of recurrent patterns of sensory and motor experience. In this theory, an image schema is an imagistic (i.e., vision-like) mental representation that captures aspects of how we experience our own bodies in relation to locations, objects, and other living things. Because image schemas are derived from sensorimotor experience and thus subject to visual and spatial modifications "in the mind's eye" (such as superimposition, rotation, scanning, or viewpoint shifts), they are seen as actually constituting the inferential mechanism by which linguistic meaning is normally extended. Image schemas are additionally said to be open to figurative interpretation, as a means of understanding abstract concepts in terms of more concrete – and so more readily comprehensible – physical domains.[2]

Evidence suggests that Latin speakers' conceptualization of ambiguity, as a kind of multiplicity of meaning (especially, but not exclusively, of words), was built up on just this kind of image-schematic basis. As Claude Moussy has shown, Latin's most conventionalized way of conveying this concept was given by forms derived from the stem *ambag-* or (with regular weakening of *a* → *i*) *ambig-*: namely, *ambages* and especially *ambiguus*, *-a*, *-um*, along with its nominal derivatives *ambiguum* and *ambiguitas* (obviously the source of English *ambiguous* and *ambiguity*,

even if speakers of this language tend to understand the concept through a quite different image: see below).[3] Uses of *ambiguus* and related words in this abstract sense, to signify uncertainties of all kinds – from the unknowable outcome of events to the questionable loyalties of elegiac lovers to dualities of bodily form in myth – are well known and scarcely bear repeating here. However, it is worth reporting several occurrences of this term, in which Latin authors make explicit the kind of semantic phenomenon they consider to be covered by this category:

(1) Cic. *Orat.* 121, *quod est ambiguorum proprium, res duas significari videmus*, "We see that two things are signified, which is the property of ambiguous words";

(2) Cic. *Top*. 96, *id autem contingit, cum scriptum ambiguum est, ut duae sententiae differentes accipi possint*, "When a text is ambiguous, it happens that two different meanings can be accepted";

(3) Quint. *Decl. min*. 317.2, *verba enim ambigua et in plures intellectus ducta sunt*, "Words, you see, are ambiguous and have developed quite a few different senses";

(4) [Cic.] *Rhet. ad Her*. 1.20, *ex ambiguo controversia nascitur, cum res in unam sententiam scripta duas aut plures sententias significat*, "Controversy arises from ambiguity, when something written in a certain sense signifies two or more meanings";

(5) [Cic.] *Rhet. ad Her*. 2.16, *si ambiguum esse scriptum putabitur, quod in duas aut plures sententias trahi possit, hoc modo tractandum est*, "If a text is thought to be ambiguous, because it can be read in two or more senses, it must be handled like this . . . ";

(6) [Cic.] *Rhet. ad Her*. 4.67, *ambiguum, cum verbum potest in duas pluresve sententias accipi*, "Ambiguity, when a word can be interpreted in two or more senses";

(7) Gell. *NA*. 11.12.1, *ambigui enim uerbi natura illa esse debuit, ut, qui id diceret, duo uel plura diceret*, "It ought to be the nature of an ambiguous word, that, who says it, says two or more things."

These passages – whose similarity of phrasing suggests they represent a continuous tradition – make clear that Latin speakers' understanding of ambiguity centered fundamentally on the notion of "(expressing) two or more meanings" (i.e., lexical ambiguity, or what today we might call polysemy).[4] It should also be immediately clear that ambiguity was understood in this sense by wholly metaphorical means – since, etymologically, *ambag- / ambig-* is constructed on the basis of the preposition *ambi-*, "round; about," and *agere*, "lead," whose combined literal meaning is something like "leading (around) on two sides."[5] Latin speakers' conceptualization of *ambiguum* can therefore be represented as in Figure 1.

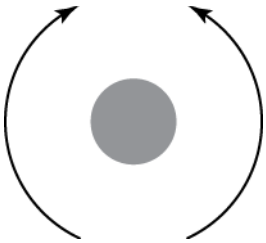

Figure 1: Metaphorical conceptualization of ambiguity in terms of

PATHS DIVERGING = *ambiguus*

If the definitions cited above indicate that *ambiguus* in many cases expressed a very general concept of "multiplicity of meaning," in certain contexts it could also take on a more specialized

sense. As Richard Thomas has argued, especially in Servius's commentaries on Vergil, this word sometimes describes the more particular case of what might be termed "contextual" ambiguity. In fact, in the Latin grammarian's technical jargon, the word *polysemus* more typically describes the situation of a word possessing multiple distinct and unrelated meanings – as when Servius describes *cano* in this way because it can mean "praise (= *laudo*)" or "foresee (= *divino*)" or "sing (= *canto*)" (in *Aen.* 1.1); *agmen,* because it can mean either an "attack (= *impetus*)" or a "crowd (= *multitudo*)" (1.82); and *subigo,* either "sharpen (= *acuere*)" or "compel (= *compellere*)" (6.302). *Ambiguus* then covers situations of interpretive uncertainty arising, instead, from competing considerations of an expression's grammatical role in context. So, for example, commenting on Vergil's description of Venus taking Vulcan into her lap – *coniugis infusus gremio per membra soporem* (*Aen.* 8.406) – Servius writes that "*per membra* can seem ambiguous (*ambiguum*), whether Vulcan's or Venus's." Similarly, on *uidit ab aduerso uenientis aggere Turnus* (12.446) he remarks that "Some see an ambiguity (*ambiguitatem*), whether Turnus himself is 'on the mound' or they are coming 'from a mound,'" and on *Turnusque feratur / per medios insignis equis* (10.20–21) that "It is ambiguous (*ambiguum*) whether 'famous for his chariot' or 'carried by chariot.'" In this usage, *ambiguus* characterizes *contexts* defined by a word or phrase whose denotation actually remains the same – *per membra* always refers to "limbs," *ab . . . aggere* to a "mound," *equis* to "horses" – but whose precise grammatical referent cannot be determined absolutely between two contextual alternatives.

Understood as a kind of interpretive uncertainty arising from overall contextual effects (rather than one owing to the multiple meanings inhering in any one word), *ambiguus* can be compared to another, also metaphorical means by which Servius characterizes multiplicity of meaning: the adjective *medius* (literally, "in the middle") or, using the fixed-form expression in Greek, (*τῶν*)

μέσων (always in the genitive, again describing a word as, literally, "of those (words) in the middle"). The following passages illustrate this usage:

(8) LOCA FETA *sciendum est autem "fetam" dici et gravidam et partu liberatam . . . ergo quia 'feta' medius sermo est, bene hoc loco epitheto discrevit, dicens "graves fetas,"* "We must realize that a pregnant woman as well as one who has just given birth can be called *fetam* . . . Therefore, since *feta* is a word 'in the middle,' in this case he nicely distinguished by means of an adjective, saying 'heavily pregnant'" (Serv. in *Aen*. 1.51);

(9) NOVAS ARTES *ars τῶν μέσων est, unde sine epitheto male ponitur. veteres autem artes pro dolis ponebant*, "*Ars* is one of the 'in-the-middle (words),' for which reason its usage without an adjective is inappropriate. The ancients in fact used *artes* in the sense of 'tricks'" (1.657; cf. 2.106, 2.152);

(10) PIABUNT *expiabunt: et τῶν μέσων est; nam plerumque et impiare significat*, "'They will ritually purify'; *piare* is one of the 'middle (words),' since often it can even mean 'defile'" (2.140);

(11) MONSTRA DEUM *et modo mala; nam medium est, quia interdum dicuntur et bona*, "In this case, they are bad; for the word is 'in the middle,' because sometimes omens can also be good" (3.59);

(12) RAUCI *rauci autem τῶν μέσων est: nam modo canoros significat, alias vocis pessimae,* "*Rauci* is one of the 'middle (words),' since sometimes it means 'melodious,' and sometimes 'of the worst voice'" (11.458);

As may be seen, *medius* – like *ambiguus* – defines a class of words that can be interpreted in (at least) two different senses. Yet the kinds of words described by this term suggests this category represents a somewhat different semantic phenomenon. The category of *medius* includes, first, words that refer to either an earlier or a later stage of some state's chronological development (e.g., *fetus* means either "pregnant" or "recently delivered"). Second, words signifying either "good" or "bad" versions of the same object, action, or quality (*monstrum*, *raucus*; also *facinus*, meaning either "feat" or "crime"; *venenum*, either "liquid" or "poison"; and *odor*, "smell" or "stench"). And, third, words which can be used in reference to some activity that occurs in two or more sociocultural contexts appearing somehow incompatible (i.e., *piare* can be an act either of religious purification or of pollution; elsewhere, *ululare* is described in this way because it can be understood as an expression either of joy at a wedding or of grief at a funeral). Generalizing over these subtypes, *medium* appears to represent the category of words whose meanings are ambiguous only when considered apart from any particular case of usage. That is, these are words whose meanings are in some way neutral between two possible interpretations, only one of which, however, is likely to be activated within a given context.[6]

The semantic category of *medius* is manifestly also – again like *ambiguus* – understood metaphorically by virtue of a spatial metaphor. Whereas *ambiguus* represents an understanding of ambiguity through the metaphorical image of PATHS DIVERGING (AROUND), though, in *medius* the operative image is that of CENTRALITY (BETWEEN). This image can be illustrated graphically as in Figure 2. Represented in this way, the images underpinning Latin's metaphorical conceptualization of *ambiguus* and *medius* as types of ambiguous meaning relations actually appear to be structurally corresponsive: they both depict a central element or point surrounded on two sides by dynamic trajectories. Where they differ is in the relative conceptual foregrounding or backgrounding of the

elements comprising their shared imagistic basis. In the image underlying *ambiguus* (the class of *per membra*, *ab . . . aggere* and so on), it is the two paths that receive focus: hence the linguistic label, "leading (around) on two sides." Conversely, in *medius* (the category including *raucus*, *facinus*, *venenum*, etc.), the central element is foregrounded, while the two paths recede from view: hence, "in the middle." This kind of conceptual "highlighting" can be likened to depth-of-field effects in photography, though the differences here involve shifts not in relative visual clarity but in relative cognitive prominence.[7]

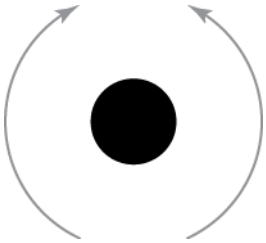

Figure 2: Metaphorical conceptualization of ambiguity in terms of

CENTRALITY (BETWEEN) = *medius*

2. Latin's "linear" metaphor of meaning.

What motivates the use of spatial imagery in Latin speakers' metaphorical understanding of these semantic categories, as well as the specific figurative meanings of PATHS DIVERGING and CENTRALITY vis-à-vis "ambiguity"? An answer to these questions rests, I believe, in the fact that "meaning" itself was conceptualized in Latin in terms of a metaphor of linear motion. This metaphor is easily made out in the etymological derivation of the two words that most regularly convey this concept at all periods of the language: *sententia* and *sensus*.[8] Both *sententia* and *sensus* derive uncontroversially from *sentio*, which in turn can be traced to PIE **s(e)nt-*.[9] Now, while reflexes of this root in some daughter languages do have meanings that mirror the abstract

intellectual sense of Latin *sentio* (e.g., Lithuanian *siñti*, "think"; Old Church Slavonic *sęštъ*, "wise"; Italian *sentire*), cognate words from several others exhibit spatial meanings that represent what is very likely its literal sense: in particular, Old Irish *sét* "road"; Proto-Germanic **sandjan-*, "send," **sinþa-*, "road; way," and **sindō-*, "travel"; and Old Armenian *ənt'anam*, "go; walk." The co-occurrence of these senses in attested outcomes of **s(e)nt-* suggests that "meaning" – at least when captured by means of *sententia* and *sensus* – was conceived of by Latin speakers as a kind of motion along a path, as when travelling on a journey (other means were also available: see below). The development of Dutch *zinnen*, "think; consider," as well as German *sinnen*, "contemplate," and especially *Sinn*, "sense; meaning," from earlier *sinnan-* (*sént-ne-*), "head for (a place)," in fact points to a regular pathway of figurative meaning extension in the Indo-European family of languages that goes something like: "path" > "thought" > "meaning (of an expression)."[10]

But what, more precisely, do I mean when I say that *sententia* and *sensus* capture an understanding of "meaning" in terms of a linear spatial metaphor? After all, neither of these words exhibits any spatial semantics whatsoever. Their denotations in fact remain exclusively within the realm of sensation, perception, and intellection.[11] (By the same token, other words equally belonging to Latin's "path" vocabulary – *via, limes, callis, semita,* and so forth – though routinely susceptible of figurative interpretation, do not tend to lend themselves to metaphorizing "meaning.") In essence, my claim is that these words deliver Latin speakers' concept of "meaning" by way of a verbal root whose concrete literal denotation has to do centrally with directed motion along a path. Very specifically, I am proposing that this concept is understood via what cognitive linguists call the PATH schema – an image schema that, in Mark Johnson's description, emerges from our primary experience of learning to focus on and track objects moving through our visual field, as well as from repeated bodily activities, beginning in infancy, that involve intentional

movement from one location to another (reaching for a toy, crawling, walking, or running toward a caregiver, or indeed traversing space to reach any desired destination).[12] As a cognitive representation that subsumes these and myriad similar activities, the PATH schema organizes and makes sense of experience by affording a certain conceptual structure or "topology" to perceptions, images, and events. Figure 3 illustrates this structure, which consists of a moving entity or "trajector" (TR) that traces a linear path from a source-point to a fixed end-point.[13]

Figure 3: The PATH schema (after Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 33)

Like other image schemas, the PATH schema is easily adapted for abstract understanding through metaphorical interpretation. English speakers, for instance, conceive of purposes as paths when we talk about working *toward* and *reaching goals*, becoming *sidetracked*, changing *course*, or having a *long way to go*. All these expressions refer literally to motion along a path, but they are normally interpreted as having to do with purposes, because our conceptual system includes the metaphor 'ACHIEVING A PURPOSE IS MOTION ALONG A PATH.'[14] (Note that the metaphor structures meaning systematically: the figurative sense does not belong to the semantic structure of a particular word, but represents an avenue of interpretation for almost any talk about paths). Careers are also very often conceptualized as paths in English: we can speak directly of someone's *career path* – a metaphor Latin shares in the concept of the *cursus honorum* and in expressions like *magistratum consequi*, literally "arrive at a magistracy" (cf. Cic. *Planc*. 24).[15] Moreover, in

being projected metaphorically to *abstracta*, the PATH schema – with its particular topological arrangement – brings with it a kind of "metaphysics" in the form of an inferential structure that corresponds to the logic of movement in physical space. More substantially, then, my claim is that when Latin speakers conceptualize "meaning" in terms of a linear metaphor (viz., "MEANING IS A PATH"), they are actually taking advantage of their full knowledge about motion along a path to reason about meaning as an abstract domain.

Of course, as Andreas Zanker has shown, this was by no means the only way in which Latin speakers conceptualized "meaning." Idiomatic expressions with *sibi vult*, for instance, suggest a kind of personification that allows words to be given human-like intentions – so that what a word "wills" or "wants (for itself)" is metaphorically understood as its meaning.[16] Plautus's *ut litterarum ego harum sermonem audio* (*Ps*. 98), where Pseudolus likens understanding the message of a letter he has just read aloud to hearing its "speech," suggests that meaning could sometimes also be construed in terms of vocal utterance.[17] Otherwise, meaning could be understood as the "(state of) mind" (*mens*) a word conveys (as in, e.g., Rut. Lup. *Fig.* 1.5, *non in eam mentem quae intellegitur, sed in aliam aut contrariam accipitur*),[18] or as a kind of "force" (*vis,* and later *potestas*) residing in words (in formulations like Cic. *Fam.* 6.2.3, *quae uis insit in his paucis uerbis* and *Fin*. 2.2.6, *quae uis subiecta sit uocibus*, or Gell. *NA.* 10.29.1, *particula quasdam potestates habet*).[19] In a letter to Tiro (*Fam*. 16.17.1), Cicero once refers to the meaning of a word as its "house" (*domicilium*). At the same time, *significatio,* the preferred jargon term of the Latin grammarians – commonly in Varro and Quintilian, and in the titles of lexical treatises by Aelius Gallus, Verrius Flaccus, and Pompeius Festus – employs the image of "marking" or "stamping" (< s*ignum,* "sign, mark" + *facio,* "make").[20] The overall set of metaphors converging on Latin speakers' conceptualization of MEANING can therefore be represented as in Figure 4.

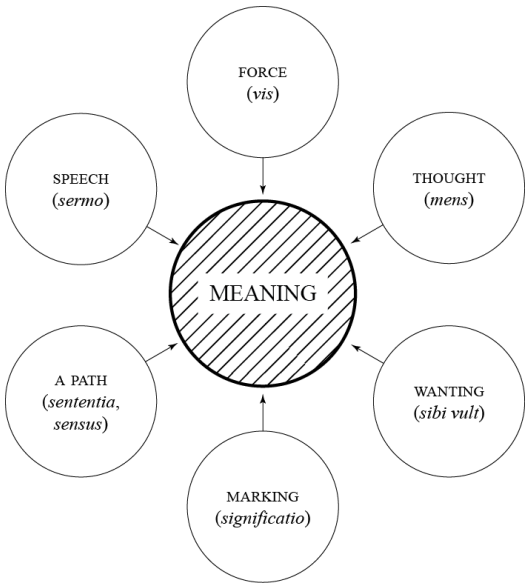

Figure 4: Metaphors converging on Latin speakers' conceptualization of meaning

Still, it is probably fair to say that the PATH metaphor represents Latin speakers' most entrenched and most systematic conceptualization of "meaning." This interpretation appears to be confirmed by the construction Latin speakers employ when talking about understanding a word's meaning. As illustrated by (2) above, to understand an expression is literally to "take" or "accept" it: *sententiam accipere.*[21] Very often this construction will include an adverb specifying the manner of interpretation: so, for example, *non recte accipis*, "You're misconstruing it" (Ter. *Andr*. 367) and *generaliter enim et specialiter accipitur*, "It (sc. the word *tempus*) can be taken in a general or a specific sense" (Quint. *IO*. 5.10.42). Alternatively, a prepositional phrase consisting of *in* + *sententiam* or *mentem* or *partem* may be used, as, for instance, in Plautus's *equidem pol in eam partem accipioque et volo*, "For my own part I am quite willing to accept it in that sense" (*Eun*. 867). Quintilian uses the expression *ad eundum intellectum* to mean "in the same sense" (*IO.*

8.3.39 and 10.1.11). What is telling about this alternate form of the construction is that when Latin speakers want to stipulate the particular sense in which a word is interpreted, they turn reflexively to a spatial construal that once more represents "meaning" as linear motion.

Additional confirmation comes from Latin speakers' use of *intendo* to mean "mean" – where the etymological sense of verb and the meaning of the preposition are clearly spatial, "head for (a place)"[22] – as well as from the concept of an "interpreter" or "translator," *interpres*.[23] If, on the one hand, this word's formation from **pret*- indicates that meaning could be understood metaphorically in terms of commercial "value," on the other hand *inter*- "between" again appears to evoke the image of meaning as a path.[24] More elaborate expressions like *licet eo trahere significationem scripti quo expediat* and *a verbis . . . sententiam scriptoris abducere* (Cic. *Part.* 108), where the spatial image is encoded in the semantics of *trahere* (*quo*) and *abducere* (*ab*), imply that the metaphor formed part of Latin speakers' unconscious, automatic, "everyday" representation of this domain.

Given what I have suggested is the systematic nature of Latin's PATH metaphor of meaning – that it structures meaning pervasively across levels of linguistic encoding (etymology, idiomatic expression, phrasal constructions) – Servius's elaboration of a typology of "ambiguity" through the images of PATHS DIVERGING (*ambiguum*) and CENTRALITY (*medium*) now appears fully motivated. The particular kind of ambiguity described by each category in fact follows naturally from the underlying spatial imagery, in the sense that the structural configuration of each image determines what is inferred about the relation of meaning(s) to context. PATHS DIVERGING (AROUND) thus provides a fitting metaphor for understanding the kind of contextual ambiguity in which words characterized as *ambiguus* are involved – where their denotations remain always the same, but their grammatical referents are indeterminate between two contextual alternatives –

because, in the underlying image, conceptual focus falls on the "paths," while the central point (understood as the stable element of meaning) provides a sort of background. In *ambiguus*, in other words, what is conceptually salient is the "divergence" between possible meanings-in-context. CENTRALITY (BETWEEN), meanwhile, can be seen as a fitting metaphor for the category of words described as *medius* – whose decontextualized meanings are in some way neutral between two possible interpretations – because, in this image, focus falls on the aspect of meaning that is independent of any context. In *medius*, that is, what is salient is the meaning "in the middle" of different possible contextually determined senses of a word. Tellingly, in articulating concepts of other kinds of multiplicity of meaning, Latin authors make use of very different metaphors: for instance, in characterizing the class of contronyms (words with two contradictory meanings), Gellius (*NA*. 12.9.1–2) employs the image of "two-headedness" (*anceps*).[25]

3. A "cultural" metaphor of ambiguity.

Looking closely at the ways in which Latin speakers conceptualized ambiguity has revealed that – in certain technical situations, at any rate – they distinguished two types of ambiguous meaning relations on the basis of a single linear metaphor. The first type, captured through the metaphorical image of PATHS DIVERGING (AROUND) (*ambiguum*), represents the category of words whose ability to be interpreted in more than one sense emerges primarily as a function of their contextual embeddedness. Indeed, some of the words categorized in this way are ambiguous only to the extent that they appear in contexts where the compression characteristic of Latin poetry does not permit grammatical dependencies to be made out precisely. The second, captured through a related image of CENTRALITY (BETWEEN) (*medium*), represents the category of words that are instead open to interpretation in multiple senses only when considered independently of any

specifying context in which just one sense could be plausibly activated. Roman interest in the role of context in the relationship between a word's senses thus appears surprisingly modern. In contemporary linguistic semantics, consideration of the different ways in which context appears able to interact with a words' different senses has led to a distinction between "ambiguous" and "vague" meaning.[26] Basically, the idea is that in cases of ambiguity, context causes one of a word's meanings to be selected or activated, while in cases of vagueness, context provides information not already specified by a word's meaning, helping to determine its sense in a given instance – in an almost exact one-to-one mapping with the Latin categories.[27] Similarly, to the extent that *ambiguum* and *medium* share a common underlying imagistic structure, the Latin categories also appear to anticipate a view that has recently emerged in cognitive linguistics, according to which ambiguity and vagueness are closely related phenomena whose difference hinges largely on the distance between a word's different senses and some covering category.[28]

But in my view the significance of Latin's spatial metaphorics of ambiguity goes well beyond constituting (yet) another way in which ancient linguistic thought appears to presage modern theory, since it can in fact be seen as a distinctive feature of Roman culture.[29] As the title of this book suggests, spatiality was in fact part and parcel of how Roman culture imagined ambiguity – as thematized repeatedly by Latin authors, and especially by Catullus in his image of the labyrinth (*Carm.* 64.112–15), which emblematizes a whole series of thematic ambiguities.[30] Comparison with metaphors from other languages and cultures is telling in this regard. To begin with, Latin differs from most other languages in conceptualizing ambiguity primarily through spatial imagery (naturally, its direct descendants tend to follow suit: cf. It. *ambiguo*, Sp. *ambiguo*, Fr. *ambigu*). Probably the commonest metaphor for this concept across even typologically distinct languages is a perceptual one that draws on images of "darkness." Thus in English ambiguity is often referred

to as the "haziness," "murkiness," or "opacity" of meaning, and the sense of an ambiguous word can be said to be "muddy," "clouded," "tenebrous," or simply "unclear." Similarly, in Mandarin Chinese what is ambiguous is "obscure" (含糊, *hán hú*) or "shady" (暧昧, *ài mèi*). In Arabic, it is "opaque, cloudy" (غامِض, *ghāmid*) or "hazy, dark" (مُبْهَم, *mubham*). Turkish *belirsiz*, "ambiguous" literally means "shadowy" or "nebulous." Speakers of Chichewa, a Bantu language spoken in parts of Malawi, say *osamvekera bwino*, "not clear." German, alongside *doppel-* or *zweideutig*, in which ambiguity is figured in numerical terms, says *unklar*. Though such images certainly presented themselves for figurative utilization by Latin authors, they tend to characterize unintelligibility or forgetfulness rather than ambiguity.[31]

What's more, Latin stands out even from languages with seemingly analogous metaphors of ambiguity in the precise details of its mappings. Take ancient Greek's vocabulary of ambiguity, which, like Latin's, relies partly on spatial imagery. In *ἀμφιβολία* (*ἀμφιβολητικός*), *ἀμφίγλωσσος*, and *ἐπαμφότερος*, for example, and likewise in *διχόγνωμος*, it is in fact chiefly the prepositions *ἀμφί* and *δίχα* whose spatial meanings of "around; on two sides" deliver the figurative sense.[32] Greek's metaphorical construal of ambiguity may thus appear to coincide with Latin's. On further reflection, however, the meaning engendered by these forms turns out to be quite unlike the image of PATHS DIVERGING underlying the Latin metaphor. The literal sense of *ἀμφί* seems to have to do above all with notions of containment and even concealment: think, for instance, of Hom. *Il.* 13.439, *ῥῆξεν δέ οἱ ἀμφὶ χιτῶνα*, or *Od*. 6.292, *ἐν δὲ κρήνη νάει, ἀμφὶ δὲ λειμών*, where adverbial *ἀμφί* includes the notion of "(completely) surrounding (so as to protect)." Similarly, *δίχα* seems to refer prototypically to static position (rather than to linear motion) "on two sides," as in Thuc. *Hist.* 4.100.2, *κεραίαν μεγάλην δίχα πρίσαντες*, and Xen. *Anab*. 6.4.11, *δίχα τὸ στράτευμα ποιεῖν.* The image of Greek's metaphor is therefore probably closer to that of ENCLOSURE. Indeed, in figurative

usage of *(ἐπ)αμφιβάλλω* and *ἀμφιβολία*, ambiguity is straightforwardly likened to a kind of garment or net.[33] In this light, Greek's metaphors of ambiguity can be called "spatial" only in a very limited sense.

But the difference between the Latin and Greek metaphors amounts to more than a difference in imagery. Because, in a cognitive-linguistic view, metaphors like these involve the transfer of whole systems of concepts from concrete to abstract, each society's way of figuratively conceptualizing ambiguity (reflected in their languages) can often bear significantly on the sorts of inferences its members will tend to make about multiplicity of meaning.[34] Consider the logical consequences of each metaphorical image. In the Greek, ambiguity is an ENCLOSURE that surrounds or encloses or conceals another object. As such, ambiguity renders its "object" (temporarily) inaccessible, and, being something placed on top of and "(completely) around" and "on both sides" of its object, it will also require additional effort to be removed in order to uncover whatever lies beneath. The image thus implies a specific "theory" of linguistic meaning. First, it implies that any expression has both an "outer" meaning, which is in some way contingent, and an "inner" meaning, which represents the true sense of the expression. Second, it implies that ambiguity belongs squarely to the level of "outer" meaning and is, as something obstructing access to "inner" meaning, detrimental to truth. This conception explains why, in the Greek world, as Catherine Atherton writes, "Ambiguity was . . . regarded . . . as a difficulty or defect, something to be coped with, not courted, and eliminated if possible."[35]

By contrast, in the image of the Latin metaphor, ambiguity is a kind of detour from an expression's meaning-path, presenting the availability of alternate meaning-paths "around" or "on both sides of" but nevertheless still towards its true meaning-destination. Understood according to this image, ambiguity does not actually seem to preclude the discovery of true meaning at all, as

implied by the Greek image. In fact, just as a detour on a journey can eventually bring a traveler back to his or her initial path, or provide simply different – but no less achievable – ways of reaching the originally intended destination, under this metaphor ambiguity constitutes merely a different, even if somehow indirect and unforeseen, means of discovering an expression's true meaning. In fact, like a fork in the road, ambiguity emerges not as an obstruction on the way to true meaning that must be avoided at all costs, but rather as a naturally occurring and perhaps even essential part of any meaning-journey: indeed, unlike a garment or other covering, ambiguity in this sense cannot be considered separate from true meaning at all. Ambiguity would thus turn out to be a mode of truth-finding that is as equally feasible as – or at any rate no less acceptable than – what may otherwise have seemed the most direct route. There may even be something appealing and worthwhile about ambiguity, just as stepping off the beaten path can often bring unexpected rewards.

What makes this metaphor a cultural metaphor (and more than just a linguistic curiosity) is that the "theory" of ambiguity implied by the image of PATHS DIVERGING – that ambiguity is in no way preclusive of true meaning – appears to mark Roman society's default ways of valuing ambiguity across different areas of social life. We know that Roman authors, far from avoiding this kind of interpretive uncertainty, frequently employed ambiguity as a part of their imaginative literary expression. As Karl Galinsky has written, "The Romans' concept of *ambiguitas* . . . is more akin to a polysemy which is deployed quite intentionally, and not just by the poets."[36] But ambiguity was also an essential element of Roman religious thought. Maurizio Bettini has suggested that ambiguity in fact typified much of Roman belief about the nature of divinity – and even had its own patron saint, so to speak, in the figure of the god Vertumnus.[37] At the same time, a god could be represented as singular or plural, male or female – a linguistic ambiguity pointing

up the fact that the gods escape humanly defined categories.[38] Ambiguity also characterizes certain distinctly Roman ritual formulas like *sive deus sive dea* and *sive quo alio nomine fas est nominare*, or *sive mas sive femina*, which function as hedges against human fallibility or ignorance in the performance of sacred (or juridical) texts. In circumstances where a single mistake in the performance of religious and legalistic acts was believed to render them invalid, introducing ambiguity ("whether a god or a goddess," "or by whatever other name it is lawful to name," "whether male or female") helped guarantee the efficacy of an utterance by opening simultaneously multiple possible understandings of a truth – the divinity's identity – that lies outside the speaker's own interpretive competence. Far from obscuring an utterance's "true" meaning, the ambiguity enables its ritual efficacy. We also know that Roman society introduced ambiguities of identity between "master" and "slave" and "public" and "private" in festival contexts – especially in the role-inversions of the Saturnalia and Compitalia – as well as in imagining spaces like the luxury garden.[39] Such welcoming of ambiguity in so many and so different circumstances indicates that Roman culture appreciated multiplicity of meaning as a feature of its symbolic world generally, viewing it as not only not inconsistent with, but also in fact determinative of, a kind of truth.

Bibliography

Atherton, C. 1993. *The Stoics on Ambiguity.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Beta, S. 2014. "Enigmi." In *Con i Romani: Un'antropologia della cultura antica,* ed. M. Bettini and W. M. Short, 287–302. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Bettini, M. 2012. *Vertere: Un'antropologia della traduzione nella cultura antica.* Turin: Einaudi.

Bramble, J. 1970. "Structure and Ambiguity in Catullus LXIV." *PCPhS* 16:22–41.

Christol, A. 2007. “Du latin *ambiguus* à l’ambiguïté des linguistes.” In *L’ambiguïté en Grèce et à Rome: approche linguistique*, ed. C. Moussy and A. Orlandini, 9–22. Paris: Presses de l’université Paris-Sorbonne.

Copilowish, I. 1939. “Borderline Cases, Vagueness, and Ambiguity.” *Philosophy of Science* 6 (2):181–95.

Corbeill, A. 2015. *Sexing the World: Grammatical Gender and Biological Sex in Ancient Rome.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Doob. P. 1990. *The Idea of the Labyrinth from Classical Antiquity to the Middle Ages.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Ernout, A. and A. Meillet. *Dictionnaire Etymologique de la Langue Latine*. Paris: Klincksieck.

Evans, H. B. 1978. “Horace, *Satires* 2.7: Saturnalia and Satire.” *Classical Journal* 73 (4):307–12.

Galinsky, K. 1994. “Reading Roman Poetry in the 1990’s.” *Classical Journal* 89:297–309.

Gaisser, J. 1995. “Threads in the Labyrinth: Competing Views and Voices in Catullus 64.” *AJP* 116:579–616.

Inkson, K. 2002. “Thinking Creatively about Careers: The Use of Metaphor.” In *Career Creativity*, ed. M. Peiperl, M. B. Arthur, and N. Anand, 15–34. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Johnson, M. 1987. *The Body in the Mind.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

———. 1993. *Moral Imagination.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Katz, A. and T. Taylor. 2008. “The Journeys of Life: Examining a Conceptual Metaphor with Semantic and Episodic Memory Recall.” *Metaphor and Symbol* 23:148–73.

Kövecses, Z. 2005. *Metaphor in Culture: Universality and Variation.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lakoff, G. and M. Johnson. 1980. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

———. and M. Johnson. 1993. *Philosophy in the Flesh.* New York: Basic Books.

———. and M. Turner. 1989. *More than Cool Reason.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Langacker, R. 2008. *Cognitive Grammar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lucy, J. 1992. *Grammatical Categories and Cognition: A Case Study of the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Manetti, G. 1993. *Theories of the Sign in Classical Antiquity.* Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press.

Moussy, C. 2007. "*Ambiguus, ambiguitas, anceps, utroqueversus* dans le vocabulaire de l'ambiguïté." In *L'ambiguïté en Grèce et à Rome: approche linguistique,* ed. C. Moussy and A. Orlandini, 57–64. Paris: Presses de l'université Paris-Sorbonne.

Palmer, G. 1996. *Toward a Theory of Cultural Linguistics*, Austin, University of Texas Press.

Pucci, J. 2014. "Order, Ambiguity and Authority in Venantius Fortunatus, *Carm*. 3.26." In *Fakes and Forgers of Classical Literature*, ed. J. Martinez, 219–30. Leiden: Brill.

Ritchie, D. 2008. "X is a journey: Embodied simulation in metaphor interpretation." *Metaphor and Symbol* 23:174–99.

Roller, M. 2001. *Constructing Autocracy.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Russell, A. 2015. *The Politics of Public Space in Republican Rome.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Short, W. M. 2012. "A Roman Folk Model of the Mind." *Arethusa* 45 (1):109–47.

Sluiter, I. 1990. *Ancient Grammar in Context.* Amsterdam: VU University Press.

Sluiter, I. 1997. "The Greek Tradition." In *The Emergence of Semantics in Four Linguistic Traditions*, ed. W. J. van Bekkum, J. Houben, I. Sluiter, and K. Versteegh, 147–224. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Spencer, D. 2010. *Roman Landscape: Culture and Identity.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Spencer, D. 2011. "Movement and the Linguistic Turn." In *Rome, Ostia, Pompeii: Movement and Space,* ed. R. Laurence and D. J. Newsome, 57–80. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Stanford, W. B. 1939. *Ambiguity in Greek Literature. Studies in Theory and Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Talmy, L. 2003. *Toward a Cognitive Semantics.* Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Tuggy, D. 1993. "Ambiguity, Polysemy and Vagueness." *Cognitive Linguistics* 4 (3):273–90.

Turner, M. 1996. *The Literary Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

De Vaan, M. 2008. *Etymological Dictionary of Latin and the Other Italic Languages.* Leiden: Brill.

Versnel, H. 1992. *Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion.* Leiden: Brill.

Wallace-Hadrill, A. 1993. "*Horti* and Hellenization." In *Horti Romani*, ed. M. Cima and E. La Rocca, 1–12. Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider.

Williamson, T. 2002. *Vagueness.* London: Routledge.

Zanker, A. 2016. *Greek and Latin Expressions of Meaning.* Munich: Beck.

---

1. I do not mean that Latin speakers were necessarily always conscious of an expression's ambiguity. If this were true, Q. Petillius Spurinus, consul in 176 BCE, probably would not have uttered the words *hodie ego Letum utique capiam,* reportedly spoken before the battle at the Campi Macri, in which he was killed – since the name of the town also means "death" in Latin (see Liv. *AUC.* 14.18.7 and Val. Max. *Mem.* 1.5.9). Likewise, as Cicero recounts (*De div.* 2.84), Marcus

Crassus would not have embarked on his military campaign after hearing the fig-seller shouting *cauneas, cauneas!* – since in addition to the name of a certain kind of fruit, this phrase could also be interpreted (but was not by the Roman general) as *cave ne eas*, i.e., "Beware of going." Omens generally work on this principle: see Beta 2014, 301.

2. See esp. Lakoff and 1980; Johnson 1987 and 1989; Lakoff 1993; Kövecses 2005.

3. See Moussy 2007; *ambiguus* had a wider extension than *ambiguitas*, which was mainly reserved for cases of linguistic polysemy. Cf. also Christol 2007.

4. Cf. Moussy 2007, 57–58.

5. Ernout and Meillet 1939, 17, 24, s.v. *ago, ambages.* We cannot, I think, accept any analysis like that of Pucci 2014, 220, n. 6, "bearing on both sides," which presupposes a derivation from *ambo* + *gerere*. For two reasons: Phonologically, *ambiguus* cannot represent the verbal stem *ger-*, since in compounds this never reduces to *-ig-*, whereas this is exactly the outcome we expect for *ago*: cf. *exiguus* < *ex-ago-*. Semantically, *gerere* would also be completely unmotivated, since Latin does not normally speak of "having" or "bearing" or "carrying" meaning, whereas *agere* neatly fits the linear spatial metaphor. Though expressions like *quot significationes capiat* (Gell. *NA.* 18.7.1) do occur, this "possession" metaphor is not at all conventional in Latin.

6. For a similar set of words that lend themselves to syntactic ambiguity, like *ignarus* ("not knowing" vs. "unknown"), Gellius sometimes uses the label *utroquoversus* "turning both ways," employing an again linear spatial image (e.g., *NA.* 9.12.13, 16, 20); cf. Moussy 2007, 60–61.

7. On conceptual highlighting, see Talmy 2003.

8. For this meaning of *sententia,* cf., e.g., Lucr. *RN*. 4.561–62, *ergo fit sonitum ut possis sentire, neque illam / internoscere, verborum sententiam quae sit*, "Thus it happens that you can hear the sound, but you cannot make out the meaning of the words"; Cic. *Caec*. 57, *cognita sententia interdicti, verba subtiliter exquiri noluerunt*, "When the meaning of the interdict was ascertained, they did not think it necessary to scrutinize the wording too carefully." *Sensus* occurs in this sense especially in the Latin of the empire: e.g., Phaedr. *Fab.* 4.5.19, *nec testamenti potuit sensus colligi*, "The meaning of the will could not be gathered"; Quint. *IO.* 1.9.2, *salvo modo poetae sensu*, "without losing the poet's meaning."

9. For the etymology, see De Vaan 2008, 554. Zanker 2016, 52, still calls the etymology "unclear."

10. Though manifesting the somewhat different surface image of an arrow's "path," the metaphor underpinning the semantic development of Sanskrit *artha* and *lakṣya* "target" > "meaning (of a word)" also suggests it was inherited. The figurative sense of English *drift*, as in "I don't catch your drift" seems to be based on a similar metaphor.

11. Except, perhaps, in the fixed formula *sensim et pedetemptim*. Since in other semantic pairings of this kind the second term typically glosses and also specifies the meaning of the first term, *sensim* may here exhibit some trace of its root's literal meaning: cf. *gradatim et pedetemptim*.

12, Johnson 1987, 113–14; see also Johnson 1993, esp. 166 and Turner 1996. Katz and Taylor 2008 and Ritchie 2008 provide experimental evidence for the psychological reality of this schema.

13. For the formal description of image-schematic structure, see esp. Langacker 2008.

14. Johnson 1987, 114–17, gives the details of this metaphor, along with ample evidence of its linguistic expression in English.

15. Inkson 2002 discusses the metaphor in English, with copious examples; for *cursus honorum*, see Spencer 2011, 64.

16. Zanker 2016, 31–35. *Quid hoc sibi vult?* and similar expressions used in reference to verbal utterances are very likely an extension of personal constructions like *quid igitur sibi volt pater?* (Ter. *Andr*. 375).

17. Through the regular metonymy "(SPOKEN) WORDS STAND FOR THE CONCEPTS THEY EXPRESS": see Lakoff and Turner 1989, 108.

18. Via the same metonymy "A CONTAINER STANDS FOR ITS CONTENTS" that is operative in English *meaning* < **men-* "mind." Cf. Zanker 2016, 45.

19. Perhaps by influence of Greek (esp. Platonic) models: e.g., Plat. *Crat.* 394b, *ἐν ἄλλοις παντάπασιν γράμμασίν ἐστιν ἡ τοῦ ὀνόματος δύναμις*; cf. *Crit*. 113a. For the Greek vocabulary of "meaning," see Sluiter 1997, 151–55. Cf. Zanker 2016, 41–42.

20. Again probably reflecting Greek usage, where *σημεῖον*, literally, "a sign, marker," had the sense of "meaning": see Manetti 1993. See Zanker 2016, 84–86, which suggests the metaphor instead emerges through a transference from animate silent communication to inanimate phenomena (including abstractions like words).

21. In Latin, mental apprehension is normally construed in terms of a haptic metaphor (i.e., "UNDERSTANDING IS GRASPING"): for the mapping, see Short 2012. Sweetser 1990 has shown that this metaphor in fact operates in a large number of Indo-European languages.

22. Zanker 2016, 54–56, analyzes the metaphor as one of mental intention, but as mental activity was often conceptualized in terms of spatial motion (see Short 2012), this begs the question.

23. E.g., Plaut. *Curc.* 434, *quod te praesente isti egi, teque interprete;* Cic. *Fam.* 10.11.3, *utor in hac re adiutoribus interpretibusque fratre meo et Laterense et Eurnio nostro.* Cf. Ernout and Meillet 1965, 320.

24. See Bettini 2012, ch. 5, for discussion of the "commercial" dimension of *interpres.* Cf. Zanker 2016, 64.

25. On this term, see esp. Moussy 2007, 59–60.

26. On the "rehabilitation" of vagueness in philosophy of language, see Williamson 2002, 70–95. The mainline view begins perhaps with Copilowish 1939.

27. So, for example, Latin *ius* would be considered a case of ambiguity, since there is probably no context in which both its meanings of "law; right; justice" and "soup, broth" could reasonably be activated (except perhaps a humorous one: cf. Plaut. *Poen.* 584, *iuris coctiores*, "better versed in law" or, punningly, "more cooked in (?) broth"). By contrast, *sermo* would be considered vague, since it is context that determines whether this word is interpreted as "oration," "conversation," "language," "word," or in any of its other numerous possible senses.

28. See Tuggy 1993 for ambiguity and vagueness in cognitive linguistics. On this account, ambiguity is the perception that arises when there is no salient concept covering a word's multiple senses: e.g., English *bank* is ambiguous because the closest category including both its senses of "financial institution" and "land at river's edge" is probably "thing." Vagueness is the perception that arises when, instead, a highly salient concept exists: so *uncle* is vague because in a society with a bilateral kinship system "parent's brother" is a more relevant concept than either "father's brother" or "mother's brother."

29. On ancient linguistic (especially Stoic) thought in relation to modern semantic theory, see Long 2005 and Sluiter 1990.

30. See Bramble 1970 and Gaisser 1995; cf. Doob 1990.

31. As shown by Short 2012, 118–19. In some late medieval Latin texts, however, the "darkness" metaphor appears to be making inroads: cf., e.g., Petrarch, *De viris illustribus* pr. 1, *omnem historie sue textum nebulosis ambagibus . . . involverunt.*

32. In *δίφατος*, *δίληπτος*, *δίλημμα* there is a metaphor from verbal utterance, ambiguity being conceived as what "speaks" two things at once; in *λοξότης* and *ἀμφίλοξος* the image is of "slantedness" or "crookedness." Greek also utilizes a weaponry image, conceptualizing ambiguity as "two edged": e.g., *ἀμφιδέξιος*, *ἀμφήκης*.

33. A similar "enclosing" or "covering" metaphor is detectable in Arabic in the semantic structure of *labs* "garment" > "ambiguity" and *multabis* "clothed" > "ambiguous."

34. In this sense, cognitive linguistics entails a weak version of the so-called Sapir-Whorf ("linguistic relativity") hypothesis, or the idea that the structure of a language, including its metaphorical structure, determines – in the sense of "limits" – its speakers' possible pathways of thought. Insofar as a language's expressions reflect its speakers' conceptualizations, the categories in terms of which they habitually speak about some domain will tend to bias thought, all other things being equal: see esp. Lucy 1992.

35. Atherton 2007, 24; see also Stanford 1939, 12–24.

36. Galinksy 1994, 305.

37. Bettini 2014.

38. Cf. Corbeill 2015, 104–42.

39. On role ambiguity in festival contexts, see Roller 2001, 269; Versnel 1992, esp. 150–57; and Evans 1978. On the spatial ambiguities of the luxury garden, see Wallace-Hadrill 1998 as well as Spencer 2010, especially 10–30. For monumental spaces like the Forum and Comitium, see Russell 2015.