

# I. A. RICHARD'S IDEA OF SLEEPING METAPHOR VS LIVE METAPHOR

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Accepted: 09.11.2022

Published: 01.12.2022

**Keywords:** Metaphor, I. A. Richards, Communication, Language, Human Development.

## Abstract

*According to I. A. Richards function of a work of art is to transfer an experience or to communicate an emotional idea. For this successful communication certain conditions need to be fulfilled both on the part of reader and the poet. The efficacy to ensure effective communication on part of a reader as explained in Practical Criticism includes avoiding barriers of communication. In the same manner, a poet must possess several characteristics among which inevitable is the command of metaphor. In 1920s, Cambridge critic, I.A. Richards proposed that language is not a signalling system rather it is the instrument of all human development. A metaphor, according to Richards, "is the omnipresent principle of language." This paper attempts to read I. A. Richards' metaphors and how use of metaphor may be taught to understand the language that constitutes our world.*

## Paper Identification



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Language is constitutive of our world; whatever we perceive of the world is through language only. In simple terms, it is considered a tool of communication, which enables human beings to exchange their utterances through verbal or sign systems. From Plato to Rousseau, Kant to Wittgenstein, all theorists have deliberated on the concept of language. Various theories have been proposed for the study of and on language.

In 1920s, Cambridge critic, I.A. Richards proposed that language is not a signalling system rather it is the instrument of all human development. It becomes the substitute for real experience and as Richards says, "...does what the institutions of sensation by themselves cannot do" (*The Philosophy of Rhetoric*). In his study of language, Richards pay special attention to metaphors. A metaphor, according to Richards, "is the omnipresent principle of language" (*The Philosophy of Rhetoric* 92). According to him a "command on metaphor" means a "command on life" (*Philosophy of Rhetoric*).

Richards divides metaphors in two parts- dead (or sleeping) and active (or live). Dead Metaphor is one, which has been used up so much that it no longer

holds the vitality required to be a metaphor. It has become part of the popular culture and unlike live metaphor; it no longer contains a novel or original idea. Its figurative elements have become literal and at times have been added as meanings proper in a dictionary. A dead metaphor occurs due to semantic shift in the history of language.

For instance, “leg of a table” is an expression where “leg” is the tenor which is being carried over through the vehicle “table”. With an over usage of the expression it has become conventional and literally mean the supporting organ of a table, just like legs of any other animal. More examples of the same could be, “time is running out”, “branches of government”, “higher than a kite” etc. In all these expressions, the words “running”, “branches”, “higher than kite” hold a literal meaning of their own but when put to metaphorical use in the above given context come across as sleeping.

Live metaphors, on the other hand, still retain the vitality and novelty and have a meaning different from the original meaning. It is an expression, which has been applied metaphorically to an object for the first time. Striking new comparisons like T. S. Eliot’s comparison of the evening sky to a “patient etherized upon a table” is an example of live metaphor.

The dead metaphors usually account for expressions that are clichéd, overused and repeated multiple times. Josef Stern counters this proposition through an example. He says “Juliet is the sun” can never be a dead metaphor even though it has been used repeatedly and regularly (The Life and Death of a Metaphor 8). I. A. Richards also claims the same when he says considering such metaphors dead would make, “Shakespeare the faultiest writer who ever held a pen” (*The Philosophy of Rhetoric*).

The distinction of dead and live metaphor prove that metaphors are gradable by nature i.e., a metaphor

dead in one context can be alive in other context. An example for such a condition could be Bible written in old world languages like Hebrew, Greek, etc. It contains a myriad of dead metaphors, which have completely lost their metaphoric value in everyday life but remain alive in context of the Bible. Josef Stern quotes some examples in his essay, “You plucked up a vine from Egypt; You expelled nations and planted it” (80, 9) (5). When one reads such verses in scripture, the metaphor “planted” appears live but otherwise it is dead.

Cornelia Müller in her book, *Metaphors Dead and Alive, Sleeping and Waking*, challenges the distinction between dead and live metaphor by providing empirical evidence. She believes that there are some metaphors, which are alive for one speaker or writer and dead for another. She therefore introduces a distinction between dead metaphors: transparent dead metaphors and opaque dead metaphors. The former category belongs to those metaphors, which are completely dead, and the latter are the ones that can be revived or were alive at the time of writing or speaking.

She takes an example from a heading of a newspaper report and picks the expression, “to put in shade”. At the outset, this metaphor seems dead, but Müller focuses on the context of the statement and how it is pictorially represented. In the picture a person lower in rank is looking at the shadow of his senior thus, pointing out the fact that for the journalist of the report at the time of writing and while searching for pictures, the metaphor was alive.

Poetry is usually considered full of dead metaphors like, “checkered career”, “walk of life”, “foot of mountain”. There are some dead metaphors that are no longer used in everyday language as they have completely lost their metaphoricity and are rather used as phrases, idioms, and even puns. For example,

“kicking the bucket”, “eye of the needle” etc. Nevertheless,

I.A. Richards believes in the power of poet to rekindle metaphoricality of a dead metaphor.

One such poet is Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai who brings alive some of the dead metaphors in his poems. For Instance, the expression “quietly your body waited for the seasons to change” in the poem, “In My Time, In Your Place”. Here, “seasons” signify passage of time just like Wordsworth in Tintern Abbey does when he says, “length/ Of five long winters”. These poets have revived a sleeping metaphor like “seasons” to life.

Live or dead, we are always surrounded by metaphors, which go unnoticed in general. It is the speaker or writer, who enlivens or kills a metaphor. Richards explicates this as a germ in the hands of poet who solely owes the onus of creating a plant. Thus, activity of a metaphor is less dependent on the number of times a metaphor has been used but more on the detail as to how it has been used. While Aristotle says command of metaphor is a unique gift of the poet, Richards refutes it by saying that the use of metaphor may be taught and is not an unachievable talent.

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