Linguistics *for* Everyone

An Introduction

Second Edition

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Making New Meanings: Figurative Language

figurative language nonliteral language; language that shifts meaning from the primary meaning of the word

Often, particularly in discussions of literature, we talk about language being **figurative**, or expressing *nonliteral* meanings, meanings that do not conform to the *primary meaning* of a word. Primary meanings of words are listed first in dictionary definitions and are the most typical or common meanings we associate with a word. And though we may think that the use of figurative language is confined to stories and poems, in fact, *most* of our everyday language use is nonliteral, from what we say in casual conversation to what we hear in a weather report on the news to political speeches. We think of objective writing and speaking, conveying "just the facts," as less figurative than literary language. On some level, this might be true, but as C. S. Lewis points out in his short treatise on language, *Studies in Words* (1990), "By his metaphor [discussed in next section] the speaker is trying to communicate what he believes to be a fact." That is, we can still express "facts" figuratively. When we say "He was madder than a hornet" or "I bombed that test," we are using nonliteral meanings of *hornet* and *bombed*. And what about when we say "Why the long face?" We aren't commenting on the length of someone's jaw but rather on their mood; and when we say "I see what you mean," we are using *see* to mean 'to understand' rather than 'to perceive with the eye'.

Language Alive!

Shifts in Meaning: Progress or Decay?

Though semantic shift is inevitable and very common, some language purists see it as a kind of language decay. Two examples of shifts that are often thought of this way are *imply/infer* and *affect/effect*. The verb *imply* traditionally meant 'to suggest without explicitly stating', and *infer* meant 'to arrive at a conclusion based on evidence.' So, when someone says, "We'd better go," he or she is *implying* that it is time to leave. If someone says, "I missed my bus," you can *infer* that he or she did not get to the bus stop on time. Due to their similarity in meaning, *imply* and *infer* are often used interchangeably. And *affect* and *effect*? The verb *affect* (with stress on the second syllable) traditionally meant 'to influence', as in 'The new process affects how we make cheese.' The verb *effect* means 'to create', as in 'The new process will effect a change in how we make cheese.' The fact that these words are pronounced identically by most speakers contributes to their tendency to be used interchangeably. Also, both words can be nouns with different meanings, but we don't mix these up as often as we do the verbs, though we do often misspell them.

Many writers are even commended for their use of figurative language to convey scientific (and presumably objective) ideas. Physician Lewis Thomas, well known for his lyrical essays on the human condition, describes the relationship between sea anemones and crabs in the following way:

> The anemones who live on the shells of crabs are precisely finicky; so are the crabs. Only a single species of anemone will find its way to only a single species of crab. They sense each other exquisitely, and live together as though made for each other. (1979: 4)

By describing the relationship between sea anemones and crabs figuratively, Thomas conveys not just his thoughts on the habits of marine creatures but also his thoughts on human relationships.

Contrast Thomas's description of the behavior of the sea anemone with the following description from *The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia* (2005), which is more technical and relies on primary meanings:

> Most sea anemones attach temporarily to submerged objects; a few thrust themselves into the sand or live in furrows; a few are parasitic on other marine organisms . . .

It might be argued, then, that the distinction between figurative language and objective, factual language is rather fuzzy, and it is perhaps not surprising that the linguistic properties of figurative language are a topic of some debate. For Aristotle, figurative language is a rhetorical device that is distinct from the standard use and meaning of language. Philosopher John Searle takes a similar view in his 1979 article "Metaphor." For the Romantics, on the other hand, figurative language is part of the imagination, central to how we see the world. From this perspective, there is no distinction at all between literal and nonliteral language. Still another view of figurative language, somewhere between the Aristotelian and Romantic models, is the position taken by linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980: 4), who argue that figurative language reflects much about our cognition and conceptual structure but that there is still a distinction, though not as great a one as Aristotle or Searle would propose, between literal and nonliteral language.

The role of figurative (nonliteral) language in creating and reflecting how we conceive of our world is complex and relevant to the larger question of the relationship between language and thought (something we take up in more detail in the following chapter). On the one hand, figurative language provides a tool to express a vast range of meaning beyond the primary meanings of words (if, in fact, we can designate certain meanings as primary, a proposal to which a Romantic might object). On the other hand, not all meaning can be expressed through language; some meaning is better expressed visually, through physical movement, drawing, and so on. (For example, try to describe the meaning of the word *spiral* or the way scissors

work without using your hands.) Below, we examine some of the ways in which we use figurative language and discuss how such language creates meaning.

Connecting Meanings: Metaphor

metaphor nonliteral meaning of one word or phrase describes another word or phrase (*My car is a lemon.*)

Perhaps the most recognizable use of figurative language is **metaphor**. A metaphor, as Aristotle conceived it and as we still understand it, is a figure of speech that sets up an analogy between two words or phrases: *something is something else*. The word ultimately comes from the Greek *metaphero,* meaning 'to carry over' or 'transfer.'

As mentioned, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) take the position that there is no real distinction between metaphors and literal speech because metaphorical meanings actually reflect our conceptual structures, how we view the world. Lakoff and Johnson also argue that these metaphorical conceptual structures influence how we behave. Metaphor for Lakoff and Johnson is not a rhetorical device but rather a way of perceiving the world that is woven throughout ordinary language. They provide examples of metaphors such as the following to support this claim:

Time is money

we spend it, waste it, save it, don't have it, invest it, budget it,
lose it

Argument as war

your claims are indefensible

you attacked every weak point in my argument

your criticisms were right on target

I've never won an argument with you

you shot down all my arguments

To what extent, if at all, do you think such metaphors shape our perspective and our behavior?

hwæt!

The word *lemon*, used to refer to a malfunctioning vehicle, narrowed in meaning from the early 1900s slang meaning of *lemon*: something bad or undesirable or which fails to meet one's expectations. It has now expanded again to mean any item that is unsatisfactory or defective.

Types of Metaphors

dead metaphor metaphor that is so common that it goes unnoticed as a metaphor (*I see your point.*)

Dead metaphors **Dead metaphors** are those that are so conventionalized in everyday speech that we don't even realize they are metaphors. Metaphors of sight provide some examples: *I see your point. I'll take a look at your paper for you. He is blind to new ideas*. These uses of *see*, *look*, and *blind* have nothing to do with visual perception; we use *see* as a synonym for *understand*, *blind* to express intentional lack of understanding, and *take a look* to mean 'investigate'. (Lakoff and Johnson argue that because these metaphors are so commonly used, they are not really dead at all but very productive.)

Another example of a truly dead metaphor is *broadcast*, which began as a metaphorical use of the casting of seeds broadly; today, it is not likely that anyone makes a connection with the spreading of seed.

We do have to *learn* that these are dead, however, as evidenced by some children's use and understanding of these words. A child who overhears the sentence *He can be so blind sometimes!* might ask, "Is he really blind?" And one child, knowing that *say* means 'to utter', said about a sign: "The sign wrote . . ." rather than "The sign said . . ." She had not yet learned the metaphorical meaning of *say*.

mixed metaphor metaphor that comprises parts of different metaphors: *hit the nail on the jackpot* combines *hit the nail on the head* and *hit the jackpot*

Mixed metaphors **Mixed metaphors** are those in which parts of different metaphors are telescoped into one utterance. This mixing can occur for a variety of reasons. The following examples were taken from the University of Illinois at Chicago website (http://tigger.uic.edu/~rramakri/Readings/Fun/Mixed-Metaphors.htm):

She grabbed the bull by the horns, and ran with it.
I've hit the nail on the jackpot.
I'm shooting from the seat of my pants.
You're pulling my leg over my eyes.
I'm flying by the edge of my seat.
Beware my friend . . . you are skating on hot water.
I would not trust him with a ten-foot pole.
We're robbing Peter to pay the piper.
I can see the carrot at the end of the tunnel.

We might come up with "hit the nail on the jackpot" because the two source metaphors ("hit the nail on the head" and "hit the jackpot") overlap in meaning ('to achieve a goal of some kind') and/or because they both include the verb *hit*. We might produce "flying by the edge of my seat" because both "flying by the seat of my pants" and "on the edge of my seat" have related meanings (unplanned action that may include fear and anxiety) and/or because both metaphors include the word *seat*.

RPE 9.18

personification attribution of human qualities to something that is not human

Personification **Personification**, another subtype of metaphorical language, gives human attributes to something that is not human. (For some, there is overlap between personification and *anthropomorphism*, but others argue that anthropomorphism is more specific, ascribing human qualities to gods, while others believe anthropomorphism to be more general that just language use; for example, ascribing human characteristics to nonhuman form in art.)

The steeples swam in the mist.
The gates opened their arms.
The project ate up all my time.
The cold knocked me out.