Why Do People Use Figurative Language?

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Research Article

WHY DO PEOPLE USE FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE?

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Abstract—*In this article, we examine the discourse goals that are accomplished by the use of eight forms of figurative language: hyperbole, idiom, indirect request, irony, understatement, metaphor, rhetorical question, and simile. Subjects were asked to provide reasons why they would use a particular figure of speech. Based on their responses, a discourse goal taxonomy that includes each of the eight figures was developed. The goal taxonomy indicates that each figure of speech is used to accomplish a unique constellation of communicative goals. The degree of goal overlap between the eight forms was also calculated, and the results provide support for theoretical claims about the relatedness of certain figures. Taken together, the goal taxonomy and overlap scores broaden our understanding of functional and theoretical differences between the various kinds of figurative language.*

Figurative language is not uncommon or exclusively poetic; it is a ubiquitous part of spoken and written discourse (Kreuz, Roberts, Johnson, & Bertus, in press; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Pollio, Smith, & Pollio, 1990). Unfortunately, figurative language is not always clear or precise. A speaker who metaphorically states, "My aunt is an elephant," may be referring to girth, length of nose, or fondness for peanuts. If discourse participants cooperate by expressing themselves as clearly, concisely, and completely as possible, as Grice (1975, 1978) hypothesized, then potentially ambiguous figurative language must accomplish certain communicative goals better than literal language (Gerrig & Gibbs, 1988; Glucksberg, 1989; Kreuz, Long, & Church, 1991). That is, the benefits of using figuration must outweigh potential costs of being misunderstood.

Research on figurative language has focused predominantly on the comprehension, and not the production, of the various figures. This extensive study of comprehension has yielded many important results (for reviews, see Kreuz & Roberts, 1993; Pollio et al., 1990). One result is the repeated demonstration that, when sufficient context is provided, it takes no more time to understand figurative expressions than to understand literal ones (Hoffman & Kemper, 1987). Because of this result, some researchers have rejected the literal–figurative distinction as being of little psychological value. Gibbs (1982, 1984, 1989) recommended that researchers stop debating what is and is not literal, and instead adopt an approach based on speech act theory (Austin, 1961, 1962; Bach & Harnish, 1979; Cohen & Perrault, 1979; D'Andrade & Wish, 1985; Grice, 1975, 1978; Searle, 1969, 1979). According to speech act theory, discourse participants comprehend utterances when they recognize the underlying goals and intentions of the other participants (Allen & Perrault, 1986). Understanding when and why an utterance is produced is crucial in understanding its meaning. The focus of this article, therefore, is to identify specific discourse goals associated with the production of different types of figurative language.

Before these goals can be derived empirically, it must be established which utterances are figurative, and which types of figuration are psychologically important. Clear-cut distinctions concerning figurative utterances are difficult (Honeck, 1986). It is possible to categorize figures of speech in various ways. One guide identifies hundreds of figures (Lanham, 1991), but includes many rhetorical devices that are not really nonliteral (e.g., *apodioxis*: indignantly rejecting an argument as false). In the psychological literature, eight distinct types of nonliteral language have emerged (Kreuz & Roberts, 1993). These are *hyperbole* (exaggeration: "I'd rather be boiled in oil than take his class"); *idiom* (a meaning not obtainable from a literal interpretation: "He let the cat out of the bag"); *indirect request* (a command phrased as a comment or question: "I sure could use the salt"); *irony* (typically, a statement contrary to an intended meaning: "Another gorgeous day!" uttered during a thunderstorm); *understatement* (presenting something as less significant than it is: saying that "Ted was a little tipsy" when Ted was very drunk); *metaphor* (implicit comparison: "Cigarettes are time bombs"); *rhetorical question* (a question that does not require an answer: "How may times must I tell you?"); and *simile* (explicit comparison: "Cigarettes are like time bombs"). These eight figures seem to form the basic categories (à la Rosch, Mervis, Gray, Johnson, & Boyes-Braem, 1976) of nonliteral language. These categories have been recognized and discussed by many literary scholars, regardless of their categorization schemes. They also have been examined by psychologists to some degree (see Barlow, Kerlin, & Pollio, 1970; Gibbs, in press).

ANALYZING THE SPECIFIC GOALS OF THE EIGHT FIGURES

Relatively few researchers have addressed the specific discourse goals that underlie the use of figuration. Gerrig and Gibbs (1988) posited that figurative language can be used to establish intimacy between some discourse participants while excluding others. Glucksberg (1989) proposed that metaphors can be more precise and informative than literal statements. Glucksberg and Keysar (1990) suggested that metaphors are easier to understand than similes.

In one study (Long & Kreuz, 1993), subjects explained the goals fulfilled by using irony, idioms, and rhetorical questions. As a measure of convergent validity, other subjects explained why characters in short scenarios made ironic or idiomatic statements or asked rhetorical questions. The goals provided in the scenario contexts were almost identical to those elicited

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more directly. This result suggests that individuals can accurately articulate their metacognitive knowledge about the uses of figurative language.

In the present study, we wanted to derive a goal taxonomy that would encompass a wide variety of figures of speech and specify precisely the discourse goals that are accomplished by using these figures. If each figure is used to satisfy particular discourse goals, then the relations between the figures can be considered in terms of the unique and shared goals they fulfill. These empirically derived goal relations can be compared with theoretical relations that have been proposed previously.

METHOD

Subjects

One hundred fifty-eight Memphis State University undergraduate students participated for course credit. Subjects were assigned randomly to one of eight conditions: hyperbole, idiom, indirect request, irony, understatement, metaphor, rhetorical question, and simile. Nineteen to 21 subjects participated in each condition.

Materials

Each subject received a booklet containing instructions, a definition and 10 examples of one particular figure, space to provide 3 additional examples of that figure, and a page on which to provide the reasons why an individual might use that figure of speech.

Procedure

Subjects were instructed that they would learn about one figure of speech through a definition and examples. Their task was to provide three additional examples of this figure and to list the reasons why an individual might use it. Subjects were encouraged to list as many reasons as possible; however, no minimum or maximum was specified. Asking subjects to produce examples ensured that they had an adequate understanding of their figure.

A goal taxonomy was created by examining the responses for all the figures. To ensure reliability, two judges independently classified each response into a taxonomy. An acceptable level of interjudge agreement was set at 75% (averaged across all conditions). Once acceptable agreement was achieved, the two judges attempted to resolve any discrepancies that remained.

The number of goal statements generated by a subject is not necessarily equivalent to the number of goals generated by that subject. For example, a subject might list, "to be funny," "to be comical," and "to be a clown." Although the judges would classify each response individually, only one unique discourse goal is being satisfied (i.e., "to be humorous"). Therefore, "to be humorous" would be entered into the taxonomy once, and not three times, for this subject. In addition, single responses could be classified into multiple categories. For example, "to show feelings" was coded as meeting two goals: "to show positive emotion" and "to show negative emotion." Therefore, all analyses are based on the number of unique goals in the taxonomy, and not the number of responses.

RESULTS

Although 158 subjects participated, only 134 (84%) demonstrated sufficient understanding of their figure by producing at least two acceptable examples of it. Only these subjects are included in the data analyses. The percentage of subjects remaining in each condition ranged from 70% to 95%.

A goal taxonomy was created and modified repeatedly to achieve acceptable reliability. Overall interjudge agreement was 67% for the first taxonomy and increased to 75% by the fourth attempt. After the judges resolved the discrepancies that remained, agreement rose to 98%. This final taxonomy appears as Table 1. Percentages for goals provided by at least one third of the subjects in each condition appear in boldface type; these are the most important discourse goals for each figure.

Thirteen responses were regarded by both judges as too vague or idiosyncratic to fit into the taxonomy. For example, in the understatement condition, one subject wrote, "Maybe a person does not know specifics, or have a strong opinion." In such cases, the judges classified the response as "other," and the percentage of "other" responses appears at the bottom of Table 1. Ten responses remained as disagreements between the judges. For example, each judge had a different opinion about how to classify "expressive method of verbalization" as a response in the metaphor condition. The percentage of disagreement for each figure appears at the bottom of Table 1.

Virtually all of the subjects' responses were classified according to 19 discourse goals. Because the number of subjects varies over conditions, the number of times each goal was uniquely provided by a subject has been standardized using percentages. A blank space in Table 1 indicates that no subject provided that goal for that particular figure. Because each subject could provide several goals, the numbers in each column do not sum to 1.

Each subject generated at least 1 goal for his or her figure; the largest number generated by any subject was 10. The mean number of unique goals generated per subject was 3.21, ranging from 2.86 for indirect request to 3.75 for understatement. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) failed to reveal a significant difference in the mean number of goals across the eight conditions, $F(7, 126) < 1$.

Because each figure of speech shares certain discourse goals with other figures, the figures can be said to overlap to varying degrees. For example, every goal provided for hyperbole was also provided for understatement; however, not every goal provided for understatement was provided for hyperbole. A closer look shows that the most frequent goals for hyperbole ("to clarify," "to emphasize," and "to be humorous") are only weakly shared with understatement, while the most frequent goals for understatement ("to deemphasize" and "to show negative emotion") are only weakly shared with hyperbole.

A method for computing overlap between two sets of re-

Table 1. *The discourse goal taxonomy with percentages of subjects reporting each goal*

Discourse goal	Figure of speech							
	Hyperbole	Understatement	Irony	Metaphor	Simile	Idiom	Indirect request	Rhetorical question
To be conventional	.22	.13	.06	.24	.06	.38	.14	.11
To be unconventional		.13	.06			.13		.06
To be eloquent	.06	.06	.06	.35	.22	.19	.07	
To be humorous	.61	.25	.65		.33	.44	.07	
To protect the self		.31	.06			.06	.57	.17
To compare similarities				.35	.33			
To contrast differences		.06	.18	.06				
To emphasize	.67	.31	.35	.24	.11	.31	.07	.28
To de-emphasize		.75			.11	.06	.07	
To add interest	.33	.06	.24	.71	.22	.31		
To provoke thought	.22	.06	.29	.35	.39	.06		.22
To differentiate groups		.06	.12		.06	.13		
To clarify	.83	.13	.35	.82	.94	.38	.07	.72
To be polite		.06				.06	.64	
To get attention	.11	.25	.18	.12	.11	.13		.17
To show positive emotion	.11	.31	.18	.06	.06	.19	.21	.28
To show negative emotion	.17	.69	.94		.17	.31		.56
To guide another's actions			.06			.06	.64	.06
To manage the discourse	.06	.13	.18	.06			.21	.39
Other		.19	.06	.12	.06		.14	.17
Disagreements	.11		.12	.18		.06		.11

Note. Percentages in boldface indicate goals listed by at least one third of the subjects in that condition.

sponses was formulated by Graesser (1981, p. 224). This overlap score measures the proportion of responses that are common to any two answer distributions. An overlap score can range from 0 (no overlap) to 1.0 (perfect overlap). Overlap scores for the 19 goals were calculated according to Graesser's formula to gauge the similarity between all 28 pairs of figures (metaphor and simile, metaphor and irony, etc.). The goals associated with metaphor and simile overlapped most (.71), while metaphor and indirect request overlapped least (.15). An overlap matrix appears in Table 2.

It is also possible to assess the degree to which, on average, the discourse goals of each figure overlap with the goals of all the other figures. The mean overlap scores were .54 for idiom, .53 for hyperbole, .53 for irony, .50 for rhetorical question, .49 for simile, .45 for understatement, .45 for metaphor, and .24 for indirect request. A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant difference in these overlap scores, $F(7, 48) = 2.97$, $p = .01$. A Duncan multiple-range test indicated that the mean overlap score for indirect request was significantly lower than the mean overlap for the other figures.

Table 2. *Matrix of overlap scores for the eight figures of speech*

Figure of speech	Hyperbole	Understatement	Metaphor	Irony	Simile	Idiom	Indirect request
Understatement	.40						
Metaphor	.63	.27					
Irony	.64	.61	.42				
Simile	.67	.36	.71	.52			
Idiom	.66	.58	.48	.68	.57		
Indirect request	.19	.36	.15	.24	.16	.29	
Rhetorical question	.56	.57	.48	.62	.47	.53	.31

DISCUSSION

These results suggest that specific discourse goals can be accomplished by using specific figures of speech. In many cases, a discourse goal can be fulfilled by more than one figure. For example, speakers can be humorous by using hyperbole, irony, a simile, or an idiom. However, certain goals are generally accomplished through the use of one particular figure. Among the eight figures, only indirect requests fulfill the goal "to be polite." Consequently, some figures share more discourse goals than others. The degree to which two figures of speech share discourse goals can be described as their "pragmatic overlap."

This goal taxonomy can be used to address theoretical claims about the various figures. Consider two of the most widely studied figures of speech: metaphor and simile. According to the taxonomy, the goals fulfilled by metaphor and simile exhibit the greatest overlap. This result is not surprising because the only difference between the structure of these two figures is the word *like* or *as*. Metaphor and simile share several predictable goals: "to compare similarities," "to provoke thought," and "to clarify." There are, however, important discourse goals that set these two figures apart. The goals "to be humorous" and "to deemphasize" were supplied for simile, but not for metaphor. Although "to be humorous" was supplied proportionally more often for other figures (e.g., for irony), a third of the subjects supplied it for simile. Furthermore, although "to deemphasize" was supplied for simile by a small proportion of the subjects (.11), it was never supplied for metaphor.

This result is consistent with Glucksberg and Keysar's (1990) intuitions about functional differences between metaphor and simile. Glucksberg and Keysar considered metaphors more forceful comparisons than similes and argued that converting a metaphor into a simile hedges or qualifies the comparison. For example, the simile "My surgeon is like a butcher" is a weaker indictment than the metaphor "My surgeon is a butcher." Because a comparison using a simile may be considered less strong than one using a metaphor, a simile may aid a listener in determining that a comparison is not intended quite as seriously.

The forcefulness of metaphor does, however, seem to give it an advantage that simile lacks: Metaphors seem to be more interesting. Over three times as many subjects provided the discourse goal "to add interest" for metaphor than for simile. It seems somewhat counterintuitive that the goal "to be humorous" does not entail the goal "to add interest." However, these two goals were both supplied by at least 30% of the subjects for only hyperbole and idiom. (Similarly, when Kreuz et al., in press, classified occurrence and co-occurrence of the eight figures in short stories, they discovered that hyperbole was often an implicit part of idioms.) For the other six figures, "to be humorous" was not strongly associated with the goal "to add interest."

This taxonomy can also be used to examine broader claims about the figures themselves. Consider, for example, indirect request, the figure that had the smallest degree of overlap with the other figures. The three main goals provided for indirect request ("to protect the self," "to be polite," and "to guide another's actions") were not supplied by more than a third of the subjects in any other condition. Technically, indirect requests are not figurative; unlike metaphor or irony, an indirect request expresses veridical information. If someone says, "I sure could use a beer," the statement is not untrue. There is, however, a conventional illocutionary force that accompanies the utterance: "Bring me a beer."

Studies of comprehension time indicate that the processing of indirect requests is temporally similar to the processing of other figures (e.g., Gibbs, 1981). Because of the similarities in processing times, it is not surprising that researchers often blur the distinctions between figures of speech by using the terms "metaphorical" and "figurative" interchangeably (e.g., Pollio et al., 1990). Honeck (1986), however, has argued that "these forms cannot be indiscriminately lumped together (e.g., as 'metaphors'). Indeed, an evitable part of theoretical progress consists in forging distinctions that were not clear or went unrecognized in the early stages of research" (pp. 26–27). The results of the present study suggest that indirect requests are functionally very different from the more nonliteral figures, and this finding seems to support Honeck's claim.

Clearly, further validation of the discourse goal taxonomy is warranted. Although theoretically based claims about the figures of speech are consistent with our results, it is crucial to verify all intuitively based taxonomies with samples of naturally occurring language. The goals that are accomplished when the figures are used may be different from intuitions about how the figures can be used. However, metacognitive information about when to use certain linguistic forms does correlate with dis-

course goals identified by subjects in short scenarios (Long & Kreuz, 1993).

One study that examined naturally occurring language does support part of this taxonomy. Long and Graesser (1988) constructed a taxonomy of wit by analyzing the kinds of remarks that made people laugh on the "Tonight" and "Phil Donahue" shows. The figures of speech in the taxonomy of wit, therefore, should be comparable to the figures that elicited the goal "to be humorous" in the present study. Four of the six figures for which any subject supplied the goal "to be humorous" do appear in the taxonomy of wit. The figures that appear in both studies are hyperbole ("overstatement"), irony, understatement, and idiom ("transformations of frozen expressions"). The only two figures considered humorous by the subjects in the present study but not mentioned by Long and Graesser are simile and indirect request. However, only 1 subject supplied this goal for indirect request. As for simile, Long and Graesser may not have explicitly examined their corpus for this figure. It would be interesting to determine whether the jokes that used comparisons were more often similes or metaphors. The taxonomy of wit also includes "replies to rhetorical questions" as one of the conditions for humor. The unexpected reply to such a question may explain its humor, and also why humor was not considered a goal of rhetorical questions in the present study.

A final caveat should be mentioned. Although it is logical to assume that subjects are exposed to these eight figures frequently (see Kreuz et al., in press, for estimates in literature), our subjects may not have had any knowledge about specific classifications of figures. Consequently, we had to train our subjects to recognize and produce one of the figures to ensure they understood the task. Unfortunately, this training may have caused subjects' intuitions to be biased toward the definition and examples that were provided. In this study, the 10 examples of each figure were drawn from a variety of published sources. Nevertheless, these results may be skewed toward discourse goals in the particular examples, and may not be indicative of how the figures are used in general. It is worth noting, however, that similar results have been reported for three figures in a study in which subjects saw only one example (Long & Kreuz, 1993).

It seems clear that certain figures of speech are used to accomplish certain communicative goals. We believe that this goal taxonomy can be useful in evaluating theories and claims about figurative language. Furthermore, we believe this approach represents an important step toward accommodating figurative language within speech act theory.

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