Figurative Language

Figurative language allows speakers/writers to communicate meanings that differ in various ways from what they literally say. People speak figuratively for reasons of politeness, to avoid responsibility for the import of what is communicated, to express ideas that are difficult to communicate using literal language, and to express thoughts in a compact and vivid manner. Among the most common forms of figurative language, often referred to as "tropes" or "figures of speech," are *metaphor,* where ideas from dissimilar knowledge domains are either explicitly, in the case of *simile* (e.g., "My love is like a red, red rose"), or implicitly (e.g., "Our marriage is a roller-coaster ride") compared; *metonymy,* where a salient part of a single knowledge domain is used to represent or stand for the entire domain (e.g., "The White House issued a statement"); *idioms,* where a speaker's meaning cannot be derived from an analysis of the words' typical meanings (e.g., "John let the cat out of the bag about Mary's divorce"); *proverbs,* where speakers express widely held moral beliefs or social norms (e.g.,"The early bird captures the worm"); *irony,* where a speaker's meaning is usually, but not always, the opposite of what is said (e.g., "What lovely weather we're having" stated in the midst of a rainstorm); *hyperbole,* where a speaker exaggerates the reality of some situation (e.g., "I have ten thousand papers to grade by the morning"); *understatement,* where a speaker says less than is actually the case (e.g., "John seems a bit tipsy" when John is clearly very drunk); *oxymora,* where two contradictory ideas/concepts are fused together (e.g., "When parting is such sweet sorrow"); and *indirect requests,* where speakers make requests of others in indirect ways by asking questions (e.g., "Can you pass the salt?"), or stating a simple fact (e.g., "It seems cold in here" meaning "Go close the window").

One traditional assumption, still held in some areas of cognitive science, is that figurative language is deviant and requires special cognitive processes to be understood. Whereas literal language can be understood via normal cognitive mechanisms, listeners must recognize the deviant nature of a figurative utterance before determining its nonliteral meaning (Grice 1989; Searle 1979). For instance, understanding a metaphorical comment, such as "Criticism is a branding iron," requires that listeners must first analyze what is stated literally, then recognize that the literal meaning (i.e., that criticism is literally a tool to mark livestock) is contextually inappropriate, and then infer some meaning consistent with the context and the idea that the speaker must be acting cooperatively and rationally (i.e., criticism can psychologically hurt the person who receives it, often with long-lasting consequences). This traditional view suggests, then, that figurative language should always be more difficult to process than roughly equivalent literal speech.

But the results of many psycholinguistic experiments have shown this idea to be false (see Gibbs 1994 for a review). Listeners/readers can often understand the figurative interpretations of metaphors, irony/sarcasm, idioms, proverbs, and indirect speech acts without having to first analyze and reject their literal meanings when these expressions are seen in realistic social contexts. People can read figurative utterances as quickly as, sometimes even more quickly than, they read literal uses of the same expressions in different contexts, or equivalent nonfigurative expressions. These experimental findings demonstrate that the traditional view of figurative language as deviant and ornamental, requiring additional cognitive effort to be understood, has little psychological validity. Although people may not always process the complete literal meanings of different figurative expressions before inferring their nonliteral

interpretations, people may analyze aspects of word meaning as part of their understanding of what different phrases and expressions figuratively mean as wholes (Blasko and Connine 1993; Cacciari and Tabossi 1988). At the same time, listeners/readers certainly may slowly ponder the potential meanings of a figurative expression, such as the literary metaphor from Shakespeare, "The world is an unweeded garden." It is this conscious experience that provides much of the basis for the mistaken assumption that figurative language always requires "extra work" to be properly understood.

A great deal of empirical research from all areas of cognitive science has accumulated on how people learn, produce, and understand different kinds of figurative language (see ANALOGY and METAPHOR). Several notable findings have emerged from this work. To give just a few examples, many idioms are analyzable with their individual parts contributing something to what these phrases figuratively mean, contrary to the traditional view (Gibbs 1994). People also learn and make sense of many conventional and idiomatic phrases, not as "frozen" lexical items, but because they tacitly recognize the metaphorical mapping of information between two conceptual domains (e.g., "John spilled the beans" maps our knowledge of someone tipping over a container of beans to a person revealing some previously hidden secret; Gibbs 1994). Ironic and sarcastic expressions are understood when listeners recognize the pretense underlying a speaker's remark. For instance, a speaker who says "What lovely weather we're having" in the midst of a rainstorm pretends to be an unseeing person, perhaps a weather forecaster, exclaiming about the beautiful weather to an unknown audience (Clark and Gerrig 1984). In many cases, ironic utterances accomplish their communicative intent by reminding listeners of some antecedent event or statement (Sperber and Wilson 1986), or by reminding listeners of a belief or social norm jointly held by a speaker and listener (Kreuz and Glucksberg 1989).

Some cognitive scientists now argue that metaphor, metonymy, irony, and other tropes are not linguistic distortions of literal, mental thought, but constitute basic schemes by which people conceptualize their experience and the external world (Gibbs 1994; Johnson 1987; Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Lakoff 1987; Lakoff and Turner 1989; Sweetser 1990; Turner 1991). Speakers cannot help but employ figurative language in conversation and writing because they conceptualize much of their experience through the figurative schemes of metaphor, metonymy, irony, and so on. Listeners often find figurative discourse easy to understand precisely because much of their thinking is constrained by figurative processes. For instance, people often talk about the concept of time in terms of the widely shared conceptual metaphor *time is money* (e.g., "I saved some time," I wasted my time," "I invested time in the relationship," "We can't spare you any time"). These conventional expressions are not "dead metaphors," but reflect metaphorical conceptualizations of experience that are very much alive and part of ordinary cognition, one reason why these same metaphors are frequently seen in novel expressions and poetic language (Lakoff and Turner 1989). There is much debate over whether people's understanding of various conventional expressions, idioms, proverbs, and metaphors necessarily requires activation of underlying conceptual metaphors that may motivate the existence of these statements in the language (Gibbs 1994; Gibbs et al. 1997; Glucksberg, Brown, and McGlone 1993; McGlone 1996). Nevertheless, there is a growing appreciation from scholars in many fields that metaphors and other tropes not only serve as the foundation for much everyday thinking and reasoning, but also contribute to scholarly theory and practice in a variety of disciplines, as well as providing much of the foundation for our understanding of culture (see Fernandez 1991; Gibbs 1994).

See also

- CONCEPTS
- MEANING
- METAPHOR AND CULTURE
- SEMANTICS

Additional links

- Figurative Language and Thought
- Metaphor and Neuropsychology

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