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The role of figurative language

Abstract

Figurative language refers to words, and groups of words, that exaggerate or alter the usual meanings of the component words. Figurative language may involve analogy to similar concepts or other contexts, and may involve exaggerations. Whenever you describe something by comparing it with something else, we are using figurative language. By using figurative language, writers can evoke emotion and imagery from their writing that literal language just cannot provide. By doing so, figurative language makes expressing meaning through writing easier and more relatable to the reader.

For many people, figurative language is a mean of poets or writers, in other words, creative people. Just a few people are aware of the fact that we actually use metaphorical expressions every day. It depends on the view everybody has what someone thinks about it.

The aim of this paper is to show that figurative language is omnipresent in our every day language and that we are using it almost constantly, maybe unconsciously.

Keywords: figurative language, metaphors, cognitive linguistic, Conceptual Metaphor Theory.

INTRODUCTION

Human language comprehension is a highly complex cognitive process which requires the processing and integration of different types of linguistic information such as phonologic, semantic, syntactic and pragmatic information. This process is assumed to rely on various subprocesses specified for these different types of information, and to involve interactions between these processes. Figurative language plays a major role in compelling literary works. Figurative language is a contrast to literal language. Its primary purpose is to force readers to imagine or intuit what an author means with an expression or statement. Multiple literary devices and elements are commonly used in the category of figurative language.

The use of multiple types of elements adds to the strength, depth and quality of figurative language through a literary work. Metaphors, similes, analogies, hyperbole, symbolism, personification, allusion, imagery and rhyme are all common figurative language elements. Applying the right element in making specific

points in writing is necessary to make figurative language work. Regardless of the tool, figurative language strengthens or makes a point more compelling and effective.

DEFINING FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

Figurative language is language which departs from the straight-forward use of words. It creates a special effect, clarifies an idea, and makes writing more colourful and forceful. Figurative language adds an extra dimension to writing, giving plain writing richness and depth. Writers use figurative language for the same reason that we use it in everyday conversation: to convey ideas in a clear, colourful, and forceful manner. Figurative language encourages the reader to bridge gaps between ideas, fill in details, make associations, and form mental pictures. All of these uses of the imagination are highly satisfying, for there is great enjoyment in understanding what has not been spelled out for us. Figurative language is a means of clarifying unclear and unfamiliar ideas. It makes the abstract real.

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Every figure of speech is created in a different way, has its own unique appearance, and is used for special purposes. It is not important for you to recognize each figure of speech, but you should be able to understand and appreciate them in your reading.

TYPES OF FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

There are many possible figures of speech, or tropes, other than metaphor. These include irony, indirect requests, sarcasm, oxymoron, hyperbole, simile, metonymy, analogy and so on. Many researchers have neglected these other tropes, believing that only metaphors have real cognitive value, but others believe that much of our thinking is based on figurative processes that include a vast array of tropes (Gibbs, 1993).

METAPHOR

A metaphor is considered one of the most important forms of language, from everyday speech to formal prose and all forms of fiction and poetry. It is a comparison between two unlike things and never uses any special language to establish a comparison.

Aristotle who was first to provide a scholarly treatment of metaphors gives a more detailed definition of the term metaphor. He said that a metaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else; the transference being either from genus to species, or from species (Gibbs, 1994).

In modern linguistics, metaphor is often understood as involving the interpretation or conceptualisation of one entity in terms of something else. Metaphor is not merely a figure of speech, but a specific mental mapping and a form of neural coactivation that influences a good deal of how people think, reason, and imagine in everyday life (Lakoff, Johnson, 1999). Verbal metaphors do not only exist as ornamental, communicative devices to talk about topics that are inherently difficult to describe in literal terms. Instead, verbal metaphors, including conventional expressions based on metaphor, reflect underlying conceptual mappings in which people metaphorically conceptualize vague, abstract domains of knowledge e.g., time, causation, spatial orientation, ideas, emotions, concepts of understanding in terms of more specific, familiar, and concrete knowledge e.g., embodied experiences.

There are three reasons why metaphors are used. First, there is the so-called *inexpressibility hypothesis*. That means that metaphors are used for expressions that are not easy to explain with literal language. This refers mostly to abstract ideas.

The second reason is called *compactness hypothesis*. This hypothesis says that people can express ideas more detailed and compact with metaphors.

The last hypothesis, called *vividness hypothesis*, says that by metaphors, expressions are made more clear and livened up.

What is more, metaphors are supposed to be helpful in learning and this for some reasons. First, they can be a kind of mnemonic aid. Because you have a figurative image in your mind, it is easier to remember information you have just received. Secondly, using metaphors can provide semantic frameworks from long-term memory. With this, new information can be applied to these frameworks (Gibbs, 1994).

In social life, metaphors also can be useful. They lead to a kind of an intimate atmosphere between the speakers. This creates a link based on same or, at least, similar experiences and interests. Therefore, not everybody gets an access to the conversation between the two. Relating to this, another function can be assumed. Sometimes, speakers want their listeners to know about their attitudes or interests. This can also be done by a special language, a kind of indirect expressions. Slang is such a way in which you can express your attitude by choosing your words. This way of speaking is used for showing the attitude to a certain subgroup of society, either sympathy or even membership or hostility to this group. Slang can also be used to distance oneself from your emotions, e.g. when you do not want to show frustration about someone like your parents or teacher or something like your job (Gibbs, 1994).

SIMILE

The simile is the most common figure of speech used. In fact, we depend on similes so much that they become worn-out very quickly. Creative writers try to create similes which are fresh and appropriate. A simile expresses an idea by comparing two things that are unlike in most respects but are alike in a certain way. Some contend that components of metaphors and similes share common ground, that there is an implied similarity between the tenor and vehicle, and the only difference between metaphor and simile is that the former involves an implicit comparison, while the latter involves an explicit comparison through the use of “like” or “as”. The purpose of the simile is to give information about one object that is unknown by the reader by comparing it to something with which the reader is familiar. Similes can be used in all kinds of writing but are especially effective in poetry and fiction, where they can be used to paint images and form pictures that carry more emotion than mere words can convey. However, a writer should guard against using familiar similes which may be considered cliché due to their overuse.

Similes are a rich way to add emotion and imagery to writing. By making comparisons between two seemingly unlike objects, authors can add insight into one or both things that might be difficult using literal language alone (Toris, White, Hughes, 1994).

METONYMY AND SYNECDOCHE

Metonymy and synecdoche, is the substitution of one word for another. Over a period of time two things sometimes become so closely related that we use the name of one for the other, or the name of a part of something is used to represent the whole thing.

Idiom

An expression which meanings cannot be inferred from the meanings of the words that make it up. Idioms have sometimes been described as “dead metaphors” because the relationship that unites the literal meaning of a phrase like “pull my leg” with the metaphoric meaning is lost. However, some theorists have demonstrated that many idiomatic expressions are decomposable or analysable and the meanings of their parts contribute to their overall figurative meaning (Gibbs, 1993).

PERSONIFICATION

Personification is a literary device in which human attributes and qualities are given to nonhuman or inanimate objects. By using personification and giving the floor human-like attributes, the sentence resonates more with the reader, offering a better image of what is happening. Writers use personification to help to establish mood and to build imagery in a piece of writing. What personification does best is that it connects a reader with the object that is being described. It is human

nature to anthropomorphize and also give inanimate objects human characteristics in order to make them more relatable. Personification also helps to boost emotion and can make plain sentences more interesting when used effectively. Good writers use figurative language like personification to give their writing life and to connect with their audiences. By giving inanimate objects human qualities, personification helps to relate ideas and objects to people, allowing an author to convey his meaning more effectively (Lakoff, Johnson, 1999).

HYPERBOLE

The hyperbole is perhaps one of the most widely recognized forms of figurative language and one that permeates everyday life through the advertising and entertainment industries. Hyperbole is the use of exaggeration for extra effect. The author can use hyperbole to add extra drama or comedy to a situation or even for the purpose of propaganda. Hyperbole, like other figures of speech, is used to communicate ideas, emotions, and images in a more efficient way than through plain language.

The fields of advertising and propaganda use hyperbole almost exclusively, which has led to it having a somewhat negative connotation. Typically advertisers or those writing propaganda use hyperbole to exaggerate the benefits or claims of their products in order to boost sales, increase the image of, or increase the popularity of whatever they are advertising. The modern term *hype* is a shortened derivation of the term.

Hyperboles can often be combined successfully with similes and metaphors to increase their effectiveness, although an author must be careful not to use common phrases at the risk of being cliché. Also, exaggerations are only effective if the extent of it is outlandishly wild, otherwise, there would be no hyperbole. Like all figures of speech, when used correctly and in the proper context, hyperboles can be used to better express an author's intentions and meaning (Anderson, 2003).

OXYMORON

An oxymoron is a pair of words that have opposite meanings, but when used in combination provide a reader with a greater context about how to interpret a passage of literature. Oxymoron is also used to place emphasis on an idea or characteristic and can add to the emotion and mood of a passage. Oxymorons are commonplace in prose and in poetry and can act as a device to develop character (Cacciari, 1998).

ONOMATOPOEIA

Onomatopoeia is the use of a word or words that are indicative of a sound that the source of the sound produces. It is used primarily because describing sounds with words can be difficult for an author. Onomatopoeia is particularly effective in poetry. Poetry relies on rhythm and meter and is often recited, creating the

perfect medium for an effective use of onomatopoeia. Poetry has its roots in aural tradition making the use of words that evoke sounds particularly appropriate. Onomatopoeia words are often single syllable words that can affect the rhythm and meter of a poem, dramatically, increasing their use for emphasizing a particular point or evoking a certain emotion that the author is trying to evoke.

Onomatopoeia is also used frequently in comic books and comic strips where space is limited and words must be used to their fullest effect to maximize their effectiveness in telling a story and conveying meaning and context to the reader. Onomatopoeia is a powerful device that authors can use to create a more immersive atmosphere by engaging the sense of sound, a concept that is often difficult to convey with words. Like all figures of speech, its use can help to better explain events, give a more vivid description of people, places, and ideas, and provide the reader with a better understanding of the writer's intent and meaning (Gibbs, Raymond, 1994)

CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR THEORY

CMT's basic characterization of metaphor is at first glance similar to received wisdom in philosophy and literary studies, and perhaps even a matter of common knowledge. Metaphors are essentially where one thing is described in terms of another thing for rhetorical effect. However, this is as far as the similarity goes. CMT, positioning itself as *contemporary*, *conceptual*, and a major pillar of the cognitive linguistics paradigm, proceeds to argue for the relationship between linguistic metaphors and human cognition (Lakoff, 1993).

The foundational arguments of CMT can be summarized and termed the conventionality argument, the conceptual structure argument, and the embodiment argument.

THE CONVENTIONALITY ARGUMENT

Metaphors are not limited to being used in instances of creative writing and speaking (e.g. poetry). Instead, they are pervasively and routinely used in everyday language, and this is likely to be the case for most if not all human languages.

THE CONCEPTUAL STRUCTURE ARGUMENT

Metaphor is not just a linguistic phenomenon. Instead, linguistic metaphors reflect how concepts are organized in our minds. We not only *describe*, but also *understand* one thing in terms of another by transferring, or 'mapping' knowledge about one concept *the source concept* to another *the target concept*. Since a large part of language is metaphoric, as per the conventionality argument, it follows that our conceptual knowledge is also largely metaphoric.

THE EMBODIMENT ARGUMENT

According to CMT, source concepts are often experientially concrete and possess some kind of bodily basis (Johnson, 1987), while target concepts are often abstract and cannot be directly experienced or perceived. Since many of our concepts are metaphoric, as per the conceptual structure argument, our conceptual understanding turns out to depend crucially on the nature of our bodies and the physical environment in which they function. The study of the bodily basis of cognition is broadly termed *embodied cognition* (Anderson, 2003), and is keenly discussed in psychology, philosophy, and cognitive science.

Conceptual metaphor theorists study one very important aspect that determines the context of metaphor comprehension and interpretation to a large degree. According to conceptual metaphor theory, conceptual metaphors belong to our knowledge of the world and we understand most metaphorical expressions by activating corresponding conceptual metaphors. Furthermore, conceptual metaphors may be activated as part of people's understanding of contexts, which in turn facilitates inferring the metaphorical meanings of utterances encountered at a later stage in discourse. In this way conceptual metaphors are often part of the context, because the mappings between the source and the target domain of a conceptual metaphor become available and restrict possible entailments of a metaphorical utterance. This understanding of what constitutes a discourse context is compatible with relevance theory's notion of a cognitive environment that encompasses a set of assumptions we use in the online processing of an utterance. The set of conceptual metaphors we access upon understanding metaphorical utterances can most definitely be regarded as a decisive part of the cognitive environment and it becomes strongly manifest if activated by key words in an utterance (Lakoff, 1993).

Finally, the contemporary theory of metaphor is at odds with certain traditions in symbolic artificial intelligence and information processing psychology. Those fields assume that thought is a matter of algorithmic symbol manipulation, of the sort done by a traditional computer program. This defining assumption puts it at odds with the contemporary theory of metaphor in two respects: First, the contemporary theory has an image-schematic basis: The invariance hypothesis applies both to image-metaphors and characterizes constraints on novel metaphor. Since symbol-manipulation systems cannot handle image-schemas, they cannot deal with image-metaphors or imagable idioms. Second, those traditions must characterize metaphorical mapping as an algorithmic process, which typically takes literal meanings as input and gives a metaphorical reading as output. This is at odds with cases where there are multiple, overlapping metaphors in a single sentence, and which require the simultaneous activation of a number of metaphorical mappings.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

Howard Gardner emphasized the importance of figurative language in a teacher's efforts to convey a novel concept to a student. Work about the cognitive significance of metaphor has shown repeatedly that metaphorical teaching strategies often lead to better learning than do explicit strategies (using what has been called denotative, analytic or technical language), since they enable the transfer of learning and understanding from what is well-known to the less well-known in a more memorable way (Zbikowski, 2002; Cacciari, 1998; Guck, 1994;).

However, some researchers have gone even further, saying that teaching without figurative language is not possible. If teachers are to base their instruction on the conventional wisdom that they should begin with things that students already know, how are they to ever introduce that which is completely new? Petrie and Oshlag (1993) claimed that radically new knowledge requires the use of metaphor in the pedagogical process of leaping the chasm between old and new knowledge and consequently acquiring new knowledge.

Due to the work of linguists, psychologists, anthropologists and others, metaphor and other types of figurative language have come to be regarded as a fundamental mode of cognition affecting all human thought and action (Turner, 1987). Mac Cormac (1985) noted that in the mid 1970s the legitimacy of metaphors in the study of cognition was still being debated, while at the time of his writing metaphors had become so widely accepted as proper cognitive devices that the question shifted to how they could be properly described. In explaining metaphor as a cognitive process, he presumed the existence of deep structures of the human mind, serving as language-generating devices. He contended that metaphor is a mediating device among the mind, the brain, and the external world.

According to Mac Cormac, metaphors are generated by means of a three-level hierarchical, but nonexclusive process:

Level 1- surface level: culture and language;

Level 2- deeper level: semantics and syntax;

Level 3- deepest level: cognition.

The semantics of metaphor can then be formalized using the mathematical tool of fuzzy logic. Literal truth, figurality and falsity can be viewed as forming a continuum of possibilities rather than a discrete set of possibilities. The figurality of the metaphorical language, in particular, can be viewed as a continuum of partial truths that extends from absolute falsehood to absolute truth. These partial truths can be represented by fuzzy values.

This is expressed by a real number on a scale from zero to one: zero is absolute falsehood; the interval from zero to a certain value represents falsehood; the interval from that value to another value represents diaphor; the interval from that value to another value represents epiphor; and the last interval to one represents truth with one representing absolute truth. Metaphors are born as diaphors and,

as they become more and more familiar through commonplace use, slowly mutate into epiphors, thereby losing their emotive tension.

Language can then be represented mathematically as a hierarchical network in n-dimensional space with each of the nodes of the network a fuzzy set, defining a semantic marker. When unlikely markers are juxtaposed, the degrees of membership of one semantic marker in the fuzzy set representing the other semantic marker can be expressed in a four-valued logic, so that a metaphor is not only true or false.

MacCormac argued that, as cognitive processes, metaphors mediate between culture and mind, influencing both cultural and biological evolution.

CONCLUSION

Figurative language is language that is used for descriptive effect, not to be understood in a strict literal sense. Although expressions of figurative language are not actually true, many do express some truth beyond the literal level. Many common, everyday expressions are figurative, and when used imaginatively, this language can add a special dimension of meaning to both speech and writing. Metaphors are often used to express concepts that are inexpressible in literal language.

Understanding figurative language should be considered only one part of a larger attempt to teach reading, understanding written works. However, figures of speech are quite common in most writing that asks to be taken seriously and that is something more than a compilation of facts.

Along with the functions the different areas of use and the numerous examples it should become obvious that figurative language cannot be ignored in our common language. Sometimes it is easier, maybe even better to use metaphorical expressions to explain difficult terms. Sometimes it is even impossible not using them.

All in all, one can say that figurative language is so omnipresent that we sometimes do not even recognise phrase as being metaphorical. So one can say that figurative language is not only part of our every-day language but also of our mind.

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