

Figurative Language

Figurative language, Figure of speech in non-literary discourse, Novel figures and frozen figures, Relevance of Figurative use

Linguistic Stylistics	
Introduction to Figurative Language	
Figures of Speech	
Paper Coordinator	Prof. Ravinder Gargesh
Module ID & Name	Lings_P_LS8 Figurative Language
Content Writer	Dr. V.P. Sharma
Email id	vijaypsharma@gmail.com
Phone	9312254857

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Objectives:

The main objective of this module is to help students understand the difference between figurative language and literal language and to learn to appreciate the role of figures of speech in literary and non-literary discourses both.

8.1 Introduction

This module introduces the students to the concept of figurative language. We take a brief look at some of the important figures of speech at the different levels of linguistic structure in both literary and non-literary discourses.

8.2 Figurative language

Figurative language is broadly defined as language that uses words or expressions deviating from their original, basic meaning. In contrast to literal language which maintains a consistent meaning regardless of the context, figurative language (or non-literal language) uses words and expressions in their non-literal meaning which depends on the context in which they are used.

To understand what figurative language means, consider the following sentences:

1. The rat was caught in a trap.
2. The highway man was caught in his own trap.

An average speaker of English will have no difficulty in understanding the difference between the two ‘traps’. In (1), ‘trap’ refers to a contrivance for ensnaring an animal; in (2), it refers to a robbery plan. ‘Trap’ in the first case, uses the literal meaning of the word; in the second case, it is a non-literal use (or, figurative use) of the word.

But the similarity between the two ‘traps’ is apparent. Trap in (1) is a concrete object, in (2) it is an abstract idea. Both share the common aim of creating a situation from which the victim cannot escape.

But how is this *semantic change* from a concrete object to an abstract idea perceived at the cognitive level? Since ‘trap’ acquired an added meaning a long time back, it has become formalized as literal meaning of ‘trap’.

Let’s, therefore, consider relatively less exploited figurative usages:

3. The country is groaning under the weight of a huge population.
4. O my Love’s like a red, red rose.

In sentence (3), the literal meaning does not make sense as ‘groaning’, which means ‘making a deep inarticulate sound as with pain’, is a peculiarly human attribute. It can only have a human Subject. Therefore, to make sense of this sentence, we modify the meaning of ‘country’ to include the feature [+human] so that *this* ‘country’ can feel pain and groan as it is pressed by a massive population which it cannot sustain. When we assign a meaning other than its literal meaning to an expression in a given context, we are giving it a figurative meaning. *An expression is said to be used figuratively when its literal meaning contradicts our knowledge of the world.*

In sentence (4), the preposition ‘like’ invites us to transfer some of the properties of ‘rose’ to ‘love’ and give it a new meaning. Love, an abstract idea becomes, like rose, an object of

freshness and beauty. Deviation, that is semantic change, takes a different form in different figures. In *metaphor* (sentence (3) above) and *simile* (sentence (4) above), for example, there is feature addition which allows us to see one thing as another, or to see the similarity between two things. In both the examples above, figurative meaning is achieved by deviation from literal meaning.

Now look at the following examples:

5. The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew,
 The furrow followed free (alliteration)
6. Never let a fool kiss you- or a kiss fool you (chiasmus)
7. In the night sky shimmered the moon (anastrophe)

In (5), sound /f/ in word- initial position occurs in successive words– ‘foam flew’, ‘furrow followed free’. In addition, the example exhibits extra-regularity (called parallelism) : three successive clauses are in past indefinite tense.

In (6), verbal pattern in the second half of the expression is balanced against the first with the parts reversed- ‘fool kiss you’ becomes ‘kiss fool you.’

In (7), the usual word-order has been reversed- ‘The moon shimmered in the night sky’ has become ‘In the night sky shimmered the moon’

If in (3) and (4), there was deviation from literal statement; in (5), (6) and (7), the deviation is from normal arrangement of words. In classical rhetoric, figures of speech resulting from deviation from literal statement were called tropes while those characterised by deviation from normal arrangement of words were called schemes. Tropes (meaning ‘interchange’) are supposed to be figures of lexical substitution, and schemes figures of grammatical patterns which might involve repetition (as in alliteration), or extra-regularity (as in parallelism). In (5), the three clauses have the same syntactic structure –Noun Phrase+Verb). They can also be characterized by syntactic deviation as in (7).

Tropes deal with meaning of words, while schemes deal with word order, syntax, letters, and sounds. While the division is still valid, current dictionaries of literary terms generally avoid such classification.

We could now define figurative language (or figure of speech) *comprehensively* as intentional deviation from literal statement, or normal arrangement of words in language. It has, however, to be noted that in a figurative sign, there is never *complete* substitution of one sign by another. The usual signifier-signified relationship is disrupted, but as we can see in (5) above, the signified is not completely detached from the signifier; it is only *modified*. ‘Country’ assimilates the human

feature of [+sensitive] to feel pain, and groan, yet it does not lose its identity of a huge land mass. A speaker says S is P but means figuratively S is R, where R is a modified version of S that has assimilated some features of P. But how do we decide what features of P will be assimilated by R? The limits of deviation, that is, the extent of modification, are defined by the context of the utterance. For example,

8. You have entertained us long enough. (irony)

This is an instance of verbal irony or sarcasm which is meant to hurt or insult indirectly. 'Long enough', with its negative connotation, is incompatible with 'entertained'. 'Entertained' takes a 180° turn, so to say, and becomes 'bored'. In *irony*, semantic deviation takes the form of opposite meaning. Irony achieves its meaning through understatement, concealment or allusion, and so may often require, apart from the context of the utterance, discourse context to interpret it. In this quote from *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, Mr. Bennet is getting increasingly uncomfortable with the terribly bad singing of his daughter Mary at a party and wants her to stop.

Hyperbole and paradox, similarly, need to be interpreted in terms of the context of utterance:

9. My grandmother is as *old as the hills*. (hyperbole)

10. I can *resist* anything but temptation. (paradox)

In both the statements, literal meaning contradicts our knowledge of the world. In order that the two statements make sense, we give a different meaning to them in the background of the context of utterance. In (9), *old as the hills* is now perceived as an exaggeration of the age of grandmother. In (10), we have an apparently self-contradictory statement, and in order to make sense of it we interpret it as a witty way of saying you *cannot resist* temptation.

We will be looking at the various ways in which deviation works in different figures of speech in the Units that follow where we discuss important figures of speech.

Recent research seems to suggest that figurative language is comprehended at the same speed as literal language; and so the premise that the recipient was first attempting to process a literal meaning and discarding it before attempting to process a figurative meaning appears to be false. While it may be true in case of frozen figures and many other simpler figurative usages, figures of speech such as poetic metaphors that create complex images and symbols do require conscious effort on the part of the reader to analyse and interpret them. We will discuss this in the Units that follow.

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literal_and_figurative_language
<http://grammar.yourdictionary.com/style-and-usage/Figurative-Language>

Exercise 1

Define figurative language.

8.3 Figure of speech in non-literary discourse

Though figurative usage is more characteristic of literature, especially poetry, it is not exclusive to it. Ordinary discourse, especially, political discourse and commercial publicity material make a prolific use of figures of speech. Political speeches, being high on rhetoric, are peppered with metaphors, puns, metonymies and parallelism.

11. Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny- Jawaharlal Nehru (metaphor)
12. Emancipation Proclamation... came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice –Martin Luther King (metaphor)
13. Ask not what your country can do for you - ask what you can do for your country –J.F. Kennedy (chiasmus)
14. The Kangaroos won the match comfortably (metonymy: using the name of one thing for another with which it is associated. Here, ‘Kangaroos’ stands for the Australian team)

Publicity material and advertisement jingles use a variety of figures of speech, especially alliteration, metaphor, and hyperbole, to put across their message:

15. Be wise, buy the best –Britannia biscuits (alliteration)
16. Drinking and driving don’t mix.
17. Fill your lungs with life, not cigarettes (metonymy)
18. Your Daily Ray of Sunshine (metaphor - ad. for a juice)
19. Limits are for breaking. (paradox – ad. for ordnance factory)
20. The best part of waking up is Folger in your cup (hyperbole – ad. for a brand of instant coffee)

8.3.1 Novel figures and Frozen figures

Let us look back at statements we began with:

21. The rat was caught in a trap.

22. The highway man was caught in his own trap.

As we saw, 'trap' acquired an added meaning a long time back, and has become formalized as literal meaning of 'trap'. In fact, it has given rise to very many idiomatic expressions: *to set a trap, to lay a trap, to lure into a trap, to walk into the trap* etc.

*Such figurative expressions are termed as **frozen** figures in contrast to **novel** figurative expressions.*

In our day-to-day communication, we use a large number of such well-worn expressions:

23. *Islamabad* has rejected India's protest. -Metonymy

Islamabad here stands for Government of Pakistan.

24. The thing that left the strongest *impression* on me from the meeting was the folding chair - Pun

25. Your dog is so ugly; we had to pay the fleas to live on him- Hyperbole

26. Honesty is *dead as dodo* - Simile

27. *Free and fair* elections are the *bedrock* of democracy –Alliteration and Metaphor

We must remember that the most prominent characteristic through which you recognize a figure of speech is novelty, created through the technique of foregrounding. Foregrounding uses linguistic deviation to give the reader a new perception of the world by consciously drawing them away from the real and the mundane. It submerges him in a "strange" perspective of life and the world.

With overuse, many of our familiar figures of speech have become clichés. Semantic deviation may characterize figures of speech, but unless there is perception of this deviation, and therefore of the novelty in the use of an expression, they can hardly be called figures of speech. They have passed into the dictionary and have become literal statements, and have lost their novelty. The reader's attention is focused only on the signified and the signifier-signified relationship is completely eclipsed. Look at the following examples:

28. A rock blocked the *mouth* of the cave.

29. Great *minds* think alike.

Historically, 'mouth of the cave' is a metaphor. Similarly, 'Great minds' is a metonymy. But do we recognize them as such in our daily use? The 'mouth of the cave' is perceived as only the opening to the cave. Likewise, 'great minds' simply means 'great intellectuals'. In such figures, neither the speaker nor the listener is aware of deviation from literal meaning. In fact, in

expressions like *branch* of a company,, *hands* of a clock, *spine* of a book, we can hardly find their 'literal' substitutes; they *are* literal expressions.

This is especially true of idiomatic expressions:

30. The news hit her like a *bolt from the sky*.
31. A *Himalayan* blunder
32. AIR's familiar *signature tune* greets you in the morning
33. He was driving at *breakneck* speed when he collided with a bus.
35. A *deafening silence* greeted his announcement.

Figurative expression in which there is no longer any perception of semantic deviation are only historically figurative. *Functionally*, they are literal expressions.

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Exercise 2

How does a novel figure of speech become a frozen figure? Give two examples of very commonly used idiomatic expressions.

8.4 Function of Figurative Language

Are figures merely stylistic devices used to lend beauty and grace to poetry?

Indeed, they serve a rhetorical function of illustrating and amplifying an idea or giving force to an argument in religious, political and philosophical discourses. Even in a scientific discourse metaphors can sometimes be used to serve as models to illustrate a problem.

Comic and satiric speech must inevitably use pun, irony and hyperbole; jokes and riddles would not be possible without the use of metaphor, pun, paradox etc.

A poet primarily uses figurative language to force readers to imagine what they mean with an expression or statement. Multiple literary devices and elements are commonly used in the category of figurative language. A figure of speech compels the reader to see an object, event, idea through the eyes of the poet or writer. Consider Lady Macbeth's soliloquy in *Macbeth*:

36. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand

Here, hyperbole becomes a verbal icon of Lady Macbeth's realization of the enormity of her crime and her sense of guilt.

Shelley speaks of poetry as 'making the familiar objects be as if they were not familiar'. A figure of speech may set up unlikely connection between two objects. It thus forces the reader to focus on the message itself rather than on the meaning alone, 'throwing into relief' the linguistic sign

against the background of the norms of ordinary language. But the poet can put figures to more direct and practical use as well. Antony in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* exploits irony to rouse the mob against Brutus and other conspirators. Even schematic figures (parallelism) can be meaningful. Consider simple repetition of 'alone' in the lines below:

37. Alone, alone, all all alone

Alone on a wide wide sea

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner (ll. 231): S.T. Coleridge

The repetition of 'alone', 'all' and 'wide' serves to intensify the sense of loneliness on a vast sea.

And in some cases it can become iconic:

38. No doubt that soldiers had to be marching

And the drums had to be rolling, rolling, rolling.

The repetition of 'rolling' emphasizes the ceaseless beating of drums; it gives a choreographic character to the words and replicates the rhythm of feet marching to the beating of the drums. But figurative speech is, indeed, often used simply as a stylistic device for rhetorical purposes.

Look at the following example from Tennyson's *Charge of the Light Brigade*:

39. Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannons behind them

Similarly, in Shelley's *To A Skylark*, there is a profusion of similes and metaphors to highlight the skylark's ethereal beauty.

Newspapers and public speakers are especially fond of using figures of speech in this fashion:

40. Even though her latest film *went down* like *Titanic*, it didn't *dampen* her spirits. She is gearing up for *flight*. (A news report)

41. There is drought in Marathwada and they have declared Bihar a *dry* state. (A pun)

<http://literarydevices.net/figurative-language>

Summing Up

To sum up the foregoing discussion, figurative language is a deviant use of language, and this deviation can work on both paradigmatic and syntagmatic levels.

Paradigmatic figures (that is, figures of meaning) can manifest themselves either through linguistic deviation (such as metaphor and simile) or contextual (such as metonymy and hyperbole) or both. Figurative usage is deviant only in the sense that literal meaning fails to interpret an utterance. But our human communication system allows words to acquire new or additional meanings. Semantic changes often add meanings to the language without subtracting any. In non-literal, i.e., figurative language, a sign acquires an additional meaning by its relationship with another sign through similarity, dissimilarity, contradiction, association etc.; the specific nature of change in meaning is governed by the socio-cultural code of interpretation that the hearer/reader applies to the utterance. Consider, for example, the expression ‘holy cow’.

38. *Holy cow!* That car almost ran into us!

39. Why should the MPs consider themselves as the *holy cows* of the system and seek exemption from odd-even traffic rule?

‘Holy cow!’ in (37) would most probably be interpreted as an exclamation expressing surprise or excitement by native speakers of English in USA or England for whom it is a euphemism for "**Holy** Christ!"

In Indian English, it has an altogether different connotation. In (38), MPs as the holy cows is a metaphor for being as sacred and worthy of love and respect as the cows in Hindu religion.

In contrast to such ‘figures of meaning’ (called the tropes), there is another class of figures, called the schemes or syntagmatic figures, which are characterized by repetition or extra-regularity, and sometimes deviation from the normal arrangement of signs in a linguistic structure. Their focus is not on *meaning* but on form of the *message*.

Figures are not merely stylistic devices used to lend beauty and grace to poetry, though they do that too. Both in ordinary discourse and in poetic discourse, they have a significant function to perform. They often say something through vivid word pictures that implant themselves on the speaker’s/reader’s mind more easily than any description in literal language will.
