

当代语言学丛书
DANG DAI YU YAN XUE CONG SHU

Studies on English Figures of Humor, Meaning and Omission

英语幽默、转义和省略 辞格探微

韩仲谦 韩楚齐 著

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Preface

A person can only be a good writer or a good speaker when he or she is familiar with the figures of speech. We can learn the habit of eloquence by probing into various figures of speech in the English language (Han, 2013, 2014). The English language embraces both usual and unusual figures of speech, with the unusual ones greatly surpassing the common ones in number. It is a worthwhile endeavor, as has been well acknowledged, to put the hundreds of unusual figures of speech in the English language under scrutiny.

Given their large numbers, the unusual figures of speech in English go far beyond the reach of one single book. The present book thus becomes the third one of the writers' series dealing with the unusual figures of speech in the English language. It shares the same Chapter I (a brief introduction to figurative language) and Chapter 2 (a general survey of figures of speech or tropes in English) with the authors' first book (*A Study on the English Figures of Amplification and Distortion*, published in December, 2013) and second book (*Studies on English figures of Emotion*,



Excess, Falsehood, Grammar, and Hidden Meaning, published in June, 2014) of the series. Chapters 3—5 probe, respectively, into three types of unusual English figures of speech or tropes in some detail, namely, figures of humor, figures of meaning, and figures of omission. As some of the members of one figure type may be bordering another figure type, a few of those which have been discussed in the first book and the second book will re-appear in different chapters of this book, just for the sake of completeness of the present work.

Thanks go to all those who have been helpful in our preparation of this book.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

Language serves as a means of communication and cognition; it enables us to cooperate and think for ourselves with other people in the community. There are at least three different basic functions of language. One is informative—language can be used to pass on information. Another is expressive—language can be used to evoke an emotion that is not a direct result of their meaning. Still another is performative—language can be used as a kind of symbol/action in and of themselves. To perform the various functions, language can be used literally or figuratively, depending on the context(s) in which the speech act occurs, or on the speaker's or the writer's personal preference of their language habits.

No matter what functions language performs, the meaning conveyed therewith can be either literal or figurative. Some speakers or writers prefer figurative language to literal language in order to impress hearers or readers more effectively and communicate their intentions more tactically.

Literal and figurative language, in fact, is a distinction within some fields of language analysis. Literal language



(i. e. , denotative meaning) refers to words that do not deviate from their defined meaning. This means that words reveal the meaning that they carry. Palmer (1976: 30) uses the term “reference” in talking about the denotation of words. Reference deals with the relationship between the linguistic elements, words, sentences, and the non-linguistic world of experience. Similarly, Crystal (2003: 129) asserts that denotation meaning involves the relationship between a linguistic unit (lexical item) and the non-linguistic entities to which it refers. For example, the denotation meaning of “dog” is its dictionary definition of “canine quadruped”. To sum up, denotation refers to the literal meaning of a word. When a writer or a speaker uses literal language, he or she is simply stating the facts as they are.

Figurative language (i. e. , connotative meaning) refers to words or groups of words that exaggerate or alter the usual meanings of the component words. It may involve analogy to similar concepts or other context, and may exaggerate. These alterations result in a figure of speech.

Palmer (1976: 63) suggests that the term connotation refers to emotive or evaluative meaning. It is also used to refer to linguistic or even dialectal differences or even to the small differences that are found near synonyms. According to Crystal (1992: 80), connotation is the personal or emotional associations that are suggested by words, and which thus form part of their meaning, for individual speakers; for example, the word *automation* may connote “efficiency” to one person, and, “rounder” to another.



On the other hand, Parker and Riley (2009: 23) use “non-literal locutionary acts” to refer to the connotation. They point out that “non-literal locutionary acts” are those for which a literal interpretation is either impossible or absurd within the context of the utterance. For example, the famished husband who walks through the door and says to his wife, *I could eat a horse* (instead of, *I am very hungry*) is performing a non-literal locutionary act. Therefore, figurative language does not always mean what is being said or read, but serves to make it more interesting and helps painting a picture in the hearer/reader’s mind. It uses words or expressions with a meaning that is different from the literal interpretation.

To be more specific, a literal usage is the “normal” meanings of the words (Jaszczolt, 2003). It maintains a consistent meaning regardless of the context (Glucksberg, 2001), with “the intended meaning correspond[ing] exactly to the meaning” of the individual words (Harley, 2001). Figurative use of language is the use of words or phrases in a manner where the literal meaning of the words is not true or does not make sense, but “implies a non-literal meaning which does make sense or that could be true” (Montgomery et al, 2007). Within literary analysis, such terms are still used; but within the fields of cognition and linguistics, the basis for identifying such a distinction is no longer used (Barber & Stainton, 2009).

Thus, figurative language is any deliberate departure from the conventional meaning, order, or construction of



words. "If something happens literally," says children's author Lemony Snicket (2000), "it actually happens; if something happens figuratively, it feels like it is happening. If you are literally jumping for joy, for instance, it means you are leaping in the air because you are very happy. If you are figuratively jumping for joy, it means you are so happy that you could jump for joy, but are saving your energy for other matters." Figurative language deals with implications rather than realities. In other words, what an individual says or writes may not correlate with what an individual actually means. It can create figures (pictures) in the mind of the reader or listener. These pictures help convey the meaning faster and more vividly than words alone.

Figurative language is everywhere, from classical works like Shakespeare or the Bible, to everyday speech, pop music and television commercials. It makes the reader or listener use their imagination and understand much more than the plain words. In the due course, various figures of speech are invented and used in "figurative language" to add color and interest, and to awaken the imagination. Almost all figures of speech, therefore, fall into the domain of figurative language.

Like wildflower seeds tossed on fertile ground, the figures of speech, sometimes called the "flowers of rhetoric", have multiplied into a garden of enormous variety over time. As a form of communication, a figure of speech can be employed in a number of ways. Creative writers may use the various techniques to add voice and color to their works.



Humorists often use methods like puns and hyperbole to exaggerate or put a new perspective on a subject in a funny way. Even everyday spoken language in some regions is populated with various figures of speech. In areas where such language is commonplace, these techniques can draw upon common cultural and literary experiences to create understanding, while at other times figures of speech may be used to muddle understanding and avoid expressing literal thoughts.

The English language is abundant with figures of speech. They help in expressing words, used in an extraordinary way to add beauty and emotional intensity of the language, employed to create an emphasis, amplify a meaning, draw a comparison or contrast, or to make a rhetorical point. It is thus a worthwhile job to probe into the meaning and function of all the figures of speech used in the English language to facilitate the vast number of Chinese English learners and practitioners in their English career. The sad fact is, however, that there are too many figures of speech being used in English and there is a vast literature on the use of those most usual or familiar figures like simile and metaphor as well. A book that covers all the figures of speech in a language would be beyond the writer's ability. Considering these facts, the writers choose to select some of the English figures of speech that are not so usual, or common in use or familiar with readers and introduce and interpret them in some detail in the hope of making the whole picture of figures of speech in English more comprehensive.

Chapter 2 Figures of Speech in English

2.1 Figures of speech as techniques of figurative language in communication

Language is a system of communicating meaning, with precise rules about how words should be used, including those of spelling, grammar and of syntax. Words must appear and be used together in the right way (much to the confusion of many students). Most of the time, we follow these rules, but what about when we want to grab attention? What about when we want others to think more about some things, and maybe not think about others? This is where figures come in.

Figurative use of language often involves the creation of various figures of speech in a language. Figures of speech are typical techniques of figurative language used in communication. Shipley (1970) asserts, "Figures are as old as language. They lie buried in many words of current use. They



occur constantly in both prose and poetry.” Traditionally, figurative language such as metaphors and idioms has been considered derivative from and more complex than ostensibly straightforward language. A contemporary view . . . is that figurative language involves the same kinds of linguistic and pragmatic operations that are used for ordinary, literal language (Glucksberg, 2001). At no place in *Book III* [*of the Rhetoric*] does Aristotle claim that these devices [figures] serve an ornamental or emotional function or that they are in any way epiphenomenal. Instead, Aristotle’s somewhat dispersed discussion suggests that certain devices are compelling because they map function onto form or perfectly epitomize certain patterns of thought or argument (Fahnestock, 1999). The emergence of non-literal language as a respectable topic has led to a convergence of many fields: philosophy, linguistics and literary analyses, computer science, neuroscience, and experimental cognitive psychology, to name a few. Each of these fields has enriched the scientific understanding of the relation between language and thought (Katz et al. , 1998).

2.2 Definition of figure of speech

The broadest definition for figure of speech is that it is the language used in a figurative or non-literal sense. A figure of speech creates a figurative rather than a literal meaning for a word or phrase via adding, deleting, or changing words and ideas in a phrase. In other words, the typical definition or



popularly assumed meaning or structure of the word or phrase does not apply. To be more specific, a figure of speech is the use of a word or a phrase, which ascend from its literal interpretation, a typical characteristic of figurative language. It can also be a special repetition, arrangement or omission of words with literal meaning, or a phrase with a specialized meaning not based on the literal meaning of the words in it, as in idiom, metaphor, simile, hyperbole, personification, or synecdoche. Figures of speech often provide emphasis, freshness of expression, or clarity. However, clarity may also suffer from their use, as any figure of speech introduces an ambiguity between literal and figurative interpretation.

2.3 History and etymology of the term “figure”

The Greeks, especially the Athenians, turned the use of figures of speech into a science, naming many of them. The Romans then took up the baton and continued the game. It is perhaps a mark of civilization where the language itself becomes a method of art.

After a long gap, theologians took up the baton in interpretation of the Bible, including:

Solomon Glassius (1625). *Philologia Sacra*;

Benjamin Keach (1682). *Troposchemalogia: or, a Key to Open the Scripture Metaphors and Types*;

E. W. Bullinger (1899). *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible*.

The term “figure” comes from the Latin “figura” which comes from “fingere”, meaning “to form”. Figures are



hence about shaping of the language, just as we talk about the figure of a body or a figure as a diagram.

2.4 Functions of figures of speech

What happens when we break rules, any rules? The first thing is that it grabs attention. We seek and monitor patterns in the world around us to reassure us that all is well. When a pattern is fractured, when rules are broken, we suddenly fear that all is not well and so we have to look closely to check for threats (and maybe opportunities).

Figures of speech are hence attentional devices, simple rule-breaking mechanisms that cause people to think differently. In poetry, they make us ponder the meaning of words and invoke deeper feelings. In changing minds, it is a big toolbox for subtle persuasion. In language communication of all kinds, figures of speech can make the scene more vivid. They can make the meaning clearer, intensify the emotional impact, and compress a lot of meaning into a few words.

A curious paradox is that figures themselves have rules. As the Greeks and Romans defined them, they tamed them and provided a rule-set for the linguistic elite. They extended the language and made it much richer.

2.5 Classification of figures of speech

The figure of speech comes in many varieties. During the Renaissance, scholars meticulously enumerated and clas-