Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics

Figurative Language

Barbara Dancygier and Eve Sweetser

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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521184731

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First published 2014

Printed in the United Kingdom by Clays, St Ives plc

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data
Dancygier, Barbara.
Figurative language / Barbara Dancygier, University of British Columbia, Vancouver; Eve Sweetser, University of California, Berkeley.
pages cm. – (Cambridge textbooks in linguistics)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-107-00595-2 (hardback)
1. Figures of speech – Study and teaching. 2. Metaphor – Study and teaching.
3. Languages, Modern – Study and teaching. I. Sweetser, Eve. II. Title.
P301.5.F53D36 2014
808'.032–dc23 2013035759

ISBN 978-1-107-00595-2 Hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-18473-1 Paperback

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Figurative Language

This lively introduction to figurative language explains a broad range of concepts, including metaphor, metonymy, simile, and blending, and develops new tools for analyzing them. It coherently grounds the linguistic understanding of these concepts in basic cognitive mechanisms such as categorization, frames, mental spaces, and viewpoint; and it fits them into a consistent framework which is applied to cross-linguistic data and also to figurative structures in gesture and the visual arts. Comprehensive and practical, the book includes analyses of figurative uses of both word meanings and linguistic constructions.

- Provides definitions of major concepts
- Offers in-depth analyses of examples, exploring multiple levels of complexity
- Surveys figurative structures in different discourse genres
- Helps students to connect figurative usage with the conceptual underpinnings of language
- Goes beyond English to explore cross-linguistic and cross-modal data

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To our students,
the past ones who inspired us, and the future ones
whom we hope to inspire.

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Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements are a moment for considering alternative spaces, since many factors are necessary to a book's development. We must first thank all the colleagues whose work has advanced the community's understanding of figurative language over the last several decades: without them, where would we be? First of all, we acknowledge (though it is almost unnecessary to state) the depth of our scholarly and personal debts to George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, Gilles Fauconnier, and Mark Turner, who have shaped the field – and without whom this book would certainly not have needed to be written. We also owe major gratitude to the research work and collegiality of a great many colleagues in the cognitive linguistics community, of whom we specially note Masako Hiraga, Sarah Taub, Chris Johnson, Joe Grady, Rafael Núñez, Cornelia Müller, Seana Coulson, Karen Sullivan, Irene Mittelberg, Elena Semino, and Ben Bergen.

This book has been a joint endeavor: neither of us would or could have written the same book alone, even with the background of all our years of discussions with each other – and without those years, we wouldn't have undertaken it. Barbara has taught about metaphor and figurative language in English Departments for many years both in Warsaw and at the University of British Columbia, while Eve has been teaching this subject matter to Linguistics and Cognitive Science students at Berkeley. So the book is also the product of several academic generations of interactions with colleagues, teaching and research assistants, and students. Sarah and Chris and Joe and Karen and Mike and our other past students and teaching assistants, many of whom are now faculty: *thank you*. George Lakoff, once Eve's teacher and now the colleague with whom she has alternated teaching Linguistics 106 for almost three decades, stands out as a unique worldwide pedagogical influence: he designed the first cognitive linguistics course on metaphor and has taught it since the 1980s. We know he would have written a very different book (indeed, he has: many of them), so he cannot be blamed for specifics of this one; but he should certainly be thanked.

We have already been fortunate in our readers. Mike Borkent, Karen Sullivan, and Kashmiri Stec generously commented on earlier drafts of major portions of this book, while Kensy Cooperrider and Alice Gaby were both heroically speedy in commenting on Chapter 7. Lieven Vandelanotte's stylistic sense and wisdom about the content are deeply appreciated. Julia Bernd gave us her unique blend of precision, intelligence, and grace under pressure as a copy editor. We are grateful and have tried to heed their insightful words. All the usual disclaimers apply (that

is, when and if we didn't listen, it is certainly our own fault). Also, thanks are due to Jan Lermitte for her expert help with indexing.

This book also owes its existence to our editor, Andrew Winnard, who understood what we needed to finish the job.

Eve would like to thank her Berkeley colleagues and students, and in particular her current and past colleagues on the Berkeley FrameNet and MetaNet Projects, and her recent co-authors Seiko Fujii, Paula Radetzky, and Kashmiri Stec. And, always and most of all, Alex – sine quo certe non.

Barbara owes much to Lieven Vandelanotte, and his unfailing support and sober judgment. She also wants to thank Mike Borkent for making work so pleasurable and easy. Above all, she is grateful to Jacek, whose importance no figurative or literal language can adequately describe.

And in fact, we need to jointly thank our families – Jacek, Szymek, and Alex have all three provided not only personal support to us both, but also crucial technical support and lively discussion, not to mention all of the amazing examples they have unearthed for us.

* * *

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1 Introduction

1.1 Reassessing figurative language

This is a linguistics textbook on figurative language. In the mid- and late-twentieth century, topics like metaphor and metonymy were the province of literature departments, and were primarily studied in their roles as part of literary texts. Figurative language was thought of as being one aspect of what gives a text – in particular, a poetic text – special esthetic value. Shakespeare, in saying, *Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?* (Sonnet 18), conveyed his message more beautifully than if he had literally talked about the subject's personal qualities, such as kindness, charm, and beauty. But did he convey the "same" message he would have conveyed in such a literal description? Intuitively, good readers and literary scholars both feel that he did not. Similarly, irony in a literary text does not just add esthetic value in some generalized way; for example, it may heighten emotional involvement, and that may be exactly the artistic effect intended. A question in both cases might be exactly *how* – how is the metaphoric text's meaning different from a literal "translation," and how does irony work differently from a nonironic recounting of similar circumstances? These already sound like issues of interest to linguists, who care about regular relationships between different choices of form and different meanings. What are the mechanisms by which figurative uses of form create meaning for readers?

In this textbook, we hope to make it clear to readers that figurative structures are far from being just decorative. They are important and pervasive in language and, furthermore, this is because the relevant cognitive structures are important and pervasive in thought – and as a result, figurative meaning is part of the basic fabric of linguistic structure. And this is true *not* just for special literary language, but for everyday language – and it holds for all human languages. The same basic mechanisms are involved in Shakespeare's sonnet as in a phrase like *autumn years*, or one like *taxes rose* (note that nothing literally went upwards).

These are strong claims. Despite important past work on metaphor by major linguistic figures (Roman Jakobson comes to mind), most current basic linguistics textbooks have little or no mention of figurative language. Indeed, the impression they give is that linguists are leaving metaphor, metonymy, understatement, irony, and other "tropes" to deal with after analysts have finished working on

topics more central to linguistic structure: in particular, syntax, phonology, morphology, and literal semantics. But the claims underlying that position are also strong, though mostly implicit. Although much evidence has been offered by linguists on both sides of the question of the mutual independence of syntax and semantics, most semanticists have assumed that literal meaning can be fully analyzed independently of figurative meaning, rather than assessing this question systematically.

However, the last four decades of research on figurative language and thought have brought us new understandings of their integral relationship to the linguistic system. An influential and productive wave of scholarship took shape following the 1980 publication of Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors we live by*. Cognitive linguistics and cognitive science conferences and journals have seen a proliferation of metaphor studies, and the topic has had an increasingly high public profile. Other traditionally recognized figures such as metonymy and irony (an old topic in cognitive science) have also been productively re-examined during the same period, though with less of the publication volume and public attention which have accompanied metaphor's "star" status. Recent work on irony in particular has been shaped by developments in linguistic pragmatics, the study of the use and interpretation of language in context; this is not surprising, since no linguistic content is ironic on its own, without a context. (It is not ironic in itself for a hero to say the heroine is not pretty enough to attract him, but it is ironic for him to say so when the rest of the novel depicts him as falling deeply in love with her.) This book will be dealing with metonymy in some depth, and irony is not neglected, but both the depth and the volume of the past few decades of work on metaphor are necessarily reflected in our textbook's emphasis.

This book is situated within a particular range of frameworks, a loose family of models often labeled cognitive linguistics. This is both because cognitive linguistic models have been productive in examining the nature of figurative language and because the new current understandings of figurative language have developed within cognitive linguistics, while practitioners of most other linguistic frameworks are not focusing on these problems. Cognitive approaches have quite radically transformed models of everyday literal language and meaning. Recent cognitive models of semantics hypothesize that linguistic production and processing involve *simulating* the situations described: that is, the same parts of the brain are activated (though not identically activated) in imagining or describing a situation as would be involved in perceiving and experiencing such a situation. This *embodied* view of meaning – that meaning is made of the same stuff as bodily experience – challenges the idea of language and thought as abstract. And this theory of meaning offers a context for reassessing the role and mechanisms of figurative language, seeing them as part of language rather than as decorative additions.

Embodied experience is inherently viewpointed – you experience a visual scene from some particular point rather than any other, and you experience situations from your own participant role rather than another. This means that

linguistic expression is adapted and developed specifically to express and prompt viewpointed meanings rather than God's-eye ones – and there is experimental evidence to support this view (see Bergen 2012 and Dancygier and Sweetser 2012 for reviews). Figurative language is viewpointed too, for the same reasons – although this issue has not been focused on by researchers. Irony may heighten emotional involvement exactly because it makes readers engage in viewpointed imagination of more than one situation; as we shall be discussing, metaphoric construal is viewpointed too, and thus shapes readers' or listeners' viewpoints.

Before moving on to our main subject matter, we need to discuss some core distinctions and models which have shaped both folk and expert understandings of figurative language. Among these are the literal/figurative distinction itself, the conventional relationship of form and meaning, the relationship between meaning and context, and the nature of embodied literal meaning.

1.2 Metaphor: What does *figurative* mean?

Thinking about figurative language requires first of all that we identify some such entity – that we distinguish figurative language from nonfigurative or literal language. And this is a more complex task than one might think. To begin with, there appears to be a circular reasoning loop involved in many speakers' assessments: on the one hand they feel that figurative language is special or artistic, and on the other hand they feel that the fact of something's being an everyday usage is in itself evidence that the usage is not figurative. Metaphor, rather than other areas of figurative language, has been the primary subject of this debate. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) recount the story of a class taught by Lakoff at Berkeley in the 1970s in which he gave the class a description of an argument and asked them to find the metaphors. He expected that they would recognize phrases such as *shoot down someone else's argument*, *bring out the heavy artillery*, or *blow below the belt* as evidence of metaphoric treatment of argument as War or Combat. Some class members, however, protested, saying, *But this is the normal, ordinary way to talk about arguing*. That is, because these usages are *conventional* rather than novel, and *everyday* rather than artistic, they cannot be metaphoric.

However, there are many reasons to question this view, and to separate the parameters of conventionality and everyday usage from the distinction between literal and figurative. One of these is historical change in meaning: historical linguists have long recognized that some meaning change is metaphoric or metonymic. For example, around the world, words meaning 'see' have come to mean 'know' or 'understand.' Indeed, in some cases that past meaning is lost: English *wit* comes from the Indo-European root for vision, but has only the meaning of intellectual ability in modern English. But in other cases, such as the *see* in *I see what you mean*, metaphoric meanings in the domain of Cognition exist

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