

Unit 6

Figurative Language

Often in speaking and writing we use words for special effects without intending our hearers or readers to interpret them with their usual, literal meanings. When someone is called a "dirty pig," no one literally thinks that he is a dirty quadruped with a snout, but a vicious person. The phrase used is an illustration of figurative language--language that communicates a meaning different from the total literal meanings of the separate words, a language that does not mean what it says.

A language is said to be "literal" if it means what it says and uses words in their "standard" sense, derived from the common practice of ordinary speakers of the language. Figurative language deliberately interferes with the system of literal usage by assuming that the terms literally connected with one object can be transferred to another object. The *transference* or "carrying over" achieves a new, wider, special, or more precise meaning. The various forms of transference are called *figures of speech* which turn away from literal meanings and towards figurative meanings.

There are eight kinds of figures of speech found in common usage.

1. A *simile* is a figure of speech in which one thing is likened to another in such a way as to clarify and enhance an image. Simile prepares the transference and explains it. It is an explicit and exaggerated comparison recognizable by the use of the words *like*, *as*, or, occasionally, *than*. It is equally common in prose and verse and is a figurative device that has been in use since ancient time.

Her eyes are *like* stars.

My heart felt heavy as lead.

She was lighter than a feather.

2. A metaphor is a figure of speech in which one thing is described in terms of another. It is used basically in poetry. A comparison is usually implicit, without using *like* or *as*. The word “metaphor” comes from the Greek word *metaphora* which derived from *meta* meaning ‘over’ and *pherein* meaning ‘to carry’. Thus, it refers to a linguistic process whereby aspects of one object are “carried over” or transferred to another object, so that the second object is spoken of as if it were the first. It is believed to be the most fundamental form of figurative language.

She is a *doll*.

He *was eaten up with* jealousy.

Tim was hurt by the *barbs of* criticism .

3. A metonymy is a figure of speech in which the name of an attribute or a thing is substituted for the thing itself. The word comes from the Greek word *metonymia*, derived from *meta* meaning ‘change’ and *onoma* ‘name’. So the name of the thing is transferred to take the place of something else *with* which it is associated. It is the expression in a single word of a concept or notion associated with but not identical to the literal meaning of the word. Common examples are “The Stage” used to mean the theatrical profession; “The Crown” for the Monarch; “Milton” for his works. This process of association also involves personification, the attribution of human qualities to inanimate objects.

He drank the whole *bottle*. (the contents of the bottle)

The *Chair* accepts his proposal. (chairman)

I am reading *Shakespeare* . (Shakespeare's plays)

4. A *synecdoche* is a figure of speech in which the part stands for the whole, or vice versa. The word is Greek, derived from *synekdechesthai* meaning 'to receive jointly'. For example, in the Lord's Prayer which goes, "Give us this day our daily *bread* ," "bread" is not just a loaf of bread but stands for the meal taken each day. Synecdoche is common in every day speech.

Man U won the friendly match in Bangkok. (*Man U* stands for the Manchester United football team)

He lost fifty *heads* of cattle when his ranch burned down. (*heads* mean the whole animals, not just the heads)

The factory employs fifty *hands* . (*hands* stand for the employees, not just their hands)

5. *Irony* is a way of writing in which what is meant is contrary to what the words appear to say. It is a figurative language in which the meaning intended is the reverse of what is literally stated. The two basic kinds of irony are verbal and irony of situation (or, on occasions, irony of behavior). *Verbal irony* involves saying what one does not *mean* . For example, when people say "That's not bad", when they are talking about something superlatively good or beautiful, they are using verbal irony. Alexander Pope might praise someone extravagantly in his poetry, but the terms he used were so extravagant that the readers could sense that the person referred to did not deserve such praise. *Situational irony* occurs when, for instance, a man is laughing at the misfortune of another man while at the same time that same misfortune is happening to him without his being aware of it. Situational irony depends upon a discrepancy

between how characters see a situation and the true nature of the situation. For example, the central character in a novel believes that his wife loves him, but in reality she only married him to provide for her invalid mother. Another kind of irony is **dramatic irony** whereby the audience know more than the characters on the stage or in the novel know. In *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus was performing his duty as a good king by trying to find the cause for the famine in his city. What he found out was that he himself was the cause of all misfortunes that happened to his people since he had killed his father and married his mother. The audience knew the fact from the beginning but the character only learned about it later.

Irony has many functions: it chides, purifies, refines, deflates, and scorns. When a writer uses irony he is drawing attention to the gap between how things seem and how complicated **they** really are.

He took my car and went to the movies with my girl without asking my permission; **he was a fine friend**.

6. A **personification** is the attribution of human qualities to inanimate objects. Personification is inherent in many languages and appears to be used frequently in all literature--especially in poetry.

His **truth** is marching on. (**Truth** is an abstraction given human attribute by the word 'marching').

Destiny rules that they are to be **together**. (**Destiny** is personified here)

Science has not yet accepted his **findings**. (**Science** represents a personification)

7. An **understatement** is the deliberate use of milder, weaker, less forceful, less sensational language than the situation requires. **it is** often

used in everyday speech, frequently with a negative assertion, with an ironic intention.

He felt some *discomfort* when the blade cut off his little finger.

The angry bull *walked* in his direction.

The hornets came out of the broken nest in a *rather vexed* state.

8. A *hyperbole* is a figure of speech which contains an exaggeration for emphasis. It is any extreme or exaggerated figure. Hyperbole was very common in Tudor and Jacobean drama.

I haven't seen you for *ages* .

This story is *as old as time* .

It is not easy to differentiate among these figures of speech. Sometimes a figure of speech may be simile or metaphor or hyperbole at the same time as indicated by the second example of hyperbole. *Science* in the example of personification may be taken by some people to be a synecdoche for 'scientists'.

Simile, understatement, hyperbole, irony, and personification apparently do not cause so many instances in semantic changes as do metaphor, synecdoche, and metonymy. These three figures underlie many changes in word meanings. The word *thrill* originally meant "pierce, bore, make an opening in "; it came to be used as a figure to indicate tingling emotional excitement. Gradually the idea that this latter indication was figurative has died out, and the word *thrill* now literally indicated excited sensation. On the other hand, the word *bore* which originally expressed the same idea as *thrill* , has also changed its meaning so that it is now an antonym for *thrill* . When no one interprets an expression as figurative

and everyone comes to accept a new meaning as literal and not metaphorical, then it can be said that the word in question has undergone a complete semantic change.

Many stereotyped phrases are also used without awareness of their original meaning. For example, when people use the phrase “to hold at **bay**”(to bring someone into a situation that makes escape impossible) very few of them would think of hunting with hounds. “To show one’s colors”(to reveal one’s true self) does not bring to mind the picture of flags being hoisted. “A red **herring**”(irrelevant matter introduced to distract attention from the subject being discussed), a phrase often used in connection with crimes and detection, does not make one think of fish. “To have an ax to **grind**”(to have a purpose of one’s own to promote) does not make one think of the actual ax and grindstone.

The essence of figurative language lies in the use of an expression having something other than everyday, commonplace, literal significance of the words used. Since figurative language is commonly introduced to students in the analyses of poetry, people tend to think that it is lofty, literary, fancy, and poetic--a device used only by poets. We all use a great deal of figurative language all the time without trying to be poetic or achieving a literary effect. Even such nonliterary materials as the sports pages or the financial columns in newspapers use a great deal of figurative language.

Exercise 1

By writing the appropriate number in the blank, indicate the kind of figure illustrated by the italicized **wording** in the following sentences.

1 simile 2 metaphor 3 metonymy 4 synecdoche 5 irony

1. The explorers were ready to brave the *myriad* dangers of the march through the jungle. _____
2. He was called "*pretty boy*"; he had cauliflower ears, beetling brows, small bloodshot eyes, a flattened nose, and badly scarred cheeks. _____
3. With five-sixths of his lungs eaten away by tuberculosis, *his chances of living another fifty years are not excellent* . _____
4. He *knifed* his way through the defensive line to score. _____
5. With the change in the interest rates, stock market prices *nose-dived* . _____
6. With as much pomp as ever was shown by *archbishop, chancellor, or regent* , the headwaiter led us to our table. _____
7. Since she was extremely *catty* , she rarely kept many of her women friends very long. _____
8. When the first *clarinet* showed up drunk, Tim had to substitute for him. _____
9. With today's rising prices it is certainly hard for the average family to find *bread and butter* for many children. _____
10. He *spat* out a rude and defiant denial. _____
11. The child got into the barber's chair *like a patient about to have a major operation* . _____
12. In his first pitching start John *machine-gunned* nineteen straight batters before allowing a hit. _____
13. But his courage began to *melt* away as he thought of the dangers he still had to face. _____
14. The near collision between the two packed jet airliners *did not make the men in the control tower happier or calmer* . _____
15. The president's *office* says that such a plan is being considered. _____

16. This development left all of his plans and hopes *in rubble* . _____
17. A *blaring radio or television* set *in the room next door* *did not add to his comfort*. _____
18. Some of the food at Joe's Restaurant is not very good, but if you always eat the Blue Hate , you will **be** all right. _____
19. At that *time* the *infant* science of bacteriology seemed to have the solution for such problems. _____
20. But *fame* is always fickle, and now Elvis is forgotten. _____
21. *The* mob went down *like tenpins* when the soldiers charged. _____
22. But sometimes, my people, *Freedom* will come again to extend us her blessings. _____
23. The infantry held its position, but the *horse* were slow in charging.

24. This company has a virtual *strangle hold* on the manufacturing of new instruments . - -
25. *The* Bench was not impressed by the lawyer's plea for clemency.

Exercise 2

In the following selection, underline any wording that is obviously figurative.

In your hands, my fellow citizens, more than in mine, will rest the final success or failure of our course. Since this country was founded, each generation has been summoned to give testimony to its national loyalty. The grave of young Americans who answered that call encircle the globe. Now the trumpet summons us again--not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need--not as a call to battle, though embattled we are--but a **call** to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out, "rejoicing in

hope, patient in tribulation"--a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself. Can we forge against these enemies a grand and global alliance, north and south, east and west, that can assure a more fruitful life for all mankind? Will you join in that historic effort? In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defining freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility--I welcome it. I do not believe that any of us would exchange places with any other people or any other generation., The energy, the faith, and the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it--and the glow from that fire can truly light the world. And so, my fellow Americans: Ask not what your country can do for you--ask what you can do for your country. My fellow citizens of the world: Ask not what Americans will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man. (John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961)