

Systematizing convergences and divergences across figures of speech as a tool for enhanced cross-linguistic analysis

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So far, in Cognitive Linguistics the study of figurative language has been largely focused on metaphor and, to a lesser extent, on metonymy, with only occasional attention having been paid to hyperbole, irony, simile, and synesthesia, sometimes only in relation to the way in which they interact with metaphor (Gibbs and Colston, 2012; Ruiz de Mendoza, 2020). Traditionally, these figures of speech have been rather loosely termed “major” on account of their (intuitively perceived) greater use, especially in literature and persuasive discourse. “Minor” figures have received even less attention than the somewhat neglected major figures. This is the case not only in Cognitive Linguistics but also in most of the theoretical work on figurative language, which has normally been produced within psycholinguistics and pragmatics. Minor figures include allegory, anthimeria, antonomasia, auxesis, hypallage, hypocatastasis, litotes, meiosis, merism, oxymoron, paragon, paradox, proverbs, and sarcasm, among others. This presentation explores a selection of major and minor figures of speech in an attempt to formulate explicit connections among them. There are three main benefits of this approach:

1. It corrects a long-standing neglect in the study of figurative language use by paying attention to a broad range of figures of speech, especially the so-called minor ones.
2. It allows us to set up clear boundary lines between figures of speech, which requires explicit criteria to determine their figurative nature, thus adding to the pool of methodological proposals for the discrimination between figurative and non-figurative uses of language (Brdar, Brdar-Szabó, and Perak, 2020).
3. It simplifies linguistic description by spelling out relations across figures.

These three benefits amount to taking a step beyond traditional ad hoc listings of figures of speech to make them part of a unified account of cognitively-motivated language use. In addition, this approach allows us to find organization patterns among figures. This can counteract the undesirable tendency to the over-proliferation of categories typical of traditional rhetoric and literary analysis. For example, hypallage has been traditionally defined as a “transferred epithet” (Dupriez 1991: 213). However, this description falls short of accounting for the true nature of this phenomenon. Expressions like “sad novel”, “happy day”, and “sleepless night” illustrate this point. On a superficial analysis, these expressions reflect the transfer of the properties denoted by the adjectives from their real-world referents (it is people are sad, happy, and sleepless) to other objects or situations (novel, day, night). On a more refined analysis, the three expressions are the result of the application of the EFFECT FOR CAUSE metonymy: a sad novel is one that makes readers feel sad, a happy day is one that causes the speaker to feel happy, and a sleepless night is one that has the effect of not allowing the speaker to sleep.

The presentation discusses other figures and sets up relations among them while redefining their boundaries. It concludes by suggesting possible ways in which this approach to figurative language can assist analysts in making more systematic cross-cultural explorations, which need to be extended from the domain of metaphor (Kövecses, 2006) to the rest of figures of speech.

References

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