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

1

topics more central to linguistic structure: in particular, syntax, phonology, mor-phology, 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 prolifera-tion 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 lan-guage 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

alongside the original literal Vision uses. This KNOWING IS SEEING metaphor is extremely productive: *transparent*, *opaque*, *illuminate*, and *shed light on* are among the many English locutions which are ambiguous between literal visual senses and metaphoric intellectual ones. Do we want to say that because these are conventional usages, they are not metaphoric? In that case, we would have to separate them completely from less entrenched uses which show the same metaphoric meaning relationship: if someone says they have *examined a candidate's record with a magnifying glass*, we probably don't want to say that there should be a dictionary entry for *magnifying glass* listing this usage. Still less would we want to make a new dictionary entry if someone said they had *gone over the data with an electron microscope*. As has been widely argued, starting with Lakoff and Johnson, the most plausible hypothesis here is that while *wit* is no longer metaphoric, *transparent* and *shed light on* are metaphoric – and that it is precisely the habitual use of conventional instances of the KNOWING IS SEEING metaphor which helps motivate innovative uses.

It is thus possible for metaphor or metonymy to motivate conventional extensions of word meanings – and figurative links which are pervasively used in this way shape the vocabularies of the relevant languages. At a first approximation, then, we might say that **figurative** means that a usage is motivated by a metaphoric or metonymic relationship to some other usage, a usage which might be labeled *literal*. And *literal* does not mean 'everyday, normal usage' but 'a meaning which is not dependent on a figurative extension from another meaning.' We will be talking about the nature of those relationships in more detail soon, but of course metaphor and metonymy are not the only motivations for figurative usage.

In this context, we might say that **polysemy** – the relationship between multiple related conventional meanings of a single word – is often figurative in nature. English *see* continues to manifest simultaneously meanings related to physical vision and ones related to cognition or knowledge: *Can you see the street signs?* coexists with *Do you see what I mean?*. Chapters 2 and 3 of this book will specifically focus on metaphoric meaning relationships, conventional and novel.[1]

1.3   Metonymy

Metonymy is a classic trope which has in recent decades played second fiddle to metaphor in the research literature. But as we shall see in Chapter 5, it is even more pervasive than metaphor in human language and thought, and indeed has cognitive underpinnings which appear to be present in other species

---

[1] Gibbs and Steen (1999) gather some major papers from the 1990s on cognitive approaches to metaphor.

as well. It often crucially underlies the evocation of other figurative structures, such as metaphor and blending. It is also quite a diverse category.

Metonymy is sometimes said to be about *part–whole* relationships, and indeed we will cover that kind of metonymy – the kind which allows the same word to be used in many languages for 'hand' and 'arm,' or for 'foot' and 'leg,' or which allows a whole working person to be referred to as *an extra pair of hands*. But more generally, metonymy is about relationships of correlation – things that occur together in experience, so that we associate them and can use the word for one to evoke the other. Salient parts do evoke their wholes, and salient subcategories evoke the larger categories of which they are parts – we may associate tissues with Kleenex-brand tissues and thus use *kleenex* to mean 'tissue.' But perhaps the most interesting kind of associational relationship is the one between entities which are coexperienced in a single setting. Consider a restaurant employee who says to a colleague that *The ham sandwich wants another soda* (example from Fauconnier 1994[1985]). Of course this employee means to refer not to the sandwich but to the customer who ordered it – and in the relevant context, the employees frequently don't know the customer's name but do share knowledge of a unique association between main dish ordered and customer. This is an example of *frame metonymy* – that is, using a label for one entity to refer to another entity which is linked to it in a situation by an association such as that of order and customer.

Continuing our discussion of *see*, we can note that alongside its metaphoric senses, it also has lively *frame-metonymic* senses; that is, meanings which are apparently related to the vision meaning more by situational correlation or association. For example, when we say, *I need to see a dentist*, we don't mean just physically seeing them; nonetheless, it would be very odd to say you have seen a dentist if you have only had e-mail contact, so face-to-face visual contact must be part of the situation referred to. Not every language uses its word for 'see' to refer to visits to medical practitioners (nor do all languages share the same frame for medical consultations). But every language does have a way to refer to vision, and the conventional extensions of *see* in English – some metaphoric, some metonymic – are closely motivated by connection with the visual meaning.

The lexicon of every language is full of polysemous words: multiple related meanings for a word (at least, for any common word) seem to be the norm rather than the exception. And many of the links which hold together these meaning networks are figurative. As well as metaphor and metonymy, irony and sarcasm give rise to new conventional word meanings. English *bad*, for example, has both negative and positive meanings, the positive sense being derived from an ironic usage of the negative one, meaning that someone else (unlike the speaker) would judge this cool or stylish thing negatively. The living and productive presence of figurative processes, constantly creating novel and creative meanings, happens against (and is supported by) a backdrop of widespread conventional meaning networks motivated by the same kinds of processes.

1.4   Broadening our understanding of *figurative*: blending and figurative grammar

We said above that to think of a meaning as figurative, we need to think of there being some literal meaning from which it is "extended" by some figurative relationship. But in this book we will argue that we need to include a broader range of relationships in our definition of *figurative*. There are two major areas where modern research has justified such broadening; one area is certain classes of **blending** and the other is **figurative uses of grammatical constructions**. We will briefly exemplify each of these ranges of phenomena.

As an example of a figurative blend, consider Fauconnier and Turner's (2002) discussion of the press coverage of *Great America II*, a modern catamaran sailing around South America from San Francisco to Boston in 1993, trying to do better than the (then still-standing) record sailing time for that route set by a cargo-bearing clipper ship called *Northern Light* in 1853. Although the two ships were very different in their advantages, and the weather conditions were also of course entirely different, still the 1993 crew wanted to beat the record, and in particular construed their trip as a *race*. News coverage said that the catamaran was *barely maintaining a 4.5 day lead over the ghost of the clipper Northern Light*. *Great America II* did not have (could not have had) a literal "lead" over a ship which passed in that general vicinity 140 years earlier, nor of course did the crew of *Northern Light* ever know that *Great America II* would be making this trip, so they could not have seen it as a competition (although nineteenth-century clipper captains were generally competitive about their travel times over major trade routes). But as Fauconnier and Turner point out, one could even imagine saying that *Great America II is 4.5 days ahead of Northern Light*. And at the end of the trip, the catamaran crew could say not only that they set a new record but also that they *beat Northern Light*.

Fauconnier and Turner label the process involved in these construals *blending*; the topic will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4, but intuitively it seems clear that such usages combine (or blend) two situations, e.g. the situation of the original 1853 trip and the situation of the 1993 trip. Further, when these situations are compressed imaginatively into the same time frame – that is, when we are imagining the trips as taking place over the same time period – then many of the components of a race emerge, even though no race existed in either the 1853 situation or the 1993 one. Two boats, traveling from the same place to the same place *over the same time period*, and both eager to go faster than other boats on that route, sounds like a race.

Although we cannot call this imagined "race" an example of some recognized trope – it is not metaphoric, metonymic, or hyperbolic – nonetheless it is not literal. It requires imaginative reconfiguration to use words like *ahead of* in such a setting – and indeed, Turner (2004) argued in more detail that *ghosts* are

imaginative blends of the absence and presence of a dead person. In fact, Fauconnier and Turner argue that both literal meaning composition (putting *cat*, *mat*, *on*, and *sat* together to get the meaning of *The cat sat on the mat*) and metaphor are subcases of conceptual integration or blending. Obviously we would not want to say that it is figurative processes which are involved in composing *The cat sat on the mat*. But we probably do want to extend our definition of figurative meaning to include nonmetaphoric combinations of elements from different scenarios to create a new scenario which is not an instance of either, such as the race between *Great America II* and the ghost of *Northern Light*.

Another area where scholars have not traditionally talked about figurative usage is in their treatments of extended meanings of grammatical constructions. We don't think of a transitive construction, for example, as having the possibility for both literal and figurative meanings. But note that in English we can say that *Line's sister knitted her a sweater*, meaning not only that Line's sister knitted the sweater (created it by knitting) but also that she did so with the intent that Line would be the *recipient* to whom she would *give* the sweater. Goldberg (1995) argued that this meaning of 'giving something to a recipient' is a characteristic of the English Ditransitive Construction (here very loosely defined as Verb Object-1 Object-2), rather than of any of the words in the sentence (certainly not the verb *knit*). But Goldberg noted that this construction is equally applicable to metaphoric "exchanges" such as linguistic communication, where there is nothing literally given or received – as we can see in *Marie told Joe the story*. As we shall see in Chapter 6, grammatical constructions as well as words frequently carry figurative extended uses. Grammatical constructions, like words, have networks of related meanings – and related by many of the same principles, which (for words and constructions alike) license both relationships between conventional meanings and novel extensions to new uses.

As we shall also see in Chapter 6, grammatical constructions are crucial in prompting figurative construals, even when we might not want to say that the constructions are themselves figuratively used. We note here the importance of copula constructions (*X is Y*) in prompting metaphoric mappings, or the role of the *X is like Y* Comparison Construction in building simile.

1.5   Figurative language, cognition, and culture

Examination of figurative language uses demands consideration of how such uses differ between languages – and that brings up the general question of how linguistic and cultural patterns are related to cognition. In Chapter 7 we will tackle this question, taking spatial metaphors for time as our sample case. Some metaphors seem in fact to be remarkably stable across languages and cultures: for example, there are innumerable languages where More is metaphorically Up (as in English *prices rose*, meaning 'prices increased in quantity'), but

no attested examples of MORE IS DOWN. And others seem remarkably specific to time and place: Gloria Yang informs us that Taiwanese speakers of Mandarin use the metaphor ROMANTIC-RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT IS KITE FLYING, which is not obviously accessible to English speakers, and would presumably be entirely opaque to members of cultural and linguistic communities where kite flying was unknown. However, we might also note that many languages lacking this metaphor do have the metaphor RELATIONSHIPS ARE PHYSICAL TIES or LINKS – and when it is explained to an English speaker that the woman is the kite flyer, and that her management of the boyfriend is understood as the kite flyer's physical manipulation of the kite (strategic letting out and pulling in of the string), the English speaker might find the metaphor quite comprehensible, though still novel.

As stated above, figurative language usages appear to be pervasive in all languages – and the reason is apparently that they reflect patterns of human cognition. Some of those patterns, such as the basic experiential correlation between More and Up, emerge fairly unproblematically from crosscultural patterns in everyday experience; other cognitive patterns are quite culture specific. But the potential for figurative patterns is a universal, as are some of the basic classes of figurative patterns. A good deal of cognitive science research over the last few decades has shown that metaphor is not "just" linguistic; rather, linguistic patterns reflect cognitive ones. Although this is a linguistics textbook and not a cognitive science one, these issues are important for linguistics, and basic treatments of some of them will be presented later in the book, particularly in Chapters 2 (on the cognitive underpinnings of metaphor), 5 (on metonymy), and 7 (on crosslinguistic patterns).

Multimodal evidence is often crucial in examining the relationship between figurative thought and language, and has been a crucial component of crosscultural comparison of figurative uses as well. Art, architecture, and other cultural artifacts show figurative uses as pervasive as those found in language: The Statue of Liberty metaphorically represents (*personifies*) the abstract concept of Liberty, and an icon of a crossed spoon and fork (objects whose central uses are in the frame of Eating) may frame-metonymically identify the location of a restaurant on a map. In general, there is a close relationship between linguistic figurative uses and the structures to be found in these nonlinguistic representations and artifacts; it is therefore illuminating to study them together, and we will be doing that throughout the book. Another area where nonlinguistic modalities are closely related to linguistic ones is the structure of co-speech gesture, which will come up mostly in Chapter 7, since differences in gestural patterns often provide remarkable support for the cognitive status of metaphors also manifested in language. Surprisingly to English speakers, speakers of Aymara (an Andean language) gesture forward in talking about the past and backward in talking about the future – and they also talk about the future as behind them and the past as in front of them (Núñez and Sweetser 2006).

1.6   The uses of figurative language

Finally, as with any kind of language, the question arises as to *how* various kinds of figurative language serve human purposes, whether everyday communicative purposes in some speech setting, or purposes more specific to some genre of communication, or of course artistic and creative purposes in poetry and fiction. As linguists, we are very much aware that language is a multilectal phenomenon; people speak and write differently depending on their social group, audience, setting, and other contextual factors. Good creative writing draws on and extends the uses familiar from more everyday usages, as well as from past artistic usages. So on the one hand, as Lakoff and Turner (1989) make clear, literary metaphor is by no means some foreign category separate from speakers' everyday metaphoric usages – indeed, novel literary metaphor and blending is usually comprehensible to readers precisely because it draws on familiar structures. And on the other hand, the metaphors of Shakespeare or Emily Dickinson – or the blends of Jonathan Raban – are unique and brilliant creations, and indications of the human cognitive ability to extend and innovate from conventions. High-quality literary texts should thus be of immense interest to both linguists and cognitive scientists – though neither group of scholars seems universally aware of the value of literature as data.

Not just in literature, but in value-laden domains such as Religious and Political Language, and in more "prosaic" domains like Scientific Discourse, figurative cognition and language are pervasive as well. And frequently these discourses have their own domain-specific and genre-specific figurative usages. Only in politics do *left* and *right* refer to particular sociopolitical opinion ranges; in chemistry they might bring to mind dextro- and laevo- ('left-handed' and 'right-handed') molecules whose structures are related in that they are mirror images of each other. The political uses of *left* and *right* began apparently as frame-metonymic associations between opinion groups and seating arrangements in the Assembly following the French Revolution; this is now largely forgotten, but the terms have taken on lively metaphoric meanings, as can be seen in a joke where a Chinese leader tells his driver to *signal left, turn right*, meaning that rhetoric should remain framed in terms of Communist values, but actual policy should accommodate capitalism.

Fields such as stylistics and discourse studies have examined figurative aspects of style and discourse along with other aspects: much work on literary texts, particularly on metaphor, has also made productive use of cognitive and cognitive linguistic approaches. In Chapter 8, we will examine a number of the themes that emerge from examining the discourse role of figurative language. Figurative usages clearly do not serve the same purposes as their literal "translations" – they are there for a reason and achieve goals for the writer. Even the *means* of evoking a figurative construal – for example, the choice of direct comparison (*Shall

I compare thee to a summer's day?) as opposed to leaving the connection to the reader (Dylan Thomas does not overtly identify *night* as referring to Death when he says, *Do not go gentle into that good night*) may be considered stylistically important.

And finally, it is no surprise that the field of rhetoric has long shown an interest in figurative language, as far back as Aristotle. Traditionally, an important aspect of rhetoric was persuasive discourse, which consists in bringing someone else around to your viewpoint on a situation. As we said above, cognitive and linguistic structures are pervasively viewpointed. But many very general ideas and frames are neutral as to viewpoint: for example, I can imagine an Election frame without personal identification with one or another candidate or party. And although the cognitive frame of Anger involves an aggrieved party and some cause (possibly a person) responsible for the grievance – and thus the possibility of taking one of the two viewpoints – the mention of *anger* does not automatically involve the speaker or listener in identification with one of these two parties rather than the other. However, that does not mean that most discourse about anger is neutral; on the contrary. Talking about an extreme expression of anger as *blowing up* or *exploding* certainly suggests the viewpoint of the addressee or onlookers of the scene, since people more naturally take on the viewpoint of a human than an explosive device. And this in turn means making at least some negative emotional assessment; explosions are harmful or at least dangerous to those present – and angry shouting may damage social relations. As Lakoff (2009) has pointed out, political framing is equally pervasive in establishing viewpoint. Using a metaphor such as *tax relief* presumes that taxes are an affliction or a burden from which citizens need "relief"; one does not need relief from the right to participate in one's government institutions, or from duties which are not onerous or coercive.

Metonymy creates viewpoint too: although the person in question may or may not resent it in particular circumstances, being viewed as *another pair of hands* does not mean that your cognitive and emotional viewpoints are being included in the construal. You are being seen as a worker or tool relevant to someone else's viewpoint and project plans. And not only does blending often involve viewpointed scenarios, it may also may create new viewpoint structures. The crew of *Great America II* not only built up a Race frame with two possible opposing viewpoints out of two separate one-participant events, but also of course took the viewpoint of their boat as contestant, not that of the long-ago crew of *Northern Light*.

So, as figurative language is shaping cognitive construals in discourse, it is typically shaping viewpoint on the relevant content as well. This happens at every level from the most wild and creative innovation to the most pedestrian usage (like *tax relief* or *angry explosion*), and in ways which may be blatantly obvious or completely under the listener's conscious radar. Understanding discourse crucially involves understanding these processes.