

1

Why Don't People Say What They Mean? Wealth and Stealth

Please consider the following lines spoken by characters in the 1985 American film, *The Breakfast Club* (Friesen, Meyer & Hughes 1985). The movie depicts five students in punitive detention on a Saturday at their high school for infractions they committed separately. The students represent stereotypical adolescent social genres of 1980s middle America: a socialite (Claire), an athlete (Andrew), an intellectual (Brian), an introvert (Allison), and a delinquent (Bender). Using the vernacular of the characters themselves, we have a “princess,” “athlete,” “brain,” “basket case,” and “criminal.” (Also included are Vernon, a school administrator, and Carl, a custodian.)

Rhetorical Question

CLAIRE: “Excuse me, sir, why would anybody want to steal a screw?”
 ANDREW: “Where do you want me to go?”
 BRIAN: “Who do I think I am?”

Metaphor

VERNON: “Don't mess with the bull young man; you'll get the horns.”
 ALLISON: “You never know when you may have to jam.”
 BRIAN: “The girl is an island with herself.”

Idiom

VERNON “Any *monkey business* is ill advised.”
 ANDREW “I got the feeling that he was disappointed that I never *cut loose* on anyone”
 BRIAN “You're so, like, *full of yourself*.”

Metonymy

CARL: “I am the eyes and ears of this institution.”
 VERNON: “Watch your tongue”
 BRIAN: “But what we found out is that each of us is a brain”

Verbal Irony

ANDREW: "That's real intelligent."

BENDER: "You richies are so smart."

BENDER: "Well ... I'll just run right out and join the wrestling team."

Hyperbole

ALLISON: "You do everything everybody ever tells you to do; that is a problem!"

ANDREW: "You've never competed in your whole life!"

BENDER: "Screws fall out all the time; the world's an imperfect place."

Understatement

ALLISON: "My home life is ... unsatisfying."

ANDREW: "Yeah ... he's kinda ... he's kinda skinny, weak."

VERNON: "Alright people, we're gonna try something a little different today."

Colloquial Tautology

VERNON: "Here we are."

BRIAN: "That's what it is."

VERNON: "Alright, that's it."

Mixed Figures

(Note that although some mixing is found in the individual figure groupings, the "mixed" figures here are relatively stronger, containing mixtures of at least three types.)

ALLISON: "It's kind of a double-edged sword, isn't it?" (rhetorical question, understatement, idiom, metaphor).

BENDER: "Oh and wouldn't that be a bite, missing a whole wrestling meet" (irony, metaphor, rhetorical question).

VERNON: "I've got you for the rest of your natural born life if you don't watch your step!" (hyperbole, metaphor, idiom, metonymy).

BENDER: "Although you'd probably have to ride in the back seat, 'cause his nuts would ride shotgun" (metaphor, hyperbole, idiom).

BENDER: "Well, Brian's trying to tell me that in addition to the number of girls in the Niagara Falls area, that presently you and he are riding the hobby horse!" (irony, metaphor, euphemism).

VERNON: "Ah, ah, ah grab some wood there, bub!" (metonymy, unintended double entendre – resulting in situational irony).

BENDER: "Hey, how come Andrew gets to get up? If he gets up, we'll all get up; it'll be anarchy!" (rhetorical question, hyperbole, irony).

CLAIRE: "You don't say anything all day, and then when you open your mouth ... you unload all these tremendous lies all over me" (hyperbole, metonymy, metaphor).

BENDER: "Does Barry Manilow know you raid his wardrobe?" (rhetorical question, irony, metonymy).

BENDER: "Show Dick some respect!" (irony, metaphor, double entendre).

The figurative language in these lines represents several kinds studied frequently by psychologists, linguists, and other language scholars. Most of this research has focused on an important and as yet unresolved question of how people comprehend language such as this, where speaker intentions and the language used are distal in various ways.¹ Another somewhat lesser-studied question, perhaps oddly, is frequently posed by non-academic-language users and happens to be the title of this chapter and in part motivates this book – *why don't people [just] say what they mean?*

People use figurative language all the time. Our conversations and writings are packed with it. We usually comprehend it on the fly with little difficulty. Occasionally, though, our ears will miss something, and confusion will happen. Other times people *do* comprehend figurative utterances, but their interpretations are different from or indeed completely opposite of the ones intended by the speaker or writer, as in misunderstanding the sarcastic comment, "I couldn't be better," spoken by a depressed person as positive. In still other instances, people comprehend absolutely nothing from figurative language, perhaps as in novel metaphors used in poetry, but they see it for what it is and uncaringly (or even without noticing) continue on to other things. Why would we then talk or write this way if confusion, misinterpretation, utter lack of comprehension, or outright dismissal can readily happen, especially when more direct language is available?

The short answer is that figurative language provides a lot of bang for its buck (*idiom*). Figurative language expresses meaning beyond its correct figurative interpretation – *correctly* understanding "I couldn't be better" as *negative* when spoken by someone feeling miserable (*verbal irony*). This extra meaning includes all kinds of things (*hyperbole*), such as speaker attitudes and emotions, contextual enhancements and elaborations, social revelations and influences, and new meanings arising from interactions between or among these things. Extra meaning also arises from the *structures* of the figures themselves, as in the belittlement expressed by minimalist asyndeton (e.g., "Been there, done that"). But how is this possible? How can language that demonstrably disconnects with speaker-intended meaning somehow achieve *more* meaning (*rhetorical question*)?

Language essentially does this through complex meaning mechanisms found throughout linguistic use and comprehension. But the mechanisms are concentrated particularly in figurative forms, whose delineation constitutes the primary content of this book. These mechanisms allow mouths

and hands to share hearts and minds (*metonymy*) and usually *without our noticing* – as hearers and even speakers. Indeed, one tiny bit (*understatement*) of the motivation driving the question “Why don't people just say what they mean?” is this lack of *apparentness* of figurative language in normal everyday talk and text. People just don't see it for what it is (*colloquial tautology*). They don't see how drenched (*metaphor*) normal language is with figures and indirectness and all that those forms accomplish. People instead focus on rarer instances where a perhaps novel figurative usage goes awry and then accordingly question why it is there. By way of illustrating figurative transparency, each of the figures explicitly labeled in this and the preceding paragraph are also present in the much shorter paragraph preceding them.

BRIEF OVERVIEW

The book attempts to provide the *long* answer to the rhetorical question in this chapter's title. It considers the wide array of figurative kinds of language to delineate different ways in which figurative and other language accomplishes complex additional meanings for speakers and writers. In so doing, it first addresses the basic question of what this additional complex meaning *is* (Chapter 2). It then discusses the myriad of *types* of these meanings, including which kinds of figurative language accomplish them and *how* (Chapter 3). Chapter 4 then treats factors surrounding how *people* use figurative language to leverage these meanings. Particular focus is given to how much people attend to what they and their interlocutors know when using figurative language and how this interacts with different kinds of figures. Other *delivery* factors concerning how to present figurative language to maximize its additional meaning output are also considered. A discussion of the *prevalence* of figurative language usage and its leveraged additional meanings, along with *limitations* and potential *expansion* of those additional meanings, is provided in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 then brings together the themes of the preceding chapters and offers several take-home messages for future research on figurative and indirect (and, indeed, all language) usage. To prepare the stage for this discussion, several of these themes need to be briefly introduced and a couple of caveats presented to corral the issues detailed in forthcoming chapters.

INTRODUCTION OF THEMES

Five primary ideas will emerge across subsequent chapters. One appears right away in Chapter 2 concerning the nature of the “additional complex

meaning” termed thus far in the use of figurative language – the notion of a *pragmatic effect*. The latter four ideas can help to orient progress through Chapters 2 through 5 but will become most prominent in Chapter 6. These involve (1) the role that varieties of *psychological phenomena* play in language processing – predominantly for figurative language but not isolated to it; (2) figurative language use and comprehension as a *social phenomenon*; and (3) approaches for dealing with the *complexity* of figurative cognition and the impact of *broad discourse content* on identification of local isolated figures. This latter theme is introduced at the end of this chapter (see the section entitled, “A Final Theme: Rorschach Figures”).

Pragmatic Meaning and Pragmatic Effects

The term *pragmatic effect* is used henceforth to refer to “additional complex meaning,” as described so far, accomplished by a speaker’s use of figurative language.² Fuller delineation of how this term and its scope of meaning are similar to and different from other accounts of pragmatic meaning is provided in Chapter 2. For now, just a brief outline of the term is provided.

An enormous amount of theoretical and empirical work has gone into investigating definitional and procedural components of semantic meaning, pragmatic meaning, interfaces between them, and how these meanings connect with many other related notions and levels of language (e.g., utterance meaning, said meaning, implied meaning, sentence meaning, speaker meaning, lexical meaning, morphological meaning, etc.). Nothing definitive is necessarily intended here in the current use of *pragmatic effect* to delineate between semantic and pragmatic meaning. Nor is some major new or different theoretical aspect of these phenomena being proposed or invented.³ And indeed, some degree of tolerance of vagueness in use of the term is sought in this explication, as it pertains to the goals of this work.

This exploration of pragmatic effects is not aimed at further hashing out definitional issues involved in figurative meaning, if indeed definitional issues can ever be completely resolved. Nor is it meant to delineate between *comprehension* versus *interpretation* – another distinction without a universally agreed-on boundary. Moreover, as will hopefully become apparent, pragmatic effects can arise from either of these general notions and indeed from mental processes separate from them. Rather, the present focus is on the richness of human mental and related internal activity that is meaningful for a speaker and that accompanies a hearer hearing (and

reader reading, speaker speaking, and writer writing), figurative or indirect language, that might exceed a person's hearing (reading, speaking, writing, etc.) nonfigurative/direct language.

Even these figurative/nonfigurative categories are admittedly difficult to delineate precisely (see later). Lesser-figurative language also can occasionally convey more rich meaning than more-figurative language – pragmatic effects are not exclusive to figurative language. But one reason for figurative language's existence is how it leverages such mental/internal activity in people conversing relative to something usually less figurative – as the forthcoming chapters will hopefully demonstrate. Thus the term *pragmatic effect* is meant loosely as a reference to mental/internal activity taking place in a person, traceable to his or her encountering figurative as well as other language, usually when receiving it (e.g., as an addressee, hearer, overhearer, reader, etc.) but also when he or she produces or even thinks about it.

Psychology and Pragmatics

Psychological processes span from lower-level physiological and sensory operations to multiple higher mechanisms in cognitive, emotional, social, developmental, and even personality and clinical psychology. An argument will be made in Chapter 6 that far too little attention has been given to the impact these processes have on purportedly encapsulated language comprehension and production. A new approach is needed to better incorporate psychological processes at large into narrower language cognition explanations, for figurative language, as argued here, as well as for all language processing in general.

To preview, many psychological processes are invoked by triggers in language processing per se and other things that accompany or precede it. Many of these processes are automatic to a degree, fast, and powerful such that they can interact with and even override ongoing language processing to influence outgoing language products (e.g., comprehensions and productions). Continuing research on figurative language thus needs to attend more fully to the totality of the minds doing this meaning making in both production and comprehension and how those minds work across multiple domains to adequately explain the linguistic phenomena involved. Processes such as low-level language processing are not fully encapsulated (Katz 2005; Spotorno & Noveck 2014). They are instead affected by many aspects of the state of the mind-body system doing the processing work.

Figurative Language as a Complex Social Phenomenon

Related to the call for a greater embrace of psychological and other influences in explanations of language comprehension and use, the fact that language takes place between highly social beings with multiple other interaction systems connecting them is crucial. Not only do we converse, but we also emote, empathize, love, hate, dismiss, resist, align, cleave, attract, and repel among one another using systems that long preceded and currently parallel linguistic communion.⁴ These systems interact in complex ways to affect processes and products of language comprehension and production. Moreover, this social aspect of language accords many more concerns for researchers wishing to explain figurative language use and comprehension because talk between people is not just a means of information exchange between interlocutors. Rather, talk is a full-blown performance, display, and propaganda system that orients speakers and hearers amid the complex social structures they inhabit, occasionally elevating a person's status in a social hierarchy and also lowering it. Thus, *that* figurative and other language operates on these levels and *how* it does so also need better explication.

Complexity Approaches

This complex tangle of human interaction systems calls for adoption of models of representation and, to an extent, prediction that embrace multiple interacting inputs as well as constraints and affordances on output that often supersede current relatively simple causal models of communication functioning. Approaches to figurative language based on constraint satisfaction (Campbell & Katz 2012; Pexman 2008), dynamical systems (Gibbs & Colston 2012; Gibbs & van Orden 2012), or other elaborate multivariate accounting hold promise at juggling this complexity because they are designed to provide probabilistic outcome estimates based on a range of interacting input parameters.

CAVEATS

Two brief caveats on the overall treatment given to figurative language and its pragmatic effects are warranted here given the different disciplines in which researchers on figurative language reside. Values placed on *types of data* in linguistic, psycholinguistic, and psychological research, among other fields, differ according to one's home discipline and subarea. Concerns

regarding *criticism in cross-disciplinary endeavors* are also raised in part because of varying familiarity with different disciplines' methods, values, and backgrounds, as well as simple differences in strengths. A third caveat concerning how to talk about figurative versus nonfigurative language in general is also presented.

Pop Goes the Examples

Whether one is a linguist studying sound patterns in sarcasm pronunciation versus proverbial forms in indigenous languages or a psychologist studying lexical choices in idiom alteration versus multimodal expressions of metaphor, one's unit(s) of analysis and how to measure it differ. People within and across disciplines simply use and respect different kinds of data. Given the focus in this book on nuances of figurative language usage and wide interdisciplinary interest in that topic, it is important for readers to see findings from a range of scientific approaches in the studies presented. Readers also need access to rich examples of figures and pragmatic effects from a variety of sources for deeper and easier conceptualization of the phenomena treated. A mixture of studies from linguistics, psychology, and other fields is thus presented without overdue attention to specific methodologies and analysis techniques in any one field to enable cross-disciplinary discussion.

For the examples presented, types and tokens from authentic broad corpora, single-instance recorded, or observed real instances of both text and talk provide one source of figurative phenomenon demonstration. For illustrative purposes, though, many other examples are culled from popular culture or invented altogether to demonstrate a particular point. These examples obviously may be caricatured, staged, over- or undersimplified, or in many other ways different from more authentic figurative language usage in real contexts. But their possible caricature status – enhancement of particular signature characteristics and especially their familiarity and/or accessibility through the Internet or other sources – makes them very useful as illustrative examples to demonstrate figure structure, figurative usage, blending, pragmatic effect accomplishment, and other processes. This book thus presents instances of figurative and other language usage from popular, predominantly North American novels, movies, television programs, Internet videos, songs, advertisements, and other sources in both talk and text. These are not offered as data per se, and their noted possible differences from in-the-moment spoken figurative language and authentic written communications

should be kept in mind. However, their vividness and ready-sharedness across diverse reader constituencies present advantages that can offset concerns about genuineness.

Problems with Problems

Related to but separable from differing values on evidence, people in different disciplines and their subareas also vary in their acceptance of critical analysis of previous work. One subdiscipline may criticize another for not attending to concerns in its field. Linguists or psychologists using experiments with experimenter-crafted language items, for instance, may criticize other researchers for not attending to sampling, causal-effect isolation, or generalizability. Conversely, experimentalists may be criticized for lack of item authenticity, for transparently staged comparisons, or for use of artificial or narrow language, settings, and tasks.

The point for purposes vis-à-vis this book is that each chapter, after opening with a brief presentation of the topic involved (i.e., prevalences of figurative language in broad populations of speakers and writers), follows with a lengthy treatment of the methodological and other problems involved in addressing that topic before then reporting and discussing the status of different findings and some new ideas. These critiques are offered in the spirit of addressing the problems at hand (i.e., how to quantify the amount of metaphor in a corpus). But they will likely nonetheless reflect disciplinary familiarity and experience. Such criticism is not intended to argue for one disciplinary approach or methodology over another. Indeed, no approach, method, or measure is infallible. All have limitations. Rather, it is hoped that the criticism will spur recognition of the need for more interdisciplinary cross talk and collaboration, including scholars reading, attending conferences, and holding discussions out of their scholarly comfort zones. Attending to criticisms of accepted approaches in their home disciplines and perhaps, especially, conducting and presenting studies using mixed approaches and methodologies (i.e., corpus and experimental analyses published/presented in tandem; see Giora et al. 2013) are thus implicit advocations.

Figurative Name Calling

The final caveat concerns use of the terms *figurative* and *nonfigurative*. Although a case has been made for the advantages of the term *nonfigurative* over *literal* (Gibbs & Colston 2012), and this book will adopt that

practice, along with regular usage of the term *figurative*, problems remain with attempted delineation between these as categories. Many presumed figurative utterances are difficult to categorize into subsets of known figurative types. Many supposed nonfigurative utterances also may be borderline figurative.

One need only look at the examples at the beginning of this chapter to see this. The first rhetorical question by Claire contains an extreme-case formulation that gives it a flavor of hyperbole. The second idiom by Andrew has hints of both understatement and hyperbole. The second irony example from Bender could be metonymic and hyperbolic, and its use of diminutivization could be a second source of subtle irony. All three of these delicate suggestions or invocations of figurative mechanisms, plus many others, also can be found easily in what most people would take as nonfigurative language.

A FINAL THEME: RORSCHACH FIGURES

A final theme is worthy of independent mention here because it pertains particularly to the preceding brief point on distinguishing figurative and nonfigurative language. Some instances of figurative language may become apparent only when considered amid the broader discourse contexts from which they are taken. If considered in isolation as a brief phrase or sentence, their figurativeness can be shrouded – ambiguities in surface form may not clearly indicate the figurativeness. However, if the broader discourse is allowed to project down on the smaller snippet contained within, figurativeness can emerge. These instances are accordingly termed *Rorschach figures*.

A further example from *The Breakfast Club* is illustrative: consider the target utterance (1.3) by Vernon that follows. This comment can be traced to an earlier event where Bender (the “criminal”) surreptitiously removed a screw from a door between Vernon’s office and the detention room so that the door would not stay open. Vernon discovers this and angrily accuses Bender of removing the screw. Bender denies the act, so Vernon threatens to shake the screw out of him and then insults Bender, saying that he’ll be the next screw to fall out.

A very angry sequence of exchanges between Vernon and Bender then occurs in which Vernon systematically increases the number of subsequent detention days in response to increasingly angry and figurative comments from Bender. These begin with Bender first mumbling, “Eat my shorts,” and then saying it pointedly to Vernon. They end with Bender saying, “You