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#### USING FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

*Using Figurative Language* presents results from a multidisciplinary decades-long study of figurative language that addresses the question, “Why don’t people just say what they mean?” This research empirically investigates goals speakers or writers have when speaking (writing) figuratively and, concomitantly, meaning effects wrought by figurative language usage. These *pragmatic effects* arise from many kinds of figurative language, including metaphors (e.g., “This computer is a dinosaur”), verbal irony (e.g., “Nice place you’ve got here”), idioms (e.g., “Bite the bullet”), proverbs (e.g., “Don’t put all your eggs in one basket”), and others. Reviewed studies explore mechanisms – linguistic, psychological, social, and others – underlying pragmatic effects, some traced to basic processes embedded in human sensory, perceptual, embodied, cognitive, social, and schematic functioning. The book should interest readers, researchers, and scholars in fields beyond psychology, linguistics, and philosophy who share interests in figurative language – including language studies, communication, literary criticism, neuroscience, semiotics, rhetoric, and anthropology.

Herbert L. Colston is Professor and Chair of the Department of Linguistics at the University of Alberta. Previously, he was a professor of psychology at the University of Wisconsin–Parkside. Professor Colston has published widely and has edited several books, including *Figurative Language Comprehension: Social and Cultural Influences* and *Irony in Language and Thought: A Cognitive Science Reader*. He co-authored *Interpreting Figurative Meaning* (Cambridge University Press, 2012) with Raymond Gibbs.

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*University of Alberta*



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*To Herbert A. Colston  
and  
Marlene D. Colston*

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You don't know anything,  
unless you know everything.  
You never know everything,  
so you always know nothing.

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## PREFACE

*Using Figurative Language* was born out of the idea that accounts of language production, use, comprehension, structure, underpinning, and change, for figurative and indirect but additionally all language, need to align with current understandings of not only human cognitive phenomena but also social, emotional, motivational, physical, and other human and animal functioning along with established explications of the all the layers of language and their nature. In kind with the cognitive commitment, the scientific study of language conducted by allied disciplines needs also to adhere to a social commitment, a developmental commitment, an embodied commitment, and commitments to emotional, evolutionary, and other domains of human structure and operation, as well as to their complex interaction, to fully portray the processes and products stemming from human linguistic communication. Some of these source data come from research in the array of subdisciplines in psychology. Other input can be found in evolutionary theory, biology, the functioning of communication systems parallel to language, linguistics proper, cognitive linguistics, literary studies, semiotics, rhetoric, and other disciplines that focus on the processes and products or both of linguistic communion.

Particular focus was put on the social underpinnings of abstract thought and, in turn, language cognition given recent developments in sociocognitive neuroscience and embodiment research, which provides evidence that a major portion of how we do cognition and, accordingly, how we do language is wired to align with our level of connection with other people or groups and our status in social hierarchies – along with concomitant social motivations produced by such hierarchies. How our cognitive functions are tuned is related closely to how we operate as part of a human social group. These social constraints and corallings, along with parallel embodied ones,

serve to orient human functioning, to make use of what is already present, and to direct us along paths set down as characteristic of evolved social species.

Caution was also raised, though, about viewing these recycling and channeled cognitive and communicative endowments as somehow deterministic for human behavior. The complexity of the chorus of processes and mechanisms that contribute to human behavior, linguistic and otherwise, affords a degree of dynamic chaos amid attractors, enabling emergent possibilities in behavioral and meaning outcomes. Tendencies nonetheless may be observed and used to construct parsimonious accounts of linguistic and related functioning. But the system maintains a modicum of volatility that occasionally can unpredictably alter linguistic behavioral patterns (e.g., production, comprehension, use, etc.).

It is hoped that this work will spur continued trajectories of incorporating linguistic, psychological, embodied, social, life-span developmental, and other contributing factors in language cognition explanation toward (1) better inclusion of multimodal, paralinguistic, and metalinguistic factors, (2) embracement of complex multivariate analysis and modeling techniques, and (3) increased blending of authenticity in content with rigor in methodology, leading to even greater crosstalk and cross-fertilization among disciplines working toward a scientifically holistic understanding of human language.