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.
Using Figurative Language

Herbert L. Colston

University of Alberta
To Herbert A. Colston

and

Marlene D. Colston
You don't know anything, unless you know everything. You never know everything, so you always know nothing.
## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acknowledgments</th>
<th>page xiii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>xv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Why Don't People Say What They Mean? Wealth and Stealth</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brief Overview</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction of Themes</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatic Meaning and Pragmatic Effects</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology and Pragmatics</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figurative Language as a Complex Social Phenomenon</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complexity Approaches</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caveats</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pop Goes the Examples</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems with Problems</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figurative Name Calling</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Final Theme: Rorschach Figures</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 What Is a Pragmatic Effect? Multidisciplinarity and Scope</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatic Effects: A Case Study</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining a Pragmatic Effect</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech Act Theory</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gricean Theory</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance Theory</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophical Accounts</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inferences</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causal Antecedent and Causal Consequent Inferences</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superordinate Goal, Thematic and Additudinal Inferences</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion Inferences</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Contents

Instantiation of Noun Category and Instrumental Inferences 39  
Subordinate Goal/Action Inferences 39  
How Are Pragmatic Effects Unlike Implicatures, Positive  
Cognitive Effects, Interpretive Hypotheses, or Inferences? 40  
Structural Effects 41  
Embodied Effects 43  
Psychological Effects 47  
Sociocultural Effects 48  
Social Knowledge about Speakers/Hearers 49  
Shared Knowledge among Interlocutors 49  
Familiarity in Interlocutors 50  
Enablement of Social Information: Social Structure,  
Language, and Culture 50  
Egocentrism in Speakers 51  
Social Information Interacting with Language Processing 51  

### 3 What Are the Pragmatic Effects? Issues in Categorizing

Pragmatic Effects 53  
Anomalous Figures 53  
Categories and Contents 63  
Pragmatic Effects and Decontextualization 65  
Delineating Pragmatic Effects 66  
General Pragmatic Effects 66  
  Ingratiation 67  
  Mastery 67  
  Persuasion 68  
  Social Engineering 70  
  Catalyzation 70  
  Efficiency 70  
Pragmatic Effects Specific to Single Figures or Figure Families 71  
  Expressing Negativity 71  
  Enhancing Meaning 73  
  Highlighting Discrepancies 73  
  Objectification 74  
  Identification 75  
  Humor 75  
  Emotion Expression/Elicitation 76  
  Extollation 77  
  Politeness 77
Contents

Impoliteness 78
Tension Reduction 81
Machiavellianism 81
Anomalous Pragmatic Effects 82

Causes of Pragmatic Effects 85
Linguistic Causes 87
Structural Causes 88
Juxtaposition Causes 89
Metapragmatic Causes 90
Social Causes 90
Psychological Causes 91
Associative Causes 96
Idiosyncratic Causes 97
Stylistic/Register Causes 97
Embodied Causes 97
Time Course of Pragmatic Effects 98
Midpoint Conclusions 98

4 How Is Figurative Language Used? Three Kinds of Answers 100
Common Ground in Figurative Language Use 101
A Brief Summary of the Debate 103
Figurative Language and Common Ground 105
Metaphor 105
Verbal Irony 108
Hyperbole 111
Contextual Expressions 112
Idioms 113
Indirect Requests 114
Common Ground in Discourse Patterns 115

A New “New Look at Common Ground” 118
Memory 119
Availability 121
Automaticity 121
Individual Differences 123
Style 124
Common Ground and Use 124
Common Ground in Figurative versus Nonfigurative Language 125
 Appropriateness 127
## Contents

Aptness 128  
Indirectness 131  
The Future of Common Ground 131  
Packaging Figurative Language 133  
Pragmatic Effects for Speakers 141  

5 What Is Figurative Language Use? Prevalences, Problems, and Promise 144  
Corpus and Observational Work 147  
Figurative Language Prevalence(s) 149  
Fixed Forms 150  
Metaphor and Pragglejaz 150  
Verbal Irony and Hyperbole 151  
Pragmatic Effect Prevalence(s) 152  
Multimodal Indicators 153  
Linguistic Indicators 154  
Control Comparisons 155  
Formula Derivation 156  
Compilation and New Studies 157  
Mediators 158  

Is Figurative Language Used Up? 160  
A Figurative Collage 160  
Fads and Fades 164  
Fixedness and Decompositionality 165  
Profanity 168  
Creativity 168  
New Figures 172  
Figurative Use beyond Language 178  
Limits of Pragmatic Effects 180  
Time 180  
Narrow Time Limits 180  
Broader Time Limits 182  
Timing 182  
Big Time 182  
Shallow and Deep Synchronicity 183  
Audience Size 184  
Multimodal Timing 185  
Structure: Hyperbole and Persuasion 185  
The Peak Problem 188
## Contents

6 Conclusion: Meaning Happens, by Hook or by Crook 191
   What Is Entailed by a Search for Meaning? 193
      Psychology and Pragmatics 194
      Psycholinguistic Meaning 195
      Linguistic Pragmatic Meaning 197
      Cognitive Psychological Meaning 200
   Figurative Language as a Complex Social Phenomenon 204
      Social Groups 206
      Sociocognitive Mechanisms 208
      Neural and Behavioral Evidence 209
   Rorschach Figures 217
   A Pragmatic Effect Organization 220
   Pragmatic Effects and Intentionality 222
   Complexity Approaches 224
      Modeling 224
      Metatheorizing 225
   Conclusion 226

Notes 231
References 239
Index 263
Many grateful thanks to Adina Berk and Matthew Bennett at Cambridge University Press, along with the editorial and production staff, for their wonderful assistance and support with publication. I am as always indebted to my friends, colleagues, and collaborators for many invigorating conversations over the years about the topics treated in this book. Among these, I am grateful to Raymond W. Gibbs, Greg Bryant, Jennifer O’Brien, Albert Katz, Penny Pexman, Rachel Giora, Chris Kello, Gerry Steen, Teenie Matlock, Gary Wood, Greg Mayer, Brigitte Friedl-Colston, Morgan Colston, Sally Rice, and Juhani Jarvikivi. I also thank Yasmin Tulpar for assistance with references and indexing, Elizabeth French for administrative support at the University of Alberta, and the very large cadre of students who contributed to my research as collaborators, assistants, and participants.
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 corollings, 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) embrace 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.