1 *Figurative language*

1.1 The scope of this book

It is well known that 'figurative language' is often used in speaking and writing to express ideas and emotions, and to affect the views and attitudes of others. However, there is increasing evidence that the use of figurative language varies depending on the nature of the communicative activity, or, more specifically, depending on factors such as topic, audience, mode of communication, situational context, and so on. In this book we propose a systematic approach to variation in the use of figurative language, and particularly metaphor and metonymy, in different 'genres' and 'registers', which we define in Chapter 2 (Swales, 1990; Martin and Rose, 2003, 2008). A central notion in our approach is that texts are produced by and for members of different 'discourse communities' – groups of people who 'have texts and practices in common' (Barton, 2007: 75). We show that the forms and functions of figurative language can differ significantly from genre to genre and across registers. We argue that this both reflects and shapes the discourse communities associated with different genres and, more specifically, the goals, conventions, expertise and ideologies of the members of the discourse communities that texts are produced by or meant for. We investigate the use of figurative language across a variety of genres and registers (both written and spoken), and consider a range of instances of communication that involve crossing the boundaries between different discourse communities.

We begin with two concrete examples that show how differences in genre can explain, respectively, the contrast between metaphorical and non-metaphorical uses of the same expression, and the contrast between different metaphorical uses of the same expression. Our first example concerns the term *copy* in the debate about cloning. This term has been used both in scientific papers and in media reports, but in different ways. As Nerlich et al. (2000: 232) point out, the use of *copy* 'may have an entirely value-free literal meaning' when it occurs, for instance in an article written for *Scientific American* by Ian Wilmut, the embryologist in charge of the team that famously cloned Dolly the Sheep. In that context, *copy* refers to the reproduction of

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an organism's genetic code in a laboratory, so that the two organisms are genetically identical. Similarly, in an academic paper cloning is defined as 'the production of an identical or near-identical genetic copy of an organism' (Savulescu, 1999: 88). In contrast, in media reports *copy* tends to be used evaluatively in order to describe a whole (hypothetical) human being as nothing more than a reproduction of another individual. This use can be described as potentially meta-phorical, as it may suggest that the relationship between a clone and the donor organism is similar to the relationship between inferior reproductions and unique originals in the context of photocopying, the visual arts and so on. As a consequence, the use of *copy* in the media can contribute to the representation of potential human clones as 'instant duplicates of adult humans' devoid of individual identity (Nerlich et al., 2000: 231). This is the case, for example, in an article in the UK newspaper *The Daily Mail,* commenting on the claim that human cloning had been achieved by the members of a movement known as the Raelians:

> Natural twins are not deliberately produced to resemble each other.
>
> A cloned child would always be a copy, deliberately produced to fulfil the potential already demonstrated by another.
>
> Two of the women who the cult claims are carrying clones are said to be seeking copies of dead children.

> (*The Daily Mail*, 30 December 2002)

Such differences in the use of the same expressions can have impor-tant implications, for example for the ways in which research work is perceived outside of the academic discourse community. Nerlich et al. (2000: 30) suggest that, by using the term *copy* in *Scientific American*, Wilmut had 'fallen into a semantic trap', as the general metaphorical associations of the word undermined his attempt to persuade the gen-eral public of the therapeutic potential of cloning techniques.

   Our second example involves a metaphor that was originally used in a highly influential paper published in the journal *Science* in 1965, and then adapted to serve a different purpose in books meant for a general audience. In the paper published in *Science*, Roger Melzack and Patrick Wall introduced a 'new theory' of pain mechanisms, in order to explain why the sensation of pain is not always straight-forwardly associated with damage to the body: it can occur in the absence of any such damage (e.g. phantom limb pain), or fail to occur in spite of considerable damage (e.g. reports on the part of wounded soldiers that they felt no pain while on the battlefield). Melzack and

Wall argued that a particular area of the spinal cord, the *substantia gelatinosa*:

> … acts as a gate control system that modulates the synaptic transmission of nerve impulses from peripheral fibers to central cells.
>
> (Melzack and Wall, 1965: 975)

Melzack and Wall called their theory the 'gate control theory of pain' and used expressions such as *gate* and *open / close* as metaphorical technical terms throughout their paper in order to capture specific processes within the nervous system that account for when and to what extent pain sensations are experienced, as in the extracts below:

> Thus, if a gentle pressure stimulus is applied suddenly to the skin, the afferent volley contains large-fiber impulses which not only fire the T cells but also partially close the presynaptic gate, thereby shortening the barrage generated by the T cells.
>
> (Melzack and Wall, 1965: 975)

> The small fibers show considerable spontaneous activity, which would have the effect of keeping the gate open.
>
> (Melzack and Wall, 1965: 977)

Since the publication of Melzack and Wall's original paper, the 'gate' metaphor has been repeatedly adapted and developed in a range of different texts aimed at different audiences. For example, in a self-help book for chronic pain sufferers (Cole et al., 2005), readers are told that:

> In chronic pain there are no treatments that can shut the gate and keep it closed all the time. However, there are ways to close the gate as much as possible so that fewer pain messages pass through the pain system. […]

> You can use the skills described in Part II of this book to gain some control over how much the gate is open or closed. […]

> *What closes the gate and stops pain?* Circle those things or activities that you know affect your own gate and add more if you can […].
>
> (Cole et al., 2005: 41; italics in original)

Here the 'gate' metaphor is realized more flexibly and by a wider range of expressions than in the case of Melzack and Wall's paper (e.g. the use of *shut* in *shut the gate*). In addition, the metaphor is used to describe the effects of an individual's everyday activities, rather than to explain the details of chemical processes invisible to the naked eye: in Melzack and Wall's paper, the gate is opened or

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closed by changes or states within the nervous system (e.g. *activity/ ies* in the nervous system and brain, *any lesion that …, any central nervous system condition that …*); in Cole et al.'s book, the gate is described as an individual characteristic of each sufferer (*your own gate*), and may be opened or closed by ordinary experiences that are partly under the person's control (e.g. going for a walk or getting stressed). These differences in the use of the metaphor reflect differences in genre, audience and function: in Melzack and Wall's paper, the metaphor is employed as part of a scientific account of when and how pain is experienced; in Cole et al.'s book, the function of the metaphor is to suggest that pain is not inevitable and to empower readers to take control of their own pain. This kind of adaptation of technical metaphors can potentially benefit the readers of books such as Cole et al.'s, but also, perhaps inevitably, involves simplification and some degree of imprecision (a more detailed discussion is provided in Semino, 2011).

In order to account for the specific ways in which words are (or are not) used metaphorically in our two examples, it is useful to consider the discourse communities to which writers and readers belong, and the goals associated with the genre under which a text can be subsumed. Our examples also show, however, that the boundaries between discourse communities and genres are not watertight. On the one hand, a particular metaphor can be adopted and adapted within a different genre from that in which it was originally introduced: this is the case with the 'gate' metaphor for pain. On the other hand, a non-metaphorical use of an expression can be (mis)interpreted as metaphorical by readers or listeners who do not belong to the same discourse community as the writer or speaker: this applies to Wilmut's use of *copy* in *Scientific American*, as Nerlich et al. (2000) suggest.

Even when a particular expression is used in broadly similar ways within and outside a particular discourse community, the nuanced figurative meaning that it has within the community may not always be accessible to 'outsiders'. For example, the metaphorical use of *transmission* to describe an approach to teaching is probably readily comprehensible to all users of English. However, the following citations of its use within the discourse community of foreign language teachers suggest that it has highly negative connotations that may not be fully accessible outside the discourse community:

> Focus in recent times on realistic pedagogy means that we can no longer depend on a transmission model of training.
>
> (Pani, 2001: 355)

> […] current pedagogical thinking seems to be shifting away from the
> traditional behavioristic model of teaching as transmission of knowledge.
> (Kohonen, 1992: 30)

The members of the discourse community of foreign language teach-
ers share a great deal of knowledge about the aspects of the 'transmis-
sion' metaphor that account for its rejection in these quotations, such
as the fact that viewing teaching as transmission positions learners in
a passive role. Readers who do not belong to this professional dis-
course community may not, however, fully appreciate what exactly is
negatively described as a *transmission* model of teaching and why.

Similarly, Caballero and Suarez-Toste (2010) discuss a range of
examples of figurative language used in wine-tasting notes that are
unlikely to be comprehensible in all their nuances to someone who
is not a member of the discourse community of writers and readers
of this very specialized genre. For example, most speakers of English
would have some understanding of what is meant by describing a
wine as *young* or *mature*. However, non-members of the discourse
community might be less sure exactly what is connoted by these terms
in the context of the description of a particular wine: whether they
are neutrally descriptive or evaluative, and if so, whether positive or
negative.

Examples such as these show the importance of shared group
knowledge in interpreting figurative language, something that is
sometimes neglected by mainstream theories of metaphor interpre-
tation. The aim of this book is to explore the use of figurative lan-
guage in relation to a variety of discourse communities, to identify the
main patterns of variation, and to explain them within a systematic
approach to genre and register.

1.2 This book in the context of current research on figurative language

Recent research into figurative language, and in particular metaphor
and metonymy, has, in very general terms, followed two main
strands.

The first strand includes broadly cognitive approaches, which are con-
cerned with the mental structures and processes involved in the produc-
tion and interpretation of metaphor and, to a lesser extent, metonymy
(e.g. Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Sperber and Wilson, 1995; Glucks-
berg, 2001). The dominant paradigm within cognitive approaches is
Conceptual Metaphor Theory, hereafter CMT (e.g. Lakoff and John-
son, 1980, 1999; Grady, 1997; Kövecses, 2002, 2010). Within CMT,

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metaphor and metonymy are seen primarily as cognitive tools that play a central role in human conceptual systems. As Kövecses observes in relation to metaphor,

> metaphor in the cognitive linguistic view means primarily conceptual metaphor, as opposed to linguistic metaphor.

(Kövecses, 2010: 33)

More specifically, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) pointed out the presence of pervasive patterns of conventional linguistic metaphors in English and other languages, as in the case of the following ways of describing arguments: *Your claims are indefensible*, *He attacked every weak point in my argument*, *His criticisms were right on target* (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 4). Lakoff and Johnson interpret these linguistic patterns as evidence of conventional patterns of metaphorical thought, known as 'conceptual metaphors'. For example, the linguistic expressions we have just quoted are seen as linguistic realizations of the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 3–6). A conceptual metaphor consists of systematic correspondences, or mappings, between a source domain (e.g. WAR) and a target domain (e.g. ARGUMENT), such as the correspondences between two people arguing and opposing armies, criticizing an idea and military attack, and so on. Typically, source domains are more concrete, embodied, simple, accessible and clearly delineated than target domains, which tend to be relatively more abstract, subjective, complex, inaccessible and poorly delineated. The choice of source domain highlights some aspects of the target domain and backgrounds others. For example, the WAR source domain highlights the competitive aspects of arguments and backgrounds their potential collaborative aspects.

Whereas metaphor is defined in CMT in terms of mappings *across* domains, metonymy is described as involving mappings *within* domains (e.g. Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 35–40; Barcelona, 2002; Kövecses, 2002: 143–62; Croft and Cruse, 2004: 216–20). For example, the use of the expression *the White House* to refer to the US president and/or the members of the US administration is described as involving a mapping between different elements of the domain that may be called US GOVERNMENT, namely, between the location of the president's residence and office on the one hand, and the members of the administration, including the president, on the other (Barcelona, 2002). This use of metonymy can be seen as an example of a more general pattern that is captured via the 'conceptual metonymy' THE PLACE FOR THE INSTITUTION (e.g. Kövecses, 2002: 144).

Overall, within the cognitive strand in research on metaphor and metonymy, the study of language is a means to an end: linguistic metaphors and metonymies do not constitute the main object of study, but are seen as evidence of mappings at the conceptual level, or are constructed by researchers in order to be used as stimuli in controlled laboratory experiments. As a consequence, claims about metaphor and metonymy as conceptual tools have tended to be illustrated with citations from unspecified sources, largely dissociated from their linguistic co-text and non-linguistic context. For instance, in an exploration of the different understandings of the term 'dead metaphor', Lakoff's examples include *He still can't grasp the basic ideas of quantum mechanics* and *I caught all the subtleties of the argument* (Lakoff, 1987: 145). Lakoff does not give the sources of the examples, which themselves offer few, if any, clues as to their context. Similarly, the examples of metaphor that are invented for the purposes of psycholinguistic experiments tend to be generic, decontextualized sentences or short texts. As Steen puts it, this does not take into account that 'all language use is genre-regulated', and that '[p]eople use language on particular occasions in specific roles, for particular goals, about particular topics, in particular settings, and against the background of specific norms and expectations' (Steen, 2007: 352–3).

The second, related and rapidly developing, strand of research on figurative language has focused particularly on metaphor, and attempts to describe patterns of linguistic (and non-linguistic) metaphor in use in order to arrive at adequate explanatory models. Researchers in this area have explored the ways in which figurative language is used in authentic communicative situations, such as education, politics or business, in order to perform different functions, such as explaining, persuading, entertaining, evaluating or supporting particular ideologies (e.g. Cameron, 2003; Koller, 2004; Musolff, 2004; Charteris-Black, 2005; Littlemore and Low, 2006; Semino, 2008). In this second tradition, which proponents sometimes call 'real world metaphor research' (e.g. Low et al., 2010), models such as CMT are a possible means, not the end, and language is the main object of study, with all the complexities and indeterminacies of naturally occurring data in context. The work in this book positions itself in this second tradition, and, specifically, examines the impact of contextual factors on figurative language use.

While this second strand of research is primarily concerned with the description of figurative language in context, it has produced findings that need to be taken into serious consideration when theorizing about figurative language in more general terms. For example, research by Cameron (2003) has shown that metaphor in spoken educational discourse is most often manifested in verbal rather than

nominal form – a fact which raises doubts about the adequacy of the theories of metaphor comprehension that are primarily based on 'A is B' metaphorical statements (e.g. Glucksberg, 2001). Other research has shown that it is not always easy to differentiate between metaphor and metonymy in authentic discourse (Moon, 1998; Deignan, 2005) and that explanations of metaphor use that are based on the notion of broad conceptual 'domains' may not be equally appropriate to all situations (Semino, 2008). Most importantly, research in the area of discourse analysis is starting to show that a 'one size fits all' approach to figurative language may not be appropriate. Rather, when analysing the forms and functions of figurative language, it is important to take account of the discourse community, genre and register in which it is used (e.g. Caballero, 2003, 2006).

Both of the strands of research on figurative language we have identified are based on the notion that metaphor, in particular, 'matters' because it is pervasive in language (and, it is increasingly being claimed, in non-verbal communication, e.g. Cienki and Müller, 2008). However, classic works in CMT in particular tend to treat language as an undifferentiated whole, and do not provide any specific detail on what 'pervasiveness' means in terms of the actual frequency of metaphor use in language and communication. This can be seen as a consequence of the emphasis on metaphorical thought, which may or may not necessarily have an observable manifestation in language, or communicative behaviour more generally.

In contrast, the second 'discoursal' or 'real-world' strand in research on figurative language tends to focus on the use of metaphor, and, to a lesser extent, metonymy in specific datasets, and to make claims about the particular characteristics of figurative uses in those datasets, including factors such as the frequency of figurative expressions. Some important findings have started to emerge from this kind of work on the nature of actual metaphor use. The use of metaphorical expressions does seem to be pervasive, but not perhaps to the extent that is suggested by general claims concerning the 'ubiquity' of metaphor in language and thought (e.g. Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Gibbs, 1994). The findings of different projects relying on slightly different identification methods suggest that, on average, the frequency of metaphorical expressions may range between 3 and 18 occurrences per 100 words (e.g. Cameron, 2003; Cameron and Stelma, 2004; Steen et al., 2010). However, linguistic metaphors do not tend to be evenly spread across texts, but often cluster at particular points, where the density of metaphor use is much higher than average (Cameron and Stelma, 2004). Metaphor clusters have been found to occur, for example, in places where the content of the message is particularly difficult

or face threatening. In Chapter 5, we analyse metaphor clusters in talk. In addition, there is increasing evidence that the frequency, form and function of metaphor use vary depending, broadly speaking, on the context of communication, and particularly on genre and register (e.g. Steen et al., 2010).

Cameron (1999a) has suggested that the use of metaphor may exhibit 'systematicity' at three different levels:

(a) '*local systematicity* of metaphors within a particular discourse event' (e.g. a specific, one-off metaphor that is used systematically throughout a poem);

(b) '*discourse systematicity* of metaphors within use in specific discourse communities' (e.g. metaphors used in scientific articles concerned with a particular topic); and

(c) '*global systematicity* of metaphors across a range of discourse types and content' (e.g. the general metaphorical tendency to talk about time in terms of movement in space, as in *the passing of time* or *the holidays are approaching*).

(Cameron, 1999a: 129; emphasis in original)

More recently, Cameron (2010a and 2010b) has proposed the notion of 'systematic metaphor' in order to capture the use of semantically related linguistic metaphors in relation to the same topic within a particular discourse event. For example, Cameron et al. (2010: 130–31) note a tendency within a focus group discussion to describe violent conflict as a game with rules, and terrorists as breaking the rules. These patterns are captured by the systematic metaphors VIOLENT CONFLICT IS A GAME WITH RULES and TERRORISTS BREAK THE RULES. Systematic metaphors are formulated in ways that resemble the conceptual metaphors of CMT, but they should not be seen as equivalent. Conceptual metaphors are intended to capture relatively permanent cross-domain mappings within the conceptual system of the speakers of a language. In contrast, systematic metaphors are generalizations on the language used by participants 'talking-and-thinking' in a particular communicative context (Cameron et al., 2010).

In this book we are particularly concerned with what Cameron calls 'discourse systematicity', which has been identified as an important level at which to study patterns and variation in the use of metaphor and figurative language more generally:

Any discourse community will have words and phrases, not only metaphorical but also technical, that emerge over various timescales as specific in form, use and meaning.

(Cameron, 2010b: 88)

> People who share a discourse world – such as prisoners, football fans, engineers, parents, are likely to have a shared language in which expressions that seem metaphorical to outsiders have become conventionalized.
> (Cameron and Maslen, 2010: 112)

Cameron (2010a: 6) mentions Cooper's (1986: 165) observation that the jargon associated with prison inmates includes metaphorical expressions specific to that group, such as *screws* for prison wardens. Some of the other examples mentioned by Cooper are actually best seen as instances of context-specific metonymy. For example, the term *porridge* is sometimes used to refer to prison. This relies on an association between prison and the food traditionally fed to prison inmates in Britain (Carter, 1998: 55).

In a large-scale quantitative study, Steen et al. (2010) identified 'metaphor-related words' in four sections of the BNC Baby (a subcorpus of the British National Corpus) that they refer to as representing different 'registers': fiction, news, academic writing and conversation. This study is the most extensive to date of those that fall within the second, linguistically focused strand of research into figurative language, and raises some important questions about variation in metaphor use. We will return to Steen et al.'s work later in this chapter and throughout the book.

To conclude this section, we should acknowledge that our distinction between the two main strands in research on figurative language is inevitably a generalization, and does not therefore apply in a clear-cut fashion to studies that contribute to both strands. Some studies within CMT are in fact based on patterns observed in actual language use (e.g. Kövecses, 2000), and recognize the presence of variation in metaphor use *within* languages and cultures, as well as *across* languages and cultures (e.g. Kövecses, 2005). Conversely, linguists working with large electronic corpora have investigated metaphorical and metonymic expressions in large language corpora in order to test the validity of existing claims about conceptual metaphors, and to place such claims on a firmer empirical footing (e.g. Deignan, 2005; Semino, 2005; Stefanowitsch and Gries, 2006).

1.3 Our approach to figurative language

The term 'figurative language' is rather problematic, as it does not capture a homogeneous and clearly defined subset of uses of language, or of ways of processing language. In this book, we use it as the most appropriate general term for the specific phenomena we are concerned with, namely: metaphor (including metaphorical expressions, similes, analogies, etc.) and metonymy. A range of other