Functions of figurative language in discourse

Structure of the subunit

This subunit introduces <u>functions</u> of figurative language, mainly metaphors, in discourse and illustrates these functions.
It provides further reading, and includes small tasks/activities related to specific functions and a larger task related to a broader project.

Learning objectives
– To be able to identify functions of metaphors in one's own discourse data
– To be able to reflect on individual functions and their relation
– To be able to include functions of figurative language as an analytical category in one's own research projects

This subunit focuses on functions of figurative devices (figurations), primarily metaphor, in (public) discourse. From a discourse analytical perspective introduced in Subunit 1, researchers investigate the forms and functions of figurations in authentic language use, taking into account who uses them, why, in what contexts, and with what possible effects; that is, looking at possible intentions, participants' roles, genres, and consequences of discursive acts.

Figurations are always used in specific communicative situations and discourse (sub)genres. These (sub)genres with their specific features, discourse participants (authors, primary and secondary audiences, etc.), and their macro and micro contexts influence figurations. For instance, texts on the same topic, but meant for different readerships, have different features, including metaphor (Skorczynska and Deignan 2006).

Metaphors and other figurations are both a product of thought, emotion, and social perception as well as a means to shape them. In metaphor studies, there has been some controversy regarding the relation between the conceptual level and the level of use. Vereza's (2021) claim is indicative of many other standpoints: conceptual metaphors belong to the level of the conceptual system with its high-order, off-line representations, whereas at the level of use we have episodic, on-line, often deliberate conceptualizations (but see Gibbs (2017), who questions deliberateness). In figurative language use, these two levels are articulated in a coherent and systematic way.

Many discourse-based studies look at choices and patterns of figurations in authentic data to account for the **implications** of figurations for, say, identity construction and maintaining social relations: domains of communication from which data are drawn include politics (e.g., Musolff 2004), healthcare (Semino et al. 2015), education (e.g., Cameron 2003), and economics (Cai and Deignan 2019). These "implications" are a near synonym for "**functions**" in this subunit. Before providing an overview of some functions of figurative devices in various genres, let us look at a couple of examples to illustrate how figurations appear in different forms: some can be easily overlooked, some seem rather visible, and some seem to be less salient than others.

Discursively salient and less salient metaphors

Let us take a look at a short text excerpt from the Brexit context (source: the *Yorkshire Post* website).[1] The author is the Brexit secretary David Davis. In this text published in May 2017, Davis warned people in Yorkshire not to vote Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn into office. Already in the first sentence of the excerpt below, he explicitly negatively evaluated Corbyn's approach (*the worst possible Brexit deal)* and the impact that voting Corbyn would have on the Brexit negotiations. Figurative language also plays an important role in Davis' message.

> (…) *That would mean the worst possible Brexit deal for Yorkshire and the UK as a whole. Corbyn has already said he will accept any deal handed down by the European Union – no matter how punitive; no matter how costly. Common sense tells us that's the worst possible approach to take. When buying a house or a car, would you state upfront that you are willing to agree to whatever the seller demanded? Of course not.* (…)

If we apply the MIP(VU) procedure, we can identify several metaphors: some seem less salient regarding the overall message of the text, whereas one metaphorical scenario seems more salient. Two of the metaphors in the text are *hand down* and *tell*. The verb *hand down* is used metaphorically here as 'officially announce'. Its more basic and concrete meaning is

'give or leave something to people who will live after you'. The verb *tell* is used here as 'show something', whereas its more concrete meaning is 'communicate something'. More salient than these metaphors is the metaphorical scenario in the question W*hen buying a house or a car, would you state upfront that you are willing to agree to whatever the seller demanded*? Here, the author explicitly invites the reader to think about the target domain—Brexit negotiations—in terms of a concrete domain many people are familiar with: negotiating the price for a house or a car.

Task/Activity/Reflection

Take a look at this example, an excerpt from Hilary Clinton's speech delivered in San Diego in June 2016, in which she discussed Donald Trump, foreign policy, and presidential duties. Identify figurative expressions and suggest whether any of these expressions seem more salient or more relevant for the text's message than other expressions.

> (...) *Unlike him, I have some experience with the tough calls and the hard work of statecraft. I wrestled with the Chinese over a climate deal in Copenhagen, brokered a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, negotiated the reduction of nuclear weapons with Russia, twisted arms to bring the world together in global sanctions against Iran, and stood up for the rights of women, religious minorities and LGBT people around the world.* (...)[2]

Deliberate metaphors

The notion of deliberate metaphors has been widely used in discourse analyses that focus on metaphors. Deliberate metaphors can be illustrated by the aforementioned discursively salient metaphor in the Brexit example above, in which Brexit negotiations are compared to negotiating the price for a house or car. Steen (2008) defines deliberate metaphors as follows: "a metaphor is used deliberately when it is expressly meant to change the addressee's perspective on the referent or topic that is the target of the metaphor, by making

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[2] https://time.com/4355797/hillary-clinton-donald-trump-foreign-policy-speech-transcript/

the addressee look at it from a different conceptual domain or space, which functions as a conceptual source" (Steen 2008: 222). In other words, in their deliberate usages, metaphors are intentionally used "as metaphors" (drawing attention to themselves), are often novel, and as a rule do not go unnoticed.

The framework developed by Steen (2008) distinguishes between metaphors at the linguistic, conceptual, and communicative levels. *Deliberate* metaphors are distinguished from *non-deliberate* metaphors at the communicative level. This approach helps account for the distinction between, on the one hand, metaphors that *are part of our everyday language* and are spontaneously mobilized to talk about certain issues, and, on the other hand, those metaphors that have *presumably* been used deliberately **to achieve a specific function**, such as to convince an audience.[3]

Task/Activity/Reflection

Look again at the excerpt from the Clinton speech above. Can you find an example of a deliberate metaphor in the excerpt?

FUNCTIONS OF FIGURATIONS

When we explain below and illustrate some of the functions of figurations in discourse, we artificially make something vague and dynamic rather static. A specific figuration and its "function" (which presumably relates to some actors' assumed "intentions" in a communicative act) may be disputed and simply rejected. This is particularly the case in political communication, in which all concepts, including figurative ones, are continuously contested. That contestation is sometimes explicitly reflected in discussions about what a particular figuration is (not) supposed to mean. Figurative language usages (with their "functions") may relate to some consequences, such as future actions. However, as Musolff puts it when discussing political metaphors, "The communicative, social and political responsibility for any action ensuing from … metaphors … lies with their users and interpreters" (Musolff 2016: 139). Audiences do not accept figurative devices blindly, and the strategy of their use (if any is involved) may fail.

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[3] A procedure has been developed for identification of deliberate metaphors (Reijnierse et al. 2018).

- **Inviting the audience to change their views**

Metaphors may invite an audience to change their views. This function is frequently addressed in political discourse analyses. Such metaphor uses are relevant *argumentative moves* and may be used to **change the perspective of the interlocutor**: this perspective-changing aspect is often linked to deliberate metaphors.

Metaphors are sometimes relevant for argumentative purposes. Let us take a look at the Brexit example again.

> (…) *That would mean the worst possible Brexit deal for Yorkshire and the UK as a whole. Corbyn has already said he will accept any deal handed down by the European Union – no matter how punitive; no matter how costly. Common sense tells us that's the worst possible approach to take. <u>When buying a house or a car, would you state upfront that you are willing to agree to whatever the seller demanded</u>? Of course not.* (…)

The underlined part seems to form part of the argumentation for Davis' standpoint, and it seems to be relevant for his argumentative goals.

However, figurations considered relevant by some discourse participants may be criticized and deconstructed by other discourse participants if they think that these figurations misrepresent the issue discussed.

Task/Activity/Reflection

Find an example from any discourse genre in which metaphors or other figurations are relevant for the argumentative purpose of the discourse participants, or where they encourage the audience to change their views and/or adopt new standpoints.

- **The explanatory, "educative" function**

It has been observed that metaphors in some discourse genres, such as science pedagogy, and popularizing science, contribute to educating the audience (Beger and Smith 2020). In such genres, explanation and education go hand in hand with convincing and

persuasion. Figurative language can be used to change popular attitudes about a topic (e.g., COVID-19 vaccination) and to persuade the audience of its benefits. The explanatory and educative function, also referred to as "pedagogic" (Cai and Deignan 2019), can be linked to the evaluative function (see below). The educative function of metaphor has been repeatedly recognized in scientific texts (Boyd 1993; Semino 2008). Some aspects of this function are sometimes described as "illustrating" (Skorczynska and Deignan 2006). This function is more frequent in popular texts and textbooks than in research articles. Resche (2012: 94) noted that teachers and textbook authors naturally use exegetical (i.e., explanatory) metaphors to support their explanations.

The educative function is observable in the example below, which can be said to belong to either journalistic or health discourse.[4]

> *Virus je kao čičak sa šapicama: Profesor Šakić otkriva koja je vakcina najdelotvornija protiv omikrona*
>
> *Šakić objašnjava da je virus kao čičak koji ima svoje male nogice kojima se kači na onog ko prođe pored njega i ta šapica najviše mutira, a veliki broj kompanija je napravio vakcinu koja blokira tu šapicu ...[5]*
>
> *(The virus is like a cocklebur. Professor Šakić explains which vaccine is most effective against omicron. Šakić explains that the virus is like a cocklebur—its little burs attach to anyone that passes by, and these burs mutate the most. A large number of companies have made a vaccine that blocks that bur ...)*

Reflection

What source domain is used to explain the mutation of the virus in the excerpt above? Is that source domain a good choice?

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[4] Discourses about *economics* or *health* or *migration*, etc. range from highly specialized academic books and articles through popular books and articles to journalism, broadcasting, social media, and so on.
[5] https://www.novosti.rs/drustvo/vesti/1063171/virus-kao-cicak-sapicama-profesor-sakic-otkriva-koja-vakcina-najdelotvornija-protiv-omikrona. *Večernje novosti,* December 6th, 2021.

The explanatory, educational function is frequent in academic discourse;[6] for instance, university lectures when lecturers explain abstract or new concepts to students by using more concrete or familiar source domain concepts.

Let us take a look at an example from such a discourse, a college lecture in psychology on the topic of aggression. In the excerpt, a professor in social psychology explains the Catharsis Theory, referring to the Hydraulic Model, which it is based on.[7] The analogy in the first sentence is important. It is subsequently elaboration by metaphor. First, the professor invites the students to consider their soul as a tank of water: the two (soul and tank of water) are directly compared. Then the professor continues with the metaphor, in which aggression is conceptualized as a fluid that drips into the soul. Most of the metaphorical expressions in the excerpt are from the FLUID domain and describe it in further detail.

> (...) *But think about this tank of water as the reservoir within your soul, that aggressive impulses are dripping into. Little hassles and frustrations of day-today life keep adding new bits of aggressive impulses to who you are. And as this tank fills up, the pressure of the weight of these impulses becomes stronger and stronger and they push on this plug that keeps it bottled up. Now, you don't behave aggressively, until all this stuff kind of explodes and comes shooting out of you.* (...) (Beger 2011: 52).

Task/Activity

(a) Identify expressions related to the FLUID domain in the excerpt above.

(b) Find an example from any discourse genre in which figurative means seem to have an explanatory and educational function.

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[6] Academic discourse features the highest proportion (17.5%) of metaphor-related words compared to three other genres, including news and even fiction (Steen et al. 2010: 781).
[7] Developed by Konrad Lorenz (2002) (Beger 2011: 54).

- **The theory-constitutive function**

Metaphors are involved in the transmission of scientific theories, and many core technical terms are metaphorical in origin (e.g., *folders* and *pages* in computer science, or *growth* in economics).[8] Reasoning in specialist discourse is based on some fundamental metaphors, which are called *theory-constitutive metaphors* (Boyd 1993). These metaphors are "an irreplaceable part of the linguistic machinery of a scientific theory" (Boyd 1993: 360). They contribute to the specific discourse of a discipline at the level of theory and concept formation. Scientists use them to express content for which no literal paraphrase is acceptable or known. These metaphors are guides to further discovery because at a relatively early stage of theory construction they allow the introduction of theoretical terms that refer to various plausibly postulated similarities and dissimilarities between target and source (Boyd 1993). These two factors—non-paraphrasability and being guides for further research—are crucial for theory-constitutive metaphors (Boyd 1993; Pulaczewska 2011). As an example of these metaphors, Boyd (1993) discusses the metaphors used in cognitive psychology, which are derived from the terminology of computer science; for instance, the claim that the brain is a sort of "computer," the suggestion that certain motoric or cognitive processes are "programmed," and so on. [9]

Task/Activity/Reflection

Provide an example of a theory-constitutive metaphor. Reflect on the difference between the theory-constitutive and educational/pedagogical roles of metaphors.

- **Evaluation**

Evaluation can be defined as a form of stancetaking, a "process whereby a stancetaker orients to an object of stance and characterizes it as having some specific quality or value" (Du Bois 2007: 142–143). Positive or genitive evaluation of a phenomenon can be carried out with non-figurative means (e.g., evaluative adjectives such as *good* and *bad*), or by using,

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[8] *Growth* is a relatively recent term today, "totally institutionalized as an indispensable economic performance indicator," but it was not fully established even in the mid-twentieth century (White 2003: 135).
[9] Boyd (1993) presented theory-constitutive and explanatory/pedagogic metaphors as different types of metaphors. However, subsequent studies differentiate between different functions of metaphors for scientific topics (Knudsen 2003; Semino 2008: 125–167).

for example, LIGHT versus DARKNESS metaphors to describe "good" or "bad" situations. Evaluative properties of metaphors have frequently been addressed in research. It has been noticed that metaphors can be used for praise or defamation in electoral discourse (Chan and Yap 2015). Research also indicates that the use of figurative language often seems to relate to expressing negative evaluations without causing offence (Demjén and Hardaker 2016). Although more attention has been paid to metaphor in this context, it has been noticed that metonymy can also be used for evaluation: in the example *The best part of working at night is that <u>the</u> <u>suits</u> have gone home* (Littlemore and Tagg 2018: 482), *the suits* refers somewhat negatively to the people that wear suits at work.

Figurative evaluation often implies using more than one means. For instance, metaphors are often combined with hyperboles in negative evaluation (Bogetić 2020).[10]

Metaphors evaluate because they create entailments, exploit scenarios, utilize significant source domains, and map connotations (Deignan 2010: 363). Let us consider source domain choices: choosing mappings from a particular source domain allows an actor to draw on its positive or negative connotations in a given context. Evoking some source domains (e.g., FOOTBALL) in a particular context can be considered an evaluative strategy because it suggests shared values between the author and (some) audience members. Semino and Masci (1996) argue that the use of the FOOTBALL metaphor in the Italian context allowed Berlusconi's party to draw on the positive connotations of football in Italian society, and that the FOOTBALL metaphor played an important role in positioning his party as democratic and patriotic. Koller (2004) argues that frequent choices of WAR and SPORT metaphors in business texts, among other things, constitute the domain of business as aggressive and violent.

The evaluative properties of metaphor and other figurations relate to their persuasive and ideological nature.

Activity/Reflection

It has been claimed in many studies that the source domain of LIQUID contributes to constructing refugees and immigrants as a threat in many national contexts. However,

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[10] However, hyperboles as such convey both positive and negative evaluations (see Carston and Wearing 2015).

Salahshour (2016) shows that LIQUID metaphors in migration discourse can be positive evaluations.

a) Can you think of some other metaphors / source domains that function similarly?

b) What about liquid in some other discourse genres: does it predominantly relate to positive or negative evaluations?

- **Establishing an emotional tone**

Metaphors and other figurations can help **establish an emotional tone**. For instance, metaphors with positive connotations in economic discourse can be used to convey a hopeful economic message for the future. Frequently, this function is linked to making complex issues conceptually stable and emotionally salient.

Research findings indicate that metaphorical language tends to have a stronger emotional impact than literal language: for instance, Gibbs, Leggitt, and Turner (2002) found that metaphors were rated as being more emotional than non-metaphorical expressions. Citron and Goldberg (2014) arrived at a similar conclusion comparing metaphorical statements involving expressions from the source domain of taste (e.g., *She looked at him sweetly*) to literal expressions (*She looked at him kindly*); conventional metaphorical expressions are more emotionally evocative than literal expressions.

In their study involving systematic experiments examining metaphorical and literal uses of verbs, Mohammad, Shutova, and Turney (2016) show that metaphorical uses of words tend to convey more emotion than their literal paraphrases in the same context, and that metaphorical senses of words tends to carry more emotion than literal senses. The authors argue that the emotional content is not simply transferred from the source into the target, but instead arises through metaphorical composition being a result of interaction of the two domains in the metaphor.

Regarding metaphors and emotions, researchers have studied the relation of some metaphors reflecting the way we think to the way we feel about something (e.g., illness), arguing that a change in mindset (e.g., using an alternative metaphor) can change emotions, which in itself can affect coping with a difficult situation (Hendricks et al. 2018).

- **Identity construction and positioning**

Many social actors in public discourse use figurations for identity construction. Goffman (1959) describes the presentation of self as a "theatrical performance" in which an individual can be seen as both a performer and a character. Creating a self-image or self-identity is a dynamic process and is subject to negotiations in interaction (Swann 1987).

Influential political actors use metaphors to **construct identities and positions for themselves, other politicians, and the electorate**. Electoral discourse, for instance, is a genre in which politicians engage in various strategies to construct identities for themselves and their rivals. One such strategy involves metaphors.[11] For instance, Jaworski and Galasiński (1998) found that Lech Wałęsa in the presidential electoral debates in Poland in 1995 identified himself as a credible candidate and a leader by using, among other strategies, SHIPMASTER and DRIVER metaphors.

In specific contexts in which some verbal acts may either pose face-threats to discourse participants or violate the existing norms or even legal rules, politicians can use figurations as an indirect strategy to either promote themselves and their political agenda, or to attack their opponents in a less face-threatening way (Chan and Yap 2015: 33).

Political actors use figurations to **help construct and maintain their political image**, but also to set an emotional tone (e.g., when advocating an unpopular policy), to trigger a mental simulation, and to help listeners conceptualize a complex issue (cf. the educative function), which indicates that normally more than one function is at work.

Task/Activity/Reflection

Take a look at the excerpt from Hilary Clinton's speech above. Reflect on identity construction in the excerpt.

- **Persuasion**

Figurations relate to power and a motivation to persuade, which is more present in some genres than others. Persuasive genres are, for example, inauguration speeches and party

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[11] In similar contexts, these have an affective, interpersonal, and pragmatic dimension, which is often neglected in favor of their ideational (i.e., topic-defining) function (Cameron 2003, 2007).

manifestos. In political speeches in crisis situations, metaphors can, for instance, be part of an attempt to persuade the public about the need for some unpopular measures.

Further reading

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