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EXPANDING VOCABULARY BY USING FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

Mihaela PARPALEA*

Abstract: *An often neglected area in the teaching of vocabulary is that of the figurative language. This article examines some definitions and suggests examples of types of figurative language to which students may usefully be exposed in the course of their learning. Arising from the suggested examples, some implications for the teaching of figurative language are discussed. These are followed by sample materials representing different strategies for helping students to understand and generate figurative language.*

Keywords: *figurative language, metaphoric language, linguistic pattern.*

1. Discussion of Metaphor

A rather recent approach ([11]:182) understands discussion of metaphor as a king of violation of the expected collocational range of a particular phrase or chunk of language. It suggests that much of the language we use is made of prefabricated chunks, into which different lexical items can be slotted. So, for example, the phrase "a year ago" is a variation of the pattern "a _____ ago" which is used to indicate a specific past time. Nattinger and DeCarrico say: "We recognize this pattern and its function even when the lexicon stretches the meaning metaphorically, as in Dylan Thomas's *a grief ago*." ([11]:35).

In other words, figurative language may involve playing with a linguistic pattern, so that when an unexpected lexical item is inserted into a slot out of its usual collocational range, it results in the creation of a new meaning ([11]:182).

2. Defining figurative language

Over the last decade, books for both teachers and students have focused on ways of recognizing, presenting and practising new vocabulary to make it accessible and memorable for students ([2], [3], [9], [13], [14]).
Figurative language, and the ways in which student awareness of it can be increased, has perhaps been given less attention that it deserves. But what exactly is figurative language?

> **figurative** adj (or a word, phrase, meaning, etc.) used in some way other than the main or usual meaning, to suggest a picture in the mind or make a comparison (*Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture* 1992:475).

This definition ties in with the notion of metaphor (one type of figurative language) as defined in traditional rhetoric. The word itself derives from the Greek "meta"

* Faculty of Philology , *Transilvania* University of Braşov.

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expressing change, and "pherein" meaning "to carry". In other words, metaphors involve a "carrying across" of meaning from one object to another ([7]:11). Thus, a comparison is made between two essentially dissimilar things by identifying one with the other. So, in that (by now clichéd) poetic metaphor "My love is a rose", a comparison is made between the loved one and a rose, where the qualities of the rose (beauty, fragrance, softness, etc.) are carried over the loved one.

3. Examples of Figurative Language

However it is characterized, what types of figurative language might be encountered by the language learner? The following examples are not comprehensive in any way, but indicate the kinds of figurative language to which learners could usefully be exposed.

1 Jae's ego is very *fragile* and she is easily *crushed*, so you have to *handle* her with *care*. ([6]).

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that our ordinary conceptual system is "fundamentally metaphorical in nature", and that this is reflected in our everyday language by a wide variety of expressions and vocabulary. Thus, in the sentence above, the language chosen to describe the subject Jane is generated out of the underlying metaphor "the mind is a brittle object" ([6]:28). Lakoff and Johnson provide numerous examples of metaphorical propositions around which different vocabulary and expressions can be clustered. Grouping vocabulary in lexical sets is now an established procedure in the teaching of vocabulary. It might also be useful for their vocabulary-building skills if students were encouraged to group vocabulary around *metaphorical* sets, as in the example above, or in Sample Activity I below.

2 The store, where a window was found to be smashed, is only *a stone's throw* from the county police headquarters. ([7]:18).

In this example the figurative language is contained in the tightly standardized formula of the idiom. Idioms are a rich repository of figurative meanings, but are so highly conventionalized that their figurative origins are all but forgotten by the native speaker. It is only when they are placed incongruously literal language that their metaphorical meaning may be reactivated, often with humorous results ([7]:17). In many classrooms it is likely that most idioms are taught formulaically as chunks of language to be digested whole. But perhaps alerting the student to the figurative meaning implicit in the idiom is a helpful way of making idioms more meaningful and more memorable.

4. Implications for Teaching

Understanding figurative language involves a process of inference. Literary critics have pointed out that understanding figurative language requires an act of "completion" from the reader, in which a "linkage" is established between the two disparate elements being compared ([4]:72), and a series of linguistic inferences are made ([12]:59). It could be argued that, for the language learner, this process of decoding is applicable not only to poetic or literary language, but to many other instances of figurative language as well. Decoding figurative language would thus seem to involve a number of states:

- comprehending that two things which do not normally collocate together are being compared or brought together;
- deducing which features of the one are salient in the comparison;

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- reinterpreting how the meaning of the other is altered when these salient features are applied to it.

In other words, in order to understand figurative language the learner needs to unravel the covert connections in the utterance through a process of inference. The learners can be helped if they are explicitly encouraged to work through the kind of stages just outlined. Sample Activity III attempts to do this.

Figurative language ranges from the conventional to the original. The two examples revealed that figurative meanings range from those recorded in dictionaries as specific senses of a word or idioms. Figurative language may be seen as positioning itself along a cline, with invariant and frozen forms at one end and creatively generated forms at the other ([11]:177). Given this characterization of figurative language, the role of the teacher is surely to provide students with strategies for decoding figurative language, while at the same time making clear which of them are standardized in dictionaries.

Figurative meanings are culturally determined. The kinds of figurative language we use stems from the underlying values and assumptions of our culture or society: "a well-understood metaphor in one culture may have entirely different meanings in another part of the world." ([5]:105). To take one example: the figurative "meaning" of different colours varies from one language group to another ([1]:34). Thus, the conventional association in British English between the colour green and nature and innocence might not be the same for students in other cultures. Students may need to be aware of these associations in order to make sense of idiomatic usage like "to be green" and "to have green fingers", as well as more literary uses of the colour green. A teacher's task is to sensitize students to the cultural significance which accrues to particular examples of figurative language in English, while encouraging them to compare these associations with those in their own language.

5. Sample Activities

Each of the following activities focuses on a specific lexical area, but the underlying procedures and principles behind them can be applied to other lexical areas as well.

Sample Activity I: *Categorizing language according to metaphorical "propositions"*
Level: Late Intermediate/Advanced

1 Here are two sentences which begin with the same first word. Can you guess what the missing word is? Compare your ideas with those of your partner.

_____ is a smoke rais'd with the fume of sighs
_____ is feeling cold in the back of vans

2 Now read these two verses from two different literary extracts. Use dictionary to help you with any words you do not understand. In each case, to what is love being compared?

A Love is a smoke rais'd with the fume of sighs:
Being purg'd, a fire sparking in lover's tears:
What is it else? A madness most discreet,
A choking gall, and a preserving sweet.
(from *Romeo and Juliet*, I.i.)

B Love is feeling cold in the back of vans
Love is a fanclub with only two fans
Love is walking holding paintstained hands
Love is
(from *Love is*, by Adrian Henri in [10]:108)

3 Which comparison in the verses above do you think is the most effective? Why?

4 Now look at the following list of sentences which can be used in English to

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talk about love. Use a dictionary to check the meaning of any words that you don't know.

She cast her spell over me.
Our relationship is in really good shape.
That is a sick relationship.
My whole life revolves around her.
I could feel the electricity between us.
He drives me out of my mind.
He is known for his many conquests.
I'm afraid the magic in our relationship is gone.
I was entranced by him.
She made an ally of his mother.
We have a really strong and healthy marriage.

5 Can you group the sentences above according to the following categories? The first one has been done for you.

Love is a physical force
(like gravity, magnetism, etc.)
My whole life revolves around her.

Love is madness.
Love is magic.
Love is patient.
Love is war.

6 Are any of the ways of describing love in Exercises 4 and 5 similar to ones you can find in the verses in Exercise 2? Which ones? Which category do *you* think best describes the experience of being in love? Why?

The aim of this sequence of activities is to sensitize students to the way in which we talk about love and relationship in English, ranging from the highly inventive metaphors to the literary text (Exercises 1 and 2) to the conventionalized figurative language found in dictionaries (Exercise 4). This conventional language can be made more memorable for students if they are encouraged to group it according to metaphorical categories/ sets, such as Love is madness/magic/war, etc.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) provide many more examples of these metaphorical categories around which students can group together new vocabulary expressions.

Sample Activity II: *Providing literal definitions and asking students to generate "figurative" meanings for them*
Level: Intermediate upwards

1 Look at the following list of words. Can you match each word with the definition that best explains its meaning?

branch	mountain	torrent	chasm
peak	wave	trickle	desert

a. a large area of sandy land that has very little water or plant life
b. a large amount of water that flows or falls very quickly
c. a very deep crack in rock, earth, or ice
d. an extremely high hill that usually has steep slides
e. the slow flowing of a liquid in very small amounts
f. the pointed top part of a mountain
g. the part of a tree that grows out from the trunk and gets leaves, buds, or flowers
h. the raised moving part of water on the surface of the lake or sea

2 The words you have just defined also have at least one other meaning. Can you find one of those meanings for each word by completing this exerciser? Use the list of words in Exercise 1 to complete the following sentences. The first one has been done for you.

a. She went to speak to the manager of the Norwich branch of I.P. Insurance.
b. The buses had arranged to leave at 9 a.m. but by 8,45 there was already a slow _____of people arriving to catch them.
c. All I did was ask for my book back, but she answered with a _____ of abuse.
d. There's a _____ separating the two political parties, and they'll never agree on anything.

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e. His career has reached its _____, and he is really enjoying his success.
f. A _____ of panic swept over the crowd when they heard the fire alarm.
g. When we came back from holiday we had ____ (plural word) of washing to do.
h. This city is a cultural _____- no theatres, libraries or music of any kind.

3 Choose three of the words on the list. Look al their two different meanings – the meaning given in Exercise 1 and the meaning given in Exercise 2. Translate the word into your own language. Does it have the same two meanings in your language? Or do you need two different words to translate it?

The aim of this sequence of activities is to encourage students to generate figurative extensions for words describing geographical features. Other lexical areas which could be exploited in similar way are medical words (cancer, cure, poison, etc.) and their figurative meanings, animal words (dog, fox, monkey, etc.) and what it means to describe a person as one of these animals, and parts of the body and how they are used figuratively (e,g, the foot of a mountain or a page, the heart of a city or a matter, the head of a person or a state, etc.).

Sample Activity III: *Listing the literal qualities in a word group in order to decode their figurative meanings in a text*
Level: Late Intermediate/Advanced

1 Can you explain the meaning of the following words?

a lighthouse
a supertanker
dented
to ram
a wreck

2 With a partner, write down at least two qualities or characteristics of each of the following:

a lighthouse a supertanker a wreck

e.g. A lighthouse guides ships in dangerous seas.

3 Look at the following headline from a newspaper srticle:
Battering leaves lighthouse dimmed but still standing.

What you think the article is going to be about?

4 Now read this extract from a newspaper article.

The invigilation opened in London yesterday of a government minister who the previous evening had publicly compared himself to a lighthouse.
Where lighthouses are normally big and bossy, Sir Nick is discreet and slender.
Throughout the day the lighthouse was repeatedly remmed by a supertanker, in the form of Lord Justice Scott and Ms Presiley Baxendale. Though substantially dented, it was still just about standing at the end of the day. The commissioners for wrecks, even so, are said to be standing by.
(from *Sketch* by David McKie in *The Guardian*, 25 March, 1994)

Was your prediction about the headline for the article correct?

5 Who are the lighthouse, the supertanker, and the wreck in this article? What qualities or characteristics do they have? What effect does it have to describe the people in the article in this way?

The aim of this sequence of activities is to help learners grapple with the more sustained metaphors or conceits often in

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certain types of texts, such as humorous journalism, advertisement, poetry, and other literary texts. The text used in this particular exercise presupposes a fair degree of cultural background knowledge by the learner, but the strategies used to unravel it could also be applied to less context-bound texts.

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