

Figurative Speech as a Representation of Meaning

DANIEL HELLER

Psychologický ústav AV ČR

ABSTRACT

The complexity and plasticity of speech is manifested inter alia by the fact that there are not a few speech phenomena that cannot be understood literally. If a speaker exclaims „This is exactly what I was missing!“ nobody expects that he hoped in a matter of fact that he will get drenched today. This pronouncement is to be understood not literally but in a metaphorical, figurative or transposed meaning. One of the tasks of contemporary psychology of speech and cognitive psychology is to reconstruct the structure and the process of the production and reception of figurative speech. The most important forms of the figurative speech are metaphor and irony. According to the classical rhetoric a metaphor substitutes the actually meant word another whereas the substitutive or comparative theory comprehended a metaphor as an analogy. The modern linguistics criticized the idea of similarities given a priori. According to the interaction theory the metaphoric meaning is generated by the mutual incidence of two ideas. As concerns the irony it is similar. The model of the process of understanding the figurative speech assumes first the reception of the literally meaning whose incoherence with the context influences the inference of actually meant (Searle). The longer processing of figurative formulation results from this thesis - „literally first“. But the empirical studies showed that understanding both the meanings is equally quick. That is why Gibbs created the contradictory model of „direct access“ that assumes understanding the figurative meanings without the regress to literally meanings. Nevertheless, there is still open question left: What happens to the literally meaning in the end of the process of understanding the figurative expression? Neither the conception of synchronous being aware of literally and non-literally meaning does not make it possible to explain the emotional and motivational dimensions of esthetical liking, endearment, and favor the research of which often starts from the figurative speech. My contribution focuses on the figurative speech as a representation of meaning. This paper pains to elaborate this idea and to bring some evidence on this topic.

CONCEPTS

Figurative language and speech

Figurative and literal language is a distinction in traditional systems for analyzing language. Literal language refers to words that do not deviate from their defined meaning. Figurative language and speech refers to words, and groups of words, that

exaggerate or alter the usual meanings of the component words. Figurative language and speech may involve analogy to similar concepts or other contexts, and may involve exaggerations. These alterations result in figures of speech, e.g. similarity, metaphor, onomatopoeia, personification, oxymoron, paradox, hyperbole, extended metaphor, etc. Words in literal expressions denote what they mean according to common or dictionary usage, while the words in figurative expressions connote – they add layers of meaning. To convert an utterance into meaning, the human mind requires a cognitive framework, made up of memories of all the possible meanings that might be available to apply to the particular words in their context. This set of memories will give prominence to the most common or literal meanings, but also suggest reasons for attributing meanings, e.g., the reader or listener understands that the author intended it to mean something different. The best known forms of figurative language and speech are metaphor and irony.

Representation

Representation refers to the use of signs that stand in for and take the place of something else. It is through representation that people organize the world and reality through the act of naming its elements. Signs are arranged in order to form semantic constructions and express relations. A representation is a type of recording in which the sensory information about a physical object is described in a medium. Since ancient times representation has played a central role in understanding literature, aesthetics and semiotics. The means of literary representation is language. An important part of representation is the relationship between what the material and what it represents. One apprehends reality only through representations of reality, through texts, discourses, images. There is no such thing as a direct or unmediated access to reality. Consequently, throughout human history, people have become dissatisfied with language's ability to express reality and as a result have developed new modes of representation. It is necessary to construct new ways of seeing reality, as people only know reality through representation. Mental representation became one of the basic concepts in cognitive psychology in last decades of the twentieth century.

Meaning

Meaning is what is meant, what is intended, or in fact is signified, indicated, referred to, or understood, signification, sense, or significance. Meaning is: – something that is conveyed or signified, sense or significance, – something that one wishes to convey, especially by language, – an interpreted goal, intent, or end, – inner significance. The concept of meaning may refer to: – meaning in linguistics – meaning which is communicated through the use of language, – non-linguistic meaning including the extra-linguistic meaning – intentional communication without the use of language, and the natural meaning, where no intentions are involved at all, – meaning in semiotics that has to do with the distribution of signs in sign relations, – meaning as a relationship between ontology and truth, – meaning as a reference or equivalence, – meaning in philosophy of language, – meaning as values, a value system or as

derived from value theory, existential meaning – as it is understood in contemporary existentialism, and the meaning of life – a notion concerning the nature of human existence.

THE PROBLEM - DECOMPOSITION OF WHAT IS EXPRESSED AND WHAT IS MEANT

The complexity and plasticity of speech is manifested inter alia by the fact that there are not a few speech phenomena in which the expression cannot be understood literally. When we speak about the *foot of the mountain* no rational user of speech would suppose that the bottom part of the mountain is a living being and has a form of the foot, especially the human foot. If a speaker without an umbrella is surprised by a downpour and exclaims “*This is exactly what I was missing!*” nobody expects that he hoped in a matter of fact that he would get drenched today. This pronouncement is to be understood not literally but in a metaphorical, figurative or “transferred meaning”. This definition of figurative speech that has been traded since the era of the ancient rhetoric has nevertheless a disadvantage that it is a self-referential metaphor in which the object is ultimately explained through itself.

One of the tasks of contemporary psychology of speech is to reconstruct – in the cooperation with linguistics and cognitive psychology - the structure and the process of the production and the reception of figurative speech, preferably in a differentiated and precise and accurate way.

This research finds that the analysis of the complexity of the figurative speech cannot be restricted to semantics (study of meaning, usually in language; from Greek *semantikos*) but it concerns also the phenomenon of using the speech, thus the pragmatics (subfield of linguistics which studies the ways in which context contributes to meaning; originally a reaction to structuralist linguistics as outlined by Ferdinand de Saussure) in semiotic sense. This pragmatic perspective was dealt with – first of all – by the theory of speech acts (Austin, Searle) which introduces different levels of speech expression on one speech expression (see Polenz, 1985). The act of expression which is connected with the phonic and grammatical structure, the propositional act that denotes the semantic content of meaning of the statement, the illocutionary act that represents the intention to act that is connected with the expression, and the prelocutive act that relates to the intended effect of the speech activity. Inside the model of the theory of speech acts the figurative speech can be specified as the decomposition of what is expressed and what is meant. This applies especially for the propositional level, and partly also for the illocutive level. This means that the intended meaning as a matter of fact must be derived, deduced, and inferred.

The basic structure of this inference of actually meant or intended meaning is reconstructed above all by the return to the concept of conversational implicature (according to Grice). According to this the so-called principle of cooperation lies in the ground of the speech communication, what means the demand to form every contribution in that way that it satisfies the purpose and the orientation of the dialogue (Polenz, 1985). This principle can be differentiated into different conversational maxims that relate to quantity (informativeness), quality (legitimacy), relation (relevance),

and modality (understandability) of the contribution to the dialogue. The decisive point for the conversational implicature is now that there are speech expressions that – seemingly – belie the conversational maxims but at the same time yet quite satisfy the principle of cooperation. The issue is thus the “open violation” that should be recognized on the side of the listener and thereby to uncover by the return to the principle of cooperation the deduced meant from what was said. This inference is no logically forced conclusion (implication) and that is why Grice uses the term “conversational implicature”. In the conversational implicature, the information of the expressed must be connected with the knowledge about the situational context and about the speaker in a constructive way. Thereby, figurative speech manifests itself as a particularly extensive case of cognitive constructivity that is fundamentally valid for the speech production and speech reception. It means that in the speech processing not only is information mediated by speech elaborated but information is actively constructed and created through the connection with knowledge about the speech and about the world. Behind this is the principle of constancy of sense explicated by Hörmann (1996), which says that speech users even when presented incoherent information (here the dissociation of expressed and meant), search for a “way of reading” that makes sense in the framework of knowledge about the world and the communication horizons.

The extensive cognitive constructivity based on such endeavor for finding sense is necessary in all variants of figurative speech, e.g. in hyperbole (exaggerating: the *snail speed*), litotes (underestimation: *not bad*), oxymoron (contradictory semantics: e.g. *speaking silence*), euphemism (covering circumlocution: e.g. *fall asleep* instead of *die*), metonymy (replacing the concept on the basis of space, time etc. contiguity, e.g. *London gives to know...*), etc. In the presentation of the inner structure and dynamics of this cognitive constructivity, we have to limit ourselves to the two most important forms of figurative speech here: the metaphor and irony.

THE STRUCTURE OF METAPHOR

According to the classical rhetoric a metaphor substitutes the actually meant word (*verbum proprium*) by another. The substitutive or comparative theory – based on this proposition – comprehended a metaphor as an analogy (Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian) that represents a similarity or a shorted comparison. Modern linguistics criticized above all that the comparison or similarity are asserted as a priori given structure attributes that can be found in the speech system. This was reflected in the middle of the twentieth century by developing the so-called interaction theory (Richards and Black; see Groeben and Christmann, 2003), according to which the metaphoric meaning emerges from the mutual interaction between two ideas, namely the topic (also the pictures reception area) and the vehicle (also the pictures providing area). Example: In the metaphor *libraries are gold mines* the topic is *libraries*, the vehicle is *gold mines*.

Both parts of metaphor are nevertheless not connected beforehand through a similarity of attributes. The similarity must be first actively established with the help of interpretation strategies, through the construction of the implications systems

(culturally shared associations) for the topic and for the vehicle so that the topic will be seen in a new way in the light of the vehicle.

The third large group of metaphor theories is the so-called diversion models. Structuralist linguistics considers the metaphor to be a speech phenomenon in which words with incompatible semantic attributes meet together. For the pragmalinguistics (especially Searle) the diversion lies in the fact that the expression is literally taken faulty and does not match the speech context or the non-speech context. For the listener it is the impulse and encouragement to search for the metaphoric meaning by the return to speech and non-speech knowledge (Groeben, Christmann, 2003).

Research in speech and cognitive psychology goes more or less explicitly to the past to all three large groups of theories (see Ortony, 1993) and tries to systematically examine how the listener in the actual process of understanding constructs the connection between “topic” and “vehicle” and by the return to known concepts creates the new categories. The results are differentiated empiric specifications that will be only briefly listed here (see details in Christman, Scheele, 2001). In the framework of classical comparative theory a relation between the topic and vehicle was set first as a comparison of attributes or features where the amount of common attributes of topic and vehicle should reveal the metaphoric meaning. It can be shown specifically that – differently from in literally comparisons – only the salient (standing out) attributes of vehicles are chosen and transferred on the topic (Saliency–Imbalance–Model of Ortony), alternatively that not the attributes of topic and vehicle – directly – are compared but their rational structure (Structure–Comparison–Model of Gentner).

The approaches oriented to theories of interaction postulate on the contrary that between the topic and the vehicle a new connection on a higher level of abstraction is created that leads to a new meaning. That is why e.g. empirically the implicit meaning represents a significantly better memory help for the recall of a previously heard metaphor than the meaning representing directly the topic or the vehicle (Verbrugge and McCarell). This is the case of “tree trunks are the straws for thirsty leaves” which is a better indication of water pipeline than tree trunks (topic) or straws (vehicle) alone.

The most prominent model based on interactions theories is the domain–interactions–model of Tourangeau and Sternberg according to which the topic and the vehicle belong to different domains (categorical areas). They specify which correspondences between topic and vehicle are relevant and which parallels can be constructed. The relation between topic and vehicle can be certainly also understood as an inclusion of classes (Glucksberg and Keysar); in the process of the interpretation of metaphor would be characteristics of that category which is prototypical for the vehicle transferred on the topic.

There are positive empirical findings for all these models (overview in Christman, Scheele, 2001). They should therefore be understood not as concurrent but as mutually complementing each other differing in those attributes, features and relations that are assigned the leading role in the process of interpretation of the metaphor. Facing the complexity of metaphor, it is fair not to try to determine any differentiat-

ing attributes with outlined borders but to specify merely the prototypical attributes. In metaphor, the issue is the decomposition of what is said and what is meant which is in speech manifested by the diversion from the conventional meaning, i.e. the related expression is literally taken faulty or does not match the speech context or the non-speech context. The diversion must be intended on the speaker's side and recognized as intended on the listener's side. Both terms of a metaphor and the semantic areas they represent are connected through the correspondences, frequently through similarity which must be discovered or reconstructed with the help of strategies like selection of attributes, transfer of attributes, categorization, comparison of rational structures, etc. The relation between the both terms is fundamentally instable and variable and must always be newly determined in relation to the common knowledge background and participants of communication.

THE STRUCTURE OF IRONY

Classical rhetoric offered four definitions of irony: – the expression of the opposite of what is actually meant, – the expression of something else than what is actually meant, – the reproof by the false praise or the praise by the assumed reproof, – any way of poking fun at someone and mockery (Knox, compare with Groeben, Scheele, 1986).

The last option is unambiguously too broad because it does not set bounds to persiflage, parody, and caricature. The last but one – “the reproof by the praise” (or vice versa) is on the contrary too narrow because it limits the irony to evaluation of persons. The first two variants however represent both principles which were elaborated and controversially discussed in classical rhetoric as a basic structure of irony: *inversio* or *contrarium* as an opposite relation and *simulatio* or *dissimulatio* as pretence which represent the general perspective of uncovered contrast between the expressed and the meant. Finally, modern psycholinguistics tries to clarify which of these principles should be ascribed more validity and how their inner structures can be modeled.

Irony as an everyday mode of communication stays in the centre of speech, unlike the so-called literary irony as a generally broken worldview (also unlike the so-called irony of the fate, as – mostly accidentally incoherence of events, objects, etc.) In discussing irony as an everyday part of communication we must first clarify in the context of the framework of the theory of speech acts whether the propositional or illocution level should be set as the constitutive one. A systematic analysis (Groeben, Scheele, 1986) shows that there is always dissociation on the propositional level which nevertheless does not exclude the dissociation on the illocution level. Example: “*It is a beautiful weather today*” denies the expressed proposition, so that actually the contrary (*bad weather*) is meant. The speech act (assert, alternatively evaluate) stays however the same.

What is being naturally frequently changed is the propositional attitude to the thematic object (e.g. that someone wishes a weather like this or not). The plasticity of the complex speech phenomenon irony is thus manifested here also in the fact that it is an improper speech on the propositional level but that it can also represent a dis-

sociation on the level of the propositional attitude (Lapp), respectively on the level of the illocution (Groeben, Scheele, 2003).

This flexibility of the object and of the belonging structure attributes is shown also in the further inner structuring. The substitution theory of irony comes out from the principal replacing of the expressed by the meant. However, there are also cases in which the meant represents only an addition to the expressed meaning, approximately when a mother looking on the disorganized children's room says: *I love children who keep their room tidy*. (Sperber and Wilson: "additive implicature"). However, there is a phenomenon of the conventionalized irony (see above: "*This is exactly what I was missing!*") in which the ironically meant is quasi directly (idiomatically) anchored in our lexicon. From this fact the so-called pretense-theory (Clark) draws the consequence that irony is marked only through the pretending the state of unknowing or incoherence. However, this tendency is incorporated already in the construction of "open pretence" by the theory of the speech acts.

A strong focusing is offered by the theory of "echoic mention" (Sperber and Wilson) according to which in irony the expressions are quasi-quoted and then denied through the actually meant. As has already been shown in the weather example in many cases the potential and therefore virtual expressions must be taken into account and so this special case must not be over generalized. The same is valid also for speech implementation patterns in which the narrative evaluations, taking over the perspectives, etc. can be differentiated in that they can proceed from a word, from part of a sentence, from a sentence, etc. as syntactical-semantic units. The relevant linguistic analyses of dialogue allow us to find out the concentration of negative evaluations (Hartung) which however must not be fundamentally generalized. (Groeben, Scheele, 2003).

The systematic-content-analytic processing of examples of irony in everyday communication (Groeben, Scheele, 1986) has shown that there are also quite positive evaluations (compare the rhetoric example "praise by the reproof"). Above all, both classical principles of opposite and contrast (with the act "the reproof by the praise" as the most frequent particular subcategory) were also proved through this content analysis as equally relevant (Groeben, Scheele, 2003). This way, irony can be reconstructed as an "unoriginal-contrastive speaking" that contains the variants of opposite-dissociation as well as of the something-else-saying only. Altogether, it is best possible to cope with the complexity and flexibility of irony with its flowing limits if – as in the case of metaphor – those prototypical attributes are determined which are particularly symptomatic but not defining in the sense of excluding limits (Groeben, Scheele, 2003). Thereafter, irony represents the "open violation" of sincerity with the consequence of conversational implicature, i.e. all participants have a common knowledge concerning the dissociation of the expressed and the meant. This happens anyway on the propositional level but it can embrace also the activity content with a specific emphasis on the propositional attitude (speaker's attitude). The seemingly strange perspective is taken at the same time which is however actually denied, and not rarely (but not exclusively) in the form of explicit or implicit quotation or reference with negative direction of evaluation. The relation of contrast between the ex-

pressed and the meant which is covering not only in the opposites-relation affects frequently the complex stores of knowledge and so the speech realization can come out from the level of a word, part of a sentence, a sentence, or a discourse.

The perspective of common (on speaker's and listener's sides) knowledge makes once more clear how important is the role played by context in the reconstruction of the ironic meant sense. This role is also responsible for the fact that the original (on grammar and semantics concentrated) thesis according to which the signals of irony are obligatory attributes of ironical expressions (Weinrich) must have been given up. Through the pragmalinguistic or speech-psychological analysis of the use of the speech became clear that the signals of irony are employed above all when the context knowledge is not sufficient for the unambiguous recognition of open violation of sincerity (Warning). Again, all the speech and non-speech aspects of process of communication which represent or signalize the cognitive incoherencies can be then used as such signals (Clyne; see Groeben, Scheele, 2003). The size and the extent of the contextual determination form meanwhile also the starting point for the modeling of the process of figurative expressions.

THE PROCESS – WITH OR WITHOUT THE LITERARY MEANING?

From the superior frame model of conversational implicature based on the theory of speech acts is derived also the model of the process of understanding the figurative speech. According to this model the literal meaning whose incoherence with the context influences the inference of actually meant (Searle) is receipted first. This point of view known as "literally first" implies the longer processing of figurative expressions in comparison to non-figurative ones, i.e. the same expressions in figurative vs. literally contexts. However, wide empirical studies show that the figurative expressions are understood equally quickly as the non-figurative (... even quicker). That is why Gibbs (1994) created the contradictory model of "direct access" that assumes understanding the actually meant figurative meaning without the previous regress to literal meaning.

However, this model stems prototypically from conventionalized, idiomatical forms of figurative speech. A comparison of familiar and unfamiliar figurative expressions shows that the latter needs longer time to be processed whereupon the literal meaning is receipted first. Giora (2003) integrated this disunited and contradictory observational data by formulating her hypothesis of graded salience. According to this hypothesis the understanding of figurative as well as non-figurative speech yields to general principle of salience: The salient, i.e. the frequent, familiar, conventional meanings are processed first because they can be directly and automatically recalled from the mental lexicon. This explains why the conventionalized figurative expressions in figurative context are processed even quicker than in the literal context. The middle salience implies that the meaning is also coded in the mental lexicon but due to the slight familiarity not on the prominent place. This explains why particular figurative expressions are processed equally quickly in figurative context as in the literal context. The non-salient meanings (daring metaphors, unfamiliar irony, etc.) must be – because they are not coded in the mental lexicon – constructed ad hoc

by means of additional inferential processes. This explains the empirical evidence in favor of the “literal first” conception.

Thus, it seems that the decades-long discussion about the relevance of the literally meaning for the immediate understanding of figurative expressions has been cleared. Nevertheless, there are still important questions left, e.g. what happens to the literally meaning at the end of the process of understanding the figurative expression? During the so-called integrative period (Kintsch) the activated salient meaning is – according to Giora (2003) – preserved if it is instrumental for the construction of the intended meaning, e.g., if we start from the “literal first” thesis, the salient literal meaning if it is needed for the inference of intended figurative meaning (“retention-hypothesis”). The conception of synchronic awareness of the literally and the non-literal meaning does not make it possible to explain the emotional and motivational dimensions (important psychological topics) of esthetical liking, endearment, and favor, the research of which often starts from figurative speech.

LITERATURE

- CHRISTMANN, U., SCHEELE, B. (2001) Kognitive Konstruktivität am Beispiel von Ironie und Metapher. In N. Groeben (Hrsg.) *Zur Grammatik einer sozialwissenschaftlichen Psychologie*. Bd. II: Objekttheoretische Perspektiven, I. Halbd. (S. 261–326). Munster: Aschendorff.
- GIBBS, R. W. (1994) Figurative thought and figurative language. In M. A. Gernsbacher (Ed.), *Handbook of psycholinguistics* (pp. 411–446). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- GIORA, R. (2003) *On our mind. Salience, context, and figurative language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- GROEBEN, N., CHRISTMANN, U. (2003) Verstehen von Sprecherintentionen: Ironie, Witz, Metapher. In G. Rickheit, Th. Herrmann, W. Deutsch (Hrsg.) *Psycholinguistik. Ein internationales Handbuch* (S. 651–664). Berlin: de Gruyter.
- GROEBEN, N., SCHEELE, B. (1986) *Produktion und Rezeption von Ironie*. Bd. I. (2. Aufl.) Tübingen: Narr.
- GROEBEN, N., SCHEELE, B. (2003) Die Produktion von Ironie und Witz. In T. Herrmann, J. Grabowski. (Hrsg.) *Sprachproduktion*. (S. 733–7633). Göttingen: Hogrefe.
- HÖRMANN, H. (1976) *Meinen und Verstehen*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- ORTONY, A. (Ed.) (1993) *Metaphor and thought* (2nd ed.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- POLENZ, P. von (1985) *Deutsche Satzsemantik*. Berlin: de Gruyter.

FIGURATÍVNA REČ AKO REPREZENTÁCIA VÝZNAMU

Representation of meaning. Figurative speech. Expressed. Meant. Metaphor. Irony. Reprezentácia významu. Figuratívna reč. Vyjadrený. Myslený. Metafora. Irónia.

Komplexnosť a plasticnosť reči sa prejavuje okrem iného aj v skutočnosti, že neexistuje rečový prvok, ktorý by sme mohli chápať doslovne. Ak hovoriaci zvolá: „Toto je presne to, čo mi chýbalo!” nikto v skutočnosti neočakáva splnenie jeho nádejí ešte dnes. Tento výrok

treba chápať nie doslovne, ale v metaforickom, figuratívnom alebo transponovanom význame. Jedna z úloh súčasnej psychológie reči a kognitívnej psychológie spočíva v rekonštrukcii štruktúry a procesu produkcie a recepcie figuratívnej reči. Najdôležitejšími formami figuratívneho rečového prejavu sú metafora a irónia. Podľa klasickej rétoriky metafora nahrádza skutočne myslené slovo iným slovom, zatiaľ čo substitučná alebo porovnávacia teória chápa metaforu ako analógiu. Moderná lingvistika kritizovala myšlienku apriórnej podobnosti. Podľa teórie interakcie metaforický efekt vzniká spolupôsobením dvoch ideí. Podobne je to s iróniou. Model procesu chápania figuratívnej reči predpokladá, že ako prvý sa vždy chápe doslovný význam, ktorého nesúlad s kontextom ovplyvňuje záverečnú podobu toho, čo sa skutočne myslí (Searle). Dlhší čas, potrebný na pochopenie figuratívnej formulácie, vyplýva z východiska „najskôr doslovne“. Ale empirické štúdie ukazujú, že pochopiť oba významy trvá rovnako dlho. Preto Gibbs vytvoril opačný model, nazvaný „priamy prístup“, ktorý predpokladá pochopenie figuratívneho významu bez toho, aby sa vracalo k doslovnému významu. Stále však ostáva otvorená otázka: Čo sa stane s doslovným významom, keď sa proces chápania figuratívneho výrazu zavŕši? Ani koncepcia súbežného uvedomovania si doslovného a nedoslovného významu však neumožňuje vysvetliť emočné a motivačné dimenzie estetického pôžitku alebo obľuby a uprednostňuje výskum, ktorý často začína od figuratívnej reči.

PhDr. Daniel Heller
Psychologický ústav AV ČR
Politických vězňů 7
111 21 Praha 1
heller@praha.psu.cas.cz