

Symposium: Understanding figurative language: Functions, attitudes, and social meaning

The nature of figurative language and its relationship to literal language remain the subject of ongoing debate. How do figurative uses of language differ from their literal counterparts, if they do? Why do speakers choose figurative expressions over available literal alternatives? Do figurative uses of language serve specific communicative functions? Which attitudinal meanings are associated with different types of figurative language use? More broadly, how does figurative language contribute to the expression of stance, evaluation, and social alignment? By examining a range of figurative phenomena from complementary theoretical and empirical perspectives, the symposium aims to advance our understanding of the cognitive, communicative, and social dimensions of figurative language.

Nicholas Allott: *The literal/figurative distinction and the functions of figurative uses of language* (Joint work with Mark Textor)

According to radical pragmatics the meaning of lexical words is routinely modulated in use. Since many such modulated uses are non-figurative this casts doubt on the literal/figurative distinction (Wilson & Carston 2007): deviation from lexically encoded meaning is the norm, not an exception. But the literal/figurative distinction matters to accounts of communication because literal uses carry information that figurative ones don't: if used literally "John is a gorilla" tells us about gorillas, but not when it is meant as a metaphor (Searle 1979). We propose a Non-Conformity View of Non-Literal Use: literal uses of a word are made with the intention to continue a 'tradition' of using a word; figurative uses are made with the intention to deviate from the tradition (Allott & Textor 2026). In this talk I outline our view and show how it can shed light on the functions of figurative uses of language.

Jane Dilkes: *The function of figurative language*

This talk focuses on metonymy as a fundamental figurative category. To investigate the functions of metonymy in different contexts, the study analyses discourse in six online groups organised into three categories relating to group purpose. Individual and group metonymies are compared across these groups. The analysis combines qualitative examination with computational methods. There are differences in prevalence and function of metonymy between the three categories of groups. While in some groups individual metonymies are not prevalent, in other groups they are used extensively for rhetorical purposes. In some groups the function of group metonymy is shown to be significantly different from non-figurative use of the same term; in other groups use of group metonymies over time aligns with predictions from social identity theory. Across contexts, metonymy appears to support movement in relation to conventional usage, or wider social norms. Group metonymies inherently represent the stance and focus of a group, including the distance of a group from wider norms.

Diana Mazzarella: *Irony as attitude expression: a developmental perspective*

Verbal irony is often distinguished from other forms of figurative language in that it is primarily *interpretive* rather than descriptive (Wilson, 2006). The primary goal of an ironical speaker is not to describe a state of affairs, but rather to express a dissociative or critical attitude towards the proposition literally conveyed. Consequently, a developmental account of irony comprehension should explain how children come to recognise the implicit and dissociative nature of ironical attitudes and distinguish ironical utterances from mistakes or lies. In this talk, I present findings from a series of experimental studies we conducted with 4- to 8-year-olds to shed light on the challenges young interpreters face and the socio-cognitive capacities that support their developing understanding of ironical uses of language.