Figurative Language in the Electronic Age: On Herding Cats and Lame Ducks

Patricia Chantrill, Ph.D.

Style in painting is the same as in writing, a power over materials, whether words or colors, by which conceptions or sentiments are conveyed. --Sir Joshua Reynolds

Rhetoric is the art of persuasion. When we attempt to construct a persuasive message, whether in everyday conversation or while writing an essay for class, we have many decisions to make, not the least of which is our choice of words and the way we string them together in sentences. Of course, when we make these choices in everyday speech and conversation, we do it almost automatically—at lightning speeds. We do not deliberate the way we might if we were writing an essay or composing a public speech. Even in the everyday context, however, most of us take the time to consider our conversational partners and make a concerted effort to choose the best language for the situation and our persuasive aims. We would call this effort “being rhetorically sensitive” to the context.

Our rhetorical sensitivity requires us to make choices about whether we will engage in literal or figurative language. Again, this choice is almost automatic in everyday conversation, but it is complicated by the fact that “being literal” is often more difficult than “being figurative.” To use literal language is to strive for accuracy in meaning, to avoid symbolic references and the need for your conversational partner to engage in interpretation. In short, literal language attempts to stay as close to denotative meaning as possible. It is especially ironic that the task of defining literal language is much more difficult than the task of defining figurative language. Why? Because language is inherently symbolic.

Try this test: the next time you are engaged in a long-distance phone conversation, limit yourself to a literal description of the color of the autumn sky on a sunny, Pullman afternoon. “It is blue,” you say. But what do you mean by “blue”? Can you describe the exact blue of the sky without resorting to comparison or symbolic references?

For centuries, Biblical scholars have been engaged in the process of interpreting the Bible, some opting for a “literal translation” of the text, others arguing that it is meant to be understood in figurative terms, especially in those instances where a literal translation seems contrary to historical fact. Figurative language uses figures of speech, such as hyperbole, simile, metaphor, irony and symbolism, or other forms of imagery. It is used to gain impact, freshness of expression, or pictorial effect. It is also used, as in the case of Pullman’s blue sky, to narrow the gap between what we mean and how our listener is likely to interpret what we mean.

Rhetorical “style” includes the use of figurative language that, in some classification schemes, is divided into the two subcategories of “figures of speech” and “figures of thought.” Figures of speech are defined as those stylistic devices that deviate from normal language (usually) in the order of words or syntax. Figures of thought include those expressions that deviate from common usage mainly in the meaning of words or semantics. This latter category is often referred to as tropes, a Greek word for “turn” or shift in meaning.

Some classifications of figurative language are much more complex. One thing we know for sure is that few language scholars agree as to how we might classify the many rhetorical devices...
available to us. It’s possible that the usable number of distinct devices is relative to how and how often you will experiment with or experience them. In one online handbook, Robert Harris (Professor of English at Vanguard University of Southern California) identifies more than 60 different rhetorical devices, the apparent distinctions between many of them being little more than a slight modification of either syntax or semantics. For now, we will focus on only those figures you are most likely to experience (and recognize) frequently, including metaphor, simile, hyperbole, metonymy, synecdoche and oxymoron.

**Ancient Metaphors: Aristotle’s Pet Trope**

If you learned any rhetorical devices in elementary school, you learned about metaphor and simile. Aristotle would have approved of this early exposure, especially as he considered metaphor to be the “master trope,” the singular device that required rare genius and repetitive practice to use successfully. “It is metaphor,” writes Aristotle in his *Rhetoric*, “above all else that gives clearness, charm, and distinction to the style.” In addition to these “decorative” qualities, metaphor can make the unfamiliar familiar and make memorable an otherwise dull description. In short, metaphor is an effective way to construct and support an argument.

**Metaphor** is defined as *implied comparison* between two relatively dissimilar objects. **Simile**, on the other hand, is an *explicit comparison* between two dissimilar objects. We turn metaphors into similes by making explicit the comparison we are attempting to construct. For example, if I wanted to make the claim that a particular restaurant’s coffee was weakly brewed, I might say, “Their coffee was rather anemic.” This metaphor compares the strength of a beverage (the “tenor” or literal part of the metaphor) to the iron content in the human bloodstream (the “vehicle” or figurative part of the metaphor.) Coffee and iron-poor blood are, of course, two very different things. Our comparison of these two different things is implied; we do not announce that we are making a comparison. Yet, most of us, upon hearing a metaphor, understand that the comparison is not to be taken literally. That’s because we know there are few things that “anemia” and “weak coffee” share in common. At the same time that a metaphor constructs a comparison between two things that are basically dissimilar, it *obscures* those differences by *highlighting* the few, significant attributes shared by both the tenor and vehicle.

If we wanted to make explicit the comparison between the tenor and vehicle, thereby constructing a simile, we would add either “like” or “as” to the metaphor: “Their coffee was as weak as an anemic patient.” Additionally, if—for effect—I exaggerate the vehicle’s attributes, thereby making the comparison between the vehicle and tenor even figuratively unlikely, I have entered the realm of **hyperbole**. “The Java Shop’s coffee was so weak that it had no pulse, no
signs of life. The paramedics ran in with their paddles, yelling ‘Clear!’ before attempting to shock hearty color back into the watery abyss.”

Okay, so I went too far with the comparison, but that’s the point. Whenever I think about hyperbole, at least a million times every day, I’m reminded of the first example that I learned as an undergraduate: “His eloquence could split rocks.” It was, at best, a confusing phrase, almost incapable of rendering a useful interaction between the tenor and vehicle. However, if we were to tone down the “rock splitting” image while still retaining the idea of a speaker whose expressions were powerful and effective, we might return to metaphor with a statement like, “Her speech was electrifying, jolting even the angry opposition into ready acceptance.” Harris argues that we are a society of “excesses and exaggeration” and that we are inclined to overuse hyperbole. More than simply an “extended metaphor,” a hyperbole can often become a metaphoric parody, a mockery of all that is good and wholesome in the realm of figurative language. If our object is to use comparison, to make the unfamiliar familiar, then it is best to stick with metaphor or simile. If our object is satire, sarcasm, or simply exaggeration for the sake of effect, then the discrete use of hyperbole may be the better choice.

Modern Metaphor: Advertising’s Work Horse

Metaphors and other rhetorical devices take visual as well as verbal forms. If a multi-national corporation wants to build brand identity or public acceptance, it is often a good tactic to employ a creative advertising team with a reputation for marketing metaphors. One of the most acclaimed examples of metaphoric advertising occurred during the halftime extravaganza of Super Bowl XXXIV in January of 2000. The company was Electronic Data Systems, an organization that’s been around for decades. However, their new millennium identity as a leader in information technology services, coupled with the desire to be known across the globe as simply “EDS,” (I had trouble locating the original name anywhere on their multi-platform, multi-page corporate website), prompted them to recruit the talents of the Minneapolis-based advertising firm of Fallon McElligott for their first ever Super Bowl ad spot.

"We've found an extremely visual way to illustrate what EDS does for its clients," said David Lubars, president/creative director at Fallon McElligott. "It's funny, unique and smart, and we think sure to be memorable to the world's largest viewing audiences on Super Bowl Sunday."

Imagine the challenge before the creative team at Fallon McElligott. They were drafted into the mission of demonstrating the essence of EDS in a 60-second time slot. Had they been “literal” types, the advertising team might have used the time to show the corporate logo while a soothing voice-over relays the standard media release about the organization:

EDS is a recognized global leader in providing E-business and information technology services to 9,000 business and government clients in about 55 countries around the world. Having founded the IT services industry more than 35 years ago, EDS delivers high value management consulting, electronic business solutions, business process management, and systems and technology expertise to help clients simplify complexity and achieve superior value in the digital economy. The company brings deep industry practice knowledge to solve challenges in a wide variety of industries, including communications, energy and chemicals, financial services, government, healthcare, products and retailing, and travel and
transportation. EDS reported revenues of $18.5 billion in 1999. The company’s stock is traded on the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE:EDS) and the London Stock Exchange.

It’s a good thing the advertising team didn’t opt for a straight description; we might have slept through the rest of the Super Bowl. Instead, the team explored “vehicles” for describing EDS’s reputation for deftly “managing the seemingly unmanageable.” According to EDS, technology experts often compare this knack for solving vast technological challenges to—you guessed it—“herding cats.”

Now, I don’t know too many people who have actually attempted to move thousands of house cats across the Great Plains, but those of us with even a passing acquaintance with the less-than-submissive feline can imagine the difficulty easily enough. And that’s the beauty of metaphor: it takes the tenor, an unimaginable abstraction (managing electronic business solutions) and transforms it by way of a vehicle (herding cats) into a vivid and nearly tangible—even if fictitious—event.

A careful analysis of selected details of the ad provides us with an opportunity to appreciate Fallon McElligott’s critical accomplishment and EDS’s metaphoric identity. As you read through the script, pay close attention to those instances where the text relies upon figurative language:

Cowboy #1 [holding old photograph]: This man right here is my great grandfather. He’s the first cat herder in our family. [Begin music.]

Cowboy #2: Herdin’ cats…don’t let anybody tell ya it’s easy.
[overhead shot of circling horseman in midst of cat stampede]

Cowboy #3: Anybody can herd cattle. Holdin’ together ten thousand half-wild short hairs…well, that’s another thing all together.
[large “herd” of cats bounds toward camera; herders in background]

Cowboy #4 [arm in sling]: Bein’ a cat herder’s probably about the… toughest thing I think I’ve ever done.
[switch to shot of cowboy in camp, rolling large ball of string; switch to two cowboys, one hoisted on the other’s shoulders, attempting to rescue several cats from tree]

Cowboy #5: I got this one this morning…right here. And if ya look at his face…it’s just ripped to shreds, ya know?
[two cowboys discuss cat scratches as herd and herders move in background]

Cowboy #6: You see the movies…
[cowboys on horseback in background as foregrounded cats swim across river]

Ya…You hear the stories, it’s…
[cowboy carries two cats across river]

…I’m livin’ a dream.
Not everyone can do what we do.
[campfire scene; cowboy removes cat hair with lint roller. Switch to cowboy on range who sneezes while thousands of cats run past him.]

Cowboy #7: I wouldn’t do nothin’ else.
           [lone cowboy stands with horse]

Cowboy #8: It ain’t an easy job, but when ya bring a herd into town and ya ain’t lost a one of ’em… ain’t a feelin’ like it in the world.
           [cowboy on horseback, young cat riding in saddle; fade to panoramic silhouette of dozens of cats running ahead of cowboy on horseback.]

In a sense, this is what we do. We bring together information, ideas and technologies…and make them go where you want.
           [Written, unspoken text over final scenes of herder and cats as they head toward horizon]

          [Music builds to crescendo. Voice in background hollers Wooo Hooo! Music ends.] [Fade to EDS logo]

          [Voice Over] EDS--Managing the complexities of e-business.

This ad creatively “brings to life” the unwieldy expression “like herding cats.” The setting, in the genre of the epic American Western saga, uses few actors and many real cowboys. Computerized cloning transforms about 60 trained felines into a stampeding “herd” of thousands, filmed separately from the horse sequences and compiled in post-production magic.

Metaphors can be “live” or “dead” according to the degree to which they spark our imagination. If a particular metaphor is overused, it often loses its ability to generate an imaginative leap of faith. We can, as Fallon McElligott has so vividly demonstrated, “resuscitate” a dead metaphor by simply reminding the viewers that the image, indeed, had its genesis in metaphor. When the cat herding ad reports that, “In a sense, this is what we do,” it not only makes explicit the comparison between cat herding and complex technological management, it helps us to revive a metaphor that might otherwise have suffered the untimely demise of overuse. The “cat herding” metaphor is made vivid, just as our understanding of the complexities of EDS’s role in global technologies is made vivid. Metaphor teaches.

On Metonymy: The Other Master Trope

Advertising and any form of narrative often employ another trope: metonymy. Metonyms replace the literal object with something related to it (police officers are “the law,” workers are often referred to as “hands,” the game of basketball is known as “hoops,” a class assignment is nicknamed “a paper,” etc.) Unlike metaphor, metonymy is not a comparative device, and while it occurs in visual and verbal forms just as commonly as metaphor, it receives much less scholarly attention than its more celebrated counterpart. Metonyms do not compare a dissimilar figurative “vehicle” to the literal tenor. Instead, this device uses selection, substitution, and condensation.
to highlight a related, figurative representation of the literal object. In the cat herding ad, the narrative exploits a subtle metonymy in the following claim:

“Holdin’ together ten thousand half-wild short hairs, well--that’s another thing all together.”

This particular construction uses what we would call a synecdoche—a type of metonymy that substitutes a part for the whole (and sometimes the whole for the part). For our purposes, we will identify synecdoche as the most common form of metonymy, even though some linguistic experts identify it as a separate figure. It is useful to think of synecdoche as being to metonymy what simile is to metaphor: a more explicit representation of the general term. In any case, metonyms and synecdoche work best when the selection, substitution and condensation process that occurs results in a significantly representative relationship with the literal object.

When we refer to a “herd” of cats as “ten thousand half-wild short hairs,” we have, in the phrase “short hairs,” selected and substituted (and condensed) cats to a particular breed’s unique fur. Cat hair is part of the whole cat and significantly representative of the cat—as opposed to most other animals.

Note that we probably wouldn’t refer to cattle as “short hairs,” though we might metonymically refer to one species as “long horns.” Note, too, that we are not comparing short hair to a cat. Rather, we are condensing the entire cat to one of its most representative attributes.

Whenever we tell a story, especially when we are visually and verbally confined to a 60-second (or less) ad spot, we must select the few most representative details that will do the best job of standing in for the entire host of details and images belonging to the story. News casts, historical narratives, even our family photo albums are metonymic portrayals of whole life stories that, for the sake of space, argument and time, have been condensed into representative figures. Metonymy is an especially powerful strategy in the age of electronic imagery, so powerful that organizations like Electronic Data Systems will move to identify themselves simply by their initials: EDS. This synecdochic tactic works to place in the public mind an abbreviated—and easier to remember—version of their corporate image.

Let’s return to the text of “cat herders” to highlight the obvious metonyms that represent the unique details germane to herding cats. A cowboy is hoisted upon another’s shoulders to help rescue a cluster of cats from a tree branch. Two men discuss the scratches they endured, one having been “ripped to shreds,” in the frenzy of herding a claw bearing creature across the plains. In the campfire scene, one cowboy warbles a harmonica tune into the night while his co-worker relaxes nearby with a Lint and Pet Hair Roller, removing the day’s deposits to the rhythm of a restful tune. A cowboy winds a great ball of string. Another rustler rides his horse alongside the herd of moving cats, the monotony of the trail only momentarily interrupted by a sneeze, presumably due to the common allergic reaction to what must be a thick cloud of cat dander.

The creatives at the advertising agency might have engaged in brainstorming to generate a useful list of metonymic details uniquely representative of the cat herding phenomenon. Next, they would be motivated to cull the list to those details that could be reasonably portrayed within the limited scope of a television ad. Apart from tree limb rescues, scratches, shedding, balls of string, and pet hair allergies, what else is uniquely representative of the task of managing a
multitude of cats? In addition to the part-to-whole (and whole-to-part) utility of synecdoche (as in the reference to “short hairs”), metonyms can come in several forms: substituting the instrument for the user (a ball of string), the container for the thing contained or vice versa (a kitty litter pan), the sign for the thing signified (shedded fur), the cause for the effect or vice versa (scratches)…and many others. The quality that all metonyms have in common is their substitution of something significantly related to the literal object.

Metaphors and metonyms have a long history of interaction in our language. Sometimes a word or phrase will begin as a metonym and, over time, become unrelated to the literal object it was meant to represent. For example, consider the word, “bootleg.” Often we’ll find this word coupled with consumer items, most recently in reference to CDs. If you’ve ever been offered a “bootleg CD,” you’re aware of the fact that this means the CD is not an authorized version. It has been “smuggled” in from an illegal (often counterfeit) source. “Bootleg” is a word with a history that eclipses our recent exposure to it in the world of counterfeit music sales. It probably came into being sometime around the Prohibition Era in this country. At that time, when alcoholic beverages were illegal, the “leg” of one’s boot could be used to smuggle in concealed bottles of liquor. In the Prohibition Era, “bootleg” liquor was a metonymy: the leg of the boot was significantly related to the act of smuggling. Now, however, boot legs have very little to do with the high-tech world of “bootleg” music. What was once a metonymy (a figurative term related to the literal meaning) has become a metaphor (a figurative term that is no longer related to the literal meaning). If a metaphoric phrase comes to us via metonymy, it’s possible that it arrives as a “dead” metaphor simply because the vivid imagery we would expect from a “fresh” or “live” metaphor would not lend any relevant meaning in the new context.

At the point when the relationship between the literal and figurative object becomes dissimilar, a metonym becomes metaphor. Sometimes, though, we encounter a metaphor that is disguised as a metonym to those of use who aren’t familiar with the metaphor’s origin. Last fall I came across an instance of metaphor that a group of colleagues and I had understood as metonymy. We were in downtown Chicago, the “windy city,” with a group of native Illinoisans; we were discussing how Chicago earned its nickname. Those of us who were not from Illinois had assumed that the phrase “windy city” referred to the “lake effect”—the fierce winds that are common along Chicago’s waterfront in the fall and winter seasons. Our interpretation was metonymic—we believed that a significant weather phenomenon had come to represent the entire city. The indignant Illinoisans were quick to correct us. It seems that the term “windy” referred to Chicago’s reputation as a political center where candidates from across the nation would gather and debate issues of great political import. The city became known as metaphorically “windy,” rhetorically “stormy” or just plain “full of hot air” as a consequence of all the opinionated exchange. Because my colleagues and I were more aware of the current weather conditions in Chicago, we had assumed that the nickname “windy city” was metonymically related to the literal meaning. It took those who were familiar with the city’s history to correct our misinterpretation and render the phrase as properly metaphorical.

**Electric Rhetoric and the Political Agenda**

Way back in 1996, when President Bill Clinton was elected to a second term in office, political commentator George Will described him as a “lame duck on a short leash.” This is an example of a compound metaphor, two images parlayed in a single phrase. With metaphor’s ability to
provoke an image, we have in this example a cognitive glitch, one that would cause the most anxious of composition instructors among us to spasmodically twitch: the notorious mixed metaphor. The two images, “lame duck” and “short leash” do not work in concert with each other. Instead, they compete for our riddle-resolving skills and work against the likelihood that either image will surface in vivid relief. Will’s construction is doubly undermined by the fact that both images, through overuse, have long since been buried in metaphor’s graveyard. Reviving “dead” metaphors, as we have already seen, is usually a simple task—as long as the metaphors in question are not also suffering from the competing forces of incompatible imagery.

One of my favorite examples of figurative language within a political context occurred during WWII, when Winston Churchill, British Prime Minister and arguably the greatest speaker of the 20th century, attempted to rally his people during the long nights of the Blitz. In the closing sentence of his broadcasted speech, Churchill asked the British to maintain their morale and vigilance,

So that 1000 years from now, men will still say, this was their finest hour.

More than a few scholars have argued that the word “hour” in this statement is a fine example of metaphor. Is it? Try the “trope type test” to make a determination:

1. Identify the particular example of figurative language (in this case, “hour.”)
2. Determine the literal meaning. What is literally meant here?
3. Determine the relationship between the figurative and the literal construction. Is it comparative, as in metaphor? Is the word “hour” a substitution related to what is literally meant, as in metonymy?

Politics, or the art of influencing others and garnishing support for one’s agenda, is comparable to the persuasive mission of advertising. It is, ironically, even more likely in our electronic era to encounter the ancient figures of speech and thought in political debate. Why? Because one of the most lauded advantages of figurative language is that it makes memorable what might otherwise be forgotten, provided it is used discretely. In the age of sound bytes and mediated aphorisms, the carefully chosen rhetorical device works like a memory-boosting bumper sticker on our oft’ overloaded mental processors. For those of us with at least a fifth grade knowledge of American history, we should have a fairly easy time completing these examples of rhetorical propaganda:

- “You have nothing to fear but…. (fear itself).
- “So that a government of the people, by the….” (people, and for the people….)
- “Give me liberty or….” (give me death.)
- “Ask not what your country can do for you…."(ask what you can do for your country).

We may not remember the particular political or historical context of these utterances, nor might we recall who said them. We cannot expect that most people would even recognize the rhetorical device at work. Then, how is it that we remember these political constructions, often in their entirety, with only the simplest of prompts? Often, it is a consequence of the common (but powerful) rhetorical strategy of repetition. And, once remembered, an argument can move deliberative listeners to understanding, if not agreement. As political campaigns wax and wane,
carefully worded and often-repeated rhetorical devices and stylistic constructions will clamor to win our attention and acclaim.

Aldous Huxley once proclaimed that, “Technological progress has merely provided us with more efficient means for going backwards.” He might have been referring to our reliance upon ancient rhetorical strategies to persuade and make sense of our modern “reality.” Huxley’s quote uses antithesis, yet another example of figurative language that involves the yoking together of two words, usually opposed in meaning, within the same clause or sentence. In this case, Huxley’s “progress” occurs in the same sentence as “backwards.” The use of opposites in this way is a form of perverse repetition—recalling what we first said by invoking its opposite. It is not uncommon for instances of antithesis to involve irony, another figure. Irony, similar to sarcasm in everyday speech, occurs when what we say (“technological progress”) results in a surprising twist of fate, (“going backwards”). For a textbook example of irony, consider the statement, “the fireboat burned and sank.” Ironic speech gives us pause so that we might ponder the surprising turn from our early expectations. We might initially expect that a fireboat would put out fires and float on the water. When it fails at both, the result is said to be ironic.

Antithesis can also be viewed as an elaborate form of oxymoron. Oxymoron is another rhetorical device that comes to us from the Ancient Greek: oxus means “sharp” and moros means “dull.” Thus, an oxymoron is a “sharp dullness” or self-contradicting phrase. Instead of combining opposites within the span of a clause or sentence, as in antithesis, oxymoron employs a combination of contradictory or incongruous words together (as in Shakespeare’s “cruel kindness”).

Oxymoron is fun to create and collect. It also makes a compact argument about a particular worldview. The narrative below attempts a brief survey (she said, oxymoronically) of some of the more common examples—see if you can find them:

Bea searched aimlessly for the sign, “Down Escalator,” but she had clearly misunderstood the security guard’s directions.

“It’s only a minor disaster,” she thought to herself, determined to use her crisis management skills to navigate her way out of the industrial park’s oldest building. She finally came across a small crowd of office workers lined up outside a service elevator. When the doors of the elevator opened, Bea and the others herded inside and were immediately accosted by the live recording of soft rock piped into the car. The only noise louder than the music came from the elevator itself as its doors closed and it groaned into motion, headed for the ground floor. The journey was nearly completed when the elevator abruptly lurched to a stop somewhere between the first and second floors.

“This,” murmured Bea in exasperation, “is an unacceptable solution.”

“I was hoping for a non-stop flight,” said the woman behind her, her smile betrayed by a noticeable nervous twitch.

A man near the doors, clad in tight slacks and a genuine imitation leather jacket, dismissed the stall as “Nothing much to worry about.” He turned to open a small door below the buttons and proceeded to take out an original copy of the elevator’s emergency instructions.

“I took Elevator Maintenance 101 as a required elective when I was in college,” he boasted. “Our student teacher was a real hoot. He drove a Dodge Ram and broke the speed limit every day on his way to work. Actually, he was a terribly nice guy, perfectly normal. He thought of teaching as a working vacation. You can’t find ‘em like that anymore.” He chuckled to himself and resumed his scan of the emergency instructions.
Meanwhile, the woman closest to the door had laughingly proclaimed herself as “Tonight's Guest Host,” though her slurred speech convinced Bea that she was either legally drunk or stifling a silent scream.

Bea elbowed to the front end of the car, afraid that she was slowly hyperventilating. “I don’t want to be found missing three days from now,” she shuddered.

Wasn’t that a pleasant story? With terms like “jumbo shrimp,” “new and improved,” “mild abrasive” and “ill health” energizing our conventional speech and our electronic airwaves, anyone can become an *amateur expert* in oxymoronic constructions. Oxymoron persuades when it brings together two opposing terms and creates new meaning from the pairing. When Shakespeare coined the term, “thunderous silence,” he produced extended meaning far beyond the individual words alone. Successful oxymoron relies on both irony and *synergy*; it offers a powerful, persuasive addition to the working language. Of course, you’ll also find plenty of examples that are as absurd as they are unintentional.

We have surveyed only a few of the most common forms of figurative language. There are *many more*. Continued study of figurative instances will not only train our eyes and ears to recognize when others are preparing a persuasive effort, it will also help us to develop our own store of linguistic goods. With a fully-stocked supply, we can yet enjoy that “freedom of thought and expression” that lends distinction to the life-long student of language and human behavior.