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Figurative Language: An Interview with Herbert L. Colston

Herbert L. Colston¹

ReVEL - The theme of this issue of *ReVEL* is “Figurative language”, which seems to be a very broad concept. How would you define it?

HERBERT L. COLSTON - Defining figurative language is actually a very difficult thing to do. This is because there does not seem to be any kind of fixed line that cleanly divides figurative from nonfigurative language. But, if you look at the sorts of language that diverge a bit as you move further toward the figurative and nonfigurative ends of this continuum, you can speak to some differences. More figurative language seen this way often involves talk, writing, or signing (but figurativity can also involve non-linguistic symbols, imagery, behaviors and many other things), where some type of deviation exists between the surface meaning of the language (or its “literal” meaning by some explanations) and the meaning that is intended by the speaker/writer/signer. So for instance in the case of a metaphor, a person might say, “I don’t trust that person, he’s a snake”, to mean that the person is untrustworthy, or dangerous, or devious, or something else fairly negative, rather than that the person is an actual animal we normally think of when hearing “snake”. Figurative language accomplishes very interesting things with these kinds of deviances, which can involve many sorts of interesting and nuanced meaningfulness. For instance in verbal irony, or sarcasm as one type of verbal irony is commonly called, often involves saying what seems to be the opposite of what one intends. So saying, “nice weather you have here” during a hurricane, is often used to express disapproval, yet it does this with what appears to be positive language. What is most interesting about studying figurative language is trying to figure out how it ends up conveying the meaning it does, through the assortment of mechanisms it employs in making that meaning.

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ReVEL - The first chapter of your book *Using figurative language* poses an interesting question: “Why don't people just say what they mean?” How would you answer this question nowadays, considering your background? Has anything changed since the publication of the book in 2015?

HERBERT L. COLSTON - I would probably have the same basic answer, but there may be more I could say about it now than back in 2015. I actually think people DO say what they mean, or at least attempt to do so (unless of course if they're lying), but they do this through the kinds of figurative processes I mentioned, for instance by using a different topic than the actual thing being discussed, as in the “snake” metaphor example, or intending something somewhat oppositional to what they say in verbal irony. People don't rely on just the more standard word meanings positioned within their grammar to convey meaning. But they employ these figurative processes to add nuance and complexity and to enrich their meanings in ways that just cannot be done without the figurative language. For instance, you could probably express the most bare-bones paraphrases of the metaphor and verbal irony examples used above (i.e., he is not trustworthy, and, this weather is bad), but you would get nowhere near the subtlety and nuance conveyed by the figurative phrasings. Figurativity lends its own powerful flavorings to meanings that you just can't do in any other way.

ReVEL - In the article “The roots of metaphor: the essence of thought”, you address the importance of the number two in metaphor and figurative language; you say that “it seems as if two is a magic number of some sort”. Can you elaborate on that cognitive duality for our readers?

HERBERT L. COLSTON - If you look closely at most of the kinds of figurative language out there (metaphor, verbal irony, metonymy, idioms, proverbs, hyperbole and many, many others), they nearly all utilize only one or two “domains” in their functioning. So for metaphor, it involves a target domain (the untrustworthy person being discussed) and a source domain (the snake). Verbal irony involves the actual situation at hand (the rotten weather), and the more desired, preferred, or expected situation that is actually stated (the nice weather). It seems that only puns invoke more than two domains, but even they usually just stick to two. My conjecture is that this number 2 is “magic” in that it is optimal—it enables many of the kinds of figurative

meaning-making mechanisms I've briefly discussed to blossom, but then it stops short of aiming for some even higher level of complexity that might happen with three or more domains being invoked. That many domains would be quite taxing for our ability to juggle. So the number two seems optimal—it leverages a lot of great meaning but does so as simply as possible.

ReVEL - From your perspective, what are some of the prominent past and recent advancements by studies on figurative language for the understanding of linguistics in general?

HERBERT L. COLSTON - Certainly the discovery that metaphoricity is something that extends much more broadly than in just the realm of language was a huge development. That metaphor constitutes a very building block of our concepts and ability to think about the world, not unlike how molecules are the building blocks of matter, was a major contribution. And more broadly, that we've now recognized just how much of our normal everyday language is indeed figurative in all sorts of ways was another big leap.

But I think we also need to go much further and to recognize that figurativity and indeed all language is more three dimensional than we've realized thus far. We tend to think of it as one dimensional and we worry excessively over *sequentiality* and *mapping* and other base ideas from psycholinguistics and figurative studies. I think we need to move to a new model of seeing language as a nested series of frame layerings, all of which are semi-transparent such that we look through, around, and past them to suss out meaning. Not unlike how we can see objects in our worlds both proximal and distal at the same time, and how we can look through a window and see both the outside and the reflected inside simultaneously and know what is going on in these scenes. That speech unfolds in time and that words are splayed out in rows on a page have focused our attention on sequencing and mapping, but I think meaning-making is much, much more complex than this.

Since 2020 I've been diligently creating poetry with a significant image component to it, from shaped texts, through created imagery in the form of graphics and shapes, to incorporation of photography with rich artistic quality of its own (some of which I do with my own photography, some with the permission of other artists). This work has really shown me how meaning-making can really escape the static forms

it takes in written and spoken language, and can be freed in many new ways that we're only beginning to discover. Coupling the language with imagery is the key to this, as is the joining of artistic creations from two different people. And that some of the content of this poetry is figurativity itself, really shows what can be done—figurativity about the figurativity of figurativity...

ReVEL - We will finish this interview by kindly asking you what bibliographic references you recommend for someone interested in studying figurative language. Do you have any suggestions for must-read works in this field?

HERBERT L. COLSTON - I have to admit that some of the most compelling works I've read recently that have greatly informed my thinking about figurativity, aren't themselves really all that concerned with figurativity. But they address adjacent phenomena that I think help us understand why we even have figurativity and employ it as we do. Among these works are Matthew Lieberman's book "Social: Why our brains are wired to connect", and Johathan Haidt's "The righteous mind: Why good people are divided by politics and religion" among others. These works show us respectively that our compulsions as a species to be ridiculously social, in large part explain the very existence of figurativity and the "social work" it does for us. And that we come equipped with evolutionarily honed moral intuitions, which are then molded into culturally perpetuated concentrations (i.e., caring about all the moral intuitions we exhibit more or less evenly, or concentrating our concerns on a smaller set of them), greatly explain how we get herded into the particular political spectrum we see recurring throughout history, and how our language, figurative and otherwise, follows accordingly.

The editors

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