

Semiotics for Beginners

Daniel Chandler

Rhetorical Tropes

Most contemporary semioticians regard rhetoric (or at least aspects of it) as falling within the domain of semiotics ([Nöth 1990, 338](#)). The study of what Saussure called 'the role of signs as part of social life' could not exclude the ancient art of persuasion. Whilst a general overview of rhetoric is beyond the scope of this text, a concern with certain key tropes (or figures of speech) is so prominent in semiotic theory that one cannot embark on an exploration of semiotics without some understanding of this topic.

Academic interest in rhetoric, or at least in the epistemological implications of certain tropes, was revived in the second half of the twentieth century by structuralists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roman Jakobson, the self-styled formalist Hayden White, poststructuralists such as Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan, and cognitive semanticists such as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. A sea-change in academic discourse, which has been visible in many disciplines, has been dubbed 'the rhetorical turn' or 'the discursive turn'. It reflects a radical challenge to the language of objectivism which derives from the seventeenth century quest to establish a 'scientific' use of language. The central proposition of this contemporary trend is that rhetorical forms are deeply and unavoidably involved in the shaping of realities. Language is not a neutral medium. In common usage we refer dismissively to 'heated rhetoric', 'empty rhetoric' and 'mere rhetoric'. However, rhetoric is not stylistic ornamentation but persuasive discourse. All discourse is unavoidably rhetorical, though academic writers in particular seldom acknowledge and often deny its presence in their writing. Rhetoric is often contrasted with rationality and allied with radical relativism or nihilism. Such assertions, of course, represent rhetoric at work (just as when the 'hardness' of the sciences is contrasted with the 'softness' of the humanities). Rhetoric is not simply a matter of how thoughts are presented but is itself an influence on ways of thinking which deserves serious attention. Academic authors construct texts which define particular realities and modes of knowing ([Bazerman 1981](#); [Hansen 1988](#)). 'Facts' do not 'speak for themselves': academic writers have to argue for their existence. Academic papers are not unproblematic presentations of knowledge, but are subtle rhetorical constructions with epistemological implications. Attending to rhetoric can assist us in deconstructing all kinds of discourse.

Terence Hawkes tells us that '*figurative language* is language which doesn't mean what it says' - in contrast to *literal language* which is at least intended to be, or taken as, purely denotative ([Hawkes 1972, 1](#)). Whilst this is a distinction which goes back to classical times it has been problematized by poststructuralist theorists (a topic to which we will return shortly). Somewhat less problematically, tropes can be seen as offering us a variety of ways of saying '*this* is (or is *like*) *that*'. Tropes may be essential to understanding if we interpret this as a process of rendering the unfamiliar more familiar. Furthermore, however they are defined, the conventions of figurative language constitute a rhetorical [code](#), and understanding this code is part of what it means to be a member of the culture in which it is employed. Like other codes, figurative language is part of the reality maintenance system of a culture or sub-culture. It is a code which relates ostensibly to *how* things are represented rather than to *what* is represented. Occasionally in everyday life our attention is drawn to an unusual metaphor - such as the critical quip that someone is 'one voucher short of a pop-up toaster'.

However, much of the time - outside of 'poetic' contexts - we use or encounter many figures of speech without really noticing them - they retreat to 'transparency'. Such transparency tends to anaesthetize us to the way in which the culturally available stock of tropes acts as an anchor linking us to the dominant ways of thinking within our society ([Lakoff & Johnson 1980](#)). Our repeated exposure to, and use of, such figures of speech subtly sustains our tacit agreement with the shared assumptions of our society.

Tropes generate 'imagery' with connotations over and above any 'literal' meaning. Once we employ a trope, our utterance becomes part of a much larger system of associations which is beyond our control. For instance when we refer metaphorically to 'putting things into words' it tends to connote the idea of language as a 'container' - a particular view of language which has specific implications ([Reddy 1979](#)). Yet the use of tropes is unavoidable. We may think of figurative language as most obviously a feature of poetry and more generally of 'literary' writing, but, as Terry Eagleton remarks, 'there is more metaphor in Manchester than there is in Marvell' ([Eagleton 1983, 6](#)). According to Roman Jakobson, metaphor and metonymy are the two fundamental modes of communicating meaning, and - according to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson - the basis for much of our understanding in everyday life ([Jakobson & Halle 1956](#); [Lakoff & Johnson 1980](#)).



Roland Barthes declared that 'no sooner is a form seen than it *must* resemble something: humanity seems doomed to analogy' (cited in [Silverman & Torode 1980, 248](#)). The

ubiquity of tropes in visual as well as verbal forms can be seen as reflecting our fundamentally *relational* understanding of reality. Reality is framed within systems of analogy. Figures of speech enable us to see one thing in terms of another. As with paradigm and syntagm, tropes 'orchestrate the interactions of signifiers and signifieds' in discourse ([Silverman 1983, 87](#)). A trope such as metaphor can be regarded as new sign formed from the signifier of one sign and the signified of another. The signifier thus stands for a different signified; the new signified replaces the usual one. As I will illustrate, the tropes differ in the nature of these substitutions.



In seventeenth century England the scientists of the Royal Society sought 'to separate knowledge of nature from the colours of rhetoric, the devices of the fancy, the delightful deceit of the fables' (Thomas Sprat, 1667: *The History of the Royal Society of London for the Improving of Natural Knowledge*); they saw the 'trick of metaphors' as distorting reality. In the *Leviathan* (1651), Thomas Hobbes dismissed 'the use of metaphors, tropes and other rhetorical figures, instead of words proper. For though it be lawful to say, for example, in common speech, *the way goeth, or leadeth hither, or thither; the proverb says this or that*, whereas ways cannot go, nor proverbs speak; yet in reckoning, and seeking of truth, such speeches are not to be admitted' (*Leviathan*, Part 1, Chapter 5),

whilst John Locke wrote similarly in 1690:

If we would speak of things as they are, we must allow that all the art of rhetoric, besides order and clearness; all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to

insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment; and so indeed are perfect cheats: and therefore, however laudable or allowable oratory may render them in harangues and popular addresses, they are certainly, in all discourses that pretend to inform or instruct, wholly to be avoided; and where truth and knowledge are concerned, cannot but be thought a great fault, either of the language or person that makes use of them. (*Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book 3, Chapter 10)

An attempt to avoid figurative language became closely allied to the realist ideology of objectivism. Language and reality, thought and language, and form and content are regarded by realists as separate, or at least as separable. Realists favour the use of the 'clearest', most 'transparent' language for the accurate and truthful description of 'facts'. However, language isn't 'glass' (as the metaphorical references to clarity and transparency suggest), and it is unavoidably implicated in the construction of the world as we know it. Banishing metaphor is an impossible task since it is central to language. Ironically, the writings of Hobbes, Locke and Sprat are themselves richly metaphorical. The poet Wallace Stevens provocatively quipped that 'reality is a cliché from which we escape by metaphor' (cited in [Hawkes 1972, 57](#)). Those drawn towards philosophical idealism argue that all language is metaphor or even that 'reality' is purely a product of metaphors. Such a stance clearly denies any referential distinction between 'literal' and 'metaphorical'. Nietzsche declared: 'What... is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms' (cited in [Spivak 1976, xxii](#)). For Nietzsche, truth or reality was merely the solidification of old metaphors.

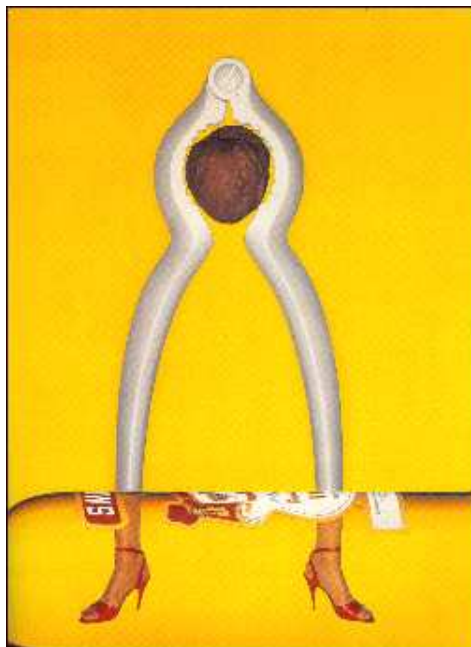
Poststructuralists (whose own use of language is typically highly metaphorical) argue that there can be no text which 'means what it says' (which is how 'literal' language is often defined). Constructivists might be content to insist that metaphors are pervasive and largely unrecognized within a culture or sub-culture and that highlighting them is a useful key to identifying whose realities such metaphors privilege. Identifying figurative tropes in texts and practices can help to highlight underlying thematic frameworks; semiotic textual analysis sometimes involves the identification of an 'overarching (or 'root') metaphor' or 'dominant trope'. For instance, Derrida shows how philosophers have traditionally referred to the mind and the intellect in terms of tropes based on the presence or absence of light ([Derrida 1974](#)); everyday language is rich in examples of the association of thinking with visual metaphors (bright, brilliant, dull, enlightening, illuminating, vision, clarity, reflection etc.). As Kress and van Leeuwen put it:

Seeing has, in our culture, become synonymous with understanding. We 'look' at a problem. We 'see' the point. We adopt a 'viewpoint'. We 'focus' on an issue. We 'see things in perspective'. The world 'as we see it' (rather than 'as we know it' and certainly not 'as we hear it' or 'as we feel it') has become the measure for what is 'real' and 'true'. ([Kress and van Leeuwen 1996, 168](#))

Michel Foucault adopts a stance of linguistic determinism, arguing that the dominant tropes within the discourse of a particular historical period determine what can be known - constituting the basic *episteme* of the age. 'Discursive practice' is reduced to 'a body of anonymous, historical rules, always determined by the time and space that have defined a given period, and for a given social, economic, geographical, or linguistic area, the conditions of operation of the enunciative function' ([Foucault 1974, 117](#)). Since certain metaphors have become naturalized and we do not tend to notice the ways in which they can channel our thinking about the signifieds to which they refer, deliberately *using* unconventional tropes can sometimes help to denaturalize taken-for-granted ways of looking at phenomena ([Stern 1998, 165](#)).

Metaphor is so widespread that it is often used as an 'umbrella' term (another metaphor!) to include other figures of speech (such as metonyms) which can be technically distinguished from it in its narrower usage. Similes can be seen as a form of metaphor in which the figurative status of the comparison is made explicit through the use of the word 'as' or 'like'. Thus 'life is like a box of chocolates' (*Forrest Gump*, 1994). Much of the time we hardly notice that we are using metaphors at all and yet one study found that English speakers produced an average of 3000 novel metaphors per week ([Pollio et al. 1977](#)). Lakoff and Johnson argue that 'the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another' ([Lakoff & Johnson 1980, 5](#)). In semiotic terms, a metaphor involves one signified acting as a signifier referring to a different signified. In literary terms, a metaphor consists of a 'literal' primary subject (or 'tenor') expressed in terms of a 'figurative' secondary subject (or 'vehicle') ([Richards 1932](#)). For instance: '*Experience* is a good *school*, but the fees are high' (Heinrich Heine). In this case, the primary subject of *experience* is expressed in terms of the secondary subject of *school*. Typically, metaphor expresses an abstraction in terms of a more well-defined model.

The linking of a particular tenor and vehicle is normally unfamiliar: we must make an imaginative leap to recognize the resemblance to which a fresh metaphor alludes. Metaphor is initially unconventional because it apparently disregards 'literal' or denotative resemblance (though some kind of resemblance must become apparent if the metaphor is to make any sense at all to its interpreters). The basis in *resemblance* suggests that metaphor involves the *iconic* mode. However, to the extent that such a resemblance is oblique, we may think of metaphor as *symbolic*. More interpretative effort is required in making sense of metaphors than of more literal signifiers, but this interpretative effort may be experienced as pleasurable. Whilst metaphors may require an imaginative leap in their initial use (such as in aesthetic uses in poetry or the visual arts) many metaphors become so habitually employed that they are no longer perceived as being metaphors at all.



Metaphors need not be verbal. In film, a pair of consecutive shots is metaphorical when there is an implied comparison of the two shots. For instance, a shot of an aeroplane followed by a shot of a bird flying would be metaphorical, implying that the aeroplane is (or is like) a bird. So too would a shot of a bird landing accompanied by the sounds of an airport control tower and of a braking plane - as in an airline commercial cited by Charles Forceville ([Forceville 1996, 203](#)). In most cases the context would cue us as to which was the primary subject. An ad for an airline is more likely to suggest that an aeroplane is (like) a bird than that a bird is (like) an aeroplane. As with verbal metaphors, we are left to draw our own conclusions as to the points of comparison. Advertisers frequently use visual metaphors, as in this ad for Smirnoff

vodka. Despite the frequently expressed notion that images cannot assert, metaphorical images often imply that which advertisers would not express in words. In this example from a men's magazine, the metaphor suggests that (Smirnoff enables you to see that) women (or perhaps some women) are nutcrackers (the code of related Smirnoff ads marks this as humour).



George Lakoff and Mark Johnson illustrate that



underlying most of our fundamental concepts are several kinds of metaphor:

- *orientational metaphors* primarily relating to spatial organization (*up/down, in/out, front/back, on/off, near/far, deep/shallow* and *central/peripheral*);
- *ontological metaphors* which associate activities, emotions and ideas with entities and substances (most obviously, metaphors involving *personification*);
- *structural metaphors*: overarching metaphors (building on the other two types) which allow us to structure one concept in terms of another (e.g. *rational argument is war* or *time is a resource*).

Lakoff and Johnson note that metaphors may vary from culture to culture but argue that they are not arbitrary, being derived initially from our physical, social and cultural experience. In 1744, Giambattista Vico made the point that: 'it is noteworthy that in all languages the greater part of the expressions relating to inanimate things are formed by metaphor from the human body and its parts and from the human senses and passions'. His modern English translators offer this adaptation of his list:

Thus, head for top or beginning; the brow and shoulders of a hill; the eyes of needles and of potatoes; mouth for any opening; the lip of a cup or pitcher; the teeth of a rake, a saw, a comb; the beard of wheat; the tongue of a shoe; the gorge of a river; a neck of land; an arm of the sea; the hands of a clock; heart for centre (the Latins used *umbilicus*, navel, in this sense); the belly of a sail; foot for end or bottom; the flesh of fruits; a vein of rock or mineral; the blood of grapes for wine; the bowels of the earth. Heaven or the sea smiles, the wind whistles, the waves murmur; a body groans under a great weight. ([Vico 1968, 129](#))

Lakoff and Johnson argue that metaphors form systematic clusters such as that *ideas (or meanings) are objects, linguistic expressions are containers* and *communication is sending* - an example derived from Michael Reddy's discussion of 'the conduit metaphor' ([Reddy 1979](#)). Metaphors not only cluster in this way but extend into myths. Lakoff and Johnson argue that dominant metaphors tend both to reflect and influence values in a culture or subculture: for instance, the pervasive Western metaphors that *knowledge is power* and *science subdues nature* are involved in the maintenance of the ideology of objectivism ([Lakoff & Johnson 1980](#)). This is consistent with the Whorfian perspective that different languages impose different systems of spatial and temporal relations on experience through their figures of speech ([Whorf 1956](#)).

Whilst metaphor is based on apparent unrelatedness, *metonymy* is a function which involves using one signified to stand for another signified which is *directly related* to it or *closely associated* with it in some way. Metonyms are based on various *indexical* relationships between signifieds, notably the substitution of *effect* for *cause*. The best definition I have found is that 'metonymy is the evocation of the whole by a connection. It consists in using for the name of a thing or a relationship an attribute, a suggested sense, or something closely related, such as effect for cause... the imputed relationship being that of

contiguity' ([Wilden 1987, 198](#)). It can be seen as based on substitution by *adjuncts* (things that are found together) or on *functional relationships*. Many of these forms notably make an abstract referent more concrete, although some theorists also include substitution in the opposite direction (e.g. *cause* for *effect*). *Part/whole* relationships are sometimes distinguished as a special kind of metonymy or as a separate trope, as we will see shortly. Metonymy includes the substitution of:

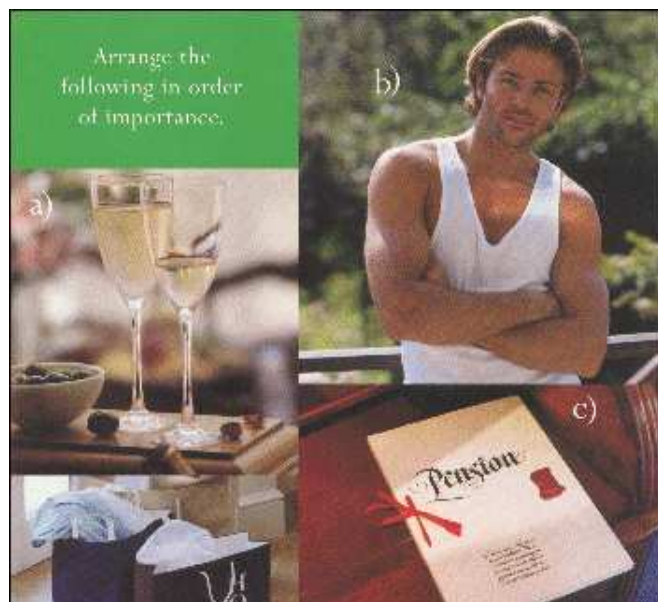
- *effect* for *cause* ('Don't get hot under the collar!' for 'Don't get angry!');
- *object* for *user* (or associated *institution*) ('the Crown' for the monarchy, 'the stage' for the theatre and 'the press' for journalists);
- *substance* for *form* ('plastic' for 'credit card', 'lead' for 'bullet');
- *place* for *event*: ('Chernobyl changed attitudes to nuclear power');
- *place* for *person* ('No. 10' for the British prime minister);
- *place* for *institution* ('Whitehall isn't saying anything');
- *institution* for *people* ('The government is not backing down').

Lakoff and Johnson comment on several types of metonymy, including:

- *producer* for *product* ('She owns a Picasso');
- *object* for *user* ('The ham sandwich wants his check [bill]');
- *controller* for *controlled* ('Nixon bombed Hanoi').

They argue that (as with metaphor) particular kinds of metonymic substitution may influence our thoughts, attitudes and actions by focusing on certain aspects of a concept and suppressing other aspects which are inconsistent with the metonym:

When we think of a *Picasso*, we are not just thinking of a work of art alone, in and of itself. We think of it in terms of its relation to the artist, this is, his conception of art, his technique, his role in art history, etc. We act with reverence towards a *Picasso*, even a sketch he made as a teenager, because of its relation to the artist. Similarly, when a waitress says, 'The ham sandwich wants his check,' she is not interested in the person as a person but only as a customer, which is why the use of such a sentence is dehumanizing. Nixon may not himself have dropped the bombs on Hanoi, but via the *controller for controlled* metonymy we not only say 'Nixon bombed Hanoi' but also think of him as doing the bombing and hold him responsible for it... This is possible because of the nature of the metonymic relationship... where responsibility is what is focused on. ([Lakoff & Johnson 1980, 39](#))



As with metaphors, metonyms may be visual as well as verbal. In film, which Jakobson regarded as a basically metonymic medium, 'metonymy can be applied to an object that is visibly present but which

represents another object or subject to which it is related but which is absent' ([Hayward 1996, 217](#)). An ad for pensions in a women's magazine asked the reader to arrange four images in order of importance: each image was metonymic, standing for related activities (such as shopping bags for material goods). Metonymy is common in cigarette advertising in countries where legislation prohibits depictions of the cigarettes themselves or of people using them. The ads for Benson and Hedges and for Silk Cut are good examples of this.



Jakobson argues that whereas a *metaphorical* term is connected with that for which it is substituted on the basis of *similarity*, *metonymy* is based on *contiguity* or closeness ([Jakobson & Halle 1956, 91, 95](#)). The indexicality of metonyms also tends to suggest that they are 'directly connected to' reality in contrast to the mere *iconicity* or *symbolism* of metaphor. Metonyms seem to be more obviously 'grounded in our experience' than metaphors since they usually involve direct associations ([Lakoff & Johnson 1980, 39](#)). Metonymy does not require transposition (an imaginative leap) from one domain to another as metaphor does. This difference can lead metonymy to seem more 'natural' than metaphors - which when still 'fresh' are stylistically foregrounded. Metonymic signifiers

foreground the signified whilst metaphoric signifiers foreground the signifier ([Lodge 1977, xiv](#)). Jakobson suggested that the metonymic mode tends to be foregrounded in prose whereas the metaphoric mode tends to be foregrounded in poetry ([Jakobson & Halle 1956, 95-96](#)). He regarded 'so-called realistic literature' as 'intimately tied with the metonymic principle' ([Jakobson 1960, 375](#); cf. [Jakobson & Halle 1956, 92](#)). Such literature represents actions as based on cause and effect and as contiguous in time and space. Whilst metonymy is associated with realism, metaphor is associated with romanticism and surrealism ([Jakobson & Halle 1956, 92](#)).

Some theorists identify *synecdoche* as a separate trope, some see it as a special form of metonymy and others subsume its functions entirely within metonymy. Jakobson noted that both metonymy and synecdoche are based on *contiguity* ([Jakobson & Halle 1956, 95](#)). The definition of synecdoche varies from theorist to theorist (sometimes markedly). The rhetorician Richard Lanham represents the most common tendency to describe synecdoche as 'the substitution of part for whole, genus for species or vice versa' ([Lanham 1969, 97](#)). Thus one term is more comprehensive than the other. Some theorists restrict the directionality of application (e.g. part for whole but *not* whole for part). Some limit synecdoche further to cases where one element is *physically* part of the other. Here are some examples:

- *part for whole* ('I'm off to the smoke [London]'; 'we need to hire some more hands [workers]'; 'two heads are better than one'; 'I've got a new set of wheels', the American expression 'get your butt over here!');
- *whole for part* (e.g. 'I was stopped by the law' - where the law stands for a police officer, 'Wales' for 'the Welsh national rugby team' or 'the market' for customers);
- *species for genus (hypernymy)* - the use of a *member of a class (hyponym)* for the *class (superordinate)* which includes it (e.g. *a mother* for *motherhood*, 'bread' for 'food', 'Hoover' for 'vacuum-cleaner');
- *genus for species (hyponymy)* - the use of a *superordinate* for a *hyponym* (e.g. 'vehicle' for 'car', or 'machine' for 'computer').

Stephen Pepper identified four basic worldviews - formism, mechanism, contextualism and organicism, each with its own distinctive 'root metaphor' - respectively, *similarity*, *simple machine*, *historic event* and *organism* ([Pepper 1942, 84ff](#)). Meyer Abrams has identified Pepper's scheme as an application of synecdoche, since each worldview presents the whole of reality in terms of one of its parts ([Abrams 1971, 31](#)).



Any attempt to represent reality can be seen as involving synecdoche, since it can only involve selection (and yet such selections serve to guide us in envisaging larger frameworks). Whilst indexical relations in general reflect the closest link which a signifier can be seen as having with a signified, the *part/whole* relations of synecdoche reflect the most direct link of all. That which is seen as forming part of a larger whole to which it refers is connected *existentially* to what is signified - as an integral part of its being. Jakobson noted the use of 'synecdochic details' by realist authors ([Jakobson & Halle 1956, 92](#)). In 'factual' genres a danger lies in what has been called 'the metonymic fallacy' (more accurately the

'synecdochic fallacy') whereby the represented part is taken as an accurate reflection of the whole of that which it is taken as standing for - for instance, a white, middle-class woman standing for all women ([Barthes 1974, 162](#); [Alcoff & Potter 1993, 14](#)). Framing is of course always highly and unavoidably selective. In fictional genres, 'realism' seeks encourage us to treat that which is missing as 'going without saying' rather than as 'conspicuous by its absence'. In mainstream films and television dramas, for instance, we are not intended to be aware that the stage-set 'rooms' have only three walls.

Whether synecdoche is separable from metonymy in general is disputed by some theorists (e.g. [Eco 1984](#)). Others disagree about what constitutes synecdoche. Roman Jakobson argues that whilst both metonymy and synecdoche involve a part standing for a whole, in metonymy the relation is *internal* (*sail* for *ship*) whereas in synecdoche the relation is *external* (*pen* for *writer*) (see [Lechte 1994, 63](#)). However, this does not reflect a broad consensus - indeed, general usage reflects the reverse (synecdochic links are often listed as *internal*). If the distinction is made as outlined above (*pace* Jakobson), metonymy in its narrower sense would then be based only on the more abstract indexical links such as causality. Even if synecdoche is given a separate status, general usage would suggest that metonymy would remain an umbrella term for indexical links as well as having a narrower meaning of its own (as distinct from synecdoche).

Irony is the most radical of the four main tropes. As with metaphor, the signifier of the ironic sign seems to signify one thing but we know from another signifier that it actually signifies something very different. Where it means the *opposite* of what it says (as it usually does) it is based on binary opposition. Irony may thus reflect the opposite of the thoughts or feelings of the speaker or writer (as when you say 'I love it' when you hate it) or the opposite of the truth about external reality (as in 'There's a crowd here' when it's deserted). It can also be seen as being based on substitution by *dissimilarity* or *disjunction*. Whilst typically an ironic statement signifies the opposite of its literal signification, such variations as understatement and overstatement can also be regarded as ironic. At some point, exaggeration may slide into irony.

Unless the ironic sign is a spoken utterance (when a sarcastic intonation may mark the irony) the marker of its ironic status comes from beyond the literal sign. A 'knowing' smile is often offered as a cue. In Britain a fashion for 'air quotes' (gestural inverted commas) in the 1980s was followed in the 1990s by a fashion for some young people to mark spoken irony - after a pause - with the word 'Not!', as in 'he is a real hunk - Not!'. However, irony is often more difficult to identify. All of the tropes involve the non-literal substitution of a new signified for the usual one and comprehension requires a distinction between what is *said* and what is *meant*. Thus they are all, in a sense, *double* signs. However, whereas the other tropes involve shifts in what is being referred to, irony involves a shift in *modality*. The evaluation of the ironic sign requires the retrospective assessment of its modality status. Re-evaluating an apparently literal sign for ironic cues requires reference to perceived intent and to truth status. An ironic statement is not, of course, the same as a *lie* since it is not intended to be taken as 'true'. Irony has sometimes been referred to as 'double-coded'.

Modality status	Postcard message	Truth status	Perceived intent
literal/factual	"The weather is wonderful"	true (the weather is wonderful)	to inform
ironic	"The weather is wonderful"	false (the weather is <i>dreadful</i>)	to amuse

lie	"The weather is wonderful"	false (the weather is <i>dreadful</i>)	to mislead
-----	----------------------------	---	------------

Irony thus poses particular difficulties for the literalist stance of structuralists and formalists that meaning is immanent - that it lies *within* a text.

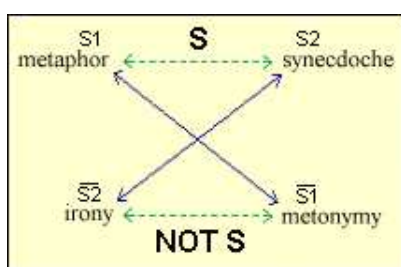


Irony is a marked form which foregrounds the signifier. Adolescents sometimes use it to suggest that they are sophisticated and not naive. Limited use is usually intended as a form of humour. Frequent use may be associated with reflexiveness, detachment or scepticism. It sometimes marks a cynical stance which assumes that people never mean or do what they say. Sustained use may even reflect nihilism or relativism (nothing - or everything - is 'true'). Whilst irony has a long pedigree, its use has become one of the most characteristic features of 'postmodern' texts and aesthetic practices. Where irony is used in one-to-one communication it is of course essential that it is understood as being ironic rather than literal. However, with larger audiences it constitutes a form of 'narrowcasting', since not everyone will

interpret it as irony. Dramatic irony is a form whereby the reader or viewer knows something that one or more of the depicted people do not know. This ad from the same Nissan campaign illustrated earlier makes effective use of irony. We notice two people: in soft focus we see a man absorbed in eating his food at a table; in sharp focus close-up we see a woman facing him, hiding behind her back an open can. As we read the label we realize that she has fed him dog-food (because he didn't ask before borrowing her car).

Here, for convenience, is a brief summary of the four tropes with some linguistic examples:

Trope	Basis	Linguistic example	Intended meaning
<i>Metaphor</i>	Similarity despite difference (explicit in the case of <i>simile</i>)	I work at the coalface	I do the hard work here
<i>Metonymy</i>	Relatedness through direct association	I'm one of the suits	I'm one of the managers
<i>Synecdoche</i>	Relatedness through categorical hierarchy	I deal with the general public	I deal with customers
<i>Irony</i>	Inexplicit direct opposite (more explicit in <i>sarcasm</i>)	I love working here	I hate working here



Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) is usually credited with being the first to identify metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony as the four basic tropes (to which all others are reducible), although this distinction can be seen as having its roots in the *Rhetorica* of Peter Ramus (1515-1572) (Vico 1968, 129-131). This reduction was popularized in the twentieth century by the American rhetorician who referred to the four 'master tropes' (Burke

[1969, 503-17](#)). Each of these four tropes represents a different relationship between the signifier and the signified; Hayden White suggests that these relationships consist of: resemblance (metaphor), adjacency (metonymy), essentiality (synecdoche) and 'doubling' (irony) ([White 1979, 97](#)). These tropes seem to be so ubiquitous that Jonathan Culler (following Hans Kellner) suggests that they may constitute 'a system, indeed *the* system, by which the mind comes to grasp the world conceptually in language' ([Culler 1981, 65](#)). Fredric Jameson's use of the [semiotic square](#) provides a useful mapping of these tropes (Jameson in [Greimas 1987, xix](#)). Note that such frameworks depend on a distinction being made between metonymy and synecdoche, but that such terms are often either defined variously or not defined at all. In his book *Metahistory*, White saw the four 'master tropes' as part of the 'deep structure' underlying different historiographical styles ([White 1973, ix](#)). In what is, of course, a rhetorical act of analogy itself, White also linked metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony with four literary genres, Pepper's worldviews and four basic ideologies. In Lévi-Straussian rhetoric, he saw these various systems of classification as 'structurally homologous with one another' ([White 1978, 70](#)).

Trope	Genre (<i>'mode of emplotment'</i>)	Worldview (<i>'mode of argument'</i>)	Ideology (<i>'mode of ideological implication'</i>)
<i>Metaphor</i>	romance	formism	anarchism
<i>Metonymy</i>	comedy	organicism	conservatism
<i>Synecdoche</i>	tragedy	mechanism	radicalism
<i>Irony</i>	satire	contextualism	liberalism

Hayden White has suggested a tropological *sequence* in Western discourse (originally based on historical writing), whereby the dominant trope changed from one period to the next - *from metaphor to metonymy to synecdoche to irony* ([White 1973](#)). He interprets Vico as the originator of this particular sequence, although Vico's hypothetical historical sequence for the development of the four key tropes seems to be open to the interpretation that it was *from metonymy to synecdoche to metaphor to irony* ([White 1978, 5ff, 197ff](#); [Vico 1968, 129-31](#)). White suggests an ontogenetic parallel to his proposed sequence of tropes in Piaget's four stages of cognitive development. However, he denies any implication that earlier modes within such developmental schemes are in any way 'inferior' ([White 1978, 9](#)). This speculative analogy should not be taken as suggesting that *children's acquisition* of these tropes is related to the age-ranges which are included here.

Hayden White's Sequence of Tropes	Piagetian stages of cognitive development	White's alignment of Foucault's historical epochs
<i>Metaphor</i>	<i>sensorimotor</i> stage (birth to about 2 years)	<i>Renaissance</i> period (sixteenth century)
<i>Metonymy</i>	<i>pre-operational</i> stage (2 to 6/7 years)	<i>Classical</i> period (seventeenth and eighteenth centuries)
<i>Synecdoche</i>	<i>concrete operations</i> stage (6/7 to 11/12 years)	<i>Modern</i> period (late eighteenth to early twentieth century)
<i>Irony</i>	<i>formal operations</i> stage (11/12 to adult)	<i>Postmodern</i> period

Michel Foucault undertook an 'archeological' study of three loosely defined

historical periods: the 'Renaissance' period, the 'Classical' period and the 'Modern' period. He argued that each period had an underlying epistemology. White suggests that each of these periods, together with the Postmodern period in which Foucault wrote, reflects one of the four master tropes in White's suggested sequence ([White 1978, 230-60](#)). Elsewhere he argues that in Foucault, 'every "discursive formation" undergoes a finite number of... shifts before reaching the limits of the *épistème* that sanctions its operations. This number corresponds to the fundamental modes of figuration identified by the theory of tropology: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony (which is here understood as *self-conscious* catechresis)' ([White 1979, 95](#)). Cathachresis is variously defined, but it is based on the notion of an abusive comparison.

Foucault himself speculated about a sequence of tropes, although this is not the same sequence as that proposed by White. He related this to the development of writing and language in a three-part sequence from *synecdoche to metonymy to catachresis or metaphor*. This is reminiscent of the speculations of Peirce about the evolution of language from the indexical and iconic towards the symbolic ([Peirce 1931-58, 2.299, 2.92, 2.90, 2.280, 2.302](#)).

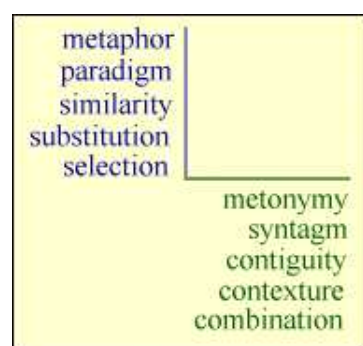
True writing began when the attempt was made to represent, no longer the thing itself, but one of its constituent elements, or one of the circumstances that habitually attend it, or again some other thing that it resembles... These three methods produced three techniques: the curiological writing of the Egyptians... which employs 'the principal circumstance of a subject in lieu of the whole' (a bow for a battle, a ladder for a siege); then the 'tropical' hieroglyphics... which employ some notable circumstance (since God is all-powerful he knows everything and sees all that men do: he is therefore represented by an eye); finally symbolic writing, which makes use of more or less concealed resemblances (the rising sun is expressed by the head of a crocodile whose round eyes are just level with the surface of the water). We can recognize here the three great figures of rhetoric: synecdoche, metonymy, catachresis. And it is by following the nervature laid down by these figures that those languages paralleled with a symbolic form of writing will be able to evolve...

In any representation, the mind can attach itself, and attach a verbal sign, to one element of that representation, to a circumstance attending it, to some other, absent, thing that is similar to it and is recalled to memory on account of it. There is no doubt that this is how language developed and gradually drifted away from primary designations. Originally everything had a name - a proper or peculiar name. Then the name became attached to a single element of the thing, and became applicable to all the other individual things that also contained that element: it is no longer a particular oak that is called *tree*, but anything that includes at least a trunk and branches. The name also became attached to a conspicuous circumstance: *night* came to designate, not the end of this particular day, but the period of darkness separating all sunsets from all dawns. Finally, it attached itself to analogies: everything was called a *leaf* that was as thin and flexible as the leaf of a tree. The progressive analysis and more advanced articulation of language, which enable us to give a single name to several things, were developed along the lines of these three fundamental figures so well known to rhetoric: synecdoche, metonymy, and catachresis (or metaphor, if the analogy is less immediately perceptible)... At the base of spoken language, as with writing, what we discover is the rhetorical dimension of words: that freedom of the sign to align, according to the analysis of representation, upon some internal element, upon some adjacent point, upon some analogous figure. ([Foucault 1970, 110-11; 113-4](#))

Hayden White's four-part tropological system is widely cited and applied beyond

the historiographical context in which he originally used it, and the application of such frameworks can often be enlightening. However, some caution is necessary in their use. Catachresis may be involved in applying any tropological framework. White himself notes that the 'affinities' suggested by his alignment of tropes with genres, worldviews and ideologies 'are not to be taken as *necessary* combinations of the modes in a given historian. On the contrary, the dialectical tension which characterizes the work of every master historian usually arises from an effort to wed a mode of emplotment with a mode of argument or of ideological implication which is inconsonant with it' (White 1973, 29). There is a danger of over-systematization when three- or four-fold distinctions are multiplied and correlated by analogy. Taken to relativistic extremes, everything can be taken as resembling everything else. Phenomena are seldom as tidy as our systems of classification. Systems always leak (and it's no good replacing the plumbing with poetry). Even Francis Bacon, who sought scientific dominion over nature, observed that 'the subtlety of nature is greater many times over than the subtlety of argument' (Bacon 1620, 261-2). It is for the individual reader to assess how interpretatively useful the application of such schemes may be on any particular occasion of use - and what the limitations of such analogies may be. Since they can be extraordinarily compelling, we need to ensure that they do not become 'more real' than what they purport to describe.

White argued that 'the fourfold analysis of figurative language has the added advantage of resisting the fall into an essentially *dualistic* conception of styles'. Roman Jakobson adopted two tropes rather than four as fundamental - metaphor and metonymy. White felt that Jakobson's approach produced a reductive dichotomy dividing nineteenth century literature into 'a romantic-poetic-Metaphorical tradition' and 'a realistic-prosaic-Metonymical tradition' (White 1973, 33n). However, Jakobson's notion of two basic poles has proved massively influential. He found evidence in the pathology of speech for metaphor and metonymy being basic in language and thinking. In a paper entitled 'Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances', he drew on existing data on two types of aphasia, interpreting these as 'similarity disorder' and 'contiguity disorder' (Jakobson & Halle 1956, 67-96). Aphasics with *similarity disorder* had difficulty selecting the word they want and fell back on contiguity and contexture, making metonymic (or synecdochic) mistakes - such as saying 'pencil-sharpener' when they meant 'knife', or 'knife' when they meant 'fork' (Jakobson & Halle 1956, 79, 83). Aphasics with *contiguity disorder* had difficulty combining words correctly and used quasi-metaphorical expressions - such as calling a microscope a 'spy-glass' (*ibid.*, 86).



Jakobson argued that metaphor and metonymy, or selection and combination, are the two basic axes of language and communication. Metaphor is a paradigmatic dimension (vertical, based on selection, substitution and similarity) and metonymy a syntagmatic dimension (horizontal, based on combination, contexture and contiguity) (Jakobson & Halle 1956, 90-96). Many theorists have adopted and adapted Jakobson's framework, such as Lévi-Strauss (Lévi-Strauss 1974). Jakobson related the tropes to Freud's dreamwork processes, regarding Freud's 'condensation' as synecdochic and his 'displacement' as metonymic (Jakobson & Halle 1956, 95). Jacques Lacan linked metaphor with *condensation* and metonymy with *displacement* (Lacan 1977, 160). Hayden White made the same links as Lacan whilst suggesting that *synecdoche* was linked to *representation* and *irony* to *secondary revision* (White 1978, 13-14). The film theorist Christian Metz posited *discursive* and *referential* axes, both involving relationships of *similarity* and *contiguity*. Whilst the discursive function acts at the level of the *signifier* in the form of paradigms and syntagms, the referential function operates at the level

of the *signified* in the form of metaphor and metonymy ([Metz 1982](#); [Silverman 1983, 288](#)).

In a more lighthearted vein, there is an amusing discussion of metaphor and metonymy in David Lodge's novel, *Nice Work* ([Lodge 1988](#)).



A typical instance of this was the furious argument they had about the Silk Cut

advertisement... Every few miles, it seemed, they passed the same huge poster on roadside hoardings, a photographic depiction of a rippling expanse of purple silk in which there was a single slit, as if the material had been slashed with a razor. There were no words in the advertisement, except for the Government Health Warning about smoking. This ubiquitous image, flashing past at regular intervals, both irritated and intrigued Robyn, and she began to do her semiotic stuff on the deep structure hidden beneath its bland surface.

It was in the first instance a kind of riddle. That is to say, in order to decode it, you had to know that there was a brand of cigarettes called Silk Cut. The poster was the iconic representation of a missing name, like a rebus. But the icon was also a metaphor. The shimmering silk, with its voluptuous curves and sensuous texture, obviously symbolized the female body, and the elliptical slit, foregrounded by a lighter colour showing through, was still more obviously a vagina. The advert thus appealed to both sensual and sadistic impulses, the desire to mutilate as well as penetrate the female body.

Vic Wilcox spluttered with outraged derision as she expounded this interpretation. He smoked a different brand himself, but it was as if he felt his whole philosophy of life was threatened by Robyn's analysis of the advert. 'You must have a twisted mind to see all that in a perfectly harmless bit of cloth,' he said.

'What's the point of it, then?' Robyn challenged him. 'Why use cloth to advertise cigarettes?'

'Well, that's the name of 'em, isn't it? Silk Cut. It's a picture of the name. Nothing more or less.'

'Suppose they'd used a picture of a roll of silk cut in half - would that do just as well?'

'I suppose so. Yes, why not?'

'Because it would look like a penis cut in half, that's why.'

He forced a laugh to cover his embarrassment. 'Why can't you people take things at their face value?'

'What people are you referring to?'

'Highbrows. Intellectuals. You're always trying to find hidden meanings in things. Why? A cigarette is a cigarette. A piece of silk is a piece of silk. Why not leave it at that?'

'When they're represented they acquire additional meanings,' said Robyn. 'Signs are never innocent. Semiotics teaches us that.'

'Semi-what?'

'Semiotics. The study of signs.'

'It teaches us to have dirty minds, if you ask me.'

'Why do you think the wretched cigarettes were called Silk Cut in the first place?'

'I dunno. It's just a name, as good as any other.'

"Cut" has something to do with the tobacco, doesn't it? The way the tobacco leaf is cut. Like "Player's Navy Cut" - my uncle Walter used to smoke them.'

'Well, what if it does?' Vic said warily.

'But silk has nothing to do with tobacco. It's a metaphor, a metaphor that means something like, "smooth as silk". Somebody in an advertising agency dreamt up the name "Silk Cut" to suggest a cigarette that wouldn't give you a sore throat or a hacking cough or lung cancer. But after a while the public got used to the name, the word "Silk" ceased to signify, so they decided to have an advertising campaign to give the brand a high profile again. Some bright spark in the agency came up with the idea of rippling silk with a cut in it. The original metaphor is now represented literally. Whether they consciously intended or not doesn't really matter. It's a good example of the perpetual sliding of the signified under a signifier, actually.'

Wilcox chewed on this for a while, then said, 'Why do women smoke them, then, eh?' his triumphant expression showed that he thought this was a knock-down argument. 'If smoking Silk Cut is a form of aggravated rape, as you try to make out, how come women smoke 'em too?'

'Many women are masochistic by temperament,' said Robyn. 'They've learnt what's expected of them in a patriarchal society.'

'Ha!' Wilcox exclaimed, tossing back his head. 'I might have known you'd have some daft answer.'

'I don't know why you're so worked up,' Said Robyn. 'It's not as if you smoke Silk Cut yourself.'



enough, I smoke them because I like the taste.'



'They're the ones that have the lone cowboy ads, aren't they?'

'I suppose that makes me a repressed homosexual,

does it?'

'No, it's a very straightforward metonymic message.'

'Metawhat?'

'Metonymic. One of the fundamental tools of semiotics is the distinction between metaphor and metonymy. D'you want me to explain it to you?'

'It'll pass the time,' he said.

'Metaphor is a figure of speech based on similarity, whereas metonymy is based on contiguity. In metaphor you substitute something like the thing you mean for the thing itself, whereas in metonymy you substitute some attribute or cause or effect of the thing for the thing itself'.

'I don't understand a word you're saying.'

'Well, take one of your moulds. The bottom bit is called the drag because it's dragged across the floor and the top bit is called the cope because it covers the bottom bit.'

'I told you that.'

'Yes, I know. What you didn't tell me was that "drag" is a metonymy and "cope" is a metaphor.'

Vic grunted. 'What difference does it make?'

'It's just a question of understanding how language works. I thought you were interested in how things work.'

'I don't see what it's got to do with cigarettes.'

'In the case of the Silk Cut poster, the picture signifies the female body metaphorically: the slit in the silk is like a vagina -'

Vic flinched at the word. 'So you say.'

'All holes, hollow places, fissures and folds represent the female genitals.'

'Prove it.'

'Freud proved it, by his successful analysis of dreams,' said Robyn. 'But the Marlboro ads don't use any metaphors. That's

probably why you smoke them, actually.'

'What d'you mean?' he said suspiciously.

'You don't have any sympathy with the metaphorical way of looking at things. A cigarette is a cigarette as far as you are concerned.'

'Right.'

'The Marlboro ad doesn't disturb that naive faith in the stability of the signified. It establishes a metonymic connection - completely spurious of course, but realistically plausible - between smoking that particular brand and the healthy, heroic, outdoor life of the cowboy. Buy the cigarette and you buy the lifestyle, or the fantasy of living it.'

'Rubbish!' said Wilcox. 'I hate the country and the open air. I'm scared to go into a field with a cow in it.'

'Well then, maybe it's the solitariness of the cowboy in the ads that appeals to you. Self-reliant, independent, very macho.'

'I've never heard such a lot of balls in all my life,' said Vic Wilcox, which was strong language coming from him.

'Balls - now that's an interesting expression...' Robyn mused.

'Oh no!' he groaned.

'When you say a man "has balls", approvingly, it's a metonymy, whereas if you say something is a "lot of balls", or "a balls-up", it's a sort of metaphor. The metonymy attributes value to the testicles whereas the metaphor uses them to degrade something else.'

'I can't take any more of this,' said Vic. 'D'you mind if I smoke? Just a plain, ordinary cigarette?'