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Figurative Language in Emotional Communication

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Over the course of the past several decades, research on figurative language has been flourishing in psychology and related fields (for recent reviews, see Cacciari & Glucksberg, 1994; Gibbs, 1994a, 1994b; Kreuz & Roberts, 1993). One of the most noteworthy outcomes of this research is the recognition that figurative language is not deviant—not a form of communication that requires special or additional cognitive processes to understand and that occurs only in special circumstances. Rather, figurative language is ubiquitous in many forms of discourse (e.g., Mio & Katz, 1996), no more difficult to understand in context than literal language (e.g., Gibbs, 1983, 1986; Glucksberg, Gildea & Bookin, 1982), and, according to some theorists, fundamental to the way people conceptualize the world (Gibbs, 1979, 1994b; Kovecses, 1986; Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Despite the rapid growth of figurative language research, most studies have focused on its comprehension. Although there have been numerous single case or small sample studies of figurative speech in therapeutic contexts (e.g., Karp, 1996; McMullen & Conway, 1996; Pollio & Barlow, 1975) and in preplanned language in speeches and literary works (e.g., Kreuz, Roberts, Johnson, & Bertus, 1996; Williams-Whitney, Mio, & Whitney, 1992), there have been relatively few rigorous studies of figurative language in everyday conversation. Consequently, as Roberts and Kreuz (1994) observe, there is little understanding of when and why speakers use figures of speech such as idioms, metaphors, and irony in a particular context.

In this chapter we explore the production of figurative language as it occurs in the communication of emotional states. We chose the domain of affective communication because the subjective nature of emotional experiences appears to lend itself to figurative expression. As Asch (1958) observed quite some time ago, "There is apparently no aspect of nature that does not serve to express psychological realities. . . . Conversely, there are, it seems, hardly any psychological terms *sui generis,* denoting psychological operations exclusively." (p. 87)

A casual examination of everyday conversation suggests that English is rife with idioms (e.g., *hot under the collar, hit the roof*), similes (e.g., *mad as a wet hen*), metaphor (e.g., *down, blue*), and other figurative expressions for emotions. The prevalence of these expressions in the conventionalized affective lexicon has been documented by several investigators (e.g., Bush, 1973; Clore, Ortony, & Foss, 1987; Davitz, 1969; Johnson-Laird & Oatley, 1989; Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1988; Ortony, Clore, & Foss, 1987; Roberts & Wedell, 1994). Studies of language use in psychotherapy likewise are replete with examples of figurative expressions, particularly metaphor (e.g., Davitz, 1969; Davitz & Mattis, 1964; Karp, 1996; McMullen & Conway, 1996; Pollio & Barlow, 1975; Siegelman, 1990).

In the remainder of this paper we first briefly reviewing prior research on speakers' and writers' use of figurative language in descriptions of autobiographical emotional experiences in laboratory studies and in therapeutic contexts. We then describe some limitations to our understanding of figurative language use, limitations that stem from using research paradigms in which each participant describes a different, personal, affective experience. Next, we describe a research methodology we have developed that uses objective stimuli—characters' experiences in brief film clips—as the emotional experiences to be expressed and review some of the issues we have been examining using this methodology. We conclude with some observations about areas for future investigation.

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE IN DESCRIPTIONS OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES

Two basic research strategies have been used to examine figurative language in descriptions of emotional experiences. Both strategies focus on how people communicate their personal affective experiences: one in laboratory settings, in which people describe (in writing or verbally) emotions of a type specified by an investigator; the other in clinical settings, in which actual dialogues between patients and therapists are examined. In this section, we discuss each of these areas of research.

Laboratory Studies of Affective Communication

In his classic paper on the communicative functions of metaphor, Ortony (1975) argued that metaphors are used to fill gaps in the lexicon, to provide succinct ways of stating ideas that would be lengthy or awkward to formulate in literal terms, and to add vividness or intensity to a message. If Ortony's argument is correct, the domain of emotional communication should be ripe for the study of figurative language: Emotions are subjective experiences, and subjective

experiences are often difficult to capture in literal terms. Emotions are also complex, made up not only of affective responses, but also of physiological reactions, cognitions, behavioral responses, and the like (e.g., Ekman & Davidson, 1994). Metaphor and other figurative expressions may serve to succinctly capture these diverse components of emotions. Emotional reactions also differ in their intensity, and metaphorical language may provide a way of communicating the level of intensity of an emotional experience.

Ortony's hypotheses were supported in a study by Fainsilber and Ortony (1987), who examined metaphor use in oral descriptions of autobiographical emotional experiences and in behaviors resulting from these experiences. In support of Ortony's view that metaphor is used for communicating ideas difficult or impossible to express in literal terms, Fainsilber and Ortony found that metaphor was used more often to describe subjective feeling states than to describe overt actions stemming from these states. They also found that figurative language was used more often to express intense emotional states than to express milder ones. On the whole, the metaphors used by Fainsilber and Ortony’s participants were frozen rather than novel, an observation suggesting that people have a conventionalized figurative vocabulary for expressing emotions.

Williams-Whitney et al. (1992) expanded on Fainsilber and Ortony’s results by examining metaphor use in written descriptions of intense experiences of pride and shame as a function of writing experience and context. They further manipulated the experiencer of the emotion (the participant him- or herself versus a person described in a vignette). Williams-Whitney et al. found that experienced writers used more metaphor than did inexperienced writers, and both groups used more metaphor for feelings than for actions. Although there was no difference between experienced and inexperienced writers in the amount of figurative language they used to describe their personal emotional states, experienced writers used more metaphor to describe others' feelings than did inexperienced writers, and more of their expressions were novel rather than frozen. On the whole, then, writing expertise appears to lead to more creative language use.[1]

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[1] As Williams-Whitney et al., 1992, noted, even though judges may deem a metaphor novel, this does not ensure that a writer has not made it a frozen part of his orher verbal repertoire. Only an analysis of the same individual's writing over time would permit a separation of novel and frozen but idiosyncratic expressions with guaranteed accuracy.

As already noted, affective states are complex and consist of subjective feelings, physiological reactions, behavioral responses, and cognitive processes. As Fainsilber and Ortony's (1987) results suggest, however, these dimensions may differ in the extent to which they lend themselves to figurative description. To address this issue, one of us (Fussell, 1992) asked undergraduate students to write descriptions of specific instances in which they had experienced mild and intense feelings of anger, sadness, happiness, and pride. In contrast to Fainsilber and Ortony's study, there were no constraints on the content of participants' descriptions. Thus, it was possible to examine the frequency with which describers mentioned cognitive, affective, behavioral and bodily reaction components of affective experience as well as their use of figurative language in each of these domains.

Figure 6.1 shows metaphor use as a function of the nature and intensity of emotional state. Metaphor use varied substantially as a function of the type and intensity of the emotional state being expressed. As predicted, participants used significantly more figurative language when describing intense as opposed to mild emotional experiences. This effect was especially strong for sadness and happiness. These findings are consistent with Ortony's suggestion that one function of metaphor is to convey intensity.

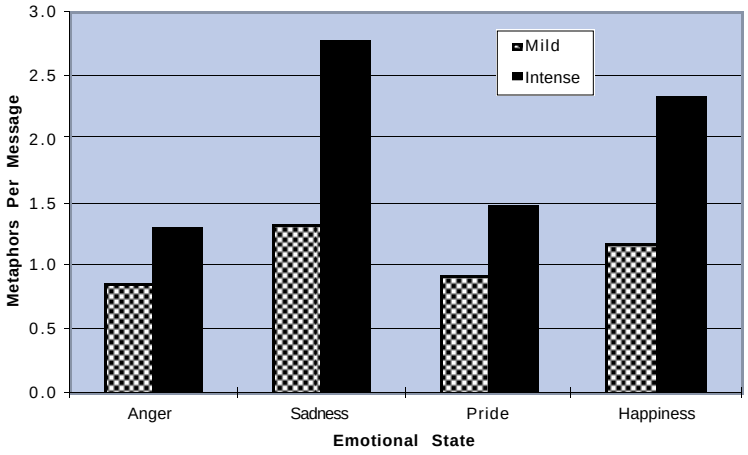

Fig. 6.1. Metaphors for feelings as a function of intensity of emotional state (Fussell, 1992).

Fig. 6.2. Affective, cognitive, and bodily response metaphors as a function of emotional state (Fussell, 1992)

Participants used figurative language when mentioning each component of an emotional experience. Examples of each type of figurative language are shown for ANGER in Table 6.1. For example, "I felt trapped by emotion," "my mind was seething and boiling," and the other expressions in the top third of this figure express affective reactions, whereas "I'd like to dismember him and keep him in my drawers" appears to be a cognitive reaction. Finally, "My stomach was twisted in knots," and "my insides feel all hot," are descriptions of bodily responses that co-occur with the affective reactions. Although figures of speech were used for describing all these components of emotional experiences, however, they were most prevalent in descriptions of feelings. As shown in Figure 6.2, participants used one to two metaphors per message to describe their feelings, whereas they averaged much less than one per message when describing cognitive reactions or bodily responses.

Although most of the figurative expressions participants produced were conventional or frozen, it is apparent from the examples in Tables 6.1 and 6.2 that a substantial number of the expressions used were fairly novel. For example, "my mind was seething and boiling," and "my entire insides seemed ready to hurt," were used to express anger. At the same time, certain themes ran through a variety of figurative expressions, such as the feeling of something "missing" in oneself in descriptions of sadness, a feeling described, for example, as "hollowness," "emptiness," "having a piece missing," "a hole in the heart," (see Table 6.2). Similarly, a several participants mentioned that they felt "larger" or "bigger" when describing an instance of pride.

TABLE 6.1

Figurative expressions for affective, cognitive, and bodily responses in descriptions of autobiographical experiences of *anger*

Affective Responses
I felt like a coiled spring.
Trapped by emotion.
Don't want to blow my top.
I felt "dark" and mean.
My temper burst.
I was RED HOT with anger.
My mind was seething and boiling.
Cognitive Reactions
I'd like to dismember him and keep him in my drawers.
I want to put somebody through the wall into the next planet.
[I had a] desire to crush the other.
Bodily Responses
My stomach was twisted in knots.
My entire insides seemed ready to hurt.
My insides feel all hot.
I feel like I'm going to burst.

Note: From *The Uses of Metaphor in Written Descriptions of Emotional States* by S. R. Fussell, 1992. Unpublished manuscript, Carnegie Mellon University. Copyright 1992 by Susan R. Fussell. Published with permission.

The research we have reviewed thus far provides some insights into speakers' use of metaphor and idioms in emotional communication, but these examples are limited in that they focus primarily on metaphor in lieu of other figures of speech. In addition, all examples have dealt with single words or utterances extracted from conversational context; thus they are limited in what they reveal about the amount, type, and communicative functions of figurative language in dialogues. For example, the rate of figurative language use might be lower in conversational than in other settings because speakers feel pressured to prepare a message in a timely fashion; or, the rate might be higher because there is less risk of misunderstanding when feedback from the listener can be used to indicate that clarification is necessary (e.g., Clark & Wilkes-Gibbs, 1986; Kraut, Lewis, & Swezey, 1982). In addition, some theories about figurative language, such as the claim that metaphor use creates a sense of closeness between speaker and listener (Cohen, 1979; Gerrig & Gibbs, 1988), are difficult if not impossible to

TABLE 6.2

Figurative expressions for autobiographical experiences of *sadness*

a sense of emptiness
feelings of hollowness
as if a small piece of a puzzle were missing and you can't find it anywhere
like I had lost a part of myself
I had a hole in my heart
like a part of me had been ripped away and I would never be whole again
a freezing fire
it just welled inside me slowly like a beach tide
I fall again into my frozen heart
like there's a black hole sucking in all my feelings and emotions
there was a darkness that hung over everything
I ached inside
as if I were silently sobbing
a deadness inside—a bottomless gloom.
everything was dark and destroyed
like I was drowning and there was nothing I could do about it
a sense of deflation, of being squeezed
as if I had a lead block in my chest

Note: From *The Uses of Metaphor in Written Descriptions of Emotional States* by S. R. Fussell, 1992. Unpublished manuscript, Carnegie Mellon University. Copyright 1992 by Susan R. Fussell. Published with permission.

examine outside a meaningful social situation. In the next section we review work that has taken a broader, discourse-level approach to figurative language production.

Figurative Language in Conversations about Emotions

Most research on the role of figurative language in conversations about emotions has been done in the context of therapeutic discourse. Studies by clinicians have examined the frequency and type of figurative language in therapeutic contexts as well as the role of metaphor in creating positive treatment outcomes (e.g., Pollio & Barlow, 1975; Siegelman, 1990). In addition to these clinically oriented studies, there has been increasing attention to therapeutic discourse as a speech genre among sociologists, sociolinguistics, ethnomethodologists, and others (e.g., Capps & Ochs, 1995; Ferrara, 1994; Karp, 1996; Labov & Fanshel, 1977). These studies have found that figures of speech are rather

common in clients' speech (Angus, 1996; Ferrara, 1994; McMullen, 1989; Pollio & Barlow, 1975) and also occur in therapists' messages to a lesser extent.

Several studies have found consistencies across clients in the metaphorical themes used to describe emotional states. For example, sociologist David Karp (1996) asked 50 former or current psychotherapy clients, all of whom had suffered from depression, to describe what the state was like. He found substantial uniformity in the figurative language used to describe experiences of depression. The most common expressions involved suffocating, falling down a pit, drowning, or being in a dark tunnel. As Karp points out, these expressions appear to be designed to capture the "downward spiral" of serious depression, in which people become increasingly absorbed by self-hatred, negative thoughts, and sadness. This interpretation is further supported by interviewees' statements that depressive states come to have "a life of their own." Unfortunately, Karp did not provide the exact percentages of people using each metaphor or the rate of metaphor use as a function of total words spoken.

Interpersonal consistency in metaphorical themes and expressions has also been demonstrated in a series of studies by McMullen and her colleagues (McMullen, 1985, 1989; McMullen & Conway, 1994, 1996). McMullen and Conway (1996), for example, analyzed 24 clients' discussions with their therapists across a number of sessions. They found that many clients described themselves in terms of fragmentation (e.g., "falling apart," "at loose ends"), and interestingly, the degree of fragmentation expressed appeared to be related to therapeutic outcome. McMullen and Conway also found repeated use of figurative expressions for anger and sadness that appear to fall neatly into conceptual schemas (e.g., ANGER AS HEAT, ANGER AS INSANITY, cf. Lakoff, 1987; Gibbs, 1994b).

Other insights into the communicative function of figurative language can be gleaned from studies of how speakers and listeners interactively construct metaphorical statements. In her excellent book on therapeutic discourse, Ferrara (1994) devoted an entire chapter to the collaborative creation of metaphor. She provided several examples of how the same metaphors, or variations on them, arise again and again during the course of a therapy session, not only repeated by the client but expanded upon in a variety of ways by the therapist. In the following example from Ferrara's transcripts (p. 140), the subsequent discussion developed and clarified the client's earlier statement that he was "floating down the river":[2,3]

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[2] We have replaced people's names with labels reflecting their roles in the therapeutic process.

[3] Here and throughout the chapter we use bold text to indicate figurative language in quoted conversations.

Therapist: What's it like to be **floating down the river**? Tell me more.
Client: It's comfortable. It's safe. Everything just **keeps on an even keel**, you know.
Therapist: Mhm.
Client: You're just kinda **floating**
Therapist: Kind of **in a canoe**? . . .
Client: No, **more like a great ole big barge**. . . .

Ferrara described other examples in which metaphors were less readily understood and the ensuing discussion focused on clarification rather than expansion. She did not report the relative frequency of each types of interaction, and research by Angus and Rennie (1988) suggests that collaborative use of metaphor may vary across therapists. Nonetheless, Ferrara's study strongly suggests that researchers should examine the entirety of a conversational interaction when investigating the role of metaphor and other figures of speech in affective communication.

The frequency of figurative language use in these studies suggests that metaphor plays an important role in communicating emotion. Research, however, has been limited to one context—client–therapist interaction—and there is limited knowledge of the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, investigators have used a very broad definition of metaphor that includes idioms, similes, cliches, and so forth, and little effort has been made to distinguish among these linguistic devices in terms of their frequency and their communicative and therapeutic functions. Finally, because there are no independent measures of the emotional states speakers intend to communicate, there is no knowledge about the communicative effectiveness of metaphor. We turn to this issue in the next section.

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE IN DESCRIPTIONS OF STANDARDIZED EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES

The Case for Standardized Emotional Stimuli

Virtually all the studies reviewed above have examined figurative language in descriptions of autobiographical emotional states. Although a focus on people's descriptions of their own experiences may heighten the realism of the findings, this focus makes it difficult to identify relationships between the figure of speech speakers' use and the underlying emotional experiences they are intending to communicate. For example, it would be circular to assume that the metaphors produced to describe sadness in such studies as Karp (1996) and McMullen and

Conway (1996) are intended to describe the same underlying emotional state simply because of their uniformity. Several key questions with respect to a social-psycholinguistic theory of figurative language use cannot be adequately addressed without using a research paradigm in which the emotions being expressed can be measured independent of the language produced to describe them:[4]

(a) To what extent do people produce similar expressions for similar underlying affective experiences?
(b) How do figurative expressions for emotions relate to these underlying experiences?
(c) How accurately can listeners identify the intended meaning of an emotional expression?
(d) How does figurative language use vary with social factors such as speaker and listener gender?

Although some of these questions (b and c) might be addressed by developing independent measures of a person's affective experiences, others (a and d) can only be addressed by using an experimental design in which many people describe the *same* affective state.

The experimental paradigm we have been using to address these issues uses objective stimuli, namely, movie clips depicting characters undergoing emotional experiences. We believe that movie clips serve as excellent stimulus materials for studies of figurative language for several reasons: First, psycholinguistic research has shown that people mentally represent fictional characters' emotional states (e.g., Gernsbacher, Goldsmith, & Robertson, 1992; Gerrig, 1993; Miall, 1989); thus, if we are careful to ascertain beforehand that all viewers of a video clip will develop similar representations of a character's emotional state, we can study inter-speaker consistency in the type and content of figurative language used to express that emotional state. Second, if we have the emotional states depicted in video clips rated on a variety of dimensions (e.g., intensity, polarity), we can examine the effects of these dimensions on emotional language. Finally, because movies and other people's emotional states are common topics of everyday conversation (Fussell, unpublished data; Shimanoff, 1985), the task faced by speakers in a laboratory is natural and realistic, and the results should be generalizable to non-laboratory settings.

In each of the studies we describe below, speakers were shown video clips that their addressees had not seen. For each clip, their task was to describe a

[4] The closest attempts in this direction have come from McMullen and her colleagues (McMullen & Conway, 1996), who link metaphor to the success of therapy as measured by objective outcome measures.

target character's emotional state so that the addressee could understand what the character was feeling. In all cases, we pretested the clips to ensure that they were interpreted similarly across viewers. There were no constraints on the types of messages speakers could create, and participants were unaware of our interest in figurative language.

In the remainder of this section we describe preliminary results from three studies we have conducted using movie clips as materials. Although we have not yet completed all analyses of the data, our results shed light on several issues, including the role of conversational interactivity in figurative language use, cross-individual consistency in figurative expressions for an affective experience, interactive construction of figurative expressions, and message comprehension. Our aim is to illustrate the types of questions that can be fruitfully addressed by using standardized emotional experiences as stimuli.

Using Figurative Language to Distinguish Between Different Emotions

In our first study using this paradigm (Fussell, Vallee, Stelmack, & Moss, 1994), we asked a small group of students to describe the emotional experiences of characters in three movie clips to a listener who had not seen the clips. The experiences in the clips can be roughly glossed as *panic*, *anger*, and *elation*. In this study, the listener was a female confederate who was instructed not to ask questions or to make comments during speakers' descriptions. On the basis of an earlier study of written descriptions of autobiographical emotional states (Fussell, 1992), we anticipated that the rate of figurative expressions would be higher for the two negative emotions (sadness and anxiety) than for the positive emotion (elation).

Participants' messages were transcribed and coded for the number of literal and figurative adjectives and phrases describing emotional states they contained. There was substantial agreement in the literal expressions that participants used to describe each emotional state (e.g., "agitated," "happy," "confused"). Consistent with Fainsilber and Ortony (1987), speakers also used conventional and idiosyncratic metaphors to describe the emotional experiences (e.g., "he felt like he was drowning"). On the whole, however, speakers used figurative language less often than we had anticipated, and generally for descriptions of negative emotional states.

Using Figurative Language to Differentiate Variations of a Single Emotional State

The results of the previous study might be taken as evidence that the time pressures of face–to–face conversation reduce the frequency and rate of metaphor

use relative to studies in which there is no addressee present. Another possible explanation for the findings, however, stems from speakers' communicative goals. In the autobiographical studies described earlier there were implicit or explicit instructions to describe a *specific* occasion on which a person has experienced a type of emotion. As Schwarz has pointed out (1994, 1996, 1998) participants approach experimental instructions as though they adhere to Gricean rules of conversation (Grice, 1975). In the autobiographical studies, the instructions might have led participants to believe that their descriptions should serve to distinguish the episode they were describing from other experiences of the *same* class of emotions. No such implicit instructions are likely to have been present in the preceding study.

Why should this difference in communicative goals matter in terms of figurative language use? One reason is that the conventional affective lexicon may not suffice for expressing the nuances of specific emotional experiences. Many affective terms, such as *depressed*, are used loosely and therefore may not have the precision speakers desire. Furthermore, as Jones and Martin (1992) observed, literal terms for emotions often have more than one conventional sense; thus, figurative language may be one way to reduce potential ambiguities in the conventional affective lexicon. This observation is consistent with Roberts and Kreuz's (1994) findings that people report using metaphors, similes, and idioms to clarify their meanings.

To examine whether the low rate of metaphor use in our first study (Fussell et al., 1994) was an artifact of the experimental instructions, we conducted two larger studies of figurative language use in which speakers' goals were to describe different instances of the *same* emotional state. We chose to focus on *depression–sadness* because research has shown that discussions of sadness are common in conversation (Shimanoff, 1985); because speakers have been shown to use figurative language when describing autobiographical feelings of sadness (Fainsilber & Ortony, 1987; Fussell, 1992; Karp, 1996; McMullen & Conway 1996; Spiegelman, 1990); and because the wide range of affective reactions that fall in this category (fleeting "down" feelings to clinical depression that can lead to hospitalization) may make it especially important for speakers to disambiguate their meanings when they use terms like *sad* or *depressed*.

The stimuli for both of our studies consisted of brief (2 to 3 minute) film clips in which a central character was shown experiencing a form of depression or sadness. The manifestations of sadness in the clips varied in intensity, in the manner in which they unfolded, and in their purity (for instance, whether anger or anxiety was also present). The five clips are summarized briefly in Table 6.3.[5]

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[5] Note that these are not pure emotions, but feelings more realistic to everyday life, and it is the role of figurative language in everyday conversation that we are most interested in examining.

TABLE 6.3

Brief description of movie clips depicting sadness or depression

Clip 1: Prince of Tides.

A man sits in a hotel room talking to his wife over the phone. She is breaking up with him. He hangs up, and starts writing a letter to his wife. He expresses his dismay that can't express his love for her. He appears sad and extremely disappointed in himself.

Clip 2: Steel Magnolias.

A woman is coming back from a funeral, apparently in control of her emotions. She breaks down when asked how she is doing, and starts screaming that she's fine but that her daughter is dead and never had the chance to do the things that she, the mother, could do. She appears alternately sad and angry.

Clip 3: Finnegan Begin Again.

A man is sitting in a chair in a very messy house. A woman knocks at the door, but he doesn't answer. Eventually, he reluctantly lets her in, and they discuss the fact that his wife has had a stroke and that his son had died in an accident. He moves slowly, and appears to have no energy.

Clip 4: Winter People.

A woman comes into a family room from the snow, moving very, very slowly. Her family asks her about her son, but she doesn't respond at first. After a few moments, she breaks out in a wail of despair at the loss of her son. She seems to be in mental anguish.

Clip 5: The Fisher King.

A drunken man is sitting outside in the cold, talking to a small wooden doll about how awful his life has been. Towards the end, he gets up and moves toward the edge of a bridge with bricks tied to his feet. It appears that he is about to commit suicide.

In the first study (Moss & Fussell, 1995), 26 female students described the five depressed characters' emotional states to a female partner who had not seen the clip. In the second study, male and female speakers described the clips to either a male or female partner who had not seen them. The two studies generated

a total of 86 conversations about each of the five video clips, which we transcribed in detail (including filled pauses, false starts, repetitions, etc.) according to the notation of MacWhinney's CLAN system (1995). We then coded the transcripts for emotion-related content (affective, cognitive, behavioral, and/or bodily reactions) and for figurative language use.

TABLE 6.4

Figurative Expressions for Sadness or Depression Video Clips (Numbers In Parentheses Denote Number of Speakers Using Each Term in Their Descriptions).

Winter People

in shock (6), in a shock (1), in a state of shock (3), in a very shocked state (1), shock (2), shocked (5)
comatosed (1), comatosed-type thing (2)
dazed (4), in a daze (2), in this daze (1)
drained (1), empty (3)
freaking out (1)
frozen (2), frigid (1)
in a trance (3)
in her own world (2) in her own little world (1)
out of it (3), out of this world (1)
not all there (1)
numb (1)
a zombie (1)

Steel Magnolias

airing her feelings out (1)
breaks down (4), broke down (2)
falling apart (1)
emotionally stricken (1)
go crazy (1)
goes on and on (1), goes through this phase (1),
going ballistic (1)
like a hot air balloon (1)
in denial (1)
let it [her emotions] out (3), putting [her feelings] out in the open (2)
hold in [her emotions] (1)
hold up (1), holding up (1)
mixed emotions (1)
pushes back (her emotions) (1)
her emotions ran the whole gamut (1)
woke up to reality (1)

We found that speakers used an abundance of figurative expressions when their task was to characterize distinct instances of *sadness*. Examples for two of the five clips (*Winter People* and *Steel Magnolias*) are shown in Table 6.4. As can be seen, the figurative language used for each clip appears to capture the nuances of the depicted state of depression. Although the literal expressions that

speakers used were fairly similar across clips (e.g., *sad, angry, depressed*), their idioms and metaphors were tailored to specific clips and to specific points in the characters' emotional experiences. For example, the character in the scene from *Winter People* was described as "dazed," "shocked," "in a trance," whereas the character in *Steel Magnolias* was described in such terms as "breaking down," "going ballistic," and "going crazy." This pattern of results is consistent with the hypothesis that figurative language is used to differentiate among variations of a single emotional state rather than to differentiate one emotional state from another.

Cross-Individual Consistency in Figurative Language Use

Gibbs and his colleagues (Gibbs, 1994b; Nayak & Gibbs, 1990) reported consistent correspondences between the use of idioms expressing emotional states and the contextual factors that give rise to emotions. For example, Nayak and Gibbs (1990) found that participants judged "flipped his lid" to be a better completion than "got hot under the collar" to the statement, "When Billy told his father he had totaled his new Porsche, his father ___," although both idioms can be glossed as "became angry." If this finding generalizes to other types of figurative language, there should be significant uniformity in the figurative expressions that speakers use to describe specific instances of an emotional state. Because we have collected so many descriptions of the same emotional event, we can examine this hypothesis empirically.

As can be seen in Table 6.4 above, where the frequency with which each expression was produced is listed in parentheses, we found striking overlap between participants' use of figurative language to describe characters' emotional states. For the scene from *Winter People*, numerous expressions referr to the central character's lack of emotional responsiveness, including *shocked, dazed, comatosed, drained, empty, frozen, numb,* and *tranced.* In contrast, the expressions for *Steel Magnolias* tended to refer to the character's futile attempts to keep her emotions under control, as evidenced by the expressions that refer to either holding her feelings in or letting them out. In short, not only is figurative language common in emotional descriptions, even in conversational settings, but these expressions appear to be a conventional way of talking about affective experiences.

Relationships Between Literal and Figurative Speech.

Our transcripts showed that speakers did not use figurative expressions in lieu of literal ones but rather in addition to them. Every description in our corpus contained at least a few literal terms for sadness. Often, figurative expressions

followed literal descriptions, an observation suggesting that figurative expressions might be intended as a clarification:[6]

> "She would go from crying to screaming to crying to screaming. So she was kinda—**she wasn't all there**. . . . " [*Pair 4*]
>
> "He has something annoying him. I mean, it's just like **eating away at him**." [*Pair 5*]
>
> "Yeah, he was really depressed and just **screwed up**." [*Pair 9*]
>
> "He don't care about anything, you know? He's kinda just **blown everything off**." [*Pair 15*]
>
> "She was very hysterical, she just **lost it**." [*Pair 50*]

At other times, figurative expressions appeared to set the stage for later details:

> "And she like **freaks out** at this point in time. She starts yelling and stuff." [Pair 27]
>
> "And she just **loses it** and starts crying." [Pair 35]
>
> "She was like on an **emotional rollercoaster**. She'd be **on like a high**. She was like mad. And then she would kind of calm from it. And then she'd get mad." [Pair 38]
>
> "And so finally, she just **let all her feelings out** and it was like a rage, almost." [Pair 40]

Because our corpus contains multiple instances of the same figurative expression, we have been performing detailed analyses of the ways in which these expressions co-occur with literal terms for sadness and depression.[7] We are especially interested in the relationships between word combinations that include intensifiers and modifiers (e.g., *very very unhappy*, *sort of sad*) and figurative speech, as researchers have argued that intensifiers and modifiers play an important role in emotional communication (e.g., Capps & Ochs, 1995), and, as

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[6] Pair numbering in brackets indicate the transcript from which the example was drawn.

[7] One of the strengths of the CLAN program (MacWhinney, 1995) is that it can examine co-occurrence matrices of virtually any type within a user-defined span of words.

discussed earlier, there is evidence that metaphor may in part serve to convey intensity (Fainsilber & Ortony, 1987; Fussell, 1992).

Relationships Between Properties of Emotional States and Figurative Language Use.

As we argued earlier, when each participant in an experiment describes an emotional event from his or her own experience, it is extremely difficult to analyze the relationships between the properties of this emotional event and the language used to describe it. In our research paradigm, we have collected independent ratings of the video clips on Osgood's Semantic Differential (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957), and we can compare these ratings with the figurative language used to describe each emotional episode. By this process we may be able to identify important relationships between the dimensional structure of an affective experience and the metaphors, similes, idioms, and other expressions used to describe that experience. The scene from *Winter People*, for example, was rated "passive" and "bad," whereas the scene from *Steel Magnolias* was rated "active" and "bad." Although we have not yet quantified the relationship, it is likely that the semantic differences between the figurative expressions used to describe the two clips (see Table 6.4 above) are related to this difference along the active/passive dimension.

Our method also allows us to examine figurative language use as a function of the temporal unfolding of an emotional reaction (Fehr & Russell, 1984; Reiser, Black, & Lehnert 1985; Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, & O'Connor, 1987). For example, in a bothersome situation, a person might begin feeling slightly annoyed and, as the eliciting event continues, become angrier and angrier until he or she is in an absolute rage.[8] Gibbs (1994b; Nayak & Gibbs, 1990) pointed out that idioms such as *hot under the collar*, *hit the ceiling*, and *flip one's lid*, appear to map onto this temporal unfolding of experience; people's judgments of the appropriateness of these expressions in specific contexts are consistent with the view that people have schematic knowledge of how others react when they are in particular situations and feeling particular emotions. In our transcripts, figurative expressions appear to be closely tied to the precise moment of the character's experience that speakers were describing. For example, although the expressions in Table 6.4 reflect descriptions of the character's emotional state at the beginning of the *Winter People* clip, these expressions were replaced in the final moments of the clip with others such as "in a meltdown," "going berserk,"

[8] Listeners in our studies often asked questions that indicated that they wanted to know the point in the experience the speaker was describing (e.g., "So she was angry but not to the point of violence?" "It was to the point to where he would commit suicide?").

"going crazy," "going insane," "losing it," "losing her mind," and "going to pieces."

The Role of Conversational Interactivity

In the first of our two studies (Moss & Fussell, 1995), we examined the impact of conversational interactivity on descriptions of emotional states by manipulating listener responsiveness. In half the pairs (the *interactive condition*), listeners were allowed to interact freely with the speaker—asking questions, making comments—whereas in the other half (the *non-interactive condition*) the listener was asked to listen silently to the descriptions. Because studies have indicated that nonliteral language can sometimes be difficult to interpret out of context (e.g., Gibbs, 1979), we hypothesized that speakers would use figurative expressions more frequently in interactive than in noninteractive settings because in the former case they could use listener's responses to monitor his or her comprehension.

As predicted, speakers in our study generated many more words of description when describing the video clips to an addressee who could participate in the discussion rather than one who sat silently. With respect to figurative language use, however, we found that although speakers in the interactive condition produced more metaphors and idioms overall, their rate of figurative language per total words spoken was not significantly different from speakers in the non-interactive condition. This finding is consistent with our view that speakers consider figurative expressions to be conventional and readily understood ways of describing emotional experiences.[9]

Figurative Language in the Interactive Construction of Messages

In addition to providing feedback about a listener's understanding of a message, conversational interaction also allows for collaboration in the construction of messages themselves (Clark & Wilkes-Gibbs, 1986; Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). As discussed earlier, Ferrara (1994) found evidence of these collaborations (which she calls "joint productions") in therapeutic conversations. We likewise found numerous joint productions in our corpus, many of which contained figurative language. For example:[10]

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[9] It is possible that because the dyads were seated face-to-face, speakers could have monitored their addressees' nonverbal behaviors for signs of comprehension.

[10] For expository purposes, we have simplified the transcriptions by eliminating filled pauses and false starts.

[Pair 10]
Describer: She was just kind of walking along, and then all of a sudden
Listener: just **let it out**.
Describer: she just **let it out**.

In other cases, the listener predicted the character's bodily or behavioral responses implied by a figurative expression:

[Pair 23]
Describer: And then finally she just **broke down** and
Listener: just started crying.
Describer: just started crying.

The presence of feedback also enabled speakers and hearers to ensure that terms and expressions having both literal and figurative interpretations were understood correctly, as in the following two examples:

[Pair 12]
Describer: Lost.
Listener: Lost? Literally lost?
Describer: No, not literally lost.

[Pair 1]
Describer: Okay, she looks like she's in shock or something.
Listener: like surprised or like medical shock? Heat stroke?
Describer: No, like she's done something.

Finally, listeners also commonly responded to a figurative expression with a reformulation in other figurative terms:

[Pair 10]
Describer: It's almost like he's **not even there**.
Listener: mhm. Like **in his own world** or?
Describer: Kind of.

[Pair 12]
Describer: and then she just **goes berserk**.
Listener: So she kind of was like **in a meltdown** or something . . .?

Or they suggested figurative paraphrases:

[Pair 12]
Describer: He was trying to basically just remove himself from the problem, trying to see how he got
Listener: **block it out**?
Describer: Yeah.

Although we have yet to analyze these joint constructions systematically, it is clear that figurative expressions generated by both speaker and addressee are important to conversations about emotional states.

Effects of Speaker and Listener Characteristics on Figurative Language Use.

With the exception of isolated studies such as McMullen and Conway (1996) and Williams-Whitney et al. (1992), research has tended to neglect the impact of speaker and listener characteristics on figurative language production. Yet there is reason to suspect that these factors affect emotional communication in general and the use of metaphors, idioms, and the like in particular. Tannen (1990), among others, has argued that men and women speak essentially different languages with respect to emotion, but to our knowledge, this hypothesis has not been tested in an experimental paradigm that uses objective events as stimuli and thus can disentangle two separate ways that personal and social characteristics might affect emotional communication—by influencing choices about *what* types of events or experiences are described and by influencing *how* those events or experienced are described. In our studies, we have found no effects of a speaker's gender on any message characteristics, including figurative language use.

As Rime and his colleagues (Rime, Mesquita, Philippot, and Boca, 1991) point out, the “social sharing” of an emotion requires its formulation in mutually understood terms to an explicit or implicit addressee—that is, emotional expression requires perspective-taking. Some clinicians have gone so far as to suggest that successful therapy can be provided only by therapists of the same gender as the client (e.g., Feldstein, 1979; Hill, 1975; Orlinsky & Howard, 1976; Persons, Persons & Newmark, 1974). Yet, with a few notable exceptions (e.g., Higgins & Rholes, 1978; McCann, Higgins, & Fondacaro, 1991), virtually all research in the perspective-taking tradition has focused on the creation of names and descriptions for more or less objective things like objects, landmarks, and public figures (for reviews of this literature see Krauss & Fussell, 1996; Schober, 1998).

In the second of our two studies of descriptions of sadness we examined perspective-taking in affective communication by asking male and female speakers to describe the film clips to male and female addressees. The total number of words, sentences, and speaking turns by both speaker and listener were computed using MacWhinney's (1995) CLAN program. The preliminary results showed that the amount of descriptive information provided for each clip varied substantially as a function of listener but not speaker gender: For all clips, both male and female speakers used significantly more words to describe a character's emotional state to a male as opposed to a female addressee. We are currently in the process of comparing the content of messages intended for male versus female listeners to determine whether this difference in amount of information extends to differences in the amount and type of figurative language. We are also examining how speaker and listener gender affect the dynamics of the conversation.

Comprehension and-or Interpretation.

As argued earlier, when each person describes his or her own emotional experiences, it is difficult to determine how well the description has been understood because there is no independent measure of the underlying emotional state. In our studies, we made a preliminary attempt to develop an independent measure of the to–be–expressed affective experience by using a version of Osgood et al.'s (1957) Semantic Differential. We chose this measure in part because of its long history in the nonverbal communication literature (e.g., Krauss, Apple, Morency, Wenzel, & Winton, 1981). We also selected this measure because it can tap dimensions of emotional meaning without using terms that are conventional parts of the affective lexicon. In each experiment, we first pretested the scenes to ensure that viewers rated them similarly on the Semantic Differential; then, we assumed that the extent to which speakers and addressees completed the scale in the same way after their conversations reflected the extent to which the description had been understood.

In retrospect, it is not clear that the Semantic Differential is the best way to measure comprehension of descriptions of emotional states, at least in a conversational setting. In all three studies we have described in this section, we have found high correlations between speaker and listener ratings on the Semantic Differential (generally .50 or better); but curiously, these correlations have been unrelated to any message characteristics we measured (e.g., length and number of utterances, figurative language) and unrelated to the gender composition of the dyad. Yet, the dialogues differed substantially in length and in the number and types of questions asked by addressees. To better understand how emotional messages are interpreted, we are currently focusing on the

processes addressees used to understanding speakers' emotional messages rather than on the final correlations between speakers' and addressees' ratings.

SOME LIMITATIONS TO THE PARADIGM

In this chapter we have argued that by conducting experiments using standardized affective experiences as stimuli, researchers can gain new insights about the role of figurative language in descriptions of emotions. By using standardized stimuli, investigators can examine such issues as interpersonal consistency in figurative language use, relationships between stimulus properties and the ways they are expressed, and effects of speaker and listener characteristics on figurative language production and comprehension.

Of course, along with the benefits of our proposed research strategy, there are several costs. The most glaring omission from our research program to date is the study of other examples of sadness or depression or other emotional states such as happiness or anger. This limitation, however, can be overcome by further experimentation. Below we briefly describe some further limitations of our paradigm that suggest that more major changes to the methods researchers use to investigate the relationships between figurative language and emotion may be required.

Relationship Between Verbal and Nonverbal Communication of Emotion.

Considerable debate has surrounded the issue of the relative priority of verbal, vocal, and nonverbal channels in the communication of emotions (e.g., Ekman, Friesen, O'Sullivan, & Scherer, 1980; Gallois, 1994; Krauss et al., 1981; Trimboli & Walker, 1987, Walker & Trimboli, 1989). Because we did not videotape our participants' conversations, our results cannot help clarify relationships between the communicative functions of verbal and nonverbal sources of information about emotional states. Nonetheless, at several places in our transcripts it was apparent that speakers resorted to bodily representations of characters' facial expressions and postures. Often, they prefaced these nonverbal displays by saying something such as: "The best way for me to communicate this is to show you." It might be informative to examine the relationship between these nonverbal displays and the literal and figurative content of the surrounding messages by using video- rather than audio-recordings in future research.

Effects of Emotional State on Affective Communication.

Although our participants might have empathized with movie characters' experiences, they probably did not fully feel the emotion at the time of their descriptions. It is entirely plausible that how a person expresses an emotional state depends upon whether he or she is *feeling* that state at the time of its description (Bowers, Metts, & Duncanson, 1985; Fiehler, 1990), especially in view of the demonstrated effects of arousal on other aspects of cognitive processing such as memory and social judgment (e.g., Christianson, 1992; M. Clark & Fiske, 1982; Fiedler & Forgas, 1988; Mackie & Hamilton, 1993; Winograd & Neisser, 1992). Innovative paradigm creation is required to examine the effects of a person's own affective state on message production while retaining the criteria for standardized emotional stimuli that we have argued for throughout this chapter.

Effects of Social Relationships on Figurative Language Use.

In our experiments, dyads were unacquainted. In everyday life, not only do people report emotional experiences most often to close friends, spouses and partners, or other family members (Rime et al., 1991), but these emotional experiences may involve these friends and family members in diverse ways. As a result, emotional expression is likely to be tempered by face management concerns (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1959; Holtgraves, 1998) and by norms about self-disclosure of emotions (for reviews of this literature, see Gallois, 1994 & Winton, 1990).

Several studies have found results consistent with the hypothesis that social norms and face management concerns affect emotional expression. For instance, Thimm and Kruse (1993) found that students were less willing to share their emotions with those of higher status than with those of equal status; when they did express their emotions, they tended to hedge their expressions with softening or intensifying remarks (e.g., "relatively," "actually," "somewhat," "totally," "absolutely," etc.) or nonverbal or paralinguistic behaviors (e.g., giggles, laughes, pauses); Shimanoff (1985) found that speakers tended to talk about positive but not negative responses to their addressees' actions or remarks and about negative but not positive aspects of their own behaviors; and Collier (1985) found that speakers used more complex grammatical forms to describe their negative as opposed to positive emotional states, which, he argued, might serve to qualify or attenuate the message. To the extent that figures of speech can be used to convey negative feelings indirectly, the use of such expressions might be even more prevalent in real-life social situations than we have found in our laboratory studies.

CONCLUSION

We have argued that analyzing multiple descriptions of the same affective experiences can lead to a number of important insights into figurative language production and comprehension in conversational settings. But our own studies are clearly small steps in this direction; additional studies using a variety of conversational contexts, research paradigms, and stimuli are required. Even if such studies are conducted, however, we would argue that rapid advancement in the area of figurative language production is unlikely to happen until researchers of adult linguistic phenomena follow the lead of child language investigators (cf. MacWhinney, 1995) by making their tapes and transcripts available to the entire community of adult language researchers.[11] By making it possible to test new hypotheses across current linguistic corpuses as well as by collecting new data, researchers can truly make progress in understanding how topics of conversation, individual and cultural characteristics of speakers and hearers, social settings, and related factors influence the frequency, type, and interactional consequences of figurative language use.

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[11] For more information on the CHILDES project and the CLAN program, contact the Web site at: http://psyscope.psy.cmu.edu/childes/childes.html.

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