Literal and Figurative

Literal refers to letters, *figurative* to figures of speech. When a gardener talks about how to prune roses, he speaks literally in using their name; he doesn't, like a poet, refer to roses only as a way of referring to love or intellectual beauty or the house of Tudor. The difference here is between single and multiple levels of meaning. Gardeners, like scientists, don't intend for *the referent to refer in turn* to something else. They mean nothing but a rose. Wishing to strip the poor overloaded rose of all its culturally accumulated burden of symbolism, Gertrude Stein said, somewhat testily perhaps in her rebellion against the philosophical poetry of the preceding generations, "A rose is a rose is a rose."

A word used literally denotes one and only one thing. If the word normally has several possible meanings, like the word *interest,* only one of those is intended. Used figuratively, a word connotes more than its common meaning or any one of its meanings alone. It implies more than it says. So to speak literally is to be more explicit, to narrow down meaning precisely, whereas to speak figuratively is to refer simultaneously to several things at once. *Equivocal* means exactly this (equivocal implying several-voiced), and the useful counterterm is *univocal* (single-voiced). James Joyce tried to create a whole language of words such as "gracehoper" that would have meaning at two or more levels. But ordinary language is virtually like this, since the etymology of most words shows that they have or had a primal, concrete meaning upon which the more familiar one is overlaid. In this way Joyce's language is like any other, but his also makes new connections among things as original metaphor always does. The root meaning of *metaphor* itself, for example, is to carry over.

Any metaphor links together two otherwise unconnected items. A person who speaks of a politician put at bay is referring by one term to two referents—some politician and some game animal that hunting hounds have closed in on and backed into an impasse. The term bridges two domains, synthesizes two items within some similarity. The receivers have to fill in some of the meaning from their own imaginations, because metaphors work implicitly. They must decide for themselves how far the comparison goes—perhaps even of what the comparison consists. There isn't one term for each referent but one term for both. That is how metaphors operate implicitly. The same concepts that are serially conveyed over time, one concept per word in literal usage, can be conveyed in a single figure of speech, metaphor, or representative token. The term *condensation* has been used to denote this sort of multilevel expression when it

occurs in dreams. It applies equally well to figurative language, which *compresses several levels of thought into one language term.*

The same is true for the symbolic figures and actions abounding in folk literature, novels, and other imaginative stories. Ostensibly, *Beowulf* or *Moby Dick* or *Alice in Wonderland* has a single level of meaning, since only one thread of language spins out the cumulative sequence, and, taken at face value, these works are productions of the analytic hemisphere. Items and actions are explicitly designated, and the subject matter is broken down and spread over parts of speech and sentence structures that dutifully dole it out according to conventional public categories. But what an extraordinary, original rendering of experience and thought! The authors have *embodied* their ideas in representative figures and deeds that stand for more than themselves. So a whale and a sea chase manage to carry along several levels of meaning simultaneously—psychological, physical, sociological, anthropological, theological—in exactly the way that the synthesizing hemisphere asserts simultaneously and implicitly a complex of different things.

The verbal work does not have to be fictional, however. Most case histories are cases because the central figure or group or experience is *typical,* that is, acts not just as referent of the words but refers in turn to other things in the common experience of reader and writer. A token represents a type, so that referring to the token automatically refers to the type as well and hence to all the other members of it. For example, Melville's white whale is a symbol. What is said about it at one level applies to other levels in the story as well.

This amounts to compressing generality and illustration into one entity. To the extent that it is literal, standing only for itself, a case at hand is only an instance that might be used to illustrate a general point; but to the extent that it is figurative, standing for others of a class, the case states a generality and illustrates it at once, though the generality, like the symbolism of the white whale, may never be stated *in so many words.* Literal discourse works by *embedding* generalities as particular sentences, strategically positioned in a discourse, which are supported by examples separately stated. Figurative discourse works by *embodying* generalities throughout the whole in recurring tokens invested with extra meaning by a web of suggestive details.

Compare literal meaning to melody, in which one note at a time is struck sequentially, and figurative meaning to chords, in which several related notes are struck simultaneously. Figurative language has overtones and undertones because several things are being referred to *at once.* Neither use of language is good or bad but has its

own function. Both must be practiced. When people speak literally, they take one meaning at a time and build some kind of linear, cumulative abstraction, the way they play a tune by sounding one note at a time. When people speak figuratively, they express several meanings together in a complex, the way they strike a chord.

Literal language parcels out thought into speech in such a way that each concept is assigned its own term. In making language commensurate with the thought it conveys, this mode takes longer and allows only one connection among concepts at a time but makes each concept stand out separately, as the notes do in a melody. Figurative language is more economical and emphasizes the kinship and the totality of the concepts considered at once but makes it hard to single out any one of them from the rest and to make explicit what the relations are among them. A chord is like a fundamental, general idea in that it contains many possible melodies, as an idea contains implications and ramifications that can be spun out separately. Each melody is an elaboration of a chord, and each chord is a complex of potential melodies united by some intuition of vibrational affinity. Such is the *resonance* of the experiences Moby Dick stands for.

Figurative use of language answers the question how language can manage to serve at once both modes of knowing though controlled itself essentially by the linear/analytic hemisphere. The secret seems to lie in a certain kind of close collaboration between halves: intuition synthesizes experience into metaphorical complexes and feeds them in explicit sequences. It's as if the analogical half, specializing in classification, makes up the collections or categories of experiences, while the digital half, specializing in seriation, names and chains these categories. The digital half processes literal and figurative names the same way, so that it can be fooled if the names are equivocal, not univocal. It is not concerned with what isn't said.

The analogical halves of sender and receiver have to conspire, in a sense, to put in and take out of the words what isn't said. This is why shared experience must be assumed. Assuming is dangerous, as we have implied, but the only alternative is to limit communication to one mode of knowing. At any rate, communicating the analogical perceptions through the digital mode is like sending a coded message by means of an unwitting messenger.

The linear half performs its work not on raw material but on material as abstracted already by the holistic half. This same coordination occurs in music when a melody is played out a note at a time as the harmony sounds with and includes these notes in chord *progressions,* which are sequenced complexes. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1
The Specialized Halves of the Brain in Most Right-handed People

LEFT HEMISPHERE	RIGHT HEMISPHERE
Intellectual	Intuitive
Analytic	Synthetic
Linear	Holistic
Verbal	Nonverbal
Sequential	Simultaneous
Temporal	Spatial
Digital	Analogical
Explicit	Implicit
Literal	Metaphorical

Source: This table owes a lot to Robert Ornstein, *The Psychology of Consciousness,* 1977, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. This is a good book for the layperson and one that I recommend highly, but research in hemisphericity evolves rapidly. For updating see *Brain/Mind Bulletin,* P. O. Box 42211, Los Angeles, CA 90042.