4-1-1983

Figurative Language: How is it Used in Basal Readings?

Maria Valeri
Florida State University

Edwin H. Smith
Florida State University

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY
Dorothy J. McGinnis Reading Center and Clinic

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE: HOW IS IT USED IN BASAL READINGS?

Maria Valeri, Edwin H. Smith
FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY, TALLAHASSEE

How much attention do editors of basal readers give to figurative language? What is the most common figure of speech found in basal readers? What is the least common figure of speech bound in basal readers? These were the questions the authors sought to answer through their research.

Three popular basal reader series were used. They were the Scott, Foresman Basics in Reading Program (1978), Ginn Reading 720 Program (1976), and the Houghton Mifflin Reading Series (1976). These basal reader series were selected because, according to Beck, et al. (1979) and Aukerman (1981), they were among the most widely used basal reader programs. Five fourth grade basal reader textbooks and three sixth grade basal reader texts were examined. The figures of speech that were found were placed into one of the 13 metaphorical categories, explanations of which follow:

Abstractionistic metaphors are comparisons of abstract ideas with animate or inanimate objects or conditions, e.g., "death is the pits."

Animal metaphors occur when certain animal characteristics are attributed to human beings, animate or inanimate objects, and abstractions, e.g., "the man is a laughing hyena."

Animistic metaphors are employed when writers attribute life to inanimate objects, e.g., "the broom acted like a dancing machine."

Frozen metaphors occur when the figurative meaning becomes a literal meaning over time, e. g., "he sat at the foot of the bed."

Humanistic metaphors involve a comparison of a real or imaginary person to a condition, an inanimate oject, or an abstraction, e.g., "the boy was like a computer."

Hyperboles are extreme exaggerations of animate or inanimate objects or abstractions, e.g., "the boy ate a two mile long hotdog."

Inanimate metaphors are associations between two or more inanimate objects, e.g., "the ground was as hard as cement."

Incarnations are associations of positive or negative attributes of a real or imaginary person, object, or abstraction with particular persons or organizations, e.g., "she acted like Scrooge."

Litotes contain positive phrases which are negatively implied or stated, e.g., "that car is not half bad."

Metonomies are substitutions of the name of an animate or inanimate object, or abstraction for another word, e.g., "board" is substituted for the word "council."

Personifications are attributions of human characteristics to non-living beings, objects, or abstractions, e.g., "the tiger was like a judge."

Sense metaphors convey positive or negative reactions which result from associations with feeling, hearing, tasting, touching, and smelling, e.g., "the girl, with a cold smile on her face, congratulated her opponent."

Synechdochies contain an individual word or words which can be substituted for a whole class; or a whole class can be substituted for an individual word, e.g., "field hand" is substituted for the words "field worker."

Each figure of speech was classified and grouped into an appropriate metaphorical category. All literary selections in the book sample were examined. Omitted were the glossaries, the specific skills lessons, the tables of contents, the biographical sketches of authors, and the annotated bibliographies.

A frequency analysis count was used to determine the most common figure of speech found at each of the two levels and the frequency rankings of the 13 figures of speech classifications.

The data revealed that the most common type of figure of speech found in the fourth grade basal readers was personification. The rank order in which the figures of speech occurred in the fourth grade basal readers was as follows: 1) personification, 2) sense, 3) animal, 4) inanimate, 5) hyperbole, 6) humanistic, 7) synecdoche, 8) abstractionistic, 9) animistic, 10) frozen, 11) litote, 12) metonomy, and 13) incarnation (See Table 1).

Table 1 – Rankings of Figures of Speech Found in Fourth and Sixth Grade

Grade 4	Grade 6
1. Personification	1. Personification
2. Sense	2. Animal
3. Animal	3. Inanimate
4. Inanimate	4. Sense
5. Hyperbole	5. Hyperbole
6. Humanistic	6. Humanistic
7. Synecdoche	7. Frozen
8. Abstractionistic	8. Abstractionistic
9. Animistic	9. Synecdoche
10. Frozen	10. Animistic
11. Litote	11. Metonomy
12. Metonomy	12. Incarnation
13. Incarnation	13. Litote

The total number of figures of speech differed among the fourth grade basal reader series ranging from a low of 71 to a high of 288. Table 2 reveals the total data, as well as the counts

of the thirteen different figures of speech.

Table 2

Total Number of Figures of Speech
Found in Fourth Grade Basal Readers

Tropes	Houghton Mifflin	Ginn	Scott Foresman	Total
Abstractionistic	6	12	2	20
Animal	42	53	5	100
Animistic	6	8	4	18
Frozen	7	10	1	18
Humanistic	17	23	0	40
Hyperbole	40	18	7	65
Inanimate	33	30	20	83
Incarnation	0	0	0	0
Litote	1	0	0	1
Metonomy	1	0	0	1
Personification	45	59	21	125
Sense	46	54	8	108
Synecdoche	5	21	3	29
Total	249	288	71	608

The most common type of figure of speech found in the sixth grade basal readers was personification. Similar results were reported for the fourth grade basal readers. The rank order in which the figures of speech occurred in the sixth grade basal readers was as follows: 1) personification, 2) animal, 3) inanimate, 4) sense, 5) hyperbole, 6) humanistic, 7) frozen, 8) abstractionistic, 9) synecdoche, 10) animistic, 11) metonomy, 12) incarnation, and 13) litote (See Table 1).

As revealed in Table 3, the total number of figures of speech differed among the sixth grade basal reader series ranging from a low of 125 to a high of 232.

The total number of figures of speech differed among the fourth grade and the sixth grade basal series ranging from a low of 196 to a high of 520 (See Table 4).

It was found that the most common type of figure of speech in the fourth and the sixth grade basals was personification. The five most commonly used figures of speech were personification, animal, sense, inanimate, and hyperbole; the five figures of speech least frequently occurring were incarnation, litote, metonomy, abstractionistic, and animistic.

Table 3

Number of Figures of Speech
Found in Sixth Grade Basal Readers

Tropes	Houghton Mifflin	Ginn	Scott Foresman	Total
Abstractionistic	12	1	0	13
Animal	26	54	35	115
Animistic	2	5	3	10
Frozen	2	12	3	17
Humanistic	7	8	5	20
Hyperbole	35	10	14	59
Inanimate	36	42	14	92
Incarnation	0	0	0	0
Litote	0	0	0	0
Metonomy	2	6	0	8
Personification	40	51	31	122
Sense	32	40	17	89
Synecdoche	6	3	3	12
Total	200	232	125	557

Table 4

Total Number of Figures of Speech
By Series and Grade Levels

Basal Reader Series	Grade 4	Grade 6	Total
Houghton Mifflin	249	200	449
Ginn Reading 720	288	232	520
Scott Foresman	71	125	196

The authors recommend that basal reader publishers should assist students in developing critical thinking skills through preserving the figures of speech found in the original writings of the stories and articles. There needs to be a balance of the most common types of figures of speech and the least frequently used figures of speech in the basal reader textbooks. Exposure to a variety of figures of speech can enhance a student's reading speaking, listening, and writing, making both his receptive and expressive modes of communication more effective.

REFERENCES

Aukerman, R. C. The Basal Reader Approach to Reading. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1981.

Beck, I. L., et al. Instructional Dimensions That May Affect Reading Comprehension: Examples from Two Commercial Reading Programs. Pittsburgh Univ., 1979. (ERIC Doc. # ED 197 322.)

Clymer, T. Indrisano, R., Higgs, J., McCullough, C.M., Diels, N.B., & Wardeberg, H. Ginn Reading 720 Program. Lexington, Mass.: Ginn & Company, 1976.

Durr, W.K., McCourt, A.A., & Windley, V.O. Houghton Mifflin Reading Series. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976.

Smith, R. G., & Tierney, R. Scott, Foresman Basics in R ading Programs. Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman, 1978.