

THE DIFFERENT SENSES IN WHICH ONE MAY TAKE THE SAME WORD IN THE SAME LANGUAGE

A useful work for the intelligence of Authors, which may serve as an introduction to Rhetoric and Logic

Before speaking of figures of speech in particular, I should say a word on figures in general, for tropes are no more than a kind of figure. One may agree that figures are the manner of speaking distantly of what is natural and ordinary; that there are certain turns and certain expressions that depart from the usual simple fashion of speaking. What then are figures? It is a word that takes itself in a figurative sense. That is a metaphor. Figure, in the proper sense, is the exterior form of the body. All bodies are extended, but outside this general property of the extended being, they each possess their particular figure and form, which makes each body appear different to our eyes than another body; it is the same with figurative expressions; in the first place they make known what one thinks. They have a general property which is appropriate for all phrases and every assembly of words, and which consists in signifying something, by virtue of grammatical structure. Moreover, each figurative expression is a particular modification that belongs to it alone, and it is by virtue of this particular modification that one makes a separate type of each kind of figure.

Indeed, I am persuaded that there are more figures of speech heard in the market place on market day than during several days in any academic academy. Thus, far from figurative speech being at a distance from the ordinary language of everyday, there are, on the contrary, ways of speaking without figures that are more removed, if it were possible to construct a discourse in which there were only non-figurative expressions. There are still mannered ways of speaking, their figures displaced or drawn from afar, which withdraw from a common and simple way of speech; in the same way as affected modes of dress are removed from the manner of costume that is in use between honest people.

Antithesis, for example, is distinguished from other manners of speech, for in the assembly of words that form antithesis, words are opposed one to the other. Thus, when one encounters examples of these kinds of words with opposing meanings, one is brought back to antithesis. The apostrophe is different from other enunciations, because it is not in the apostrophe that one addresses at once a word to a person present or absent, etc. There is nothing more common than to address speech to those to whom one speaks, and to reproach them when one is discontent with their conduct. There are ways of speaking that are quite ordinary in language in which it is evident that words must be supplemented, to achieve the expression of a thought in which liveliness and passion may be heard. One calls this figure ellipse, that is to say, omission.

It is not only in the prosopopeia that the dead, the absent, or inanimate beings speak: it is even in other figures; they have each their particular character, which distinguishes them from other collections of words, and which makes for sense in the ordinary language of ordinary people.

Grammarians and rhetoricians, having made their observations on the different manners of speaking, have made particular classes of these different manners, so that they may put in order and arrangement their own reflections. Manners of speaking, in which there has not been remarked any other property than that of making known what one thinks, are called simply sentences, expressions, intermissions; while those that express not only thoughts, but also thoughts enunciated in a particular way that gives them their own character, those, I will say, are called figures, because they appear, so to speak, in a special form, and with a specific character that distinguishes one from the other, and above all from that which is no more than a phrase or an expression.

As M. de la Bruyère says, there are certain things in which mediocrity is intolerable: poetry, music, painting, and public speaking. There is no use of figures in what he says; that is to say, his whole sentence does nothing else but express what M. de la Bruyère is thinking, without having any special character. However, when he adds what a torture it is to hear a cold discourse pompously declared, or hear a mediocre verse pronounced in too-emphatic a manner; it is the same thought; yet it is expressed in the particular form of surprise (or admiration) that makes of it a figure. Imagine, for a moment, a multitude of soldiers, of which some have only the ordinary costume they wear before their engagement, and others who wear the uniform of their regiment: these are they who have a dress that distinguishes them, and makes it known to which regiment they belong: some wear red, others blue, yellow, etc. It is the same in the assembly of words that compose discourse; an educated reader responds to a certain word, to such a phrase, to such a figure of speech, according to the recognition of the form, the sign, the character of that figure; sentences and words that do not bear the distinguishing mark of any particular figure are like those soldiers who wear no regiment's uniform; they have no other modifications that those that are necessary to make known what one is thinking.

It is hardly astonishing that figures, when they are used appositely, give vivacity, force, and grace to discourse; for, other than the suitability of the expression of thoughts, like all other collections of words, they have again, if I dare say so, the advantage of their appearance, I mean to say, of their particular alteration, which serves to wake attention, to please, or to move.

However, although well-placed and selected figures embellish discourse, and that they are, so to speak, the language of imagination and of emotions, it should not be believed that discourse only draws its beauty from figures. We have many examples of all kinds of writing, where beauty consists in the thought expressed therein without any figure. There may be no figure, and yet much that is sublime may reside in a single word. I could give any number of examples, enunciated without a figure, and in which a thought alone gives value. Therefore, when one says that figures embellish discourse, it is merely to say that, in the occasions where figures are hardly used, the foundation of thought may be expressed in a manner that is made more lively, or more noble, or more agreeable by the assistance of figures, than wit would be if expressed without figures.

From all that I have just said, one may form this definition of figures: FIGURES are the way of speaking distinctly of others by a specific modification, that means that one reduces each part to its particular, and this renders discourse more lively, more noble, or more agreeable than the ways of speaking that express the same foundation of thought, without any other special or particular modification. My objective is that my readers will find the reflections and the examples of which they have need, if not for themselves, then for their pupils. It is up to the teachers to rule on the use of these reflections and examples according to the degree of enlightenment, the talents, and the spirit of their followers. It is this conduct that removes the thorns, that gives the taste for letters; from there the love of reading, from which is born the necessity of instruction. Instruction creates the good citizen, while a sordid interest, born of misunderstanding, can only create the opposite.