

The Role of Contrast in Metonymy and Other Figures: Comparisons and Contrasts

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In metonymy, there is typically a strong qualitative contrast between source and target—e.g., between the country and the football team in a metonymic case like “England lost the match.” However, the role of contrast in metonymy needs more systematic investigation. Several authors (e.g., Burkhardt 2010) have claimed that euphemism can rest on metonymy, as in using “neutralize” for “kill.” The strong contrast in the levels of overt acceptability of target and source is key here. Metonymy can have a depersonalizing and typically demeaning effect (as pointed out by Warren 2006 and Littlemore 2009), for instance in using “suit” to refer to someone who habitually wears a suit. Here the person/non-person contrast is operative. However, I will consider additional considerations about contrast in metonymy by developing hypotheses on such matters as transferred epithets (e.g., “weary road”), “de-roling” (suppressing the target’s true role) and evaluative aspects of metonymy. For instance, I will explore the way in which de-roling adds a further dimension of evaluation-laden contrast. I will also compare and contrast the roles of contrast in metonymy with its roles in other figures, notably metaphor and irony. For example, in metaphor, having a non-personal source for a target that is a person can again be demeaning (Charteris-Black 2009), but for markedly different reasons. Contrast can also be important for the aptness of the metaphor (more so than in metonymy). But other roles of contrast in metaphor have seen much less detailed study than the role of similarity or analogy has. One novel observation here is that, in metaphorical ironies, ironic contrast may affect the detailed operation of metaphorical mapping processes, and this issue raises the question of the extent to which metaphorical mappings themselves need to map between contrasting elements as opposed to elements that are deemed to contribute to target/source similarity. The study of contrast should assist typological analysis of metonymy and clarify how different types of metonymy relate to other figures.