

MULTIMODAL EXPRESSIONS OF FIGURATIVE THOUGHT: A STUDY OF THE SOVIET OCCUPATION (1940–1964) POSTERS

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to analyse figurative language in use. According to the core writings in cognitive linguistics, figurative language is representative of figurative thought. Human beings express themselves figuratively because their thinking is primarily figurative. Similar ideas have been advanced since the writings of Max Black, Charles K. Ogden, I. A. Richards, and Paul Ricoeur; however, these ideas gained a wider recognition at the end of the 1980s, when George Lakoff and Mark Johnson published their seminal work “Metaphors We Live By”, thus propelling the development of cognitive linguistics and cognitive stylistics.

The properties of figurative thought are excellently demonstrated via those examples where interaction of the verbal and visual discourse occurs. The poster collection of the National Library of Latvia is well-suited for this purpose. The posters created during the Soviet occupation (1940–1991) abound in propaganda; nevertheless, they present a remarkable source for research. Seven posters from 1940 to 1964 are analysed in this article.

The eventual results demonstrate the pervasive use of metonymies and their interaction with other figurative patterns to shape multimodal discourse.

Keywords: *cognitive stylistics, figurative pattern, metaphor, metonymy, multimodal discourse.*

Theoretical framework and research material

The purpose of this article is to analyse figurative language as a reflection of figurative thought. Cognitively, a figurative way of expression testifies to figurative thinking, which depends on inherent figurative concepts, enabling thoughts. The main research question aims at examining the properties of figurative thought by studying posters where the interaction of the verbal and visual representations and the interplay of different *figurative patterns*¹ gives rise to multimodal meaning.

¹ I use the term *figurative pattern* to denote metaphors, metonymies, etc. *Figurative pattern* means thought pattern indicating the fact that thought is primary.

My research questions are connected with the analysis of figurative language as representative of figurative thought in multimodal discourse. The aim of the article is to examine the interaction of metonymies and metaphors, and to establish whether there are any other regular patterns of interaction in multimodal discourse, for instance, that of hyperboles and puns.

The theoretical framework of the article is based on the findings of **cognitive linguistics** and **cognitive stylistics** [Lakoff and Johnson (1980) 2003; Gibbs (1994) 2002; Barcelona 2003; Forceville and Urios-Aparisi 2009; Naciscione 2010]. Human thinking is primarily figurative since the concepts, which are essential for making thought processes possible, are also figurative as the writer and linguist Charles Kay Ogden, critic, poet, and teacher Ivor Armstrong Richards, philosophers Max Black and Paul Ricoeur, cognitive linguist and philosopher George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson have demonstrated [Black 1962; Lakoff and Johnson (1980) 2003; Ogden and Richards 1946; Ricoeur (1975) 2008].

Many scholars in different disciplines tend to agree that **concepts** are described as the building blocks of thoughts and are essential to such processes as inference, memory, learning, decision making and categorization [Margolis and Laurence 1999; Margolis and Laurence 2015]. *Concepts are the most fundamental constructs in theories of the mind. Given their importance to all aspects of cognition, it's no surprise that concepts raise so many controversies in philosophy and cognitive science* [Margolis and Laurence 1999: 3]; and *concepts are mental representations* [Margolis and Laurence 1999: 77].

Development of cognitive linguistics and cognitive stylistics is ongoing, and increasing amounts of data are analysed every year. The properties of figurative thought, especially, interaction of the verbal and visual discourse is a proliferous area of research.

The **research method** applied is manual qualitative data analysis to select the most significant and stylistically salient examples. Research methods are manual for two reasons: the material is visual, and Latvian and Russian are synthetic languages where at least ten different forms exist per every noun and verb. I follow the method of four stages developed by Anita Naciscione [Naciscione 2010: 43–55]. The first stage is **recognition** at which every poster in the chosen CD poster collection¹ is observed, the presence of figurative meaning is detected, and a figurative pattern is identified. The second stage is **verification**, and at this stage the figurative pattern is confirmed to be either a metonymy, metaphor, hyperbole, pun, etc. The third stage is **comprehension**, and at this stage the figurative mean-

¹ See **Research material and case studies**.

ing construction and interaction of different figurative patterns in discursual use¹ are analysed. It also includes the analysis of interaction of the verbal and visual aspects, and multimodal meaning construction. The fourth stage is **interpretation**, and the political, social and cultural context of every poster is taken into consideration.

I have also applied Critical Metaphor Analysis that has been developed by the linguist Jonathan Charteris-Black *an approach that explores how metaphors are used to create rival, contested views of the world, ideologies* [Charteris-Black 2019: 12]. Charteris-Black claims *that metaphor is (...) central to critical discourse analysis since it is concerned with forming a coherent view of reality. Critical analysis of the contexts of metaphors in large corpora may reveal the underlying intentions of the text producer and therefore serves to identify the nature of particular ideologies* [Charteris-Black 2004: 28]. I would argue that in visual representation several posters are enough to identify a particular ideology that attempted to form the Soviet reality. It is important to analyse how concepts interact with discourse and socio-cultural context. As Charteris-Black states *the social influence of ideology, culture and history may provide a more convincing account of why particular metaphors are chosen in specific discourse contexts* [Charteris-Black 2004: 243].

As a modern term **multimodality** appeared in the 1990s with the book “Visual English” edited by Sharon Goodman and David Graddol. At least two semiotic modes, namely, verbal and visual, have to be employed simultaneously to constitute a multimodal discourse [Goodman 1996]. The semiotician Gunther Kress and the linguist and social semiotician Theo Van Leeuwen maintain that Western culture treasured monomodal communication in the past, thus it dominated; however, over the last decades, multimodal form of representation is rising in necessity and predilection [Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001]. The linguist and semiotician Hartmut Stöckl reminds us that multimodality is a late discovery of the obvious since human communication has been multimodal since time immemorial [Stöckl 2004]. The linguist and multimodality scholar Charles Forceville champions a multimodal approach to researching metaphor discussing five senses: vision, hearing, touch, smell, and the ability to taste, and different semiotic modes: pictorial signs, written signs, spoken signs, gestures, sounds, music, smells, tastes

¹ Used in discourse. *So abundant are definitions of discourse that many linguistics books on the subject now open with a survey of definitions. (...) They all, however, fall into the three main categories (...): (1) anything beyond the sentence, (2) language use, and (3) a broader range of social practice that includes nonlinguistic and nonspecific instances of language* [Schiffrin, Tannen, and Hamilton (2001) 2010: 1].

and touch. For Forceville a metaphor is multimodal if its *conceptual target domain*¹ is expressed in one semiotic mode, but its source domain is expressed in another semiotic mode [Forceville 2009].

Research material and case studies

Empirical research material for this article has been excerpted from the poster collection of the National Library of Latvia, specifically, the Soviet posters (1940–1991). A two CD set has been examined; it contains CD 1 *Poster in Latvia 1899–1945* (244 posters) and CD 2 *Poster in Latvia 1945–2000* (320 posters), 564 posters altogether [The National Library of Latvia 1899–1945]. Seven posters from the time of Soviet occupation with stylistically salient examples have been selected for a closer analysis.

The first poster that has been chosen for a detailed *stylistic analysis*² of figurative patterns illustrates a set of metonymies (Figure 1).



Figure 1. *Exhibition of consumer goods for the LSSR local district industries*. The National Library of Latvia, 1940. CD Collection: *Poster in Latvia, 1899–1945*. Not signed. Niklāvs Strunke. Riga: VAPP.

¹ *Conceptual domain* is a relatively complex knowledge structure of coherent aspects of experience [Evans 2007: 61–62]. It is a *segment of our memory for preserving certain types of experience*, e. g., education, journey, knowledge, light, love, life, work, etc. If we imagined that all our memories are stored in a cabinet, one conceptual domain would be one shelf in this cabinet [Veinberga 2020: 18], e. g., a love shelf or an education shelf.

² I use the term *stylistic analysis* to describe the study conducted in this article which is based on cognitive stylistics.

Metonymy is a figurative pattern that operates within one conceptual domain. In metonymy a part of something or someone stands for the whole or vice versa, or a part stands for a part [Gibbs (1994) 2002; Kövecses 2002; Krasovska 2013]. Thus, metonymy can be defined as a *stand for* figurative pattern the operation of which can be reflected in the following formulas: **A** stands for **A₁**; **A₁** stands for **A**; or **A₁** stands for **A₂** [Krasovska 2013; Veinberga 2014], where **A** is the whole, and **A₁** and **A₂** are parts. All metonymic relationships are based on associations of contiguity or closeness.

The verbal text of this poster is not figurative, only the visual images are figurative. *LPSR* means LSSR (Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic). This fact begs a question whether multimodality is applicable. I would argue that this poster¹ is multimodal because the nonfigurative text interacts with the figurative visual images, for instance, the word “exhibition” is translated into the visual mode via a number of metonymies that illustrate different industries represented at the local district exhibition, and this interaction might also be treated as pun-like² (Table 1).

Table 1. Metonymies of Figure 1 “Exhibition of consumer goods for the LSSR local district industries”

Visual metonymies	Occupation	Industry
a man a woman	working members of society	–
a hammer	a manual worker	industry
a trowel	a builder	building
an anvil	a blacksmith	metalworking
a pair of compasses a ruler	an engineer	technology
a wood planer	a carpenter	carpentry

It must be pointed out that the tools may also represent slightly different occupations and industries than indicated in the table, e. g., a pair of compasses can also be the tool of an architect or a carpenter, etc.

¹ It also refers to Figure 2, Figure 4, Figure 5 and Figure 6.

² A *pun* is usually regarded as a word play or lexical ambiguity: a *foregrounded lexical ambiguity, which may have its origin either in homonymy or polysemy* [Leech (1969) 1991: 209]. However, when a text is translated into a picture, it automatically creates a pun as the image, unless it is a photograph, is metaphorical *per se*.

The other set of metonymies is related to the Soviet symbols: flag →¹ the Soviet Republic of Latvia → a part of the USSR. The hammer and sickle are also the Soviet symbols. The flag of the Soviet Republic of Latvia was only red before 17 January 1953 when a different flag with blue sea waves at the bottom of the flag was adopted. This poster is not a propaganda poster *per se*, it only contains the Soviet symbols representing the Soviet power.

The second poster advertises physical education (Figure 2). On the one hand, it can be viewed as a positive reinforcement of exercise as everyone knows that physical training is healthy and helps people to stay fit. On the other hand, the underlying reason for the Soviet enthusiasm was more sinister as a healthy and strong individual would make a good soldier in the Soviet army and defend the Soviet Union. On the top right corner of the poster there is the USSR emblem with a slogan *Готов к труду и обороне* which means “Ready for work and defence”.



Figure 2. *Exercise: The basis of physical education*. The National Library of Latvia, 1941. CD Collection: *Poster in Latvia*, 1899–1945. Signed: R. Bērziņš / Roberts Bērziņš. Riga: VAPP.

Also in this poster the verbal text is not figurative; however, the visual images are figurative. There is the same metonymy as in the previous poster: the LSSR flag that stands for the Soviet Republic of Latvia which is a part of the USSR.

A *hyperbole* is employed in this poster. Hyperbole is *popularly known as exaggeration or overstatement* (...). *In drama, hyperbole is often used for emphasis as a sign of great emotion or passion*. (...) *In pragmatic terms hyperbole superficially violates*

¹ Stands for.

Grice's maxims¹ of quality and quantity, since it distorts the truth by saying too much. But hyperbole is not the same as telling lies: there is normally no intent to deceive one's listeners, who will no doubt infer the true state of affairs anyway [WDS (1990) 2011: 202–203].

There is a hyperbolised figure of a woman in the foreground that is a metonymy for a physically active member of society; and there are *metonyms*² for every active member of society in the background. On the issue of hyperbole, it should be noted that all of the analysed posters show hyperbolised human figures, which is an unavoidable feature of the poster genre.

The third poster features both figurative verbal text and visual images (Figure 3).



Figure 3. *Long live the mighty Soviet aviation. Long live the Soviet pilots – the proud eagles of our homeland.* The National Library of Latvia, 1941. CD Collection: *Poster in Latvia, 1899–1945.* Not signed. Riga: VAPP.

There are two cases of metonymies with flags: (1) the flag of the LSSR that stands for the Soviet Republic of Latvia as a part of the USSR, and (2) the flag of the Soviet aviation (a star and an eagle) stands for aviation in general.

From the text “Long live the Soviet pilots – the proud eagles of our homeland” a verbal conceptual metaphor PILOTS ARE EAGLES³ can be derived. *Conceptual*

¹ The British philosopher Paul Grice (1913–1988), probably influenced by Immanuel Kant, formulated four conversational maxims: quantity, quality, relation and manner. The maxim of quality is related to truthfulness; and the maxim of quantity is related to the degree of information normally demanded [WDS (1990) 2011: 351–352].

² A *metonymy* is a specific use of metonymy.

³ Conceptual metaphors are commonly highlighted by the use of capital letters.

metaphor is a figurative pattern which operates within two conceptual domains that are related by similarity; usually one domain is more concrete whereas the other one is more abstract. Conceptual metaphors often help people to make sense of different abstract phenomena [Lakoff and Johnson (1980) 2003; Gibbs (1994) 2002; Kövecses 2002]. Conceptual metaphor can be expressed via formula: **A is B**; **A** is the target domain for the abstract concept, and **B** is the source domain for the more concrete concept. In the case of **PILOTS ARE EAGLES** we can conceptualise a pilot as an abstract occupation and an eagle a concrete bird that is native to flying.

There is a visual hyperbole: hyperbolised figures of pilots in the foreground, and a metonymy: metonyms of planes in a V-formation in the background that interact with the verbal text, and thus stand for aviation. The text “Long live the mighty Soviet aviation. Long live the Soviet pilots – the proud eagles of our homeland” is a propaganda text. As not everyone was happy in a country of totalitarian regime, especially in Latvia in 1941, shortly after the Soviet occupation, the government had to constantly reiterate the fact that the Soviet Union was a mighty country, and its military power, including aviation, was the best.

The fourth analysed poster once again presents a case of verbal text that is not figurative and a number of figurative visual images. It also includes a visual hyperbole: hyperbolised figures of a man and a woman in the foreground (Figure 4).



Figure 4. 1941 January 12: *Everyone to the elections. Let's elect the best representatives of the working people in the Supreme Soviet who are fully loyal to the Lenin-Stalin course!* The National Library of Latvia, 1941. CD Collection: *Poster in Latvia, 1899–1945*. Signed: O. Norits / Oskars Norītis. Riga: VAPP.

There are several visual metonymies: a man and a woman stand for the working members of society who can vote in the upcoming elections. The meaning of work is metonymically reinforced by the hammer in the man's hand: the hammer stands for a worker and working people of the Soviet Union. The woman has a ballot paper in her hand that stands for elections; the red flags represent Soviet power; and the red people in the background are patriotic Soviet citizens.

Table 2. Metonymies of Figure 4 "1941 January 12: Everyone to the elections. Let's elect the best representatives of the working people in the Supreme Soviet who are fully loyal to the Lenin-Stalin course!"

Visual metonymies	Meaning
a man a woman	working members of society
a hammer	a worker working people
a ballot paper	elections
red flags	Soviet power
small red people in the background	patriotic Soviet citizens

Theoretically there was universal suffrage in the USSR; however, in practical terms the elections were a theatre performance as there was no choice; and the only party voters can vote for was the Communist Party. Nevertheless, everyone had to participate, and that was the duty of the citizen. People could be punished for not participating: being apolitical was a deviation.

The fifth poster is similar to the fourth one in two aspects: (1) its verbal text is not figurative whereas the visual images are figurative, and (2) it propagates an event that a Soviet citizen is forced to attend. May the 1st demonstrations were compulsory (Figure 5).

The Soviet power metonymies include the Soviet star, the hammer and sickle and the red flags. It is notable that the symbol of hammer and sickle is metonymic from its very beginning as it stands for proletarian solidarity, uniting the working-class and the peasants. The hammer stands for the workers and the sickle stands for the peasants. It was first adopted in Russia during the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. *The hammer and sickle represented physical labour in factory or field; there was*



Figure 5. *May the 1st – International Proletarian Solidarity Day!* The National Library of Latvia, 1941. CD Collection: *Poster in Latvia, 1899–1945*. Signed: R. Strops / Eduards Roberts Strops. Riga: VAPP.

no symbol for the scientist, the statesman, or the scholar [Barzun 2021]. Hammer and sickle are often used as a revolution symbol for communists.

Other metonymies are related to the image of the globe that stands for the world inhabited by international proletarians. There are hyperbolised figures in the middle ground and metonyms for every active member of society in the foreground (Table 3).

Table 3. Figurative patterns of Figure 5 “May the 1st – International Proletarian Solidarity Day!”

Figurative pattern	Image	Meaning
visual hyperbole	large figures in the middle ground	strong proletarians, leaders
visual metonymies	Soviet star	Soviet power
	hammer and sickle	
	red flags	the USSR
	small figures in the foreground	every active member of society
	the image of the globe	the world inhabited by international proletarians

The sixth poster depicts Joseph Stalin. The year of printing has not been indicated on the poster; nevertheless, it can be inferred that the poster was printed between 1945 and 1952 because (1) it is from the *CD collection: 1945–2000* and (2) Stalin’s rule lasted from April 3 1922 until his death on 16 October 1952. Stalin

was notorious for his personality cult and was acclaimed as a universal genius, a “shining sun,” a “great teacher and friend” and almost religiously as “our father”. The poster is a typical illustration of Stalin’s personality cult (Figure 6).



Figure 6. *Long live the leader of the Soviet people – the great Stalin!* The National Library of Latvia. S.a.¹ CD Collection: *Poster in Latvia, 1945–2000*. Not signed. Arveds Segliņš. Riga: LVI..

The verbal text is not figurative, although it is a propaganda text praising the leader of the USSR. The visual images are figurative containing hyperbole, allusion and a number of metonymies (Table 4).

Table 4. Figurative patterns of Figure 6 “Long live the leader of the Soviet people – the great Stalin!”

Figurative pattern	Image	Meaning
visual hyperbole	a large figure in the in the foreground	the leader of the USSR
visual allusion	red flags around Stalin form a kind of throne	iconic image of a symbol of power
visual metonymies	red flags	the Soviet power / the USSR
	small figures with red flags in the background	the common Soviet people
	an image of Lenin	the communist ideology / the first leader of the Soviet Union

¹ S.a. – Latin *sine anno* (without a year).

Soviet power forcefully remonstrated against religion. A pro-work and anti-religion poster vividly illustrates this attitude (Figure 7).



Figure 7. *Human reason will be done on earth as in heaven!* The National Library of Latvia. 1964. CD Collection: *Poster in Latvia, 1945–2000*. Signed: L. Bērziņš 64. / Ludis Bērziņš. Riga: LVI.

Stylistically, it is a creative instantiation of both the visual and the verbal modes. The foreground of the poster presents a well-lighted hyperbolic figure of a young man, holding a sheaf of wheat and a book in one hand, while a plane is taking off his other hand. The background features a dark figure of an elderly woman kneeling in front of the Bible, on which a dark grey text in what appears to be Black letter or

Table 5. Figurative patterns of Figure 7 “Human reason will be done on earth as in heaven!”

Figurative pattern	Image or text	Meaning
verbal allusion	Human reason will be done on earth as in heaven	the Lord's Prayer: Thy (=Your) will be done, on earth as it is in heaven
visual hyperbole / metaphor	a large figure of a man in the foreground	the power of the human being
Metaphor	a dark figure of an elderly woman in the background kneeling in front of the Bible	old ways
visual metonymies	a sheaf of wheat	crops
	a book	knowledge
	a plane	power of engineering

Gothic script reads “God’s will be done”, thus metaphorically hinting at, what the Soviets called, the old beliefs. The caption of the poster is a white text proclaiming in block capitals “Human reason will be done on earth as in heaven”, which is an allusion to the Lord’s Prayer (Table 5).

Conclusion

The most commonly used figurative pattern of the analysed political posters is visual metonymy: 33 cases¹. There are seven cases of visual hyperbole, three cases of metaphor (one verbal and two visual cases) and two cases of allusion (one visual and one verbal). No puns were identified in the analysed examples, apart from the obvious pun-like effect when the verbal texts are represented visually. The examined material offers a probable answer why metonymy prevails in these posters: the reason is often straightforward as the choice of tools to stand for certain professions or the flag to stand for the country is easier to depict visually.

Multimodal meaning is created both via interaction of the verbal and visual modes, and via text and image interaction, and also via interaction of different figurative patterns.

The reason for the lack of figurativeness in the captions of the posters is most likely related to the Soviet ideology as it was essential to precisely reiterate their slogans.

The pervasive use of figurative patterns confirms that our thinking is naturally figurative regardless of ideology. Moreover, ideology is targeted at large masses of people, thus it is designed to have a strong, clear and persuasive impact.

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¹ The features of a figurative pattern are counted in every poster, as there might be many different figurative patterns in one poster.

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