

Pro 1:6; Jn 6:51-53...60; 10:6**I. Definition**

“A FIGURE is simply a word or a sentence thrown into a peculiar *form*, different from its original or simplest meaning or use.” E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech in the Bible*, p. xv.

In an expression the words may retain their literal meaning, yet the expression be a figure of speech. Figurative speech does not demand a figurative meaning be given to words. Figurative speech includes different meanings given to words other than the most simple, plain, and primary (semantical), different sentence constructions other than the most simple (syntactical), and different forms of expression other than the most simple (structural).

In many peoples' minds “figurative language” is synonymous with a specific branch of figurative language: words whose meanings take on an unusual sense, other than the literal or simplest meaning. Thus, “the book of Revelation is full of figurative language.” While this is one KIND of figurative language, it is by no means the ONLY kind. We will be using the term “figures of speech” in the broader sense. We are the losers for not recognizing these many other kinds.

A. Common in our language

- “Morning” (Ellipsis)
- “That makes me climb the walls! (Hyperbole)
- “Give me half a cup” (Metonymy)
- “He thinks he is somebody!”
- “Shoot the breeze”
- “Pick up your room”
- “Shake a leg”
- “Purr like a kitten”
- “Iron will”
- “Don’t do that, or else...!”
- “The pot is boiling”
- “Flying along about 90 miles an hour”

B. Throughout the Bible

- Robert Young, *Analytical Concordance to the Bible*: “Hints and Helps to Bible Interpretation”...”Bible Idioms” - 71 divisions, hundreds and hundreds of references.
- James Macknight, *Apostolical Epistles*: 331 examples of “Hebraisms” with multiple references under each
- Robert Milligan, *Reason and Revelation*: about 20 pages in discussion of.

- E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible*: over 1,000 pages; over 200 categorical names of figures; nearly 8,000 references in all.
- D. R. Dungan, *Hermeneutics*: 175 pages out of 400 to the discussion of.

II. Why use?

- Add force to language; grab attention - e.g., **Lk. 14:26**, "hate"
- Line of demarcation - **Mk 4:10-12**

III. How Recognize?

- A. Become familiar with the various forms peculiar to that language. Some forms are common to many languages.**

E.g., "not...but": **1 Sam 8:7; Ac 5:4; Heb 10:25; Jas 5:12; 1 Pt 3:3-4**

- B. When taking the word or expression literally would be contrary to the rest of the scriptures:**

- Immediate CONTEXT
- Other scriptures - Law of HARMONY

E.g. **Mt. 7:1**, "judge" (synecdoche of genus; universal, genus, "judge," for particular, species, Hypocritical, hypercritical judging...see **v. 15; Jn 7:24**)

- C. When taking a word or expression literally would be contrary to common sense.**

E.g. **Ps 18:2; Mt 8:22; 26:26,28; Jn 6:54; Ro 12:20**

Common sense appealed to in perception of the Divine Will: **Mt 12:25-29; Ac 2:29**

- D. When it is said to be figurative.**

E.g. **Mt 16:5-12; Jn 2:18-22**

IV. Rules of Interpretation

- A. Context**

Considerations in exploring context...

1. **Who speaking or writing?**
Hab. 1:1... 5... 12... (Dialogue)
2. **Who addressed?**
2 Co 10:1; 11:19,21 (Sarcastic irony)
3. **Subject being discussed?**
Mt 16:5-12 (Metonymy)
4. **Purpose, or intent of writer or speaker.**
Mk 4:10-12 (Parables to conceal truth. Meaning may not be so obvious and cannot be arbitrarily assigned.)
5. **Inspired interpretation decides meaning.**
Jn 11:12-13 (Euphemy)
6. **Type of language: prose; poetry; irony; symbolism; etc.**
Rev 6:12-17 (Symbolism - a book of symbols. Cmpr. Ezk, Zac.)
7. **Parallel words, phrases.**
Ps 18:1 (Exergasia¹); **Prv 11:25** (Parallelism)

B. Harmony

Considerations in establishing harmony...

1. **Does the interpretation of the figurative language agree with literal accounts of the same thing?**

Jn 7:37-39
What *did* believers receive after Jesus was glorified?
 - Not HS baptism (all believers not receive it)
 - Not tongues on Pentecost (all believers not receive them)
 - Not miraculous powers (all believers not receive this either)
2. **Compare “synoptics”.**

Mt 10:34, “sword” - **Lk 12:51**, “division”
3. **Compare the same writer or speaker on the same subject in other places, whether in the same letter, other letters, or addresses.**

Jn 3:16 (“believes” - Synecdoche) - **Mk 16:16**
4. **Compare other writers and speakers on the same subject.**

Jn 3:16 - Ac 2:37,38; Ja 2:14,24

¹ Exergasia - “Words of the same signification are repeated to make plainer the previous statement: or to illustrate the sense of what has been mentioned before.” Bullinger, p. 399

5. Compare O.T. background of N.T. quotes.

Ac 2:19,20 - symbolism?

- **Is 13:10** - Babylon, **vv 1,17,19**. Note “day of the Lord,” **vv 6,9**
- **Amos 8:9** - Israel, **1:1, 7:10, 8:13,14**. Note “day of the Lord” **5:18,20**
- **Joel** [from whence this prophecy taken] **2:10** - a judgment on Judah & Jer that was “near,” **1:14,15, 2:1; 2:31** - “after this,” **v 28...Ac 2** - dest. of Jer.?; **3:15** - “in those days and at that time, when...” **3:1** - a judgment on the nations following the judgment of **2:31**. So, three judgments: (1) “near” - Judah & Jer; (2) “after this” - days of Messiah - dest. of Jer.?; (3) “in those days..” - final judgment on nations. Note “day of the Lord” with each judgment: (1) **1:15, 2:1,11**; (2) **2:31** (3) **3:14**.

6. Compare N.T. interpretations of O.T. prophecies.

Mal 4:5,6 (“Elijah” = Type) - **Mt 17:10-13**

C. Mistakes in interpretation

1. Beware of transposing the meaning of figures.

Because a figure of speech is employed to connote a certain idea in one passage does not mean that same concept is attributed to it when used elsewhere.

“Breastplate”

- righteousness, **Eph 6:14**
- faith and love, **1 Th 5:8**

“Sacrifice”

- bodies, **Rom 12:1** (*living sacrifice*)
- Christ, **Eph 5:2** (*death*)
- gifts, **Php 4:18**

“Seed”

- body, **1 Co 15:36f**
- moral conduct, **Gal 6:7**

“Leaven”

- doctrine, **Mt 16:6,12**
- moral conduct, **1 Co 5:6**

“Clothing”

- resurrection body, **2 Co 5:3**
- Christ, **Gal 3:27**
- new man,
- **Eph 4:24**

“Children”

- humility, **Mt 18:3**
- selfishness; innocence, **1 Co 14:20**

2. Beware of expanding the meaning of figures

An author or speaker uses a figure in a given context to connote a certain idea. To expand the application of that figure beyond the author or writer’s intent is to do so without warrant.

Lk 8:4...8 (parable) - Must one convert one hundred others to qualify as “good soil”?

1 Jn 5:1 (anthropopatheia², Bullinger, p. 889) - But, a child begotten without its own will being involved

Examples:

- “Once a child, always a child.”
- Unbaptized believer a “child of God” in prospect (Ketcherside)

3. Beware of mixing figures

Each figure is employed for a certain purpose in a specific context. If WE mix two or more figures and derive an amalgamated figure leads to confusion and misunderstanding. If the SPEAKER or WRITER does so, that is different for he is the originator of the thought. But that does not give US the right to mix figures contrary to the usage in the respective contexts.

Examples where the SPEAKER/WRITER mixed figures:

- **Jn 10:7,11** (metaphors) - Jesus at once both the “door” and the “shepherd” at the same time
- **Rev 5:5-6** - Jesus both “Lion” and “Lamb”
- **Rev 21:9-10** - the church is both a “bride” and a “city”

Example of ARBITRARY mixing of figures

Christ the “husband,” church the “bride,” God is the “Father,” Christians are the “children,” OT was period of “betrothal,” the “marriage too place on Pentecost!

CONC

Mk 8:14-21 - “Do you not understand?”!

² “...from *anthropos*..., *man*, and *pathos*..., *affections* and *feelings*, etc....This figure is used of the ascription of human passion, actions, or attributes to God.” Bullinger, p. 871.