Metaphor Production in Creative Writing

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The present research examined patterns of metaphor production in autobiographical and non-autobiographical creative writing contexts by experienced and novice writers. Subjects wrote brief descriptions of feelings and actions related to intensely emotional experiences. Support was obtained for the hypothesis that more experienced writers would display consistent patterns of figurative language production while novice writers would differ in their production of metaphorical language as a function of writing context. Support was also obtained for the generalizability of previous findings on verbal metaphor production to the writing domain—but only for novice writers.

The present study reflects an attempt at unifying and extending research findings from both figurative language and writing research domains. In both research domains, it is generally acknowledged that the experience of the author is critical to production (Flower & Hayes, 1977; Collins & Williamson, 1984; Gibbs, Kushner, & Mills, 1991). For example, Gibbs et al. (1991) discussed how the production of metaphors is often connected to the experience of its author. They noted T. S. Eliot’s poem Little Gidding in which people had to endure an interminable night. In this poem, “the dark dove with the flickering tongue” was a metaphor for a German dive bomber. This is clear because Eliot was in London during World War II and was subjected to German air raids.

1 Portions of these data were reported at the 68th Annual Convention of the Western Psychological Association in Burlingame, California, April 28, 1988. The authors express their appreciation to Donald Ross who was most generous with his time, insights, and creative writing students.

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Fainsilber and Ortony (1987), in one of the few empirical studies of metaphor production, used an autobiographical context to investigate the factors that influence production of figurative language. They found that people produced higher proportions of metaphorical language when verbally describing their intense internal feelings than when describing their actions. Note that the subjects in that study were instructed to verbally describe their own feelings and actions, thus making their production based upon autobiographical experience. According to Fainsilber and Ortony, two factors supported the use of metaphors to describe emotional states. The first was inexpressibility. Because of their subjective nature, emotions are difficult to express in concrete terms. Thus, because intense subjective feelings are rather difficult to express, people may require metaphorical language in order to convey the nature of such feelings (cf. Ortony, 1975).

The second factor that may have encouraged the use of metaphor in the Fainsilber and Ortony (1987) experiment was intensity. The authors suggested that subjects used more metaphors to describe intense feelings because metaphors are useful for capturing the vividness of such emotional experiences (cf. Ortony, 1975). It should be noted, however, that the authors acknowledged that their interpretations were somewhat undermined by the nature of the metaphors produced by the subjects. Their subjects produced eight times as many frozen metaphors (e.g., "I was bottling things up") as novel metaphors (e.g., "It was like a bright light was shining upward"). Unfortunately, they did not report a separate analysis with only novel metaphors included.

Fainsilber and Ortony's (1987) findings suggested two questions of primary importance to the present study. First, does the finding of enhanced metaphor production when describing feelings generalize to the writing domain? If so, writers should use more metaphorical language when writing about intense feelings generated in some situation than when writing about their actions in the same situation. Second, does this pattern of production exist only for contexts that are autobiographical in nature? Often, in creative writing, the task is to describe the feelings and actions of people who are quite different from the author. For this reason, we asked whether describing any intense feelings leads to heightened metaphor production or whether increased use of metaphors is found only in the context of describing intense autobiographical feelings.

Both metaphor research (e.g., Ortony, 1979) and writing research (e.g., Benton, Kraft, Glover, & Plake, 1984) led us to expect differences in the descriptions generated when writing in autobiographical vs. non-autobiographical contexts. From the social psychological literature, we