

# A Semiotic Theory of Tropes

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## *Abstract*

There are two interesting puzzles about tropes. They are literal nonsense, yet native speakers easily make sense of them. Moreover, despite the fact that tropes are literal nonsense, native speakers find them helpful in clarifying and enhancing meanings and sharpening reference. In this paper, there is an attempt to explain these puzzles through the use of theories of markedness and rank, as framed by Peirce's semiotic theory. Tropes are nonsense in that they tend to violate the implicit rules of semantic fields. These create puzzles and anomalies for the native speakers to resolve—abductions—and they do so primarily by certain markedness and rank operations. By neutralizing or bracketing categorical ranks, speakers can see, more clearly, the similarity between the salient or marked features of elements from disparate semantic fields. This results in a more vivid sense of the targets of such tropes. Markedness assimilation can help sharpen reference or help to focus distinctions that make things clearer. Markedness reversals can also help in the manner, but can also obfuscate when that is appropriate.

*Keywords: tropes, markedness, rank, Peirce*

There are two interesting puzzles about tropes. First, they tend to make sense out of nonsense. If someone wants you to “lend them a hand,” this would require a great sacrifice, with no prospect of getting the hand back, except through difficult surgery. If you “harden your heart” toward another, it's likely you will also die, since the heart could no longer pump blood. Violations of a language's semantic, referential, and grammatical rules create certain anomalies, incongruities, nonsense or, at least, puzzlement in native speakers. Setting aside grammatical incongruities, such as ‘then was is dog’, semantic anomalies, such as ‘The rock said hello’, can create puzzlement or nonsense for the listener, since rocks do not have agency, nor are they speakers of language. But this is exactly what tropes do. A trope, such as personification, illustrated in the song, *Good Morning*

*Starshine*, from the play, *Hair*, ('Good morning starshine, the earth says hello'), loses this semantic incongruity and makes sense. Despite this literal nonsense, English speakers at least are able to easily make sense of these statements.

Second, despite the fact that tropes spout literal nonsense, ironically, they often clarify the sense of things, and make reference more determinate, better than literal descriptors. "Lend me a hand" is much clearer than "I need some help," and "having a heart of stone" provides a more vivid sense of a person than several literal phrases could do. Sign systems create enormous efficiencies in the economy of information. As Edward Flemming (2004) notes, even at the phonological level the forces that shape language sound "need to minimize effort on the part of the speaker and minimize the likelihood of confusion on the part of the listener" (p. 232). If it is said that 'the president issued a statement today', it is unclear to which of many presidents is being referred. But if we say 'the Whitehouse issued a statement today', the reference is much clearer. Indeed, if a picture is worth a thousand words, tropes may be worth a thousand pictures. Tropes create clarity and meaning with an economy of information. As Orson Scott Card (1995) put it, "metaphors have a way of holding the most truth in the least space." Generally speaking, in considering the two major tropes of metaphor and metonym, the latter creates an economy of reference, while the former creates economies of meaning (Shapiro, 1983, p. 198).

How are these things possible—that a piece of literal nonsense can perform certain functions better than the literal expressions? Using Charles Peirce's semiotic theory as a framework, I will attempt an explanation of these anomalies through the use of the markedness theory of Roman Jakobson and his followers. Making sense out of these sort of semantic anomalies are, in Peirce's language, cases of abductions—attempts to resolve anomalies by proposing a solution. My thesis here is that the abductive process of sense-making of semantic and referential anomalies requires that the interlocutors execute certain markedness and rank neutralizations (bracketing), assimilations and reversals.

## 1. The Semiotic Framework

For Peirce, human semiosis is situated in a discursive community—what Peirce calls a *commens*, held among speakers and hearers (LW, p. 197). Its base for Peirce is the *collateral experience* that is shared in the discursive community (CP 8.179), gained through what he calls *coenosopic* observation, that is, observations gathered from the ordinary experience of dealing with things as they appear to be, and habitualized over time (CP 1.184). Regardless of the influence of particular discursive communities, signs perform certain core functions. Something functions as a sign when it is, first, about something else, encodes information about it, and in a manner that has a significant effect on the sign agent in terms of feeling, behavior, or thought (CP 2.274; CP 2.92; LW, p. 32; Liszka, 1996, pp. 18-19). Semiosis is this triadic relation among sign, as encoded information, object or referent as source of that information, and the interpretant as that

which translates that information in a manner that affects the sign agent.

Tropes are a semiotic phenomenon that performs these functions as well. It encodes information about something in a certain peculiar manner, and in a way that has a significant effect on sign agents. The trick is to understand the peculiarities by which it performs these functions, and what advantages it has over non-figurative language processes.

Although Peirce's trichotomy of icon, index and symbol is best known, he developed three different typologies to explain these three principal functions of signs. The first typology—*qualisign*, *sinsign*, *legisign*—describes how information is encoded in sign-vehicles through qualities, contiguous distinctions and conventional or natural patterns and regularities of such qualities and distinctions (CP 2.243-2.246). If, as Saussure argues, "in language there are only differences" (1905-1911, p. 120), then language encodes information in the inherent properties of these distinctive features, or in the relations among such differences, either through similarities or contrasts, contiguities and combinations. For example, in many languages, comparatives use progressively longer inflections to indicate changes in quantity, for example, 'great', 'greater', 'greatest'. Tenses are often inflected as well, such as 'play', 'played', 'will play'. Also it is typical for many languages to encode singular versus plural nouns with added inflections: 'boy/boys', 'girl/girls', 'Freude/freuden', 'chico/chicos'. Chinese does not have plurals in this sense, but increases the quantity of words (*mǎ* vs. *hěn duō mǎ*), and Japanese by doubling words in some cases (*watashi-tachi*). On the other hand, as we know, tonal qualities can serve as distinctive features in Chinese. A *qualisign* such as the blaring shrill sound of a smoke detector has a different quality from the melodic tone of a doorbell (ding-dong). The quality of the tone is a distinctive feature in which a piece of information can inhere. The fact that these form patterns in language suggests that sound systems in language are often legisemiotic. In English, for example, a non-native speaker can learn that, as a general rule, a plural is formed by adding /s/ to a singular noun. *Sinsigns*, on the other hand, work on contiguity of distinctions, so that they're timing and association with certain events can act as a distinctive feature. The fact that the fire alarm sounds NOW is significant, as opposed to its absence. The presence of a sign attached to a door, such as an EXIT sign, often indicates some signifying function.

The second, better known typology—*icon*, *index*, *symbol*—describes the way in which information encoded in the sign can refer to, represent, or indicate the sources of that information (CP 2.247-2.249). The shrill, deafening sound of a fire alarm has a quality that makes it distinctive; but, for most mammals with similar aural capacity, it serves to attract attention to the sound itself and, thus, when associated with something else, such as a fire or danger, it can indicate that association. Thanks to the fact that the fire alarm is sounding NOW on the wall serves as an *index*, referring to something that needs our attention directly; and, thanks to conventional education and training with fire alarms in the schools and elsewhere, we associate that sound symbolically with the possibility of fire.

The third typology—*rhema*, *dicent*, *argument*—describes how the information

about something encoded in the sign schematizes it for interpretation (CP 2.250-2.253). This three-fold division of rhema, dicent, argument, is apparent in the usual analysis of language into the lexicon, grammar, and discourse or, in logic, among terms, propositions, and arguments. By putting the information into a term in the language, or in propositional form, the information in the sign is prepared for interpretation, just as processes in the ear and brain prepare soundwaves by translating them into sounds with certain tones, loudness, timbre, and the like. The pragmatic maxim argues that interpretants perform the function of translating or unfolding the implicate order of the sign in its relation to other signs. The meaning of the sign emerges in this process. The meaning of a sign is its implicate order, its practical translations into other signs or, ultimately, into patterns of behavior. For sign agents such as human beings, signs may engender thought patterns (logical interpretants), or, evoke varying feelings (emotional interpretants), such as the way in which the quality of a musical tone, or a pattern of tones can evoke feelings, or the way in which certain signs engender action or behavior (energetic interpretants), for example, the way in which the fire alarm often leads to the action of exiting the room and the building.

By using a language's lexicon, the sign readies interpretation for a native speaker by implicating what John Lyons calls its *semantic field* (Lyons, 1977). A semantic field is a network of lexemes that are related by affinities, such as synonyms and parts of wholes, and contrasts of varying sorts. Brothers and sisters form a contrast set, as do red, blue, green, yellow. The part of the body associated with kicking is the foot not the elbow. Semantic fields are made coherent by a certain conceptual domain that organizes and differentiates terms at a higher level (Kittay, 1989, p. 33).

Rhemata also schematize for emotional interpretants. Calling a woman 'bitch' creates a certain emotional response, as opposed to 'woman'. Calling her 'lady' or 'ma'am' may also evoke certain negative feelings since it invokes terms that are pre-feminist movement. Rhemata also have energetic interpretants, much like the cartoon character, Homer Simpson's vocalization of 'donuts' moves him to eat them.

Dicents are syntagmatic combinations of lexemes as constrained by semantic and grammatical rules, and exemplified by well-formed grammatical sentences or the standard notion of proposition in logic. Propositions obviously have an implicative order. One logical interpretant of the proposition, 'Charles Smith recently died', is that that he was alive at one time. Propositions certainly have emotional interpretants, and performatives, such as "I now pronounce you man and wife" clearly demonstrate that propositions also have energetic interpretants as well.

Arguments are colligations or combinations of propositions, constrained by grammatical and logical rules. These obviously lend themselves to logical interpretants: If all human beings are mortal, and Socrates is a human being, then the logical interpretant is that he is mortal. Rhetorical arguments, as Aristotle noted long ago, have a *pathos* or emotional interpretant. 'Patriots would not defile the flag' has a certain emotional interpretant. Practical reasoning is a good example of arguments that lend themselves to

action: If I desire a good job, then it is necessary for me to get a good college education. Therefore, I should endeavor to go to college.

Altogether, the three typologies represent the three important aspects of any sign system: the expressive plane, how information is encoded, the referential plane, how something is referred to or represented by that information, and the sense function, how meaning emerges through signs by means of an implicate order, that is, connections to other signs.

So what does Peirce have to say about figures of speech in light of these three trichotomies of signs? Peirce does talk about metaphors, but unfortunately, he does not follow the framework of his three trichotomies, and only analyzes metaphor in terms of its representative or referential function, and does not mention either its expressive or sense-making function. As is well known, Peirce considers metaphor to be a hypoicon, a species of icon, along with images and diagrams. Images refer or represent by sharing the same properties as that to which it refers. Diagrams are cases where the relations among parts of the sign map those among the parts of that to which it refers. The metaphor, on the other hand, represents “the representative character” of that to which it refers, by “representing a parallelism in something else” (CP 2.277). More specifically, like any icon, it shows a similarity between things, but between things *of a different kind*. But it focuses on the *representative character* of the comparison between the source and target. The metaphor ‘iron fist’, compares things of different kinds by a similarity in their representative character—namely ‘hardness’. ‘Iron is particularly marked for its hardness, and for those who have collateral experiences of iron, this is easily understood. What is needed is some supplement to Peirce’s very thin account of metaphor, and I will argue here that the notions of markedness and rank as developed by Jakobson and his followers can help in this respect.

## 2. Markedness and Rank

It is clear from these sign typologies, that Peirce sees similarity, contiguity, and their conventional and natural patterns as core operators in these functional aspects of signs. Roman Jakobson argued this as well, but embedded them in a somewhat different framework. Following Ferdinand de Saussure, he claimed that there were two axes, two structural operators of language: paradigmatic selection of features among alternatives, and syntagmatic combination of features into higher order units. Selection and combination were the principal ways in which interlocutors encoded and decoded information in signs. In turn, selection and combination were governed by operators of similarity—or affinities—and contiguity (Jakobson, 1995, pp. 117-120).

Jakobson and his followers also noted at least two other important underlying operators that, in turn, constrained similarity and contiguity, ones I argue here are key to explaining how tropes work. These are the notions of *markedness* and *rank*. Markedness is an underlying constraint on selection, whereas rank is an underlying constraint on

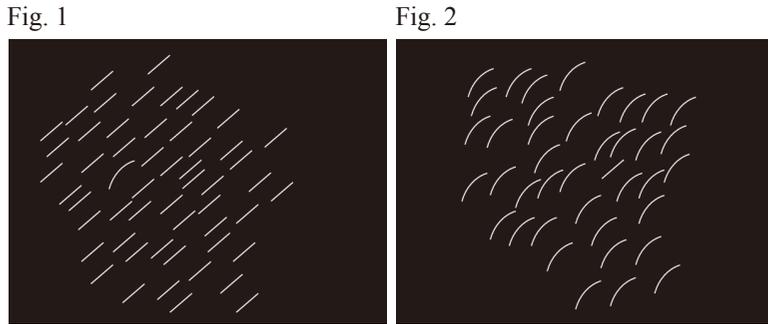
combination. Markedness is defined in several ways, most commonly as an asymmetry between contrasts (Trubetzkoy, 1975, p. 162), the presence or maximum of a certain feature, versus its absence or minimal presence (unmarked) (Jakobson, 1995, p. 136). In that respect, the marked unit is usually the most *salient* feature in a contrast set. From the framework of information, marked units carry more information or have more complex structures than their unmarked counterparts (Shapiro, 1983, p. 79). Jerome Bruner noted that Jakobson considered markedness to be the most primitive and important distinction in language (1984, p. 163). In this context, Jakobson specifically links these mechanisms of selection, combination, similarity, contiguity and markedness to Peirce's notion of the interpretant, understood as the way in which the implicate order of signs in a system of signs is developed (Jakobson, 1995, p. 120). Both Michael Shapiro and Henning Andersen, students of Jakobson, consider markedness as having an interpretant function: "the idea can now be advanced with some confidence that markedness is a species of interpretant, fully compatible in its own way with the system of interpretants established by Peirce" (1983, p. 17).

Marked and unmarked can be articulated in Peirce's terminology of breadth and depth. He claimed that the greater the breadth of reference for any sign, the less the depth of information that it can convey about those referents. The smaller the breadth the more depth of information can be conveyed (CP 2.419). We can describe all human beings in a certain way, for example, as having a face composed of eyes, nose, ears, cheeks, eyebrows, etc. However, in describing the face of any one person, we would need to provide more specific and detailed information about its size, shape, and other distinctive features. Generally speaking, the more unmarked something is the broader its reference, but the less depth it has, and the simpler its expressive features. The more marked feature is able to convey more specific information—more depth about fewer things—but usually at a certain cost of complexity in expression. The unmarked feature provides less information about more things and the marked feature provides more information about fewer things. For example, 'day' as the unmarked term, can mean a 24 hour period or just the 9 to 5 part of a working day, or any day of the week, including holidays. 'Holiday', on the other hand, is marked in that it represents only a subset of 'days', provides more specific information about what kind of day it is, and has a more complex expressive form. Chinese is unmarked in regard to tense. However, in most Indo-European languages, past tense is marked. In English, the present tense is unmarked since in some cases it can represent the past as in the historical present ('Peirce says...'), and the future, such as 'the bus leaves tomorrow'.

Some definitions characterize the unmarked in Gestalt terms as ground and the marked as figure. Other definitions characterize the unmarked as ground and the marked as figures, or, the unmarked as normative or typical of a category, the marked unusual or special, which allows the unmarked to represent an entire contrast set or category.

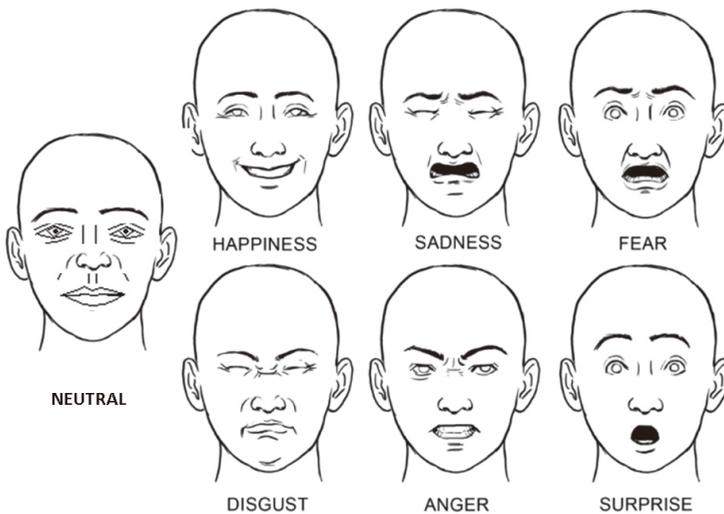
Because marked signs carry specific information, they tend to be more distinctive than unmarked signs. This can be illustrated with a visual example, based on the work of

Ann Treisman (1985).



In figure 1, the curved line “pops-out” in a background of straight, oblique lines, whereas the straight oblique line in figure 2 does not pop-out in the background of curved ones. This asymmetry marks the curved line relative to the flat line, and has more salience to the human eye than the flat line. To give another visual example that builds on this, consider these stylized expressions of what are considered to be the six primary emotions (Fig 3):

Fig. 3



As Zhang et al. (2015) note, “particular regions of the face are likely more salient or informative for recognition of facial expressions” (p. 616). The three most salient regions according to Paul Ekman and William Friesen (1978) are the mouth and lower face, eyes (including the bridge of the nose), and eyebrows/forehead.

One can view such facial expressions as syntagms, with each of the salient regions on the face as place-holders for a paradigmatic selection of particular features relative to that region (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4



For example, as Figure 4 illustrates, the smile—which is an upturned curve (the corners of the mouth being raised)—is selected from a contrast set of possible mouth shapes: the down-turned curve of the frown, the rectangle shape of anger, the more circular shape of surprise. Each of these can be considered marked, relative to the more neutral and unmarked expression of flattened lips. If the features of each salient region are compared, one can see how they form a certain contrast set that marks them relative to the more neutral unmarked feature, as well as to each other. The same is the case with the other distinctive parts of the face, such as the eyes, eyebrows and bridge of the nose.

*Rank* is essentially an organizing principle of features in a syntagm that determines which features can be co-present. Rank gets explained somewhat differently, depending on linguistic theory. In the structuralist-formalist tradition of Jakobson, distinctive features form hierarchies, in which their presence or absence will determine what comes next, forming an implicate order in the hierarchy. For example, Henning Andersen shows that the five vowels of Lezghian can be composed of distinct paths, with the superordinate feature being the absence of consonantal feature and the presence of a vocalic one, which can then be combined with the presence or absence of compact, grave, and flat features in a certain order. (Andersen, 1979, p. 379).

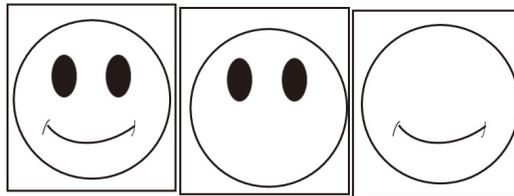
In Halliday’s systemic-functional theory of language, the notion of rank has a family resemblance to the structural linguistic notion. Language is ranked into levels, from the lowest (morpheme) to word to phrase to clause. Clauses, in turn, can be combined into complexes (2004, p. 9). Each rank is composed of features from the lower rank: “There is a form of order...that we can call constituency, whereby larger units are made up out of smaller ones.... We refer to such a hierarchy of units, related by constituency, as a rank scale...” (2004, p. 5). Thus the syntagmatic combination of features in a unit are selected from the lower rank features, which serve a different function in the higher unit than they do in the lower.

In the optimality theory of Alan Prince and Paul Smolensky (2004), rank is characterized as a certain precedence of one rule of syntagmatic combination over another. For example, combinations of phonemes into syllables will follow certain rules that have a rank order, such that the lowest rank will be violated before the higher ones, in order to accommodate language needs. Differences in languages are the results of differences in ranking of these basic rules. For example, typical rules of syllabic formation include a three-part structure of

onset—the initial consonant; a peak, usually a vowel, and the coda, the final consonant. Languages such as English violate the onset rule, whereas languages such as Yawelmani (Californian Indian) violate the coda rule, with the conclusion that in combining phonemes into syllables, the Yawelmani language ranks the onset rule over the coda one.

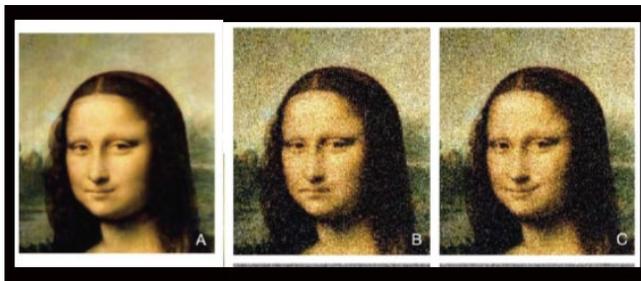
Markedness and rank can be seen as core mechanisms of sign economy. For example, as Figure 5 illustrates, it is possible for the smile alone to convey sufficient information for viewers to read it as an expression of happiness in these well-known emoticons. The emoticon has minimal information to refer to a face, but the elimination of the smile as in the second emoticon, makes the emotion represented more ambiguous. On the other hand, the smile alone is sufficient to express that emotion.

Fig. 5



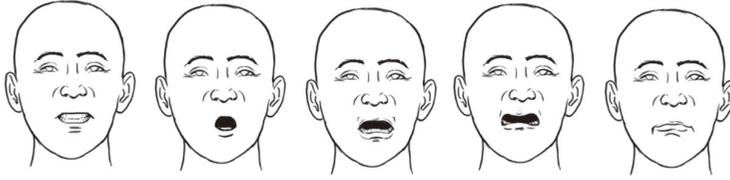
This also helps to explain the notorious ambiguity around the Mona Lisa smile. Is she happy or sad, or something in between? According to a study by Leonid Kontsevich and Christopher Tyler (2004), what makes the most difference in perception of happiness and sadness in Mona Lisa is the mouth shape. As illustrated in Figure 6, given the original in the first frame, if the corners of the mouth in the painting are made flatter, as in the second frame, the reading of sadness in the face is more prominent; conversely if the corners of the mouth are lifted higher, as in the third frame, then the perception of happiness is more pronounced (p. 1494).

Fig. 6



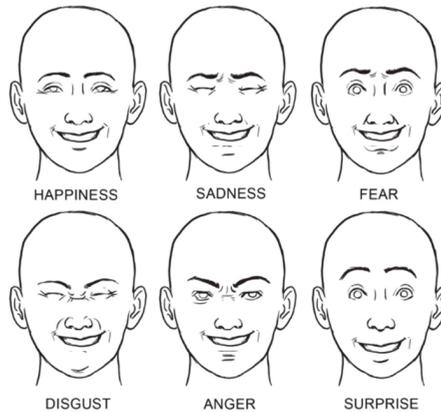
At the same time, the smile can be considered to have the highest rank among facial features for happiness in that it must be present for such interpretations to occur. Consider the case where, in the stylized faces above in Figure 3, all the features of the facial expression for happiness are kept constant, but the smile is replaced with the features representing the other emotions (figure 7).

Fig. 7



In this case, the emotional expressions are much more ambiguous. With the smile, the expression “pops-out,” much like the curved line in Treisman’s experiment. As further confirmation, consider the converse case, where all the facial features of the various emotions are kept in place, but the mouth feature for each emotion is replaced with a smile (figure 8).

Fig. 8



In most cases, people can still reasonably interpret the facial configurations as different expressions of happiness.

Before showing how tropes employ markedness and rank in order to sharpen reference and make meaning more vivid, let me talk briefly about some other organizing principles. These include what Henning Andersen and Michael Shapiro call *assimilation*, *neutralization*, and *reversal*, each of which—I will argue—helps to explain the various organizing rules in tropes. *Assimilation* is the tendency of a semiotic system toward iconic, specifically diagrammatic parallels, among its ranked levels so, just as marked aspects of the lexicon parallel marking at the morphophemic level in many cases. For example, in most Indo-European languages, the markedness in number, tense, comparatives, and diminutives parallel markedness in their morphology: boy, boys; walk, walked; great, greater, greatest; Jim, Jimmy. The singular is unmarked and its morphology is less complex than plural.

*Paradigmatic or markedness neutralization* occurs when the difference between an unmarked and marked selection is bracketed so that the unmarked term can represent the entire paradigm. English speakers tend to use the term ‘old’ versus ‘young’ when counting age in sentences: ‘He’s 60 years old’. In effect the use of the unmarked term *neutralizes*

the marked distinction between old and young. ‘Old’ can represent a specifically marked sense of not-young, but also can represent the superordinate category of age. Another example is length: ‘The board is 6 feet long (not short)’ (Battistella, 1996, p. 44; Van Langendonck, 1999, p. 568). This is also true for tenses: ‘I go to market tomorrow’. The present tense can represent the future tense, and in some cases the past, as in the historical present: “So I step up to the guy and tell him off,” in relating a story in the past ‘Young’ on the other hand, is marked and tends to represent a more specific spectrum of age.

*Rank neutralization* occurs when subordinate features of contrastive superordinate categories are combined syntagmatically—in effect, a sort of mis-categorization of features. For example, in English, personal pronouns that represent gendered things can substitute for neuter things, such as “She’s a fine ship.” Malapropism is another example, where a similar sounding word is used in place of the proper word, but the sense which the speaker intends is still conveyed: “They were dancing the *flamingo*,” instead of *flamenco*. We’ll see rank neutralization figures prominently in certain kinds of tropes.

The third organizing principle of markedness and rank is *reversal*. *Markedness reversal* occurs when the marked values of contrasts are reversed, usually contextually. For example, wearing a tuxedo to work is generally considered marked attire for business purposes, a suit and tie generally considered unmarked business attire. However, wearing business attire to a formal gala would reverse the markedness, and make such attire stand out in the crowd. During a campaign, a presidential nominee may present himself or herself on a first name basis to crowds of supporters, and avoid more formal uses of their name. But it would be marked use of naming, if the justice swears in the new president, using just the first name. Thus, the markedness values of someone’s name can reverse, depending on context: James Smith, James Robert Smith, Jim Smith, Jim, Jimmy. Whereas twenty years ago, it was not unusual to use ‘man’ as the unmarked term for gender (as in ‘one step for man, one giant leap for mankind’), there is currently a markedness reversal in using it to represent both men and women. Similarly for terms applied to African-Americans, so that ‘negro’, ‘colored’, used in their time as unmarked references, are now considered marked uses, with certain specific connotations.

*Rank reversal* is what Michael Halliday (2004) calls *rank shift*, one aspect of which is *upranking* or *upgrading*, where a lower-ranked constituent of a higher ranked level can serve the function of the higher ranked entity and, conversely, where the lower-ranked feature can represent the higher one (p. 9). In grammar, a higher ranked clause may substitute for a lower ranked noun, as in the construction, “*Being undecided* is a difficult circumstance.” Depending on whether the rank is hyponymic (a kind) or meronymic (a part of), such upranking or downranking is common enough. So in the rhyme, “four-and-twenty *blackbirds*, baked in a pie...when the pie was opened, the *birds* began to sing,” the superordinate term (birds) can substitute for the hyponym (blackbirds), without change of reference or meaning. Rank reversal can have certain emotional interpretants, for example, in the abortion debate in America, pro-life elements often label a zygote or fetus as ‘a baby’, even though the fetus is a part of the developmental stage of a fully-

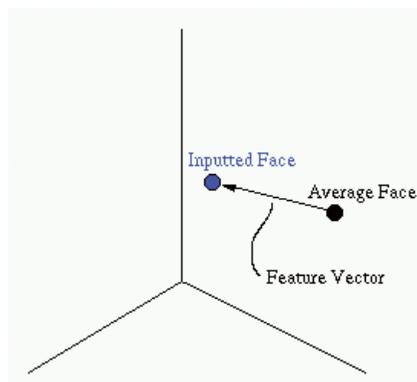
developed baby, which implies that abortion is the equivalent of killing a fully-formed child. Whereas the fetus may be upgraded through such rank reversals, calling human beings ‘animals’ is a rank reversal that usually downgrades the referent.

### 3. The Application of Markedness and Rank to Tropes

If assimilation, neutralization and reversal are basic operating principles of markedness and rank in language, tropes can be categorized and explained in terms of them. Let me begin with an example of tropes of assimilation. In assimilation, there is a mapping of markedness and rank relations in one rank level of the sign onto the other. Consider the visual trope of caricature, which might be considered a form of visual hyperbole. The purpose of caricature is to create a representation of a person that is immediately recognizable but in a manner that exaggerates certain facial or bodily features of the person—something that usually generates emotional interpretants such as humor or ridicule. Susan Brennan (1985) has done an interesting job of showing the basic operating principles behind caricature.

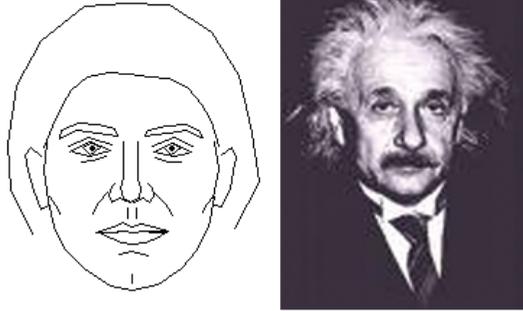
Brennan developed what she considered to be a relatively neutral, average or unmarked (Indo-European) face (a sort of mid-career Michael Jackson face), one that has many neutral, unmarked features. The face is the result of averaging the coordinates of the principal facial features for several dozens of actual faces. Using a methodology similar to what is called reverse correlation, one measures the distinctive features of the inputted face, relative to the average face. This can be represented as a feature vector in 3D space (figure 9):

Fig. 9



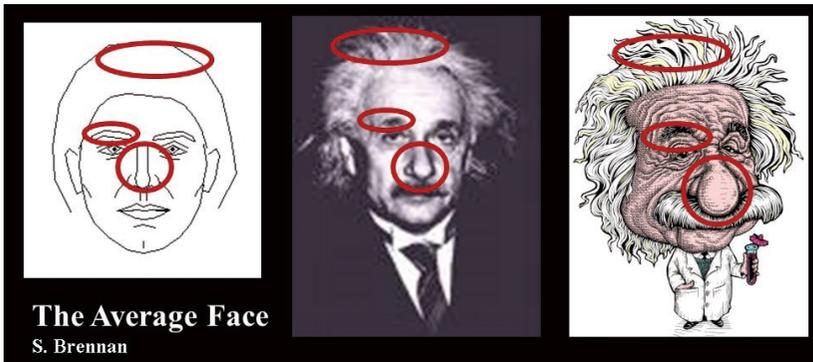
This also illustrates what Göran Sonneson (2016) and others have pointed out in regard to the concept of iconicity, namely, that photographs or portraits are not images in Peirce’s sense of the term—since they do not share the properties of the original—but diagrams of the positioning of facial features (p. 40). For example, in comparing photographs of Albert Einstein to the average face, it is clear that there are certain prominent, salient features that distinguish him disproportionately from the average face (figure 10). These constitute the marked features of his face.

Fig. 10



On the expressive plane, the caricaturist, either intentionally or subconsciously, exaggerates, that is, double-marks the marked features of the target face, so that there is an *assimilation* between the markedness of the face and the markedness of its representation (figure 11). Too much distortion and the referent of the caricature may not be recognizable, but given enough marking, the referent becomes even more recognizable. On the content or meaning plane, the caricature is a rhema that evokes emotional interpretants such as laughter, humor or ridicule.

Fig. 11



Caricature does not change the referent, but the sense of the referent through marking the marked on the expressive plane. There are additional markers used here, for example, the stereotypical lab coat, uniquely associated with the scientist. However, these are unnecessary redundancies, since the facial features can carry the reference alone.

Among recent examples of verbal hyperbole is the use of this trope by Donald Trump on the campaign trail in 2016. His frequent use of hyperbole (what he calls ‘truthful hyperbole’ in *The Art of the Deal*—which is an oxymoron) is typical in the sense that it selects the quantitatively greatest—the most marked—among relative comparatives in a claim. If the claim were true, it would tend to have verisimilitude with what it refers to: ‘the trout was about 12 inches long’. Instead the speaker selects terms such as ‘huge’ in place of the accurate length. Hyperbole tends to make what is claimed to be good, the best ever, and what is bad the worst; what is modest, grand, what is average, great, and

what is regular size, enormous. In Trump’s recorded hyperboles—which he uses quite frequently—he often selects words such as ‘greatest’, ‘best ever’, ‘worst’ (disaster), ‘total’ (failure), ‘absolutely’ (true), etc. Among his many hyperboles include: “the greatest jobs president God ever created”; the economy “is a disaster”; Senator Warren is “a total failure”; President Obama is “the worst president in American history”; the Middle East is “the greatest mess anyone has ever seen”; he will be “reducing taxes tremendously” and “create tremendous numbers of new jobs”; in Chicago they’ve had “thousands of shootings”; “our energy policies are a disaster”. The overall emotional interpretant effect on listeners is usually one of being impressed in the case of its positive use, and being startled in case of its negative use.

Another trope of markedness assimilation is vulgarism. Vulgarisms tend to make a marked referent more marked. Vulgarisms tend to select lexicon in the relevant semantic field that refer directly to a salient feature of a highly marked, socially tabooed topic, and liken the referent to something that evokes emotional interpretants of disgust or offense in some cases, but humor in others. For example, bodily functions considered best conducted in private are often targets of vulgarisms. Dealing with extricating the mucus from one’s nose is a function that in many societies considered to be impolite, and demands certain polite refinements if done in company. In Western societies this is usually done through the use of a handkerchief (which is a euphemism for the instrument used). A vulgarism such as ‘snotrag’ not only refers directly to the bodily fluid by selecting a base or vulgar term in the semantic field, but also selects a term to liken it to something of less value or refinement—a rag.

Euphemisms, on the other hand, are examples of markedness reversal, since their purpose is to unmark the marked. They refer obliquely or indirectly to something considered socially taboo or fearful precisely in order to avoid offense (Linfoot-Ham, 2005, p. 228). They tend to unmark the referent by metonymic contiguity, by using something peripheral in the semantic field, rather than something very salient and central (Liszka, 1990). ‘Handkerchief’ is a good example. Taken literally, someone unfamiliar with the language or culture would have no clue that this has something to do with extricating mucous from the nose. The fact that the nose is blown into the cloth and uses the hand accordingly is very peripheral to the sense of the practice. By calling it a ‘kerchief’, which is usually thought of as an article of clothing tied about the neck or head, also functions to misdirect the audience as to the reference and, thereby, soften the reference. ‘Bathroom’ is another common euphemism to describe a room that is used for urination and defecation, but can also be used for bathing or showering. ‘Going to the bathroom’ could mean either one. ‘They’re sleeping together’ as a euphemism for having sex, uses the place where sex takes place—the bed—and the function of sleeping in a bed, as way of indirectly referring to sex acts. Often euphemisms are used in order to make something lowly or demeaning sound better, as the Chinese “环境美容师” (environmental beautician) for a “清洁工” (sanitary worker/street cleaner). Other examples include ‘pre-owned’ for ‘used’, ‘hair-free’ for ‘bald’, ‘misspoken’ for ‘lying’. Some euphemisms

disguise the referent by using a term that sounds something like the referent, as in ‘Cripes’ for ‘Christ’ or ‘doggone’ for ‘goddamn’. Abbreviations are also used to disguise offensive referents, such as ‘pee’ for ‘urine’ or ‘Gee’ for ‘God’ (see Liszka, 1990).

Since metaphors and metonyms have been mentioned in the context of these lesser types of tropes, it’s appropriate to turn to their analysis. Let’s begin with metonymy. In general, metonymy is a case of *rank reversal*, where a part represents a whole, the hyponym represents the hypernym, or conversely (Shapiro, 1983, p.200). But it is usually not just any part that is selected, but a particularly marked feature in the semantic field. George Lakoff (1987) argues that metonymy is the case where a subordinate term can stand for the superordinate because it is a ... ‘stereotype’ (pp. 288-289). As Janda notes (1996), markedness correlates with the distance from the prototype of a category. A stereotype is something uniquely associated with the referent, as the mortar board hat for the professor or student, or, the crown for the king, white lab coat for the scientist, wheels for car, sail for ship, etc. As such, metonyms typically select parts that are especially marked, relative to their semantic field. The result is that metonyms perform their referential or representative function more efficiently and clearly than many literal descriptors.

In Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, Antony famously begins his eulogy of Caesar by saying, “Friends, Romans, Countrymen, lend me your ears,” the ear representing the entire act of listening, and ‘lending’ being metaphorically applied to the act of listening. Ears are most associated, most salient to listening practices, hence marked with regard to the semantic field of hearing and listening. When the captain says ‘All hands on deck’, the hands refer to the crewmen on the ship. Generally speaking, the part that is selected to represent the whole is marked relative to the context of the speech situation. It would not be due for Antony to say ‘lend me your hands’, nor for the captain to say ‘all ears on deck’. The hands are especially marked in the captain’s context, since the sailors perform most of their functions with their bodies, the hands representing the most salient part of the body in this context, as when we say ‘lend me a hand’. It generally refers to an order by the captain for all seamen of all watches to muster on deck immediately for some important or serious task. Using the marked rather than the unmarked to represent the whole creates a rank reversal. Normally, Antony might say, ‘please listen’, where listening entails all the subordinate features and behaviors associated with listening. But since the ear is a marked body part uniquely associated with listening, then it can represent the entire category of listening.

Consider the example of the metaphor-metonym complex, “he ruled with an iron fist.” The target in this case is the act of ruling, specifically the manner and style in which a ruler might rule. The metonym focuses on a part of the body, the hand and, more specifically, a certain disposition of the hand to form a fist. This comes with the understanding that a fist is usually formed to hit something hard, and generally associated with anger or forcefulness. Thus, as in most metonyms, as we have seen, there is a part in the semantic field of the person that represents the whole, but specifically a marked part of the whole. If it is said that ‘the king rules with his head’, this is another possible metonym that conveys a different sense of style in ruling, namely, a ruler who is clever or thoughtful in the way

of governance. Another workable body part would be the ‘heart’, as in ‘the king rules with his heart’. It is unlikely that any sense could be made of saying that ‘the king rules with his toe’. The toe in this case is not marked with regard to the target topic. There are only certain parts of the body that seem to work in this case, only because they represent more clearly than other parts, functions of being human that are relevant to ways of ruling.

Metaphors somehow transform semantic nonsense into a clearer sense of things. As Michael Halliday (2004) argues, “the metaphor reconstrues the model of our experience construed in the congruent mode into an incongruent mode that is further removed from our everyday experience....,” a sort of ‘rank-shift.’ (p. 646).

Metaphors perform a sense-making function by linking something better understood (the *source*) to something less understood (the *target*). As Michael Haley (1988) emphasizes, metaphor “involves understanding one thing in terms of another thing of a *different kind*....” (p. 423) George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue that metaphor has an important cognitive function of explanation and understanding, such that one subject in one semantic field is understood in terms of a completely different one. So a metaphor such as ‘A is B’ links two different domains, whereby ‘B’ (the source) explains the target (A). “Metaphor allows us to understand a relatively abstract or inherently unstructured subject matter in terms of a more concrete, or at least a more highly structured subject matter” (Lakoff, 1993, p. 42). For example, consider Marcia Muller’s (1988) description of a woman’s face: “Deep parenthesis around her mouth made her look older than her twenty-seven years.” A good metaphor such as this creates a more vivid description of the face, than a number of literal descriptors could do.

Metaphors work by a rank neutralization or bracketing of differences among disparate hypernymic categories in the semantic field (Shapiro, 1983, p. 200). By neutralizing or bracketing the sense of those categories, the constituent features of each semantic or conceptual category can be considered part of the same semantic field and so compared and contrasted. As David Sapir (1977) emphasizes, “Metaphor states an equivalence between terms taken from separate domains....” (p. 4). Eva Kittay (1989) argues that what’s important to note about this linking of different domains is their *incongruity* (p. 37), that is, literally, the metaphor does not make semantic sense. Metaphors do not work very well if the source is drawn from the same domain as the target, for example, spoon as the target and fork as the source, since they both belong to the same category of utensils. This incongruity between categories is usually thought of as a disruption in the normal combinatory or syntagmatic rules among semantic fields. In the example above, parentheses belong to the category of grammatical marks, the nasolabial fold is part of facial features and expressions, and so belong to two distinct semantic fields or conceptual categories in the *commens* of ordinary experience. But when these incongruities are bracketed, and the similarity between the marked feature of the parentheses (its peculiar shape) and the marked feature of the face (the shape of the nasolabial fold) can be emphasized. As Laura Janda (1996) puts it, “similar mapping operates between categories, producing the alignment of central members with central members and of peripheral

members with their marked counterparts” (p. 218).

Although the bracketing of incongruent semantic categories is necessary for a good metaphor, it is not sufficient. The mere juxtaposition of semantically incongruent categories does not usually yield very good metaphors, as catechresis illustrates. For example, a descriptor such as ‘green dreams’ coming from a surrealist poem does not work very well as a metaphor. What is required additionally to make sense out of the nonsense is some similarity between constituents of the two incongruent categories. But even that is not sufficient for a good metaphor, since the similarity must be between particularly *marked* features of those constituents. Consider for example the metaphor-metonym combination, ‘iron fist’, discussed above. This is literal nonsense, since the sentence combines two semantically incongruent categories: fists are not made of iron in any ordinary collateral experience. Rulers and metals do not have much semantic overlap. However, iron has a particularly marked characteristic for hardness or strength (Bickerton, 1969). However, bracketing those incongruities allows the marked feature of iron, ‘hardness’, to be compared with the marked feature of certain style of rulers, that is rulers that rule by brute force. On the other hand, if we were to say that ‘he ruled with a metal fist’, this does not quite work as well as a metaphor, since ‘metal’ has an unmarked sense. Metals can have a variety of properties. They can be hard or soft, malleable, corrosive, etc. Iron or steel, on the other hand, is marked for strength or hardness.

Whereas metaphors neutralize disparate categories, oxymorons often neutralize or bracket markedness among contrast sets within the same category. Certainly, a person can be living and a person can be dead, but it is nonsense to say they are both. Living is the unmarked status of a person and death their marked one. In ordinary discourse we can use living to describe both living and dead. For example, ‘he lived a good life’, or, ‘he’s no longer living’. It’s much harder to use death to describe living: ‘he’s no longer dead’ doesn’t quite work. The oxymoron brackets the markedness relations, so that the phrase ‘the living dead’ makes sense in describing very vividly a quality or lack of quality of living.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Despite the fact that tropes are literal nonsense, native speakers are not only able to make sense of them, but also find them helpful in clarifying and enhancing meanings and sharpening reference. For these reasons, they are frequently used and, over time, become habituated in a way that makes them seem part of literal discourse—as the case of so-called dead metaphors illustrates.

Tropes are nonsense in that they tend to violate the implicit rules of semantic fields. Semantic fields represent the collective sense and reference of the lexicon of a language, the speakers’ *commens*, as that is gathered from observations and understanding of the collateral experience of ordinary living. A semantic field is a network of affinity and contrast sets for any member of the lexicon. They are given coherent organization through conceptual categorization. In figures of speech the organizing rules of this categorization are violated.

In ordinary life, hearts are not made of stone nor fists of iron, the earth does not talk, people cannot be both dead and alive, and no one lends their hands normally to anyone. These create puzzles and anomalies for the native speakers to resolve—abductions—and they do so primarily by certain markedness and rank operations. By neutralizing or bracketing categorical ranks, speakers can see the sharpened similarity between a salient or marked feature of a constituent of one category with another and, if the one is better understood than the other, then that can clarify meanings. Markedness assimilation can help sharpen reference or help to focus distinctions that make things clearer. Markedness reversals can help in the manner, but can also obfuscate when that is appropriate.

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