John Benjamins Publishing Company

In defense of commonality

Rachel Giora
Tel Aviv University

Looking into our individual differences, either as a group (e.g., women; Israelis who support boycotts of Israel) or as a particular human being is important and interesting. Despite assuming commonalities, the persistent quest for the uniqueness of the individual, however, is instrumental in obscuring the reality that we are all a lot more similar than different. In the same manner, the search for the uniqueness of poetic language may also blur the fact that both poetic and non-poetic linguistic uses follow, in most part, similar cognitive principles, and may have similar aesthetic effects, whether in production or in comprehension. Good science underlines that which we have in common even while looking at our differences; at the end of the day, when our idiosyncrasy is filtered out, our similarities stand out quite clearly. Clearly, studying our uniqueness **only** as well as studying **both** our idiosyncratic and shared characteristics are political choices. Even as scientists, we are always faced with a choice.

Keywords: similarities, differences, political choices in science, poetic language

"Each of us is lots of them".
Rela Mazali (2001:62)

Ever since Western modernity,[1] but even more so, since the rise of the free market ideology (e.g., Beck & Beck, 2001; Taylor, 1989), the idea of the uniqueness of the individual has become a dominant creed not only in economy but also in education, the arts, and the sciences. The notion of our individual uniqueness and discreteness maintains such a stronghold in our perception of ourselves and others that we let go the possibility, in fact, the reality, that we are all, also, very much alike; this is true even when we are creative, as in literature and art. Indeed, it is a commonplace in scientific research that hypotheses predicting no differences are not worth pursuing since null results, even when contradicting earlier ones, are hardly publishable. Ironically, though, it seems a lot more conceivable, especially in the sciences, to look for similarities between humans and animals to the extent that at times one might get the impression that men are more closely related to chimpanzees or mice than to women or to any "other" of their conspecifics, of

Scientific Study of Literature 1:1 (2011), **104–112**. DOI 10.1075/ssol.1.1.11gio
ISSN 2210–4372 / E-ISSN 2210–4380

whatever ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, culture, religion, or impairment (see also Harding, 1986). In this article, which applauds the inception of the *Scientific Study of Literature*, I would like to say a few words in defense of commonality.

Poetic language — production

Given that the scientific study of literature is our focus here, it seems natural to begin by questioning the quest for the uniqueness of the creativity of poetic language. This may be paraphrased in the following way: Do we, as language users, obey different cognitive constraints when producing poetic language compared to when engaging linguistically in ordinary communicative interaction?

The belief that poetic language differs from ordinary common use dates back to Aristotle. According to Aristotle, deviating from "what is usual makes the language appear more stately… It is therefore well to give to everyday speech an unfamiliar air" (Aristotle, 350 BCEa Book 3, Part 2). Metaphor, for one, he maintains, differs from "the normal idiom" in that it is sophisticated and riddle-like: It elevates style "above the commonplace and mean, while the use of proper words will make it perspicuous" (Aristotle's 350 BCEb, Section 3, parts xxi, xxii).[2]

More recent findings, however, belie this view. Indeed, the assumption that poetic language deviates from the norm — from standard, non-poetic language — has not gained sufficient support. Rather, the prevailing literature on figurative language, for example, involving tropes such as metaphor, metaphoric simile, zeugma, synaesthetic metaphor, and oxymoron, shows that the cognitive constraints governing these figures, in various languages, do not distinguish poetic from non-poetic language (Gibbs, 1994). For example, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Shen (1995) show that the semantic structure of poetic and non-poetic tropes is the same, following less complex cognitive principles such as mapping from the concrete to the abstract rather than the other way around. This has been found to hold for metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Lakoff & Turner, 1989), metaphoric comparisons (Shen, 1995), zeugmas (Shen, 1998, 2008; Shen & Kotzer, forthcoming), synaesthetic metaphors (Shen & Gil, 2008; Shen & Aisenamn, 2008), and oxymora (Shen, 2007; and see a review of the literature therein). These instances suggest that we are not necessarily governed by different cognitive constraints when producing literary and non-literary figurative language; albeit different, these genres have a lot in common.

Poetic language — comprehension

As language users, do different cognitive principles apply when we make sense of poetry as compared to making sense of ordinary non-poetic language? Research shows that interpreting poetic and non-poetic language is guided by the same cognitive constraints. For instance, humans, whether typically or less typically developed, are sensitive to degree of salience rather than to degree of metaphoricity or poeticity (Giora, 1997, 2003). Thus, novel, nonsalient interpretations of unfamiliar expressions or utterances, whether literal or nonliteral, poetic or non-poetic, rely more heavily on right hemisphere (RH) regions than on left hemisphere (LH) regions. For example, nonsalient, novel metaphoric interpretations of metaphors taken from poetry were shown to be processed faster in the RH than in the LH (Faust & Mashal, 2007); nonsalient, literal interpretation of familiar idioms engaged primarily the RH (Mashal, Faust, Hendler, & Jung-Beeman, 2008); nonsalient ironic interpretations were processed primarily in the RH; this has been found to be true of both typically developed adults and LH damaged individuals (Giora, Zaidel, Soroker, Batori, & Kasher, 2000), as well as typically developed children and children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). The latter, however, invested more effort in the process than the typically developed controls and relied more heavily on attention to socially relevant cues (Wang, Lee, Sigman & Dapretto, 2006).

Similarly, our sensitivity to degree of novelty does not distinguish literal from nonliteral language. For instance, deriving the nonsalient literal interpretation of familiar idioms took longer than activating their salient idiomatic meaning (Gibbs, 1980; Mashal et al., 2008); interpreting literal optimal innovations — innovations such as *curl up and dye*, which automatically activate their alternative salient (though not necessarily literal) meaning (*curl up and die*) (Giora, 2003; Giora, Fein, Kronrod, Elnatan, Shuval, & Zur, 2004) — was as effortful as interpreting novel metaphoric interpretations which are also optimally innovative (Giora, Gazal, Goldstein, Fein, Stringaris, 2010). This sensitivity to degree of salience did not distinguish typically from less typically developed individuals, either, despite their differences. Although performing worse than typically developed controls across the board, both young adults diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome (AS) and non-AS controls exhibited similar patterns of behavior with regard to making sense of novel versus familiar stimuli, regardless of degree of metaphoricity. Indeed, both, AS and non-AS individuals, erred more on and took longer to make sense of both novel metaphoric and novel literal expressions presented in a supportive context than familiar metaphoric and familiar literal expressions presented in such supportive contexts (Giora, Gazal, et al., 2010). Similarly, both deaf and hearing participants took longer to read statements embedded in contexts biasing

them toward the nonsalient ironic interpretation than in contexts biasing them toward the salience-based (often literal) interpretation (Giora, Duke, & Fein, 2010).

Importantly, as indicated by Hasson, Avidan, Gelbard, Vallines, Harel, Minshew, and Behrmann (2009), it is possible to show that when filtering out idiosyncratic responses from less typically developed individuals' responses, a more typical response profile may emerge, which resembles the shared responses seen in typically developed individuals. Hasson et al.'s findings were collected from individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ADS) and non-ADS individuals during free-viewing of a popular audio-visual movie. These results show that, under conditions approximating real-life situations, it is indeed possible to identify idiosyncratic neurological responses. However, it is also possible to identify a more typical pattern of neurological activity, which ADS and non-ADS individuals share. Thus, on top of results indicating individual differences between typical and less typical groups, the study could also point to shared commonalities.

Contrary to expectations, then, often focusing on what we have in common rather than on how we differ could be "breaking news". More importantly, though, highlighting differences only blurs the fact that what makes us "unique" boils down to minute differences compared to what we all share.

Poetic language — aesthetics

Is poetic language, or more precisely, metaphor, unique in that it is ornamental or pleasing, as assumed by Aristotle and his followers? Poetics and pleasure extend beyond the metaphoric. In Giora et al., (2004) we ran six experiments showing that it is not metaphor that is likable but rather optimal innovation. As mentioned above, to be optimally innovative, a stimulus should involve a novel — less or nonsalient — response to a given stimulus, which automatically evokes a salient/coded response from which the nonsalient response differs both quantitatively and qualitatively. Our findings show that familiar (Hebrew) utterances, expressions, or collocations (*Body and soul*), which do not involve any novel nonsalient response, were rated as less pleasing; pure innovations (*Bobby and Saul*), which do not involve any salient response, were rated as least pleasing; variant versions of the familiar (*Bodies and souls*), which do not involve enough novelty, were rated as less pleasing than familiar expressions; optimal innovations (*body and sole*), however, were rated as most pleasing. This was true regardless of whether they were literal or figurative (see also Shuval & Giora, 2005) and despite the fact that they took longer to make sense of than the familiar expressions.

These optimally novel expressions and utterances are not necessarily poetic: They occur both in art as well as in everyday language (see also Brône & Coulson,

2010). For instance, *body and sole* is the name of a shoe shop; *weapons of mass distraction* was used in the media to deride Bush's lies about the war in Iraq; *GA-ZA-STROPHE* is the name of a documentary by Samir Abdallah and Khéridine Mabrouk, shot one day after the Israeli war against Gaza "ended", in January 2009; *greenwashing* was recently used by Max Blumenthal (December 8, 2010) to describe the original aim of planting pines on Mount Carmel, Israel, which was to conceal "the sites of the hundreds of Palestinian villages the Zionist militias evacuated and destroyed in 1948"). The aesthetic appeal of these innovations resides in the recoverability of the salient (*Body and soul*; *weapons of mass destruction*; *catastrophe*; *whitewashing*), which allows the nonsalient (whether literal or figurative) and the salient (whether literal or figurative) to be weighed against each other. To be aesthetic, then, one needs to be optimally innovative regardless of degree of figurativeness or poeticity.

Couldn't this be what Aristotle might have meant, after all? In *Rhetoric* he dismisses pure innovations as unattractive since they "puzzle us"; the familiar is also dismissed as unattractive since it conveys old information only. From metaphor, however, we can acquire new ideas, which is what makes metaphor attractive: "Now strange words simply puzzle us; ordinary words convey only what we know already; it is from metaphor that we can best get hold of something fresh" (Aristotle, 350 BCEa, Book III, emphasis added). In this sense, ("fresh", novel) metaphors make up optimal innovations.

Talking heads: Speaker–hearer alignment

With the development of technology, it is now possible to have (almost) direct access to evidence supporting the view that verbal communication is a joint activity (Clark, 1996), which is based on an alignment between speaker's and a hearer's minds and brains. While so far language production and comprehension have been treated separately, as distinct activities, Stephens, Silbert, and Hasson (2010) have been able to show that speakers and listeners mirror each other's brains when engaging in verbal communication. Using fMRI technology to record brain activities of both a speaker telling an unrehearsed real-life story and a listener's response, they found that the speaker's activity is spatially and temporally coupled with that of the listener's. Similarly, the listener's brain activity also mirrors that of the speaker's (with a delay, though). Stephens et al. have also located areas that exhibit predictive anticipatory responses. They show that the greater the anticipatory speaker–listener coupling, the greater the understanding. These results, then, demonstrate that it is shared responses in speakers' and hearers' brain activities that account for human communication.

Could this also be the case when we produce internal talk? Can we engage with ourselves as we do with others? Du Bois (2009) looked into the "interior dialogues" of a widower who lives on his own and who tends to speak aloud where others might only think the words to themselves. This speaker taped himself while at home alone, yielding a recording of his own routine dialogues with himself. Du Bois' analysis of this discourse shows that, even under conditions of solitude, sociality does not disappear. Au contraire. Self-talk follows the same real-life dialogic practices and cannot be divorced from sociality.

With the help of technology, we might soon be able to compare our actual conversations with our inner flow of thoughts when we, for example, sit alone and read literary works (see Gibbs, this volume). This, however, will probably not block our very common human urge to (verbally) share our experiences with others, who, while listening or watching, will mirror our own neural activity.

Good science, as well as good politics, will not indulge in differences exclusively and will not fail to bring out the fact that human individuals, albeit unique, are primarily very much alike. An adequate scientific account of how we produce and comprehend literature will strive to explain **shared** and **different** aspects of our human experience — linguistic and nonlinguistic, poetic and otherwise.

Contrary to expectations, despite claims for objectivity, science, not least the scientific research of literature, is not agnostic to politics. Science, in fact, scientists can affect us either by e.g., supporting dominant trends aiming at privatizing the individual and otherizing the "other" or by questioning them and suggesting alternatives. It is not a matter of what is true but a matter of choice, often a choice of perspective; not just seeing the "other" as similar to us but also seeing ourselves as similar to the "other": "Each of us is lots of them" (Mazali, 2001: 62).

Acknowledgements

This paper was supported by a grant to the author by THE ISRAEL SCIENCE FOUNDATION (grant No. 652/07). I also wish to thank Rela Mazali, Anat Matar, and Sasha Weitman for very helpful discussions and comments.

Notes

1. See also a review of Emile Durkheim's notion of individualism in Lukes (1969) and a discussion of Georg Simmel's view on the topic by Farganis (2000: 146–148).

2. This view has been widely endorsed (e.g., Chomsky, 1965, 1965; Grice, 1975; Ziff, 1964; Reinhart, 1976; Steen, 1993) but also rejected (Bickerton, 1969; Cohen & Margalith, 1972; Gopnick & Gopnick 1973; Jakobson, 1959; Reddy, 1969; for a review, see Reinhart, 1976).

References

Aristotle (350 BCEa). *Rhetoric*. Translated by Roberts Rhys W. The internet classic archive. Available from http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/rhetoric. html

Aristotle (350 BCEb). *Poetics*. Translated by Butcher S. H. The internet classic archive. Available from http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.1.1.html

Beck, U., & Beck, E. (2001). *Individualization*. London: Sage.

Bickerton, D. (1969). Prolegomena of a linguistic theory of metaphor. *Foundations of language, 5*, 34–52.

Blumenthal, M. (December 8, 2010). The Carmel wildfire is burning all illusions in Israel. *The Huffington Post*. Available from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/max-blumenthal/the-carmel-wildfire-is-bu_b_793484.html

Brône, G., & Coulson, S. (2010). Processing deliberate ambiguity in newspaper headlines: Double grounding. *Discourse Processes, 47*(3), 212–236.

Cohen, J., & Margalith, A. (1972). The role of inductive reasoning in the interpretation of metaphor. In D. Davidson & G. Harman, (Eds.), *Semantics of natural language*. Dordrecht: Reidel.

Chomsky, N. (1965). *Aspects of the theory of syntax*: Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Clark, H. H. (1996). *Using language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Du Bois, W. J. (2009). Interior dialogues: The co-voicing of ritual in solitude. In G.

Senft & E. B. Basso (Eds.) *Ritual communication*, 317–340. Oxford: Berg.

Farganis, J. (2000). *Readings in social theory: The classic tradition to post-modernism*, 3rd ed. New York, NY: McGraw Hill.

Faust, M., & Mashal, N. (2007). The role of the right cerebral hemisphere in

processing novel metaphoric expressions taken from poetry: A divided visual field study. *Neuropsychologia, 45,* 860–870.

Harding, G. S. (1986). *The science question in feminism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Hasson, U., Avidan, G., Gelbard, H., Vallines, I. Harel, M., Minshew, N. &

Behrmann, M. (2009). Shared and idiosyncratic cortical activation patterns in autism revealed under continuous real-life viewing conditions. *Autism Research*, *2*, 220–231.

Gibbs, R. W. Jr. (1980). Spilling the beans on understanding and memory for idioms in context. *Memory & Cognition, 8*, 149–156.

Gibbs, R. W. Jr. (1994). *The poetics of mind: Figurative thought, language, and understanding*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Giora, R. (1997). Understanding figurative and literal language: The graded salience hypothesis. *Cognitive Linguistics*, *7*, 183–206.

Giora, R. (2003). *On our mind: Salience: Context and figurative language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Giora, R., Fein, O., Kronrod, A., Elnatan, I., Shuval, N. & Zur, A. (2004). Weapons of mass distraction: Optimal Innovation and Pleasure Ratings. *Metaphor and Symbol*, *19*, 115–141.

Giora, R., Zaidel, E., Soroker, N., Batori, G., & Kasher, A. (2000). Differential effects of right and left hemispheric damage on understanding sarcasm and metaphor. *Metaphor and Symbol, 15*, 63–83.

Giora, R., Gazal, O., Goldstein, I., Fein, O., & Stringaris, A. (2010). Salience and context: Interpreting metaphors and literals by young adults diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome. Paper submitted for publication.

Gopnik, I. & Gopnik, M. (1973). Semantic anomaly and poeticalness. *Journal of Literary Semantics*, *2*(1), 57–64.

Grice, H. P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In P. Cole & J. Morgan (Eds.), *Speech acts: Syntax and semantics* (Vol. 3, pp. 41–58). New York, NY: Academic Press.

Jakobson, R. (1959). Boas' view of grammatical meaning. *American Anthropological Association Memoir, 89*, 140–145.

Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Lakoff, G. & Turner, M. (1989). *More than cool reason — A field guide to poetic metaphor*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lukes, S. (1969). Durkheim's 'Individualism and the intellectuals'. *Political Studies, 17*(1), 14–30.

Mazali, R. (2001). *Maps of women's goings & stayings*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Mashal, N., Faust, M., Hendler, T. & Jung-Beeman, M. (2008). Hemispheric differences in processing the literal interpretation of idioms: Converging evidence from behavioral and fMRI studies. *Cortex*, *44*, 848–860.

Reddy, M. J. (1969) A semantic approach to metaphor. *Papers from the Fifth Regional Meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society*, 240–51.

Reinhart, T. (1976). On understanding poetic metaphor. *Poetics, 5*, 383–402.

Shen, Y. (1995). Constraints on directionality in poetic vs. non-poetic metaphors. *Poetics*, *23*, 255–274.

Shen, Y. (1998). Zeugma: Prototypes, categories and metaphors. *Metaphor and Symbol*, *13*(1), 31–47.

Shen, Y. (2007). Foregrounding and communication: The battlefield between deviation and cognitive constraints. *Language and Literature*, *16*(2), 169–181.

Shen, Y. (2008). Cognition and poetic figures. In R. Gibbs (Ed.), *The Cambridge handbook of metaphor and thought* (pp. 295–307). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Shen, Y. & Kotzer, E. (forthcoming). The farmers sowed seeds and hopes: Element order in metaphorical phrases. In O. Fischer, & M. Ljungberg, (Eds.) *Iconicity in Language and Literature*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Stephens, G. J., Silbert, L. J., & Hasson, U. (2010). *PNAS Early Edition*, 1–6. Available from http://www.pnas.org/content/107/32/14425

Shuval, N., & Giora, R. (2005). Beyond figurativeness: Optimal innovation and pleasure. In S. Coulson, & B. Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, (Eds.) *The literal and nonliteral in language and thought* (pp. 239–254). Frankfurt: Peter Lang.

Steen, G. (1993). *Metaphor and literary reception*. London: Longman.

Taylor, C. (1989). *Sources of the self — the making of the modern identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wang, A. T., Lee, S. S., Sigman, M., & Dapretto, M. (2006). Neural basis of irony comprehension in children with autism: The role of prosody and context. *Brain, 129*, 932–943.

Ziff, P. (1964). On understanding utterances. In J. J. Katz & J. A. Fodor (Eds.), *The structure of language*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Author's address

Rachel Giora
Department of Linguistics,
Tel Aviv University
Tel Aviv 69978
Israel

giorar@post.tau.ac.il