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# UNIT 36 THE NON-LITERAL USE OF LANGUAGE

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## 36.0 OBJECTIVES

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The choice of suitable words with their literal meanings plays an important role in communication. But for effective communication and for making an impact on the listeners there are some non-literal features of language which are equally important. The objective of the present unit is to acquaint you with some such non-literal features of language. After having read this unit, you should be able to use those features in your communication to make it more effective and impressive.

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## 36.1 INTRODUCTION

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Language can be used literally and non-literally. When we say that there is a lion in the cage, we are using the word *lion* in its literal sense, i.e. in the sense of an animal. But when we say that someone is the lion of Punjab what we are in fact trying to convey is that he is as brave as a lion. Here the word *lion* has been used in a non-literal sense.

The non-literal use of language is also called the figurative use of language. The figurative use of language is a major device of rhetoric. Rhetoric is the skill of using language in speech or writing in a special way that influences or entertains people. It lends eloquence to speech. Rhetoric is a pervasive feature of oratory; all famous orators make plentiful use of rhetorical devices. Some of these devices are explained below.

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## 36.2 SOME RHETORICAL DEVICES

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### 36.2.1 Anticlimax

Anticlimax is the opposite of climax. The purpose of anticlimax is to achieve a kind of comic effect by suddenly presenting an absurd or trivial idea after an elevated idea has been presented. Look at the following example of anticlimax:

**Here thou, great Anna! whom three Realms obey,  
Dost sometimes counsel take – and sometimes Tea.**

### 36.2.2 Antithesis

The prefix *anti-* means ‘opposed to’ or ‘against’. When two sets of words or meanings are put in opposition or contrast, we have a ‘thesis’ and an ‘antithesis’. The following examples will make this clear:

**To err is human, to forgive divine.  
Speech is silver, but silence is gold.  
The virtuous shall prosper, and the evil shall perish.  
Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice.  
Crafty men condemn studies; simple men admire them; and wise  
men use them.**

Antithesis is used for emphasis. It is marked by parallelism in grammatical structure.

### 36.2.3 Epigram

A statement which is polished, condensed, and pointed is usually referred to as an epigram. This word is also used for phrases that express an idea in a clever or amusing way. The following examples will clarify the point.

**History repeats itself. Historians repeat each other.  
The only sure way to double your money is to fold it.**

Epigrammatic statements are an essential feature of the language of advertisements. They give punch to the slogans for promoting a product. The following slogan is from a bank’s advertisement encouraging people to invest their money in term deposits.

**Your money grows while you sleep.**

### 36.2.4 Euphemism

This is a Greek word and its literal meaning is “to speak well”. In day-to-day life we have to refer to several things and ideas which might be terrifying, or offensive or disagreeable according to our social norms. So, to refer to them we use a term which is vague or less direct. The most common examples are the phrases that we use for death. Instead of saying “the man died yesterday” we say “the man passed away yesterday”. An insurance agent will always say “if something happens to

you". In fact, what he means to say is that "if you die". Some more examples are given below:

*Mistress* for "concubine"

*Special education* for "education of children with learning problems"

*Physically challenged* for deaf, dumb, blind or otherwise physically handicapped persons

### 36.2.5 Hyperbole

Hyperbole is a Greek word which means 'overstatement'. It refers to our tendency to exaggerate. For example, everyday we get caught in traffic jams. Referring to a particular traffic jam, a person may thus express his annoyance:

**Today I had to waste the whole day in a jam at MG Road.**

He might have been caught in the jam for half-an-hour, but his annoyance at it was so great that he exaggerates this. We exaggerate to convey the seriousness of a fact or for comic effect too. Referring to the speed at which one runs, a person may say:

**He runs so fast that you can not race with him even if you ride on a rocket.**

This exaggerated statement achieves two purposes – one, the fact that he runs **very fast** is conveyed to the listener, and two, it is conveyed *emphatically* and *comically*.

In literature this figure of speech is used quite frequently. Look at the following passage from Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, in which Hamlet compares his love for Ophelia with that of her brother for her. Mark the hyperbole.

**I loved Ophelia: forty thousand brothers  
Could not, with their quantity of love,  
Make up my sum.m1**

Lady Macbeth, suffering from the guilt of having goaded Macbeth to murder the King, expresses the agony of her soul in hyperbole:

**No; this my hand will rather  
The multitudinous seas incarnadine  
Making the green one red.**

(*incarnadine* means *to colour*)

### 36.2.6 Irony

In irony, a statement means just the opposite of its literal meaning. A very beautiful example of irony comes from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. In this play Antonio calls Brutus an honourable man. The word 'honourable' here is intended to mean just its opposite.

**Here under leave of Brutus and the rest  
(For Brutus is an honourable man:  
So are they all, all honourable men)  
Come I to speak in Caesar's funeral.**



**He was my friend, faithful and just to me;  
But Brutus says he was ambitious,  
And Brutus is an honourable man.**

### 36.2.7 Litotes

In Litotes an affirmative statement is made by negating its opposite. The effect of litotes is that it suggests a strong expression by means of a weaker one.

**He is a citizen of no mean city.**

What the speaker wants to convey is that 'he is a citizen of a great city'. Some more examples are given below:

**The man is no fool (i.e. very clever).**

**He was not a little (i.e. greatly) surprised.**

In the following extract from one of the plays of Shakespeare, a character very beautifully describes his wound in terms of Litotes:

**No, 't is not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church door but 't is enough, 't will serve.**

### 36.2.8 Metonymy

In metonymy, an object or idea is referred to by the name of something with which it is generally associated. The following examples will clarify the point.

**The Bench (i.e. the judges) delivered its judgment on the crime.**

**The Crown (i.e. the King) of England has been on a royal visit to America.**

**The whole city (i.e. almost all the people of the city) watched the exciting cricket match.**

**I have been reading Shakespeare (i.e. the works of Shakespeare) these days.**

### 36.2.9 Oxymoron

Oxymoron refers to a phrase that combines two contradictory qualities or ideas; since the qualities or ideas seem to be opposite of each other, the idea appears to be impossible. Look at the following phrases that can be termed oxymoron:

**A deafening silence**

**Cruel kindness**

**Love is the wisdom of the fool and folly of the wise.**

### 36.2.10 Paradox

A paradox refers to a person, thing or situation that has two opposite features and therefore seems strange. It also refers to a statement that contains two opposite ideas which make it seem impossible or unlikely, although it may be true. Some examples of paradox are given below:

**He is a loner who loves the company of strangers.**

**He is a comedian whose personal life is very unhappy.**

**This poor country is rich in natural resources.**

### 36.2.11 Pun

Some words have two or more than two meanings. When used in a proper context, such words may give rise to two or more interpretations of the statement, though the speaker has only one meaning in mind. Such use of words is done deliberately by the speaker.

The word *grave* means 'a place in the ground where a dead person is buried'. Another meaning of *grave* is 'very serious'. In the following example, the use of the word *grave* gives rise to a humorous situation as it can be interpreted in both its meanings of *serious* or *dead*.

**Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave man.**

Some more examples of this kind are given below. The speaker, in all these examples, plays on the two meanings of the italicized words.

**You say that you are studying trees. What *branch* of this subject do you find most interesting?**

**Life depends on the *liver*.**

Another kind of pun is when the speaker plays on the meanings of two words with almost the same pronunciation, as in the following examples:

**Why are beautiful girls like hinges?**

**Because they are a thing to adore.**

The word *adore* means *to love someone very much*; but it sounds like *a door*. The humour here lies in the fact that the listener may take *adore* as *a door* which will match the word *hinges* in the first line of the statement.

You will find lot of puns in newspaper headlines.

### 36.2.12 Rhetorical Questions

A rhetorical question is a question in form. But it functions not like a question but forceful statement. The emphasis carried by a rhetorical question is even greater than a direct statement. For example, if reach home late your mother may make the following statement:

This is not the time to come home.

But she may also choose to tell you the same thing more emphatically. So, she may use the following rhetorical question:

Is this the time to come home?

She does not require an answer to this question. In fact, she is warning you that you should be more careful in the observance of the time of coming home. A rhetorical question is asked but no answered is expected.

A rhetorical question may be positive or negative. If it is positive, it functions as a strong negative statement; and if it is negative, it functions as a strong positive statement.

Positive:

Is that any way to talk? (That is certainly not the way to talk.)

Can anyone criticize this act of charity? (No one can on any account criticize this act of charity.)

Negative:

Is no one going to help me out of this problem? (Certainly there is someone who will help me out of this problem.)

A rhetorical question is generally used in a persuasive discourse. The speaker normally uses the rising intonation of a yes-no question.

You will enjoy reading the following passage from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. You may notice that the passage contains a set of rhetorical questions. The effect of these questions on the reader is certainly much more than that of statements:

**If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not avenge?**

### 36.2.13 Simile and Metaphor

When two dissimilar objects are compared, it is called a simile. The comparison is made between the two with respect to the common features that they share. The words *like*, *as* or *so* are used in a simile. For example:

**He is as brave as a lion.**

**Her skin shines like the moon.**

**How far that little candle throws his beams!**

**So shines a good deed in a naughty world. (Shakespeare)**

In a metaphor also a comparison is made between two dissimilar things, but the likeness between the two is not clearly stated. It is only suggested. For example, when we say "He fought like a lion", we are using a simile; but when the same idea is expressed as "He was a lion in the fight", we are using a metaphor. A few examples of metaphor are given below:

**The camel is the ship of the desert.**

**Life is a dream.**

**Life is a journey.**

**Life is a bubble.**

Comparing the simile and the metaphor, it is said that a simile is an expanded metaphor and a metaphor is a contracted simile. That is, if we say "The camel in a desert is like a ship in an ocean", we are using a simile; but when we say "The camel is the ship of the desert", we are using a metaphor.

### 36.2.14 The Transferred Epithet

When an epithet is transferred from its proper word to another that is closely associated with it, it is a case of transferred epithet. For example, in the following sentence, the adjective *sleepless* refers to the subject *he* but it is associated with *night*.

**He passed a sleepless night.**



✓ Check Your Progress 1

Name the rhetorical devices used in the following statements:

1. The more haste, the less speed.
2. I must be taught my duty, and by you.
3. He makes no friend, who never made a foe.
4. Fools who came to scoff, remained to pray.
5. The cup that cheers but not inebriates.
6. Hasten slowly.
7. Curses are like chickens; they come home to roost.
8. A thousand years are as yesterday when it is past.
9. We had nothing to do, and we did it very well.
10. Language is the art of concealing thought.
11. He followed the letter, but not the spirit of the law.
12. One truth is clear: whatever is, is right.
13. Labour, wide as the earth, has its summit in heaven.
14. They were swifter than eagles; they were stronger than lions.
15. Swiftly flies the feathered death.
16. Youth is full of pleasure, age is full of care.
17. The naked every day he clad, when he put on his clothes.
18. Sceptre and crown  
Must tumble down,  
And in the dust be equal made  
With the poor crooked scythe and spade.
19. I thought ten thousand swords must have leapt from their scabbards to  
avenge a look that threatened her with insult.
20. His honour rooted in dishonour stood,  
And faith unfaithful kept him falsely true.
21. They speak like saints, and act like devils.
22. Speech was given to man conceal his thoughts.
23. But still fought on, nor knew that he was dead!
24. He who praises everybody praises nobody.
25. Be wise with speed;  
A fool at forty is a fool indeed.

## 36.3 SOME FAMOUS SPEECHES

### 36.3.1 Edmund Burke: The Impeachment of Warren Hastings

Now, to see how these devices of rhetoric are used by an expert you will find below an excerpt from the speech of Edmund Burke (1727-1797), a British statesman. Edmund Burke was a powerful orator. The devices used by an expert orator are often seen in his prose. To influence his listeners, Edmund Burke freely uses such devices as asking questions, repeating the same phrase, and skilful variation in sentence construction and sentence length.

#### *The Impeachment of Warren Hastings*

My lords, what is it that we want here to a great act of national justice? Do we want a cause my lords? You have the cause of oppressed princes, of undone women of the first rank, of desolated provinces, and of wasted kingdoms.

Do you want a criminal, my lords? When was there so much iniquity ever laid to the charge of anyone? No, my lords, you must not look to punish any other such delinquent from India. Warren Hastings has not left substance enough in India to nourish such another delinquent.

My lords, is it a prosecutor you want? You have before you the Commons of Great Britain as prosecutors; and, I believe, my lords, that the sun in his beneficent progress round the world does not behold a more glorious sight than that of men, separated from a remote people by the material bounds and barriers of nature, united by the bond of a social and moral community; all the Commons of England resenting, as their own, the indignities and cruelties that are offered to all the people of India.

Do we want a tribunal? My lords, no example of antiquity, nothing in the modern world, nothing in the range of human imagination, can supply us with a tribunal like this. My lords, here we see virtually in the mind's eye that sacred majesty of the crown, under whose authority you sit, and whose power you exercise. We see in that invisible authority, what we feel in reality and life, the beneficent powers and protecting justice of his Majesty. We have here the heir-apparent to the crown, such as the fond wishes of the people of England wish an heir-apparent of the crown to be. We have here all the three branches of the royal family in a situation between majesty and subjection, between the sovereign and the subject – offering a pledge in that situation for the support of the rights of the Crown and the liberties of the people, both which extremities they touch. My lords, we have a great hereditary peerage here; those who have their own honours, the honour of their ancestors, and of their posterity to guard; and who will justify, as they have always justified, that provision in the Constitution by which justice is made hereditary office. My lords, we have here a new nobility who have risen and exalted themselves by various merits, by great military services, which have extended the fame of this country from the rising to the setting sun: we have those who by various civil merits and various civil talents have been exalted to a situation which they well deserve, and in which they well justify the favour of their sovereign, and the good opinion of their fellow subjects, and make them rejoice to see those virtuous characters that were the other day upon a level with them, now exalted above them in rank, but feeling with them in sympathy what they felt in common with them before. We have persons exalted from the practice of the law, from the place in which they administered high though subordinate justice, to a seat here, to enlighten with their knowledge and to strengthen with their votes those principles which have distinguished the courts in which they have presided.



My lords, you have here also the lights of our religion; you have the bishops of England. My lords, you have the true image of the primitive church in its ancient form, in its ancient ordinances, purified from the superstitions and the vices which a long succession of ages will bring upon the best institutions. You have the representatives of that religion which says that their God is love, that the very vital spirit of the institution is charity, a religion which so much hates oppression, that when the God whom we adore appeared in human form, he did not appear in a form of greatness and majesty, but in sympathy with the lowest of the people, and thereby made it a firm and ruling principle that their welfare was the object of all government; since the person, who was the Master of Nature, chose to appear himself in a subordinate situation. These are the considerations which influence them, which animate them, and will animate them, against all oppression; knowing, that He who is called first among them, and first among us all, both of the flock that is fed and of those who feed it, made Himself "the servant of all".

My lords, these are the securities which we have in all the constituent parts of the body of this house. We know them, we reckon, we rest upon them, and commit safely the interests of India and of humanity into your hands. Therefore, it is with confidence that, ordered by the Commons, I impeach Warren Hastings, Esq., of high crimes and misdemeanours.

I impeach him in the name of the Commons of Great Britain in Parliament assembled, whose parliamentary trust he has betrayed.

I impeach him in the name of all the Commons of Great Britain, whose national character he has dishonoured.

I impeach him in the name of the people of India, whose laws, rights, and liberties he has subverted, whose properties he has destroyed, whose country he has laid waste and desolate.

I impeach him in the name and by virtue of those eternal laws of justice which he has violated.

I impeach him in the name of human nature itself, which he has cruelly outraged, injured, and oppressed in both sexes, in every age, rank, situation, and condition of life.

Now that you have read the text given above, consider the following points:

- How do the first four paragraphs begin?
- Edmund Burke poses a question in each of the first four paragraphs and then goes on to answer the questions in a very forceful style. He obviously poses these questions to attract the attention of the listeners.
- In the first paragraph, notice how he has used parallel constructions like *of oppressed princes, of undone women of the first rank, of desolate provinces, and of wasted kingdoms*.
- Read the fourth paragraph and make a list of the clauses which have similar pattern beginning with 'we have'.
- In the fifth paragraph he takes recourse to repeating the same clause beginning *I impeach him*. He uses this device to influence his listeners and make an impression on them about the severity of Warren Hastings' misdeeds.

### 36.3.2 Martin Luther King: I have a Dream

Given below is Martin Luther King's most famous sermon which he gave on August 20, 1963, to 200,000 people gathered before the Lincoln Memorial,

Washington, D.C. See how he repeats the same clause pattern to achieve the desired effect. Find out on your own what other features make this sermon so impressive.

### *I Have A Dream*

I have a dream  
That one day  
This nation will rise up  
And live out the true meaning of its creed  
"We hold these truths to be self-evident,  
That all men are created equal."

I have a dream  
That one day  
Even the state of Mississippi  
A state sweltering with the heat of oppression  
Will be transformed  
Into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream  
That my four little children  
Will one day live in a nation  
Where they will not be judged  
By the colour of their skin  
But by the content of their character.

I have a dream  
That one day  
Every valley shall be exalted  
Every hill and mountain shall be made low,  
The rough places will be made plain,  
And the crooked places will be made straight,  
And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed  
And all flesh shall see it together.  
This is our hope.

Reading some of the speeches of Jawaharlal Nehru, Swami Vivekananda, and Abraham Lincoln will give you an idea how these master-orators exploit language for making powerful speeches.

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## 36.4 LET US SUM UP

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Non-literal features of language like anticlimax, antithesis, irony, paradox, oxymoron etc make the language effective and influential. We have seen two examples in which the speaker has made free use of some non-literal features to convey his ideas with great conviction and effectiveness. One is The Impeachment of Warren Hastings by Edmund Burke. In his speech Edmund Burke has freely used questions, parallel constructions and repetition of the same clause pattern to convey the seriousness of the matter. The second example is I Have a Dream by Martin Luther King. Through repetition and use of the same clause pattern Martin Luther King has been able to make his sermon inspiring.

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## 36.5 FURTHER READING

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You may read the following speeches / prose texts for further examples of the use of non-literal features of language.

1. *Abraham Lincoln's address at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania*

This is the famous speech where Lincoln defines democracy as the government of the people, by the people, for the people.

2. *Jawaharlal Nehru's speech delivered in the Constituent Assembly, on August 14, 1947.*

This speech of Nehru contains such inspiring sentences like 'Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny' and 'At the stroke of midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom'.

3. *Jawaharlal Nehru's speech informing the nation about the death of Mahatma Gandhi.*

This speech is remembered for such memorable sentences as "I do not know what to say and how to say it, but Bapu is no more" and "The light has gone out of our life".

4. *Swami Vivekananda's addresses at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago, 1893.*

While reading the six speeches that he gave at the Parliament of Religions, you should notice certain points. How does Swamiji address his audience? What kind of language does he use? Is it a simple, everyday language, or is it very complicated and abstruse? Is it a technical language or is it a familiar language? Are the sentences long or do they tend to be short? What sort of words does Swamiji use? These questions will give you an idea of these talks as examples of rhetoric and communicative skills.

5. Shakespeare's works are one of the finest examples of rhetoric. It would be a good idea if you read some extracts from at least two of his plays – *Julius Caesar*, and *The Merchant of Venice*. In *Julius Caesar*, read Antonio's speech which he gave at Caesar's funeral. In *The Merchant of Venice*, read the court scene in which the trial of Antonio is held.

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## ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

1. Epigram
2. Irony
3. Epigram
4. Antithesis
5. Metonymy
6. Oxymoron
7. Simile
8. Hyperbole
9. Paradox
10. Epigram



11. Antithesis
12. Irony
13. Simile
14. Hyperbole
15. Metaphor
16. Antithesis
17. Pun
18. Metonymy
19. Hyperbole
20. Oxymoron
21. Antithesis
22. Epigram
23. Hyperbole
24. Paradox
25. Pun