



# A psycholinguistic approach to construction figures

## Call for papers

Faculté des Lettres || Sorbonne université

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## Overview

This workshop will take place at the Université de la Sorbonne in November 2019. It will bring together psycholinguists, neurolinguists and stylisticians to study the specific figures of speech called *construction figures* or *figures based on construction*.

**Psycholinguistics and stylistics share common objects.** Stylistics is defined today as “the formal study of texts in regard to their literary aspect” (MOLINIÉ 1992). It seeks to identify some remarkable linguistic configurations recognized and labelled as *figures of speech*. Among these, the **figures of construction** concern “the way the words are combined and arranged in the sentence” (FONTANIER 1968 [1827]). This category comprises phenomena such as :

- *anacoluthon* (unexpected discontinuity within the sentence (1));
- *hyperbaton* (syntactic appendage (2));
- *amphibology* (syntactically ambiguous sentence (3));
- *apo koinou* or “construction louche” (sentences sharing a syntactic pivotal component (4)).

- (1) a. Ô ciel ! Plus j’examine, et plus je le regarde, c’est lui. (Racine)  
b. Le nez de Cléopâtre, s’il eût été plus court, la face du monde aurait changé. (Pascal)
- (2) a. Si on la questionnait elle dirait qu’elle s’y repose. De la fatigue d’être arrivée là. De celle qui va suivre (Duras).  
b. Albe le veut, et Rome; il faut leur obéir. (Corneille)
- (3) Elle a fini sa thèse sur l’île de Pâques.
- (4) Je n’aime pas les enfants sont toute ma vie. (publicité, cit. CORMINBŒUF 2012)

This kind of utterances is not unfamiliar to psycholinguists and neurolinguists, who work on stimuli sometimes very similar to these configurations, but who do not describe them as figures of speech. This is particularly true for scientists working on:

- long-distance dependencies (FUTRELL & AL. 2015)
- syntactic processing of ambiguities (especially with *garden path sentences* (*i.a.* BEVER 1970, FRAZIER & FODOR 1978));
- the impact of the limitations of working memory on syntactic processing (GIBSON 1990, GIBSON & THOMAS 1999);
- the respective roles of punctuation (FAYOL 1981) and boundaries of syntactic constituents (JUST & CARPENTER 1980) in sentence comprehension;
- - the effects of lexical and syntactic priming (*i.a.* BOCK 1986, PICKERING & FERREIRA 2008, POLETTI *et al.* 2012)

Similarly, **phonetic or lexical repetitions** are abundantly described in stylistics, and have at the same time given way to numerous studies in psycholinguistics (*i.a.* GRILL-SPECTOR *et al.* 2006). Stylistics refer to such phenomena as:

- *anaphora* (repetition of the same word at the beginning of successive sentences or phrases (5));
- *reduplication* (immediate repetition of a word or phrase (6));
- *antanaclasis* (repetition of a same word with two different meanings (7));
- *hypozeugis* (parallel construction of successive clauses (8)).

(5) Moi Président...Moi Président... (F. Hollande en 2012)

(6) Rapide, rapide, c'est vite dit.

(7) Notre qualité d'impression fait toujours impression. (slogan)

(8) Des trains sifflaient de temps à autre et des chiens hurlaient de temps en temps (Queneau).

If they do not share their methods and goals, stylistics and psycho/neuro-linguistics clearly share some of their objects, therefore it is likely that they can learn from each other. Besides, the current state of research in these disciplines seems to reflect a convergence of interests that may facilitate interactions between these fields. This workshop aims at encouraging such interactions.

**Psycholinguistics and non-literal speech.** The growing interest in psycholinguistics and psychology for figurative or non-literal discourse comprehension and production dates back to the 1980s (GLUCKSBERG, GILDEA & BOOKIN 1982) (KATZ *et al.* 1998; GLUCKSBERG 2001; GIORA 2003, *etc.*).

It is well-known that some stylistic figures have since been extensively studied in psycholinguistics and cognitive psychology. This is particularly true for *figures of meaning* (or *tropes*), especially *metaphor*. Since Lakoff & Johnson (1980), countless studies addressed various aspects of metaphor, whether psychological or neurological, in order to describe its interpretation (*i.a.* COULSON & VAN PETTEN 2007) or its production processes (BENEDEK, BEATY *et al.* 2014). More general research has also been conducted on what distinguishes the metaphor from semantic incongruities that are not characterized as figures (KUTAS & HILLYARD 1980; *i.a.* ARZOUAN *et al.* 2007). Stylistics has been dealing with similar problems in its attempt to discriminate literal, figurative, and flawed speech.

Despite such interest for figures and non-literal speech, some relevant phenomena still have not been addresses in detail. The *figures of construction*, in particular, still constitutes an unexplored field of study in psycho- or neurolinguistics. Paradoxically, cognitive stylistics (SEMINO & CULPEPER 2002; STOCKWELL 2002), since its recent development, has restricted its scope to tropes and especially to metaphor, leaving aside figures of construction. A few studies in French have recently tried to bring stylistics and psycholinguistics together in order to refine the analysis and the way in which to account for such figures (GAUTIER 2015; GAUTIER, BARBET & PERRET 2015; WATINE 2017 and forthcoming).

## Perspectives

Stylistic figures are salient linguistic configurations for which a large amount of qualitative descriptions exists. Classical rhetorical studies as well as modern stylistics have identified a great number of attested examples of every such figure along with their contextual interpretation. Both theoretical and experimental approaches to production and comprehension may take advantage of these data and their qualitative analysis.

Some of the following subjects may be of interest, but the workshop is not limited to these ones:

- Just & Carpenter (1980) put forward the idea that a *wrap-up* effect occurs at the end of the parsing of phrases and sentence. Its nature has long been unclear (VANGOMPEL & HILL 2000), but recent studies (WARREN, WHITE & REICHEL 2009; NELSON *et al.* 2017) confirmed by various means the occurrence of a *closure effect* at the end of sentence parsing. Hopefully, experimental studies on the figures of construction that are based on syntactic appendages will allow a better understanding of closure mechanisms, as suggested by GAUTIER, BARBET & PERRET (2015).

- The processing of figures of construction has never been studied yet. Can we expect reanalysis phenomena to occur in these constructions as they do in garden-path sentences (FODOR & FERREIRA 1999)? Will neural responses be similar to or different from the ones noted during the parsing of unexpected structures?
- Regarding the *figures of repetition*, numerous works in psycholinguistics from the 1970s and 1980s may lead to revise current stylistic categories: Is it legitimate to distinguish lexical from syntactic repetition? Or word repetition from stem repetition? Does the placement of the word in the sentence have an influence on its processing, as we can infer from the different names each configuration has received in stylistics?
- Is there a specific way of processing configurations based on the disjunction of idioms (*tmesis* (9a) or *parembole* (9b))? Can the saliency effects that usually occur with these phenomena be correlated to working memory constraints (as hypothesized by WATINE (2017) for *tmesis*)?
  - (9) a. Apprenons l'art, *mon cœur*, d'aimer sans espérance.
  - b. D'un point de vue scientifique (*je ne suis pas gourmand*), je voyais dans ce mélange un aperçu de la perfection (J-P. Toussaint)

For stylistics and literary linguistics alike, great benefits can be expected from psycho- or neurolinguistical approaches to figures of construction. Such approaches would make it possible to understand more precisely what makes some linguistic structures salient, and ultimately, such research could help to build a new typology of figures of speech based on psychological and neurological data, but also on their contextual effects.

## Schedule and practical information

**Conference website:** <http://psychofigures.sciencesconf.org>

**Call deadline:** Title and abstract expected before **1st-March-2019**.

**Notification of acceptance:** **30th-April-2019**.

**Key speaker:** Christophe PALLIER (INSERM-CEA Cognitive Neuroimaging Unit - Neurospin)

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