The Classification of Some of the Major Figures of Speech Including Scriptural Examples

An Adaptation of E.W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible*

**Figures of Comparison**

1. **Simile**: an *explicit comparison* (using “like” or “as”) between two things of unlike nature that yet have something in common.
   
   e.g., “All flesh is like grass” (I Pet. 1:24)

2. **Metaphor**: a *comparison* between two things of unlike nature that yet have something in common; a declaration that one thing is or represents another.
   
   e.g., “The LORD is my shepherd” (Ps. 23:1)

3. **Hypocatastasis**: an *implied comparison* between two things of unlike nature that yet have something in common.
   
   e.g., “Dogs encompass me” (Ps. 22:16)

   *Using Psalm 22:16, let us note the difference between these first three figures:*
   
   -- If the psalmist had used a simile, he would have said, “My enemies are *like* dogs.”
   
   -- If the psalmist had used a metaphor, he would have said, “My enemies *are* dogs.”

   -- But as a hypocatastasis, the psalmist simply says, “Dogs encompass me.” With the hypocatastasis, the subject must be inferred. The interpreter must determine if these are real dogs, and if not, what are they. Once this is done, the interpreter must return to the figure and ask why the psalmist has compared his enemies to dogs.

4. **Parable**: an *extended simile*.
   
   e.g., “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to (is like) a man who sowed good seed in his field…” (Matt. 13:24ff.)

5. **Allegory**: an *extended metaphor*.
   
   e.g., “Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants…” (Gal. 4:24ff.)

6. **Personification**: the investment of non-human subjects with human qualities or abilities. e.g., “The fields are destroyed, the ground mourns” (Joel 1:10)

7. **Anthropomorphism**: a comparison of God to some corporeal (physical, tangible) aspect of mankind.
   
   e.g., “Incline your ear to me” (Ps. 31:2)

8. **Zoomorphism**: a comparison of God (or other entities) to the lower animals.
   
   e.g., “In the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy” (Ps. 63:8)
Figures Involving Substitution

1. Metonymy: the substitution of some attributive or suggestive word for what is meant ("crown" for "royalty," "pen" for "writer," etc.). There are four kinds:

A. Metonymy of Cause: the writer states the cause but intends the effect.

   e.g., “The whole earth was of one lip” (Gen. 11:1)

   Lip (cause) refers to language (effect); the point is that the entire earth spoke one language.

B. Metonymy of Effect: the writer states the effect but intends the cause.

   e.g., “O my help, hasten to my assistance” (Ps. 22:19).

   The stated effect is help, what the psalmist will receive. The intended cause is the LORD who will help him.

C. Metonymy of Subject: when the subject-matter or thing is put for the attributive or adjunct of it; the place or the container is put for that which is contained.

   e.g., “The grave cannot praise you” (Isa. 38:18).

   The prophet means that a dead person in the grave cannot praise God.

   *The metonymy of subject is very common in Scripture, especially in the OT. Note in particular parts of the body put for the that which was connected with them: “soul” for desires and appetites, “heart” for thoughts and will, “kidneys” for affections and passions, “Liver” for emotions and the center of the immaterial being (See Hans W. Wolff, Anthropology of the Old Testament).

D. Metonymy of Adjunct: the writer puts the adjunct or attribute for the subject.

   e.g., “Then you shall bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to the grave” (Gen. 42:38)

   Here we have the opposite of metonymy of subject; the adjunct/attribute ("gray hairs") is put for the subject (old Jacob).

2. Synecdoche: the exchange of one idea for another connected idea. Like metonymy, this figure is based on a relationship rather than a resemblance. As a general guideline, one may use synecdoche for figures that are actually a part of the whole, or the whole for the part—more strictly connected to the thing intended than a metonymy would be.

A. Synecdoche of the Genus: the genus is substituted for the species ("weapon" for "sword," “vehicle” for “bicycle,” etc.).

   e.g., “Preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15)

   A word of wider meaning is used for a narrower sense; the genus is “creature,” and the intended species is people.

B. Synecdoche of the Species: the species is substituted for the genus.

   e.g., “A land flowing with milk and honey” (Ex. 3:8).

   Words of narrower sense for a wider meaning; the intended genus is all enjoyable foods.
3. **Merism**: the use of two opposite statements to signify the whole (“day and night” for all of life, etc.)

e.g., “You know when I sit down and when I get up” (Ps. 139:2)
The opposites are used to make the point: “You know every move I make.”

**Figures Involving Addition or Amplification**

1. **Acrostic**: the repetition of the same or successive letters at the beginning of words or clauses.

e.g., Psalm 119

2. **Inclusio**: the rhetorical figure in which a literary unit begins and ends with the same (or similar) words.

e.g., “O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (Ps. 8:1,9).

3. **Hyperbole**: the use of exaggerated terms for the purpose of emphasis or heightened effect; more is said than is literally meant.

e.g., “The cities are great, and walled up to heaven” (Deut. 1:28).

**Figures Involving Omission or Suppression**

1. **Ellipses**: the omission of a word or words in a sentence.

e.g., “There is in my heart [ ] like a burning fire” (Jer. 20:9).
The NIV supplies the omitted subject (“your Word”), which the context confirms as correct. But the Hebrew poetry emphasized the subject more by leaving it out.

2. **Aposiopesis**: sudden silence; the breaking off of what is being said.

e.g., “My soul is greatly troubled; but you, O LORD, how long…?” (Ps. 6:3)
The sentence is not complete because of the intense emotion involved. The psalmist simply breaks off the sentence and leaves all in the care of the LORD.

3. **Erotesis**: a rhetorical question; the asking of questions without expecting an answer (to express affirmation, demonstration, admonitions, prohibitions, lamentation, etc.).

e.g., “Is anything too hard for the LORD?” (Gen. 18:14)

Copied, author/editor unknown.
Formatted and posted by Theologue (theologue.wordpress.com)