1. INTRODUCTION

In many cultures, metaphors are used for describing persons, their appearance, attitudes, and personality. For the Western Apache, for instance, nominal metaphors (i.e., of the form “An A is a B”) are a distinct speech genre associated with “wise” adult men and women (Basso, 1976). These “wise words” can be used only to specify one or more behavioral attributes “indicative of undesirable qualities possessed by the referents of the metaphor’s constituents” (Basso, 1976, p. 104). In this culture wise words invariably refer to negative attributes; only some among the good talkers of Apache can use them, presumably those acknowledged by the community as “wisdom bearers.” As an Apache consultant speaking to the anthropologist Keith Basso pointed out, the capacity to master the Apache language is identified with that of speaking metaphorically.

It’s too bad that you didn’t try to learn about wise words before. When I was young, old people around here used to make them up all the time. Only a few people did it and they were the best talkers of all. . . . Those old people were smart. One of them would make a new one and right away other people would start to use it. . . . Only the good talkers can make them up like that. They are
the ones who really speak Apache. They are the ones who make up “wise words” and don’t have to use someone else’s.

In our culture the use of figurative language can sometimes reflect the need to maintain standards of politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1978), especially when a negative appraisal about someone’s behavior, attitudes, or personality is intended. Literal language can be far too explicit and “face-threatening”; an ambiguous statement (be it ironic, idiomatic, or metaphorical) can always provide the speaker with an out (“you didn’t understand me”). The figurative structure of many insults or euphemisms exemplifies such preference for indirectness when negative comments are involved. Figurative expressions, unlike explicit attributions, can in fact be ignored or misunderstood (cf. also Drew and Holt, 1988; Fussell, 1992; Leech, 1983; Levinson, 1978).

Ortony (1980) suggested three different functions played by metaphors: they express things that are literally inexpressible (e.g., sensory experience, cf. Cacciari, in press); they provide a more vivid and image-evoking medium for expressing subjective experiences and emotional states (cf. also Labov, 1984); more relevantly for the purposes of the present study, metaphors represent a compact form of expression for complex ideas because they allow a predication of a bundle of properties in a condensed statement (sometimes a single word). Corresponding literal expressions (if there are any) can be quite prolix by comparison. Ortony explicitly refers to metaphors, but idiomatic expressions also possess this “summarizing property” (Drew and Holt, 1988, 1992).

In this chapter, I report the results of a set of experiments concerning the use of conventionalized and innovative metaphors in persons description. Persons description provides a very interesting field for testing the compactness hypothesis proposed by Ortony: We can in fact describe someone using a metaphorical statement instead of a literal one, not so much to save face (a conventionalized metaphor can in fact be as “face-threatening” as a literal expression) but to communicate in a condensed way a set of attitudes, values, and appraisal toward him or her. Metaphorical meanings can be positively polysemous but also potentially ambiguous, depending upon the knowledge and beliefs shared by the interlocutors or specified by the linguistic context, the speaker’s intentions, and the inferential capacity and knowledge base of the addressee. As Black observed (1979, p. 29), “ambiguity is a necessary by-product of the metaphor suggestiveness.”

What does it mean that a metaphor provides a compact form of predication? No attempt has been made so far to operationalize the notion of compactness proposed by Ortony. One possibility is to examine the number of words necessary to paraphrase a single metaphorical term. If it is true that nonliteral language allows a more compact form of expression than literal language, then more than a single word would be necessary to paraphrase a metaphorical term.