

Chapter 4. This Means That: Metaphor

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Figure 4.1
<https://visualhunt.com/>

“Life is a puzzle.”

Life *can* be puzzling (figure 4.1)—not knowing where to go in a new place, wondering how you will fit with all the different shapes, sizes, and colors of things you encounter, and trying to make sense out of what sometimes seems like a jumbled mess.

Our tendency to make comparisons to aid understanding is common in communication. More than just uttering these similarities or analogies, we tend to *think* that way. Our knowledge about the world is largely “metaphoric” – knowing one thing in terms of something else. Metaphors are frequently used in our daily speech, writing, and visual communication.

The identification of a metaphor dates to Aristotle, with the notion that metaphor works through analogy, transferring meaning from one concept to another: "As old age is to life, so is evening to day. Evening may therefore be called, 'the old age of the day,' and old age, 'the evening of life'" (Aristotle, 350, 21).

Advertisements often use metaphorical images because visual comparisons can be quickly evident, understood, and accepted. Absolut Vodka ads have a long history of using visual metaphors to suggest a relationship between its vodka and popular or desired lifestyles—often using imagery that violates physical reality. The Absolut bottle has taken the shape of a guitar, has been suggested by a spiraling lemon peel, has been represented as an Andy Warhol painting, and has appeared on a man’s back as the *only* skin not tattooed -- all to evoke tastes, attitudes, identities, and popular culture. Our eternal passion for springtime is captured in one ad in which the Absolut bottle is constructed with wildflowers—a metaphor comparing the scents and sensations of spring (and perhaps evoking an image found on a seed packet, suggesting “new beginnings”) with an Absolut recipe for a mixed drink.



Metaphor: When *this* stands for *that*.

Metaphor: A word or phrase for one thing that is used to refer to another thing in order to show or suggest that they are similar

- Merriam-Webster <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/metaphor>

Most students learned about metaphor in their high school Literature class while studying the figurative imagery evoked by the wording in poetry or Shakespearean plays. In his poem, “Nature,” Henry Wadsworth Longfellow compares nature (constant, lovely) to a mother (nurturing, loving). William Shakespeare wrote abundantly in metaphor. Romeo says to Juliet, “Night’s candles are burnt out, and jocund day stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops,” comparing dawn with a joyful dancer.

Yet it wasn’t until the early 20th century that metaphor was studied, elaborated, and formalized as a theory—first only concerning word choice (linguistic), but later understood as the way humans think (concepts). Richards first introduced an influential definition of metaphor as an aspect of *language* in 1936, developing The **interactive theory of metaphor** introduced in 1936 defined two parts of the metaphor: 1) the “tenor” (the topic)—Longfellow’s nature—the underlying situation referred to, and 2) the “vehicle” (the framing word or phrase)—a mother.

Later in the 20th century, a new understanding of metaphor based on conceptual thoughts, and not words alone, radically changed the study and use of metaphors. This chapter will cover **conceptual metaphor theory** in detail as it is essential to your understanding of how metaphors work visually.

Metaphor is all around us.

When Princess Diana tragically died in 1997, her public identity as a combination royal figure head, fashion model, and pop star triggered global mourning and inspired singer/song writer Elton John to metaphorically commemorate her as “England’s Rose” (Mirzoeff, 1999, p. 231) in his tribute song, *Candle in the Wind 1997*.

Every metaphor has a topic—Diana—which is the underlying situation referred to, and a framing word, phrase, or image—England’s rose. Meaning enters in the *interaction* of these two components, and context influences a metaphor’s interpretation. In the combining of topic and frame, meaning is transferred from one to the other—enriching, transforming, or creating understanding.

Nicknames of popular athletes and politicians often use animal, food or body-related metaphors. For example, the late Mohammed Ali was known as the “Louisville Lip,” a nickname connecting the Louisville-born boxer to his outspoken personality. Boxer Jake Lamotta was deemed “Raging Bull,” and NFL lineman William Perry was called the “Refrigerator” (figure 4.2).

In the world of politics, George Washington was known as the “Old Fox,” and Richard Nixon as “Iron Butt.” One can just imagine the visual interpretations of these nicknames. However,

knowing the context of these associations is critical to understanding their meaning. For example, whereas William Perry earned his nickname due to his immense size, Nixon earned his from long days of studying during law school. With such vividly descriptive nicknames making metaphoric comparisons, it's easy to visualize them and even imagine how they might be characterized pictorially.



Figure 4.2

Source: <http://www.chicagotribune.com/sports/football/bears/chi-fakers-guide-to-the-bears-20140904-htmlstory.html>

CAPTION: Public figures are often caricatured in illustrations using visual metaphors. This [illustration](#) of William Perry, nicknamed “Refrigerator” or “The Fridge,” who scored a touchdown for the Chicago Bears in Super Bowl XX, delivers an explicit metaphor conveying his size as well as a causal interpretation—the handfuls of sausages and turkey leg.

Conceptual Metaphors

Metaphor, then, isn't only about the words we select. Rather, it's how we think. All people naturally and unconsciously think in terms of metaphor; it's pervasive in everyday thought, say George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. With this claim in 1980, the two scholars started a revolution in the study of metaphor by extending its understanding beyond spoken words. Lakoff and Johnson argue that metaphors construct meaning through tapping into our ideas and concepts; "human thought processes are largely metaphorical" (1980, p. 6). With their introduction of **conceptual metaphor theory**, the authors established new terminology: target (the topic) and source (the frame).

“Love is a long and winding road.”

Metaphorical concepts work to structure our understanding of experiences, events, and the actions we perform. For example, one might say of a love affair “it’s been a long and winding road.” This is an ordinary, everyday expression, yet it is readily understood because the concept of love as a journey is a fixed part of how we think.

How else do we think about love? It can be a crazy journey, we can find ourselves at a crossroads, or it can be a dead-end street. Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 44) suggest other journey metaphors that people may use in describing their experience in a relationship, such as “bumpy road,” or “heading in the same direction” (Table 4.1).

CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR		
Target	Source	Metaphorical Expression
Love Affair	Type of Journey	Is a long and winding road Hit a dead end At a crossroads Turned onto a bumpy road Heading in the same direction

Table 4.1.

“The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” - George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (1980, p. 6)

In fact, conceptual metaphors become so embedded in a culture that they become fixed by convention, an unconscious common sense. For example, the conceptual metaphor "argument is war" is reflected through a wide variety of sayings, including, “He shot down my claims;” “She attacked my weak points;” “My criticisms were right on target;” and “I won the argument” (2003, p. 5).

Types of Conceptual Metaphors

There are various types of conceptual metaphors. Understanding some of the predominant types will help you analyze, select, or construct meaningful visual metaphors (Tables B and C).

Structural, Orientational, Embodiment, Conduit

Structural.

The most common category of conceptual metaphor is **structural** (table 4.2), in which somewhat complicated and abstract experiences (the target) are understood based on simple, specific experiences (the source). For example, in the metaphor “life is a puzzle,” the target “life” is given meaning by the source “puzzle.” The selection of the framing source is crucial to the inferred meaning. The metaphor “life is a picnic” presents a different perspective. Likewise, if we describe politics as a game or politics as a witch hunt, we are establishing quite different

realities with each. Metaphors are important tools in conveying meaning, as they evoke ideas (and visual images) the recipient can easily grasp. Consider the metaphorical potency and the visual imagery in the words of a homeowner fleeing a fast-spreading forest fire, “I was driving through hell”.

Table 4.2

STRUCTURAL METAPHOR EXAMPLES			
Target	Source	Metaphorical Expression	Visual Expression example
Life	(is a) Challenge	“Life is a puzzle”	Situations shaped as puzzle pieces
Politics	(is a) Game	“The candidate is playing hardball”	Politicians seen as video game characters
Argument	(is) War	“He took aim at my claims”	Word graphic in shape of gun
Time	(is) Money	“A wrong turn cost me an hour”	Clock on stack of dollar bills

Orientational.

Many of our fundamental ways of thinking are organized in terms of spatial comparisons known as **orientational metaphors** (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 18). Orientational metaphors have to do with direction and positioning in space, for example, “*I’m feeling up today*” (“up” is happy) or “*I’m feeling down today*” (“down” is “sad). Other orientational metaphor relationships are inside-outside, front-behind, shallow-deep, center-periphery, etc.

Embodiment.

Metaphors can also be structured by the features and function of our bodies; from bodily sensations--how the world is physically experienced through our movement and interactions, for example balance and near-far relationships (Johnson,1987). These are formally known as **embodiment** metaphors. Studies have found participants lean forward when thinking about the future (*future is ahead*), and in a research study, those holding heavier clipboards judged the material to be more important (*important is heavy*) (McNerney, 2011).

Conduit.

Finally, language (in all its symbolic manifestations) functions to communicate; to transfer thoughts from one person to another. Michael Reddy conceived of the **conduit metaphor**, understanding that ideas are objects, expressions are containers for those objects, and communication is the sending of those containers. Examples of the **conduit** metaphor include *getting a message across* and *her feelings came through*.

Table 4.3 (see following page) offers examples of these three metaphor types.

EXAMPLES OF OTHER CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS		
Orientation	Framing idea	Metaphorical Expression
Up	Happy	My spirits rose
Down	Sad	My spirits sank
Embodiment	Framing idea	Metaphorical Expression
Eyes	Personal perspective	How I see the world
Hands	Learning	Grasping the basics
Ears	Empathy	I hear you
Conduit	Framing idea	Metaphorical Expression
Communication	Sending	Ideas came across clearly
Lack of Communication	Blockage	Can't get ideas across

Table 4.3

Metaphor's Extended Family

Another helpful way to look for metaphors is by understanding how the following figures of speech can be communicated visually.

Synecdoche. If you don't recognize this term as a figure of speech, you may remember the 2008 film of the same name. *Synecdoche* the movie starred Philip Seymour Hoffman as an ailing theater director who blurred the boundaries between fiction and reality—prompting his cast to act out their lives. As a metaphor, synecdoche means the use of a physical part of something to stand for the whole, or less commonly, the use of the whole to stand for a part. An example of the former is the expression “all hands on deck,” hands standing for sailors. An example of the latter is “Argentina won the game,” Argentina standing for the country's team members. Visually, the wheel of a car may represent “car”:



Metonym. This metaphoric construction uses a close association with a concept—and not a physical part of it. In America, the “Oval Office” refers to the function or position of the president, and not the person of the president or his literal office. Similarly, “Hollywood,” when used as a metonym, refers to the American film industry and not the California city. News coverage is prone to use metonyms, such as referring to the U.S. financial markets as “Wall Street.” Visually, the news may show the image of the iconic bull to indicate “Wall Street” (financial markets).



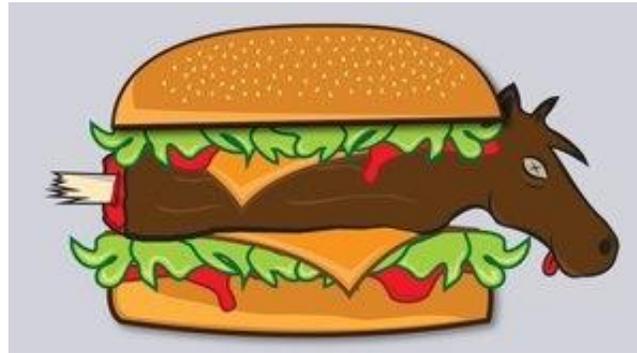
Personification. This metaphor is when a physical object or entity is referred to or presented as a person, thereby suggesting human motivations, characteristics, and activities (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 33). Personification can be found in many types of metaphors, all helping audiences make sense of things through human terms. For example, overheard on a shopping trip, “That dress likes you.” Or, imagine this metaphor illustrated on a travel blog post, “The forest told me to stay.” Consider this visual metaphor (“The sun smiled upon us today”) using personification:



Irony. Alanis Morrissett’s song “Ironic” may come to mind along with the debate about its meaning. Some conclude it’s not about irony, but its title implies it—and that’s ironic. Irony is a deliberate metaphorical expression that signifies an oppositional meaning—often implying sarcasm or seen as insulting. Certain types of irony exaggerate or understate:

Hyperbole. This literary device is often found in song lyrics. Roberta Flack sang “Killing me softly with his song,” which combines the metaphor of “song” as seducer and the hyperbole of “killing” for being overcome with emotion. **When a metaphor uses extreme exaggeration, this is use of hyperbole**—often unrealistic or literally unbelievable—serving to emphasize an implied meaning. It can both praise or scorn. For example, saying “She’s a giant in the industry” about someone who is well respected, or “He’s a real brain” about a

fellow student who's failing statistics. Consider the expression, "I'm so hungry I could eat a horse."



Litotes. This figure of speech uses diminishment and negativity to gain positive attention toward something, thus the resulting effect is ironic. It usually is the use of double negatives that function to affirm something as positive. For example, "It's not too shabby" and "It wasn't a terrible movie." Litotes can be very effective in visual imagery. Consider an early ad introducing the Volkswagen Beetle (figure 4.3), combining a curiously small car with the negative "Lemon" label. The body copy then explains that only a small blemish on the glove compartment prevented it from passing inspection, not the outstanding quality of its design and function.



Lemon.

This Volkswagen missed the list. The chrome strip on the glove compartment is blemished and must be replaced. Chances are you wouldn't have noticed it; Inspector Kent Kroner did!

There are 3,309 men at our Wolfsburg factory with only one job: to inspect Volkswagens at each stage of production. 3,000 Volkswagens are produced daily; there are more inspectors

than cars!

Every shock absorber is tested; light checking won't do it; every windshield is scanned. VW's have been rejected for surface scratches barely visible to the eye.

Final inspection is really something! VW inspectors run each car off the line onto the Funktionsprüfstand (car test stand), take up 189 check points, get ahead to the automatic

break stand, and say "no" to one VW out of fifty.

This preoccupation with detail means the VW lasts longer and requires less maintenance, by and large, than other cars. It also means a used VW depreciates less than any other car!

We pluck the lemons; you get the plums.



Figure 4.3

Source: <http://brandstories.net/2012/11/03/vw-beetle-story-lesson-in-brand-persona-development/>