Mixing Metaphor

EDITED BY

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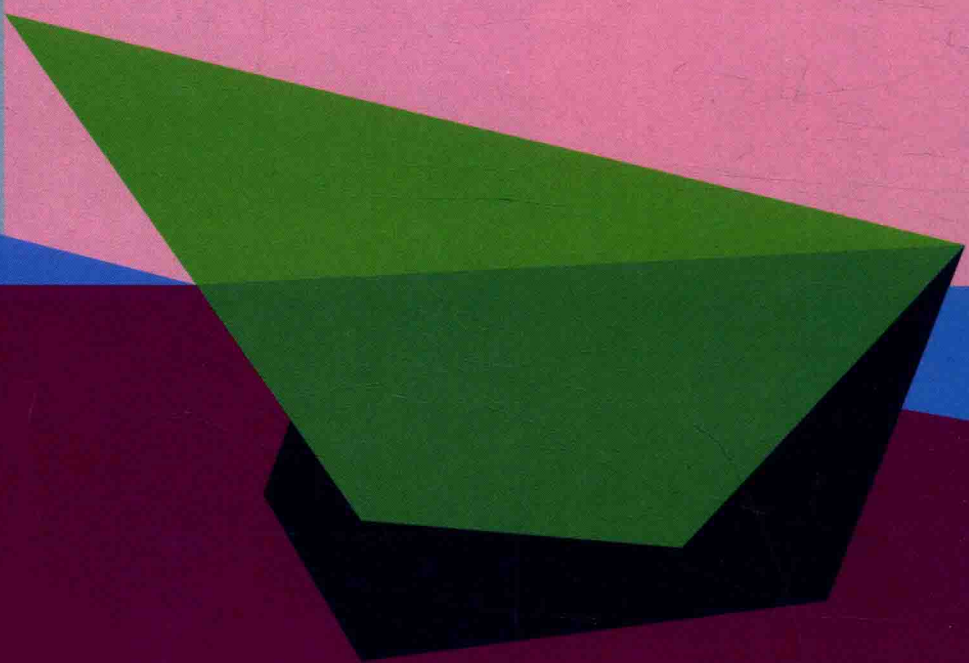

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Mixing Metaphor

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Mixing Metaphor

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Volume 6

Mixing Metaphor
Edited by Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr.

Introduction

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1. Mixing metaphor in perspective

Several years ago I asked a group of university students, studying psychology, to write down whatever they knew about "the topic of metaphor." My general aim was to capture something about people's folk beliefs about metaphor without defining "metaphor" or providing linguistic examples. The survey did not reveal very much, which is not surprising perhaps given the vague, open-ended question. Some people noted that metaphor involved talking about one topic in terms of another, or was prominent in poetry, while a few students had nothing to say. The most frequent comment, however, made by 40% of all respondents, was that "one should not mix up your metaphors" (or similar wording). When I later asked students to explain this remark, several stated that the prohibition against mixed metaphor was something they were explicitly taught in high school. Indeed, if you look up the phrase "mixed metaphor" on the internet, you will immediately encounter a whole host of negative comments about the topic, mostly from books or essays on writing style and composition. Consider a few of these definitions of mixed metaphor and warnings about its use:

> "A succession of incongruous or ludicrous comparisons."
> "Mixed metaphors often, but not always, result in a conflict of concepts."
> "When you use metaphor, do not mix it up. That is, don't start by calling something a swordfish and end by calling it an hourglass."
> "Even if a mixed metaphor sings, it should be derailed."

One older English composition textbook admonishes:

> "Sometimes writers go so far as to forget the metaphorical significance of their words as to combine distinctly incongruous metaphors, producing what are called mixed metaphors. … All such forms of confusion manifest a certain insincerity; they show that one is writing without having one's mind on what he is really saying." (Lathrop, 1920: 200)

As these remarks make clear, mixed metaphor does not have a good reputation, which is why people are often instructed to avoid it. Examples of mixed metaphor

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are also posted on the internet to alert people of the bad results that arise when we get sloppy with our metaphors. Consider a recent example of a statement, published in the *Boston Globe,* in which a labor arbitrator commented on a city tax proposal: "I conclude that the city's proposal to skim the frosting, pocket the cake, and avoid paying the fair, reasonable, and affordable value of the meal is a hound that will not hunt." The speaker's remark is representative of "a succession of incongruous and ludicrous comparisons" that most of us find amusing, even if we still typically see this as poor, mixed-up metaphor.

The reality, though, is that mixed metaphors are everywhere in both speech and writing as is made evident by the examples discussed in the present chapters. There is great irony, for me, in that the most notable belief about metaphor, namely that we should not mix metaphors together, is a topic which is rarely studied in the interdisciplinary world of metaphor scholarship. We have explored the vast ways that people use metaphor in language, gesture, art, and other multimodal media. Metaphor is now widely recognized as a fundamental scheme of thought, which gets manifested at many levels of human experience, ranging from culture and history, through everyday thinking and language, down to neural firings. Still, little attention is given to the fact that mixed metaphor is quite common.

Are mixed metaphors simply cognitive errors, bad writing, or failed attempts at humor? One could argue that people possess a rich set of conceptual metaphors, which enables them to understand a wide variety of abstract concepts. Enduring conceptual metaphors provide coherence for many aspects of experience. Nonetheless, we all occasionally slip up and produce bizarre mixtures of metaphorical statements. How does this happen?

A different possibility is that mixing metaphors actually demonstrates people's cognitive flexibility to think of abstract topics in a myriad of metaphorical ways. For example, the labor arbitrator talked about a series of ideas using colorful language that may reflect his varied metaphorical understandings of the city tax proposal and its implications.

I have always taken great delight in mixed metaphors and noted a slow emergence of interest in mixed metaphor within the metaphor community. This book aims to bring the topic of mixing metaphor center stage within the world of metaphor studies. The contributors to this volume are all established metaphor scholars, some of whom have written briefly on the topic of mixed metaphor or done work that is clearly relevant to both how and why people sometimes combine metaphors in their use of language, gesture, and multimodal media. Authors were encouraged to write anything they wanted in connection with mixed metaphor, and to make use of any empirical findings and theories that they felt best explained the existence and use of mixed metaphor. The end result is a diverse collection of articles, appealing to varying empirical findings and theories of metaphor.

Still, the most notable, consistent theme of this volume is that mixed metaphors do not reflect cognitive errors or necessarily impede our understanding of what other people mean to communicate. People may rapidly shift their attention between different source domains when speaking of some topic, or engage in elaborative reasoning about a single source domain to reveal some of its less known or hidden meanings. Mixing metaphor in discourse does not necessarily cause listeners or readers undue cognitive effort to interpret speakers' messages in context. In many cases, source domain information may only be partly activated, which enables people to easily attend to other possible sources for expressing metaphorical meanings. In fact, the existence of mixed metaphor, both within and outside of language, offers testimony to the cognitive flexibility that is the hallmark of human intelligence and creativity.

2. Summary of the chapters

The first group of chapters examines whether mixed metaphor represents errors in thinking and causes difficulties in understanding.

Zoltán Kövecses's chapter is titled "A view of mixed metaphor within a conceptual metaphor theory framework." Conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) has sometimes been criticized for being unable to explain mixed metaphor. Some scholars have argued that any assortment of linguistic metaphors from different source domains should be prohibited within CMT because people presumably think and speak about abstract topics from the perspective of specific conceptual metaphors. Once a person conceives of a topic in a metaphorical manner, the individual should use metaphorical language that is consistent with this specific metaphorical scheme. Kövecses outlines several reasons why this view of CMT is incorrect. CMT actually predicts the emergence of mixed metaphors in discourse given the fact that many abstract targets are structured by multiple source domains. In most cases, people are not aware that they are mixing their metaphors because the varied source domains are activated only to a small degree. People's multiple, metaphorical understandings of single topics enable them to easily, mostly unconsciously shift from one to another, depending on the specifics of the discourse situation.

Lynne Cameron's chapter "Mixed metaphor from a discourse dynamics perspective: A non-issue?" focuses on how mixed metaphor unfolds in spontaneous talk. Using her discourse dynamics approach, Cameron argues that there is little linguistic evidence (e.g., pauses, hesitations, explicit comments from speakers) to suggest that people experience difficulty understanding mixed metaphorical messages in context. A crucial part of Cameron's explanation of mixed metaphor is

that speakers manage their interactions "through metaphor," which makes even mixed figures a natural extension of what people are doing when talking. Readers may consciously recognize mixed metaphors in texts given the slower pace of reading and the visual presence of incongruent figures on the printed page. But even with written language, the perils of using mixed metaphors are vastly overstated, especially given the perspective of those individuals immersed in the flow of discourse. As Cameron argues, most of the prohibitions against mixed metaphor come from scholars who embrace an asocial view of metaphor, one that fails to properly acknowledge what people are really doing with metaphor in both conversation and writing.

Cornelia Müller's chapter in this section is titled "Why mixed metaphors make sense." She argues that mixed metaphor is a perfectly reasonable way of speaking, writing, and acting (e.g., using gestures), given people's cognitive abilities to respond to moment-by-moment affordances within different communicative situations. People are able to flexibly shift their attention to various aspects of metaphorical mappings, and sometimes foreground ideas that are not standard readings of conventional metaphors. For example, consider the statement "The butter mountain has been in the pipeline for some time," which refers to how overproduction of butter in the EU has led to huge amounts of butter awaiting distribution for some time. Although this mixed metaphor presents a clash of domains on the surface, the two metaphors (e.g., butter mountain and pipeline) nonetheless work together semantically (e.g., huge amounts of something and awaiting distribution). Bringing forth background knowledge when speaking and gesturing activates different, mostly hidden, aspects of metaphorical meaning that frequently makes good sense for the discourse participants. This dynamic view of metaphor emphasizes how conventional metaphors range along a continuum from sleeping to waking depending on speakers' and listeners' specific degree of cognitive activation for source domains as discourse unfolds in interpersonal interactions.

Julia Lonergan and Raymond Gibbs's chapter is titled "Tackling mixed metaphors in discourse: Corpus and psychological studies." This article first presents results of a corpus examination of a set of mixed metaphor excerpts originally published in *The New Yorker* magazine in their "Block That Metaphor!" column. Most of the metaphorical phrases seen in these excerpts have been previously employed with similar meanings in other contexts. But the mixing of these different metaphorical expressions is novel. A psychological study, where people were asked to write out their interpretations of the different parts of each mixed metaphorical narrative, showed that participants gave very consistent readings of these phrases. More importantly, people appear to be readily able to integrate these diverse metaphorical phrases into a coherent whole, mostly because of the ancillary assumptions they make about the source domains in these metaphors.

The second group of chapters primarily explores how and why people employ mixed metaphors in discourse.

John Barnden's chapter, "Mixed metaphor: Its depth, its breadth, and a pretense-based approach," presents an overview of his computer model, ATT-Meta, which is dedicated to reasoning about metaphor and has been extended to handle various kinds of mixed metaphor. A key feature of ATT-Meta is its adaptation of a fictionalist/pretense world in which metaphor users pretend that what is described is literally true. This pretense enables people to draw rich metaphorical inferences using their extensive knowledge of the source topic. Barnden illustrates many of the advantages of ATT-Meta for dealing with mixed metaphor, and he strongly argues against the traditional idea that metaphor understanding primarily depends on constructing parallel mappings from a source to a target. Instead, much metaphor reasoning involves people drawing on ancillary assumptions about the source topic to create meaningful interpretations of metaphors, even ones that are complexly mixed.

Gerard Steen's contribution is titled "Mixed metaphor is a question of deliberateness." Although many observers claim that mixed metaphors are the products of illogical thinking or simple errors in language production, Steen suggests that mixed metaphors are typically deliberately produced for specific rhetorical purposes. In some cases, admittedly, the deliberate use of mixed metaphors leads to a clash of images, which some may consider to be poor writing (e.g., "From November 1958 through the summer of 1966 the crisis over Berlin simmered, diplomatic nerves frayed, and the exodus of East Germans grew to a flood."). Still, the deliberate mixing of metaphors may lead listeners and readers to infer rich metaphorical messages precisely when people recognize their deliberate composition and use. Steen explores different cases where metaphors are deliberately and non-deliberately mixed and generally argues how paying attention to the deliberateness of mixed metaphors is an important feature of a three-dimensional approach to metaphor focusing on metaphor in language, thought, and communication.

Fiona MacArthur's chapter, "When language and cultures meet: Mixed metaphors in the discourse of Spanish speakers of English," examines how non-native speakers often graft metaphorical conceptualizations and wordings from their native language when speaking in a second language. She calls these unique constructions "hybrid" rather than "mixed" metaphors because speakers are often successful in communicating these messages in face-to-face interactions. Of course, even native speakers borrow words and metaphors from other languages, but non-native speakers do this quite often, as when one person, talking about her anticipated difficulty in crafting her essays for an upcoming exam said, "My problem is that they are not developed so they have just in squares so I have to joint at the ideas." The statement "joint at the ideas" in several places

refers to her wanting to write coherent exam answers that integrate several ideas and pieces of information. MacArthur claims that hybrid metaphors constitute a kind of shared understanding, or "conceptual pacts," between speakers and listeners through their continued use in discourse. Listeners typically recognize the ad hoc nature of these hybrid metaphors and focus more on the content, as opposed to the form, of what non-native speakers say. One implication of this analysis is that training non-native speakers to become proficient in a second language does not require strict adherence to conventional linguistic forms. There are important communicative benefits to be gained from people's use of hybrid metaphors that are often "condemned under the rubric of mixed metaphor."

Charles Charteris-Black's chapter is titled "The 'dull roar' and the 'burning barbed wire pantyhose': Complex metaphor in chronic accounts of pain." From an examination of interviews with people who are in chronic pain, Charteris-Black argues that mixed metaphor serves the important rhetorical function of making a speaker's claims quite credible to listeners. For example, when people describe their pain, they employ repeated, mixed images to convey very strong emotions that are otherwise difficult to articulate given the private, subjective nature of their pain and discomfort (e.g., "I used to feel that I was wearing a burning barbed wire pantyhose."). Using mixed metaphors provides speakers with a sense of greater control over the chaos of their experience of being ill. Pain suffers use repeated and mixed metaphors, along with other figures, to emphasize the sincerity of their beliefs when making claims or arguments to audiences. Mixed metaphors are often used purposefully for their unique appeal without necessarily being conscious.

The final collection of chapters focuses on ways that mixed metaphors are realized in speech, writing, and multimodal discourse.

Carita Paradis and Charlotte Hommerberg's chapter is titled "We drank with our eyes first: The web of sensory perception, aesthetic experiences, and mixed mappings in wine reviews." Wine reviews, authored by famous wine connoisseurs, often present a stream of consciousness reporting a person's mixed sensory experiences of picking up, smelling, tasting, and relishing a glass of wine. Consider a part of one review: "Bright crimson. Extremely sweet and ripe – almost New World – with some floral aspects. This one is lively and flirtatious with some pretty dry, sandy tannins underneath. Rather unusual. Could do with just a tad more acidity to life it. Just a bit confected? Very brutal finish." The narrator employs various metaphorical source domains to describe his different visual, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile sensations (e.g., "lively," "flirtatious," "underneath," and "lift it"). Paradis and Hommerberg's analysis highlights the importance of metaphor, among other things, in writers' transitions from sensory perception (tasting the wine) to conception (thinking about the wine) and then into language (talking about the experience). They note how the pervasive mixing of metaphor is almost

expected within wine reviews as a discursive practice as writers try to evoke some of their rich, yet mixed sensory experiences of wine that readers can then read about and imagine for themselves.

Elena Semino's chapter is titled "A corpus-based study of 'mixed metaphor' as a metalinguistic comment." She explores a group of 141 occurrences of the phrase "mixed metaphor" from the Oxford English Corpus (e.g., "This is funny for me, because I rely on the words always being at my finger tips and on the tip of my tongue [with apologies for the mixed metaphor] but currently, there're not"). Semino's analysis describes how "mixed metaphor" is used in different genres, grammatical forms, and for different rhetorical purposes. Most uses of "mixed metaphor" offer a negative assessment of some topic, although many others are employed to show off speakers' and writers' humor and creativity. Semino concludes by questioning whether "mixed metaphor" necessarily represents a "viable and operationable technical term," given the diversity of ways people apply the phrase in characterizing their own and other's discourse.

Charles Forceville's chapter "Mixing in pictorial and multimodal metaphors?" explores whether it is proper to conceive of mixed metaphor in nonlinguistic domains. Almost all discussions of mixed metaphor focus on natural language. Forceville demonstrates through several case studies that several pictures, film segments, and multimedia products simultaneously mix their metaphors. For example, one ad for the VW Golf shows an art gallery exhibit of an engine with a long pipe attachment that ends with the horn of a musical instrument. The merging of car engine with music instrument, both of which are part of an art exhibit, implies that the VW Golf is a powerful artistic object, producing beautiful music. The quote at the bottom of the ad reads "Golf R32. Perfectly tuned." Forceville claims that examples like these are instances of metaphorical blends, which may be best explained within conceptual blending theory. Mixed metaphors in pictures and films may be more consciously created than what is seen in everyday speech. Metaphors may be readily mixed within nonlinguistic domains that serve important functional and aesthetic purposes and can quickly capture people's attention and appreciation.

Anita Naciscione's chapter is titled "Extended metaphor in the web of discourse." She analyses the stylistic use of lexical metaphor (e.g., "fire" meaning passion from LOVE IS FIRE) and metaphorical phraseological units (e.g., "The road to hell is paved with good intentions.") in discourse, ranging from Old English to Modern English literary texts. One conclusion she draws is that extended metaphor, sometimes involving an interrelationship of metaphor and metonymy, "is not a slip of the mind as a 'mixture' of thought but a regular element in each case of use." Extended metaphor has been observed in texts throughout history and is sometimes recreated in novel forms within contemporary discourse.

One of the beauties of simultaneous metaphorical images, even those involving several topics, is that it provides semantic and stylistic coherence in the texts, which extend to multiple uses of metaphor as well. Naciscione concludes that the traditional views of mixed metaphor as contaminated or impermissible forms are simply incorrect and that the study of extended metaphor is critical to understanding the interaction of stylistic patterns in figurative meaning construction.

One issue over which scholars differ concerns whether mixed metaphors arise automatically or from deliberate discourse strategies. Many authors here have argued that people mix metaphors quite unconsciously within the flow of discourse, while others emphasize the role of purposeful, deliberate, and perhaps quite conscious thought processes. Mixed metaphors may, indeed, emerge from various combinations of fast-acting unconscious and slower-developing conscious thinking. Still, it is clear that the existence of mixed metaphor is not a reflection of cognitive confusion or disorganized linguistic forms.

There is certainly much more that needs to be explored empirically on how and why people employ mixed metaphors in language and other domains. My hope is that this volume will facilitate new research and discussion on mixing metaphors. The traditional divide between "metaphor" and "mixed metaphor" may ultimately be untenable given the various flexible ways that people employ metaphor in language and elsewhere. Rather than being a deviation from proper metaphor use, mixed metaphors may be ideal reflections of people's typical metaphorical experiences in language, thought, and communication. In this manner, the study of mixing metaphor may offer significant insights into contrasting theories of metaphor. Several of the chapters here outline theoretical frameworks that may explain some of the various ways that metaphors are mixed in language and other forms of expression. I boldly suggest that one important test for any comprehensive theory of metaphor is its ability to explain both how mixed metaphors come into being and are ultimately interpreted by others. This "mixing metaphor test" should become one of the essential ways by which scholars evaluate the rigor and breadth of competing metaphor theories.

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Is Mixed Metaphor a Problem?