

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18454/RULB.2021.25.1.39>**ПРИЧИНЫ И СЛЕДСТВИЯ НЕКОРРЕКТНОГО ИСПОЛЬЗОВАНИЯ МЕТАФОРЫ**

Научная статья

Карачина О.Е. *

ORCID: 0000-0001-5340-9617;

Московский международный университет, Москва, Россия

* Корреспондирующий автор (olg839[at]rambler.ru)

Аннотация

Целью данной статьи является изучение причин некорректного использования метафор и последствий, к которым оно приводит. Новизна исследования заключается в интерпретации ошибочного применения метафор с точки зрения их функционального назначения. В центре исследования находится рассмотрение двух типов некорректного использования метафор: а) результат грамматической ошибки, демонстрирующей столкновение эстетической и когнитивной функций, и б) результат риторической ошибки, приводящей к нарушению объяснительной функции метафоры. В заключении делается вывод, что неправильное использование метафоры происходит вследствие: 1) непреднамеренного столкновения онтологически несопоставимых сферы источника и сферы цели, что создаёт впечатление небрежности речи; 2) преднамеренного столкновения онтологически несопоставимых сферы источника и сферы цели с целью порождения комического эффекта; 3) установления неверной, хотя и внешне логической аналогии, что приводит к созданию искаженной картины описываемой действительности.

Ключевые слова: некорректное использование метафоры, сфера источника, сфера цели, смешанная метафора, риторическая ошибка, объяснительная функция.

CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF METAPHOR MISUSE

Research article

Karachina O.E. *

Moscow International University, Moscow, Russia

* Corresponding author (olg839[at]rambler.ru)

Abstract

The article aims to look at the reasons for and consequences of the inappropriate use of metaphors. The novelty of the research lies in the interpretation of misused metaphors in terms of their functional purposes. The focus is placed on two types of metaphor misuse: a) as a result of a grammar mistake, demonstrating the clash of ornamental and cognitive functions; b) as a result of a rhetorical mistake, leading to violation of the explanatory function of the metaphor. To establish clear principles of empirical material selection, a distinction is drawn between the notions of metaphor misuse and mixed metaphor. The research concludes that the inappropriate use of metaphor stems from the following: 1) unintentional collision of semantically incompatible source and target domains, which results in careless grammar; 2) deliberate collision of semantically incompatible source and target domains for humorous effect; 3) establishing an essentially inaccurate, albeit seemingly logical, analogy, which leads to building up inadequate or defective knowledge of the described reality.

Keywords: metaphor misuse, source domain, target domain, mixed metaphor, rhetorical mistake, explanatory function.

Introduction

Metaphor, brought by Aristotle into scholarly conversation [1], has evolved from a mere rhetorical device confined to literary and linguistic studies to an effective instrument of cognitive analysis that is applied in a wide range of anthropocentric disciplines, such as anthropology, psychology, sociology, psycholinguistics, etc. The new comprehensive approach to metaphor was established largely due to the insightful theory of G. Lakoff and M. Johnson [10], who revealed the cognitive nature of metaphor and its pivotal role in human conceptualization.

However, metaphor can be a very controversial source of information about the ways the speaker thinks because it may be used inappropriately. This article aims to look into the reasons for metaphor misuse, as well as the consequences it may lead to. For this reason, we endeavored to: 1) outline all the cases of inappropriate use of metaphors; 2) pinpoint the reasons behind each case of metaphor misuse; 3) discuss how metaphor's failure to perform the intended functions can hinder effective communication.

For empirical material, we drew upon online media, including edited articles, as well as unedited texts, such as forum comments, bloggers' posts, etc.

In terms of methodology, the study employs a range of qualitative methods, such as data collecting, content analysis for identifying metaphor and its verbal surroundings, evaluating semantic and logical coherence, metaphor analysis for revealing the mapping procedure, and discourse analysis for explaining the reason behind choosing a certain metaphor and its malfunctioning.

The practical value of study into metaphor use goes far beyond the limits of literature and linguistics, inasmuch as metaphor plays a substantial role not only in creating colorful verbal forms but also in building up and conveying knowledge. In this respect, developing skills in metaphor handling can be vital for any human activity that prioritizes communicating ideas clearly and precisely to the target audience.

When used in speech, metaphor performs a whole range of functions: nominative, cognitive, ornamental, communicative, pragmatic, etc. In cases when metaphor is misused, some of these functions may come into conflict. We distinguish two types of metaphor misuse for various reasons.

The first case is a violation of ornamental function when excessive embellishment precludes logical clarity. This kind of misuse embraces mistakes based on the collision of mutually exclusive target and source domains. The following sentence provides a good illustration of this misuse:

And this tank soon became Hitler's flagship [3].

Although the message of the utterance would be easily understood due to the use of the conventional metaphor *flagship* referring to the most important product or service of an organization, the direct meaning of the word *flagship* – the main SHIP in a fleet — comes into conflict with the metaphorized referent (*tank*), thus creating cognitive noise.

Another type of misuse is piling up metaphors built on different sources for the description of the same situation, which complicates cross-domain mapping. This quick switchover between metaphors of different nature results in a badly selected mosaic, which is clearly demonstrated in the excerpt below:

These actions resulted in a significant redirection of market focus and gave the firms a ringside seat when the proverbial music stopped [12].

This sentence shows more than a mere succession of incoherent metaphors – the two metaphors (to give a *ringside seat* and *the proverbial music stopped*) are syntactically connected (temporal relationship) to constitute a logical unity. However, this logic is hindered by the difference of experiences these metaphors invoke. The source domain for the first metaphor is a boxing match where a ringside seat means a front-row seat next to a boxing ring (thought to be the best place to watch the match) [14]. Meanwhile, the second metaphor refers to the game of musical chairs, in which participants, while the music plays, walk around chairs, the number of which is one less than that of the players. The moment the music stops, each participant tries to sit on a chair. The player who is too slow to secure a chair leaves the game [14]. Both expressions have long been used in their figurative meaning: to have a *ringside seat* – to have a better position/view, a *game of musical chairs* – a situation in which people or things are moved, shuffled, or rearranged from one position to another. Thus, what the writer tries to say in the above sentence is that the firms were in a better position at the time of the market reshuffle.

The above-mentioned examples are referred to as mixed metaphors. Traditionally, a mixed metaphor is understood as “the linking of two or more disparate elements, which can result in an unintentionally comic effect produced by the writer’s insensitivity to the literal meaning of words or by the falseness of the comparison” [5]. However, in the last two decades, the notion of mixed metaphor has been reviewed and expanded to embrace all cases of metaphors that occur in close textual adjacency but do not share a cognitive basis. As is clear from recent research [7], [9], [11], a mixed metaphor is no longer viewed as a rhetorical slippage caused by the writer’s inadequate language skills or poor taste for metaphor. On the contrary, as Mark G. Lee and Mark Barnden argue, metaphor mixing in terms of motivation and reasoning is identical to using straight metaphors and, therefore, complies with all the cognitive processes of mental mapping [11, P. 29].

Moreover, there is solid statistical evidence that mixed metaphor is quite a common feature in speech rather than an occasional deviation from the norm. According to M. Kimmel, 76% of the studied metaphors were identified as mixed, and more importantly, they did not cause any difficulty in understanding [9, P. 97]. Other empirical research shows that mixed metaphors work very effectively for descriptive purposes, for instance, when it is necessary to convey very diverse, complex human feelings [2].

Going back to the traditional definition of mixed metaphor as a rhetorical mistake with unintentional humorous effect, we would argue that metaphors are often purposefully scrambled to make the utterance sound amusing. In this case, the effect is comparable to that of pun, zeugma, or oxymoron. For example:

"I think you might have hit the nail on the button" [6].

The idea of pressing the right button is metaphorized, with the source domain (hit the nail) semantically contrasting to the target (press the right button).

We can compare it to a similar effect of the half-joking rude sign on a Russian bus: *Все зайцы – козлы*. This is a metaphor wrapped in a metaphor wrapped in another metaphor, where the outer level presents the ontologically impossible equation: *зайцы (hares) = козлы (goats)*. The underlying level reveals two metaphors: fare-dodging passengers are called “*зайцы*” (transferred qualities — fast run and cowardice), bad, dishonest men are rudely called “*козлы*” (transferred qualities – stubbornness and stupidity). The message is simple, but the animal metaphor sounds witty and amusing due to the formal equation of the different animal species.

The second case of metaphor misuse is the violation of the explanatory function. Metaphors are often recruited to explain something in the clearest and shortest way. However, as F. Boer and M. Demecheleer rightly warn, “Metaphor is helpful (and even indispensable) as a vehicle to think about abstract phenomena, but one should be careful not to mistake the metaphors for the 'reality' they try to describe” [4, P. 116]. In the following example from an article about the U. S. military policy in the Middle East, the writer uses an ill-suited metaphor to describe the Obama administration’s threat to put more pressure on Iran:

The administration may be lifting its skirt a little bit to show some ankle [15].

Semantically, the idiom *to show some ankle*, which is used to describe giving a hint or just partial information in order to attract attention or stir up interest [13] perfectly fits the context. The article discusses Obama’s sudden decision to reveal some information about U.S. military support for Israel in order to intimidate Iran and force it to curtail its nuclear program. However, what makes this metaphor a poor choice for this context is a contradiction between a serious subject of the political discussion and strong associations invoked by the mapped domain, i.e. light-minded, flirtatious behavior of a woman. Moreover, through the use of such an ambiguous metaphor, the writer may create an unintended impression of the American leadership, perhaps as weak and unreliable.

While the above example is no more than a specific situation of inappropriate use of metaphor, there is an increasing concern about misleading implications of key metaphors habitually employed in vital discourses.

A good illustration of the aforesaid is the term *economy pie*, one of the most common metaphors used in debates about income distribution. It compares the economy to a pie with a predefined size that could be simply re-sliced to produce more

equitable pieces. This analogy is strongly criticized by economic experts [6] who argue that it not only misinterprets the actual mechanism of economic growth but also provokes complaints of social injustice, such as the rich taking a larger share of the economic pie at the expense of the other segments.

Another metaphor often used in economic discourse, especially in times of economic crisis, is *tighten the belt*. This may lead to false associations when applied in the wrong context. Initially standing for a household thrifty policy, now the metaphor is often extended to the level of the national economy. This fundamentally erroneous analogy can be refuted by the so-called paradox of thrift — the more each family saves, the less money the economy receives, so the effect will be quite the opposite of what is desired [8].

As is clear from the above examples, the rationale behind such metaphors is to simplify complex concepts for the lay audience by using familiar notions. In other words, these metaphors are intended to perform explanatory, communicative, and pragmatic functions. In reality, however, they prove to be ultimately ineffective, as the perspective on the target concept inferred from the cross-domain mapping turns out to be essentially misleading.

Conclusion

Thus, we can conclude that improper use of metaphor stems from semantic incompatibility of source and target domains, which normally results in the use of careless grammar or a humorous effect if used intentionally. It also stems from establishing seemingly logical but essentially inaccurate analogies, which leads to building up inadequate or defective knowledge. Metaphor misuse of the first type is easily identified and effectively dealt with in a language classroom. The second type is much harder to address, but it deserves very close attention due to the far-reaching effect such metaphors have on the quality of political, economic, military, and equally significant discourses.

Конфликт интересов

Не указан.

Conflict of Interest

None declared.

Список литературы / References

1. Аристотель. Этика. Политика. Риторика. Поэтика. Категории / Аристотель. – Минск: Литература, 1998. – 1391 с.
2. Нагорная А. В. Смешанная метафора как средство вербализации interoцептивного опыта [Электронный ресурс] / А. В. Нагорная. – URL: <https://www.academia.edu/> (дата обращения: 18.03.2021).
3. A case of misused metaphor [Электронный ресурс]. – URL: <https://thestar.com.my/lifestyle/viewpoints/mind-our-english/> (дата обращения: 14.09.2020).
4. Boers F. A Few metaphorical models in (Western) economic discourse / F. Boers, M. Demecheleer // Discourse and perspective in cognitive linguistics, Liebert, W. A., Redeker, G., Waugh, L. R. eds. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing. – 1997. – 270 p.
5. Britannica. Mixed metaphor [Электронный ресурс]. – URL: <https://www.britannica.com/art/mixed-metaphor> (дата обращения: 10.03.2021).
6. Foundations of meaning: primary metaphors and primary scenes [Электронный ресурс]. – URL: <https://escholarship.org> (дата обращения: 14.03.2021).
7. Hilpert M. An empirical approach to the use and comprehension of mixed metaphors / M. Hilpert // Review of cognitive linguistics / Published under the auspices of the Spanish Cognitive Linguistics Association, John Benjamins Publishing Company. – 2010. – Vol. 8 – P. 66-92.
8. How national belt-tightening goes awry: Economic view. The New York Times [Электронный ресурс]. – URL: <https://nytimes.com> (дата обращения: 04.03.2021).
9. Kimmel M. Why we mix metaphors (and mix them well): Discourse coherence, conceptual metaphor, and beyond / M. Kimmel // Journal of Pragmatics, January 2010. – Vol. 42, Issue 1. – P. 97-115.
10. Lakoff G., Johnson M. Metaphors we live by / G. Lakoff, M. Johnson. – London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003. – 193 p.
11. Lee M. G. Reasoning about mixed metaphors within an implemented artificial intelligence system / M. G. Lee, J. L. Barnden // Metaphor and Symbol. April 2001. – №16 (1). – P. 29-42.
12. Nichol M. 3 Cases of Mixed Metaphors [Электронный ресурс] / M. Nichol. – URL: <http://dailywritingtips.com> (дата обращения: 14.09.2020).
13. Show-ankle meaning (yourdictionary.com) [Электронный ресурс]. – URL: <https://www.yourdictionary.com/show-ankle> (дата обращения: 18.03.2021).
14. The Free Dictionary. [Электронный ресурс]. – URL: <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com> (дата обращения: 20.03.2021)
15. Why did Obama give bunker-buster bombs to Israel? [Электронный ресурс]. – URL: <https://news.yahoo.com/blogs/envoy/why-did-obama-bunker-buster-bombs-israel-145927712.html> (дата обращения: 20.03.2021)

Список литературы на английском / References in English

1. Aristotle. *Ethica. Politica. Rhetorica. Poetica. Categories* / Aristotle. – Minsk: Literatura. – 1989. – 1101 p. [in Russian]
2. Nagornaya A. V. *Smeshannaya metafora kak sredstvo verbalizatsii interoceptivnogo opyta* [Mixed metaphor as a means of verbalization of interoceptive experience] [Electronic resource] / A. V. Nagornaya. – URL: <https://www.academia.edu/> (accessed: 18.03.2021). [in Russian]

3. A case of misused metaphor [Electronic resource] – URL: <https://thestar.com.my/lifestyle/viewpoints/mind-our-english/> (accessed: 14.09.2020).
4. Boers F. A Few metaphorical models in (Western) economic discourse / F. Boers, M. Demecheleer // *Discourse and perspective in cognitive linguistics*, Liebert, W. A., Redeker, G., Waugh, L. R. eds. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing. – 1997. – 270 p.
5. Britannica. Mixed metaphor [Electronic resource] – URL: <https://www.britannica.com/art/mixed-metaphor> (accessed: 10.03.2021)
6. Foundations of meaning: Primary metaphors and primary scenes. [Electronic resource] – URL: <https://escholarship.org> (accessed: 14.03.2021).
7. Hilpert M. An empirical approach to the use and comprehension of mixed metaphors / M. Hilpert // *Review of cognitive linguistics* / Published under the auspices of the Spanish Cognitive Linguistics Association, John Benjamins Publishing Company. – 2010. – Vol. 8 – P. 66-92.
8. How national belt-tightening goes awry: Economic view. The New York Times. [Electronic resource] – URL: <https://nytimes.com> (accessed: 04.03.2021).
9. Kimmel M. Why we mix metaphors (and mix them well): Discourse coherence, conceptual metaphor, and beyond / M. Kimmel // *Journal of Pragmatics*, January 2010. – Vol. 42, Issue 1. – P. 97-115.
10. Lakoff G., Johnson M. *Metaphors we live by* / G. Lakoff, M. Johnson. – London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003. – 193 p.
11. Lee M. G. Reasoning about mixed metaphors within an implemented artificial intelligence system / M. G. Lee, J. L. Barnden // *Metaphor and Symbol*. April 2001. – №16 (1). – P. 29-42.
12. Nichol, M. 3 Cases of mixed metaphors [Electronic resource] / M. Nichol. – URL: <http://dailywritingtips.com> (accessed: 14.09.2020)
13. Show-ankle meaning (yourdictionary.com). [Электронный ресурс]. – URL: <https://www.yourdictionary.com/show-ankle> (accessed: 18.03.2021).
14. The Free Dictionary. [Электронный ресурс]. – URL: <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com> (accessed: 20.03.2021).
15. Why did Obama give bunker-buster bombs to Israel? [Электронный ресурс]. – URL: <https://news.yahoo.com/blogs/envoy/why-did-obama-bunker-buster-bombs-israel-145927712.html> (accessed: 20.03.2021).