

The cognitive motivation behind mixed metaphors:
Evidence from usage data

This paper studies the cognitive motivation behind so-called mixed metaphors. Examples (1) and (2) illustrate how such expressions combine two semantically incongruent source domains into a single conceptual scene:

- (1) Hyde Street Pier is an oasis of calm in a sea of tourism.
- (2) Austin is an island of liberalism in a conservative desert.

A moment of reflection will reveal that an oasis is to be found in the desert, not the sea. Conversely, the definition of islands precludes their occurrence in the desert.

Mixed metaphors have not received much attention in cognitive linguistic research, despite prominent acknowledgments to the fact that the combination of metaphors is a pervasive phenomenon (e.g. Lakoff & Turner 1989: 70). This may be due to the popular beliefs that mixed metaphors are poor stylistic choices or represent mere sloppy thinking. This paper makes the case that these beliefs – while true in some cases – are not generally applicable.

Examples such as (1) and (2) are highly motivated and carry emergent meanings (Coulson 2001, Fauconnier & Turner 2002). Rather than being detrimental to conceptualization, the incongruity of (1) and (2) adds to the rich imagery that is evoked by these examples.

This paper uses corpus evidence from the Sketch Engine (www.sketchengine.co.uk) to analyze how concepts such as *oasis* or *island* are understood metaphorically, and how they are then understood in relation to metaphorical uses of *sea* and *desert*. A quantitative investigation of co-occurring lexical material (Gries & Stefanowitsch 2003) can show that for example the phrase *an oasis of X* typically co-occurs with nouns such as *peace*, *tranquility* and *serenity* (cf. also Hanks 2006), suggesting that a metaphorical *oasis* is a sheltering place where one is isolated from harmful activity or noise. By contrast, the phrase *an island of X* is associated with the nouns *sanity*, *civilization*, and *stability*. A metaphorical *island* thus tends to be understood as a place that has desirable socio-political characteristics. Corresponding analyses of *sea* and *desert* bring to light that the *sea* is often metaphorically understood as a vast body of a bothersome substance (*a sea of debt*), whereas the *desert* typically expresses the absence of a commodity (*an intellectual desert*).

In the light of these findings, the motivation of the above examples becomes clear. Example (1) conveys that Hyde Street Pier is a peaceful place that is unspoilt by an otherwise common problem. Example (2) states that Austin is a socially attractive place to live in, whereas its surrounding area lacks this quality. Any single-domain mapping would have failed to express these precise meanings.

Methodologically, the present paper adds to the growing body of work that applies corpora to the study of metaphor (cf. Deignan 2005, Stefanowitsch and Gries 2006) by providing a means to study mixed metaphors on the basis of usage data. It further addresses the theoretical question of how mixed metaphors are conceptualized and how semantically conflicting source domains are integrated.

References

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