

# Metaphor

## 1. What is metaphor?

A **metaphor** is an imaginative way of describing something by referring to something else that has the qualities that you want to express. For example, if you want to say that someone is very shy and timid, you might say that he/she is a mouse.

Examples: pp. 90-93.

*Metaphor:* Oh, my love is a red, red rose.

*Implied metaphor:* Oh, my love has red petals and sharp thorns.

Analyze the following poems:

### The Night Has a Thousand Eyes

Francis William Bourdillon (1852-1921)

The night has a thousand eyes,  
And the day but one;  
Yet the light of the bright world dies  
With the dying sun.

The mind has a thousand eyes,  
And the heart but one;  
Yet the light of a whole life dies  
When love is done.

### The Eagle

Lord Tennyson Alfred (1809-1892)

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;  
Close to the sun in lonely lands,  
Ringed with the azure world, he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;  
He watches from his mountain walls,  
And like a thunderbolt he falls.

## 2. What role does a metaphor play in our daily communication?

### (1) It's highly productive

One day I was driving down a freeway with my wife and two children when one of my sons, age eight, remarked: "Hey, Mom, my sock has a hangnail." My wife, quietly, and without special note, responded: "Don't worry about it, I'll fix it when we get home," and the topic was dropped. I was the only one of the four who even noticed anything unusual in this interchange. Here, a new metaphor was created, produced, and comprehended without the slightest awareness by either of the primary participants.

(David E. Rumelhart, 1979: p. 72)

Metaphors in daily life:

Water the spark of knowledge and it will bear fruit.

### (2) The meaning legitimize the usage of words (e.g., verbs, adjectives, etc.)

Business had been slow since the oil crisis. Nobody seemed to want anything really elegant anymore. Suddenly the door opened and a well-dressed man entered the showroom. John put on his friendliest and most sincere expression and walked toward the man.

(David E. Rumelhart, 1979: p. 79)

- (3) Consider the sentence pattern “A is B”

Knowledge is power.

Right is might; might is right.

Richard is a gorilla.

- (4) However, metaphors are necessary instruments of understanding

In 1933 George Lemaitre, the Belgian priest and physicist credited with the Big Bang theory of the origin of the universe, conceived of a primal atom that existed before anything else, which expanded and produced everything. And so, he remarked, making a wonderful metaphor, the evolution of the cosmos as it is today “can be compared to a display of fireworks that has just ended.” As astrophysicist and poet Alan Lightman has noted, we can’t help envisioning scientific discoveries in terms of things we know from daily life—spinning balls, waves in water, pendulums, weights on springs. “We have no other choice,” Lightman reasons. “We cannot avoid forming mental pictures when we try to grasp the meaning of our equations, and how can we picture what we have not seen?” In science as well as in poetry, it would seem, metaphors are necessary instruments of understanding. (X. J. Kennedy, 1991: p.588)

- (5) Metaphors and prepositions: in, on, at, into...

I *put* a lot of energy *into* washing the windows.  
I *get* a lot of satisfaction *out of* washing windows.  
There is a lot of satisfaction *in* washing windows.

The ship is *coming into* view.  
I have him *in* sight.  
I can’t see him—the tree is *in* the way.  
He’s *out of* sight now.

- (6) Metaphors and personification (Examples from George Lakoff & Mark Johnson, 1980: p. 33)

His *theory explained* to me the behavior of chickens raised in factories.  
This fact *argues against* the standard theories.  
*Life has cheated* me.  
His *religion tells* him that he cannot drink fine French wines.  
*Inflation has attacked* the foundation of our economy.

Metonymy (imputing human qualities to things that are not human)

The *ham sandwich* is waiting for his check. (= the person who buys ham sandwich)

The *Times* hasn't arrived at the press conference yet. (= the reporter from the Times)

### 3. Practice

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A true spaceship would have to be under the control of a captain, since no ship could possibly survive if its course were determined by committee. Spaceship Earth certainly has no captain; the United Nations is merely a toothless tiger, with little power to enforce any policy upon its bickering members.

If we divide the world crudely into rich nations and poor nations, two thirds of them are desperately poor, and only one third comparatively rich, with the United States the wealthiest of all, Metaphorically each rich nation can be seen as a lifeboat full of comparatively rich people. In the ocean outside each lifeboat swim the poor of the world, who would like to get in, or at least to share some of the wealth. What should the lifeboat passenger do?

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Garrett Hardin, 1993: pp. 626-627)