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The Figure in the Idiom

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Summary

The argument: every metaphor and metaphoric idiom grows out of and is nourished by a seminal metonymy. Since these germinating seeds — and the mineral elements which feed them — work under cover, we tend to overlook them when we feast off harvests cropped from the fields of metaphor: and we therefore forget to take into account the radical fecundity of the metonymic germ. This essay attempts to remedy such forgetfulness.

At the same time, it also claims that metonymy (a figure of rhetoric) and implication (a habit of logic) name the same generating constituent — the sap which sustains the metaphoric plant — and that our intuitive sense of this interdependence enables us to see how a figurative expression or idiom achieves its end — at least, when it is still possible to locate the source.

While most other diggers in the fields of idiomatic language prefer either to sift through the soil for the taproots of syntactic structure or delve into deeper psycho-linguistic seams, I sieve my samples to trace and select for analysis those elements which germinate and fertilize the metonymic seeds — and so feed the crops of metaphorical language with their necessary rhetorico-semantic nutriment. I sort a few specimens exhumed by myself or culled from two recent publications, a *Thesaurus of English Metaphors* and the proceedings of a symposium on idioms held recently in the Netherlands.

Key Words: idiom, metaphor, metonymy

Introduction

This essay is the most recent instalment of a continuing examination of the work of metaphors and metonymies in everyday language¹. Last time I focused upon collocation; this time I consider idioms.

1 Starting Points

1.1 The inventors, or coiners, of metaphorical expressions must have assumed that their original listeners or readers would recognise, without hesitation, the literal referents of terms used figuratively, and that they would be able, in addition, to work out the implications which motivated the metonymies on which a metaphor subsists.

1.2 A metaphor matches features of one domain with analogous features of a domain which falls within a quite different category, set or family, and it does so by an act of figurative super-imposition, or mapping whereby the figurative terms, while seeming to replace the literal terms, in fact draw attention to the semantic congruence of the two. These features will have family relationships with other features of their own domains, and will have been chosen as suitable matches because of their specific, metonymic representativeness.

When both domains — families, sets or categories — are completely familiar to us as part of our everyday experience, we have no problems in seeing how such a cross-over of referents and relationships works. And when the categories are as familiar to us as, shall we say, men and stones, the utter 'otherness' of the categories may alert us to that in their metonymic relationships — their causal links and their

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mutual dependencies — which is oddly the same while not the same (Section 4.1, and seq.).

1.3 Yet should we select for metaphorical use a culture-specific process — the manner in which a butcher kills a pig, for instance — and employ a single moment of that process to represent a general state of affairs, later generations may not be able to match the idiomatic expression to its source — and will have to learn its figurative meaning by rote.

That is to say, once phrases which refer to culture-specific acts are used idiomatically and metaphorically, and so become familiar and fixed through usage, even native speakers may begin to find it difficult to relate the figurative meanings to any literal source: the way pigs are killed in Ted Hughes' Yorkshire is quite different from the way they are killed in my native Hereford, or in East Anglia, where my brother lives (Section 6.1, below). If we are second-language learners, such idiomatic expressions may not only be opaque, they may be uninterpretable on every level. When we can no longer relate the terms of a given idiom to any literal context, linguists call the idiom 'unmotivated'.

Nevertheless, there must have been a time when the idiom *was* motivated.

2 Background

2.1 I have been an enthusiastic student of rhetoric for forty years, but since becoming a teacher of English as a second language, my interest in the workings of figures has been heightened by my concern over the problems which idioms, or idiom-like phrases, can present to the second-language learner. Whenever one of my colleagues at Hokudai

came to me with a problem in a text that he, or she, was reading, the factor which had foxed my bewildered friend was — almost always — a metonymy upon which an idiom or idiomatic expression depended for its suitability and strength. Comparisons which rely upon common knowledge — whether analogies, similes or metaphors — are always easier to work out.

I choose the verb 'to fox' — meaning to deceive, to trick, and, thus, to baffle — as an example of a common metaphor boosted by a fundamental metonymy, for it is derived from a fox's characteristic ability to deceive and baffle those who are on its track, or trail: the name of the animal stands, metonymically, for a pre-eminently significant feature of that animal's behaviour — its foxiness. Thereafter, the term may be applied metaphorically to anyone or anything which demonstrates comparable behaviour, and since the nature of foxes is familiar to most people the comparison presents few problems.

Yet this metaphoric usage remains metonymic in essence, since it is a specific instance of a certain general kind of behaviour or operation which stands for — stands in for — all examples of behaviour or operations of that sort.

2.2 This is the argument that I have chosen to defend.

I follow *le Group μ* of Liege in believing that a metonymy lies at the heart of most — if not all — metaphors, and I am grateful to Gérard Genette who has pointed out that "Every metonymy can be converted into a synecdoche by appeal to a higher totality, and every synecdoche into metonymy by recourse to the relation between constituent parts"².

I take this to mean that a synecdoche — a part of something which stands for the whole of that something, or vice versa — becomes

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a metonymy when the part in question takes priority as the most significant part of the whole body in question, or vice versa: the part which — for the purposes you have at any particular moment — overrides in importance all the others. The signifying part may be the cause for the consequence, the inventor for his invention, the functionary for the function, the container for the thing contained, the genus for the species, the actor for his action, the agent (a fox) for his native traits (its foxiness), and all of these the other way round; or it can be one part of a whole standing in for another part of that whole. In brief, it is the sign for the thing signified. The part that you select to represent the quality you wish to isolate becomes — should you go on to make a metaphor — the *heart* of the metaphor.

2.3 In handbooks of rhetoric, ‘hands’, as in “All hands on deck!”, is given as an example of a synecdoche, which it is, but it is also — much more significantly — a metonymy, since a man’s hands are, in this instance, that part of his body which signifies his function: that he is a manual worker: his hands are his *essential* tools, without which he cannot function.

Yet we may also chose as significant another characteristic function of hands: that they can be used as indices, to point. Thus, by a catachrestic metaphor, we call the hands of the clock ‘hands’ because we have no other word for them. That nobody thinks of this usage as a metaphor, or bothers that the metaphor is derived from a metonymy — the functionary, ‘hand’, for the function, ‘to point’ — cannot be used to argue that the usage is unmotivated: or to deny that the metonymy and metaphor are inter-woven. And though many metaphorical matchings, mappings and cross-overs rest upon visual likenesses, many more are related to each other through similarity of behav-

iour, causal dependencies and functional affiliations — and all such couplings and connections are essentially metonymic.

Shakespeare's favourite metaphor for a poet was not coiner, but 'forger' — a verbal blacksmith, with all that that entails, metonymically, of fire, technique and pain.

3 Aim

My aim in this essay is, once again, to point to the ubiquity of metonymic and metaphorical operations in everyday language, and to show, in the present piece of writing, that idioms and idiomatic expressions are no exception to this state of affairs: indeed, they exemplify it rather well. In particular, I wish to argue for the priority of metonymy over metaphor in this operation: semantic priority as well as temporal.

4 Taking Sides

I make this claim in a somewhat polemical spirit, since in the *Thesaurus of Traditional English Metaphors*, a new and immensely useful publication, ed. by P. R. Wilkinson, Routledge (1993), the editor tells us that he has omitted metonymies from his collection since these are, he says, too marginal, too personal — and too ephemeral. Yet many of his multitudinous examples — all of them dated and glossed — do not strike me as metaphors at all, and those which are metaphors proceed from an initial metonymic step, while further metonymic relationships often work in harness with the analogy and add horsepower to the metaphor's still active, onward career.

4.1 I begin with some simple instances from the *Thesaurus*: the similes "as hard as flint" and "as hard as marble", which become metaphors

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when applied, as they sometimes are — in a quasi-idiomatic way — to a person's heart: “he is flint-hearted”, “she is marble-hearted”; “he has a heart of flint”, “she has a heart of marble”. That these phrases are comparisons — either similes or metaphors — is not a matter for dispute; yet the analogies depend crucially upon underlying metonymies. Certain very particular characteristics of flint and marble have been isolated as being their distinguishing, or salient, characteristics — salient to the particular matter in hand, that is — and the whole substance stands, metonymically, for that selected part.

If we say of a woman — as we sometimes do — that she is marble-hearted, we are not saying that her heart is glossy or veined or suitable for carving statues with, all characteristics of most marble; we are saying that she is unfeeling, and cold. Here, the whole substance, marble, stands for, represents, one aspect of the stone, the aspect which, in this context, everybody will recognise and comprehend. At the same time, marble may have been chosen for the comparison — rather than granite or limestone — since from marble you can carve the statue of a beautiful woman: marble is beautiful *and* cold.

Yet should we speak of meat as ‘marbled’ — which we can — we are not suggesting that the meat is hard or cold — or beautiful. We have selected a different distinguishing characteristic of marble to be represented by the whole stone: as marble is veined, so is meat. This is a simile, a simple comparison, while “marbled meat”, which signifies that meat is veined like marble, is a simile concentrated into a metaphor. Yet the figure requires the initial metonymy — of the whole standing for the (unnamed) signifying part — if it is to function as an effective comparison.

In the case of flint, the word ‘flint’ used analogically can — depending on its context — mean either loyal or hard-hearted.

Nevertheless, the quality of flint which is selected as being its prime or truly representative characteristic is — whatever the context — that it *lasts*, that it *does not wear away*, and this characteristic can represent either fidelity and loyalty on the one hand or imperviousness to feeling on the other, and can be used so, as a comparison: if you are ‘as true as flint’ (a simile) you are dependable; if you are ‘as hard as flint’ (another simile) you are cold and unfeeling.

Although these expressions are simple comparisons — and, if sufficiently concentrated, can be thought of as metaphors — they retain their metonymic nature and function: one material body — marble/flint — with certain qualities stands for, stands in for, other material bodies — men/women/meat — which share the same attributes, and are fellow members of the same ‘set’: a set of things (stones and hearts) which are impervious (to water or to feeling), or a set of things (stones and meat) which are veined: fuzzy sets, certainly, but sets nonetheless.

I have chosen these particular lapidary examples simply because, the other day, one of my students came to ask me what the expression “to get blood from a stone” might mean. I was able to show him the phrase in *The Kenkyusha Dictionary of Collocations*, where the phrase is given a context and a translation into Japanese, and he understood immediately. I was then able to say that to get any response from the class of which he is a member was like trying to get blood from a stone. He knew exactly what I meant; and grinned.

4.2 If we use the expression “to get blood from a stone” as an analogy, no one will be able to see what we intend by it unless he knows something about stones and blood. My student would have to know that stones possess certain qualities: that they are hard, unresponsive,

and lack — as far we know — consciousness; he would also need to know that one of the things which stones do not possess is blood. He would also have to understand that blood is what distinguishes a living, and thus sentient, being. It is what stones and blood stand for — what they represent in all their metonymic inter-relationships — that enables the comparison to work. Because such knowledge is “encyclopaedic knowledge” — something that everybody knows — everybody understands at once what the metaphor entails: it is a simple comparison, and it is immediately comprehensible.

4.3 Since I am arguing that the linguistic habit of metonymy — the supplanting by one term of a related term — is fundamental, and ubiquitous, I shall whet my argument on the grindstone of more specimens with a lithic origin. I therefore select from the *Thesaurus* a handful of the many idioms that make use of certain typical qualities or specific characteristics of stones in which a more-or-less generic term, such as ‘stone’, stands in place of some specific attribute or characteristic feature of stones, and is then used, analogically, of some feature in men, or human affairs, where similar metonymic relationships can be seen to be present or to operate.

I add, as a gloss, the logical reasons which seem to have led to the choice of the term ‘stone’ — or ‘rock’ or ‘grit’ — in the first place, since I wish to offer evidence for my additional claim that metonymy is closely related to devices of implication.

Thus, when I use the term ‘metonymic presupposition’, I mean the logical inference which we draw when we recognise how one signifying, typical, specific characteristic of the ‘domain’ in question is causally related to other parts of the same domain. We may take it as given — as presupposed — that certain stones, or rocks, can be found —

shall we say — at the bottom of river-beds.

4.3.i Store managers may be worried because sales are *rock-bottom* (metaphor). Since rocks often lie at the bottom of river beds (metonymic presupposition), they cannot lie any deeper (entailment).

4.3.ii A man can be *as steady as a rock* (simile). Since substantial rocks require earthquakes or volcanoes to move them (metonymic presupposition), so it will be equally difficult to move the man (entailment).

4.3.iii A man can have *no more wit than a stone* (simple comparison). Since stones are insentient (metonymic presupposition), they cannot think (entailment).

4.3.iv A man can *start the stone, or ball, rolling* (metaphor). Since a rolling stone is outside the starting agent's control (metonymic presupposition), he cannot predict the outcome of its action (entailment).

4.3.v A man can be a *rolling stone* (metaphor). Since rolling stones never remain fixed in one place (metonymic presupposition), they gather no moss (entailment).

4.3.vi A man can show *real/true grit* (metaphor). Since grit is famously durable (metonymic presupposition), a man of grit will demonstrate a similar durability (entailment).

The *Thesaurus* does, in fact, give us these reasons for the birth of the idioms, but it does not spell out their logico-rhetorical conception as I have just done, since it overlooks or ignores what I believe to be crucial: that the metaphors grow out of metonymies which in their turn are inter-twined with presupposed pre-conditions and entail consequences; and that it will have been because of these logically coherent

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inter-relationships that the comparison will have been thought suitable — by the smith who forged the figure — in the first place³.

4.4 Another student, another question: what is a red-letter day? Of course, a good dictionary — although not *Cobuild*, under any of the lexical items — would have told her that it means an ‘important’ day, but she wanted to know, naturally enough, why it should mean this. The reason is not difficult to track down: in church calendars, all Saints Days or special festivals of the church are traditionally printed in red letters. Thus, where in one context — the specific context of the christian year — ‘red’ signifies a day that has special importance, it can, by a further metonymic shift, stand — in every context — for any day in the year which has special significance for the person who uses the phrase.

All this is in the *Thesaurus*, without the editor appreciating, apparently, that a red-letter, being one feature only — although, of course, the distinguishing feature — of the day in question, has come to stand for the day as a whole: and that this is a metonymic, not an analogical, operation. Although the phrase is now generally used in a figurative sense, it retains its metonymic disposition: that in a full year of days, one specific type of day stands, metonymically, for all the other days which share certain similar and special characteristics. I do not understand how this extended usage can be called a metaphor.

4.5 In another place, we are reading *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and we have just been paused over Puck’s forecast that the discord and confusion which he has created among the two pairs of lovers is about to be resolved:

“Jack shall have Jill,

Naught shall go ill,

The man shall have his mare again and all shall be well.”

While recognising that the third line must be a proverb used metaphorically, one of my students naturally wanted to know what ‘mares’ had to do with the matter. The note (in the Arden edition) tells us that the expression is proverbial, but does not tell us how it is to be interpreted: that presumably is clear: what was lost has been found, and whatever trouble the loss had led to has been put right. Wilkinson simply says “Order restored”, since he, too, presumably thinks that the reasons why it means this are clear enough: that the expression implies, presupposes, that something was lost and has been found, and that it is the finding of it which will entail the restoration of order.

The idiom presupposes that the loss of the mare has caused things “not to be well”, which presupposes that the mare must have been, for the man in question, an especially valuable animal, while if its restoration entails that all is well again, this would presuppose, too, that the man is likely to have only one mare, and thus must be relatively poor.

What has been lost in *The Dream* is, to put it simply, someone you love, and although ‘mares’ and ‘one’s love’ are obviously being matched or mapped on to each other analogically since they belong to two different domains, or worlds, or sets, they nevertheless — and both together — belong to the set of especially valuable things that have been lost and are found again, and one member of that set, ‘mares’, stands — alongside as well as in place of — another member of that set, ‘one’s love’. One part of the whole supplants another part of the whole, and if that whole is again a fuzzy set, it is the notion of fuzzy sets that enables us to see that while this is, yes, a metaphor, it is — *at one and the same time* — also a metonymy.

5 On Quotations as Idioms, and their Modification

5.1 I recently wrote of a colleague and friend that she is one of those people who always “goes with you the second mile”. This is an allusion to a remark made by Jesus Christ, quoted by St Matthew: “Whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain” (St Matthew, ch 5, v 41). You do not, of course, have to be a Christian either to know the phrase and what it means or — more importantly — to behave in the way that it recommends; but you do need to know the original remark to make sense of any writer’s or speaker’s adaptation or modification of it — and to experience the pleasure which recognition of the allusion will, the writer hopes, evoke in the informed reader.

Christ’s original remark can, in this instance, be understood, and acted upon, quite literally, but its meaning can be extended to refer to any offer or act of help over and above what might be expected or required. The second mile is that particular stage of the whole journey which signifies what it means to have taken the decision to set out upon — and go — the second mile: it presupposes an action which is non-obligatory and gratuitous. When we use this figure in another context as a comparison, it remains essentially a metonymic operation: one act of supererogatory kindness stands for another act of a similar nature.

This is the way in which most of Christ’s parables or figurative expressions work. The word ‘parable’ is taken to mean a comparison or an allegory or analogy, as its etymology — ‘to put alongside’ — suggests: which may perhaps confirm one’s doubt that the distinction which structuralists make between syntagmatic metonymies and paradigmatic metaphors might not be quite as clear-cut as they have tended to suggest⁴.

5.2 The Routledge *Thesaurus* lists thirty-eight direct quotations from St Matthew and three adaptations. These maxims of moral wisdom have become part — and parcel — of the corpus of English idioms, and although most present-day British speakers of English are unlikely to be able to identify the source of the phrases, most will probably still be able to understand them since they are still used, if not as often as once upon a time. What was particular to a context — the parable or saying as recounted by Matthew — has become common to any context in which the remark is considered appropriate: a single instance comes to signify all instances of a similar kind: this, once again, is a metonymic as well as an analogical operation, and the metonymic step has priority, both temporal and semantic.

So it is with most of the quotations selected from St. Matthew as idioms: for example, “to hide your light under a bushel”, “to turn the other cheek”, “to cast pearls before swine”, “to build on sand”, “to put new wine in old bottles”, to possess “a pearl of great price”, “to bear the heat and burden of the day”, “to strain at a gnat and swallow a camel”.

All of these expressions can be understood literally, but they are generally used — as Christ first used them — analogically of situations or conditions that might be thought comparable. This naturally suggests that Jesus Christ was not only expressing himself, but thinking, analogically: that he was, in fact, inventing metaphors. Yet for me — if not, I realise, for everybody — the force of these expressions still depends upon their original metonymic rather than their analogical nature since we should have to know the literal meaning of the original terms to be able to perceive their figurative implications: that, for instance, pearls, metonymically, stand for and represent precious *stones*, while swine, metonymically, represent and stand for unworthy *creatures*; and that — at the same time — pearls belong to the set of

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all things which are *precious*, while swine belong to the set of all things which are *unworthy*.

Since they are all simple analogies, they are not difficult to interpret. All except the last. And this is made more difficult to work out because the compositor who set the King James Version is likely to have made an error — as Wilkinson carefully points out. In Tyndale’s 1525 version, we read “strayne out a gnat and swallow a camel”. I look this up in Tyndale and find:

“Woe be to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, which thithe [lay a tax on] mint, annise and cummin, and leave the weightier matters of the law undone: judgement, mercy and faith...Ye blind guides which strain out a gnat and swallow a camel.”

That is to say: if a gnat, an irritating insect, has landed in your wine, you strain the wine through muslin to avoid drinking it, while you eat a camel, an awkward and stubborn beast, without batting an eyelid. It seems that size is the principal signifying quality: you agonize about small things but are unfazed by large ones. Yet that cannot be the only signifying feature: it would seem that Jesus has chosen the camel to represent more than size, but what that may actually be remains somewhat obscure — and this will have something to do with the culture in which camels are familiar beasts and their habits well-known.

6 Everaert et al

Since I wrote my piece about the role of metaphor and metonymy in the establishment of collocational choices, and after I had decided to extend my discussion to the making of idioms, I came across *Idioms, Structural and Psychological Perspectives*. This is a collection of essays developed out of lectures given at a conference held in Tilburg, the

Netherlands, in 1992, published in 1995. I already had a theme and a focus, but the volume has helped me to concentrate my focus and enlarge my theme, and I recommend it for its wide-ranging general interest: I shall refer to the volume as Everaert⁵.

The title indicates the volume's focus, which only in places and in passing overlaps with mine. The emphasis is technical and research-based: accounts of recent experiments designed to find out, for instance, whether listeners process idioms more quickly than non-idiomatic strings; discussions of the level in the syntactic structure at which idioms are inserted. One article, perhaps the most important, offers a model for a typology of idioms — a phraseology — although it is highly technical and sometimes hard to follow for readers — such as myself — who are daunted by formal and mathematical logic and who are — perhaps therefore — much more attracted by the notion of fuzzy sets.

Although I am not qualified to express a specialist's opinion about any of these technical issues, I do feel entitled to take up some of the points made by the contributors: points which deal with the metonymic and metaphoric processes by which the idioms came into being in the first place, and our need for some sense of this if we wish to do more than take the figurative meaning of the idioms on trust. Since taking the figurative meaning on trust is what ordinary native-speaking users generally do, most linguists seem content to follow suit.

Although the matter of the articles in Everaert falls mostly outside my brief, two of them do bear some relation to my theme, and I found them heartening, since there was plenty in them to support my beliefs. Indeed, one of them suggests that “trope interaction in idioms” might be “one of the exciting avenues for future research”⁶. I therefore submit these unscientific, ‘anecdotal’ pages as a nugget that might, perhaps, be

added to whatever the yield of such research may finally amount to. I propose now to pull out a few plums from the pudding cooked by Everaert and his colleagues, plums that are to my rhetorician's taste and present purposes.

6.1 I gather from the Introduction to Everaert that, until recently, most discussions of idioms conducted by professional linguists have concentrated almost exclusively on the idiom “to kick the bucket”, which is taken as an example of a fixed or ‘frozen’ idiom: that is to say, it cannot be analyzed syntactically speaking — passivized, inverted or generally played about with in the fanciful if unutterable ways which linguists like to propose — and retain its idiomatic meaning; nor can other terms be inserted into it (apart presumably from adjectives, or expletives, such as ‘bloody’, before ‘bucket’); the phrase must be inserted as it stands into any string in which it occurs — all of which makes it a fascinating problem for syntacticians. It is also an idiom which appears to be unmotivated: we cannot decode, without help from a reference book, how the terms used can be made to refer to anything which produces the meaning attributed to the idiom: in this case, ‘to have died’.

It is generally assumed — as it would be by most native speakers, and by myself until I did some elementary research — that ‘bucket’ here means ‘pail’, as R. W. Gibbs (in Everaert) also supposes, and that it is — as well as being unanalyzable — unmotivated, indeed opaque, although there will be “obscure historical reasons” for its having come into existence. Well, yes. It does not, interestingly, appear in a recent Lancaster corpus of recorded phone conversations (Drew and Holt in Everaert), for all its supposed universality — perhaps because it shows a disrespectful attitude towards the dead; even so, native speakers

would know exactly what it meant without knowing *why* it meant ‘to have died’ or ‘to be dead’: nor, of course, would it bother most of them that they did not know.

Gibbs knows that the original kicker is supposed to have been a pig, whose last gesture in life was to kick a bucket, and that the origin of the idiom is, as he observes, metonymic: here, in Gibbs’s words, “a salient act has a “stands-for” relation to an entire idea or event”: one kick is part of the whole sequence of actions that lead from the catching of the pig to the cutting of it up.

It may not, however, have been a pail that the pig kicked, but the beam (‘bucket’ in East Anglian dialect, from Old French, *buquet*, and Fr, *trébuchet*, a balance)⁷ from which the already dead pig is hung upside down before the slaughterer slices it open from the anus to the chops. The kick would have been the last, purely reflex, action of a pig that was no longer alive.

Actually, of course, it does not matter syntactically, or even semantically, whether the bucket in question is a pail or a beam, although if it is a beam, it makes more pragmatic, and rhetorical sense, and offers a more vivid and tangible, indeed shocking, image for the listener to grasp: as I know from personal experience, and have written about in a very different place⁸ — hence my remarks about pigs above, in 1.3.

What matters to me, in the context of this essay, is not whether knowing that a ‘bucket’ may be a ‘beam’ makes the idiom any more or less analyzable — in any sense in which we might use the term — but that, in Gibbs’s words, it is the “salient act”, which represents a whole string of acts of which it is the selected, significant — and thus the signifying — part: signifying, in this context, the last spasmodic twitch of a dead beast. It is a classic metonymy. And that is what still gives

— if I may put it so — a kick to the expression, however recalcitrant — just like a pig — it may seem to those who look at language from only the syntactic and scientific points of view.

6.2 The contributors to Everaert often make the point that idioms are culture-bound — one of the Axioms which headed my previous piece — and many of the idioms cited by Ray Jackendoff are opaque to me since I am unfamiliar with the American culture which produced them; some of them are apparently opaque to Jackendoff himself.

Jackendoff cites “sleeping in the buff”, and says that since ‘buff’ normally denotes a colour or a polishing operation, it is completely ‘unmotivated’. According to Lakoff (cited by Geeraerts, in Everaert), “motivation involves the principles that explain (or make plausible) why a particular linguistic expression means what it does”.

Although it is actually quite easy to discover what motivated the expression “to sleep in the buff”, I am presuming that such information, as far as Professor Jackendoff is concerned, would be beside the point, which is — again I presume — that most users do not know, and their ignorance does not bother them, how idioms such as “sleeping in the buff” came into being: in this sense only are such expressions unmotivated. The issue is, however, very much germane to my own particular point — and point of view — and so I turn to the *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* to follow the trail which the lexicon lays down.

The *NSOED* tells us that ‘buff’ is an abbreviation of ‘buffalo’ (an ellipsis)⁹, and came — by a series of metonymic steps — to mean, i), the skin of that animal, which when dressed was dull-yellow (the colour which we now think of as buff); ii), the name of military uniforms made from the dressed buffalo hide or skin; iii), *any skin when denuded of*

hair or covering; iv), the name, The Buffs, of the East Kent Regiment, a regiment of infantry who wore buff-facings on their uniforms; v), thus, the colour buff, with which the uniforms were 'blancoed'; vi), the polishing stick — a buffer — used to apply that colour; vii), and, after New York City fire-fighting volunteers who wore buff-coloured uniforms, anyone who turned out to watch a fire; viii), thus, any kind of enthusiast, as in the phrase "an opera buff".

I am grateful to Professor Jackendoff for sending me to the dictionary to find all this out, since I did not know most of it beforehand. And it suits my purposes ideally since it vividly demonstrates the way in which words and phrases may, indeed, lose their original meanings by a series of metonymic sidesteps or shifts — and thus appear to be unmotivated — yet shows, as well and in case-book fashion, how all of these shiftings of the signified are — when they occur — perfectly well motivated.

Professor Jackendoff tells us in the same rather startling paragraph that he has no use for the word 'rampant' — as in the idiomatic phrase 'running rampant' — "outside this idiom, but some people evidently do". I may have got the tone wrong, but this seems unduly dismissive of heralds, architectural historians and botanists — or poets, if it comes to that — all of whom have perfectly legitimate, and well-motivated, reasons for using the term. 'To ramp' is, if you are a four-legged animal, to rear up on your hind legs. Since, in heraldry, it is often a lion who is portrayed rampant, the lion's perhaps mythical characteristics of high-spiritedness, vigour and strength have become metonymically associated with the word. As the strong and the vigorous are often unrestrained as well — since nothing is allowed to stand in their way — the word has come to have much the same meaning as 'rampage', another word which comes from the verb 'to ramp': to

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indulge in unchecked and wild behaviour: you can “go on the rampage” as well as “run rampant”. Plants can behave like this, too.

6.3 Drew and Holt (in Everaert), who are British linguists, cite the expression “(he) had a good innings”, another useful example of a culture-bound idiom. Although the idiom may puzzle North Americans, I understand it because it is part of my culture, and it will be understood by Australians, New Zealanders, Indians, West Indians, Pakistanis, Singhalese, Zimbabweans, South Africans, and the Kobe Cricket Club.

Yet how, a North American may well ask, can we speak of ‘an innings’ — the indefinite article and a word with the plural marker — when, in baseball — a game with the same parentage (child’s play called rounders) — an inning is an inning? In cricket, however, an innings covers the time a batsman spends at the crease — which is the place where he stands — between the time he goes in to bat and the time he is ‘out’; it can also refer to the completed portion of the game when all eleven batsmen have had their turn to bat, or enough runs have been scored for the captain to declare the innings closed. The England cricket captain has recently spent ten hours, spread over two days, at the crease (with breaks for nourishment and sleep), and in that single innings he made 185 runs; at the end of the game, a Test Match between England and South Africa, he was still not out. Everyone agrees that it was a very good innings indeed.

Drew and Holt quote this idiom since it occurred in a recorded conversation that is part of their data, data used, in their experiment, to discover how people signal a change of conversational topic. Two people are talking of a man who has just died. One of them reports that the dead man had been seventy-nine when he died; later, the same

speaker says “So he had a good innings, didn’t he?” ‘Good’ in this context clearly means ‘long’. “A long time” is unstated, but it is of the metonymic essence: and if a man’s life is long it is obviously presumed, presupposed, to be good. Each year is one more run added to his score: his tally of runs and years.

When the idiom is used like this, it entails that the innings is over, or nearly over, for if, as here, ‘an innings’ is used as a metaphor for ‘a human life’, then the past tense in this instance tells us that that life has come to an end; the addition of an aspectual auxiliary, on the other hand, as in “He has had a good innings”, would not necessarily mean that the man was dead, but it would certainly imply that he was old. ‘Not out’ signifies, and stands for, ‘not the end’. When a sometime Test cricketer entitled his autobiograophy *80, Not Out*, the reader would infer that the man was still alive: “I have had a good innings”, the man might have said.

6.4 I have recently noted another cricketing term commonly used as a metaphorical idiom, and I mention it since it seemed strange in its context, which was a Canadian film — *The Company of Strangers* — and in Canada, alone among the former Dominions, people do not play cricket, or not seriously. Winnie, however, spent her wartime youth in England, which probably explains her usage. She is standing up to her knees in water, trying to catch a fish with a rod and line that she has just put together herself. She is not having any success. Her remark, which concludes the scene, is “I think I’m batting on a sticky wicket here”.

A wicket, to begin with, is a small side-gate, with upright slats, while the two pairs of three stumps, with bails across the top, which face each other — twenty-two yards apart in the middle of a cricket

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field — are also called wickets: this is not a metaphor, I think, simply a comparison based on similarity of appearance. Winnie's 'wicket' is the length of turf which lies between the two sets of wickets and is the part of the pitch upon which the direct contest between the batsmen and the bowlers is played out; the field is all around them. This further extension of meaning is clearly metonymic: the area between the wickets relates the sets of wickets to each other, and is thus called a wicket. One part of the pitch — which, by metonymy, means here the playing area rather than the pitched wickets — takes the name of the particular objects with which it has a functional and consequential, as well as a contiguous, relationship: no wickets, no wicket.

If the weather has been fine, the grass will be dry, and if the wicket has been professionally prepared, it is relatively easy for batsmen to play on since the ball will not do anything untoward — beyond what the bowler can make it do — after it has pitched: in cricket, 'pitched' means "hits the ground", which the ball usually does before it reaches the batsman. The pitch or bounce of the ball, once the batsman has read the bowler's hand, is reasonably predictable. If, on the other hand, the weather has been wet, and the ground is damp, the grass will be 'sticky' — your shoes will stick to it and you may consequently slip and fall; more seriously, the ball, once it has pitched, may skid, or turn, and bounce, in ways that are unpredictable.

All these conditions, which are metonymically related to each other by presuppositions and entailments, have to be understood if we are to appreciate what the idiom implies: it presupposes that the conditions for my enterprise are not favourable and entails that what I am doing is likely to be unprofitable. 'Sticky' presupposes that the bad weather has made the patch I play on very difficult to play on and it "stands in for" all the other factors that are present and operative when a wicket

is sticky; similarly, those same factors entail that I may not be successful in my enterprise, and that if I hope to achieve anything I shall have to play with unusual skill and determination. We can then use the term metaphorically, as Winnie does, when she realises that she is unlikely to catch any fish.

7 More on Quotations as Idioms, and their Modification

7.1 In his important taxonomic study of phrasemes (in Everaert), Igor Mel'cuk, of the Université of Montréal, cites, while discussing the issue of syntactical insertion, two idioms between whose component parts it is impossible, so he claims, to insert other lexical material. What first intrigued me about his examples is that they are both modifications — idiomatic deformations, one might almost say — of, in the first place, a prayer and, in the second, a poetic couplet. Professor Mel'cuk does not point this out, and, since he says that he is not a native speaker of English and tells us that he spends a lot of time asking his colleagues about the meanings of idioms, it is possible that he may not know that this is what they are. The two idioms are “to kingdom come” and “[to] trip the light fantastic”.

Professor Mel'cuk gives no context for either of these expressions, nor does he gloss them. I do not know therefore what he supposes them to mean, nor does he tell us where he came across them. As for the quasi-idiom — as he would call it, I think — “to kingdom come”, it might occur in some such remark as “when the shell exploded amongst the group of soldiers they were all blown to kingdom come”. (Of course, the phrase may be cited in scholarly texts which I have not read.) In such a context, the phrase means to be dispatched “to a world other than this one”, “to the next world”, and, of course, such an entailment presupposes, in this particular example, that the soldiers

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have been killed. The phrase, as it stands here, is thought (by Brewer)¹⁰ to come from a couplet in verses by John Wolcot (1738-1819), who wrote under the pseudonym Peter Pindar:

And forty pounds be theirs, a pretty sum,
For sending such a rogue to kingdom come.

Peter Pindar himself, one supposes, took this from the Lord's Prayer: "[May] thy kingdom come; thy will be done in (*sic*, the Anglican version) earth as it is in heaven". And the Lord's kingdom is, of course, both heaven as we commonly understand it and the future establishment of just such a heaven upon earth: "for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever, Amen". It is clear, however, that Pindar's rogue — presumably betrayed to the authorities for a reward of forty pounds — will not be going to heaven: a hotter place will have been reserved for him. So, once again, metonymies would appear to be at work: the world to come, whether 'heaven' or 'hell', must be represented by the first of those terms, since it, in turn, is designated by the term "kingdom", which stands in a metonymic relation to it.

If I am right, Pindar has actually taken the two words — a noun and a verb — from one context (dropping the vocative which gives us the mood of the verb) and applied them as if they were a single noun phrase, which might be paraphrased as "that kingdom which is to come", or, by extension, "to the place of the physically dead". A phrase which signifies the heavenly kingdom in one context — the Lord's Prayer — can, when thus deformed, be used to signify death and its consequences: and had you been a British Tommy in the trenches of the Great War, you would have had no hesitation in inserting a 'bloody' or some other expletive between 'to' and 'kingdom' or even between

'kingdom' and 'come': "Poor old Bill's been blown to bloody kingdom
***** come!"

We can also pair "kingdom come" with 'till', and often do, and the phrase takes on a different nuance. As my mother and I stood waiting for a bus which never came, she remarked, "It looks as if we are going to be here till kingdom come", which means "till God's kingdom comes", which means, metonymically and by extension, "till the end of Time". This, as well as being a metonymy rather than a metaphor, is a hyperbole, a rhetorical flourish which the use of the term seems to encourage.

7.2 The case of "to trip the light fantastic" is even more illuminating — at least, for my purposes, if not for Professor Mel'cuk's. It is the deformation, obviously made for comic purposes, of a couplet from John Milton's (well-known) poem *L'Allegro*, and I have been wondering who originally played this joke on the learned poet. It sounds like something Bertie Wooster might have said, misquoting Jeeves — it has a Wodehousian ring. I have not, however, been able to find it in the handful of the Master's works on my shelves, and therefore cannot be sure, but I am pretty certain that whoever did coin the expression would have expected his, or her, readers, or hearers, to know the lines that were being alluded to: there would have no joke, and no pleasure in recognising it, if they hadn't.

In *L'Allegro*, Milton invites the Three Graces to join together in a sprightly dance:

Come, and trip it as ye go
On the light fantastic toe.

Yet even if we did not know the original lines — the source from which the idiom is derived — would it not be possible to say something

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like “What about tripping with me the light fantastic?”, or “I’d love to trip with you again that perfectly wonderful light fantastic we danced a week ago”?

My own literary and rhetorical interests lead me to note, since it is relevant to my case, that Milton clearly took some of the words of this couplet as well as its metre from a similar couplet of Ariel’s in *The Tempest*, when Ariel says of the rabble over whom Prospero has given him power:

Each one tripping on his toe,
Shall be here with mop and mow.

Ariadne’s thread can sometimes lead us a very long way back, and, if we follow it, it may help us to untangle knots which time has subsequently tied.

Both Shakespeare and Milton are using ‘toe’ literally, yet ‘toe’ is also the metonymically signifying part of the ‘foot’, and the foot is that part of the body which — in the West but not in Japan — we associate with dancing, just as, metonymically, we associate the hand with work, the tongue with articulate speech and language, the ear and eye with the faculties of perception and understanding. If we look at Milton’s lines for themselves and think of what he has added to Shakespeare’s couplet, we may notice that Milton, too, is indulging in the habit of metonymic representation — as he does, constantly, and with the greatest virtuosity.

To say ‘toe’ rather than ‘foot’ presupposes that the ‘heel’ is not touching the ground (the dancer is already partly uplifted — a metonymic presupposition), while the word ‘light’ goes on to associate the toe with what the Renaissance thought of as ‘air’, a heaven-aspiring lightness of deportment: toes are only light, rather than heavy, when they are off the ground. ‘Toe’ is thus, in Milton’s usage, a double

metonymy: it is the signifying part that stands not only for something material but also for something metaphysical: it signifies both physical and spiritual uplift. The Longmans' editor of the poem tells us that the *OED* thinks this use of 'fantastic' — an adjective — to be a novel one, and that Milton was thinking of the toe as making movements of extravagant agility. Milton might also have had Botticelli in mind, for, on his visit to Florence, he would certainly have seen Botticelli's 'Primavera', and the Graces are practically air-borne on their delicately-turned toes.

In Milton's time, 'to go' still had the meaning of 'to walk', and 'to trip' does not mean "to catch your foot in something and fall flat on your face"; it is another form of moving, a very airy, light-footed one; 'it' would refer, metonymically, to something more or less like "the dancing movement". In his song "Come unto these yellow sands", Ariel uses the verb 'to foot' in a similar metonymic fashion: "foot it featly here and there"; 'feately' means 'gracefully', 'lightly', as it still meant in Dryden's day, when he adapted Ariel's line for his own purposes, and spoke of a "Quire of Ladies", the Graces again, and their "feately footing". In these instances 'to foot' means 'to dance'. Today, 'to foot' has two figurative extensions: not only to pay the reckoning, "to foot the bill", but to move very quickly.

7.3 All that I have said so far, were I pretending to be a linguist, might be anathema to André Schenk of Utrecht (in Everaert) who says categorically: "Methodologically, the ability of people to play with words is outside the scope of a theory of idioms proper; therefore, data involving word games cannot play a role in a theory of idioms". As I am not wishing to construct a theory of idioms, or to analyse them in any proper linguistic manner, I hope that I may be absolved. Yet, since

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every idiom is an example of wordplay, and as metaphors and metonymies empower most idioms and are themselves styles of wordplay in the widest sense, why should wordplay be left out of consideration?

Conclusion

I have reached the end of my allotted space, although I could continue such analyses endlessly, since the examples which lie to hand, in reference books and elsewhere, would keep me happy till kingdom come, however long my innings might happen to last. I trust, however, that I have gone some way to supporting my case that metonymic and metaphoric strategies are essential operations in the making of idioms, and that metaphors cannot work independently of metonymies: they need to work hand in hand with metonymies if they are to work at all. There, for the time being, I must rest my case.

Notes

- 1 I have published four articles on this topic in *The Northern Review*, the House Journal of the English Faculty, Hokkaido University. The first, "Identifying Metonymies", was published in issue No 12, 1984.
- 2 *A General Rhetoric*, by *le Group μ*, English translation published by The John Hopkins Press, 1981, and Gérard Genette, 'Rhetoric Restrained', in *Figures of Literary Discourse* (p 109), English translation published by Basil Blackwell, 1982.
- 3 I discuss these issues at much greater length in "The Implications of Metonymy", *The Northern Review*, No 19, 1991.
- 4 I tackle Jakobson on this in my article "Roman Jakobson on Metaphor and Metonymy" in *The Northern Review*, No 17, 1989.
- 5 *Idioms: Structural and Psychological Perspectives*, edited by Martin Everaert et al, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale, New Jersey and

Hove, UK, 1995.

- 6 R. W. Gibbs, Jr., in Everaert, "Idiomaticity and Human Cognition", p 112.
- 7 Brewer offers this as a possible explanation of the idiom: *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, (Cassell), 14th edition, last reprinted 1994.
- 8 I have written, and have had privately printed, four volumes of verse autobiography; in *My Father's House*, I describe how my father killed and dismembered a pig.
- 9 It is sometimes difficult to draw the line between a metonymy and an ellipsis. I discuss this in detail in "On Ellipsis and Metonymy", *The Northern Review*, No 16, 1988. I also consider that sub-set of metonymies which begin life as euphemisms — polite ways of referring to the impolite.
- 10 Why doesn't Professor Mel'cuk have a copy of Brewer on his desk, not to mention editions of Shakespeare and Milton — and the Routledge *Thesaurus*, too, now that it is in print?