

“IRONING THE BUGS OUT”: MIXED METAPHORS

DON HAUPTMAN

New York, New York

donhauptman@compuserve.com

The mixed metaphor has long been vilified by language lovers. After all, a metaphor *per se* is often a stretch. The attempt to combine two or more vastly dissimilar figures of speech usually results in a jarring incongruity and an absurd image. Such clashes are often amusing, although the humor is strictly unintentional.

“The issue is on the back burner in a holding pattern.” That’s one of my favorite examples, recorded in 1976 by *Washington Post* language watcher Lawrence Harrison. It is also pleonastic—another problem that commonly arises when tropes are tangled.

Even great writers have committed this linguistic solecism. Consider Shakespeare’s “Or to take arms against a sea of troubles”. Style guru Theodore M. Bernstein exonerated the Bard in this instance, however, observing that “the discrepancy here is not obtrusive and the effect is certainly far from ludicrous.”

But in the hands of speakers or writers who are not as skilled, the results tend to be less prepossessing. Following are a few choice examples I have gleaned from the media. (Text not within quotation marks is paraphrased from the source cited.)

- Network TV programming simply reflects our society and culture, a broadcasting industry executive insisted. “It does not push the envelope over the edge” (*The New York Times*, Aug 1 1991)
- When the mood of investors suddenly turned from bearish to bullish, Edward Collins, head of U.S. stock trading at Daiwa Securities America, proclaimed “Here we are, off to the races again like there’s no tomorrow” (*The Wall Street Journal*, Dec 20 1996)
- In 1981, President Reagan decided against basing a defense system in a small town in the Southwest, disappointing residents and real estate speculators alike. Commented Jack Matthews of the Nevada Association of Realtors “The small businessman is in shock. It was pie in the sky, and now they’re on hold” (*The New York Times*, Oct 12 1981)
- One of O.J. Simpson’s attorneys, in an interview, said “If the shoe was on the other foot, I’d be peeling you off the ceiling” (*CNN*, Jul 20 1995)
- “Illegal immigrants Race Against Clock to Get Through a Small Window of Opportunity” (Headline, *The New York Times*, May 1 2001)
- Technology writer Thomas E. Weber, denouncing pop-up ads that aggravate Internet users, wrote “They swarm the screen like whining mosquitoes, leaving us hapless Web-surfers to swat them with mouse clicks” (*The Wall Street Journal*, May 21 1001)
- “Though hardly out of the woods yet, the death watch is over for News Corp...” (*The New York Times*, Feb 26 1992)

Of course, with sufficient linguistic dexterity, it's possible for more than two metaphors to battle each other, as these examples demonstrate.

- A Pentagon staffer, complaining that efforts to reform the military have thus far been too timid, wrote "It's just ham-fisted salami-slicing by the bean counters (*The Wall Street Journal*, May 9 1997)
- Pediatrician and author William Sears, commenting on a trend toward unorthodox child-rearing practices, wrote "We should have nipped this in the bud before it took off, metastasized" (*The Wall Street Journal*, Jan 17 1998)
- "It's easy to sympathize with Bush. He must be enormously frustrated to see President Clinton remain as mired in the limelight as a Goodyear Blimp lodged in the Lincoln Tunnel" (Syndicated political column, Feb 27 2001)

In conclusion, "when you boil it right down to brass tacks" (a specimen cited by Bergen Evans), it is best to avoid mixing your metaphors.



The picture is reproduced from John Langdon's *Wordplay: Ambigrams and Reflections on the Art of Ambigrams* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992) with the permission of the author.