

WITH THIS SEA CHANGE, WE'RE OFF TO THE RACES! Mixed Metaphors and Associated Risible Boners

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In a profile, science-fiction writer Ursula LeGuin was quoted thus: “My tentacles are coming out of the pigeonhole in all directions.”

This remark was surely intended humorously. Alas, however, mixed metaphors are usually inadvertent—and they are all too common. This linguistic solecism occurs when figures of speech create images that are bizarre or ridiculous or impossible. In past compilations, I’ve cited such instant classics as “milking the gold rush” and “the fabric of our melting pot.”

Now it’s time for another roundup of these ubiquitous bloopers. I found the following recently in newspapers and other media:

- “I’m piggybacking on a juggernaut.”
- “The explosive costs of housing have spread like wildfire. . . .”
- “If a politician thumps the Bible, is that a get-out-of-jail-free card?”
- “He’d rather chew glass and makes no bones about it.”
- Theater review blurb: “A game-changer that hits you like a shot in the heart.”
- “I want to be sure the new blood coming into the company jells with the rest of us.”
- “Trump had campaigned on a message of ‘draining the swamp,’ referring to the revolving door of lobbyists and policymakers, but his choices display otherwise.”
- “But people are also able to silo themselves into an echo chamber, where they hear only things that they already agree with.”
- Possibly intended jokingly: “Mr. Kissinger does not believe the arc of history makes house calls.”
- “Time after time the media bites at his smoke and mirrors. . . .”
- “They’ve left open the door to be able to put their foot down.”
- “And any lingering fallout from the candidates’ performances will almost certainly be swallowed up by a debate. . . .”

- “When it hits you in the head, you will find a way to jump it.”
- “The Marine Corps thought because they shut a Facebook page down, the group was dead. We had to show them it was just metastasizing into back rooms.”
- “It was like a dream come true was right around the corner.”

Some metaphor pairs don’t technically qualify as mixed, but are nevertheless problematic because of awkward juxtapositions, clashing clichés, or other stylistically inelegant usage. I’ve named these “mashed metaphors.” Some recent specimens:

- “We believe it’s just a smoke screen for a witch hunt. . . .”
- “Gun to my head, it’s not something in my wheelhouse.”
- “We have to tread lightly. . . . You have got to do it without throwing too much sand in the gears.”
- “Even worse, greenlighting the deal could set off a domino effect.”
- “[The city] needs to get its act together because we’re nipping at your heels.”
- “There’s an element of snake oil salesmanship in real estate, so you have to develop a sense for when they’re blowing smoke.”
- “[It’s] a common theme: how ordinary people, leading conventional lives, step up to the plate and open their hearts. . . .”
- “You have to go in the other direction—be so rooted in your community that you can turn on a dime.”
- “But the proof will be in the pudding, in whether journals actually hold scientists’ feet to the fire.”
- “Foggy Bottom might be rolling out the red carpet, but I don’t see any evidence the charm offensive is changing minds on Capitol Hill.”

The question might arise: How does one *properly* use multiple metaphors—*unmixed*, so to speak? In this example, the device is deployed correctly: “We’ll take a deep dive into the murky waters of campaign-finance law.”

There’s a lesson here. If you don’t want your writing to be red meat that gives you a black eye in the sweet spot, the acid test is to take the gloves off and take the bull by the horns. To communicate effectively, it pays to split hairs as you walk on eggshells!