

“GET OUT OF YOUR CAVE AND SMELL THE COFFEE!”

Many More Mixed Metaphors and Malaphors

DON HAUPTMAN

New York, New York

donhauptman@nyc.rr.com

Not long ago, I volunteered to help a worthy cause as a consultant, pro bono. But the experience proved disappointing and frustrating. The panjandrum ignored or rejected my advice. Relating the sad tale to a friend, I griped: “They’re turning me away even though I’m offering them gold on a silver platter!”

My remark is a *mixed metaphor*—a combination of tropes that have an unintentionally bizarre or awkward result. In many cases, the image created is amusing because, taken literally, what’s described is ludicrous or impossible.

A classic example: “I was out of the frying pan and into hot water.” Others, found via Internet search: “He’s the big cheese in a small pond.” “Time to get my act in gear.” “The storm of protest was nipped in the bud.”

A related phenomenon is the *mashed metaphor*. And still another is the *malaphor*. If the terms sound confusing, hold your horses and step on the brakes! All will be made clear below.

This is the fifth anthology of this genre that I’ve assembled for *Word Ways*. Perhaps because of widespread illiteracy—or bad editing—the examples just keep coming. First, here are a few standard-issue mixed metaphors, gleaned via my reading of newspapers and other media:

- “We have the home run in the back pocket.”
- “They’re putting their sacred cows on the table.”
- “Is there really a push-button magic pill?”
- “My mission has been to stitch back some of that nuts-and-bolts coverage. . . .”
- “I happened to catch a window that was historically difficult.”
- “[It’s] pummeling toward them like a meteor.”

But some specimens fail to meet the precise definition of a mixed metaphor. They don’t conjure up a contradictory or absurd mental picture. Rather, they’re what I call “mashed metaphors,” most often a series of clashing clichés. Consider this example: “They seem to have drawn the wagons around Herman [Cain] right now. At the grassroots level, I don’t think this has changed the chemistry.”

Then we have the metaphor malapropisms, or malaphors. Someone recalls an expression and then unwittingly grafts it onto another. Or some other incongruous imagery is created. “I was up a tree without a paddle.” “He’s feathering his own bed.” “She rules with an iron thumb.”

I found the above examples on malaphors.com, a website that was launched earlier this year with the mission of collecting and analyzing such specimens.

The phenomenon hasn’t escaped my notice, either. A business colleague, attempting to convey the idea that someone was naïve, referred to “a babe in the manger.”

She had conflated the concept of an innocent infant with the phrase “a dog in the manger.” This expression, from one of Aesop’s fables, has an entirely different meaning: You shouldn’t senselessly hoard an item, denying it to someone else even though it’s of no value to you. Of course, the Jesus story was likely a simultaneous influence.

Here are more malaphors I’ve encountered:

- “It’s the pink elephant in the room.”
- “Being a victim of the same boat. . . .”
- “It happened in the blink of a click.”
- “Don’t rule it out of hand.”
- “The contemporary reader must navigate some antique slang. . . .”
- “We were amazed that out of the woodwork these people came roaring up.”
- “When the situation shifts to Israel . . . the ground gets murkier.”

Gaffes such as these can be amusing, although the humor is usually at the expense of the hapless speaker or writer. Don’t be the butt of such jokes. Always review your writing to be sure that it contains no mixed metaphors or malaphors.

The lesson or moral? Never open a can of worms . . . because it’s tough to put the genie back in the bottle!