Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr.

Words making love together: Dynamics of metaphorical creativity

Abstract: Metaphor is one form of language in which people engage in significant word play. For the most part, scholars assume that each novel metaphor arises from specific rhetorical and pragmatic goals, such as to be creative, polite, vivid, and memorable. In this way, creative metaphor use is a conscious, deliberate act that is intended to be seen as such by listeners and readers. My claim is that this view of metaphorical creativity is overly simplistic and ignores many of the factors, ranging from cultural to bodily influences, which actually shape the automatic, less conscious creation and use of metaphor. I describe various psycholinguistic, linguistic and literary studies that offer support for this expanded view of metaphoric creativity. From consideration of the interacting constraints that gives rise to novel metaphorical discourse, I outline a model of dynamic word play, more generally. This approach offers a more comprehensive, psychologically realistic view of what people really are doing when both mundane and poetic metaphors burst forth in thought and communication.

Keywords: automatic mind, Bob Dylan, Charlie Sheen, conceptual metaphor, consciousness, deliberate metaphor, Donald Trump, metaphoric creativity, mixed metaphor, Wallace Stevens, word salad

1 Introduction

Bob Dylan, recent Nobel Prize laureate in Literature (2016), splashed on to the music scene in the early 1960s with a long list of beautifully crafted, poetic songs. A documentary film, titled “Don’t Look Back”, released in 1967, followed Dylan as he embarked on a concert tour in the United Kingdom during 1965. At one point in the film, Dylan was smoking a cigarette with a friend on the street outside a traditional English shop. On either side of the shop’s entrance were two long vertical signs. The sign on the left said:

Animals
& Birds
Bought
Or
Sold On
Dylan stood looking at the two signs for a few seconds, and then spontaneously started to spit out a creative reading of the words in front of him, as he walked back and forth between the two signs. This is what he said:

I want a dog that's gonna collect and clean my bath, return my cigarette, and, and give tobacco to my animals, and give my birds a commission. I want – I'm looking for somebody to sell my dog, collect my clip, buy my animal and straighten out my bird. I'm looking for a place to bathe my bird, buy my dog, collect my clip, sell me cigarettes and commission my bath.

I'm looking for a place that's gonna collect my commission, sell my dog, burn my bird, and sell me to the cigarette. Going to bird my buy, collect my will, and bathe my commission. I'm looking for a place that's going to animal my soul, knit my return, bathe my foot and collect my dog. Commission me to sell my animals to the bird to clip and buy my bath and return me back to the cigarettes.

It is difficult to convey the utter joy that Dylan seemed to have experienced as he engaged in this on-the-spot wordplay. He laughed as he spoke, made highly gestured poses, and even danced at different moments as the words poured out. Some of what Dylan produced seemed creative in the sense of using words in new combinations, some of which convey novel (e.g., “commission my bird”, “going to bird my buy”), and possibly metaphorical meanings (e.g., “sell me to the cigarette”, “going to animal my soul”, “knit my return”). Dylan, by the way, was already known at this time for his uncanny ability to sit down and effortlessly write a song or poem.

How do we experience Dylan’s creative wordplay in this case? For example, should we characterize the product of Dylan’s wordplay as emerging from his conscious, deliberate mind as if he very self-consciously and purposefully aimed to be creative, even cute, in saying what he did? Or should we alternatively attri-
bute Dylan’s wordplay production as arising spontaneously from his unconscious mind without any deliberate forethought, perhaps enhanced by his many years of writing songs and poems? This contrast between creative wordplay as a conscious or unconscious process underlies many debates within cognitive science on both verbal metaphor production and human creativity (Gibbs 2017).

My primary purpose in this chapter is to suggest that creative wordplay always emerges from a constellation of interacting forces that do not easily fall into a simple division between the conscious and unconscious minds. All speech events, even creative, playful ones, are constructed from the interaction of many social, cognitive and linguistic factors, and cannot be reduced to a single part of human minds or brains. At the same time, new metaphoric meanings can sometimes arise, more simply, from playing with words when speakers and writers have no preordained thought or topic in mind. One of the main messages I wish to convey here is that it is often difficult to characterize how people are thinking when they engage in wordplay. Looking at the language alone does not necessarily provide clear insights into the relationship between metaphoric language and metaphoric thinking. For example, cognitive linguistic research through its systematic analyses of linguistic patterns provides key insights into the possible cognitive and experiential motivations for why people speak and write in specific ways. However, more detailed, psychological studies are required to fully understand all the complex unconscious forces that dynamically shape any creative instance of metaphoric wordplay. Similarly, we can try to understand some of the specific literary, historical and biographical circumstances that possibly led to different wordplay productions. Yet even with this additional information, we must be careful not to insist that some instance of wordplay can be directly attributed to one, or just a few, of these circumstances. The dynamics of wordplay, like all human behaviors, emerge from many forces which always include complex conscious and unconscious cognitive processes.

2 Metaphoric creativity in action

Metaphor has long been deemed as a topic of creative wordplay, at least in cases of novel verbal metaphor. Consider one of the most discussed metaphor, namely William Shakespeare’s phrase, “Juliet is the sun” uttered by Romeo upon Juliet’s appearance on her balcony in Act 2, Scene 2 of the play Romeo & Juliet (Shakespeare 2009). This metaphor is wonderfully apt in describing some of the ways that Romeo feels about Juliet. We may ponder upon reading and re-reading this metaphor as to what Shakespeare may have been thinking at the very
moment when he first wrote down these words (Gibbs 2011). Did Shakespeare first consider various possibilities, beginning with the words that Juliet is “lovely”, “beautiful”, and “gorgeous”, but decided that these adjectives were too bland, and so then imagined Romeo saying that Juliet made him “dizzy”, lightheaded”, or “swoon”? Rejecting these words as also being inadequate, did Shakespeare consider various metaphors, such as “Juliet is the moon” or “Juliet is the center of the universe”, before he suddenly came up with the words “It is the East, and Juliet is the sun”?

It is impossible for us to know with any certainty the mental processes that guided Shakespeare on the particular day and specific time he wrote down “Juliet is the sun”. We may assume that Shakespeare was playing with words, to some degree, and may even quite consciously intended what he wrote to be interpreted as conveying metaphorical meanings (e.g., “I will now produce a word string to convey metaphorical meaning”). Many traditional theories of metaphor implicitly assume that creative metaphor use is a conscious rhetorical act (i.e., to be vivid, memorable, concise, polite) (Goatly 1997; Grice 1989). This leads us to ask, more generally, if wordplay is primarily a product of human consciousness. After all, literary scholars, for instance, often advocate for the primacy of human agency, including a writer’s deliberate rhetorical intentions, in their explanations of literary meaning and interpretation (for examples of this from the world of metaphor see Fludernik 2011). But the vast literature from cognitive linguistics and psycholinguistics demonstrates that much metaphoric thinking and language use arises automatically within the cognitive unconscious mind (Gibbs 1994, 2017). People often think and speak in metaphoric ways without any awareness of doing so. For this reason, many uses of metaphor, even novel one’s such as Shakespeare’s “Juliet is the sun”, may be created and produced without much, if any, conscious deliberation. This observation does not deny that conscious thoughts can contribute to wordplay in various domains. My point, nonetheless, is to emphasize that unconscious mental processes may drive wordplay and creative metaphor production far more so than is typically acknowledged in the scholarly study of wordplay dynamics.

Still, there are examples of metaphoric language that, on the surface, are difficult to imagine as being anything but deliberately created and articulated (see debate between Gibbs 2011; Gibbs and Chen 2017; Steen 2008, 2017). Consider the single expression “Minimalist artist spills bean”.¹ This phrase is a play on the common American idiom “spill the beans” meaning “to reveal a secret.” The

---

creativity, and humor, in “Minimalist artist spills bean” lies in the way it renews a common idiom by substituting a singular “bean” for the original plural term “beans”, a move that reactivates the more literal reading of the phrase “spill the beans”. At the same time, the new phrase highlights the impression that a minimalist artist is one who strives for less (singular) rather than more (plural). Reading this creative idiom variation makes one think “oh, that is clever”, and it is hard to imagine that the producer of this phrase was not in some way trying to be clever by playing with the words in a familiar idiomatic phrase.

There are other examples of metaphoric wordplay that also seem to be quite consciously created and produced as metaphors. Consider the following newspaper headlines used to talk about the outcome of sporting events, in this case, American college football games: “Cougars drown Beavers”, “Cowboys corral Buffaloes”, “Clemson cooks Rice”, and “Army torpedoes Navy” (Kövecses 2010). The nicknames of the college teams (e.g., “Cougars” are the mascot for Washington State University, “Beavers” are the mascot for Oregon State University, “Buffaloes” are the mascot for University of Colorado, etc.) are paired with verbs that metaphorically refer to defeat. Thus, beavers live in water and can be defeated when drowned, cowboys corral cattle, and therefore would defeat an opponent like buffaloes by corralling them, rice is considered done or defeated when cooked, and a Navy ship is defeated when torpedoed. Clever headline writers take advantage of people’s ability to know what literal actions can be metaphorically used to refer to the idea of defeating, and do so in humorous ways, inviting readers to chuckle at the puns. Writing headlines may possibly involve people deliberately creating metaphors, and other rhetorical devices, which ask readers to draw cross-domain comparisons, and appreciate the aesthetic pleasures of doing so.

I must still urge great caution before attributing significant conscious intent to the production of novel metaphors. These metaphoric expressions really appear to be created in a playful manner, yet their production need not be driven by conscious mental processes alone. A sports headline writer may implicitly understand the requirement that headlines should be short, pithy, and “stand out.” But this general requirement may be fulfilled in many ways without a writer having to slowly, deliberately attempt to “be creative” or “playful” or even “metaphoric” (e.g., thinking quite consciously about metaphoric ways of describing how cougars can defeat beavers). We can still comment that a writer was a skilled wordsmith without assuming that this competence is mostly a product of that person’s conscious mind. After all, psychological research demonstrates that many expert human behaviors arise from well-practiced, automatic mental and physical processes without any conscious deliberation (see Gibbs 2011).
For example, Shakespeare’s writing of “Juliet is the sun” is not simplistically caused by some intentional mental state, or some conscious thought about what to say, nor can the metaphorical statement be reduced to some specific linguistic or conceptual knowledge that Shakespeare possesses in his mind. But the “context” for Shakespeare’s specific metaphorical production likely emerges from the interaction of many forces, which may include some of the following:

– Cultural models active at that time about love, sex roles, astrology
– Evolutionary history of “sun” as metaphor
– Contemporary uses of “sun” including Shakespeare’s own
– Shakespeare’s present imaginings/simulations of Romeo’s predicament
– Shakespeare’s present physical context and bodily positions/movements
– Shakespeare’s immediately preceding speech and future plans for play
– Shakespeare’s entrenched neural bindings for people and physical objects

Language scholars from many disciplines often debate which of these above factors best explains why people, including specific individuals like Shakespeare, said or wrote what they did. These same scholars will then often privilege one of these forces in their theoretical accounts of wordplay, including creative metaphoric language use, and even explicitly reject that other possible factors are having any major causal relationship to linguistic behavior (e.g., neuroscientists will argue that language production is all a matter of neural activity and reject cultural/historical accounts of why people said what they did) (Gibbs 2017). But all wordplay emerges from the dynamic interaction of forces operating along many different time scales (e.g., slow moving historical and cultural factors to fast moving cognitive and neural processes). The important point, though, is that these forces are tightly coupled so that it makes no sense to attribute wordplay creativity to any single force alone, such as conscious deliberate intentions.

Let’s examine a different case of creative metaphor that also suggests at least some sense of delight in wordplay. The great American poet Wallace Stevens produced a series of novel aphorisms, many of which provided pithy commentary on the art of poetry (Stevens 1957). Presented below are several cases:

– The poet makes silk dresses out of worms.
– The poet is the priest of the invisible.
– Poetry is a pheasant disappearing in the brush.
– Reality is a cliché from which we escape by metaphor.
– Realism is a corruption of reality.
– Sentimentality is a failure of feeling.
– Thought tends to collect in pools.
Stevens’ aphorisms capture ideas/beliefs that seem immediately pertinent to people’s lives and their understandings of the world, even if these sayings are unfamiliar. We may debate the truthfulness of these novel aphorisms, but their playful twist on accepted truths (e.g., do we typically view sentimentality as a “failure”?) may be relevant to different real-world situations, especially in understanding the role of poetry in human life. Still, Stevens’ ability to “make silk dresses out of worms” most likely emerges from unconscious, divergent thinking skills that tacitly discern important connections between diverse kinds of ideas (e.g., relations between “words” and “worms”). Creative individuals can spin out clever linguistic patterns without necessarily being conscious of what they are doing, especially in cases when a speaker or author is a practiced, skilled wordsmith. Skilled writers, like all experts in fact, are notoriously unable to describe exactly how they think when engaged in creative behaviors. Automatic mental processes rule supreme in most of these cases of creative metaphoric wordplay (Gibbs and Chen, in press).

As seen here, much wordplay creates new combinations of familiar ideas and linguistic expressions. To take another example, some literary authors have created novel versions of familiar proverbs to represent unusual (e.g., ironic, satirical, absurdist) perspectives on life’s enduring themes. Consider the following statements from the book “Proverbs from Purgatory” (Schwartz 1995; itself an allusion to Blake’s “Proverbs from Hell”), along with the original proverbs presented in italics:

A bird in the hand makes waste. *(A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.)*
Two heads are better than none. *(Two heads are better than one.)*
A stitch in time is only skin deep. *(A stitch in time saves nine.)*
He’s just a chip off the old tooth. *(He’s a chip off the old block.)*
Let’s burn that bridge when we come to it. *(Let’s cross that bridge when we come to it.)*
It’s like killing one bird with two stones. *(It’s like killing two birds with one stone.)*

These twisted proverbs blend together parts of familiar expressions to convey new insights into old “pearls of wisdom”. Each phrase expresses a satirical view or the dark side of enduring metaphoric life themes that play such an important role in shaping people’s beliefs and actions. Thus, “A stitch in time is only skin deep” provides a rather profound alternative view of the worthy reminder that “A stitch in time saves nine” (i.e., even our most conservative actions taken to protect us from future harm may not guarantee that we always remain safe).

“Proverbs from Purgatory” suggests another important lesson about the dynamics of metaphoric creativity. Just as Bob Dylan spontaneously created several new metaphors from his almost random association of words from two signs, so too do the “Proverbs from Purgatory” arise from the playful combination
of different familiar proverbial sayings or simply from changing single words within these figurative expressions. Metaphoric creativity, in this sense, does not begin with a creative idea that is subsequently put into words. Playing with words can result in novel ideas bursting forth as if the words themselves were making love together. Creative individuals, such as Dylan, are capable of spinning out playful, and sometimes meaningful, combinations of words right on the spot. Other writers, such as Stevens, may take more time as they sit there and examine different combinations of words to see which, if any, result in something that presents new poetic insights. As was the case with Shakespeare, we do not typically know the exact conditions that shaped specific literary creations. A recurring theme here is that simply looking at the language alone does not reveal the specific psychological processes which give rise to creative wordplay.

3 Creativity and the automatic mind

Are people really capable of producing playful, novel metaphors without much conscious thought or deliberation? Consider cases where certain poets explicitly aimed to be playful with words automatically without the overt influence of their conscious, deliberative minds. Automatic writing is a practice that first arose in the 19th century, and was most seriously explored during the early 20th century during the rise of Surrealism in Europe. There are various techniques to enable automatic writing, the simplest being to allow one’s pen in hand skitter across the page to “scribble without self-consciousness” as one focuses only on the words just produced. The writer aims to record whatever was in mind at that moment so as to compose prose with presumably no forethought or planning.

For example, the French writer André Breton in his “Manifesto of Surrealism” wrote that Surrealism was “Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express - verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner – the actual functioning of thought” (Breton 1969: 26). Consider one of Breton’s famous poems, from 1931, titled “Free Union”, which some scholars attribute to automatic writing. Breton presents a series of image metaphors describing his wife. Presented below are its opening lines, first in the original French and then in translation (Benedikt 1974):

Ma femme à la chevelure de feu de bois
Aux pensées d’éclairs de chaleur
À la taille de sablier
Ma femme à la taille de loutre entre les dents du tigre
Ma femme à la bouche de cocarde et de bouquet d’étoiles de dernière grandeur
Words making love together: Dynamics of metaphoric creativity 31

Aux dents d’empreintes de souris blanche sur la terre blanche
À la langue d’ambre et de verre frottés
Ma femme à la langue d’hostie poignardée
À la langue de poupée qui ouvre et ferme les yeux
À la langue de pierre incroyable

My wife whose hair is a brush fire
Whose thoughts are summer lightning
Whose waist is an hourglass
Whose waist is the waist of an otter caught in the teeth of a tiger
Whose mouth is a bright cockade with the fragrance of a star of the first magnitude
Whose teeth leave prints like the tracks of white mice over snow
Whose tongue is made out of amber and polished glass
Whose tongue is a stabbed wafer
The tongue of a doll with eyes that open and shut
Whose tongue is an incredible stone

The poem, imbued with incongruous images, may seem absurd at first – people do not typically associate feminine beauty with “white mice” or “stone”, not to mention using them as vehicles to describe a lover’s teeth and tongue. “Free Union”, with all its uncanny metaphors, captures our attention, spurs our curiosity, and prompts us to see beauty in these disparate, seemingly abhorrent things, which not only describe the physical attributes of his wife, but more essentially, depict his equally complicated feelings towards her. According to Breton, and others, these different metaphors in all of their playfulness may have emerged automatically without the writer explicitly, consciously aiming to create either metaphors or novel comparisons.

A key source of poetic imagery in automatic writing is the way that words, once written, function to activate, or prime, the emergence of semantically related words. Repetition is frequently observed in automatic writings, especially in exercises in which the writer focuses his or her attention on what was just produced (e.g., the repetition in Gertrude Stein’s “a rose is a rose is a rose”). “Free Union” exhibits several of these aspects of word repetition (e.g., “stone”, “waist”, and “tongue”) and semantic priming (e.g., “brush fire” primes “summer lightning”, “mouth” primes “teeth”, and “polished glass” primes “incredible stone”). These lexical and semantic associations are part of the co-occurrence relationships within French (and English), at least some of which are instantiated within the mental lexicons of individual speakers, such as Breton. Again, the words alone are driving part of the metaphoric creativity seen in “Free Union”.

The 20th-century Portuguese author Fernando Pessoa also practiced automatic writing, an experience in which he once reported feeling “owned by some-
thing else”. In his famous “factless autobiography”, titled “The Book of Disquietude”, Pessoa wrote of his dreams and consciousness, and offered many philosophical commentaries on life, such as the following (Pessoa 1996: 29–30):

To live a dispassionate and cultured life in the open air of ideas, reading, dreaming and thinking about writing. A life that’s slow enough to be forever on the verge of tedium, but pondered enough so as never to find itself there. To live life far from emotions and thought, living it only in the thought of emotions and in the emotions of thought. To stagnate in the sun goldenly, like a dark pond surrounded by flowers. To possess, in the shade, that nobility of spirit that makes no demands on life. To be in the whirl of the worlds like dust of flowers, sailing through the afternoon air on an unknown wind and falling, in the torpor of dusk, wherever it falls, lost among longer things. To be with a sure understanding, neither happy nor sad, grateful for the sun and for its brilliance and to the stars for their remoteness. To be no more, have no more, want no more ... The music of the hungry, the song of the blind, the relic of the unknown wayfarer, the tracks in the desert of the camel without burden or destination.

Pessoa claimed this passage to be an automatic composition. He talks here of different metaphoric possibilities that are rooted in our everyday bodily movements as we take different journeys and experience the “open air of ideas”, “stagnate in the sun”, “possess... the spirit of nobility”, feel the power of the “whirl of the worlds”, “sailing through the afternoon”, “falling lost among longer things”, wanting “no more”, and recognizing that some journeys are “without burden or destination.” These metaphoric ideas are not completely novel suggestions, but are intimately tied to our ongoing embodied actions in the world that we use to better understand more abstract topics, in this case Pessoa’s philosophical speculations about the meaning of his own life (Gibbs 2006, 2017).

Note, however, the ways that the intermingling of different words, and their underlying concepts, provide for novel creations. Consider the sentence “To live life far from emotion and thought, living it only in the thought of emotions and in the emotions of thought”. This seemingly contradictory statement (i.e., living far from emotion and thought but living within thought and emotion and emotions of thought), made me as a reader think differently about some of the intricate workings of the poetic mind. Simply twisting the words around in various novel patterns, as Pessoa may have done without conscious deliberation, gives readers new ideas to ponder, some of which occur by discerning analogies to previously stated utterances in the text.

The minimal awareness of some aspects of automatic writing does not provide definitive evidence of a clear dissociation between unconscious and conscious mental processes (Koutstaal 1992). It may be more appropriate to refer to the automatic writing behaviors of famous writers as “flow” states in which “a person performing an activity is fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus,
full involvement, and enjoyment in the process of the activity” (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). Bob Dylan’s spontaneous wordplay creation, described at the opening of this chapter, is another excellent example of a wordsmith being in a mental state of “flow”. Flow is not a special state of the unconscious mind, but one where we seem at one with the world, as we lose self-consciousness and act at optimal levels of our abilities. There is no doubt that writers like Breton and others may have been skilled automatic writers and experienced a certain freedom from some limitations of the conscious mind while in a “flow” state. One can imagine Breton in the very moments of writing “Free Union” having novel metaphors spill forth given his deep-rooted poetic sensibilities, without conscious thoughts driving the creative process. As a skilled poet, Breton was able to produce novel, cross-domain mappings regarding his wife without necessarily having any conscious awareness of this during the writing process.

4 Metaphoric creativity and the disturbed mind

Case study analyses of famous historical artists (e.g., Ludwig van Beethoven, Virginia Woolf, Edward Hopper) suggest that creativity and psychopathology share many common features, including the experience of increased speed of thought, flow of ideas, and the heightened ability to perceive visual, auditory, and somatic states (Santosa et al. 2007). Genius and creativity have been linked to psychopathology both in the individual and in the family history (Eysenck 1995). For example, Lord Byron famously described his understanding of the relation between creative arts and personality disorders in the following manner: “We of the craft are all crazy. Some are affected by gaiety; others by melancholy, but all are more or less touched” (from Jamison 1993: 2).

Let me explore one case of the possible relationship between metaphoric wordplay and the disturbed mind through an examination of one period of time in the life of the American TV and movie actor Charlie Sheen (Gibbs, Okonski, and Hatfield 2013). Sheen is notorious for his chaotic personal life, which has been much documented and discussed within Hollywood circles, and is continually the focus of attention within the broader American entertainment media. Starting in 2001, Sheen was the star of the number one rated show on American television, a comedy titled “Two and a Half Men”. In the summer of 2010, Sheen was widely reported to be deeply involved with drugs and alcohol. He was eventually fired from the program and then began a very public attack against the producers of the show, the television network who aired the program, the Hollywood media, and the rehab industry for failing to recognize his unique
talents as an actor and his special abilities as a person. These “rants” were notable for their unusual linguistic style and for Sheen’s apparent physical and mental disarray when speaking.

I have argued that metaphoric creativity does not necessarily require deliberate psychological processes. People can produce creative wordplay effortlessly without much, if any, deliberate intent. Various psychological conditions, in different context, may lead speakers and writers to creative wordplay. To give one example, consider below a short piece, created and produced by Sheen, which he put on the Internet as an advertisement for a series of one-man concert performances he did in the Fall 2010.²

Dog speed my good soldiers
I give you my word
This warlock bats 1000 percent
You know by now my promises are golden
Hash tag, fastball.
I am bringing my violent torpedo of truth
Defeat is not an option’ show out to you in the battlefield
If you are winning, I’ll see you there
Trolls need not apply
You all suffer from Sheenis envy
Buy your ticket, take the ride and the ride will take you
Surge forward Sheen’s cadres.
Ignition, lift off, bye!

This brief advertisement is clearly intended to be understood by those people who had followed, and appreciated, Sheen’s past public verbal “rants”. Several of these lines convey metaphoric meaning. For instance, “Dog speed my good soldiers” twists the classic “God speed” (meaning “good wishes for your journey”) and then refers to Sheen’s loyal fans as “good soldiers”, which more generally conceives of Sheen as leading an army against all that was trite and conventional in contemporary America. His statement, “This warlock bats 1000 percent”, refers to Sheen’s magical powers that make him a warlock who is perfection incarnate, as represented by a perfect batting score of 1000 percent in American baseball. “Fastball” is another reference to American baseball suggesting that Sheen’s message, or “pitch”, is fast and potentially destructive or, switching his metaphor, a “violent torpedo of truth”. The claim that there will be no “defeat” on “the battlefield”, given that they are “winning”, is a direct instantiation of the common conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR, in which

Sheen and his followers conceive of themselves as being in battle with enemies (e.g., the producers of “Two and a Half Men” who are “trolls” suffering from “Sheenis” (alluding to “penis”) “envy”. Finally, fans are urged to go “buy your ticket” to one of the scheduled concerts, and “take the ride”, suggesting how the event will be a special journey in which “the ride will take you” as if a rocket ship that engages in “ignition”, “lift off” and goes metaphorically upward.

Many people found Sheen’s rhetoric to be understandable, humorous, and clever, even if also bizarre. Watching Sheen’s interviews, with his constant smoking, fast speech rate, gaunt face, and wild looking eyes, enhanced the impression that Sheen was psychologically disturbed and was experiencing a manic episode tied to some possible bi-polar disease, or the negative physical effects of withdrawing from alcohol and drugs. It is situations like this that reinforce the belief that creativity in language use partly arises from disordered psychological mental states or processes (as defined by the “Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders” or “DSM-V” 2013).

One mode of thinking that underlies Sheen’s speech is the adoption of different metaphoric and allegorical perspectives. Sheen often embraced different personae, such as that of a supernatural being, a great athlete, or rock and roll star and then spoke from these different points of view. Consider how Sheen described his life at one point:

Guys, it’s right there in the thing, duh! We work for the Pope, we murder people. We’re Vatican assassins. How complicated can it be? What they’re not ready for is guys like you and I and Nails and all the other gnarly gnarlingtons in my life, that we are high priests, Vatican assassin warlocks. Boom. Print that people. See where that goes.

This commentary elaborates on the basic metaphor of Sheen as a supernatural being and does so in concrete detail in regard to the roles that Sheen and his followers adopt. We understand that Sheen does not really work for the Pope as a “Vatican assassin warlock” but that Sheen is asking us to imagine him doing so to express broader allegorical messages about his life and thoughts (e.g., that he is more powerful personally and professionally than many of his critics). Sheen’s friends are “gnarly gnarlingtons”, which is a playful personification on the term “gnarly” that refers to very difficult, dangerous people or situations. He later adds to this metaphoric vision, with a slight change in his leadership role, when he asserts: “There’s a new sheriff in town. And he has an army of assassins.”

A different conversation shows Sheen elaborating on the metaphoric idea of his being a special machine, or weapon, when he states:
I’m sorry, man, but I’ve got magic. I’ve got poetry in my fingertips. Most of the time – and this includes naps – I’m an F-18, bro. And I will destroy you in the air. I will deploy my ordinance to the ground.

The specificity of Sheen’s elaboration on his self-image, in this case, as a specific powerful machine (i.e., “an F-18” fighter jet) that can defeat his opponents works effectively to communicate Sheen’s belief of his personal power, once more, but does so indirectly through this “mini-allegory”. Nobody believes that Sheen is a fighter jet, but people can appreciate the complexity of his thinking from the particular concrete implications outlined about the ways in which Sheen is a fighter jet and what he can do in this role. The “poetry” in his “fingertips”, which is another reference to his special powers, emerges for the spontaneous articulation of this allegorical vision.

Finally, in another excerpt, Sheen continues this machine or fighter jet theme in more specific detail:

If you love with violence and you hate with violence, there’s nothing that can be questioned. People say, ‘Oh, you’d better work through your resentments’. Yeah, no. I’m gonna hang on to them, and they’re gonna fuel my attack. Because they’re all around you. Sorry, you thought you were just messing with one dude. Winning.

These words or phrases are not particularly creative metaphors in isolation. But the detailed way Sheen articulated his simple metaphoric vision by pressing his claim, and doing so in repetitive and alliterative ways sometimes sounds poetic (e.g., “And they’re going to fuel the battle cry of my deadly and dangerous and secret and silent soldiers”).

The creativity in Sheen’s metaphoric talk makes use of extensive, contextually-driven source domain inferences that are both local and personal. Whenever a metaphoric view of some topic is provided, only some of the word choices may have direct relations to the target domain, with others acting to fill out, often in creative ways, our understanding of the source domain. For example, when Sheen refers to himself as a special machine (e.g., an F-18 fighter jet), he does so through the mention of very specific elements in the source domain of military machines (e.g., “I will destroy you in the air”, “I will deploy my ordinance to the ground”). Sheen is essentially engaging in on-the-spot reasoning about the source domain and selectively picking out those parts that best illustrate, in vivid detail, his momentary understanding of who he is and the powers he possesses. We cannot, from a distance, determine the extent to which Sheen may have been aware of his implicit choice of different metaphoric persona when he speaks. But his creative wordplay, his ability to refer to unusual associations of different
metaphoric source domains, is most likely rooted in unconscious and automatic thought processes.

Like many famous artists, Sheen may have been suffering from a manic depressive disorder that could easily have fueled his expansive verbal behavior. During these periods a person may feel an elevated or irritable mood state and may also suffer from inflated self-esteem, decreased need for sleep, talkative verbal behavior, racing thought patterns, distractibility, increase in goal directed activity, psychomotor agitation, and excessive involvement in hedonistic behaviors that may be pleasurable in the moment but ultimately lead to dire consequences (DSM-V, 2013). Still, Sheen’s creative abilities to play with words through on-the-spot source domain reasoning is something shared with many other great linguistic artists. This kind of expansive metaphoric ability may, nonetheless, be facilitated by different mental states, such as having abnormally fast thought patterns.

Mixed metaphors may be another example of creative wordplay which may arise from a range of possible mental disorders. It is again difficult to know exactly what a person was thinking when he or she produced coherent or mixed metaphors, even when they may appear to be quite creative, playful, or clever. Consider the following list of statements, which are also known as examples of “word salad”.

The sheep languished blue trains suffer
Run desk making dinner sunglasses menu
Folders pile swimming red clouds
Sadness cups coffee printer power outage
Dogs sleep chicken pencil trees
E-mail purple orange swims blackened
Garbage pink composition solely bags speak deodorant
Horse paper handbags skipping forests play together
In worlds with pencils, schools page drink slime

Psychologists and psychiatrists often equate unusual, bizarre wordplay, such as seen in these word salad examples, with different thought disorders, including schizophrenia. However, some of these statements may be interpretable given an understanding of some unknown context, one that only the speaker is perhaps aware of. Several of the above expressions convey meaningful metaphoric ideas (e.g., “Garbage pink composition bags speak deodorant”). One possibility is that speakers of word salad are imaging contexts in which the above statement makes

good sense, but fail to recognize that other people may not share the requisite background knowledge to interpret their pragmatic messages.

Many teachers and language mavens have historically warned against the evils of mixed metaphors precisely because these are considered illogical and reflect word salad-like confusion on the part of speakers and writers. One prominent example of this belief is seen in reactions to the speech of the now President of the United States, Donald Trump. Trump is well-known for his rambling, incoherent talk, which is sometimes also seen as “word salad” (i.e., the seemingly random mixing up of words). Several newspaper headlines have attacked Trump for his rambling speech style (e.g., “Trump Rolls Out Word Salad Economic Policy To Room Full Of Economists”, “Trump Caught Knowing Nothing, Mumbles Word Salad”). Consider the following response from Trump to a question about a nuclear arms agreement that President Obama had signed back in 2015:

Look, having nuclear – my uncle was a great professor and scientist and engineer, Dr. John Trump at MIT; good genes, very good genes, OK, very smart, the Wharton School of Finance, very good, very smart – you know, if you’re a conservative Republican, if I were a liberal, if, like, OK, if I ran as a liberal Democrat, they would say I’m one of the smartest people anywhere in the world – it’s true! – but when you’re a conservative Republican they try – oh, do they do a number—that’s why I always start off: Went to Wharton, was a good student, went there, went there, did this, built a fortune but when it was three and even now, I would have said it’s all in the messenger; fellas, and it is fellas because, you know, they don’t, they haven’t figured that the women are smarter right now than the men, so, you know, it’s gonna take them about another 150 years – but the Persians are great negotiators, the Iranians are great negotiators, so, and they, they just killed, they just killed us.

This narrative does not feature many striking metaphors, but illustrates the slapdash manner in which Trump often expresses himself when talking about otherwise serious issues. Many commentators in the US media have widely speculated about Trump’s possible psychological disorders to explain his frequent incoherent speech. In support of this claim, observers often note that Trump mixes together different metaphors in his speech. In May 2016, for example, Trump complained about China and its trade imbalance with the US by stating that China is “raping our country”, but that “we have the cards, don’t forget it”. It seems odd, on the surface, to blend the topic of rape with one’s card playing skills. Of course, many presidents have in the past mixed their metaphors during important political speeches, yet Trump’s critics blast him for his lack of a unifying image to bring together his odd assortment of words and metaphors. Nonetheless, as shown by Trump winning the presidency in the Fall 2016 election, his sometimes chaotic speech is not disturbing to many US voters. Indeed, Trump’s odd play with words “helps construct an identity for him as
authentic, relatable and trustworthy, which are qualities that voters look for in a presidential candidate”.4

Even if some people worry about the mental states of individuals with a propensity to mix their metaphors, many others take great pleasure, even humor, in the ways that metaphors can be twisted around in speech and writing. One set of studies examined the mixing of metaphors taken from the “Block That Metaphor!” column in the “New Yorker” magazine (Lonergan and Gibbs 2016). The mixing of metaphors mostly resides in the various combinations between target and source domains. Consider one part of an excerpt in which a critic comments negatively about a column posted on an Internet blog.

This sort of journalistic tripe is poison, and yet, at the same time, grist for the mill among the twisted jackals who make up Congress and who, it seems, have no qualms about using the Internet as a personal whipping post whenever it suits their fancy.

This long statement refers to the original Internet column, members of Congress who may read columns like this one, and how these individuals may use such columns on the Internet for political purposes. Thus, there are three basic target domains explicitly noted, and each of these is described using different source domains. For example, the column is poison tripe for some people, and grist for the mill for others (2 source domains for this single target), the members of Congress who read the column are twisted jackals (2 source domains for this single target), who use the material on the Internet as a whipping post for political ends. Overall, this one part of the mixed metaphor excerpt employs several different source domains for metaphorically talking about several different topics or target domains. The vividness of this example, however, stems from the diversity of the source domain experiences that are mentioned. These different source domains have little or no pre-existing semantic relations when used to convey either metaphoric or non-metaphoric messages. Many of the mixed metaphor excerpts in the Lonergan and Gibbs (2016) studies reflect this type of diverse mixture of different target and source domains which often go unnoticed by listeners and readers.

A different mixing of metaphors uses a single source domain to talk of several different target domains. Consider the following vignette (Lonergan and Gibbs 2016):

At last, the lip service that education has been lathered in for the past couple of decades seems to have found the razor’s edge among people who are willing to do something

about improving it here, at the elementary level all the way up through public universities. But as budgets continue to be shaved, will the arts once again be trimmed from the programming”

Several target topics are referred to in this example, which include talk about education, people who are willing to do something to improve education, and the education budget, particularly relating to the arts. This interrelated set of targets are all metaphorically described in terms of the source domain of men’s faces, as in talk of “lip service”, and men’s shaving of their faces as in “lathered”, “razor’s edge”, “shaved”, and “trimmed”. This metaphoric journey through a single source domain is quite similar to the on-the-spot reasoning about a single source domain seen in some of Charlie Sheen’s speech. One may generally expect people to have less difficulty interpreting this mixed metaphor excerpt precisely because it employs a single extended metaphor referring to men’s shaving, compared to mixed metaphors that shift between different source domains. The humor in this case arises from the way contiguously related elements in a single source domain is applied to several different targets (see Lonergan and Gibbs 2016 for other types of source to target domain relationships in mixed metaphors).

One set of empirical studies gave university students the above, and other, mixed metaphor vignettes and they were asked to write out interpretations of what they read (Lonergan and Gibbs 2016). Several interesting results were shown. First, mixed metaphors are not unusual in discourse. Mixed metaphors are not necessarily difficult to interpret. Readers find it relatively easy to interpret a person’s mixing of metaphors partly because these reflect our multiple metaphorical ways of thinking of abstract ideas and events (e.g., love can be characterized as a journey, a manufactured object, a magical process, a plant, a mental disorder, and so on). Coherence of metaphor is not a clue to consciousness or deliberateness of intent. Some speakers may take great delight in playfully spitting out clever mixtures of metaphor, hoping that listeners will take aesthetic pleasure in what the speaker said and how he/she said it. In other cases, speakers may mix their metaphors for a wide variety of reasons, often in complex combinations of diverse cultural, historical, social, cognitive and linguistic forces.

The interesting point about word salad and mixed metaphors is that their existence raises deep questions about whether any example of seemingly creative wordplay is really a product of a consciously creative mind or an automatic, almost thought-less output from a disturbed or disordered-mind. Our interpretation of any sequence of words in speech or writing as being creative or not depends dramatically on our assumptions about the persons producing them and the historical, cultural, social and personal contexts in which specific instances
of language are produced. Computer scientists in the field of Artificial Intelligence have even developed programs that create novel metaphors through automatic means ranging from discerning literary patterns from large corpora to making random connections between diverse concepts and words (Veale 2012). Whether people find these meaningful depends on their assumptions on who created the words and for what purpose (e.g., the designers of these programs). Simply looking at the text alone is insufficient to tell us whether some apparent wordplay is conscious, deliberate, playful and creative or just a mix of random associations.

For instance, readers’ assumptions about authors determine both the amount of cognitive effort they put into understanding linguistic statements and what meanings they infer. One set of experimental studies presented people with various comparison statements (e.g., “Cigarettes are time bombs”) and they were told that these were written either by famous 20th-century poets or randomly constructed by a computer program lacking intentional agency (Gibbs, Kushner, and Mills 1991). The participants’ task in one study was to rate the “meaningfulness” of the different comparisons and in another study to simply read and push a button when they had comprehended these statements. Readers rated metaphorical comparisons, such as “Cigarettes are time bombs”, to be more meaningful when supposedly written by famous 20th-century poets than when these same metaphors were presumably created through random constructions of a computer program.

People also took much less time to comprehend these comparisons when they were told that the poets wrote the statements. Moreover, they took longer to reject anomalous utterances (e.g., “A scalpel is a horseshoe”) as “meaningful” when the poets supposedly wrote these statements. Readers assume that poets have specific communicative intentions in designing their utterances, an assumption that does not hold for the output of an unintelligent computer program. Consequently, people put more effort into trying to understand anomalous phrases when they were supposedly written by poets. They more quickly rejected as “meaningless” these same anomalous expressions when told that an unintelligent computer program wrote them, because computers are assumed to lack communicative intentions. Thus, people’s assumptions about the basic fact of human intentionality shape their immediate processing, and even in some cases their ultimate interpretations, of creative metaphoric language.

I can illustrate the pervasiveness of assumptions about intentionality in the interpretation of language as possible wordplay by quoting from a paper by Gerard Steen (2017) over the merits of “deliberate metaphor theory”. As may be evident from above, I have many doubts as to whether people are ever really
capable of distinguishing between metaphoric language that may, hypothetically, be created deliberately and metaphoric language that only arises automatically (Gibbs 2011, 2015). People create and use metaphors given a variety of personal and situational constraints.

In a recent article, Elaine Chen and I took issue with recent developments with the claim that some metaphors are deliberate and accused Steen of “taking metaphor studies back to the Stone age” in making his arguments on behalf of a theory which has so little evidence to support it. Steen (2017: 15) responded to the Gibbs and Chen (2017) article and in one place wrote the following:

As for wordplay, Gibbs knows that my last name “Steen” means “stone”, which turns Stone Age into a pun that must be appreciated as such by readers who share this knowledge. Wordplay, too, draws attention to the source domain as a separate domain of reference outside the target domain because it hinges on the contrast between two word senses (common noun versus proper name) and arguably has the same effect of inducing deliberateness. Equating DMT’s “Steen Age” with “Stone Age” is a brilliant stroke of critical genius that may be appreciated by many.

Unfortunately for me, my good friend Gerard should not credit me, and Chen, for a “brilliant stroke of critical genius” in engaging in wordplay by using “Stone” as a way of referring to “Steen” in the title of the Gibbs and Chen (2017) article. As it turns out, I have no recollection whatsoever of learning that “Steen” means “stone” and had no intention of clever wordplay when coming up with the “Taking metaphor back to the Stone age” title. But Steen, who may indeed have told me that “Steen” means “stone” at one point in our long relationship, assumed playful intent when there was none present. This example illustrates that our assumptions about speakers and writers, both in terms of what they may know and who they may be, sometimes leads us to draw different mistaken interpretations of language, including whether some stretch of discourse was intended as wordplay or not.

No single instance of creative wordplay is necessarily tied to one, and only one, underlying reason or cause, as is sometimes suggested by scholars who argue that creative language use, including metaphor, arises from specific conscious processes while ignoring unconscious influences (Steen 2008). As noted earlier for Shakespeare’s production of “Juliet is the sun”, many cognitive and linguistic forces, such as people’s individual abilities to pick out novel elements within metaphorical source domains, may be driven via multiple cognitive unconscious abilities. For example, research shows that people with larger short-term memory spans are often better able to create and understand novel metaphors than are people with smaller short-term memory spans (Chiappe and Chiappe 2007). Creative metaphor production has also been shown to be linked
with fluid thinking abilities as measured by different IQ tests (Silvia and Beaty 2012). More generally, metaphor production is also tied to ongoing bodily actions, especially those related to our differing past and ongoing experiences of the source domains (e.g., the taking of journeys) in enduring conceptual metaphors (e.g., LIFE IS A JOURNEY) (Gibbs 2017). These, and many other, factors that shape wordplay behaviors are very difficult to access through conscious introspection. For this reason, wordplay scholars must be careful to not offer simplistic reasons for why some instance of wordplay exists, and always situate wordplay within the complex dynamics of human psychological experience.

5 Conclusion

Wordplay is one of humankind’s most creative activities with linguistic metaphor being one of its finest achievements. As Aristotle once famously wrote, “To be a master of metaphor is the greatest thing by far. It is the one thing that cannot be learnt from others, and it is also a sign of genius” (Aristotle 1997: 122). The act of creativity spinning new metaphors, or slightly novel variations of familiar metaphoric sayings, is closely associated with word-playing skills. The scholarly study of wordplay, most generally, and creative metaphor use, more specifically, often assumes that “play” is a special activity in which people consciously decide to engage in some creative, non-serious action. This assumption is not terribly surprising given the common idea that “play” is a separate, sometimes very organized, type of behavior (e.g., “Let’s go outside and play”, “I am going to the play tonight”), which may operate according to different rules than other aspects of life. We can easily imagine some talented wordsmith sitting down and thinking “I will now play with words”, as a special activity in which the person again aims to be creative with language, including trying to produce novel metaphoric sayings. Wordsmiths may embrace this playful activity with great seriousness, exactly in the ways that great athletes place their entire bodies and souls into their participation in competitive sporting events.

There are, of course, innumerable ways in which words can be played with, and the rise of scholarly interest in wordplay begins with describing, and even cataloging some of the ways that creative wordplay are accomplished (Winter-Froemel and Zirker 2015). My interest as a cognitive scientist is, partly, with what the products of wordplay, particularly in terms of creative metaphoric language use, reveals about the human mind and its splendid capacities and functions. I have great sympathy with Aristotle’s famous claim that metaphor may be one of the “greatest things by far” in human life. Still, my work, and those of
legions of other scholars over the past several decades has shown that metaphoric thinking and language use is not restricted to a special few people, or geniuses, but is a fundamental part of how all people think, reason and imagine about their lives and the world around them (Gibbs 1994, 2017; Lakoff and Johnson 1999). In line with this grand conclusion about the poetics of everyday minds, my main claim in this chapter is that our judgments of some stretches of language being “wordplay” should not be taken as direct evidence of some strictly conscious, deliberate attempt to “play” with words. “Play” is often an after-the-fact justification of what we have done rather than a distinct mode of deliberative thought that we choose to engage in before we act (creatively or otherwise). People can produce wonderful, creative examples of different combinations for many interacting reasons, most of which are based on automatic cognitive and linguistic processes rather than on slow, deliberate, conscious thoughts. These fast-acting processes are part of the cognitive unconscious, and interact with each other in complex, dynamic ways in each moment of linguistic creation.

Most importantly, we may be unable to adequately assess exactly how a person produced a novel metaphor, or any other playful use of language, from simply looking at the language alone without understanding the intricate context, including the psychology of the speaker or writer. From which creative language emerges. Wordplay, in everyday discourse and special literary texts, arises as a complex activity that is shaped by the particular individuals (i.e., including their personal histories, psychological talents and cognitive abilities), working in specific historical, cultural, social, and linguistic contexts, all aiming to achieve a massive variety of personal, pragmatic and aesthetic goals. As wordplay scholars, we can dig into the language produced and the broader cultural and perhaps personal contexts in which these novelties came about. Yet we will always be greatly limited in being able to specify the precise sub-personal mental processes from which individual wordplays arose unless we are able to study in great detail all of the psychology motivating people’s particular, in-the-moment linguistic actions.

The good news, however, is that we can study the cognitive unconscious workings of human minds, within different cultural contexts and engaged in different tasks, to at the very least map out a larger set of constraints which very well could be contributing to any specific act of wordplay. Part of my plea, then, is for wordplay scholars to recognize the broader range of cognitive unconscious processes that operate when speakers and writers produce words which seem to be making love together in fabulously exquisite ways. Furthermore, we must study words not simply as linguistic resources that people may use, playfully or otherwise, but acknowledge how words in context may reflect particular modes
of thought and primarily come into being because of our deeply-rooted, unconscious conceptual, communicative and aesthetic needs. Examining the dynamic complexities of metaphoric language productions is an excellent arena to uncover the automatic and unconscious human impulse to understand the world and our place in it through the playful use of words.

6 References

Chiate, Dan & Penny Chiate. 2007. The role of working memory in metaphor production and comprehension. Journal of Memory and Language 56. 172–188.