

# Sports Metaphors - To Live by and Spice up Sports and other Domain Specific Languages

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**Abstract:** *Would you rather be a first stringer than a bench warmer? Are you likely to find a Monday morning quarterback out in left field? If you can answer these questions, then you, like millions of sports fans will understand the baseball, football, and boxing metaphors used in non - sports language. However, if you would be tempted to take off your gloves for Sunday punch, your ignorance of sports may cause you to become confused by the sports terms bouncing around, not just sports but legal arenas as well. "A first-class performer -A member of the starting team can be found not just on the court but in other spheres of life. Just a few examples cited show us that the wealth of sport language cannot be ignored at all. Due attention has to be attributed to sports metaphors, if one wants to understand the complex arena of life and the society at large. Therefore this paper introduces a class module aimed at teaching important business lessons through the responsible use of sports metaphors, as well. First, we briefly discuss the needs and benefits of using sports metaphors within the classroom. Second, we draw attention to some potential pitfalls of misusing these unique metaphors. Finally, we demonstrate how the sports of tennis and basketball (among other relevant sports) can aid students in understanding aspects of managerial and other text-driven decision making.*

**Keywords:** sports metaphors, metaphorical framing model, society at large, communication, comprehension.

## 1. Introduction

First to introduce the theoretical model we need to explain The Metaphorical Framing Model. It contains two basic stages of cognitive processing: metaphor activation and application. The first stage involves activation of a root metaphor. This occurs when, either explicitly or implicitly, a root metaphor is activated that links the communication target to a metaphor vehicle or source (e.g., "Operation Desert Storm is a football game"). It is worth noting that there are at least five psychological routes to activating a root metaphor. The root metaphor typically contains a concrete entity, event, or story line (e.g., "football game") that is associated with the target of the communication (e.g., "Operation Desert Storm").

Often, this central theme or story line can be conceptualized as a prototypic event schema or script (e.g., "an event in which fans are loyal to their preferred team, the coach is in charge of the game plan, offensive maneuvers are based on both a ground and passing game strategy, non-essential personnel sit on the side lines, etc."). The second stage involves application of the metaphor. At this stage, the central theme or story line influences the individual's impression of the target event or topic being described in the communication (e.g., "Israel remained on the sidelines" produces the belief that Israel did not directly participate in the military operation). This can occur in a relatively direct or indirect manner. This is where we situate our sporting metaphors and proceed with numerous examples of sports metaphors embedded into other domain specific languages.

A metaphor is an expressed figure of speech that characterizes an object by alleging that it is, using any point of comparability, similar or the same as a subject someone might not understand. A metaphor is a kind of analogy and is very similar to other associated figures of speech that derive their developments from affiliation, correlation or

similarities including allegory, hyperbole and simile. Often used are also the following: *allegory* is a broadened metaphor where a story shows a valued feature of the subject, a hyperbole can be used to show intense emotion or to make a powerful effect but is not supposed to be taken word for word. Finally, a *simile* is a figure of speech that honestly analyzes two opposite subjects, typically by using the words "like" or "as" or "if" or "than".

Some authors have advocated that metaphors are not simply dramatic but mentally vital as well. Lakoff and Johnson suggest that metaphors are omnipresent in daily life, not just in dialect but also in cognitive belief and functionality. Another way to view a metaphor is as an association that illustrates how two items that aren't similar in many ways are actually *very* alike in a different valuable way. Lakoff and Johnson clarify how a metaphor is a simple comprehension and maintaining one subject in the context of another. Lakoff and Johnson call this approach a "conduit metaphor", meaning someone can place concepts or items into speech or "containers" then transmit them via a "pathway" or "conduit" (like an electrical wire) to the intended audience who grabs the concept or idea from the vessel and creates or adds value to it.

Intercommunication or verbal exchange can be the vessel where ideas and concepts fit into. The box is totally apart from the concepts. Lakoff and Johnson offer a few illustrations of every day metaphors we use: "argument is war" and "time is money". Metaphors are broadly used in different circumstances to explain an individual definition. The authors also advocate that verbal exchange can be seen as a machine. "Communication is not what one does with the machine, but is the machine itself." (Johnson, Lakoff, 1980).

## 2. Does sports participation correlate to the use of sports language?

Americans seem to be obsessed with using sports metaphors. But this obsession is not limited just to the Americans. The English people from all walks of life use sports language, particularly sports metaphors, to spice up any other domain specific language.

Even though you might not even participate in a particular sport, you might still use phrases like “out of the ball park” or “hit a home run” or “let’s touch base”. These metaphors aren’t just reserved for sports talk but they are increasingly becoming a part of everyday conversation.

Have you ever been a part of a conversation that took on the form of a sports commentator from ESPN? One minute you thought you were in a business meeting and the next, you thought you were in the presence of Lou Holtz from ESPN College football. Some of these metaphors we use we might not even realize are originated from sports. We have just picked them up during the course of our lives and use them in the daily context of our communication.

“A first-class performer -A member of the starting team can be found not just on the court but in other spheres of life. A bench warmer: “A nonparticipating participant is the one who is prepared to perform but seldom or never does. Monday- morning quarterback “A second-guesser“ is an unqualified critic who second-guesses the strategy of the weekend football game on the following Monday.” If you come to work and a colleague tells you that you are out in left field it means that you are disoriented or deranged. If you take off the gloves this means that you get tough or you want to play hardball. In your final phase of the project you might “attack someone or something with your biggest weapons meaning you want to throw a knockout punch and end someone’s week.

Just a few examples cited show us that the wealth of sport language cannot be ignored at all. Due attention has to be attributed to sports metaphors, if one wants to understand the complex arena of life and the society at large. Data enabling international comparisons of public participation in sports are even scarcer than for culture. For the purposes of this project, Eurobarometer Survey 64.3 was used, conducted November-December 2005. It includes questions on levels of physical activity for leisure purposes, and what obstacles respondents faced to being physically active in their leisure time. Eurobarometer 72.3 has subsequently been released, which contains more specific questions about sports participation, headlines will be referred to.

Headline findings for those participating in sport are:

- GB respondents are more recreationally active than average in Europe: 46% of UK respondents said that they exercise or play sport at least once a week, compared to 40% in Europe (Eurobarometer 72.3).
- In the UK 73% also said that they engaged in physical activity outside sport (e.g. dancing, walking, gardening,

cycling) at least once a week, compared to 65% in Europe (Eurobarometer 72.3).

### 2.1 Factors influencing sports participation

There is interplay of various factors influencing sports participation which in turn influences subsequent ratio of the use of sports language in other domain specific languages. Great Britain as usual is set as the model of sports language use trend setting. These factors were recorded in the following manner:

- Most socio-demographic factors including age, sex, marital status, occupation and education are less influential on whether or not people participate in sport in GB compared to Europe a whole. A logistic model predicting attendance by age of terminal education for GB explained only 2.3% of variance, whereas a model for all other countries explained 6.2%
- There is a clear association between higher levels of participation in sport and lower levels of demographic influence on participation, by country, i.e. the more people do sport, and the less participation is influenced by demographic factors. This relationship was not found within cultural domains. This is illustrated below using stratification according to terminal age of education: graphs of the other stratification indices are similar, although GB is particularly below average here.
- It is evident also that in relation to GB’s lower than expected levels of stratification on terminal education, the percentage of people participating in sport in GB is lower than the trend would predict. This is also true of most of the other demographic variables.
- The major motivation for exercise was to improve health, which was even more important in the UK than Europe (65% vs. 61%), as were other health-related reasons including improving fitness and weight control: however, having fun and being with friends were also more important motivations for UK respondents compared to the European average (Eurobarometer 72.3).
- When asked whether there were opportunities locally to be active, UK respondents were slightly less likely than average to agree (72% vs. 75%), but they were also more likely to disagree that their Local Authority didn’t do enough for its citizens in relation to physical activity – and both percentages have improved slightly since 2005 (Eurobarometer 72.3). However, none of these findings are significant at 95%.
- GB respondents were more likely than average to say that they did not have time to take up local opportunities to be physically active (77% vs. 66%) (Eurobarometer 64.3).
- Almost no contextual data relating to sport could be discovered. We were able to compare the percentage of compulsory school hours (primary and secondary) spent on sports with levels of sports participation, but any relationship was very weak.

It seems that sports participation is not corresponding to the use of sports language since sports language is used widely in all spheres of life from the courts to the classroom, while doing shopping to negotiating political decisions.

## 2.2 From "Acing the Test" to "Touching Base": The Sports Metaphor in the Classroom

The use of sports metaphors to convey business lessons both within and outside the classroom is a common phenomenon. The sports metaphor, however, is prone to misuse and can often inadvertently exclude large segments of the student population. To address these issues, we put forth an innovative and novel pedagogical approach that attempts to capitalize better on the shared meanings between athletics and certain business practices. Using the sports of tennis and basketball, we demonstrate how sports metaphors can be responsibly used to aid in the understanding of business lessons, such as managerial decision making.

Instructors often use metaphors to enhance the learning experience. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) suggest that metaphors are important because they can deeply influence a person's attitudes, perceptions, and world view. Because of the increasing popularity of athletics within US culture, sports' metaphors are becoming more common (Palmatier & Ray, 1989). Unfortunately, these metaphors are often used without thought or consideration to possible student reactions.

This paper introduces a class module aimed at teaching important business lessons; through the responsible use of sports metaphors. First, we briefly discuss the needs and benefits of using sports metaphors within the classroom. Second, we draw attention to some potential pitfalls of misusing these unique metaphors. Finally, we demonstrate how the sports of tennis and basketball can aid students in understanding aspects of managerial decision making.

### 3. Needs and Benefits of Sports Metaphors

As many researchers have noted, metaphors are linguistic devices that can improve communication and enhance learning (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Morgan, 1986). To begin, metaphors can simplify difficult concepts. For instance, researchers have found that using sports can assist children to learn difficult math problems (Freedman, Hanvey, Lindsey, Ryan, & Bell, 1995).

Also, metaphors can often communicate more efficiently than other forms of expression. For example, Archer and Cohen (1998) argue that court judges often use sports metaphors in their judicial opinions to capture a point quickly. Finally, listeners usually respond to metaphors. This is particularly important when the subject matter is viewed as dry or overly technical.

Metaphors, then, are unique because they trigger an individual's memory and sensory capacities and thus increase the motivation to learn regardless of the subject area (Hill & Levenhagen, 1995). Because many people participate or have participated in athletics, sports metaphors are often likely to generate listener interest. So sports metaphors are of educational value because they can simplify difficult concepts, shorten communication cycles, and generate listener interest in many subject areas.

The world is run in large part by the government and private business, but the nation's No. 1 hobby appears to be sports. So, it is no small wonder that the language of business and government is steeped in sports metaphors. How many will one hear over the next week or so? One simply has to keep count and in the end one would be surprised by the results.

The first one usually to hear is that a player would sign a contract with a certain team because that team had the "inside track." This is a horse or dog racing term and refers to the advantage that the top position often has. It also refers to NASCAR and the pole position. It did not work this time – the player signed elsewhere. Football references are everywhere. People in both business and government are looking for a "quarterback" for leadership, and they do not want to "fumble the ball" while moving said ball "down the field." My friend Bill Shacklett says that often. They have a "game plan" for success, reaching their goal and, naturally, scoring a touchdown.

If something happens during this game plan that either insures success or destroys the plan then that something is called a "game changer." For instance, if the quarterback breaks his ankle – that's a definite game changer. Naturally, if you see success slipping away then you could attempt a desperate "Hail Mary."

If you've been cheated or tricked in your efforts for success, this is a "low blow." Your early efforts toward your goal can be named for rounds – Round 1 or 2 for instance. Your final action that gained success is the "knockout punch." These are all boxing terms, of course.

Easy questions are "softballs," and when you absolutely know the answer or action to be taken it's a "slam dunk." If you have no idea what to answer or do, then you are "behind the eight ball." If you do everything correctly and in order with no mishaps, then you have "run the table." This is a billiard term. A remark that a person is "out of bounds" generally means they made a remark or did something totally unacceptable or at least questionable. This is a golf term or perhaps football, basketball or soccer.

Baseball has been with us since the Civil War, so it is full of terms we use daily. Strangely it has no "out of bounds." It has something even better. If a person does the wrong thing virtually every day they could be described as a "foul ball." I'll bet there's a "foul ball" in your family, work place or daily life.

If a person is a foul ball they will often be described as "out in left field." There is at least one foul ball or someone in left field in every workplace, classroom, family or office and on every team. This is not necessarily a bad thing. If there's a big challenge, I hope someone "steps up to the plate" and "knocks it out of the park." Terrific success is a "home run." If you do hit a home run, be sure and "touch all the bases" on your way home.



#### 4. Conclusion

This is just to barely scratch the surface. There are dozens and dozens examples more. It also seems that irrelevant of the type of specific domain language sports metaphors are permeating all spheres of life and language is most prone to this blending of ordinary and specific register languages. Although not many people are taking up sport on a regular basis sports language is used most regularly not just to denote sports events and sports disciplines reality. The source contains a series of cognitive entailments that are potentially mapped on to the target. This multi-faceted image can directly determine the listener's impression of the news event. Or, it can indirectly influence this impression by guiding processing of other literal information pertaining to the news event. Under appropriate circumstances, metaphorical language may also influence the message recipient's motivation or ability to systematically process a political, business or any other type of communication.

#### 5. Pedagogical implications

There are several implications emerging from the research in terms of future policy and practice in continuing professional development of ESP science teachers. As with experienced teachers, developing cognitive, metacognitive and affective strategies involves more than simple practical experience. Novice teachers need not only procedural knowledge about scientific literacy teaching but also conditional knowledge. The development of this knowledge demands the opportunity to compare and contrast their experiences with those of others and thus further their proficiency in specific domain knowledge including indispensable language of sports.

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