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CONCLUSION

The empirical study of idioms and proverbs in cognitive linguistics and psycholinguistics provides considerable evidence against the idea that all idioms are dead metaphors. People's preexisting metaphorical understanding of many basic concepts provides part of the motivation for why people see idioms and proverbs as having the figurative meanings they do. This metaphorical knowledge influences the linguistic behavior of idioms and also motivates people's use and understanding of many other nonidiomatic expressions and novel verbal metaphors. Many colloquial expressions do not therefore belong to a separate category of linguistic entity (the wastebasket!) apart from both literal and other types of figurative language but reflect various linguistic and conceptual knowledge that is used repeatedly when people speak about their everyday experiences. The complexity of idioms and proverbs and the fact that these phrases differ in terms of their syntactic, lexical, conceptual, and pragmatic properties suggest that it is unlikely that a single theory will account for all aspects of idiomaticity. Yet it seems certain now that the study of clichéd idiomatic expressions can provide significant evidence on how people think metaphorically in everyday life.

*Chapter 7*

## Metonymy

Consider this simple poem by William Carlos Williams, titled "This Is Just to Say."

I have eaten  
the plums  
that were in  
the icebox  
and which  
you were probably  
saving  
for breakfast  
Forgive me  
they were delicious  
so sweet  
and so cold

This poem appears to resist the poetic foundation of language, in that it has neither meter nor rhyme. We might interpret it as a written message that the author left on the kitchen table for his wife to read. Yet our understanding of this poem depends on our inferring the highly specific context of a kitchen, a certain time frame, and a typical husband-wife relationship (Hedley, 1988). The poem has meaning for us precisely because of the larger situation to which it refers. Our understanding of this poem thus depends on our ability to think metonymically at the mention of parts of some event and infer something about an entire situation.

Metonymy is a fundamental part of our conceptual system:

People take one well-understood or easily perceived aspect of something to represent or stand for the thing as a whole. It is similar to metaphor in that the conceptual basis of metonymy is easily seen in the similarity between various metonymic expressions. Consider again some of the following statements, first mentioned in the opening chapter:

- Washington has started negotiating with Moscow.
- The White House isn't saying anything.
- Wall Street is in a panic.
- The Kremlin agreed to support the boycott.
- Hollywood is putting out terrible movies.
- Paris has dropped hemlines this year.

These examples are not arbitrary single expressions but reflect the general cognitive principle of metonymy, where people use one well-understood aspect of something to stand for the thing as a whole or for some other aspect of it (G. Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). All of the expressions above relate to the general principle by which a place may stand for an institution located at that place. Thus, a place like Hollywood stands for an institution located at that place, namely the major motion picture studios.

This chapter explores the role of metonymy in thought and language. Speakers and writers often use metonymy to refer to people, objects, and events. Many of these metonymies have become conventionalized, as when a television journalist states *The White House isn't saying anything about the scandal* with reference to the president or to representatives of the president's administration. Listeners find conventional metonymies like this one quite easy to comprehend. Novel metonymic expressions can be more difficult. For instance, the metonymic sentence *The ham sandwich is getting impatient for his check* makes little sense apart from a specific context, as when one waiter wants to inform another that a customer who was served a ham sandwich wants to receive the check (Nunberg, 1979). Speakers' frequent use of metonymic expressions and listeners' understanding of these utterances are motivated by metonymic models that form a significant part of our everyday

conceptual system. Our ability to make sense of Williams's simple poem partly reflects our ordinary ability to think in metonymic terms.

In this chapter I discuss empirical evidence that reveals that metonymy is not simply a figure of language requiring special processes to be understood. Instead, metonymy constitutes one of the primary ways people refer to people, events, and situations and thus reflects a particular mode of thought. Metonymic thought underlies many kinds of reasoning and allows people to draw inferences about what speakers and writers mean in discourse. My discussion of metonymy extends to studies on colloquial tautologies and indirect speech acts, because these nonliteral utterances also reflect various aspects of metonymic reasoning.

#### DISTINGUISHING METONYMY FROM METAPHOR

Rhetoricians, linguists, and literary theorists from Aristotle to the present day have achieved little consensus in distinguishing metonymy from metaphor. At first glance, these two tropes appear to be similar, for each describes a connection between two things where one term is substituted for another. Some theorists suggest that metonymy is a type or subclass of metaphor (Genette, 1980; Levin, 1977; Searle, 1979). Other theorists argue that metaphor and metonymy are opposed, because they are generated according to opposing principles (Bredin, 1984; Jakobson, 1971). Metaphor belongs to the selection axis of language, because it is based on similarity. Metonymy belongs to the connection axis, where simple contiguous relations between objects are explored: part-whole, cause-effect, and so on. In contemporary literary studies, the metaphor-metonymy opposition has gradually become a commonplace of practical criticism (Hedley, 1988; D. Lodge, 1977).

Metaphor and metonymy can best be distinguished in making different connections between things (G. Lakoff & Turner, 1989). In metaphor, there are two conceptual domains, and one is understood in terms of another. For instance, when a boxer is likened to a creampuff, as in *The creampuff was knocked*

many such instances as an important cohesive device in text and discourse understanding.

Certain scholars have argued that metonymy is the figure that tends to predominate in discourse that privileges the contiguity relation (Jakobson, 1960; H. White, 1973). For example, 19th-century realism is seen as a metonymic mode of writing. Jakobson points out that in *War and Peace* Tolstoy uses metonymy for shorthand reference to minor characters in terms of *hair on upper lip* and *bare knuckles* after each character is first described in detail. Metonymy also dominates the ideology of much 19th-century historical writing (H. White, 1973). For instance, many 19th-century historians, such as Tocqueville in his work on the French Revolution, aimed for organicist systems of explanation by understanding particular historical phenomena as a microcosm of a macrocosm. The idea that metonymy serves as a mode of theory in authors' discursive practices is quite suggestive of the claim that metonymy is a fundamental part of everyday thought.

#### METONYMY AND THOUGHT

There is a growing body of literature in cognitive linguistics and experimental psychology that points to the metonymic character of thinking and reasoning. One important source of evidence is the systematic analysis of conventional expressions. Consider some of the following examples that illustrate various metonymic models in our conceptual system: OBJECT USED FOR USER (*The sax has the flu today*, *We need a better glove at third base*), CONTROLLER FOR CONTROLLED (*Nixon bombed Hanoi*, *Ozawa gave a terrible concert last night*), and THE PLACE FOR THE EVENT (*Watergate changed our politics*, *Let's not let Iraq become another Vietnam*). Many of these models depend on conventional cultural associations, which reflect the general principle a thing may stand for what it is conventionally associated with (Turner, 1987). This principle limits the use of metonymy to certain relationships between entities. For example, we can use the name of any well-known creative artist to refer to the creations of that artist, as in *Does he own any Hemingway?* or *I*

*saw a Jasper Johns yesterday*. Metonymy functions primarily in this way for reference.

There are limits, however, to the use of metonymy in acts of reference. Not any product can be referred to by the name of the person who created the product. I could hardly say *Mary was tasty*, using *Mary* to refer to the cheesecake she made, in spite of the analogy between Mary's mixing and processing of ingredients to produce her cake and Jasper Johns's mixing and application of colors to produce his paintings. Any given instance of a referring function needs to be sanctioned by a body of beliefs encapsulated in an appropriate frame (Nunberg, 1979; J. Taylor, 1989). Thus, one widespread belief in our culture is that the distinctive value of a work of art is due uniquely to the genius of the individual who created it. But we do not normally believe that such a relationship always holds between a cake and the person who baked it.

Some of the best evidence in support of metonymic models of thinking comes from experimental studies of prototype effects in cognitive psychology (G. Lakoff, 1987). Extensive research demonstrates that participants judge certain members of categories as being more representative of those categories than other members. For instance, robins are judged to be more representative of the category "bird" than are chickens, penguins, and ostriches. Desk chairs are judged to be more representative of the category "chair" than are rocking chairs, beanbag chairs, barber chairs, or electric chairs (Rosch, 1978). The most representative members of any category are termed prototypical members.

As was discussed in Chapter 2, prototype effects have been obtained in a number of domains, using a variety of experimental tasks. These findings are clearly inconsistent with the classical theory of concepts and categorization. Yet prototype effects do not themselves imply any specific theory of mental representation (G. Lakoff, 1987; Rosch, 1978). Many psychologists suggest that prototype effects directly mirror category structure in such a way that prototypes constitute specific representations of categories, but prototype effects are simply experimental findings for people's intuitions of category membership. Such findings (e.g., people's ratings) may have many sources.

One source of prototype effects is metonymy. People use metonymic models in reasoning about typical and nontypical members of categories. For example, consider some prototype effects for the "mother" category (G. Lakoff, 1987). People in our culture view housewife mothers as better examples of mothers than nonhousewife mothers. This effect is due to metonymic reasoning, where a salient subcategory (e.g., housewife mother) has the recognized status of standing for the whole category. Other subcategories of "mother" are defined in contrast to this salient stereotypical case. A "working mother," for example, is a woman who raises her children and provides essential nurturance for them yet also works at a job outside the home. We do not consider an "unwed mother" who gives up her child for adoption and then gets a job to be a working mother, since only mothers for whom nurturance is a concern can properly be categorized as mothers. Various other subcategories of mother, such as "stepmother," "birth mother," "adoptive mother," "foster mother," and "surrogate mother," deviate from the central case of the prototypical housewife mother stereotype. The housewife mother metonymically stands for the entire category of mothers in defining how people reason about mothers and motherly behavior. We consequently refer to individuals as *mothers* because we metonymically conceptualize complex categories, such as "mother."

Reasoning about most nontypical cases, such as "surrogate mother," on the basis of typical cases is a significant part of human thought (*ibid.*). We constantly draw inferences on the basis of typical cases and do so without conscious effort or awareness. Experiments support this conclusion. For instance, participants will infer that if the robins (a typical "bird") on a certain island get a disease, then the ducks (a nontypical "bird") will as well, but not the converse (Rips, 1975). People may also use salient examples of categories in making probability judgments about certain events. For example, California earthquakes are salient examples of the category "natural disasters" (particularly to residents of California!), and people use just such examples in making probability judgments about natural disasters. Participants in one experiment were asked

to rate the probability of one of the following statements (Tversky & Kahneman, 1983):

A massive flood somewhere in North America in 1983, in which more than 1,000 people drown.

An earthquake somewhere in California in 1983, causing a flood in which more than 1,000 people drown.

The probability given to the second statement was much higher than that given to the first, a finding that violates the law of conjunction, because the probability of the two events' happening cannot be higher than the probability of any one event's happening alone.

These experimental findings show how people reason using metonymic models, where a salient instance of part of a category may represent or stand for the whole category (G. Lakoff, 1987). Such evidence is consistent with the claim that metonymy is a fundamental aspect of ordinary conceptual thought.

Everyday dialogue provides additional evidence for the conceptual basis of metonymy. Consider the following example:

A: How did you get to the airport?  
B: I waved down a taxi.

Speaker B means to inform the listener A "I got to the airport by hailing a taxi, having it stop and pick me up, and then having it take me to the airport." Successful interpretation of B's remark demands that the listener make this inference about what the speaker meant. Grice called this kind of inference a *conversational implicature*, and we say that B implicates the proposition just mentioned by virtue of what is said along with various background knowledge and beliefs shared with A.

But what kind of knowledge is used by listeners in drawing conversational inferences or implicatures? How does a listener infer that B actually found a taxi to take him to the airport? Traveling from one place to another involves a series of actions, where people find some vehicle to take them to the de-

sired location, get into the vehicle, ride in it to the destination, arrive, and get out. An idealized cognitive model of this series of events includes the following (G. Lakoff, 1987):

- Precondition: You have (or have access to) the vehicle.
- Embarkation: You get into the vehicle and start it up.
- Center: You drive (row, fly, etc.) to your destination.
- Finish: You park and get out.
- End point: You are at your destination.

It is conventional to use one part of this idealized model to evoke the entire model. Thus, people can simply mention the Precondition, Embarkation, or Center to stand for the entire series of events that make up the travel scenario. In the brief exchange above, Speaker B mentions a Precondition (getting access to a taxi by hailing one) to represent the entire travel scenario. Other possible responses that might work equally well specify other parts of the idealized model, as in:

- I drove my car. (*Center*)
- I called my friend Bob. (*Precondition*)
- I hopped on a bus. (*Embarkation*)
- I stuck out my thumb. (*Embarkation*)

People metonymically mention subparts of the travel scenario to stand for the whole scenario. Listeners readily recognize that speakers intend them to understand the entire scenario when one subpart of it is stated, because they share a cognitive model.

Psychological research unknowingly provides good evidence that people reason metonymically when understanding language. Consider the following pairs of utterances (Gernsbacher, 1991):

- (1a) I need to call the garage (where my car was being serviced).
- (1b) They said they'd have it ready by five o'clock.
- (2a) I think I'll order a frozen margarita.
- (2b) I just love them.

In each of these examples, a plural pronoun occurs in the second sentence. But only singular noun phrases occur in the

first sentence. Strictly speaking, these pronouns are illegal because of the prescription that a pronoun must agree with its antecedent in person, number, and case. However, a series of experimental studies demonstrate that people rate as more natural and read more quickly sentences with "conceptual anaphors" (e.g., sentences with *They* and *them* in the above examples) than they do sentences with appropriate singular pronouns (the same sentences with the grammatically correct pronoun *It*) (ibid.). Understanding conceptual anaphors requires our recognition that the singular entities mentioned (e.g., *the garage*) metonymically stand for some conceptual set (the people who work at the garage). Illegal plural pronouns are natural and easily understood precisely because of our pervasive ability to think metonymically about various people, places, events, and objects.

Psychological research also provides good evidence that people immediately infer entire sequences of actions from having heard or read only some salient subpart. In fact, when an inference must be generated to understand some verbal message, people do construct the missing information and often misremember it as having been part of what was originally said. Consider the following simple tale:

- John was hungry and went into a restaurant.
- He ordered lobster from the waiter.
- It took a long time to prepare.
- Because of this he only put down a small tip when he left.

When people hear this brief episode, they presumably activate their knowledge of the activities normally associated with eating in a restaurant and use this information to fill in the gaps to make the story coherent. This type of knowledge, called *scripts* (Schank & Abelson, 1977), consists of well-learned scenarios describing structured situations in everyday life. To comprehend a message like the passage above, listeners must first decide what script is relevant and then how it is to be modified to fit the situation at hand.

A number of experiments show that people automatically infer appropriate script-related actions when these are not

explicitly stated. For example, when listening to the story above, people infer *John ate the lobster*, and this inference becomes indistinguishable in their memories from the linguistic material they originally heard (Abbott et al., 1985; Bower et al., 1979; Gibbs & Tenney, 1980; Graesser, Woll, Kowalski, & Smith, 1980). Speakers (and writers) can assume that listeners will supply the necessary scriptlike inference needed to understand what is being said and so typically will leave implicit any information that listeners can supply themselves.

Other experimental studies indicate that reading times for sentences are facilitated if they are preceded by relevant knowledge-based materials (Bower et al., 1979; Garrod & Sanford, 1985; Sanford & Garrod, 1981; Seifert, Robertson, & Black, 1985; Sharkey & Sharkey, 1987). These studies suggest that prior activation of script-based knowledge provides readers with a highly available set of causal connections that can facilitate sentence-by-sentence integration. Whenever information about a goal or plan must be inferred, the story is more difficult to understand. Consider the following tale:

He wanted to be king.  
He was tired of waiting.  
He thought arsenic would work well.

Understanding this brief passage requires that readers make pragmatic inferences about the connections between the events described in the story. Making these inferences takes cognitive effort. For example, the last statement in this story, *He thought arsenic would work well*, took longer to read in the version above than when the plan was explicitly stated (e.g., *He decided to poison the king*) by being inserted as the next-to-last line (Seifert et al., 1985). When people read the story without the plan's being explicitly stated, they had to infer it, which increased the time needed to understand the story.

All the work on script-based language processing in psychology and artificial intelligence illustrates the importance of metonymic models in everyday thought. People's knowledge in long-term memory of coherent, mundane series of events can be metonymically referred to by the mere mention

of one salient subpart of these events. We see that the mention of the subpart metonymically stands for the whole event. This inference facilitates our being able to assume unstated propositions about what speakers and writers mean. For this reason, the extensive work on inferencing in conversational implicature and knowledge-based parsing constitutes part of the evidence about the figurative nature of everyday thought and understanding.

Another demonstration of metonymic thought is people's use of gestures. Many iconic gestures appear to be based on metonymy. One study had a speaker describe to a listener a Sylvester and Tweety cartoon (McNeil, 1992). As the speaker recounted the cartoon, she mentioned how Tweety dropped a large bowling ball down a drainpipe that Sylvester was crawling up. She said:

he's coming up and the bowling ball's coming down and he [swallows it].

At *swallows it*, the speaker presented an iconic gesture: the left hand moving straight down into center while the right hand was moving straight up into center and forming a space around the left hand to show the bowling ball passing into Sylvester's mouth. This iconic gesture presents the right hand as Sylvester's open mouth, standing for the entire event of the bowling ball's going into Sylvester's mouth and his swallowing it. Thus, the right hand metonymically stands for an entire event. The speaker selects a salient part of the swallowing event for presentation.

Another metonymic gesture was seen as part of a speaker's effort to recall a word and/or find an appropriate sentence structure. In the following example, the speaker was describing his recent summer vacation when at one point he stated:

And then we went off to go [...] fishing.

During the bracketed phrase, the speaker remained silent for 4 sec and started to flick his wrist back and forth in front of him as if he were fly casting. The selection of the wrist move-

ment used in fly casting metonymically stands for the entire event of going fishing. In general, as was the case with metaphorics (see Chapter 4), speakers use gestures metonymically to refer to certain events. These gestures illustrate people's metonymic understanding of certain actions, events, and situations.

Metonymic thought is not just seen in language and gestures. Many aspects of film and theater illustrate people's common metonymic understanding of situations. Because the very processes of filming (selecting camera angles, focusing, framing) and staging entail selections and rejections, film and theater are inextricably tied to various kinds of metonymies. Film conveys drama by replacing an image of a person with an image of what an audience knows belongs to the person, such as a voice, a shadow, a cap, a ring, or a footstep. The items selected should evoke a whole web of connected ideas and happenings. Consider these examples of metonymy from some classic films (Whitlock, 1990).

In Godard's *Vivre sa vie* (*My Life to Live*), the sexual transactions with clients are indicated by showing Nana (Anna Karina) reaching for a metal coat hanger. Although its link with prostitution is clear – a prostitute has to undress to some degree, and might well hang up some clothes – this item is selected for repeated emphasis, and it is not one of the more obvious actions one would associate with the practice of prostitution. The novelty of its selection is what makes this metonymy striking and an appropriate figurative correlation for dehumanized and unerotic sex (*ibid.*).

Synecdoche, where a part stands for the whole, can also be seen in the same film. Nana is negotiating with a photographer late at night in a bistro. She is trying to get him to let her have some money. To bed her, he is using the bait of offering to take publicity pictures of her, which will help her get film roles. As they negotiate, the camera pans from one to the other, but at the limit of each swing, the frame on that side bisects the figure. Such repeated exclusions of part of the figures serve to suggest that neither character exists fully as a person for the other but is only a means to a personal end.

Other films have specific objects that become associated with

a particular character or with some event or situation pertaining to that character. Extensive use of props or small objects is evidence of this metonymic implication. Consider the five teacups seen by Mrs. Brenner (Jessica Tandy) in Hitchcock's *The Birds* when she finds the dead farmer. These cups function as a metonymy because they imply the damage done by the birds that have attacked the house, and they hint at some further unspeakable destruction. They also metaphorically represent Mrs. Brenner's tense fragility, glimpsed in the desperation of her endeavors to preserve a domestic and unchanging home life.

Much of the evidence about the metonymic character of everyday thought comes from indirect sources that have not explicitly sought to uncover metonymy in thinking and language. Yet the various evidence from research on categorization, decision making, language processing, and gestures and from an analysis of art and film work provides overwhelming support for the ubiquity of metonymy in everyday thought.

#### UNDERSTANDING METONYMIC EXPRESSIONS

We clearly have an easy time processing such conventional expressions as *The White House announced a tax hike* and *The buses are on strike today*. These metonymies are directly motivated by long-standing metonymic models in our conceptual system (THE PLACE STANDS FOR THE INSTITUTION and OBJECTS STAND FOR THEIR USERS). Yet no empirical studies have specifically examined people's understanding of these kinds of conventional metonymy. One reason for the neglect is that most language scholars fail to recognize the metonymic character of expressions like *The White House announced a tax hike*, preferring to see such utterances as plain literal language.

It's very easy to find wonderful, creative examples of metonymy in everyday speech and writing. One of the best I know of comes from the satirist Erma Bombeck, who wrote in one of her newspaper columns about her daughter's difficulties finding a suitable roommate (H. Clark, 1983). Consider what Bombeck says as she quotes her daughter:

We thought we were onto a steam iron yesterday, but we were too late. Steam irons never have any trouble finding roommates. She could pick her own pad and not even have to share a bathroom. Stereos are a dime a dozen. Everyone's got their own systems. We've just had a streak of bad luck. First, our Mr. Coffee flunked out of school and went back home. When we replaced her, our electric typewriter got married and split, and we got stuck with a girl who said she was getting a leather coat, but she just said that to get the room.

This passage contains many phrases that are instances of *nonce sense* (i.e., senses "for the nonce," or for the specific occasion) or *contextual expressions* (i.e., expressions with shifting senses that depend almost entirely on context for their interpretation) (*ibid.*). It seems odd to talk about steam irons' having trouble finding roommates or electric typewriters' getting married. Traditional theories of parsing will fail to handle many of these phrases, even though for the most part we can easily understand what Bombeck's daughter is saying. For example, consider the sentence *Steam irons never have any trouble finding roommates*. Most parsers will search their lexicons for the sense of *steam irons* that is intended, namely "a person who owns a steam iron," and will fail to find anything like this meaning. As would be the case with each of the contextual expressions in this passage, most parsers are unable to create novel, or nonce sense, interpretations for common words and phrases, precisely because they do not have the capacity to make the appropriate inferences about what speakers/authors truly mean. The difficulty parsers, and we as readers/listeners, face is that the meanings of contextual expressions appear to be nondenumerable and depend crucially on the time, place, and circumstance in which these utterances are made.

One scheme proposed to account for how people use and understand contextual expressions is the *innovative denominational verb convention* (*ibid.*; E. Clark & Clark, 1979). This account, originally offered to explain our understanding of innovative denominational verbs, such as *porched* as in *John porched the newspaper*, states that in using an innovative denominational verb the speaker means to denote:

- a. the kind of situation
- b. in which there is good reason to believe
- c. that on this occasion the listener can readily compute
- d. uniquely
- e. on the basis of their mutual knowledge
- f. in such a way that the parent noun denotes one role in the situation, and the remaining surface arguments of the denominational verb denote other roles in the situation

In understanding such contextual expressions as *John porched the newspaper*, listeners ordinarily infer a hierarchy of goals they believe the speaker is trying to attain. For example, the speaker might have the following goals in making that utterance:

1. For the listener to recognize that the use of *porched* denotes the action John's throwing the newspaper onto the porch.
2. For the listener to recognize that the assertion of what John did with the newspaper is the kind of action that there is good reason to believe that on this occasion the listener can readily compute uniquely on the basis of common ground with the speaker in such a way that porching something plays one role in the act with John as the agent and the newspaper as the patient.
3. For the listener to recognize that the use of *porched* denotes porches.

By inferring the lowest subgoal, (3), from the fact that the speaker is using the noun *porch*, we are to infer the next subgoal up, (2), from the fact that it is being used as a verb too. Finally, we can infer the highest subgoal, (1), from our understanding of (2). Key in this list of goals is the assumption that the listener/reader will interpret the speaker's current utterance in light of what the speaker and listener at that moment both know (called their *common ground*). Because the intended meaning of *porched* in *John porched the newspaper* (namely, "John threw the newspaper onto the porch") is not stored as a conventional sense of the noun *porched*, subgoal (2) is an essential part of the comprehension process in which listeners compute the novel meaning on the spot. Similarly, understanding the

contextual expressions in Bombeck's story also requires recovery of the speaker's goal hierarchy, including significant common-ground information. For example, understanding *Our electric typewriter got married and split* has the following goal hierarchy:

1. Bombeck wants readers to recognize that she is using *electric typewriter* to denote the individual (one of her daughter's roommates) who owns an electric typewriter.
2. Bombeck wants readers to recognize that her assertion about getting married is the kind of thing that she has good reason to believe that on this occasion we can readily compute uniquely on the basis of our common ground such that this kind of thing has something to do with electric typewriters.
3. Bombeck wants readers to recognize that she is using *electric typewriter* to denote an object used for typing.

Only by considering our common ground with Bombeck can we recognize when *electric typewriter* is to be construed as having a stands-for relationship in which certain people, places, events, and things may stand for other people, places, events, and things. Many of the inferences required to understand what is meant in this passage are fundamentally metonymic, in that each of these contextual expressions requires readers to understand that the objects mentioned (e.g., *steam irons*, *stereos*, *Mr. Coffee*, and *electric typewriter*) stand for the people who own these items (i.e., THEIR POSSESSIONS FOR PEOPLE). Many contextual expressions, but not all, will be readily understood when interpreted in light of such conventional metonymic mappings as OBJECTS USED FOR THEIR USERS, THEIR POSSESSIONS FOR PEOPLE, THE PLACE FOR THE INSTITUTION, or THE PRODUCER FOR THE PRODUCT. These stands-for relationships reflect preexisting patterns of metonymic thought that in many cases substantially constrain the kinds of inference listeners are likely to draw to make sense of what speakers say.

Some psycholinguistic research has looked at how people understand novel metonymic expressions, such as *The electric typewriter got married and split town*. One set of studies shows that readers can determine without great difficulty the appro-

priate referents for metonymic expressions in discourse (Gibbs, 1990b). Consider how a reader might understand the word *tuxedo* in the statement *John fired the tuxedo because he kept dropping the tray* as referring to a butler. Despite the literal incongruity of this statement, most readers find this sentence to be quite interpretable. How do readers arrive at the correct interpretation of this seemingly anomalous utterance, one that is classically seen as a violation of the Gricean maxim of Quality? Most theories of sentence processing assume that all the possible senses for each word in an utterance are listed in the mental lexicon and that listeners select from among them to understand a word. But understanding contextual expressions involving metonymy requires that a process of *sense creation* must operate to supplement ordinary *sense selection*. The contextually appropriate meaning of *tuxedo* cannot be selected from a short list of potential meanings in the lexicon, because these potential senses are unlimited. After all, *tuxedo* can refer to many kinds of people, not solely butlers. Listeners must instead create a new meaning for the word *tuxedo* beyond its conventional interpretation.

There are two general ways in which people might create new senses during the processing of metonymic expressions. One idea, called the error recovery model, assumes that sense creation is initiated only after the conventional meaning has been found to be in error. This model posits that listeners recognize the need for a figurative interpretation of such utterances as *The ham sandwich is getting impatient for his check* after they are seen to be violations of the maxims of Truthfulness. After all, it is untruthful to claim that inanimate objects, such as ham sandwiches, exhibit human traits, such as impatience. An alternative view of how metonymic expressions are understood, called the concurrent processing model, claims that sense creation and sense selection processes operate simultaneously, perhaps in competition with each other, in the determination of tropological meaning.

An experimental test of these hypotheses had participants read short stories that established preempting meanings for old words (Gerrig, 1989a). For example, people read stories ending with *The horse race is the most popular event*. In a con-

ventional context, this final phrase referred to a standard race between horses; in the innovative situation, the final phrase referred to a unique situation where snails competed in a race that was the length of King Louis's horse. Readers took roughly the same time to comprehend this statement in both contexts. This overlap in reading times suggests that error recovery cannot be operating. Instead, readers seem to be creating and selecting meanings for the phrase *the horse race* at the same time. These data are similar to those obtained for metaphor comprehension that show that contextual expectations drive the recovery of metaphorical meanings at the same time as their literal meanings are being rejected (Gerrig & Healey, 1983; Inhoff, Lima, & Carroll, 1984; Ortony, Schallert, Reynolds, & Antos, 1978). The results of this study provide initial support for the concurrent processing model of metonymy comprehension (see Chapter 3).

What evidence is there to suggest that people create new meanings when they comprehend metonymic expressions? They may simply recognize that statements like *The ham sandwich is getting impatient for his check* or *The scalpel was sued for malpractice* refer to previously mentioned referents without actually determining that there are any figurative connections between these utterances and their referents. This idea implies that people can comprehend metonymic statements without having to create any new senses or meanings for those descriptions. All that is required to understand *The scalpel was sued for malpractice* is that readers establish a temporary arbitrary link or symbol between the figurative term (*the scalpel*) and its referent (*the surgeon*).

One study assessed whether readers actually formed metonymic connections between these figurative statements and their referents (Gibbs, 1990b). Participants in this study read stories ending with such statements as *The scalpel was sued for malpractice* and described what each final expression meant in its context. The participants invariably understood that the final sentence referred to some earlier stated individual in the story context (e.g., that *scalpel* referred to *the surgeon*). More important, people were also asked to describe why the initial noun phrase in each final statement referred

to its earlier stated referent (i.e., why the surgeon was called a *scalpel*). Participants also correctly described a metonymic relationship between metonymic statements and their earlier stated referents (e.g., "the surgeon was called a *scalpel* because surgeons often use scalpels" or "the athlete was called a *glove* because gloves are an important part of a baseball player") 88% of the time. This finding suggests that readers determine the figurative connections between the final metonymic statements and their previously stated referents. It appears, then, that people may create novel senses for metonymic referential terms during the on-line processing of these innovative expressions. Readers' comprehension of figurative referential descriptions involves both sense selection and sense creation processes.

Other evidence demonstrates that listeners make immediate use of common-ground information – the beliefs, knowledge, and attitudes that are shared by speakers and listeners – in creating new senses for old words (H. Clark, 1983; H. Clark & Gerrig, 1983). Consider the sentences *While I was taking his picture, Steve did a Napoleon for the camera* and *After Joe listened to the tape of the interview, he did a Nixon to a portion of it*. These utterances contain eponymous verbs (i.e., verbs associated with a proper name) that are metonymic because each action stands for some specific act conventionally associated with an individual. Traditional linguistic parsers have significant difficulty understanding contextual verb phrases such as *did a Napoleon for the camera* and *did a Nixon to a portion of (the tape)* (H. Clark, 1983). In contrast, experimental research shows that people usually experience little problem interpreting these phrases, especially when they have specific knowledge of the person referred to by the eponymous verb phrase (e.g., the famous painting of Napoleon) (H. Clark & Gerrig, 1983). Understanding eponyms is guided by a hierarchy of constraints regarding the speakers' and listeners' *common ground* (ibid.).

1. *Identity of the eonym.* The identity of the eonym is assumed to be part of the speaker's and listener's common ground. A speaker wouldn't sincerely say *Please do a Napoleon for the camera* if she did not assume that both she and the lis-

tener recognized that the identity of Napoleon was in the common ground.

2. *Acts of the eponym.* Certain acts associated with the eponym are assumed to be part of the common ground. A speaker may know that Napoleon did many things: ruled France, crowned himself, laid siege to Moscow, was exiled to Elba, etc. A speaker assumes that some of these are part of the common ground shared with listeners.

3. *Relevant acts of the eponym.* Certain acts specified in (2) are part of the common ground and are relevant in the sentence the speaker uttered. For instance, the speaker assumes that from the set of acts associated with Napoleon the listener could choose at least one that a person could do for the camera, such as frown, crown oneself, pose hand-in-jacket, and so on.

4. *The type of act referred to.* It is because of common ground that the speaker assumed the listener could readily and uniquely identify the type of act the speaker intended from the type of act in (3). In this case, out of all the acts Napoleon could have done for the camera, the speaker believes that the hand-in-jacket pose was in the common ground with the listener and that the listener could infer that this was meant.

Listeners presumably interpret an eponym starting at Level 1 and narrow down the possible interpretations by adding constraints at Levels 2, 3, and 4. An experimental test of this hypothesis presented participants with sentence frames containing either known or unknown eponyms (*ibid.*). These sentence frames either contained restricting context or were unrestricted. Presented below is an example of a known eponym in both a restricted and unrestricted context:

#### Restricted Context

If during a conversation with a friend, he were to say the following sentence: *After Joe listened to the tape of the interview, he did a Nixon to a portion of it.*

#### Unrestricted Context

If during a conversation with a friend, he were to say the following sentence: *After Joe listened to the tape of the interview, he did a Nixon.*

Participants then wrote down what the speaker either (a) almost certainly meant, (b) probably meant, or (c) might have meant or simply stated that they (d) couldn't really tell what the speaker meant. The results gave clear evidence of an eponym-centered process. Verb phrases like *did a Nixon to a portion of the tape* were more interpretable when the eponym was known, allowing the reader to get down to Levels 2, 3, and 4, than when the eponyms were unknown (e.g., *did a John Jacobs to a portion of the tape*). The verb phrases with known eponyms were more interpretable when the surrounding context was more restrictive, allowing the participants to reach Level 4, than when it was unrestricted, which allowed readers to get, at best, to Levels 2 or 3.

The influence context has on the interpretation of an eponym depends partly on the type of eponym. Understanding *do a Nixon to the tape* or *do a Napoleon for the camera* may be readily understood without any other contextual information, because each specific act noted by the eponym is especially salient. A speaker wouldn't say *I was in bed doing a Napoleon to a mystery story* and expect the listener to understand this to mean simply "I was in bed reading a mystery story." The type of act intended to be recognized must be peculiar to Napoleon. In this way, understanding eponyms requires metonymic reasoning, since listeners must recognize certain part-whole relationships between the eponym (the whole) and salient acts associated with it (the parts). Understanding *do a Napoleon* requires that listeners recover not just a collection of acts associated with Napoleon but a particular type of act. The more coherent the collection of acts associated with an eponym, the easier it will be to find an acceptable interpretation of a phrase like *do a Napoleon*.

Another study demonstrated that people expect the intended target act to be coherent and salient among the acts associated with an eponym (H. Clark & Gerrig, 1983). Participants read a series of vignettes, each ending with a sentence containing an eponymous verb phrase. Each vignette described three acts associated with an individual. In the first form, two of the eponym's acts were mundane and the other was highly unusual. In the second form of each vignette, all three acts were

highly unusual, so that no single act was more salient than the others. Each vignette also ended in different types of completion. In one case, the eponym was unrestricting, containing the bare eponymous verb phrase (e.g., *do an Elvis Edmunds*); in the second case, the eponym was restricted, containing an additional qualifying phrase intended to narrow down the interpretation (e.g., *do an Elvis Edmunds to some apples I bought*). The third kind of eponym was an extending completion, containing a qualifying phrase intended to pick out the same acts as the restricting completion but extended to another domain (e.g., *do an Elvis Edmunds to a piece of driftwood*). Presented below are examples of these two types of vignettes and their different completions:

#### One Salient Act

Imagine that a friend of yours told you about his neighbor, Elvis Edmunds. Elvis loves to entertain his children in the evening with several card games he knows. He often plays canasta with them. During the day, Elvis is employed as an insurance salesman. He likes to work best on days when there is not a cloud in the sky. To supplement his income, Elvis carves fruit into exotic shapes for the delicatessen down the road. Later your friend says, "I have often thought about

*doing an Elvis Edmunds.*" (unrestricting)

*doing an Elvis Edmunds to some apples I bought.*" (restricting)

*doing an Elvis Edmunds to a piece of driftwood.*" (extending)

#### Three Salient Acts

Imagine that a friend of yours told you about his neighbor, Elvis Edmunds. Elvis loves to entertain his children in the evenings with several magic tricks that he knows. He often surprises them by pulling dollar bills out of his ear. During the day Elvis is employed as a professional skywriter. He likes to work best on days when there is not a cloud in the sky. To supplement his income, Elvis carves exotic shapes for the delicatessen down the road.

Later your friend says, "I have often thought about

*doing an Elvis Edmunds.*" (unrestricting)

*doing an Elvis Edmunds to some apples I bought.*" (restricting)

*doing an Elvis Edmunds to a piece of driftwood.*" (extending)

The participants' task was to interpret each vignette, rating their confidence in their interpretations. Restricting completions were more interpretable than either unrestricting or extending completions. Thus, people found it easier to interpret *do an Elvis Edmunds to some apples I bought* (meaning "to carve the apples into exotic shapes") than to understand either *do an Elvis Edmunds* or *do an Elvis Edmunds to a piece of driftwood*. These same effects were found regardless of whether there were one or three salient acts or whether the acts were coherent or incoherent.

These data on the interpretation of eponymous verb phrases demonstrate that people use hierarchical information associated with eponyms to create sensible meanings of these novel phrases. The farther listeners get down the hierarchy, the more confident they will be that their interpretation is the correct one. These experimental findings provide further evidence that understanding contextual expressions involving metonymy requires quick access to common-ground information to create novel interpretations for these nonliteral utterances. The difficulty sometimes associated with making sense of metonymic phrases is not in the extra time it takes to resolve the apparent violation of Truthfulness maxims but in the effort needed to access particular information that supposedly constitutes part of the common ground between speakers and listeners in any discourse situation.

Exactly how the sense selection and sense creation processes work together when people interpret metonymic phrases is unclear. For most words and phrases, listeners don't simply adopt one process (as for conventional meaning) or the other (as for novel senses). Readers of metonymy and related contextual expressions must do more than simply search through their mental lexicons to retrieve the appropriate meanings of these terms for the context at hand. After all, the possible meanings of metaphoric referential descriptions, such as *The ham sandwich is really upset with me*, are nondenumerable and not listed as part of their ordinary senses (H. Clark, 1983). One could assume that listeners exhaustively evaluate all the conventional meanings in the lexicon before trying to create the intended senses of a word around one of these conven-

tional senses. This *strict serial process* would be similar to the *Standard Pragmatic Model* discussed in Chapter 3. Another possibility assumes that listeners begin creating senses in parallel to accessing conventional senses from the lexicon. Whatever model is chosen, it must be capable of showing how people can easily create meanings in real-time discourse situations.

The speed with which people determine the correct referent for different metonymies may also be influenced by the conventionality of these figurative terms. There may be certain cases where there is less need for listeners to create new senses for metonymies because the appropriate sense is already represented as part of the meaning of a word or phrase. For instance, athletes are sometimes referred to as *jocks* (a metonymic description). Many slang expressions are metonymically motivated. Someone who says *I need some bread to pay my rent*, meaning "I need some money to pay my rent," has used *bread* metonymically to stand for money, a convention that has evolved in American English, given that a primary use of money is to purchase such basic food items as bread. Slang dictionaries are testimony to the development of specific meanings for metonymic phrases (cf. Spears, 1982). Some figurative descriptions of people might be comprehended through selection of one of their preestablished senses. These conventional slang descriptions of people might actually be understood as fast as, if not more quickly than, literal descriptions. Other research has shown that slang metaphors, such as *I need some bread*, were interpreted more quickly than nonslang equivalent sentences (Gibbs & Nagaoka, 1985).

Finally, it is, again, important to note that understanding metonymic expressions may depend on recovering some underlying metonymic model. For example, the metonymic expressions *The White House isn't saying anything*, *Wall Street is in a panic*, and *Hollywood is putting out trashy movies* don't just occur one by one but are instances of more general metonymic principles, in this instance THE PLACE STANDS FOR THE INSTITUTION. People may comprehend the correct referent of such novel phrases as *Havana is getting divorced from Moscow* through recognition of THE PLACE STANDS FOR THE INSTITUTION conceptual

metonymy. Similarly, metonymic referential descriptions of people, such as *The sax has the flu today*, *The scalpel was sued for malpractice*, and *The glove at third base has to be replaced*, all represent part of the metonymic mapping where THE OBJECT STANDS FOR THE USER. Part of our ability to understand figurative descriptions of institutions and people might be attributed to our recognition that any metaphoric or metonymic utterance is an instantiation of some conceptual mapping (i.e., THE OBJECT STANDS FOR THE USER). The ubiquity of these conceptual models in many aspects of our thinking and reasoning provides part of the motivation for why speakers frequently use metaphor and metonymy and why listeners so readily understand the meanings of such anomalous sentences as *The ham sandwich just spilled beer all over himself*.

#### COLLOQUIAL TAUTOLOGIES

Referring to a part by mention of the whole is a common aspect of such metonymic expressions as *The government stopped me for speeding last night* and *The New York Times is late for the senator's press conference*. Listeners usually experience little difficulty comprehending these kinds of metonymy. Another version of metonymy that has become quite colloquial for speakers is to refer to aspects of people, objects, and events through tautological statements. Consider the following brief exchange between two parents (Gibbs & McCarrell, 1990). A mother asks her husband *Did the children ever clean up their rooms?* The father shakes his head and responds *Well, boys will be boys*. At first glance, the father's response to his wife's question seems nonsensical. The phrase *Boys will be boys* is true by virtue of its logical form alone (as a nominal tautology) and, superficially, contributes no new information to the conversation. But the utterance *Boys will be boys* is readily interpretable, and most listeners would agree that the father intended to convey a particular meaning, something like "Boys will be unruly, and it is often difficult to get them to do what you want." Nominal tautologies are found with surprising frequency in everyday speech, literature (e.g., Gertrude Stein's

famous line *A rose is a rose is a rose*), and advertising (e.g., *Motor oil is motor oil*). These expressions are metonymic because the speaker names a general category (e.g., boys) to refer to specific salient parts or attributes of that category (e.g., unruly behavior).

Most discussions of linguistic tautologies, following Grice, have explicitly assumed that the interpretation of utterances like *Boys will be boys* and *A promise is a promise* changes from one situation to another (P. Brown & Levinson, 1978; Fraser, 1988; Levinson, 1983). *Boys will be boys* may convey the idea that boys are unruly in one context but in another can express the notion that little boys are cute and adorable. We cannot strictly derive "boys are unruly" from *Boys will be boys* apart from the specific context at hand and any background knowledge shared by speakers and listeners. The Gricean proposal, the *pragmatic view*, suggests, then, that the interpretation of nominal tautologies is context-dependent, with different meanings attached to the same tautology, depending on the conversational context and the shared beliefs of the participants (Levinson, 1983). For the conversation described above, the father's remark *Boys will be boys* flouts the maxim of Quantity, because the assertion of a tautology is not informative when taken literally. Yet it is clear that despite the apparent failure of cooperation, most listeners normally assume that the speaker is cooperative at some deeper level. We do this normally by inferring that the speaker is trying to remind us of some belief or attitude about boys, namely that boys are often unruly (ibid.).

Critics of the pragmatic view have argued that there is a good deal of regularity in the interpretation of colloquial tautologies because these phrases are to some extent language-specific (Wierzbicka, 1987). This *semantic* account suggests that the meanings of colloquial tautologies must be explicated in appropriate semantic representations for different phrases in different languages. For example, nominal tautologies like *Boys will be boys* are simply not used in French, German, or Russian. Thus, the French sentence *Les garçons seront les (des?) garçons* (i.e., "The boys will be the boys") would simply be incomprehensible. If the variety of interpretations for sentences

like *Boys will be boys* and *A husband is a husband* were simply due to pragmatic process of conversational implicature, then the acceptability of such phrases should be identical in different languages. But the extreme variation in the interpretation of nominal tautologies in different languages suggests that these phrases are partly conventional and language-specific. Each tautology has a specific meaning that cannot be predicted in terms of universal pragmatic maxims (ibid.).

The semantic view proposes that English nominal tautologies can be distinguished in terms of their different syntactic patterns and their different nominal classifications (ibid.). For example, tautologies of the syntactic form "N (abstract – singular) is N (abstract – singular)" (e.g., *War is war*, *Politics is politics*, and *Business is business*) convey a sober, mostly negative, attitude toward complex human activities that must be understood and tolerated. Tautologies of the form "N (plural) will be N (plural)" refer to some negative aspects of the topic but also convey an indulgent attitude toward this relatively unchangeable negative aspect (e.g., *Boys will be boys*). Phrases like *Rapists will be rapists* or *Murderers will be murderers* seem less acceptable, because it is unlikely that the speaker would wish to convey an attitude of indulgence toward the topic. In general, contrary to the pragmatic view, a semantic approach to nominal tautologies proposes that the specific syntactic form and lexical content of different phrases contribute significant information to their interpretation and acceptability.

A third approach to colloquial tautologies is a hybrid theory that captures aspects of the previously described views. Within this framework, the systematic and conventional meaning associated with tautological constructions varies with the speaker's/listener's conceptual knowledge of the objects that nouns in the tautology refer to. An English nominal tautology signals that the speaker intends that the listener recognize (a) that the speaker holds some view or attitude toward all people, activities, or objects referred to by the noun phrase, (b) that the speaker believes that the listener can recognize this particular view, and (c) that this view is relevant to the conversation (Fraser, 1988; Gibbs & McCarrell, 1990). The very form of nominal tautologies signals that the speaker intends

to convey the belief that the participants share a view about some aspect of the noun mentioned in the tautology and wishes to bring this belief to the listener's attention. The particular beliefs about a noun that a speaker wishes to convey will depend partly on context. For instance, in different circumstances a speaker may state *Business is business* to convey either that business is competitive (a negative attribution) or that business is financially rewarding (a positive attribution).

However, context alone is insufficient to explain the exact interpretations listeners/readers give to colloquial tautologies. Speakers and listeners share information about the social situation at hand, but they also mutually assume specific stereotypical understandings of people, activities, and objects (cf. Putnam, 1975). This stereotypical knowledge is directly used in interpreting exactly what speakers mean when they refer to different people, activities, and objects in nominal tautologies. Listeners should often interpret *Boys will be boys* to mean that boys are unruly not just because of the specific conversational context but because of the assumption that the speaker shares as part of the common ground a similar stereotype about boys. But when speakers refer to objects such as hats and beds or to food such as carrots in tautological phrases, they seem less likely to evoke specific attitudes about these objects, because people generally don't have strong stereotypes for them. People may certainly have strong prototypical representations of particular objects and events (Rosch & Mervis, 1975), but they do not have as detailed stereotypical attitudes toward concrete objects like hats, beds, and carrots (Dahlgren, 1985). Phrases like *A hat is a hat* and *Carrots will be carrots* seem less acceptable as meaningful tautologies than do phrases, such as *Business is business* and *Boys will be boys*, that mention people or activities for which speakers/listeners have strong stereotypes. These observations suggest that people's stereotypical attitudes toward the people, activities, or objects referred to by the noun phrases in nominal tautologies play an important role in the use and acceptability of these colloquial expressions.

One series of studies investigated the relevance of these hypotheses for explaining people's acceptance of different nomi-

nal tautologies (Gibbs & McCarrell, 1990). Participants in these experiments were asked to rate the acceptability and affective quality of systematically generated tautological phrases both without any contextual information and in different contexts. A first study showed that people could readily understand the meanings of many nominal tautologies without supporting contextual information. However, there were specific differences in the acceptability of different types of nominal tautologies. People found it easier to assign meanings to tautologies containing human role nouns (e.g., *Salesmen are salesmen*, *A teenager is a teenager*) and abstract nouns (e.g., *War is war*, *Promises are promises*) than they did to statements containing concrete nouns (e.g., *Flowers will be flowers*, *A hat is a hat*). Moreover, participants found modal tautologies with human role nouns (e.g., *Boys will be boys*) the easiest to interpret and modal phrases with concrete nouns (e.g., *Carrots will be carrots*) the most difficult to interpret.

Modal tautologies can be used to convey new information about the future. They can not only remind a listener of a pre-existing stereotype but predicate its continued existence. This predication is informative only if a change in the stereotypic behavior is possible. The possibility of change is enhanced by the idea of volition, to which the modal verb *will* also refers. It is difficult to ascribe volitional behavior to concrete objects. For instance, a teacher is more capable of change than is a carrot. Since it is much less likely that concrete nouns will change, the modal tautology predicating their continued existence is much less informative. Modal tautological phrases with concrete nouns do not make as much sense and are judged less acceptable than tautologies with human role nouns. Although there is little difference in participants' acceptability ratings for singular tautologies (e.g., *An X is an X*) with human role, abstract, or concrete nouns, plural syntactic forms (e.g., *X's are X's*) with human role and abstract nouns are more comprehensible than are plural forms with concrete nouns. These findings support the predictions of the semantic view of nominal tautologies (Wierzbicka, 1987), in that both syntactic and lexical information operates to make some tautological phrases more understandable than others.

A second study once again found that tautologies with human role nouns were more acceptable than were phrases with concrete nouns. But the presence of positive and negative contextual information in this study clearly influenced people's interpretations of tautological sentences. People generally found tautologies in negative contexts more comprehensible than in positive contexts. Thus, people found phrases like *Boys will be boys* easier to understand when seen in a context supporting a negative view of boys (e.g., boys will be unruly) than in situations highlighting positive aspects of boys (e.g., boys are cute and adorable). Some tautologies, such as *Telephones are telephones*, were equally comprehensible when seen in either a negative (telephones are annoying and always ringing) or positive (telephones are invaluable for convenient communication) context. Colloquial tautologies containing concrete objects were overall more contextually flexible than tautologies with either human role or abstract nouns. Finally, there were important syntactic constraints on the acceptability of various forms for tautologies that also influence their usage. It seems perfectly appropriate to state the modal construction *Boys will be boys*, but it is less sensible to say *A boy is a boy*. Stereotypes are general impressions of people and things that are most easily evoked in plural and modal syntactic forms that focus on classes of things rather than on individual instances of a concept.

The findings from both studies suggest principled differences in people's interpretations of various types of tautological sentence. Tautologies with human role nouns are the most interpretable and generally convey negative, sober attitudes. This was not the case for tautologies containing nouns referring to concrete objects. Such findings reflect people's stereotypical attitudes toward various people and human activities. People in a linguistic community share certain beliefs, knowledge, and attitudes – their common ground – and use this information in deciding what to say as well as in understanding what is meant from what is said (H. Clark & Carlson, 1982; Gibbs, 1987b; Gibbs, Mueller, & Cox, 1988). Part of the common ground that forms the context for comprehension is the set of stereotypical attitudes people have about other individu-

als (and types of individuals) and various human activities. Speakers can easily remind listeners about their shared beliefs about certain people and human activities by uttering simple redundant phrases, such as *Business is business* or *Mothers will be mothers*. Colloquial tautologies are convenient devices for evoking the shared stereotypical presuppositions among conversants without having to spell out those beliefs. We understand *Boys will be boys* as expressing a very different meaning from *Girls will be girls* because of our different stereotypical attitudes about boys and girls. Interpreting colloquial tautologies requires metonymic reasoning, in that listeners must recognize how the mention of a whole refers to some salient part (e.g., how mention of boys refers to their unruly behavior). To the extent that speakers wish to remind listeners that they share a negative stereotype about people, activities, or things, we can metonymically refer to the whole of these people or activities and let listeners infer which aspects are intended to be recognized.

#### INDIRECT SPEECH ACTS

Metonymic reasoning, where people infer wholes from parts and parts from wholes, is also important in other acts of reference where speakers make requests of listeners. Making a request requires that speakers specify enough information to enable someone to recognize which information or action is desired. Yet most situations in which requests are made appear inequitable. Whenever a speaker requests something from someone, it costs the addressee some effort to supply what is desired. This could, and does in many situations, threaten the addressee's face value (P. Brown & Levinson, 1978; Goffman, 1967). Face is defined as consisting of the freedom to act unimpeded (negative face) and the satisfaction of having one's values approved of (positive face) (P. Brown & Levinson, 1978). People usually act to maintain or gain face and to avoid losing face. A speaker's request often imposes on addressees and can potentially threaten the hearer's face. People are polite to the extent that they enhance or lessen the threat to another's

face (*ibid.*; H. Clark & Schunk, 1980). To eliminate any threat to the addressee's face caused by a request, speakers usually formulate their requests indirectly, as in *Could you lend me ten dollars?* Making indirect speech acts provides addressees with options that enable them either to comply with requests or give some good reason why they can or will not respectfully do so without losing face (R. Lakoff, 1973). Speakers who formulate their requests indirectly assume, though, that listeners can recognize that an entire series of actions is being described from the specific mention of one salient part. For example, understanding *Can you lend me ten dollars?* as a request requires that listeners see the question about their ability as referring to a series of actions that ends with a transaction of goods. In this way, speaking and understanding indirect speech acts involves a kind of metonymic reasoning, where people infer wholes (a series of actions) from a part.

There are a number of ways in which indirect speech acts can be made (Gibbs, 1981a, 1981b, 1986d; Gibbs & Mueller, 1988). Each form specifies some part of the transaction of goods between speaker and listener, in which the listener's task is to infer the entire sequence of actions that the speaker wishes the listener to engage in to comply with the request. Requesting that someone shut the door, for example, can be done by questioning the ability of the listener to perform the action (*Can you shut the door?*), questioning the listener's willingness to shut the door (*Will you shut the door?*), uttering a sentence concerning the speaker's wish or need (*I would like the door shut*), questioning whether the act of shutting the door would impose on the listener (*Would you mind shutting the door?*), making a statement about some relevant fact in the world (*It's cold in here*), or simply asking what the listener thinks about shutting the door (*How about shutting the door?*).

Most investigators view these different sentences as conventional ways of performing indirect directives, each of which is especially polite (Bach & Harnish, 1979; Ervin-Tripp, 1976; Gordon & Lakoff, 1971; Morgan, 1978; Searle, 1975). That is, for arbitrary reasons people use some sentence forms to make indirect speech acts and not others but tacitly agree to use only those particular forms as a matter of convention (see Lewis,

1969). Different kinds of indirect speech acts, however, may not be equally appropriate for a given social situation. Ordering a Big Mac at McDonald's by saying *I'll have a Big Mac* appears to be more appropriate than is the request *Do you have a Big Mac?* Traditional theories of indirect speech acts are unable to specify why speakers view some indirect requests as appropriate in some situations and not in others. Most theories simply stipulate that the decision to use one kind of indirect request as opposed to another is an arbitrary phenomenon.

Formulating the right request in a situation depends on designing a transaction that takes into account a good deal of information (Gibbs, 1985b). A transaction requires the exchange of "goods," such as tangible objects, commitments, or obligations, between people. This process has several parts. First, the speaker decides what goods or entities he or she lacks and so begins to formulate a plan for finding these goods or entities by determining a likely source, such as a book, a look at an object, or information from another person. If the speaker decides to get the goods from another person, he or she selects the person by judging, among other things, who is most likely to have the information, who is most available, and whom it is possible to make a request of. At this point, the speaker plans a social transaction in which the speaker exchanges something with the appointed addressee for the desired information. The speaker must then find a way of inserting this plan for the addressee's contribution (i.e., a response to the request in the form of providing the information) into what the addressee is doing or planning to do at the moment. In some situations, like service encounters (see Merritt, 1976), the addressee's primary activity may be to be a filler of requests – perhaps as a drugstore clerk. The expected transactions that arise in such situations are most easily planned for by a speaker. There are also detour transactions, where the speaker interrupts the addressee's activities or projected plans to impose his or her own goals. These situations are more difficult to plan for, but in each case the speaker finally designs his or her request as a turn in the transaction. To do this, the speaker must first assess what reasons there

may be for the addressee not to give the desired information. *The speaker will then formulate an utterance to deal with the greatest potential obstacle.* By doing so, the speaker thereby implicates that the addressee will divulge what the speaker wants to know.

The possibility that speakers formulate their requests to deal with the main obstacles to compliance is called the *obstacle hypothesis* (Francik & Clark, 1985; Gibbs, 1986d). This idea is interesting because it suggests that the apparent conventionality of an indirect request depends largely on the extent to which an utterance specifies an addressee's projected obstacles in complying with the speaker's request (Gibbs, 1986d). Thus, *Do you have the time?* may be conventional to use in requesting the time of a passerby on the street, because the greatest obstacle to the listener in providing the information may be that he or she simply doesn't know it and has no access to a timepiece. Since the speaker cannot rule out this most limiting case, he or she must design the request around it. However, saying *Do you know what time you close?* as a request to a store owner in order to find out what time the store closes is inappropriate, because the owner is presumed to know what time his or her business closes. The most likely obstacle in this situation is the store owner's willingness to provide the desired information. In general, the obstacle hypothesis reflects the way speakers reason metonymically in getting addressees to comply with their desires. By stating some part of the projected transaction of goods, speakers assume that listeners will infer what is desired and adopt as their own plan the intention to complete other actions within this transaction.

A good deal of experimental evidence supports the obstacle hypothesis. One set of studies had participants read various scenarios depicting a protagonist about to make a request (Gibbs, 1986d). In some situations, the obstacles were general or even unknown. An example of this kind of scenario is presented below.

Tracy and Sara were tired of eating dinner at their college's dining hall. So they went downtown to find something excit-

ing to eat. They decided to go to Tampico's. Sara wanted an enchilada, so when the waitress came to take their order Sara said to her . . .

In other situations, the potential obstacle for the addressee in fulfilling the request was specific, as shown in the following scene.

Tracy and Sara were tired of eating dinner at their college's dining hall. So they went downtown to find something exciting to eat. They decided to go to Tampico's. Sara wanted an enchilada, but was unsure whether the restaurant had them or not. The waitress came up to take their order and Sara said to her . . .

The main obstacle in this situation for the addressee (the waitress) in complying with Sara's request was whether the restaurant actually served enchiladas.

The participants' task in a first experiment was to read each scenario and simply write down what they would say in such a situation. Across all the different scenarios, the participants employed a variety of surface forms in making their requests (e.g., *May I . . .? I would like . . . Can you . . .? Would you mind . . .? Do you have . . .?*). Although these forms of indirect request were used most often, all request forms were not equally appropriate in a particular situation. This was seen in how different types of requests were generated in different obstacle contexts. For instance, the participants generated Possession utterances, like *Do you have . . .?* 68% of the time when they read stories where the main obstacle concerned the addressee's possession of the object desired by the speaker. People produced Possession requests only 8% of the time in contexts where the obstacle concerned the addressee's Ability to fulfill the request, and participants never generated Possession utterances in situations with State-of-World obstacles. Similarly, people made requests using Permission sentences, like *May I see . . .?* 51% of the time in Permission contexts but only 10% of the time in Possession scenarios. Speakers clearly seem sensitive to the obstacles present in many situations and choose their requests accordingly.

A second study provided a better assessment of how speakers make requests in more realistic situations. Participants were brought to six locations on a university campus, each of which was carefully designed to highlight a different potential obstacle. For example, an experimenter and a participant went inside the university library and walked over to a table where a student was busily working on a paper assignment. The participant was told to imagine sitting near the student and also working on a paper and having his or her pen suddenly run out of ink. Participants were then asked to state what they would say to the nearby student in order to get that addressee to lend them a pen. Overall, participants produced appropriate requests 74% of the time. Thus, when people were asked to make requests in situations that closely approximated the real world, they had an even stronger tendency to produce utterances that specified the obstacles present for the addressees.

Specifying the potential obstacles for addressees in making indirect requests makes it easier for listeners to comprehend these speech acts. Consider the following story and two possible indirect requests:

Barbara and her roommate were getting dressed to go out.  
 Barbara wanted something to wear with her same old blue pants.  
 She wanted to wear her roommates' baby-blue cashmere sweater.  
 Her roommate usually lets her borrow it,  
 but she may have taken it to the dry cleaners that day.  
 So Barbara is not sure that her roommate is able to let her have it.  
 So Barbara says to her...  
*Can you possibly lend me your blue sweater?*  
*Would you mind lending me your blue sweater?*

The obstacles alluded to in this story concerned the ability of the addressee to lend the blue sweater to the speaker. For this reason, *Can you possibly lend me your blue sweater?* is better suited to making a request here than is *Would you mind lending me your blue sweater?*

Although the *Would you mind . . . ?* utterance is by no means entirely inappropriate, the results of a reading-time experiment indicated that people process indirect requests that adequately specify the reasons for an addressee's not complying with a request faster than they understand indirect requests that do not specify such obstacles (Gibbs, 1986d). People learn to associate specific obstacles for hearers with different social situations and know when sentence forms best fit these circumstances. A control study showed that, without context, participants found both types of indirect requests equally difficult to process, suggesting that the conventionality of an indirect speech act is not a property of an utterance itself but is due to some relationship between an utterance and a particular social context.

Although scholars have claimed that many indirect requests are understood via some sort of short-circuited process (Bach & Harnish, 1979; H. Clark, 1979; H. Clark & Schunk, 1980; Gibbs, 1979, 1981a; Morgan, 1978; A. Munro, 1979; Searle, 1975), no one has specified what it is about some requests that makes them different. The results of this particular reading-time study establish that people take less time to process indirect requests that specify the addressee's projected obstacles. Seeing indirect speech acts specified in this way makes it easier for listeners to determine speakers' intended meanings. What makes some indirect speech acts apparently "conventional" is the appropriateness of the sentence forms in matching the obstacles present for addressees in a social context.

These studies emphasize the importance of metonymic reasoning in people's use and understanding of indirect speech acts. Speakers plan their requests as part of a transaction of goods in conversation. Consequently, people prefer to highlight potential obstacles to listeners' completing the transaction of goods. By picking out salient obstacles, even ones that are more apparent than real, speakers assume that listeners can metonymically infer the entire sequence of actions that must occur for the transaction of goods to be completed. Once again, we see an instance of people inferring the intended meanings of speakers' indirect or figurative statements partly through an understanding of conceptual metonymy.

## CONCLUSION

Metonymy is a widely used figure of thought whereby we take one well-understood or easily perceived aspect of something to represent or stand for the thing as a whole. Although metonymy has traditionally been viewed as a special rhetorical device in poetry and literature, it is a ubiquitous part of how we think of people, places, events, and things. Our conceptual ability to use one well-understood aspect of some domain to stand for the domain as a whole, or to use the mention of a whole domain to refer to one salient subpart, motivates our speaking so frequently in metonymic terms. Listeners are readily able to understand conventional and novel metonymic expressions precisely because the inferences needed to interpret such language are a common mental operation in our everyday conceptual system.

Much of the work in cognitive psychology on the inferences drawn during text understanding illustrate the prominence of metonymic thought. Psychologists have not recognized that many inferences in discourse processing, as well as in everyday reasoning, reflect common patterns of figurative thought. Yet it is clear that our ability to think metonymically constrains what speakers/authors explicitly state and what they leave unstated. In a similar way, metonymy constrains how listeners/readers understand the communicative intentions underlying messages or texts. An interesting challenge for psychologists is to explore the ways that different textual inferences arise from metonymic thinking. At the same time, the constraints that metonymy places on the production and understanding of certain conventional expressions, tautological phrases, and indirect speech acts point to essential, motivated links between linguistic pragmatics and everyday cognition. Linguists, philosophers, and psychologists would do well to adhere to the cognitive wager by investigating these important connections between language and mind.

## Chapter 8

# Irony

The late comedian/actor Andy Kaufman used to perform a routine where he would challenge any woman from the audience to come up on stage and engage him in a wrestling match. Kaufman's challenge was that no woman could beat him in a wrestling match because of women's "inferiority" to men. On each occasion, one or more volunteers would come forth and wrestle Kaufman, often with tremendous intensity, as the two contestants tried to slam each other onto the mat.

What made this routine so interesting was that you did not really know whether Kaufman really believed in what he was saying or doing. A friend once commented to me as we watched Kaufman's performance on television's *Saturday Night Live* that Andy was *just pulling our chains*. We debated this point, wondering whether Kaufman was indeed serious about his "inferiority" claim or was, in a perverse manner, trying ironically to show the absurdity of using physical strength to try to demonstrate the inferiority of women.

Kaufman's act, if you consider it that, illustrates how we often wrestle with the question of irony in everyday life. We see Kaufman's act as at least potentially ironic because we conceptualize the wrestling match as somehow quite disparate from our concept of comedy. Irony is traditionally seen as a situation that contrasts what is expected with what occurs or as a statement that contradicts the actual attitude of the speaker. In his classic work titled *The Concept of Irony* (first published in the late 19th century), Kierkegaard (1965: 378) wrote *As philosophers claim that no true philosophy is possible*