

# The Cognitive and Creative Nature of Mixed Metaphors

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the phenomenon of the mixed metaphor, a type of metaphor long overlooked in linguistic research. Mixed metaphors, which combine incompatible conceptual frames within a single expression or context, often produce humorous, absurd, or stylistically marked effects. By analyzing historical and modern examples—from Shakespeare's Hamlet to early 20th-century prose—the study emphasizes the linguo-creative potential of such expressions. The paper further discusses mixed metaphor as a product of cognitive-linguistic transformations, referencing key theories by Humboldt, Chomsky, and contemporary Russian scholars. It also reviews its historical development, theoretical foundations, and manifestations in literary and discursive contexts. The study highlights the linguistic creativity involved in producing mixed metaphors, using both classical and modern examples. Based on a cognitive-discursive approach, it argues for the legitimacy and effectiveness of mixed metaphors as a rhetorical and stylistic device. Ultimately, the study positions mixed metaphor as a dynamic and creative linguistic resource that reveals deep-seated conceptual blending mechanisms in discourse.

**Keywords:** Mixed metaphor, linguistic creativity, cognitive linguistics, metaphor theory, conceptual blending, discourse analysis.

**Introduction:** Metaphor, as a cognitive and linguistic phenomenon, has been widely studied in modern linguistics. However, mixed metaphor—a subtype involving the combination of logically incompatible or conceptually divergent metaphorical frames—has received relatively little scholarly attention until recently. Often dismissed as stylistic errors or rhetorical flaws, mixed metaphors actually offer insight into the creative functioning of language and the underlying conceptual structures speakers employ.

The goal of this paper is to explore the nature, structure, and cognitive mechanisms of mixed metaphors, arguing that they represent a vivid form of linguistic creativity and conceptual integration. Through theoretical grounding and selected textual examples, this study reveals how such metaphors function not merely as rhetorical tools, but as windows into the dynamic processes of meaning-making in language.

## Defining Mixed Metaphors

Mixed metaphors involve the blending of two or more metaphorical expressions that are semantically or

conceptually incompatible, often within the same clause or sentence. Scholars have defined mixed metaphors in various ways:

- “Contextual union of logically incompatible concepts” [Akhmanova, 1969: 224].
- “Multiple metaphors in close contextual proximity, but based on distinct conceptual mappings” [Kimmel, 2009].
- Combinations that “often produce absurd or humorous effects,” such as: “The new job has allowed her to spread her wings and really blossom” [Cambridge Dictionary].

Although the term “mixed metaphor” was first officially recorded in the 18th century, such examples can be found in much earlier texts.

Historical Illustrations: From Shakespeare to Fowler

One of the earliest and most famous examples of a mixed metaphor appears in Shakespeare’s Hamlet. Rather than using the straightforward metaphor “to take arms against a host of troubles”, Shakespeare crafts the following mixed metaphor:

Whether ’tis nobler in the mind to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles...

(Hamlet, Act III, Scene I)

Here, the metaphor blends military imagery ("take arms") with a natural element ("sea of troubles"), creating a striking and imaginative conflict of frames. The "sea" is not a tangible enemy against which one might raise weapons, yet the metaphor suggests an overwhelming and relentless emotional struggle.

Another well-known example comes from H.W. Fowler (1908):

This, as you know, was a burning question; and its unseasonable introduction threw a chill on the spirits of all our party.

In this instance, the metaphor juxtaposes heat and cold frames—"burning question" and "threw a chill." Though semantically contradictory, the metaphor conveys the emotional weight and discomfort caused by the question, evoking conceptual metaphors such as:

- Important issues are hot objects
- Unpleasant feelings are cold experiences

Such examples indicate that each component of a mixed metaphor may refer not to literal temperature but to abstract conceptual domains.

#### Linguistic Creativity and Conceptual Blending

The phenomenon of mixed metaphor cannot be fully understood without considering the creative nature of language use. The foundations of linguistic creativity were laid by Wilhelm von Humboldt, who introduced the notions of:

- Ergon – language as product, and
- Energeia – language as activity and ongoing creation [Humboldt, 1984: 78].

This dynamic view of language was later expanded by scholars such as Steinthal, Potebnja, and Bakhtin, who emphasized the interplay of individual expression and collective language norms. Karl Vossler, for example, distinguished between socially conditioned collective creativity and individual free creation in language.

In the 20th century, Noam Chomsky contributed to the discussion by distinguishing between competence (internalized knowledge of language) and performance (actual language use in context) [Chomsky, 1965]. While his focus was primarily syntactic, the distinction laid groundwork for exploring how metaphorical and creative uses of language might vary across discourse contexts.

#### Russian Contributions and Associative Theory

Within Russian and post-Soviet linguistic traditions,

significant attention has been given to non-standard, creative language forms. Scholars such as T.A. Gridina have proposed associative models of linguistic creativity. According to Gridina [1996], linguistic units can be transformed through shifts in conventional associations, activating multiple levels of linguistic and cognitive transformation.

Mixed metaphors, from this perspective, are not stylistic errors but products of associative reorganization—manifestations of the mind's ability to blend conceptual frames creatively. This aligns with broader theories of conceptual integration and frame shifting, central to cognitive linguistics.

#### DISCUSSION

The Function of Mixed Metaphors.

Far from being linguistic anomalies, mixed metaphors serve important communicative and stylistic functions:

- **Expressive enrichment:** The combination of contrasting frames adds emotional or aesthetic depth.
- **Cognitive engagement:** Readers or listeners are invited to resolve conceptual tension, which may enhance understanding.
- **Humor or irony:** Intentional use of frame conflict can produce humorous or ironic effects, especially in media or literature.

The creative use of mixed metaphors may thus reflect not only individual stylistic choices but also cultural and cognitive patterns of meaning-making.

Modern approaches to the study of the creative potential of thought and language as types of linguistic creativity include cognitive, discursive, and semiotic methodologies. Researchers often note that in a typical communicative situation, when individuals convey personal meanings, they demonstrate the "linguistic creative potential of thinking," while discourse should be understood as a form of "heuristic activity."

Creative types of discourse are diverse, but they are all characterized by active influence on the recipient. One of the common features is linguistic manipulation—engaging the recipient in the interpretation of external information by "violating standard language use and activating linguistic creativity processes within discourse activity." This mechanism is seen as one of the main reasons for the emergence of mixed metaphors in discourse.

As previously mentioned, the phenomenon of the mixed metaphor as a linguistic-cognitive construct remained outside the focus of linguists for a long time. This neglect is due to several reasons:

1. Mixed metaphors were often perceived as stylistic flaws (at best) or as pathological language use (at

worst).

2. Inferring the meaning of a mixed metaphor is significantly more complex than interpreting a single metaphor. The combination of multiple idiomatic expressions in one mixed metaphor necessitates the consideration of several conceptual domains simultaneously.

Lori Rozakis advised in her well-known book, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Grammar and Style*: "Don't mix drinks and metaphors, and you'll go far." However, as K. Sullivan rightly notes, strictly adhering to this rule may result in unnatural writing and severely limit an author's creativity. Moreover, from a cognitive perspective, mixed metaphors are both necessary and beneficial. Sullivan argues that limiting oneself to one metaphor per paragraph is counterproductive and often unrealistic.

With the advancement of the cognitive-discursive paradigm, philologists have begun to recognize the intentional use of mixed metaphors as a means of expressing linguistic creativity to produce specific—often humorous—effects within discourse.

## **CONCLUSION**

Mixed metaphors illustrate the dynamic, creative, and cognitive nature of human language. Rather than being dismissed as errors, they should be viewed as powerful linguistic tools that reveal the complex interplay between thought, expression, and discourse context. By examining historical usage, theoretical foundations, and associative mechanisms, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of metaphor in linguistic creativity.

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