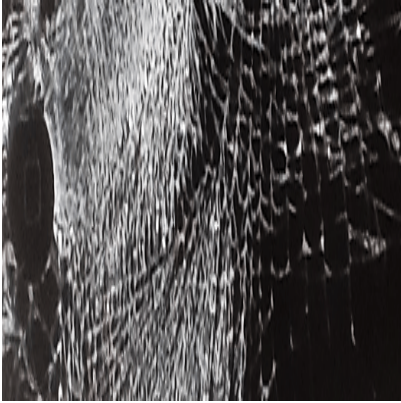


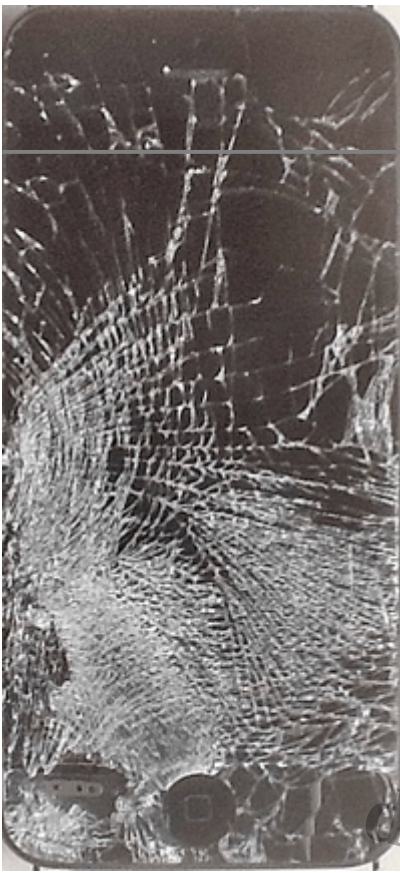


Bad metaphors

Description

“Osborn pushes the nuclear button” • That’s a clever headline from the [Guardian](#) this week, leading an article about the UK Chancellor’s invitation for Chinese investment in the UK nuclear energy programme.

The headline is a joke, but also a metaphor. A literalist would read it as a lie. For the rest of us it’s simply a metaphor. In fact pushing buttons is pretty well metaphorical whichever way you look at it, especially as I push the button, hopelessly, on my recently shattered smartphone. I think there are at least three kinds of metaphor: dead, live and forced.



1. Dead metaphors. A dead metaphor is one that no longer excites

interest. It's taken for granted, like whistleblower, leaked document, pressing the right buttons, or being shattered.

2. Live metaphors. You can revive dead metaphors by reminding yourself just how wedded human beings are to indirect references, especially in the computer world: motherboard, memory, desktop, rubbish bin, button.

But then pointing to a smartphone and saying "this is a smartphone" operates metaphorically. What literal organisation of categories entitles a pointing finger to be associated with a phone? Evidence the difficulty I have getting my neighbour's cat to exit where I'm pointing.

3. Forced metaphors. Metaforce is a brand of dietary supplement for body builders. So I can't use that. But body building is a good metaphor for forced metaphors. This week I taught a class on design and metaphor, and ran an experiment. Everyone was given a noun at random, which they then shared with the person to their left. So that meant everyone had two nouns, and every noun appeared in two pairings. I then said do something with the two random words you've been given, in ten minutes.

☛ If this is a video game what is its unique selling point?

☛ If this is an app, what does it do?

☛ If this is a song, what is the first line of the lyrics?

☛ If this is a band then what type of music does it play?

☛ Type the two words into a web search engine. Any surprises?

☛ Type the two words into an image search. Does anything new emerge?

Shattered metaphors

As it was a digital class they entered their responses on laptops and smartphones with the results visible to all as comments on a WordPress site. So a typical game response was: toothpaste + dinosaur = A dinosaur that chases you in the morning if you haven't brushed your teeth.

This simple exercise illustrates at least three points to me, or at least it reinforced three main points from the literature on metaphor.

1. It's easy to dream up some association of two terms that makes sense, even when forced. This supports the view of psychologists that we "process" metaphors instantaneously. Metaphors require no extra special cognitive effort additional to some literal processing. Putting any two words or concepts together activates this capacity for reasoning relationally.
2. Words are not pre-loaded in our minds with definitions, feature lists and attributes, such that we match one word with another. It's rather a case that one word provides a context for the other. This is the *interactionist* theory of metaphor.
3. Creativity of the metaphorical kind is everywhere in our use of language. In the context of art, design, entrepreneurship, and research, it's effects can be amplified through the obvious and forced use of metaphor.

I was also reminded of the entrepreneurial power of metaphor in a talk I heard this week by the independent game designer Nicoll Hunt, who invented the retro game [Fist of Awesome](#). The game is not to my taste, but the method is: throwing together words like fist and awesome, as well as lumberjacks, bears, aliens, strip joints, and dinosaurs.



Notes

- Some other forced metaphors from the class: mosquito + porridge = If it's a song, the first line could be: "there is a mosquito in my porridge, I don't know how bad the day could be"; party + brush = An app that suggests hairstyles for parties and events; shower + toe = video game: you have to shower as many toes as you can in one minute. More toes- higher score; highway + wok = This is a new iPhone game app that let users play with their friends. While one user is driving a car on the highway, the other is throwing woks to hit his/her car. You should be careful! Let's start; joke + apple = an app with jokes about apple products or jokes about apple, e.g. What kind of apple isn't an apple? A pineapple; chainsaw + button = strong love song: the more I love u, the more I want to discover u; paper + spoon = if it can be a song, it would describe the painful part of love! such as, "Love is like a paper spoon, it seems you can get anything you want through it, but it's just an illusion."
- Also see blog posts tagged [metaphor](#).

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Category

1. Creativity

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rcoyne99

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