

## METONYMY AND OTHER FIGURES OF SPEECH

Adapted from a Wikipedia article: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metonymy>

**Metonymy** (mi-TON-i-mee) – a figure of speech (a TROPE) in which a thing or concept is referred to by the name of something closely associated with that thing or concept.

Metonymy and related figures of speech are common in everyday speech and writing. SYNECDOCHE and METALEPSIS<sup>1</sup> (also see below) are considered specific types of metonymy. POLYSEMY, multiple meanings of a single word or phrase, sometimes results from relations of metonymy. Both METONYMY and METAPHOR involve the substitution of one term for another. In metaphor, this substitution is based on some specific analogy between two things. In metonymy the substitution is based on some understood association or CONTIGUITY. In addition to its use in everyday speech, metonymy is a figure of speech in some *poetry* and in much *rhetoric*. Greek and Latin scholars of rhetoric made significant contributions to the study of metonymy.

SYNECDOCHE, in which a specific part of something is used to refer to the whole (like "counting heads"), is usually understood as a specific kind of metonymy. Sometimes an absolute distinction is made between a metonymy and a synecdoche, treating metonymy as different from, rather than inclusive of, synecdoche. There is a similar problem with the terms SIMILE and METAPHOR.

METALEPSIS is closely related to metonymy, and is sometimes understood as a specific kind of metonymy. Metalepsis is a figure of speech in which a word or a phrase from figurative speech is used in a new context. The new figure of speech refers to an existing one. For example, in the idiom "lead foot", meaning someone who drives fast, lead is a heavy substance, and a heavy foot on the accelerator pedal would cause a vehicle to go quickly. The use of "lead foot" to describe a person follows the intermediate substitution of "lead" for "heavy". The figure of speech is a "metonymy of a metonymy".

The concept of metonymy also informs the nature of POLYSEMY, i.e., how the same phonological form (i.e., similar sounding words) has different semantic meanings. If the two meanings are unrelated, as in the word *pen* meaning both *writing instrument* and *enclosure*, they are considered HOMONYMS. Within logical polysemies, a large class of mappings may be considered to be a case of metonymic transfer (e.g., "chicken" for the bird, as well as its meat; "crown" for the object, as well as the institution).

Metonymy works by the *contiguity* (association) between two concepts, whereas the term "metaphor" is based upon their *analogous* similarity. When people use metonymy, they don't typically wish to transfer qualities from one thing to another as they do with metaphor. There's nothing press-like about reporters or crown-like about a monarch, but "the press" and "the crown" are both common metonyms. Some uses of figurative language may be understood as both metonymy and metaphor. For example, a king, like his crown, could be stiff but malleable, overly ornate, and often immobile.

The phrase "to fish pearls" uses metonymy, drawing from "fishing" the idea of taking things from the ocean. What is carried across from "fishing fish" to "fishing pearls" is the domain of metonymy. In contrast, the metaphorical phrase "fishing for information" transfers the concept of fishing into a new domain. If someone is "fishing" for information, we don't imagine that the person is anywhere near the ocean; rather, we transpose elements of the action of fishing (waiting, hoping to catch something that cannot be seen, probing) into a new domain (a conversation). Thus, metaphor works by presenting a set of meanings and uses them to suggest a similarity between items, actions, or events in two domains; but metonymy references a specific domain (here, removing items from the sea).

Sometimes, metaphor and metonymy may both be at work in the same figure of speech, or one could interpret a phrase metaphorically or metonymically. For example, the phrase "lend me your ear" could be analyzed in a number of ways. One could imagine the following interpretations:

- Analyze "ear" metonymically first – "ear" means "attention" (because we use ears to pay attention to someone's speech). Now, when we hear the phrase "lending an ear (attention)", we stretch the base

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<sup>1</sup> *Metalepsis*: showing a relationship between two seemingly unrelated things. Here's an example from Shakespeare: "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, Creeps in this petty pace from day to day, **To the last syllable of recorded time;**"

meaning of "lend" (to let someone borrow an object) to include the "lending" of non-material things (attention), but, beyond this slight extension of the verb, no metaphor is at work.

- Imagine the whole phrase literally – imagine that the speaker literally borrows the listener's ear as a physical object (and the person's head with it). Then the speaker has temporary possession of the listener's ear, so the listener has granted the speaker temporary control over what the listener hears. We then interpret the phrase "lend me your ear" metaphorically to mean that the speaker wants the listener to grant the speaker temporary control over what the listener hears.
- First, analyze the verb phrase "lend me your ear" metaphorically to mean "turn your ear in my direction," since we know that, literally, lending a body part is nonsensical. Then, analyze the motion of ears metonymically – we associate "turning ears" with "paying attention," which is what the speaker wants the listeners to do.

It is difficult to say which analyses above most closely represents the way a listener interprets the expression, yet all three analyses yield the same interpretation.

### **Examples:**

- **CONTAINMENT:** When one thing contains another, it can frequently be used metonymically, as when "dish" is used to refer not to a plate but to the food it contains, or as when the name of a building is used to refer to the entity it contains, as when "the White House" or "the Pentagon" are used to refer to the U.S. presidential staff or the military leadership, respectively.
- A physical item, place, or body part used to refer to a related concept, such as "the bench" for the judicial profession, "stomach" or "belly" for appetite or hunger, "mouth" for speech, "hand" for someone's responsibility for something ("he had a hand in it"), "nose" for concern about someone else's affairs, (as in "keep your nose out of my business"). A reference to Timbuktu, as in "from here to Timbuktu," usually means a place or idea is too far away or mysterious.
- **Tools/instruments:** Often a tool is used to signify the job it does or the person who does the job, as in the phrase "the press" (referring to the printing press), or as in the proverb, "The pen is mightier than the sword."
- **Product for process:** This is a type of metonymy where the product of the activity stands for the activity itself. For example, in "The book is moving right along," *the book* refers to the process of writing or publishing.
- Punctuation marks often stand metonymically for a meaning expressed by the punctuation mark. For example, "He's a big *question mark* to me" indicates that something is unknown.
- **SYNECDOCHE:** A part of something is often used for the whole, as when people refer to "head" of cattle or assistants are referred to as "hands." The one hundred-dollar bill is often referred to as "Bens", "Benjamins" or "Franklins" because it bears the portrait of Benjamin Franklin. Also, the whole of something is used for a part, as when people refer to a municipal employee as "the council" or police officers as "the law".
- **TOPOONYMS:** A country's capital city or some location within the city is frequently used as a metonymy for the country's government, such as Washington, D.C., in the United States; Downing Street or Whitehall in the UK; and the Kremlin in Russia. Similarly, places such as Wall Street, Madison Avenue, Silicon Valley, Hollywood, Vegas, and Detroit are used to refer to their industries. Wall Street is often used metonymically to describe the entire U.S. financial and banking sector.
- Common nouns and phrases can also be metonyms: RED TAPE can stand for bureaucracy, whether or not that bureaucracy actually uses red tape to bind documents.