1 Introduction

> "We the people, in order to form a more perfect union."
>
> Two hundred and twenty one years ago, in a hall that still stands across the street, a group of men gathered and, with these simple words, launched America's improbable experiment in democracy … The document they produced was eventually signed but ultimately unfinished. It was stained by this nation's original sin of slavery, a question that divided the colonies and brought the convention to a stalemate until the founders chose to allow the slave trade to continue for at least twenty more years, and to leave any final resolution to future generations.
>
> (Barack Obama, "A More Perfect Union," Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, March 18, 2008)

This dramatic passage opens a speech given by then-Senator Barack Obama at a crucial moment in his first campaign for the US presidency. Obama's pastor and long-time friend, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, had made a series of remarks, in sermons and interviews, which were construed by many who heard them as unpatriotic. (A notable example occurred in a sermon critical of government policies and actions, in which Reverend Wright quoted the patriotic song, "God *bless* America," then substituted "God *damn* America.") The furor over Reverend Wright's harshly worded criticisms of US policies threatened to undermine Obama's support among moderate and independent voters, key constituencies in his election campaign. The immediate purpose of the speech was to defuse this controversy before it derailed the entire campaign.

The broader issue Obama faced was the role of "race" in the election. He had to address the issue of race relations in a way that would prevent it from becoming the central theme of his campaign. In this opening passage, Obama began with a reference to a defining event in US history, and then quickly narrowed the focus to a particular aspect of that event. The language in this passage set the stage for much of what follows, including a detailed discussion of

the more recent history of the civil rights struggle in the United States, his own campaign, and the controversy over Reverend Wright's remarks.

Now consider an example from another, very different political speech. In spring 2005, in Gateshead, an industrial city in northern England, then-Prime Minister Tony Blair addressed the annual conference of his party. The Labour party was badly divided, in large part over a series of controversial decisions Blair had made, decisions which many voters regarded as dangerously mistaken and potentially destructive to the good of the nation. In the face of widespread hostility within the party toward these policies and decisions, Blair's task was to unite the party in preparation for elections later that year. His address included the following passage, in which he began with a description of the early days of his tenure as prime minister following the initial Labour victory that brought him to power, and recounted the history leading up to the current situation:

> So after the euphoria, came the steady hard slog of decision-making and delivery. And the events that tested me. And the media mood turning, and friends sometimes being lost as the big decisions mounted, and the thousand little things that irritate and grate, and then all of a sudden there you are, the British people, thinking: you're not listening and I think: you're not hearing me. And before you know it you raise your voice. I raise mine. Some of you throw a bit of crockery. And now you, the British people, have to sit down and decide whether you want the relationship to continue. If you decide you want Mr. Howard, that is your choice. If you want to go off with Mr. Kennedy, that's your choice too. It all ends in the same place. A Tory Government not a Labour Government. (Blair, 2005; for a detailed discussion see Deignan and Semino, 2010; Ritchie, 2008a)

Both of these passages come from speeches delivered at crucial times in the speaker's political career, but the speakers faced very different political situations. Not surprisingly, the speeches also reflect very different ways of using language. In particular, they reflect different ways of using and developing metaphors and stories. Both passages include some conventional phrases, which might not be classified as metaphorical at all, depending on how *metaphor* is defined. Examples from Obama's speech include "*divided*" and "*brought to a stalemate*." In addition to "*steady hard slog*," "decision-*making*," and "*delivery,*" examples from Blair include "the media mood *turning*," "friends being *lost*," "the *big* decisions *mounted*," and "the thousand *little things* that *irritate and grate*." In Blair's speech, the entire story about throwing crockery functions as a metaphor.

What accounts for the expressive power of these passages? How do the metaphors in Obama's opening lines prepare the hearers to understand (and, Obama hoped, accept) the remainder of the speech? What does Blair's metaphorical story about a quarrel between spouses tell his listeners about the situation facing the Labour Party in 2005? How do listeners or readers make sense of these metaphors, and how do they contribute to meaning? These are a few of the questions that will be addressed throughout this book.

WHAT IS A METAPHOR?

Before taking up questions about how metaphors work and how they are used, it is important to establish what we are talking about – what is a metaphor? How is a metaphor related to other uses of language? It is impossible to understand the results of metaphor research, compare different studies, or even think systematically about metaphors without having a clear understanding of what a metaphor is, and knowing how each researcher defines and identifies metaphors.

Notation: I use the convention of marking metaphorical phrases by placing the metaphorical elements in italics and the entire phrase within quotation marks.

Invented examples will be placed within single quotation marks ('*rising* prices') to contrast them with attested examples from actual discourse ("*stained by*"), which will appear in double quotation marks. Following Richards (1936) I will refer to the concept that is described or expressed by the metaphor (in the case of "*stained by*," the moral feelings aroused by treating human beings as property) as the *topic* of the metaphor, and the metaphorical words or phrase (in this case, "*stain*") as the "*vehicle*." I will introduce other notational conventions as they are needed.

The question "what is a metaphor?" is not easy to answer. At one extreme are the eloquent and colorful literary metaphors, such as the oft-quoted lines, "All the world's *a stage*, and all the men and women merely *players*" (William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act 2, Scene 7, lines 139–140). Virtually everyone would recognize these words, "*stage*" and "*players*" as metaphors, especially in the context of the scene, which takes place between the exiled Duke and Jaques, a member of his retinue.

In the following lines Jaques develops and expands the metaphor, describing the "seven ages of man" as "*acts*," beginning with "the infant / Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms," proceeding through "the lover / Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad / Made

to his mistress' eyebrow" and ending with the "Last scene of all, / That ends this strange eventful history, / … second childishness and mere oblivion, / Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything."

Many other familiar phrases are based on the "*stage*" metaphor. We speak of 'the journalist's *role* in a democracy.' A person known for frequent emotional outbursts is a '*drama queen*.' A person who exaggerates his own contribution to a project is '*hogging* the *spotlight*.' (Notice that this phrase combines the "*stage*" metaphor with a common animal metaphor, 'being greedy is *being a pig*.') In a song written by Paul Anka (1969), Frank Sinatra and others sing about "When I *face the final curtain*." Goffman (1959) analyzed social interactions in terms of '*front-stage performance*' and '*back-stage* preparations' and Meyrowitz (1985) developed the '*front-stage/back-stage*' metaphor into a critique of television content.

At the other extreme are familiar idioms such as '*rising* prices,' '*icy* greeting,' '*close* relationship,' and '*dead-end* job'. These phrases are certainly not *literal*, since prices are not objects located in or capable of moving through space, and a greeting is not an object or substance that can have a temperature. But they are so commonly used and so readily understood that they may not seem metaphorical at all. Even more problematic are words like '*salary*,' with a metaphorical origin that would be recognized only by a specialist. ('*Salary*' comes from Latin *sal*, salt; at one time Roman soldiers were paid with a monthly allotment of salt, which at that time served as a medium of exchange. The idiom '*not worth his salt*' probably derives from the same vehicle.) In between these extremes are phrases like Obama's "*brought* the convention to a *stalemate*" (this phrase also combines two distinct metaphors) and Blair's "*end in the same place*."

"Metaphor" has been variously defined in terms of substituting one word for another word with an apparently different meaning, comparing one idea to another, or creating an implicit analogy or simile. For example, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (unabridged) defines metaphor as both transfer and analogy: "the figure of speech in which a name or descriptive term is transferred to some object different from, but analogous to, that to which it is properly applicable." Aristotle regarded a metaphor as an implicit comparison, based on rules of analogy. According to this definition, Obama's phrase, "the *original sin* of slavery," implicitly compares slavery to Adam and Eve's sin of disobedience to God, and Tony Blair's "some of you *throw a bit of crockery*" implicitly compares accusing the prime minister of betraying party principles in a political dispute to throwing dishes in a marital dispute. Kövecses gives a similar definition: "metaphor is a figure of

speech in which one thing is compared to another by saying that one is the other" (2002, p. vii). In this definition, metaphor can be thought of as a simile with the comparison term (e.g. *like)* dropped. To use Kövecses' example, which appears frequently in the philosophy and linguistics literature, 'Achilles is *like* a lion' becomes 'Achilles *is* a lion.' Achilles, or more precisely Achilles' character (the topic) is compared to a lion (the vehicle) with respect to specific qualities they have in common, such as fierceness and courage. (The qualities that provide a basis for comparison are often referred to as the '*ground*' or '*grounds*' of the metaphor.) As Kövecses points out, in this traditional view, metaphor is a figure of speech, based on qualities common to the two entities that can be identified and compared, and used primarily for aesthetic or rhetorical purposes.

A definition in terms of comparing topic to vehicle would seem to apply readily to metaphors composed of two nouns linked by *to be* or a similar verb. In 'Achilles is *a lion*,' Achilles exhibits moral or personality characteristics such as *bravery* that are commonly attributed to lions. Thus, 'Achilles is *a lion*' seems to be merely a fancy way of saying 'Achilles is *brave like a lion*,' and that explanation seems to capture most of what is meant by the metaphor. Some metaphors that do not include *to be* can be changed to this form without loss of meaning; for example the idiom, '*beanpole*,' is often used in a phrase like "that child is a *beanpole*," in which the qualities of being tall and thin are attributed to a fast-growing child, and the comparison definition seems to capture most or all of the intended meaning.

At first glance, the implicit comparison explanation seems to fit "*the world is a stage*," but when we read the entire passage in which Jaques elaborates on this metaphor, it appears that Shakespeare meant something more than simply comparing social performance to theatrical performance (see also Black, 1993). Even greater difficulties arise when we attempt to apply this definition to metaphors like Blair's "some of you *throw a bit of crockery*" and adjective-based metaphors like "*incendiary* language," from Obama's speech. In order to analyze these metaphors in terms of implied simile it would be necessary to change the syntax of each statement in ways that would, arguably, also change their meanings in context. Each of these metaphors has a complex relationship with its context that defies translation into a simple "A is B" statement. "Some of you *throw a bit of crockery*" does not merely compare a political quarrel to a comically violent quarrel between spouses; among other things it implies something about the respective roles of Mr. Blair and the party dissidents, and about the intellectual weight of their disagreements. Ordinarily "*incendiary*

language" might be taken as a simple description of the emotional intensity of Reverend Wright's language, but in the context of race relations in the United States, where language ("burn baby burn") actually has led to urban riots and arson-caused fires, the metaphor takes on a resonance that extends well beyond a simple comparison.

Going beyond the more traditional definitions, Kenneth Burke (1945) defined metaphor as "a device for seeing something in terms of something else." Yanow (2008) defines metaphor as "the juxtaposition of two superficially unlike elements in a single context, where the separately understood meanings of both interact to create a new perception of each and especially of the focus of the metaphor." Along slightly different lines, Semino (2008, p. 1) defines metaphor as "the phenomenon whereby we talk and, potentially, think about something in terms of something else." Applying Semino's definition, "*incendiary* language" would be considered a metaphor because the vehicle, "*fire*" is used to talk and think about an abstract quality of certain very emotional language. "*Throw a bit of crockery*" would be considered a metaphor because the vehicle is used to talk and think about the way certain Labour Party members and other citizens had recently criticized Mr. Blair.

Although these definitions mark an improvement over the more traditional idea of a simile with the word *like* omitted, they remain rather vague – what does it mean to *see* words used in a sermon in terms of *fire*? And what is it that we do when we talk or think about *words from a sermon* in terms of *fire*? What do we do when we talk or think about an intra-party quarrel in terms of *throwing crockery*? These remarks are not intended to criticize these definitions (I don't think I can offer anything better) so much as to underscore the difficulty of formulating a satisfactory definition of this complex phenomenon. One might be tempted to follow the example of US Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's definition of pornography: "I know it when I see it."

Note that we find ourselves relying on metaphors even as we attempt to define metaphors. 'Metaphor *vehicle*' is itself a metaphor, expressing the idea that a metaphorical word or phrase '*carries*' some meaning associated with the topic. '*Detachment*' and '*disengagement*' also seem to be metaphorical: they express *practical affairs* as an object of some sort to which more practical-minded people are '*attached*' or not. So the attempt to explain how "*incendiary*" or "*throw a bit of crockery*" qualifies as a metaphor leads to use of other metaphorical language.

In Burke's definition of metaphor as "a *device* for *seeing* something in terms of something else," "*device*" refers literally to a *machine* or

tool of some sort, and carries an implication of passivity – the activity is performed by the *user* of the device. "*Seeing*" refers literally to one mode of perception, vision, but here it may also be understood as a *metonym* (using a term designating one concept to refer to related concepts). A reader *sees* a metaphor but a listener *hears* it. If we change Burke's phrase to "*perceiving* something in terms of something else" it will become apparent that *perceiving* can itself be understood as referring to the sequence of processes through which language is perceived and comprehended. '*See*' and '*hear*' are both often used as metaphors for *understand*, although they usually express different aspects of understanding.

At this point, it seems evident that Semino's definition has much in common with Burke's – but the differences are worth noticing because they are theoretically important. Burke refers to *seeing*, which implies an emphasis on the audience rather than the speaker or writer; Kövecses and Semino refer to *talking*, which implies an emphasis on the originator, the speaker or writer. Burke refers to a "*device*," and Semino refers to a "phenomenon." *Device* places emphasis on the agency of the perceiver, and *phenomenon* places more emphasis on the metaphor itself as a locus of activity independent of either the speaker or the listener. Both Burke's and Semino's definitions differ from Kövecses' definition, which simply refers to a figure of speech and the comparison it makes.

Notation: When discussing what Lakoff and Johnson (1980) call "conceptual metaphors" I will mark the broader metaphorical concept underlying the vehicle – in this case, MORE IS UP – by small capital letters.

Semino's stipulation that we "potentially think about something in terms of something else" extends the definition in a way that suggests a cognitive aspect to metaphor: it suggests that metaphor may be an attribute of thought. Conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) introduces a way of thinking about metaphor that extends this implication even further (Chapter 4). Lakoff and Johnson define metaphor as not merely *thinking* about something in terms of something else, but actually *experiencing* something *as* something else. When we speak of a '*warm* relationship,' according to Lakoff and Johnson we experience the emotion of affection as actual physical temperature (EMOTION IS TEMPERATURE). When we understand Obama's description of Wright's language as "*incendiary*," we experience the emotional intensity of the language as if we were experiencing sensations associated with physical *fire* (PASSION IS HEAT). When we hear Blair's characterization of the intra-party

policy disputes, we experience them as an actual dish-throwing squabble between spouses. Semino's claim is somewhat less extreme than that of Lakoff and Johnson (and somewhat less precise as well). She does not claim that "*incendiary* language" is experienced *as* fire, but merely that it is experienced *in terms of* fire – by which she seems to mean that we experience some of the emotional, intellectual, and perhaps perceptual responses associated with fire as we process the metaphor.

In the next several chapters it will become apparent that definitions of "metaphor" and advice for identifying metaphors tend to be associated with theories about how metaphors are used and understood. This is why it is important to be clear about what a researcher or theorist means by *metaphor*: the definition itself may imply assumptions about metaphors that will constrain the kind of theory that can be expressed. A second reason why definitions are important is that, if two writers use different definitions, they are likely to be discussing different things. When this happens, what appears to be a theoretical difference may actually be the result of looking at different phenomena.

Definition: For the present, "metaphor" is defined as *seeing, experiencing, or talking about something in terms of something else.*

For the present, I will continue to follow the definitions proposed by Burke and Semino, and understand metaphor as seeing, experiencing, or talking about something in terms of something else. However, Yanow's qualification is also important: to qualify as a metaphor, the topic and the vehicle must be "superficially unlike." In the most straightforward instances, the topic and the vehicle will be from entirely different realms of experience. Thus, "*incendiary* language" is a metaphor because *language*, a system of regularized sounds used to express meanings, is presented to be understood in terms of *fire*, a physically hot and destructive process of combustion. "Grief is a *journey*" (Obst, 2003) can be classified as a metaphor because grief, a variety of emotional response, is described as a *journey*, a form of extended motion through space.

In other commonplace examples, however, topic and vehicle appear to belong to closely related realms of experience, for example, "white is *the new black*" and "he's *another Jackie Chan*." *White* and *black* are two (opposite) shades, so "white is *the new black*" would seem merely to state a falsehood. However, the trope shifts attention from the realm of color to the realm of fashion, thus implicitly invoking an entirely different realm of experience. In "he's *another Jackie Chan*," the shift is between two aspects of identity, requiring something like Yanow's criterion of "superficially unlike."

Even with Yanow's qualification, this simple definition is not as straightforward as it might seem. In the first place, this definition suggests that expressions are either metaphorical or not, and there are many examples for which a clear and simple classification is not easy to determine. A frequently discussed example is a group of metaphors such as '*win*' or '*lose* an argument,' '*attack* an opponent's argument,' '*defend a position* in an argument and so on, all of which Lakoff and Johnson cite as evidence for an underlying metaphor, ARGUMENT IS WAR. As their critics have pointed out and Lakoff and Johnson acknowledge, both *argument* and *war* are associated with a more general concept, *conflict*, and hence might reasonably be considered to belong to the same broader realm of experience. If words and phrases such as '*win*,' '*defend*,' and '*attack*' pertain to the more general concept, *conflict*, then applying them to *argument* would be an example of metonym, not metaphor.

A different sort of problem arises from ambiguous phrases that appear to be intended metaphorically even though they are literally applicable, and phrases that can be understood either literally or metaphorically, or both at once. In the United States, a person may refer to a friend who behaves in a crude or unmannerly way as "an *animal*," a characterization that is literally true in a biological sense but is used metaphorically to express an attitude toward the friend's behavior. In "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," Frost (1923) ends with the line, "And miles to go before I sleep," repeated for emphasis. Closing a poem about riding home on horseback, the line is literally true, but coming after "I have promises to keep," it is also a metaphor for Frost's life, drawing on the commonplace metaphors LIFE IS A JOURNEY and DEATH IS SLEEP; understanding the poem requires that the closing lines be understood as simultaneously literal and metaphorical.

Terminology: '*Mapping*' generally refers to a process in which particular words are connected with meanings. In metaphor theory it refers to a process in which certain attributes of a metaphor vehicle are associated in a systematic way with ('*mapped onto*') comparable attributes of the topic.

In spite of these difficulties, at least for the present the definitions proposed by Burke and Semino provide a basis for classifying many of the phrases from Tony Blair's speech to the Gateshead Conference as metaphorical. For example, "*steady hard slog*" expresses the *process* of decision-making in terms of *motion through space* and "*end in the same place*" describes the election process as *motion through space*, which appears to draw on the same JOURNEY vehicle used by Obst (2003) to describe the grieving process, and frequently used to express many

abstract experiences. We often speak of the '*beginning*' of life, '*goals* in life,' and '*direction*' in life; '*beginning*' a project and '*making progress*' or '*coming to a dead-end*.'

Metaphor might also be defined in terms of what it is not, and metaphorical language contrasted with literal language. However, the concept of *literal* poses its own difficulties (Gibbs, 1994). *Literal* derives from the same root as *letters* and *literacy*, and originally refers to a *letter-by-letter* reading of a text such as the Bible or another religious text (unabridged *Oxford English Dictionary*). Moreover, *'literal'* is itself frequently used in a clearly metaphorical sense, as in 'My mother will *literally kill me* if I'm not home by midnight,' in which *'literally'* serves to intensify '*kill*,' which itself might be understood as either metaphor or hyperbole (exaggeration used for emphasis or humor).

Literal ordinarily implies a code-like one-to-one *mapping* of words with meanings. Very few words afford such a direct mapping; the precise meanings '*conveyed by*' words are usually strongly influenced by context (Gibbs, 1994; Wilson and Sperber, 2004). Accordingly, it may be more accurate to think of a continuum that ranges from what we think of as literal language (*feather-pillow*) through hyperbole ('*feather-weight*') to what would be universally recognized as metaphor ('*feather-brain*'). This issue is itself of some theoretical importance, and it will be discussed throughout the book.

A note about terminology

As explained earlier in this chapter, I refer to the concept that is described or expressed by the metaphor as the *topic* of the metaphor, and the metaphorical word or phrase as the '*vehicle*.' In Tony Blair's "*steady hard slog* of decision-making," the task of making decisions or, more precisely, Blair's feelings about the task, is the topic, and "*steady hard slog*" or, more generally, '*marching*,' is the vehicle. To look at a more complicated example, '*put your thoughts into words*' implies 'thoughts are *objects*,' 'words are *containers*,' and 'speaking or writing is *putting objects into containers*.' *Expressing one's thoughts* is the implicit topic of the overall statement and '*putting objects into* (*something*)' is the vehicle. *Words* is the topic of a related metaphor that is implied by the phrase, with '*container*' as the implied vehicle.

Many other terms have been used to describe the parts of a metaphor. What I call the *topic* is sometimes called the *tenor* and sometimes the '*target*' (a metaphor that implies perhaps that the meaning is '*aimed at*' what is being discussed). What I call the '*vehicle*' is also sometimes called the *basis*. I like '*vehicle*' because it specifies that the