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READING IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOL

'Carbon Dating' Figures of Speech

Kenneth VanderMeulen

Teachers usually find that students become enthusiastic and energetic when they are discovering new things for themselves. This article points up some possibilities in teaching students to become "detectives," investigating the age and origin of words and phrases used in American simile and metaphor. An end result is sure to be a heightened feeling for literary style, with an increased appreciation for creative writing a possible "spinoff." Students may also gain a clearer picture of the cultural settings from which these figures of speech are derived.

One of the interesting characteristics of our language in print is the use of comparisons to increase vividness in description. Since the beginning of English in Anglo-Saxon stories and poems, the creative leaning of the writer has always been to use a word from another world or field of endeavor to add to the picture presented. Since Anglo-Saxon as a language contained only about one-tenth of the words we have in English today, it was necessary to borrow and improvise in order to keep the imagery high. One area in which men have continuously used metaphor has been in describing their own exploits; they have always borrowed the qualities of wild beasts to tell about themselves. Primitive tribesmen called themselves the *fox* for its cunning, *running deer* for agility, or the *cat* for stealth. Needless to say, the practice has not diminished, even in this age of automation and electronic magic. News commentators and sports broadcasters who wish to be creative regularly employ such names of wild animals—we know more about a person because he is called *Hawkeye*, a player because he's known as *Bear*, or a coach because his players call him *Moose*.

We can observe the changes of our culture in the ways that many figures of speech move into and out of our popular magazines. Nowhere is the practice more readily recognized than in the work of

writers who are or have been regularly syndicated columnists, whose commentary on the world can be found in newspapers and news articles. One writer, for example, seems to have a penchant for using gambling terms, and grinds out such phrases as *high stakes*, the *show-down*, *ace in the hole*, a *four-flusher*, *blue chip*—all the while writing about some matter far removed from the area of poker. Another example: When golf became popular again after the Great Depression, readers were educated to the implications of *teeing off* on an enterprise, when the optimum standard was *par for the course*, and a good business deal was a *birdie*.

Probably the original similes were used among tribes which had only vague references to time, distance, and other such units of measurement. Their standards were elemental; the strength of a great oak, the height of the mountain, as far as the stars, as firm as a rock. One can see that good stories are difficult to tell unless the pictures are made vivid, and exactness of measurement would only hinder the story teller.

When the American nation was a farming culture and the bulk of our population lived in small rural towns, all writers of short stories and news commentary felt perfectly safe in using literary devices which made reference to agricultural pursuits. Even today our language is replete with phrases that originated on the farm, although we are finding fewer and fewer readers who have the experiential background to appreciate them. As *stubborn as a mule*, a *sheepish* look, possessing *horse-sense*, a *dog's life*, to *cow* one's enemy, to *wolf* one's food, to *weasel* out of a situation, and *eating high on the hog* are references to a life style most Americans have not known in a hundred years. However, we may still find such sentences in the news as "He went on the stump in his county," or "He had a rough row to hoe," though no one makes speeches from stumps and few people even know what a hoe looks like.

With the growth of industrialization and machine power, a great new supply of words and terms were offered to our language of imagery. Although we are witnessing some atrophy in this decade, the railroad terms will continue to be used as similes and metaphors by commentators and writers until children will begin to ask "What was a train?" We employ the word *railroad* as a verb, and apply it in another context—to *railroad a bill* through Congress. Everyone today recognizes the picture of a person *building up a head of steam*, understands his confidante who just had to *blow off a little steam*, and draws the proper inference when someone says "I'm a *cog* in the

company.” The use of *meshing gears* in committee or group dynamics is still in vogue, and we may read phrases like *using a little oil* and *pour on the coal* in *Time* or *Newsweek*. There were whole decades, during the period of our history when factories were run from the flywheel and pulley principle, when moral lessons were drawn from industrial metaphors—the stamina of the engine (“I Think I Can”), the awesome drive of the big steam piston, and the seeming relentlessness of the machinery.

Now we have come to the age of more daytime leisure for more people, and terms from various sports have become regular parts of our conversation and familiar essays. Of course, fighting, which became refined as boxing many years ago, has given us terms which sportswriters spread through the medium with alacrity. In business, in education, in the ministry—we may borrow *in-fighting*, *footwork*, *throw in the towel*, *first round*, *kayoad*, *punchy*—to use in writing about fields remote from boxing. In the same way, many of the terms originally attached to the game of baseball became figures of speech to use in all other pursuits, simply because it was American and everyone understood the values. A lawyer says he wants to *touch all the bases* with his client, a salesman says he *struck out*, a politician *fields* questions from the audience, and the words *umpire*, *foul-ball*, and *short-stop* are used in areas as different as labor relations and romance.

In the past twenty years we have watched the growth and addiction of the reading public for terms originating in collegiate and professional football. Business and political reports and descriptions contain many such phrases as campaign *kickoff*, sales efforts resulted in a *touchdown*, the president’s *game-plan*, to *quarterback* a meeting, *run with the ball*, to *run interference for*, to *intercept*. The terms are no longer considered esoteric and are to be seen in formal statements by office holders in positions of great responsibility.

Thus, it would be possible for a student committee or any group of word “detectives” to spend a little time with the Oxford English Dictionary and produce some highly interesting sidelights on our extreme dynamic language. Suppose we take one example of what might be done in this regard. If we focus our attention on a single era of literary reference, the sailing vessel period of our history, we are sure to turn up some terms which are used in a different context today. Most of the phrases and words, rich heirlooms from the earliest development of communication, are now lost to our use, at least on land. Most of the sailing vessel words came over before the Mayflower, and

applied realistically to the tools and the way of life of that time. Yet, some remain to enhance our land-locked language today.

First, we hear “welcome aboard!”—a greeting reserved for a new employee in a dry land company. *Board* meant simply the edge-board on a ship, but we can *board* a plane, refer to something gone *by-the-board* (meaning lost forever), or say an object or person is *overboard*—which may mean lost or even fired by the company. The only reference to a shipwreck used in a land sense is *on the rocks*, which may happen to a business or a marriage.

How completely concepts of terms may change can be seen in the word *landlubber*. Originally from Scandinavia, it was the ultimate in insults; to call a sailor a landlubber was to say he was a fat, clumsy, idle, worthless, ugly oaf. Today it is not uncommon to hear a person refer to himself as a landlubber!

About two-thirds of the sea-going terms assumed their present form in English after previous use in Norse and Dutch. The *helm*, for instance, was *hjalm* in Old Norse, and meant a raised platform at the back of the Viking boat where a sailor handled the rudder. Men who are *at the helm* of large industries today do not see themselves as standing behind the crew. Later mechanical progress did locate the helm amidships, however.

We speak of things going along *on a steady keel*, but do not think about the nautical application. The counterpart on land is *foundation*, since the Norse word (kil) *keel* was the timber on which the whole framework of the ship was built. We find the word used in Old English as far back as the year 1000, with corresponding forms in other languages that predated English.

In the same way, all seafaring nations had a word for the concept of *buoy*, a floating marker fettered to a spot where a submerged hazard lay. *Boie*, from Dutch, gave us our present word. The idea of floating symbols for navigation came to land use very early. We find forms like *buoyancy*, *buoyed up by the news* as part of the expanded meaning today. Another word which grew in scope of meaning after it came to land use is *ballast*. From Danish and Swedish, it first meant loading a ship for the sake of weight alone. The idea so appealed to writers of creative material that *ballast* came to have the figurative use as a burden or weight which gives stability to one's morals. Bacon used it in 1612: “Solid and sober nature, more of *ballast* than sail.”

In certain cases of sailing terms, we can trace the change in concept as the words were brought on shore. *Cargo* was the shipping assignment or *charge*, the reason for sailing, so to speak. Now it is the

weight or material being carried. *Anchor* was a heavy bent piece of metal (compare “angle”) lowered to hold the vessel from drifting away. On land, men began to use the word as a verb—to *anchor* the corners, and then as an adjective—the *anchor*-man. Much more refined today, anchors are a decorative symbol; however, they began most simply as curved or bent pieces of metal, which may also have been the origin of the phrase “by hook or crook.”

Scuttle, as used on land today, usually means to wreck previous plans or an existing structure. Once a noun only, it referred to an opening through which a man could crawl to get below. Apparently, it became a verb in time of war, when orders were given to open holes in the sides or bottom of a ship to sink her. Because sinking a vessel was of such grave consequence, *scuttle* has always carried a connotation of finality.

Not so in the case of the word *scuttlebutt*. It has come to mean, in all branches of the military as well as other places, the rumors of what may happen. *Scuttlebutt* included everything from idle gossip to genuine intelligence concerning the potential and possible. Until a century ago, *scuttlebutt* referred to the huge cask (butt) of fresh water which stood on the deck, and around which sailors would gather to wait for their ration to be given. We can easily surmise that passing the time with idle rumor and tales until the opening of the cask (scuttle the butt) gave the term its name and reputation.

Some words are used with equal land and sea reference. *Skipper*, for example, is simply a Dutch word for the master of the ship. *Beam*, the cross member in the construction of a sailing vessel, had its first use on land. Coming from the Dutch also, it meant timber, or tree, or straight trunk. In land use, beams are made of wood or metal, and no distinction in direction is made. The *beam* of the sailing vessel was its width.

The word *barge* began with dignity, meaning an open boat which carried only high ranking persons. Then barges began carrying coal and pig iron, and the word went downhill. To *barge* into a conversation today means a clumsy or tactless entry.

A few nautical phrases from the old days are used on land by persons who have little idea of original meaning, but a vague sense of context. Before an argument (squall?) or some emotional confrontation, someone may say “Batten down the hatches,” meaning prepare for trouble. Specifically, the order meant to wedge down the covers over the openings (hatches) in the deck. “Sailing under false colors” is another such phrase, one may use without thinking of sailing at all.

High school students who find adventure in the exercise of tracking down words used and changed social contexts in literature may decide to try another area of pursuits and activities. Teachers might encourage students to be watchful for figures of speech that come from the world of chess, or horse racing, or a kind of work that is limited in scope. Where, for a starter, does the term *traffic-jam* originate? To what does True *Grit* refer? Where does “Strike while the iron is hot” come from? And “Not on your tintype”? Usually, the teacher who listens to his students carefully can sense the right time to broach the whole topic. There is a great deal of ferment in the language right now, and many terms are being tried by the younger set. A few will stay. Perhaps the conversation could begin there—what, of the space and computer terms being injected into our language in other contexts, will remain to become part of our figures of speech? *Count-down, in orbit, programmed*—surely the reader thinks of others—are used in ways far removed from machines. Only the surface needs to be touched for this activity to become a valuable part of class discussion.