CHAPTER 4

Metaphor

Relate your product to something that is current and relevant and that everyone understands.¹

—Marc Benioff, founder and CEO of Salesforce

As we’ve seen before, introducing a new idea or concept is often a tough challenge. Sometimes an idea doesn’t land on your audience even if you explain it twice or thrice.

So, what is that missing glue between a new idea and common understanding? Well, exactly what the word “glue” made in the question I just asked: visual language. You well know what glue is, you know that glue is used to bind or stick two elements together, but most importantly you have just created a visual image of “glue” on your mind. Maybe you imagined a school glue stick or a UHU tube?

The lesson is: for complex and novel concepts, ditch the literal explanations and instead use visual language. After all, our world is already surrounded by expressions like that, and successful speakers are using it to rock the tech stage.

¹Benioff, Marc and Carlye Adler. Behind the Cloud: The Untold Story of How Salesforce.com Went from Idea to Billion-Dollar Company—and Revolutionized an Industry. Jossey-Bass, 2009.

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What Is a Metaphor?

You have likely heard of metaphors before now. So, what are they, and when are we really using metaphors and not something else?

First of all, think of visual language: when was the last time that you heard words that immediately made you create visual images on your mind? Visual language is the raw material for metaphors. You need that so that your audience can paint a picture in their minds.

Strictly speaking, a metaphor throws literal meaning in the trash and replaces it with words that represent it visually. It’s not about explaining an idea, nor about comparing it with something familiar, but instead about replacing it with visual imagery.

Definition of Metaphor

A metaphor is a figure of speech in which a phrase or word replaces another to suggest likeness or analogy between them. Etymologically speaking, metaphor comes from the Greek word metaphorēin (meaning “to transfer”).

Now let us review an example. Barbara McAfee used the expression “listening with your skin” during a TEDx talk. Here the metaphor is “with your skin” which in this context means “deeply.” As you see, “with your skin” has replaced the literal expression.

Something to remember about this concept is that, in order to have a metaphor, you need to

- Use visual language
- Replace literal meaning

Everyday Metaphors

We hear, read, and use metaphors all the time, often without noticing. Here are just a few examples:

1. “It is going to be clear skies from now on.”
2. “Your voice is music to my ears.”

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2 Merriam-Webster Dictionary, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/metaphor, Accessed 23 Jul. 2020.
3 “How Oral Tradition Singing Helps Us Live & Work Better Together.” Barbara McAfee. TEDxBend https://youtu.be/1rRQu1QnaoQ
3. “We’re in **uncharted territory** here,” as used by Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, March 12, 2020, about COVID-19.

4. “The demagogue is always **cherry-picking** the rare stats that back up their ideas.”

5. “We are still not **out of the woods**.”

6. “The company had **a pebble in their shoes** until they deployed our software.”

7. “He’s **head and shoulders above** everyone in the industry.”

And there are many everyday metaphors like these.

### Some Famous Metaphors

Besides day-to-day metaphors that are part of everybody’s language, some well-known people have created their own metaphors, and here are a few examples:

1. “One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a **lonely island** of poverty in the midst of a **vast ocean** of material prosperity,” Martin Luther King Jr. “I have a dream” speech.⁴

2. “Focus on the **forest** and forget the **trees**,” said Warren Buffett.⁵

3. “**Illuminate**” is the title of a book by Nancy Duarte.⁶ She created that metaphor and repeatedly used it to convey the message that leaders must enlighten the path where the employees, investors, and customers walk through. Leaders have to illuminate the path, become **torchbearers** (another metaphor).

4. “From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an **iron curtain** has descended across the Continent,” by Winston Churchill.⁷

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⁴[https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihaveadream.htm](https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihaveadream.htm)

⁵[https://www.berkshirehathaway.com/letters/2018ltr.pdf](https://www.berkshirehathaway.com/letters/2018ltr.pdf)

⁶[https://www.duarte.com/illuminate/](https://www.duarte.com/illuminate/)

⁷[https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1946-1963-elder-statesman/the-sinews-of-peace/](https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1946-1963-elder-statesman/the-sinews-of-peace/)
Great Metaphors Used in Technology

During talks, product launches, interviews, and marketing material, the technology arena has experienced remarkable metaphors that are worth showing you.

Are you ready?

Here is a selection of effective metaphors:

1. **The cloud.** That’s a common metaphor that is daily used to refer to services that are fully on Internet servers, instead of on premises. The metaphor contrasts what is on premises (on the ground level), with the cloud (up there).

2. **Data mining.** Another concept that has been used for a while, in which “mining” replaces the idea of extracting value out of large amounts of data.

3. A nifty story on Teradata video\(^8\) revolves around data analysts looking for insight. The video starts with the words “Somewhere in the **Data Wasteland** … A fearless group of analysts struggle to make sense of it all.” The 2-minute story ends with the apparition of a prophet-looking person saying “If you don’t have the answers, how good is a solution?” The message is that without a good solution (Teradata Vantage) the data analysts are surrounded by nothing but data wasteland.

4. Citrix’s video “Why Design Matters to Me”\(^9\) showed five guiding principles the company used. The principle “Inspire delight” was illustrated with the metaphor “Giving your users a great experience over and over is the best way to ignite fireworks in their hearts.”

5. On the first days of salesforce.com, the business concept was so novel that it was introduced with metaphors. The one to explain AppExchange was: **The eBay of enterprise software.**\(^10\)

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\(^8\) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FvSgENwIvTI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FvSgENwIvTI)

\(^9\) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJt340fooKA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJt340fooKA)

\(^10\) Benioff, Marc and Carlye Adler. Behind the Cloud: The Untold Story of How Salesforce.com Went from Idea to Billion-Dollar Company—and Revolutionized an Industry. Jossey-Bass, 2009.
6. EDS, a consultancy firm later absorbed by HP, created a video commercial “Building airplanes in the sky.” After showing a surreal footage of a plane that is at the same time being constructed and carrying passengers, the video shows the message “In a sense this is what we do. We build your digital business even while you’re up and running.”

7. On MacWorld 2007 Keynote, Steve Jobs revealed that Mac computers would switch their type of microprocessors. For that announcement he used the metaphor “A huge, heart transplant to Intel microprocessors.”

8. The “walled garden” is a business metaphor used for many years to refer to commercial strategies pursued by dominant technology firms. An example is Apple, who aims to retain complete control over the software, services, and accessories used along with their proprietary devices.

9. A cryptographic hash is a sieve. Mikko Hyppönen had to explain “hash” to nontechnical audiences. He came up with the metaphor of a sieve. You can take a flour sieve and you put something through it. The amount of flour that goes through to sieve is the hash and in digital hashing you can regenerate the pile of flour from this hash. It’s unique. A tiny amount of data represents the original full amount of data.

10. Writing to the steel. Panos Panay was asked by a CNBC reporter if Microsoft as a device manufacturer was working on making its own chipsets. Panay replied, “In part of the Devices team we have a silicon group that goes down to the steel. I think when you make software you have to make it together with hardware, we call it writing to the steel. This is important and being able to create silicon that proliferates through the product and brings the right experience through the software to our customers.”

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11 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7XW-mewUm8
12 https://www.cnbc.com/video/2017/11/01/ai-is-bring-computing-to-life-microsoft-exec-says.html
11. **Technology that fades to the background.** Another metaphor that Panos Panay used in a blog post\(^{13}\) he wrote in 2018. He described that people who work using Surface Studio to create and design things feel an immersive experience.

12. **Devices that sing.** In an interview,\(^{14}\) Panos Panay talks about devices made by Microsoft partners that create mixed reality. In particular a headset, and referred to these as devices that sing.

13. **The Internet’s immune system.** Cybersecurity expert Keren Elazari gave a TED talk\(^{15}\) in 2014 in which he described why hackers are the immune system for the information age: “Sometimes they make us sick, but they also find those hidden threats in our world, and they make us fix it.”

**Create Your Own Metaphors**

I hope you are now convinced of the power of using metaphors. You can of course use known popular metaphors or someone else’s metaphors, but you can take a step forward and create your own.

Not many speakers in the tech arena use metaphors, and from those even fewer of them create their own metaphors. A person worth mentioning is Salesforce CEO Marc Benioff, who explicitly recommends that people create their own metaphors, as written in his book *Behind the Cloud.*\(^{16}\) He believes that metaphors are a powerful way to communicate a message, and that it is worth it to make your own. He also recommends testing a new metaphor before sharing it widely. Try them on your closer circle to ensure they work.

**Similes and Analogies**

Metaphors have their close relatives—cousins, if you will—which also use visual language to express ideas: *similes* and *analogies.* Now it’s time to analyze what the difference is between these figures of speech.

\(^{13}\)https://blogs.windows.com/devices/2018/10/02/meet-surface-pro-6-surface-laptop-2-surface-studio-2-and-surface-headphones/

\(^{14}\)https://youtu.be/nCR4CTgOneY?t=559

\(^{15}\)https://www.ted.com/talks/keren_elazari_hackers_the_internet_s_immune_system

\(^{16}\)Benioff, Marc and Carlye Adler. *Behind the Cloud: The Untold Story of How Salesforce.com Went from Idea to Billion-Dollar Company—and Revolutionized an Industry.* Jossey-Bass, 2009.
Simile

A simile is a figure of speech that compares two separate things, which normally starts with the words like or as. Etymologically speaking, *simile* comes from the Latin word *similis* (meaning “similar, like”).

Some good examples are

“Defend your gross margin *like a junkyard rottweiler*” by James Watt on the book *Business for Punks: Start Your Business Revolution – the BrewDog Way*.

“I’ve said it many times before about Kevin De Bruyne, his feet are *like paint brushes...*” by Martin Keown, former football player and sport commentator.

At the end of 2014, Dr. Alice Bunn, Director of Policy at UK Space Agency, described Rosetta’s successful mission of landing a probe put into a meteor as “*like trying to land a fly on a speeding bullet*.”

“It’s *like playing a game of Tetris*. When your successes disappear but your failures pile up” by Mikko Hyppönen, during Slush 2019 talking about the work of cybersecurity professionals.

“Now, software on mobile phones is *like baby software.*” Steve Jobs during the iPhone launch in 2007.

Analogy

An analogy is a comparison of two ideas that are separate. It allows us to explain something based on parallels and similarities.

Often an analogy uses similes and metaphors.

Examples

A common analogy in the sales industry is “We hired the wrong applicant for our sales team. *He’s a farmer, and we need a hunter.*”

In the preceding example, “farmer” and “hunter” are metaphors that represent two different styles of salespeople.
In 2008, Intel had the challenge to explain “dual core” to the general consumer. So they created an analogy: “since the microprocessor is like the brain of a computer, a dual-core chip was like having two brains in a laptop—one brain can handle one function while the other brain is doing something else.”

The preceding analogy used the simile “like the brain of a computer” and “like having two brains in a laptop.”

“Cellphones leapfrogged the landlines and there wasn’t a need to put landlines in a lot of countries or in remote locations,” Elon Musk during Tesla Powerwall launch (2015).

This analogy compares the challenge of installing telephones in remote areas with the vision of installing electricity to remote areas.

You can also convert similes into metaphors, by removing the word “like” and—as in metaphors—replacing literal meaning with visual language. The aftermath is shorter speech and shorter phrases. And as you might know, shorter phrases are usually more impactful.

Why You Should Use Metaphors

Now you know what metaphors (and their cousins similes and analogies) are. Not convinced yet? Here is a summary of strong reasons why you should use metaphors:

- **Metaphors simplify complex concepts.** Depending on what you have to speak about, sooner or later you will have to introduce a novel or complex idea. When you find it hard to explain a difficult concept that your audience can’t relate to at all yet, a metaphor could be the best tool you can use.

- **Metaphors will help you connect your new or complex concept with an idea that is already familiar to your audience.** Every audience has developed deep familiarity with movies, popular songs, sports, famous people, food, commonplace technologies, and so on. Your task is to build a bridge between that familiar idea and your new concept.

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22https://www.forbes.com/sites/carminegallo/2017/05/21/a-trendy-silicon-valley-buzzword-offers-a-valuable-lesson-in-effective-communication/

23https://youtu.be/NvCIhn7_FXI
Metaphors use visual language that is easier to remember. We’re using, hearing, and reading metaphors every day. Visual language creates long-lasting memories, and this is where the power of metaphor comes in.

Best Practices

Finally, when you have decided to use metaphors as part of your speaker toolkit, the following practices will make your work easier and more impactful:

- Metaphors are effective when connecting two fields that are very distant, but your audience is familiar to one of them. For instance, science fiction, automobiles, computer games, board games, escape rooms, and computer hardware are some common fields that techies are fond of. Find the right fields or interests based on the demographics of your specific audience.

- Pay attention to cultural and geographical connotations. We humans share a lot but in every country and region there are habits, famous people, products, and laws that everybody knows but can be unknown to the rest of the world. Thus, a really good metaphor can work wonders in one country and be useless elsewhere. For instance, neuroscience researcher Wendy Suzuki said in her TED talk\(^\text{24}\) at TEDWomen 2017 that “Exercise is a supercharged 401(k) for your brain.” That was a well-crafted metaphor, but it has zero meaning for most people outside the United States. Great for one country, cryptic for all the others.

- Every time you hear or read a striking metaphor, write it down. Keep a record of them to create your metaphors file, and you could include similes and analogies, too. That will help you to find the right metaphor at the right time and will serve as inspiration to create your own.

- Want an unusual way to find metaphors? Read poetry. Communication trainer Ira Virtanen told me in an interview\(^\text{25}\) “reading poetry gives you a ton of unusual, fresh, accurate, surprising metaphors and imagery. In sum, you can happily bid farewell to clichés.”

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\(^{24}\) [https://www.ted.com/talks/wendy_suzuki_the_brain_changing_benefits_of_exercise](https://www.ted.com/talks/wendy_suzuki_the_brain_changing_benefits_of_exercise)

\(^{25}\) [https://www.timetoshinepodcast.com/ira-virtanen-power-poetry-reading-public-speakers/](https://www.timetoshinepodcast.com/ira-virtanen-power-poetry-reading-public-speakers/)
Key Takeaways

- Metaphors are one of the most powerful figures of speech. The key reason is because metaphors use visual language.
- We say, hear, and read metaphors daily. Many speakers in the tech arena use metaphors to communicate their ideas effectively.
- Similes and analogies are powerful figures of speech as well.
- If you want to stand out, create your own metaphors. Your effort will pay off.
- Make your voice music to your audience’s ears!