

## Communicating in English with Baseball Metaphors

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**Abstract:** Teaching English as a foreign language in the United States presents several new problems for the language learner. They encounter different social levels of language use, different dialects, and confusing English idioms. They encounter the heavy use of sports metaphors. This becomes a problem when they are not familiar with the sport referred to. In particular, the use of sports metaphors in American English presents a challenge to the language learner. This essay deals with the teaching of baseball metaphors for learners of American English.

**Keywords:** Baseball metaphors, the game of baseball, baseball expressions, teaching sports metaphors, reading comprehension.

### 1. Introduction

There is a difference in teaching English as a foreign language overseas and in the United States. When one teaches English overseas, the opportunities for interaction with native speakers of English is somewhat controlled. However, when one learns English as a foreign language in an English speaking country, one is confronted immediately with the problems of daily usage of the English language. Some of these problems are listed below:

Table 1. Problems of Daily English Usage

Different Social Levels of English	One encounters a wide array of different levels of English ranging from colloquial to formal English. This presents the student with the problem of knowing when to code switch appropriately when using English.
Dialectal Differences	In addition to interacting with others in Standard English, the student also encounters others who will engage them in one of several regional dialects.
Profane Language	Students will encounter many examples of profanity in English and may unknowingly incorporate these into their use of English.
Confusing English idioms	Idioms are expressions that one learns in a foreign language. They do have grammatical structure, but they have lost much of their original meaning, such as “kick the bucket.” Many so-called idioms are essentially metaphorical expressions.

The use of metaphors in the teaching of English to foreign students is the focus of this report. In particular, this investigation will deal with sports metaphors as these are commonly encountered by foreign students living in the United States. It is argued that one must have some rudimentary knowledge of certain sports in order to better understand these sports metaphors.

## 2. Why Should One Study Metaphors?

Every language has a collection of wise sayings or proverbs. When the contexts for these sayings are known, they are referred to as proverbs. However, when the meanings underlying these expressions are lost, they are referred to as idioms. Foreign students are told to memorize these idioms. They may not realize that many of these so-called idioms are really metaphorical expressions that can be readily understood by providing them with the appropriate background knowledge. Consider, for example, the following English expressions:

Table 2. Meanings of Sports Metaphors

Sports Metaphor (Baseball)	Sports Meaning of the Expression	Common Meaning of the Expression
A ball park figure	An estimation of the number of people in attendance at the ball park during a game	<i>A rough estimate</i>
Covering all bases	Keeping a fielder close to each base to make it difficult for the runners to reach them safely.	Taking precautions for every situation. <i>Did you study for the exam? Did you cover all of the bases?</i>
He dropped the ball	The outfielder almost caught the ball. If he did, the other side would be out. They would lose. However, he dropped the ball and they gained the advantage.	<i>To drop the ball means to let down your own team.</i>
He threw me a curved ball	The pitcher has the ability to throw the ball at the hitter and make it change direction. It may be a drop ball, a curve, a slider, a slow ball or a fast ball.	A curved ball changes direction unexpectedly. It deceives the hitter. Throwing a curve ball means to deceive someone. <i>We nearly had a contract and then he threw me a curved ball.</i>

The common usage of metaphors in idioms plays the function of organizing conversations. The concept of metaphors has a long tradition in western rhetoric. However, despite their usefulness, metaphors were treated pejoratively by language teachers for nearly two millennia. The question that needs to be asked is why. It turns out that the beginning of this ban on metaphor goes back to the noted Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle (St. Clair, 2002). Plato had his famous philosophical academy and his prized student was Aristotle. One day when Aristotle returned from a trip, he was told that Plato no longer ran the academy. It was led by

his nephew. In Greek, the word nephew is *nepatos* and the practice of giving prized positions of power to one's relatives is called nepotism. Aristotle was furious and he renounced Plato and his teachings. One of the things that Aristotle renounced was the use of metaphor. Plato loved to use metaphors to explain his major philosophical teachings. Aristotle argued in favor of deductive reasoning (major premise, minor premise, and conclusion). The works of these ancient Greek philosophers were lost to western scholarship until they were translated by Arab scholars. It turns out that they translated Aristotle and not Plato. Hence, western philosophers favored the writings of Aristotle and his claims about why one should not use metaphorical thinking. This whole traditional way of thinking was changed with the advent of the cognitive sciences. In particular, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) argued in favor of metaphorical use, pointing out that more people argue and think metaphorically than through deductive or inductive reasoning. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) called this *conceptual metaphor*.

Metaphors are expressions based on an analogy to something. That something is called the source and the metaphor is known as the target. Metaphorical thinking is analogical thinking (Heine, 1997). It is one of the most common ways in which human beings communicate. As noted earlier, human beings think metaphorically (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). These kinds of metaphors are referred to as conceptual metaphors because they are used to create concepts. The concept is written in capital letters and the metaphor expressions are written as lower case sentences.

Table 3. Conceptual Metaphor (Lakoff &amp; Johnson, 1980)

<b>Conceptual Metaphor</b>	ARGUMENT IS WAR
<b>Linguistic Expressions</b>	<i>I demolished his arguments.</i>
	<i>He never won the argument.</i>
	<i>He attacked the weak point of my argument.</i>
	<i>His claims were indefensible.</i>

This metaphor is based on the experience of war. It is the battlefield experience that provides the source of these linguistic expressions. Another common type of metaphor discussed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) that is used in cognition are orientational metaphors. These metaphors account for how human beings position themselves in the world. These are metaphors that have to do with verticality (up versus down), symmetry (left versus right), horizontalness (front versus back), and proximity (near versus far). These metaphors are often used to express emotions.

Table 4. Orientational Metaphor (Lakoff &amp; Johnson, 1980)

<b>Orientational Metaphor</b>	CONSCIOUSNESS IS UP; UNCONSCIOUSNESS IS DOWN
<b>Linguistic Expressions</b>	<i>Wake up!</i>
	<i>He fell asleep.</i>
	<i>He rises early in the morning.</i>
	<i>He sank into a coma.</i>

Both kinds of metaphors are used in sports. However, conceptual metaphors tend to dominate. Since the focus of this essay is on sports metaphors, it is time to focus on a particular sport in order to further explicate how these metaphors operate.

### 3. Baseball Metaphors

#### 3.1. The Game of Baseball

The history of baseball in the United States can be traced back to the eighteenth century. Historians argue that it was a truly American invention and the first team to play this game was the New York Knickerbockers. It was a nine-man team that played for nine innings with the bases (home plate, first, second, and third) placed 90 feet apart. The batter at home plate would hit the ball thrown to him by the pitcher of the opposing team. Next, he would run the bases. If he completed the run of the bases, he made a home run. He was put out of the game by being tagged by opposing team (Hample, 2007).

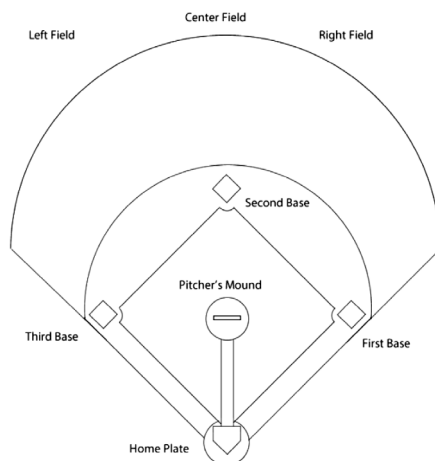


Figure 1. Baseball Field

Baseball is a team sport that is played on a special field over a period of nine innings. Each inning is divided into two parts. One team occupies the top half of the inning on the field and the second team occupies the second half of the inning. One of these teams is on the offensive and the other is defensive. The defensive team is on the field and there is only one offensive player on the field at any time. He is the batter. His goal is to hit the ball thrown to him by the pitcher. If he hits the ball out of the park, it is called a home run and he must run all three bases and return to home plate. Usually, however, a batter is either struck out by the pitcher or he hits the ball and advances on base. There may be as many as four offensive players on the field at any time (the hitter, the player on first base, second base, and third base). This situation is referred to as “the bases are loaded.”

### 3.2. The Pitcher, the Catcher and the Umpire

The pitcher and the catcher work together. The catcher stands behind home plate and he catches the ball thrown by the pitcher. He signals to the pitcher and tells him what kind of pitch to throw. There are several kinds of pitches: the fast ball (this can be as fast as 90 mph or more), the drop ball, the curve ball, and sliders. The umpire stands behind the catcher and decides if a base is within the strike zone. If it is, he calls it a “strike”. If it is not, he calls it a “ball”. When the batter has missed three “strike” balls, he is struck out and leaves home plate. If he receives four “balls”, he is allowed to advance to first base (Strecker, 2014). If the batter hits a ball within the strike zone, and the ball is not caught in the air by the defensive team, he runs to the first base (first base).

The etymology of umpire comes from Latin. His task is to treat the players equally. In Latin, this is expressed as *UM PAR*. Since the umpire is supposed to be above the players, he was called *non UM PAR* which in Latin is *NON UM PAR*. There are several expressions in English which were restructured due to a confusion having to do with the indefinite article. The indefinite article “a” is used when a word begins with a consonant and “an” when a word begins with a vowel. This rule proved confusing for the hearer if he did not know a new expression in English. For example, the original word for orange was “norange.” When one asked for an orange, they said “a norange.” This was confusing to the hearer who perceived it “an orange.” The same thing happened to the word umpire. The expression “a numpire” which was heard “an umpire”, and the word was restructured, i.e., lost the initial consonant/n/.

### 4. Baseball Metaphors

Many baseball metaphors pervade throughout the English language. Some of the more prevalent ones are listed below:

Table 5. Meanings of Baseball Metaphors

Baseball Metaphor	Sports Meaning of the Expression	Common Meaning of the Expression
Getting to first base	The batter needs to score a run by getting onto first base.	When one has success in dating, he is said to get to first base. <i>How did it go last night? Did you get to first base?</i>
Heavy hitter	Someone who is capable of hitting the ball out of the ball park.	This refers to the top people in a company. <i>John is our heavy hitter.</i>
Hitting a home run	This happens when the batter has an opportunity to cover all of the bases and return to home plate. This is often done by hitting the ball out of the park.	This refers to a highly successful operation. <i>How did the new business venture go? – We hit a home run.</i>

In-there pitching	The pitcher is the one who most actively tries his best to defeat the opponents on the other team.	This means to try one's best. <i>We all got out and helped. Everybody was in there pitching.</i>
Major league	Baseball has two leagues: the major and the minor. The major league is where the best players compete.	This is an expression for the highest level of competition. <i>Congratulations on the promotion. You are now playing in the major league.</i>
Not in his league	Not playing in the major league.	This means to be without competition. <i>You are the best. There is no one else in your league.</i>
Play ball	This is what the umpire says when the game begins.	This means to get started. <i>Let us do it. It is time to play ball.</i>
Playing hardball	Real baseball is played with a hard ball; women's baseball is played with a softball.	This means to play brutally and without consideration or mercy. <i>The new boss is playing hard ball with us.</i>
Rain check	When a game was cancelled due to rain and spectators are given a ticket (a rain check) that allows them free entrance to the rescheduled game.	This means to be excused from participating in an event. <i>Come over and join us. – Thank you but I will take a rain check.</i>
Step up to the plate	The batter must be able to do his best when he steps up to home plate.	This means to take responsibility. <i>I am depending on you to step up to the plate.</i>
Touch base	A runner must briefly touch the base as he goes on a run.	This now means to keep in touch with others. <i>Let me know how you are doing. Let's keep in touch. Let us touch base next week.</i>
Three strikes and you are out	A batter is out if he has three strikes against him.	This means that one has no more chances left. <i>This is it! Three strikes and you are out.</i>
Two strikes against you	A batter with two strikes is in a dangerous position. One more strike and he is out of the game.	This means to be dangerously close to failing. <i>Be careful! You already have two strikes against you.</i>

When one teaches these metaphors, they should not be merely memorized. They should be incorporated into various classroom activities.

#### 4.1. Reading Assignments with Baseball Metaphors

A good way to introduce students to metaphors is by first explaining what the game is all about. After they have heard several of the expressions and understand where they came from, they are introduced to a reading assignment using these metaphors.

- Their first task is to identify the major sports metaphor. Is it from basketball, football, soccer, or baseball? Have them create a title for the reading using a sports metaphor.
- Their next task is to circle all of the baseball sports metaphors that they can recognize within the reading passage.
- Then, discuss the story that they have read using these new sports metaphors.
- Finally, the students are asked to write their own story using these metaphors.

Table 6. Reading Comprehension Passage

Reading Sample
John joined a new company as a field representative. He was told about the company and to go out and play ball. If he became a heavy hitter, the boss would reward him. John wanted to do well. He did not want to strike out. He wanted to hit a home run. He knew that this job would be more difficult than the last and that he could be thrown a curve ball when he was not expecting it. He wanted to play a fair game. He wanted to be on a par with the others. John was ready for the major leagues. He knew that he could step up to the plate. He was not going to strike out. It is now time to play ball. John touched base with his supervisor and covered all the bases.

A model student response identifying the metaphors is given below:

Table 7. Model Response to Metaphor Identification in Reading Passage

Joining the <b>Major Leagues</b>
John joined a new company as a <b>field representative</b> . He was told about the company and <b>to go out and play ball</b> . If he became a <b>heavy hitter</b> , the boss would reward him. John wanted to do well. He did <b>not want to strike out</b> . He wanted to <b>hit a home run</b> . He knew that this job would be more difficult than the last and that he could be <b>thrown a curve ball</b> when he was not expecting it. He wanted to <b>play a fair game</b> . He wanted to be <b>on a par</b> with the others. John was <b>ready for the major leagues</b> . He knew that he could <b>step up to the plate</b> . He was not <b>going to strike out</b> . It is now time <b>to play ball</b> . John <b>touched base</b> with his supervisor and <b>covered all the bases</b> .

#### 5. Concluding Remarks

Metaphors play a major role in interacting with native speakers of a foreign language. If one does not know the source of these metaphors, then the problem becomes one of dealing with

these expressions as idioms. However, once one knows where these expressions come from, they become delightful metaphors. Many sports metaphors are used in English. However, many of the old sports metaphors have lost their meaning over time and function as dead metaphors in English. An example of a dead sports metaphor is the expression “to win hands down.” This expression comes from horse racing. When a jockey was far ahead of the other horses and approaching the finishing line, he raised his body, stopped whipping the horse, and let his hands hang down. This means to win the race in a big way. He can be said to win hands down. For those who understand this metaphor, it is not a dead metaphor. For those who are not aware of the source of this metaphor, it remains a dead metaphor. This essay argues that language classes need to incorporate metaphors into their activities. By bringing information about the source of these sports metaphors, one can facilitate the learning process in the language classroom.

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