First Blood Went to Arsenal
*A Study of Metaphor in English Football Commentary*

Freja Gunell
English C/Special Project
Tutor: Gunnar Bergh
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Abstract

The aim of this study was to look at English media football commentary and find out what metaphors are used and what purpose they serve. To this end, match reports of two Premier League matches in eight different English newspapers have been used. The metaphors found therein have been analysed and compared to current theories of metaphor forms and function. In these match reports both structural, ontological and orientational metaphors exist. They are drawn from a wide variety of source domains, although the domains of physical fight, military conflict and animal behaviour are particularly prominent. The function of metaphor in this context seems primarily to be to interpret facts in a way that make them palatable to the reader.

Key words: language, metaphors, football commentary, English media
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1 Introduction

Reading or listening to football commentary, it is easy to see that metaphor is frequently used. The events on the field are explained in terms of war, dominance, strategy and in many other ways. Metaphors are used to describe the actions of individual players as well as the game itself and its changes. Thus, a player can “tame the ball”, a game can be played “in the final weeks of the campaign”, and if a team finds “their hopes of survival diminishing” they can make a “last stand”.

While it is readily apparent that metaphor is used, the function of metaphor is less obvious. In this essay, I will look both at what kinds of metaphors are used, and what function they serve in this context. By analysing metaphors found in match reports in English newspapers, I intend to find out what source domains common metaphors are drawn from, to what degree structural, orientational and ontological metaphors are used, as well as to see how the usage of metaphor fits into current theories of metaphor function.

1.1 Theoretical background

1.1.1 Types of metaphors

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980:3), our conceptual system is “fundamentally metaphorical in nature”, i.e. metaphors are an intrinsic and inescapable part of the way we think. It is not surprising, then, that these metaphors appear in the media we produce, from academic writing to football commentary. Lakoff and Johnson recognise three separate kinds of metaphor commonly used, namely structural, orientational and ontological metaphor.

A structural metaphor, in their terminology, is a metaphor “where one concept is metaphorically structured in terms of another” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980:14). This means that vocabulary from one domain, called the source domain, is used to describe another, quite separate domain, called the target domain. Lakoff and Johnson’s prototypical example is “argument is war” (1980:4), a structural metaphor where vocabulary from the source domain war is used to describe an argument. Utterances such as “Your claims are indefensible” or “He shot down all of my arguments” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980:4) are examples of this type of metaphor. Lakoff and Johnson emphasise that this is the way that an argument is normally referred to, and that it is not a stylistic choice or a conscious attempt at allegory as such.

Further, Lakoff and Johnson (1980:14) define orientational metaphors as metaphors that “give a concept a spatial orientation”. In contrast to structural metaphors, orientational metaphors do not have a particular source domain that they use to describe the target domain, but simply assign a spatial direction to the target domain. The orientational metaphor “happy is up” is used in expressions such as “I’m feeling up.” and “My spirits rose.” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980:15). According to Lakoff and Johnson, the use of orientational metaphor has a physical and cultural basis (1980:14). These orientational metaphors are
perhaps not as overtly metaphorical as the structural ones, but are nevertheless very pervasive in the way we tend to discuss matters.

Finally, there are ontological metaphors. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980:25), an ontological metaphor allows us to view an event, activity, emotion etc. as an entity or substance. They give the example “inflation is an entity”, manifested in expressions such as “We need to combat inflation.” and “Inflation is backing us into a corner.” (1980:26). These examples show how ontological metaphors enable us to speak about abstract concepts in a very concrete way that would not otherwise be possible.

1.1.2 Function of metaphor

One function of metaphor can be to further our understanding of a concept. No matter what kind of metaphor is used, its function can be to make something abstract easier to grasp (Lakoff and Johnson 1980:115). Goatly (1997:149) calls this function “explanation and modelling”, and describes how the “electricity as flowing water” metaphor helps make clear how electricity behaves in certain contexts. Another aspect of how metaphor can help our understanding is that it can fill lexical gaps (Goatly 1997:149). If there is no appropriate word available for describing a concept, a metaphor can serve instead. For instance, in the domain of football, a *defender* is a player who tries to keep the opposing team from scoring.

Another function of metaphor is to express emotion (Goatly 1997:158). A writer’s choice of one metaphor over another, or use of metaphor instead of a more literal description, can tell the reader something about the attitude of the writer towards the subject at hand.

A related aspect of metaphor is that they by necessity point to certain aspects of an experience at the expense of others (Lakoff and Johnson 1980:156). If a writer consciously chooses to use metaphor in a certain way, he or she has the ability to push for a certain understanding of events, one that would not necessarily be shared by all those who experienced the event first-hand. Writing that “Elano tumbled over a Jonas Olsson challenge” (*Daily Mail*, Manchester City–West Bromwich Albion) gives another impression than writing that “Jonas Olsson stupidly tripped Elano” (*Daily Star*, Manchester City–West Bromwich Albion). Goatly points to a similar idea of metaphor usage that he calls “decoration, disguise and hyperbole” (1997:158), again refering to how metaphors can be used not only to clarify, but to clarify certain aspects at the expense of others.

1.2 Aim

The purpose of this essay is be to study what kinds of metaphors are used in current football commentary and what functions they tend to serve in this context. In particular, I will look at a selection of match reports from the Premier League in English national daily newspapers, trying to identify and analyse metaphors found therein.
In analysing what kinds of metaphors are used, I intend to use the categories introduced by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), namely structural, orientational and ontological metaphor, as well as to look at metaphors by their source domain. If we accept that metaphor is indeed part of our conceptual system, its function becomes a challenging question, perhaps stretching even outside the field of linguistics. What I will concentrate on in this essay is not primarily the function of this fundamental preference for using metaphor that humans seem to have, but rather the function of specific instances of metaphor usage, namely in the specific text type of football commentary. Looking at this much more limited field, it seems more realistic to come up with some relevant results.

1.3 Material and method

In order to study metaphor usage in this context, I intend to look at match reports from the Premier League in eight English national daily newspapers, more specifically reports of the matches West Bromwich Albion–Manchester City on 19 April 2009 and Liverpool–Arsenal on 21 April 2009. The Premier League was chosen because it is extensively covered in a wide variety of English-language newspapers, making it easy to use several sources. Written match reports, rather than live radio or television broadcasts, make for simpler and more accurate data acquisition, as the material is already in text format and need not be transcribed. Match reports were chosen in favour of live written minute-by-minute coverage because of the greater availability of the former.

The eight newspapers used are Daily Mail, Daily Mirror, Daily Star, The Daily Telegraph, The Guardian, The Independent, The Sun and The Times. Being the most widely circulated newspapers in Great Britain, at least according to the Audit Bureau of Circulations, these papers provided coverage of both the target matches. In all, the resulting 16 match reports amounted to about 12 000 words.

My method of investigation is to read the match reports and manually extract metaphors used in them. This approach has certain disadvantages. It necessarily limits the size of the material to be investigated, and it relies on my intuition of what a metaphor is. Having acquired a list of metaphors used in this context, I intend to analyse them both quantitatively and qualitatively, and compare my findings to current theories of metaphor usage.

2 Presentation and analysis

Early in my investigation, it became obvious that many utterances that seem metaphorical in fact use jargon that has to be considered intrinsic to the football domain, and not consciously metaphorical. Such jargon may be a result of lexical gaps being filled by metaphorical expressions, as a word formation process (Goatly 1997:149). I have ignored such usage in the following analysis, since much of the vocabulary used (for instance captain, attacker, shot) seems to come from a military/warlike source domain and would skew the results. My
basis for what words are part of the vocabulary is the official FIFA publication *The Laws of the Game*.

With that in mind, I found 281 metaphors in the 16 match reports I used. Many of these are the metaphors that are commonly used in everyday speech and writing, rather than metaphors that are specifically related to football or the match that is reported on.

### 2.1 Source domains

Metaphors used in sports commentary turn out to be of several different kinds. In an attempt to illustrate the different types, I will give some examples below from three source domains that have turned out to be particularly prominent, i.e. physical fight, military conflict and animal behaviour.

**Physical fight**

- teams pummel each other (*The Daily Telegraph*, Liverpool–Arsenal)
- they recover from physical blows (*The Daily Telegraph*, Liverpool–Arsenal)
- players punch clear of one another (*The Sun*, Liverpool–Arsenal)
- one team wrestles the title off another (*Daily Mail*, Liverpool–Arsenal)
- first blood goes to one team (*Daily Mail*, Liverpool–Arsenal)
- a player parries another (*Daily Mail*, Liverpool–Arsenal)
- a team leaves themselves exposed (*Daily Mail*, Liverpool–Arsenal)
- a team is thumped in the solar plexus (*Daily Mirror*, Liverpool–Arsenal)
- a player plunges a dagger into the other teams’ heart (*The Times*, Liverpool–Arsenal)
- a player is unable to land a decisive blow (*The Guardian*, Liverpool–Arsenal)
- a team fights to the end (*The Sun*, Manchester City–West Bromwich Albion)

**Military conflict**

- a player can be under fire (*The Sun*, Liverpool–Arsenal)
- a player is deployed in a more advanced role (*Daily Mail*, Liverpool–Arsenal)
- a match is a battle (*The Sun*, Manchester City–West Bromwich Albion)
• the midfield is a battle zone that can be occupied (Daily Mail, Liverpool–Arsenal)
• a player can finish off another from close range (Daily Star, Liverpool–Arsenal)
• the manager of one team may resume hostilities against another manager (Daily Mirror, Liverpool–Arsenal)
• after the battle, the dust settles on the field (The Times, Liverpool–Arsenal)
• a team makes a last stand (The Independent, Liverpool–Arsenal)
• the players are the troops of a team (The Sun, Manchester City–West Bromwich Albion)
• a player can miss the goal point-blank (Daily Mirror, Manchester City–West Bromwich Albion)

Animal behaviour

• one player pounces another (The Daily Telegraph, Liverpool–Arsenal)
• a team tears into the other team (The Daily Telegraph, Liverpool–Arsenal)
• a team comes flying out of the traps (The Daily Telegraph, Liverpool–Arsenal)
• a team wants to go for the jugular (The Times, Liverpool–Arsenal)
• a team has its tail up (The Times, Liverpool–Arsenal)
• a player paws at the ball (The Times, Liverpool–Arsenal)
• a manager has attacking instincts (Daily Mirror, Liverpool–Arsenal)
• the fans howled in fury (Daily Mirror, Liverpool–Arsenal)

Each of the source domains physical fight, military conflict and animal behaviour has contributed several metaphors to the material of the present study. The metaphors that come out of these domains also make up a substantial part of the total collection, altogether 27%. In particular, physical fight provides 9% of the metaphors, while military conflict and animal behaviour contributes 11% and 7%, respectively.

These three domains are far from all source domains used. Metaphors are in fact picked from a wide variety of fields, for instance finance (a player can reduce the arrears, or profit from the industry of a team mate), arguments (a player has the last word, or wins a battle of wits) and many others. However, none of these source domains seem to have contributed such a sheer amount of metaphors as those mentioned above. In fact, the source domain of roughly 60% of the metaphors used in the match reports is a source domain that is only used for that single metaphor.
2.2 Types of metaphors

While metaphors used in football commentary can come from a variety of source domains, they can also be of several different types. Lakoff and Johnson (1980:14,25) divide them into structural, orientational and ontological metaphor, and, interestingly enough, the present match reports show examples of all three kinds.

2.2.1 Structural metaphors

The structural metaphors are, unsurprisingly, the most numerous. In the examples of source domains used, we have already seen several seemingly fundamental concepts. Consider the following:

TEAMS ARE HUMAN BEINGS

There are several examples of this phenomenon in the category of physical fight above: teams pummel each other (The Daily Telegraph, Liverpool–Arsenal) and a team fights to the end (The Sun, Manchester City–West Bromwich Albion). Other examples include that teams survive things that “would have seen off lesser mortals” (The Daily Telegraph, Liverpool–Arsenal), a team can “push the self-destruct button” (Daily Mail, Liverpool–Arsenal) or “keep the faith” (The Daily Telegraph, Liverpool–Arsenal). They have physical bodies, can be “thumped in the solar plexus” (Daily Mirror, Liverpool–Arsenal) or “reveal their glass jaw” (The Guardian, Liverpool–Arsenal).

FOOTBALL IS A DUEL

This is another metaphor that uses physical fight as its source domain. One player might explicitly duel with another for possession of the ball, but more common are metaphors that merely refer to the concept of duelling, such as offering a “challenge” (The Independent, Manchester City–West Bromwich Albion). In this context, not only players but teams might duel with one another, using the metaphor of teams as human beings.

TEAMS ARE ARMIES

If the metaphor of teams as human beings is not used, teams are likely to be construed as armies instead. Even if they are not usually explicitly referred to as such, the language usually makes it clear that we are faced with this type of underlying metaphor. Several of the metaphors with military conflict as a source domain point to this interpretation. For example, the players are the troops of the team (The Sun, Manchester City–West Bromwich Albion), the teams meet in the midfield, which is a battle zone (Daily Mail, Liverpool–Arsenal), and the teams’ leaders, their managers, may resume hostilities towards one another (Daily Mirror, Liverpool–Arsenal).
TEAMS ARE ANIMALS

Another possible metaphor for representing football teams is that of seeing them as animals. It is used primarily to show their interaction with other teams, which they may attack and tear into (Daily Mail, Liverpool–Arsenal). It is also used to specifically refer to the team as a group of animals, which may interact: “Liverpool would come flying out of the traps” (The Daily Telegraph, Liverpool–Arsenal) and “Liverpool had torn into Arsenal” (The Daily Telegraph, Liverpool–Arsenal).

THE OPPONENT IS AN OBJECT

The opponent, whether it is a single player, several players or the whole opposing team, is an object that can be manipulated by other players. For example, a player can turn another player (The Daily Telegraph, Liverpool–Arsenal), a kick can go straight through the whole team (Daily Mirror, Manchester City–West Bromwich Albion), or tear down part of it (Daily Mail, Liverpool–Arsenal). He can invite a fellow team member to interact with an opposing player (Daily Mail, Liverpool–Arsenal), as one might invite someone to interact with an object.

LEAGUE PLAYING IS RACING

To play in a league such as the Premier League is to compete in a race: “the point that wins them the title race” (The Times, Liverpool–Arsenal). Teams race against one another both for the title and for specific positions: “the race for seventh place” (Daily Star, Manchester City–West Bromwich Albion). A team that fails to do well can crash out of the league (Daily Star, Liverpool–Arsenal), while a successful team can overtake it and gain the lead (The Independent, Liverpool–Arsenal).

2.2.2 Orientational metaphors

Orientational metaphors are not as numerous as structural metaphors, but still very pervasive in the match reports. A particularly prominent example is victory is forwards. A team that is in the lead is said to be ahead of the other, or in front of them: “Robinho had put City ahead in the eighth minute” (The Times, Manchester City–West Bromwich Albion). The other team is, conversely, said to be behind, and can chase or overtake the leading team: “Liverpool had made a point to Manchester United that they will not give up the chase lightly” (The Daily Telegraph, Liverpool–Arsenal). This metaphor is coherent with the orientational metaphor described by Lakoff and Johnson (1980:16) “foreseeable future events are up (or ahead)”. While it is not certain which team will be victorious, for the most part one of the teams will be, and as such victory can be described as a “foreseeable future event”.
Goatly (197:44) considers the metaphor “development/success=movement forwards” as one of the “root analogies”, metaphors that are very fundamental in human experience and language usage. It is possible that VICTORY IS FORWARDS is one realisation of this underlying analogue.

2.2.3 Ontological metaphors

Ontological metaphors are, like orientational metaphors, not as common as structural metaphors but still rather fundamental to the language used in match reports. Regarding the concept of football itself, two metaphors are used: FOOTBALL IS A SUBSTANCE and FOOTBALL IS AN ENTITY. Examples of the former include “football flowed beautifully” (Daily Mail, Liverpool–Arsenal) and “bring European football back” (The Sun, Manchester City–West Bromwich Albion). The latter is shown in “football just is not fair” (The Sun, Liverpool–Arsenal), “football at its best” (Daily Mail, Manchester City–West Bromwich Albion) and “the improbable nature of the football” (The Independent, Liverpool–Arsenal).

Viewing football as a substance or activity seems to fit with Lakoff and Johnson’s view that activities are substances (1980:30–31), for instance in “I couldn’t do much sprinting until the end”. However, their view that activities are viewed as substances and “therefore as containers” (1980:31) does not seem to fit with the usage of “football” in football commentary.

Another frequently used ontological metaphor is VICTORY IS A SUBSTANCE. It can be wrapped up, sealed and a manager is said to try to “bolt the back door and safeguard victory” (The Daily Telegraph, Manchester City–West Bromwich Albion). This metaphor gives a good example of the function of ontological metaphor: allowing the journalist to talk about the abstract concept of victory in a concrete manner.

2.3 Function of metaphor

Metaphors seem to be used for several different purposes, but primarily to describe action taking place in the game. The players’ interaction with other players is what is most frequently captured by structural metaphors. It is in fact quite unusual to see such interaction described in a straightforward, non-metaphorical way. Given the prevalence of metaphors in this context, it is easy to assume that metaphors must serve a particularly important function, one that cannot easily be fulfilled by non-metaphorical language. I will offer some ideas of their possible functions in this context and discuss them below.

2.3.1 Conveying facts

It seems unlikely that the function of metaphors is just simple communication of facts. To say that “Elano tumbled over a Jonas Olsson challenge in the area and picked himself up to win a battle of wits with Carson” (Daily Mail, Manchester City–West Bromwich Albion) does not convey any more factual information than just stating the bare fact would do, nor does it make it clearer. It is indeed
likely that such writing, if anything, obscures what is happening to those who are unfamiliar with that kind of writing. However, that very function, obscuring what is happening to those unfamiliar, could have a purpose. Goatly writes about what he calls “cultivating intimacy”, meaning that common metaphors and metaphors referring to common experiences can create a sense of intimacy or community in a group of people (1997:160). It is possible that this is one function of what would otherwise seem an unnecessary obfuscation of facts.

2.3.2 Interpreting facts

The purpose of a match report is, of course, not only to describe what has happened, but to do so in a way that appeals to the reader. Even if it was possible for the writer to produce an objective description of what had happened during the match, it would presumably not make for exciting reading. In all the match reports that have been used for this essay, it is clear that the journalists are giving their own perspective and opinion on the events of the match.

It may be that this interpretation is necessary to convey facts in an understandable manner. Lakoff and Johnson suggest that “A given metaphor may be the only way to highlight and coherently organise exactly those aspects of our experience” (1980:156), pointing to the necessity of metaphor. For his part, Goatly writes that “metaphors can explain some relatively abstract concept in terms which are more familiar to the hearers” (1997:150). While football as an activity is hardly an abstract concept in itself, the rules and conventions of association football certainly have nothing natural about them. Perhaps one function of metaphor in match reports, then, is to make these abstractions more understandable. If football can be described in terms of physical fight, it makes football understandable in the terms of an activity that is natural to human beings.

But even if metaphor is necessary to convey certain events, it is still up to the journalist to choose which metaphor to use. For example, the events that were described by one journalist as “Elano tumbled over a Jonas Olsson challenge in the area and picked himself up to win a battle of wits with Carson” (Daily Mail, Manchester City–West Bromwich Albion) is described by another as “Jonas Olsson stupidly tripped Elano in the box and the Brazilian got up to restore City’s lead from the spot” (Daily Star, Manchester City–West Bromwich Albion), each description making the reader interpret the events slightly differently.

Using structural metaphors is another way of encouraging different interpretations. By describing the action taking place in terms of something else, be it animal behaviour or warfare, the writer can focus on certain aspects of what is happening. Goatly calls this function “decoration, disguise and hyperbole” (1997:158). He writes how metaphors can be used “to dress up concepts in pretty, attention-grabbing, or concealing clothes” (1997:159). Looking back at the example above, it is possible to conclude that one journalist aims at Elano’s clumsiness, while the other focuses on Olsson’s stupidity.
2.3.3 Coherence

The journalist can also form a more coherent narrative of the different aspects of the game by linking them in a metaphorical way. It is obvious that more takes place during a match than would be possible to write about, at least under the circumstances a newspaper offers. The writer needs to choose what to report on and weave these bits together. Metaphors can undoubtedly help here by forming connections between actions that might not otherwise be connected. Lakoff and Johnson describe this phenomenon as the “creation of similarity”, and point out how new metaphors can make us focus on certain similarities that might have been less obvious before (1980:148).

3 Summary and conclusion

As indicated in the results section, it is clear that the initial assumption of football commentary containing a great deal of metaphor must be considered valid. It is difficult to say that there is a single source domain that most metaphors come from, but the source domains that have been called physical fight, military conflict and animal behaviour here seem to be the domains that contribute most metaphors each. Further, all three kinds of metaphors commonly recognised, i.e. orientational, ontological and structural metaphors, occurred in the match reports investigated. In the present material, orientational metaphors are used to describe, for instance, victory, ontological metaphors are employed to describe victory, and also football itself, while structural metaphors, which are the most numerous here, are used to describe almost any kind of event that is deemed worthy to include in the report. Particularly prominent, however, is how structural metaphor is used in describing actions that take place between players on the field.

Metaphors are often quite intricate, and it is unlikely that their function is to simply describe what has taken place. Rather, it seems as if metaphors are used to turn those facts of what has happened into writing that appeals to the reader, by choosing some of the events and forming a coherent description of the match in this way. By doing this, the journalist also has the opportunity to provide his or her own interpretation of the facts.
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