The XYZs of Creative Name-Calling

Why the most unique individuals often make the best categories

The words we use to name categories are often quite distinct from the words we use to name the individual members of those categories. So, "golfer" names a category of golf players and "Tiger Woods" denotes just one individual (albeit a prominent one) in this category. However, when it comes to enforcing the logical distinctions between categories and their members, language operates a well-oiled revolving door. In this chapter we consider the enigmatically-named XYZ construct, and explore the ways in which it allows a speaker to turn prominent members of a category into new and vibrant categories in their own right.

Raising The Dead, Burying The Living

Creativity often exploits what is hidden in plain sight, and the most obvious insight can sometimes yield a truly devastating remark. The most memorable put-down in the history of American politics, at least of the televised era, made a virtue of the blindingly obvious in precisely this way. During the 1988 U.S. vice-presidential debates, in which Republican Dan Quayle debated Democrat Lloyd Bentsen on live TV, Quayle responded to criticisms of his tender young age (at least when compared to the well-seasoned Bentsen) by noting that he possessed as much political experience as another young contender, John F. Kennedy, when he first ran for the presidency in 1960. Bentsen saw his opening, and replied as follows:

> "Senator, I served with Jack Kennedy. I knew Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy"

Bentsen didn't eject Quayle from the garden of Camelot with a simple refutation of the form "*you're not X*". Rather, he carefully and craftily constructed a measured AAB structure (or, more accurately in this case, an AAAB structure) that artfully built up to a

rhetorical crescendo. In the AAA part of his delivery, Bentsen established his credentials to act as a judge in all matters JFK, and then, sitting in judgment, used his B to deliver a damning verdict on Quayle. Note how each successive A serves to strengthen the relationship between Bentsen and John F. Kennedy: not only did they work together, and not only did they know each other, they were *friends* no less! Bentsen succeeds in snatching the mantle of Camelot back from Quayle, and does it in such a way that it actually seems to rest most naturally on Bentsen's own shoulders.

Out-manoeuvred by the older man, a dismayed Quayle could only complain about the unfairness of it all. Here, briefly, is the exchange that followed Bentsen's zinger:

Quayle: That was really uncalled for, Senator.

Bentsen: You're the one that was making the comparison, Senator — and I'm one who knew him well.

So who was really in the right here? Bentsen's retort was rhetorically masterful, to be sure, but was it *fair*? Could Quayle validly claim to be the victim of a sucker-punch? In fact, they were both right, though in different ways.

Quayle had compared himself to Kennedy using a simile with very narrow terms of reference – each, he claimed, had the same experience in the senate, so any criticism of Quayle *on this score* was also a criticism of Kennedy. No explicit identification with Kennedy had been uttered, nor, the wounded Quayle implies, sought. However, even the most narrow comparison with a historical personage as luminous as JFK will inevitably leak some of the vehicle's warm glow onto its topic, just as a comparison with Richard Nixon would undoubtedly cast an unwanted shadow. Hubris is fatal for a politician on the rise, and Quayle could hardly identify himself directly with Kennedy, yet he could subtly place the possibility of identification in the minds of the audience. Quayle was exploiting the tendency of even the most literal similes to figuratively say more than is logically defensible. Here are the pieces of a potent metaphor, Quayle told his audience: now you do the work of putting them together for me, to think what I cannot overtly say. Who knows? Quayle's ploy may even have worked, had Bentsen not recognized the danger

and moved quickly to neutralize it.

There was little point in Bentsen disputing the factual and rather uncontroversial basis of Quayle's overt comparison. Rather, he needed to undermine the implied metaphor lurking beneath the innocent-sounding simile. His crushing retort was entirely accurate, both in terms of its own factual content and in its understanding of Quayle's true communicative intent, yet it was not entirely gentlemanly or "proper". The put-down "*Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy*" was not licensed by anything that Quayle had actually said, but merely by something that an ungenerous listener might accurately suspect. Bentsen briefly shattered the pretence of gentlemanly discourse on which televised political debates are founded, and in the words of Erving Goffman, performed an "accurately improper act" to "pierce the sleeve of immediate reality". No wonder Quayle looked so deflated as the air rushed out of his presumption of JFK-like qualities.

We see in the Quayle-Bentsen exchange two different but creative kinds of *name-calling*. Quayle used a simile to suggest a metaphor as a politically-sound way of calling himself "*another John F. Kennedy*". Bentsen attacks the metaphor directly, to assuredly eject Quayle from the category of JFK-like politicians, and to exile him to the category of JFK-pretenders. Quayle and Bentsen each invoke JFK as an individual and as a category of skilled politicians. Quayle does so implicitly, while Bentsen is more explicit, using a tell-tale "no" instead of a "not" in "*you are* no *Jack Kennedy*" to imagine a whole breed of JFKs. In this chapter we'll dig deeper into this intriguing phenomenon, in which the names of prominent individuals are turned into creative new categories in their own right.

Sticks and Stones and the Bones of Creative Comparisons

Though sometimes childish, name-calling is often the most evocative route to a concise description. Bob Dylan's decision to embrace an electric sound back in 1965 was controversial among folk traditionalists, and led to some memorable name-calling. In recordings of a Dylan concert at the Free Trade Hall in Manchester, an emotional audience member can clearly be heard to shout "*Judas!*" just as Dylan and his band are about to launch into an electric version of *Like a Rolling Stone*. Dylan's responds by

telling his band to play the song even louder. The incident is memorable not because it is original or particularly creative – the name "Judas" has long moonlighted with a secondary figurative sense of "traitor" in our cultural lexicons – but because of its timing, the fact that it was recorded for posterity, and because of its undiminished potency as an insult. Judas Iscariot has come to represent the very model of the vile, deceitful back-stabber, someone who will sell out even a close friend for monetary gain. Judas was an apostle who betrayed his spiritual leader *and* his god. Many Dylan fans worship Bob Dylan as a musical deity in his own right, but it is more likely the malcontent in Manchester was criticizing Dylan for betraying the muse of traditional folk music, a deity for whom Dylan was viewed both as high-priest and chief apostle. Of course, it is possible to read too much into this, since "Judas" is simply a colourful way of saying "traitor", much as "Quisling" has become an emotive way of saying "collaborator". Yet these names carry even more baggage than the lexical categories we substitute them for, and much of this baggage is analogical in nature. Even a simple reading of "*Judas!*" begs the question "who is being betrayed, and how is the Biblical story relevant?". So "Judas!" is more than a nasty epithet; it is a Biblical analogy that has been tightly compressed into a linguistic spitball, to be fired at will from a verbal pea-shooter.

As Douglas Hofstadter has noted, a range of different names are used as compressed analogies in this way. For instance, we might describe an amorous colleague as a "Romeo" or a stern taskmaster as a "Stalin" or a "Hitler. Not all name-calling is insulting, and we might naturally describe a young person with precocious musical abilities as a "Mozart", or someone of obvious intelligence as an "Einstein". This kind of name-calling is often influenced by physical appearances, so it can be more apt to describe a small and pushy bore as a "Napoleon" rather than a "Stalin". During the Dreyfus affair in 19th-century France, Alfred Dreyfus was labelled a "Judas" not just because he was considered, unfairly, to be a traitor, but because he was a Jew. Indeed, in some important respects, it was the availability of "Judas" as a popular epithet that reinforced the apparent logic of viewing Jews as potential betrayers. Yet while such names can serve as compressed similes, they are also essentially analogical: for every "Romeo" there is a "Juliet", for every "Judas" there is a "Jesus", and for every "Sherlock" there is a puzzle to be solved or an insight to be reached. Some contexts of use will support richer analogical

readings than others; in some, "Romeo" will simply describe an over-sexed chaser of girls, in others a genuinely star-crossed young lover whose object of desire comes from a different family or social class. Therein lies the real power of these names. They can be used as stretchy *one-size-fits-all* analogies that grow to fit whatever context we choose.

For Hofstadter, analogy is a kind of unplanned insight, something that happens all the time because our brains are tireless pattern matchers. As such, it arises from that feeling of recognition we get whenever a new situation is strikingly similar to a past experience. To paraphrase Hofstadter in the words of Yogi Berra, analogy is déjà vu all over again. There were no acoustic diehards in the garden of Gethsemane, but "*Judas!*" is still appropriate in a Dylan context because his adoption of counter-traditional instruments can make purists feel as angry as they feel (or think they should feel) when they remember the story of Judas. So these names seem apt when used in a new context because the new context reminds us of previous emotive experiences with the same name. But some names are just more suitable as brickbats than others, and not every name with analogical potential can be conveniently hurled at our opponents. Though we can call lovestruck young men "Romeo" and know that everyone will take our meaning, the name "Juliet" is not so usable as an epithet for lovestruck girls, even though its use follows obviously from the Shakespearean analogy. Other evocative names occupy an uneasy middle ground: they may seem apt, and even erudite, but it just doesn't seem right to hurl them about the place as labels. Even if Dylan was a famous procrastinator, and spent tedious amounts of time deciding on the next song to play, it would still sound exceedingly odd if someone in the audience were to shout out "*Hamlet!*", no matter how justified they might feel. Some names are virtual expletives in their own right, others fit neatly into the accusatory pattern "*you X!*", and others need a little more linguistic support to work as name-calling. "*Hamlet!*" is decidedly odd, but "*get a move on, Hamlet*" can work in some contexts.

We need dedicated linguistic support to wring the full analogical potential from evocative names. Only a small number of names come ready-fitted with a sense that denotes a famous individual (fictional, historical, or otherwise) *and* a sense that denotes the open-ended category of beings who share key properties with this eponymous

individual. Fortunately, when we need to go beyond the set of broadly judgmental categories that come with a language as standard, such as "fool", "master", "genius" and "leader", there are linguistic structures whose job it is to turn named individuals into fine-grained semantic categories or *brands*. Lloyd Bentsen used "*no Jack Kennedy*" to simultaneously turn JFK into a category of gifted politicians and to close the doors to this category with the resounding "no". Alternately, it is possible to describe Roger Federer as "*another Bjorn Borg*" and Tiger Woods as "*another Arnold Palmer*" or even "*another Muhammad Ali*". The use of "another" here turns a one-off individual into a recurring category of individuals, whether people, places or things; thus we can say that "*Iraq is another Vietnam*", that "*the EU is another Roman Empire*" and even that "*Avatar is another Dances With Wolves*". Or we might say that "*Tiger Woods is the Michael Jordan of Golf*", which uses the subtleties of "the" and "of" to suggest that there is more than one Michael Jordan, and that perhaps each sport has its own version of this iconic sportsman.

This latter structure is what linguists call an XYZ construct, in which an entity X is described as a member of the category Y in the context of Z. In effect, Y can serve multiple roles in an XYZ construct; it typically denotes both a relation between X and Z, as in "*Ben Bernanke is the* head *of the Federal Reserve*", and a category to which X belongs, as in "*French is the* language *of diplomacy*". XYZs are most creative when Y suggests a metaphorical relationship between X and Z, as in "*Einstein is the* father *of the atom bomb*" or "*necessity is the* mother *of invention*". Of the figurative fillers for Y, proper-named individuals are amongst the most interesting, and looking to the web we find wonderful examples such as "*Barack Obama is the Roger Federer of the press conference*" and "*Britney Spears is the Michael Jordan of pop music*". Let's look at a wider selection of the figurative XYZs that can be found on the web:

Paris Hilton is the Zsa Zsa Gabor of the 21st Century

Victoria Williams is the Yoko Ono of the folk scene

Chris Manion is the Woody Guthrie of the right

Qifa Nabki is the Winston Churchill of the Islamic Resistance

Nick Denton is the William Randolph Hearst of the blog world

Pdq Bach is the Weird Al Yankovich of the classical music world

David Wetherell is the Warren Buffet of the internet

Steve Jobs is the Walt Disney of the tech world

Ben Bernanke is the Tony Robbins of the financial world

Newt Gingrich is the Trotsky of the Hard Right

Roger L'Estrange is the Torquemada of the late Stuart age

David Cameron is the Tony Blair of the conservative party

Michael Jordan is the Tony Hawk of the basketball world

Milton Caniff is the Rembrandt of the comics

Scipio Africanus is the Tommy Franks of the Roman legions

Peter Brett is the Tolstoy of the F train

Daniel Melingo is the Tom Waits of the contemporary tango

Shahruhk Khan is the Tom Cruise of the Bollywood Industry

Edward Abbey is the Thoreau of the desert

June Wanniski is the Thomas Paine of the Reagan revolution

Bill Gates is the Thomas Edison of the tech industry

Nicholas Sparks is the Stephen King of the mush-brained romantic novel

Like similes, XYZs are syntactically marked and are easily recognized from their linguistic form, so they are just as easily harvested in large numbers from the texts of the web. XYZs also combine interesting properties from the full range of creative devices, marrying the assertiveness of metaphor, the pinpoint selectivity of analogy and the imaginative power of blends in a single linguistic form. The most creative XYZs also exhibit the same tendency for asymmetry as creative metaphors. While "Roger Federer" and "Tiger Woods" are almost always interchangeable for figurative purposes, we get laughable results if we reverse "*Britney Spears is the Michael Jordan of pop music*" to form "*Michael Jordan is the Britney Spears of basketball*". The key to this asymmetry is the same salience imbalance we observed earlier in similes. Michael Jordan is a towering

figure in the sport of basketball, both literally and metaphorically. He commands the respect of most of his sporting peers and a great many fans, and as psychologist Andrew Ortony might say, *mastery, dominance* and *professionalism* are extremely salient aspects of our common conceptualization of Michael Jordan. An XYZ that describes Britney in terms of Michael allows us to transfer these salient properties to a target for which they seem not in the least salient. Yet the comparison works because we are willing to believe that, behind her tabloid persona, Spears has mastered her craft and commands the respect of fellow professionals, on a commercial level at least. But invert this XYZ and an entirely different set of properties is transferred in the opposite direction, properties that are salient for Britney and not for Michael, such as *girly*, *tacky*, *sultry*, and perhaps even *unhinged*. Ortony's notion of salience imbalance means that even if it makes sense to invert a creative comparison, it will make sense in a very different way.

So as one might expect, the source-domain individual (the Y) is almost always more well-known than the target-domain individual (the X). As with similes and metaphors, figurative XYZs typically employ Ys with well-established salient properties to highlight the same properties in Xs for which they are not so established or salient. This proves to be the key to harvesting large numbers of figurative XYZs from the web, since we can expect the most useful Ys to find themselves reused with greater frequency. Looking to the Google n-grams of common text sequences on the web, we first identify n-grams of the form "*the <NAME> of the*", where *<NAME>* is either a single-word name (like "Rembrandt" or "Mozart") or a double-word name (like "Walt Disney"). These names can be used to anchor search queries for the web at large. Given the name "Rembrandt", for instance, we generate the query *"* is the Rembrandt of the *"* and send this to Google, in the hopes that the * wildcards will net a bounty of figurative X / Z pairings.

As with our earlier experiences of mining figurative comparisons from the web, this process is akin to panning for gold: even when we know where to look and bring the right tools, we still have to sift through an awful lot of muck to find the nuggets of gold. In all, we trawl over 60,000 Google snippets, and use automated analysis to pare these down to about 10,000 before we manually throw away those that are not well-formed (e.g., where the X is not a proper name) or where the XYZ is not used figuratively. This eventually

yields a corpus of 2190 unique XYZs in which Y is a proper-named individual that is figuratively used to denote a whole category of analogically-similar things. As expected, the most frequent source-domain Ys are all prominent individuals with well established propensities and abilities. Figure 1 shows the 20 most frequently recurring Ys among these 2190 figurative XYZs. Though the 2,190 examples in the corpus use a collective total of 668 different source individuals in the Y position, the 20 most frequent Ys account for about 10% of the whole collection.

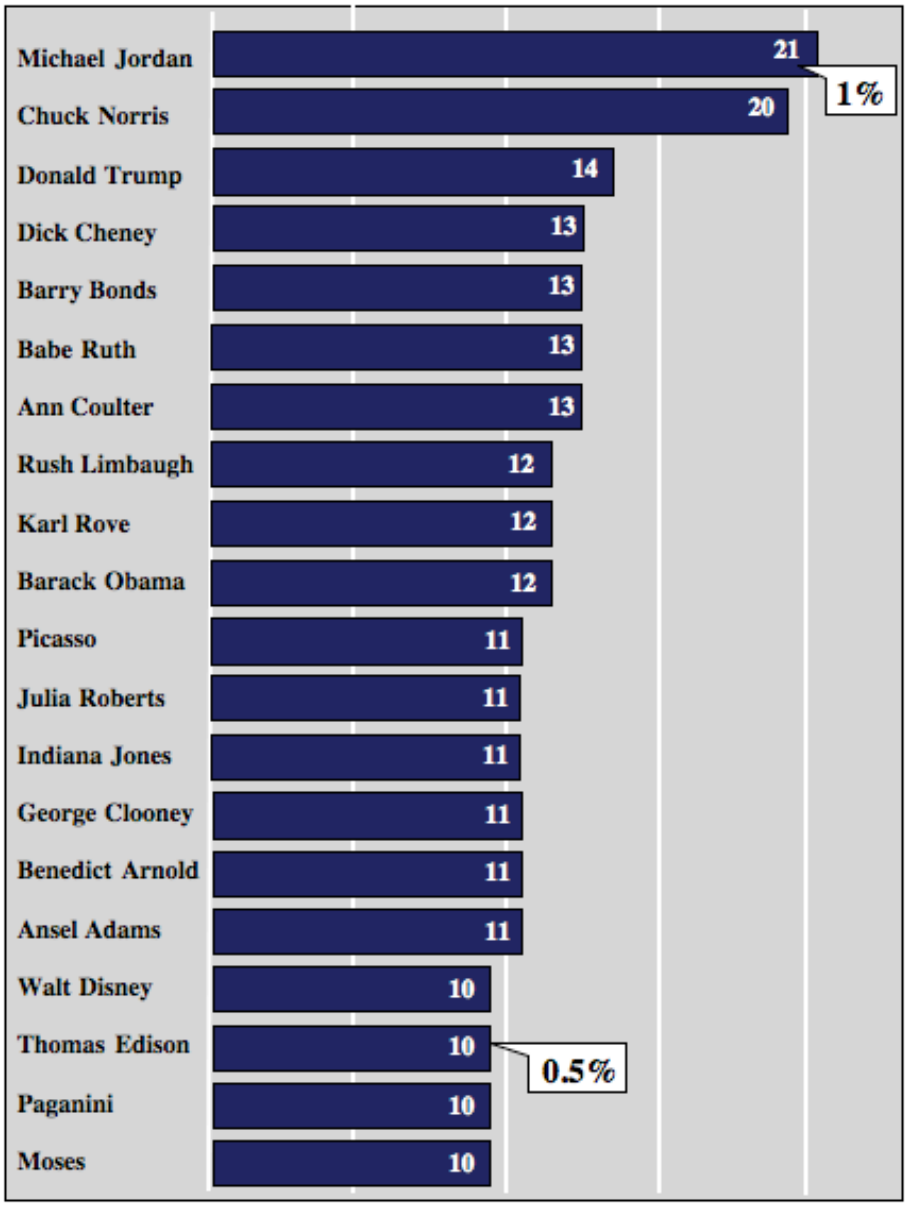

Figure 1. *The twenty most popular source-domain individuals (Y's) in XYZ constructs.*

We see a range of individual-types in this top 20 selection that is broadly representative of the corpus as a whole, from historical figures to fictional figures to artists, musicians, actors, politicians and sportsmen. These individuals are ciphers for some commonly ascribed properties: Benedict Arnold, for instance, stands for any individual who is traitorous or just plain fickle about which side to support; Rush Limbaugh can stand for any political loud-mouth with partisan views; and Chuck Norris, an expressionless actor who is lampooned relentlessly on the internet, exemplifies the class of single-minded unreflective individuals with bark instead of skin.

As one who occupies the pinnacle of his chosen sport, Michael Jordan has become a role model for strivers in any sport, and some non-sports besides. Here are the twenty-one Xs that are compared to Jordan in our corpus (with corresponding Zs in parentheses):

> *Manny Pacquiao* (Philippines), *Andrew Gaze* (NBL), *Chet Snouffer* (boomerang), *Garry Kasparov* (chess), *Mwadi Mabika* (WNBA), *Vince Young* (NFL), *Pádraig Harrington* (golf), *Tiger Woods* (golf), *Randy Couture* (martial arts), *Daryll Pomey* (Philippines), *Tony Hawk* (skateboarding), *Champ Hallett* (wheelchair basketball), *David Berg* (courtroom), *Bronwyn Weber* (cakes), *Michael Chabon* (literary), *the tuna sandwich* (mid-day meal), *Billy Bob Thornton* (movies), *Ralph Appelbaum* (museums), *Allan Bloom* (seminars), *Britney Spears* (pop), *Randall Ross* (rare books)

Some targets are closer than others, and most are themselves sportsmen. The closest are basketball players from other leagues (the NBL and the WNBA) and of another gender (Mwadi Mabika). But Jordan is a model of excellence for any competitive endeavour, and has leadership qualities that even tuna lovers can apparently find inspirational.

Let's look at the 20 most frequently used domain descriptions (the Zs) in the web corpus. Stripping out support words like "world", "genre", "domain" and "industry" to reduce a domain description to its essential core, we arrive at the top-20 of Figure 2. The corpus contains 1312 different Zs, yet this top 20 accounts for 367 different examples, or more than 16% of the corpus. Once again we find the same conceptual diversity in the top tier, which includes times (the 21st and 20th centuries proving most popular), geographic locations (North, South, East and West are all in the top 20), sports and sports

organizations (the NBA, NFL and NHL), politics and political parties (the Republicans getting an additional boost from the inclusion of the GOP) and political orientations (left versus right), as well as art, music and gaming.

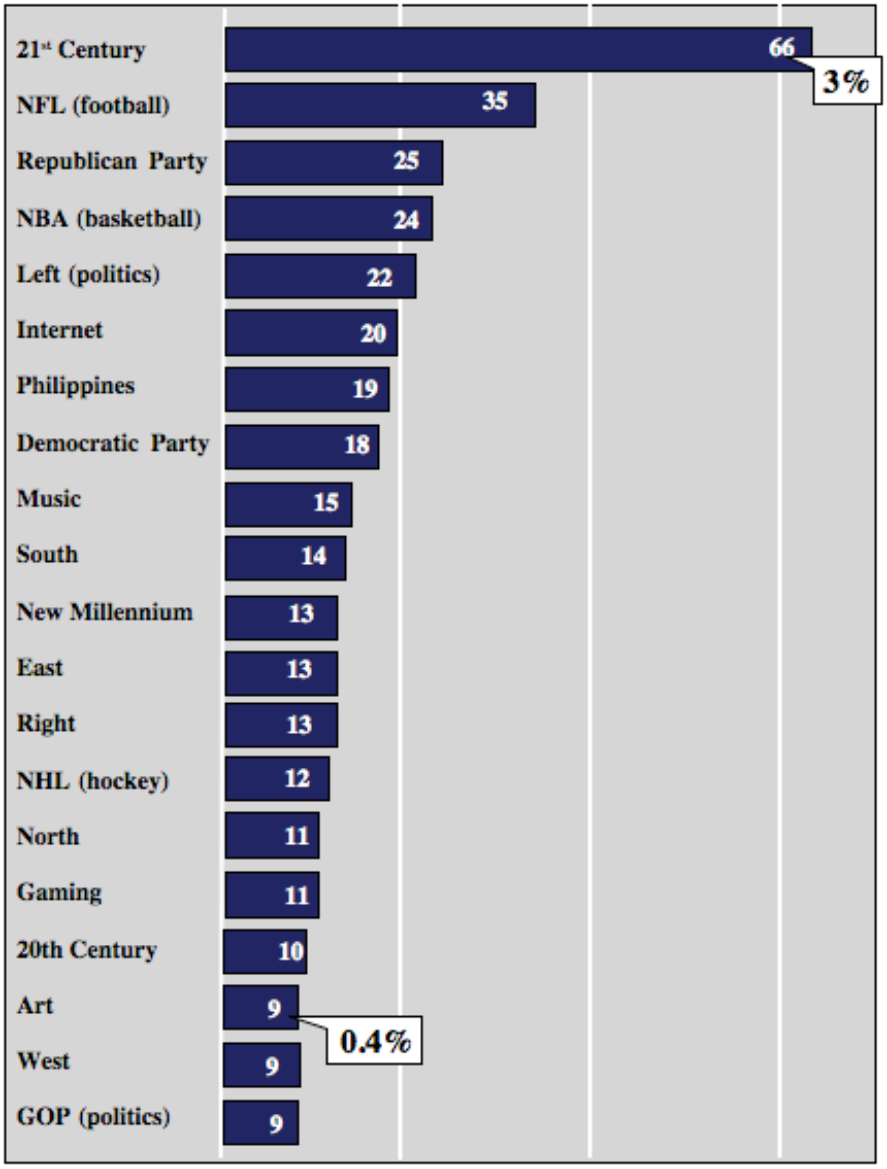

Figure 2. *The twenty most popular target-domain descriptions (Z's) in XYZ constructs. The numbers shown are raw frequency counts in the corpus, and not overall percentages.*

To get a bird's-eye view of the different kinds of individuals that can fill the Y position (i.e., the source concept position) in figurative XYZs, we annotate the Y filler of all 2190 examples with one of the following domain labels: *Politics, Music, Art, ShowBiz,*

Military, Crime, Business, Religion, Sport, Comedy, Culture, Drama, Science. It is not possible to choose a set of domains that are truly mutually exclusive, but this set of 13 labels does a good job of capturing the diversity of the corpus with an acceptable level of generality. *ShowBiz*, for instance, covers real individuals who work on TV, the stage, or in movies, while *Business* covers the worlds of commerce, finance and industry. In contrast, *Drama* is used to annotate fictitious characters who appear in movies, books or other narrative forms. *Culture* is used to annotate individuals that represent different ethnic or social groups. Figure 3 shows the breakdown of source concepts according to this labelling scheme.

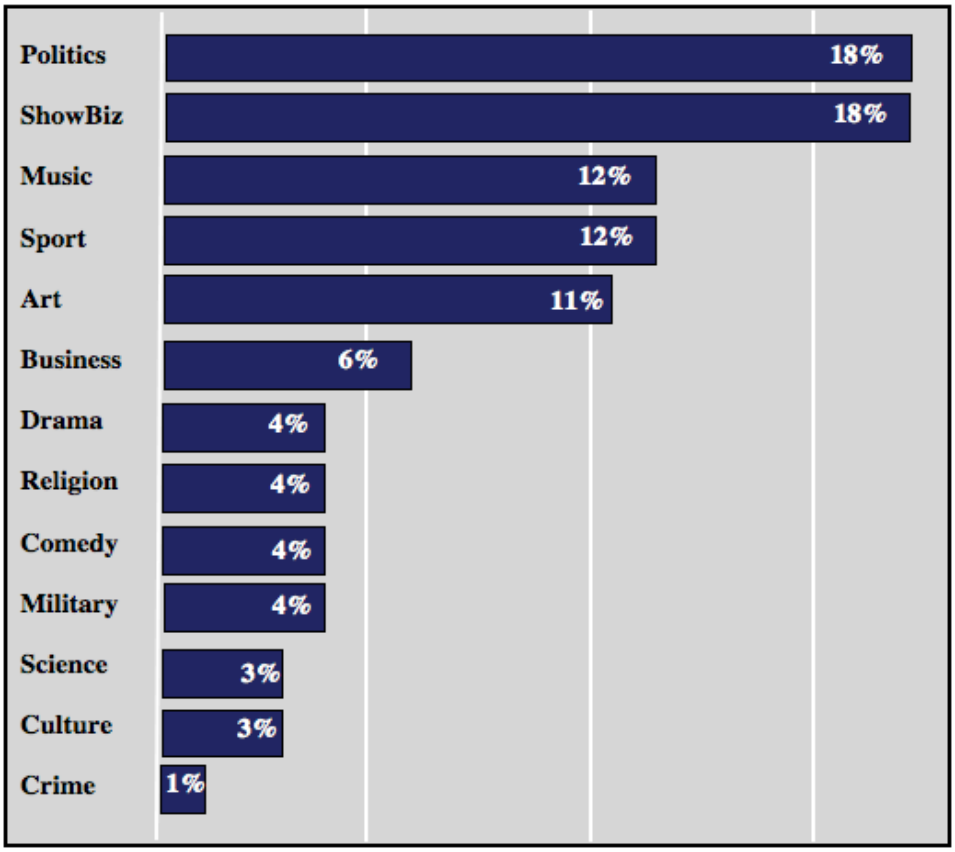

Figure 3. *Distribution of different source domains in our sample of XYZ expressions*.

Two source domains share the top spot: *Politics* and *ShowBiz* each represent 18% of the corpus. *ShowBiz* provides our modern celebrity-obsessed culture with some of its most recognizable icons, while *Politics* provides some of its most topical and partisan

figureheads. If we group *ShowBiz, Music, Sport, Art, Comedy* and *Drama* into a single category, called *Entertainment* say, we can see that the world of entertainment accounts for over 60% of the source concepts in figurative XYZs on the web.

When we likewise annotate all of the target concepts in the corpus (the Xs) with the same set of domain labels, we get a sense of the kinds of individuals that XYZs are most used to describe. Figure 4 shows the distribution of target domains that emerges.

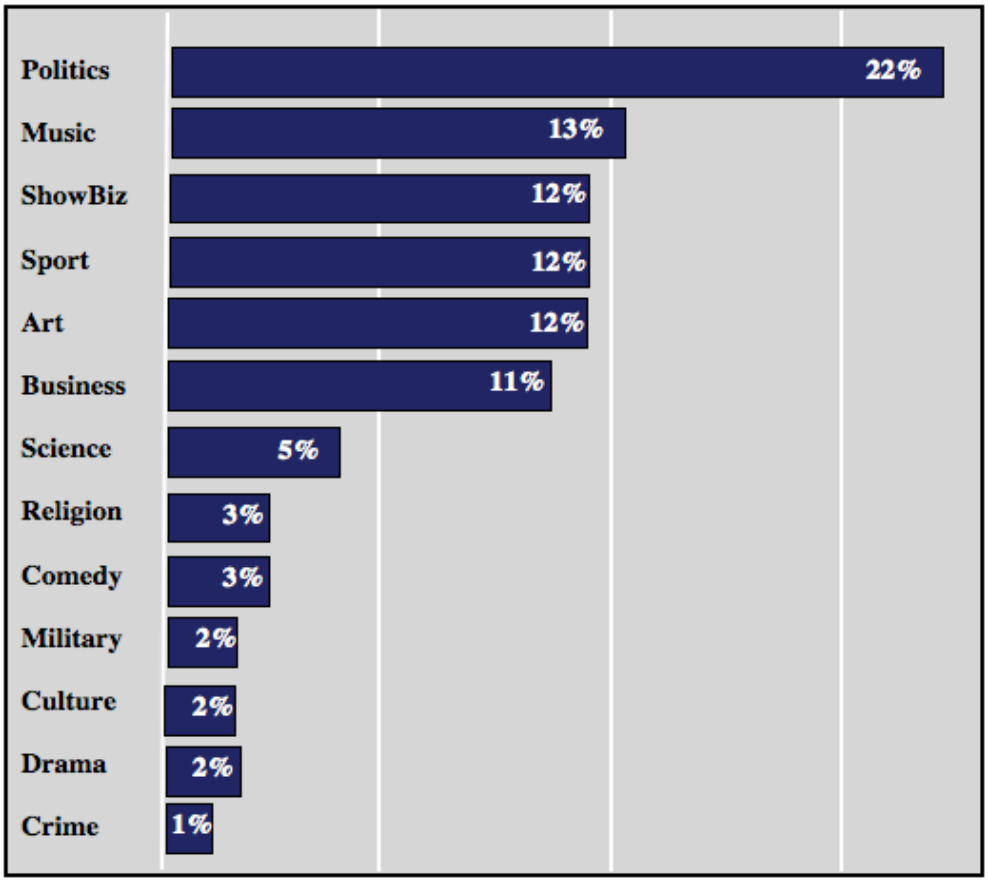

Figure 4. *Distribution of different target domains in our sample of XYZ expressions.*

Politics is the clear winner here, representing more than a fifth of the individuals that are described by figurative XYZs on the web. The internet has become an increasingly politicized space, and hosts many outlets for voters to voice their concerns, for pundits to pitch their peculiar insights and predictions, and for politicians to spread their message and to raise campaign funds. But most political XYZs describe politicians in terms of other political figures, and 27% (or 594) of the XYZs in our web corpus use either an X

or a Y from the *Politics* domain. Figure 5 shows the breakdown of target domains (Xs) for the 22% of XYZs that use a political figure as a source concept (Y).

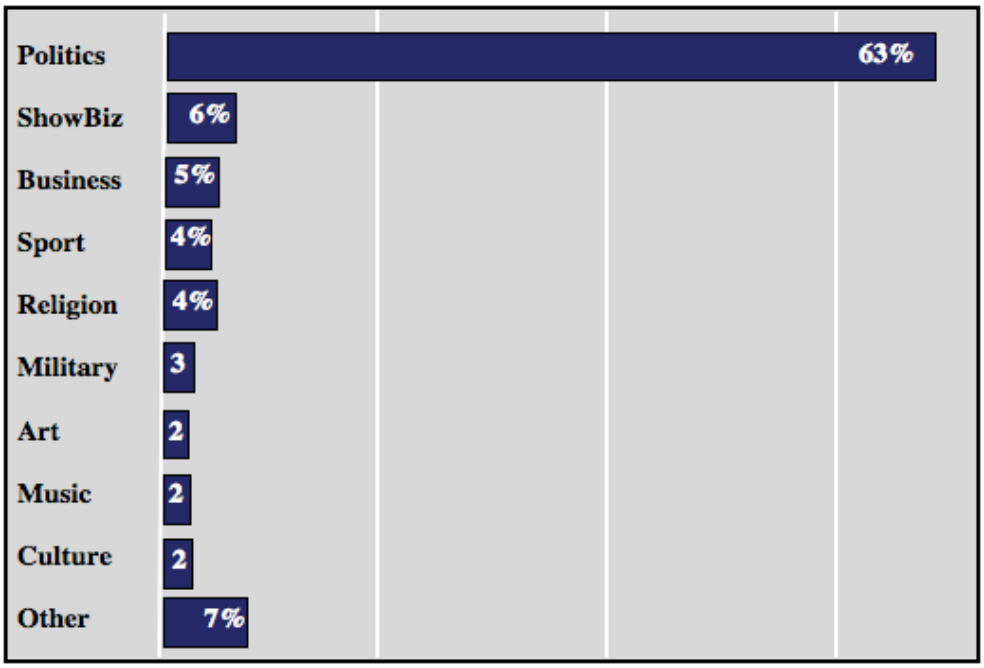

Figure 5. *Distribution of different X domains for XYZs with a Political Y concept.*

But another category of individuals dominates our XYZ corpus to a much greater extent, a category that cross-cuts all other semantic domains. It turns our that these web XYZs are remarkably male-centric, with very few female concepts on either side of the equation. Figure 6 shows the breakdown of XYZs by gender on an X-to-Y basis.

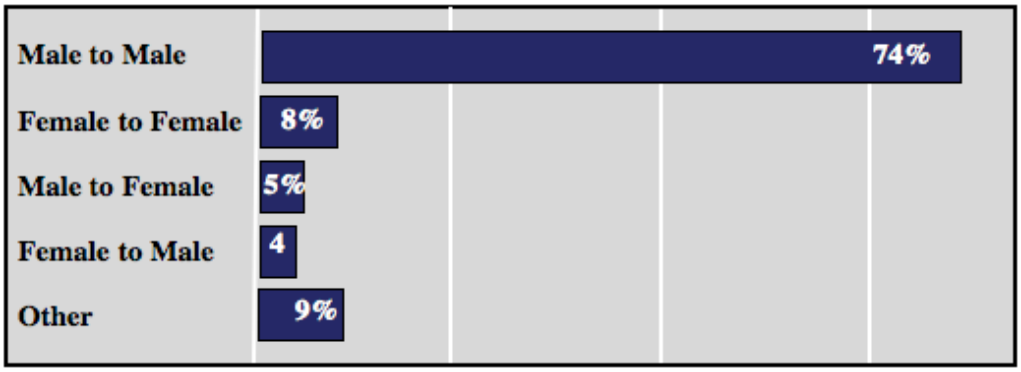

Figure 6. *Breakdown of source-to-target mappings by gender of the mapped entities. Other denotes expressions where either the source or the target has no obvious gender.*

It certainly is a man's world, for XYZs at least, and though just 9% of our corpus involve cross-gender XYZs, there are more females in these comparisons than there are in the pure female-to-female cases. Figurative comparisons can bridge large semantic gaps between domains, but gender appears to be a bridge too far for most comparisons.

Most of our XYZs involve individuals from the real world, and so very few exploit fictional characters in either a source or target capacity. However, in XYZs that do draw upon the world of fiction, fictional sources are four times more likely than fictional targets, and as shown in Figure 7, a small percentage of XYZ expressions employ fictional sources *and* fictional targets.

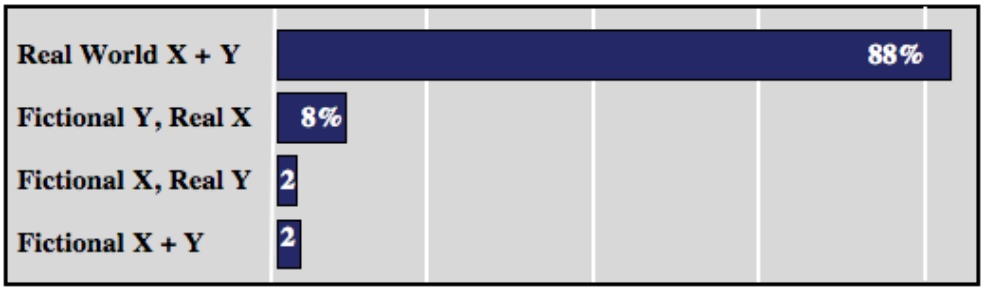

Figure 7. *Breakdown of source and target entities by fictional status*.

You might think it impossible to hurt the feelings of a fictional character, but the web XYZ "*Bruce Wayne is the Donald Trump of the DC universe*" comes close. One is certainly as rich as the other, though Batman might have trouble squeezing Trump's meringue-shaped hair into his cowl. A web XYZ that describes a real person in terms of a fictional entity is "*Jann Wenner is the Charles Foster Kane of the baby boomers*". Wenner, the founder and publisher of *Rolling Stone* magazine, might just as easily be compared to William Randolph Hearst, the real-world newspaper magnate on which *Citizen Kane* was based. More flatteringly, the corpus reveals that Warren Buffet is considered by some to be "*the Sherlock Holmes of the stock market*", while right-wing FOX news host Glen Beck has been called "*the Homer Simpson of the airwaves*". Since the same heroic archetypes continually resurface in popular culture, one fictional character will sometimes be compared to another, as in "*Allan Quatermain is the Indiana Jones of the Victorian age*" and "*Jack Sparrow is the Han Solo of the Caribbean*".

We have seen that *Political* source concepts are most commonly used to describe *Political* targets. To better estimate the tendency of figurative XYZs to align concepts from the same general domains, we need to look at the big picture across all XYZs in our web corpus. Figure 8 presents the likelihood of each domain-to-domain configuration.

	Politics	Music	Art	ShowBiz	Business	Crime	Military	Sport	Comedy	Religion	Science	Culture	Drama
Politics	296	10	14	30	25	1	15	22	4	20	10	10	4
Music	22	196	19	24	14	0	1	21	3	5	6	0	4
Art	10	24	177	15	17	0	0	14	3	4	5	1	2
ShowBiz	43	40	37	170	42	2	0	34	27	9	10	9	14
Business	14	5	9	9	87	0	0	15	0	0	14	2	4
Crime	6	1	2	0	5	9	0	3	1	2	4	2	0
Military	46	1	9	2	10	0	32	3	1	5	4	0	0
Sport	15	20	3	24	22	1	2	153	9	4	7	1	3
Comedy	18	5	5	8	7	1	0	12	28	3	1	1	3
Religion	34	6	2	4	8	2	3	4	1	26	4	5	0
Science	6	1	5	2	12	2	1	4	1	4	46	5	1
Culture	13	6	3	10	7	0	1	0	1	1	2	18	2
Drama	19	9	6	10	25	2	2	15	2	3	2	8	21

Figure 8. *Mappings of source domains (rows) to target domains (columns). Each row is a different source domain for a Y, each column a different target domain for an X.*

Each position in Figure 8 specifies the number of examples with a Y from a given source domain that are used to describe an X in the corresponding target domain. So, for instance, we see that 34 of our XYZs with a Y from the *Religion* domain are used to describe a target X from the *Politics* domain, yet more evidence of the unfortunate intermingling of these two areas of human affairs. However, in XYZ terms, the case of *Religion* is something of an exception to the rule: as highlighted in Figure 8, the highest

numbers are typically located on the diagonal, indicating a certain conservatism of mapping in XYZs. In all but three cases – namely *Religion* to *Politics*, *Military* to *Politics*, and *Drama* to *Business* – the X in a figurative XYZ is more likely to belong to the same general domain as Y than it is to belong to any other domain.

Nonetheless, even when X and Y reside in the same general domain, the Z component still has considerable latitude in deciding on what aspects of X and Y should be compared. For instance, some XYZs focus on mapping a tool or an instrument used by Y to a corresponding tool used by X, as in these examples from our web corpus:

Louis Lot is the Stradivarius of the flute

Ali Wood is the Pavarotti of the piano

Nitsuga Mangore is the Paganini of the guitar

For purposes of analysis, we can designate these XYZs as *ToolToTool* mappings. Other XYZs map an organization in the source domain to a corresponding organization in the target domain, as when Vince Young is described as "*the Michael Jordan of the NFL*" and the NFL is implicitly mapped to the NBA. We can designate these XYZs as *OrgToOrg* mappings. When one political figure is compared to another on the far side of the left/right divide, we designate the mapping as *SideToSide*. When an XYZ identifies a target as the equivalent of the source concept in a given time frame, the mapping is designated *TimeToTime*. When a target is identified as the equivalent of the source in another geographic location, the mapping is designated *PlaceToPlace*, but when two different cultures are aligned (as in "*Maurice Schwartz is the Olivier of the Yiddish stage*"), the mapping is designated *CultureToCulture*. A mapping is designated *GenreToGenre* whenever two actors or musicians or artists or fictional characters are identified as equivalent across different genres (as in "*Gil Evgren is the Norman Rockwell of cheesecake*"). When two artists are said to be equivalent across different mediums, as in "*John Buscema is the Michelangelo of the comics*", the mapping is designated *MediumToMedium*. When two businessmen are said to produce comparable products for different markets, the mapping is designated *MarketToMarket*. Finally, when two individuals are compared because they pursue different but alignable activities, as in

"*Garry Kasparov is the Michael Jordan of the chess world*", the mapping is designated *ActivityToActivity* (e.g., because it implies that chess is comparable to basketball).

Again, this system of categories is anything but perfect, but even a rough-and-ready system should allow us to do some basic analysis on the contribution of the Z component to figurative XYZs. Figure 9 shows which kinds of mappings are most often employed in our corpus of web examples.

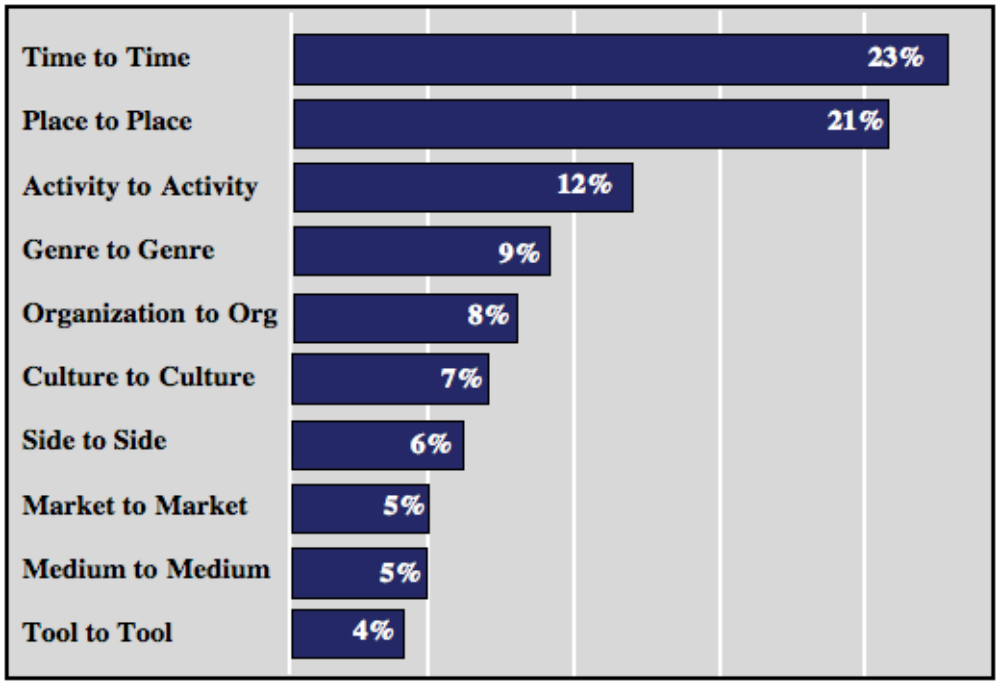

Figure 9. *Breakdown of XYZ comparisons by the aspect of each concept that is mapped*.

So the lion's share of XYZs in our web corpus align two individuals on the basis that they are similar people at different times (*TimeToTime*, 23%) or similar people from different places (*PlaceToPlace*, 21%) or cultures (*CultureToCulture*, 7%). These spatio-temporal-cultural mappings cut across all kinds of source and target domains, while other mapping types – such as *ToolToTool* or *MediumToMedium* – tend to prefer one kind of individual (such as musicians and artists) to others. As we might expect, *SideToSide* mappings are almost always found in comparisons between two political figures, and are rarely found in mappings between non-political domains.

To better appreciate the relationship between mapping types and conceptual

domains, we need to consider the likelihood that a given mapping type will occur in an XYZ where X and Y are drawn from a specific domain. To this end, Figure 10 offers a breakdown for each mapping type: each row represents a different kind of mapping, each column represents a different conceptual domain, and each numeric value is the percentage of XYZs of the given mapping type that compare two individuals in the given domain. Each row sums to 100%, and the highest value in each row – the preferred conceptual domain for a given mapping type – is highlighted. Note that these percentages are calculated from an analysis of the 1,314 XYZs in our web corpus that compare individuals from the same general domain.

	Politics	Music	Art	ShowBiz	Business	Crime	Military	Sport	Comedy	Religion	Science	Culture	Drama
TimeToTime	**28**	14	14	17	3	1	3.5	5	4	3.5	2	3	2
PlaceToPlace	**24**	13	22	14	5	1	6	5	2	2	4	0	2
GenreToGenre	2	26	26	**33**	1	1	0.5	0.5	1	1	4	1	3
CultureToCulture	**42**	7.5	5	7.5	2	1	2	3	3	9	11	4	3
MediumToMedium	15	1	**41**	15	10	1	0	0	3	0	4	3	7
ActivityToActivity	5	5	1	9	6	0	0	**70**	2	1	1	0	0
MarketToMarket	0	3	3	7	**70**	0	0	5	0	0	12	0	0
OrgToOrg	29	9	1	1	0	0	0	**59**	0	1	0	0	0
SideToSide	**93**	1	1	2.5	0	0	0	0	2.5	0	0	0	0
ToolToTool	0	**96**	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Figure 10. *Distribution of domains for each mapping type, in XYZs where X and Y belong to the same conceptual domain.*

Figure 10 shows that *Politics*-to-*Politics* comparisons are the dominant source of *TimeToTime*, *PlaceToPlace*, *CultureToCulture* and *SideToSide* mappings in our corpus. In contrast, *ActivityToActivity* and *OrgToOrg* mappings are most likely found in *Sport*-to-*Sport* comparisons, while *ToolToTool* mappings are almost always found in *Music*-to-*Music* comparisons, with a small number in the *Art*-to-*Art* domain and zero occurrences in any other kind of XYZ. But no mapping type is entirely restricted to a single domain,

and even *SideToSide*, which strongly prefers political comparisons, is found in *ShowBiz*, *Music*, *Art* and *Comedy* comparisons. This 7% minority is populated with media figures that have been politicized by their outspoken views. So we find "*Michael Moore is the Leni Riefenstahl of the Hollywood left*" and "*Max Eastman is the Byron of the left*", as well as the difficult-to-categorize "*Parker Posy is the Doris Day of the dark side*". Yet even this is a political *SideToSide* comparison, if your politics are those of a Jedi knight.

Figure 11 presents the flip-side of this distribution, showing the preferred mapping types for web XYZs in a given domain (again, X and Y are assumed to reside in the same general domain). Notice how, in 10 out of 13 cases, the most common mapping type for a given domain is either *TimeToTime* or *PlaceToPlace*. Aligning individuals across space and time is apparently the most common function of the figurative XYZ construction.

	TimeToTime	PlaceToPlace	GenreToGenre	CultureToCulture	MediumToMedium	ActivityToActivity	MarketToMarket	OrgToOrg	SideToSide	ToolToTool
Politics	**29**	23	0	10	3	2	1	9	23	0
Music	25	20	16	3	0.5	3	1	5	0.5	**26**
Art	25	**37**	17	2	15	1	1	0.5	0.5	1
ShowBiz	**33**	24	23	4	5.5	7	2	0.5	1	0
Business	13	17	2	2	8	10	**48**	0	0	0
Crime	**45.5**	36.5	9	0	9	0	0	0	0	0
Military	34	**57**	3	6	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sport	9	8	0.5	1.5	0	**50**	2	29	0	0
Comedy	**43**	17	7	10	6.5	10	0	0	6.5	0
Religion	**39**	26	0	26	0	6	0	3	0	0
Science	15	**28**	11	22	7	2	15	0	0	0
Culture	**56**	5.5	5.5	22	11	0	0	0	0	0
Drama	**30.5**	30.5	17	0	22	0	0	0	0	0

Figure 11. *Preferred mapping types (cols) when X and Y are in the same domain (rows).*

TimeToTime mappings are especially interesting since they can work in either temporal direction. For instance, one can compare a contemporary individual to a historical entity, as in "*Rupert Murdock is the William Randolph Hearst of the 21st Century*". But one can also compare a historical entity to a contemporary individual, as in "*Jefferson is the Trotsky of the 18th Century*" or "*Russ Meyer is the Tarantino of the 70's*". In one particularly bizarre example, a fictional entity of the far future is compared to a historical entity from the past, in "*Mega Man is the Walt Whitman of the 28th Century*". Overall, there is a very strong preference in XYZs for the backward-looking comparison, in which a contemporary (or future) individual is compared to a similar individual from the past. As shown in Figure 12, future-looking comparisons (such as "*Lillie Langtry is the Lindsay Lohan of the late 19th century*") account for less than one third of all *TimeToTime* mappings in our corpus of web XYZs.

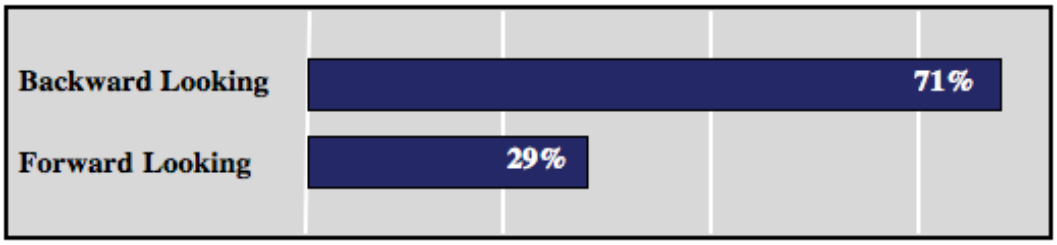

Figure 12. *Breakdown of TimeToTime comparisons according to whether they are backward-looking (X lives after Y) or forward-looking (Y lives after X).*

Let's conclude our discussion of XYZs by looking at the examples that do not yield so neatly to our analysis here. Some of the most humorous XYZs in our web corpus exploit a source individual Y to describe a non-human object, as in the following cases:

Chico's Tacos is the Willy Wonka of culinary experiences

Der Sturmer is the Rush Limbaugh of the Third Reich

The Woodland is the Rodney Dangerfield of the lineup

DSL is the Rocky Balboa of the fast-access future

File Organizer is the Rocky Balboa of the genre

Alfa Romeo is the Quentin Tarantino of the automotive world

Facebook is the Patrick Henry of the 21st Century

Apple's iThingy is the Paris Hilton of mobile phones

Chicken Inasal is the Oprah Winfrey of the menu

Nintendo is the Ned Flanders of the console world

The tuna sandwich is the Michael Jordan of the mid-day meal

Samsung DLPs are the Lindsay Lohan of the television market

Pac Man is the King Lear of the 1980's 8-bit videogame revolution

The Razr is the Kate Moss of phones

Red Lion is the Julia Roberts of the amaryllis clan

The Borgata is the Julia Roberts of casinos

Bradley's Battleship is the John Travolta of board games

Piper Cub is the Henry Ford of the aviation world

Krug is the Dorian Gray of the wine world

Red meat is the Donald Trump of cancer

Copy-protected CDs are the Dick Cheney of the music industry

Tungsten is the Cleopatra of the elements

Platinum Pro is the Chuck Norris of the editing world

The K750i is the Chuck Norris of the photography world

Toyota Prius is the Che Guevara of the [eco-friendly car] movement

The Manhattan is the Cary Grant of cocktails

Mac Mini is the Bruce Lee of the computing world

Big Bordeaux is the Barry Bonds of the wine world

The Montrachet is the Angelina Jolie of the pack [wines]

We also find the following XYZs that use people to describe an animal or a plant:

The Parrot is the Robert De Niro of the bird world

Moby Dick is the Samson of the ocean

The Blue Marlin is the Muhammad Ali of the fish world

Pit Bulls are the Mike Tyson of the K9 world

The Boxer is the George Clooney of the dog world

The Northern Pintail is the Audrey Hepburn of the duck world

Whomping Willow is the Mike Tyson of the plant kingdom

The potato is the Tom Hanks of the vegetable world

These figurative XYZs resemble similes more than analogies, since most are built around a single highly-salient property of the source concept. So, for instance, Tom Hanks is *versatile*, Rocky Balboa is *resilient*, Chuck Norris is *implacable*, Muhammad Ali is *graceful*, Kate Moss is *super-slim*, Donald Trump is *aggressive*, Angelina Jolie is *voluptuous*, Audrey Hepburn is *elegant*, Cary Grant is *sophisticated* and Rodney Dangerfield *gets no respect!* As with humorous similes, a comparison can seem flimsy and gratuitous if it aligns two very different concepts from distant parts of our conceptual systems on the basis of a single shared property, especially if this property has different meanings in the source and target domains. Such flimsiness makes it hard to take a comparison seriously, but can make it easier to recognize the humorous intent behind the comparison. As a result, we still comprehend the core message – that X has the salient property stereotypically associated with Y – while the incongruous juxtaposition gives us the added bonus of a smile. Humorous XYZs are double-edged comparisons that can cut both ways, since information inevitably flows in both directions, from Y to X (the real message) *and* from X to Y (the humorous bonus), to meet in the middle to construct a blended mental image. For instance, when we imbue the humble potato with the versatility of the actor Tom Hanks, we might imagine the different culinary uses of potatoes as the different roles that a talented potato can play in a meal. In doing so, we effectively equate Hanks with a talented potato, and slyly diminish the value of his craft.

Even flimsy XYZs have the potential to be elaborated into more complex analogies. Barry Bonds is famous as a "*big hitter*" in baseball, so any wine compared to this high-profile player might also be said to "*pack a wallop*". But Bonds has also been dogged by accusations of doping, and these allegations can transfer to the wine domain as suspicions

of chemical adulteration. Consider the comparison "*Red meat is the Donald Trump of cancer*", which reads like a puzzle that does not want to give up its meaning too easily. We know, for instance, that Donald Trump is a famously aggressive property tycoon, and that cancer is scariest when it spreads aggressively. We also know that aggressive predators tend to be voracious consumers of red meat, but these two puzzle pieces refuse to click together. Something is missing, and the meaning only becomes clear when we look to the explanatory text in which the original author imbeds the XYZ. She notes that since red meat has been implicated in the development of many different kinds of cancer, it can be metaphorically categorized as an aggressive and opportunistic builder of cancers. So "the Donald", who is the very model of an aggressive and opportunistic property developer, perfectly fills the Y role in this XYZ. As with the humorous similes we considered in an earlier chapter (remember Jerry Seinfeld's enigmatic description of George Carlin as "*a train hobo with a chicken bone*"?), humorous XYZs provide attention-grabbing mental imagery but do not always wear their meanings plainly on their sleeves. Yet their humour is scarcely diminished by having to explain these meanings; rather, the imagery and the explanation play complementary roles in a text, with the former serving as a sturdy and memorable scaffolding for the latter.

Conclusions: When Language Gives You Lemons …

In a rather nice retelling, the *Time Out guide to Mumbai* presents the tale of how the Persian Parsis came to settle in India. Here is a brief extract:

> "They [the Parsis] arrived in Gujarat in the eight or ninth century and sought asylum from the local king. He is said to have sent them away with a glass of milk full to the brim – his way of saying that his kingdom was full. The Parsi elders conferred, added some sugar to the milk and sent it back – to suggest that they would mix thoroughly and sweeten the life of the community."

The Parsi elders were wise enough to recognize a creative symbol when they saw one. Rather than view the milk as just milk, or naïvely accept it as a welcome gift, they

perceived its new figurative meaning. But even the language of the guide's retelling – "his way of saying" and "to suggest" – is agnostic as to whether this meaning was conveyed as a simile, metaphor, analogy or blend. There seems little to be gained from labelling the symbolism as one or the other, and a case can be made that it arises from the interplay of all four together. The elders take the container of milk, appreciate its symbolic content, and subtly modify its physical contents to make comparable changes to its symbolic content. The resulting concoction is both a physical blend (of milk and sugar) and a figurative blend (of Gujarati and Parsi); it is also a simile (the Parsis promise to be "*as sweet as sugar*"), a metaphor (not least because the glass evokes the STATE IS A CONTAINER schema) and an analogy (the Parsis will be to Gujarat "*as sugar is to milk*").

This tale of the Parsis is a story of creative *non*-linguistic communication, but its lessons are just as applicable to verbal communication: to be creative with language is to make the most of what we are given, to recognize and unlock the full meaning potential of commonplace words and ideas. Throughout this book we've looked at a range of under-appreciated but abundant riches in language, from clichés to stereotypes to common constructions that allow us to imply more than we actually say. We've seen how we can vary clichés in unexpected but useful new ways, and how can we can combine the most familiar stereotypes in compositions that are as meaningful as they are surprising. In this chapter we've seen how we can turn the most prominent individuals in a culture, whether real or fictional, historical or contemporary, into symbols of something bigger than themselves. In each case, a creative speaker identifies untapped value in a linguistic artefact that is too often taken at face value.