

Metaphors of identity in dating ads and newspaper articles

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Abstract

This article investigates metaphors of identity in dating ads and in two types of newspaper writing, 'hard' and 'soft' news articles. It focuses on issues of textualization and processing, and particularly on the role of cotext in decoding metaphors. Taking a pragmatic approach founded in the cooperative principle, it argues that the maxims of quality and relation play related but separable roles in the interpretation of identity metaphors; and that this process is guided and constrained by cotextual selections in the environment of the metaphorical term. The particular kinds of cotextual guidance provided by the writer are seen to vary according to genre-driven issues. These include the purpose and stylistic conventions of the genre in which the metaphor occurs and the circumstances under which the text is composed and read. Differing functional motivations are suggested for the use of identity metaphors in each of the genres considered.

Keywords: metaphors of identity; dating ads; 'soft news'; 'hard news'; cooperative principle; cotextual selections.

- (1) Female space cadet, 28, needs male navigator. Based SW but travels. Must have a pulse!

1. Introduction

The data that provided the initial impetus for the work reported here were drawn from a genre that may initially seem neither the most obvious nor the most promising for a study of metaphor—the genre of dating advertisements (ads). All the ads that provide examples here are drawn from a single publication's weekly dating ad column, 'SoulMates', covering the

first three months of its appearance, from June to August 1995, in *The Guardian*, a British daily newspaper. The corpus consists of three complete columns over the three months, amounting to 584 ads in all. At the time my data were collected, the column was divided textually by the headings ‘Women’ and ‘Men’, according to the sex of the advertiser, but did not have its current further subdivisions to distinguish straight and gay ads. Women placed a total of 223 of the ads, accounting for just over 38% of the corpus; men placed the remaining 361 ads.

As you would expect within this highly constrained and formulaic genre, oriented to the packaging and projection of identities (Coupland 1996; Shalom 1997; Marley 2000), the vast majority of ad writers opted for nominal group headwords that provided clearly literal basic categorizations of both self and desired other. Over 70% in this corpus of just under 600 ads used sex-based labels in nominal groups such as *slim*, *sweet*, *black female*, 27 and *bright ‘Guardian’ man with social skills* to project identities that may well involve inferential work on the part of the reader, but which are clearly intended to be taken ‘literally’, in the sense of their being read as essentially truthful representations (Marley 2000, 2005). However, in among this preponderantly ‘truth-committed’ corpus (in Routledge and Chapman’s [2003] terms) was a significant collection of ads projecting identities that were striking in their departure from this norm. While it may be noted that *sweet* and *bright* provide metaphorical elements to the descriptions immediately above, such frozen or institutionalized usages in the relative periphery of the nominal group (Marley 2000) are less strikingly metaphorical than the headword categorization *space cadet* in the example that opens this article. Within a dating ad column as a whole, then, there is an immediate textual impact of foregrounding that accrues to the choice of a clearly nonliteral label, whose metaphorical significance must be more actively worked out.

The interactive and intertextual nature of dating ad metaphors has previously been noted by, for example, Shalom (1997) and Thorne and Coupland (1998). However, the focus in these discussions is on higher level discourse functions, rather than on the issues of textualization and processing that interest me here. Within the larger body of work on metaphor in general, the issue of processing has itself been the center of much debate over whether the understanding of all metaphors necessarily involves some conscious recognition of nonliteralness (Picken 2001: 64–65). In what Gibbs (1994: 83) calls the ‘standard pragmatic model’, recognition of nonliteralness has traditionally been considered a fairly routine aspect of metaphor, accounted for in terms of Grice’s cooperative principle. More specifically, it is usually associated with flouting the maxim of quality, though Goatly (1997: 297) argues instead ‘that it is better

diagnosed in terms of the maxim of Relation'. For followers of the cognitive approach associated with Lakoff and Johnson (1980), on the other hand, such recognition is better seen as an optional, extra stage of the kind of long-term, reflective processing associated with literary metaphors.

In fact, although the genre of dating ads may at first glance seem very different from literature, the 'space cadet' ad above provides a typical illustration of the careful composition and the wordplay that many of the examples in my corpus share with literary artifacts. These two features, in combination with the ad reader's goal of identifying a potential partner on the basis of such a spatially limited text, create a context that might be seen as precisely conducive to extended and reflective analysis. The example is further typical of the metaphors in my corpus in being a 'culturally grounded [...] *intertextual metaphor* [...] originated in semiotic experience', a characteristic that Zinken (2003: 509; original italics) distinguishes from the grounding in image schemata that underpins cognitive approaches to metaphor. Thus, a conceptual metaphorical reference to reaching one's goal—to take Zinken's (2003: 508) example—may be cognitively founded in the early physical experience of crawling from A to B, which is mapped onto a more abstract domain of Action, from which the image schema of Source–Path–Goal is then derived. An intertextual metaphor, such as 'Scientific progress leads to new Frankensteins', on the other hand, is semiotically founded in experience—in this case experience of 'culturally salient texts, films, pieces of art' (Zinken 2003: 509).

The careful composition, wordplay, and cultural grounding of dating ad metaphors are all potentially indicative of a stage of recognizing non-literalness and hence consistent with the pragmatic accounts of (literary) metaphor that I take as my starting point in this article. In the section that follows, I begin with close examination of a selection of dating ad identity metaphors in relation to the cooperative principle. Searle's early work on interpreting metaphor, following Grice and first published in 1979, has been the subject of criticism, as evidenced, for example, in Steen's (2000) review of a number of alternative theoretical positions and their exponents. Nevertheless, I revisit it here in a spirit of constructive criticism, in part precisely for its fundamental foundation in the cooperative principle. It may perhaps be suggested that the usefulness of Gricean pragmatics has been superseded by relevance theory (RT; Sperber and Wilson 1986), with RT accounts of metaphor having been developed (e.g., Pilkington 1991; Goatly 1997) that subsume the maxim of quantity under relevance and account for manner in terms of processing effort. Such RT-based accounts, however, inevitably leave no place for the maxim of quality and, while I would not wish to deny a central role for relevance, I do want to propose that both relevance and quality can be

seen to play related but separable roles in interpretation. The final issue I want to raise in Section 2 is also hinted at by Goatly's (1997) work on the language of metaphors, which points to a role for cotext as well as relevance. Close attention to the textual realizations of the metaphors in my dating ad corpus shows that their interpretation is guided and constrained by cotextual selections even more extensively than is suggested by Goatly.

Section 3 then seeks to develop the account by turning to similar metaphors of identity in a different domain, that of newspaper writing. This section firstly aims to provide some of the supporting evidence for the proposed processes of interpretation that Steen (2000) finds lacking in pragmatic approaches, by investigating the processing of an example drawn from 'soft news'. It then briefly presents an account of a further example, this time one that occurred repeatedly in 'hard news' coverage.¹

2. Metaphorical identities in dating ads

2.1. *Dating ad metaphors and the cooperative principle*

Searle (1979) originally suggested that the process of understanding metaphors occurs in three stages, which are discussed individually in the subsections that follow.

2.1.1. *Searle's first stage.* The first of Searle's stages involves recognizing that if the utterance were taken literally it would be defective. Possible defects that cue the subsequent search for alternative meaning include 'obvious falsehood, semantic nonsense, violations of the rules of speech acts, violations of conversational principles of communication' (Searle 1979: 114). Example (2), with its references to feline character types projecting identities for both ad writer and prospective partner, illustrates the point:

- (2) Old Tom, prowling West Yorks., seeks kitten for beer & skittles & mountain pathways.²

Clearly, the labels *Old Tom* and *kitten* are not to be taken as referring literally to either participant in Example (2).³ The foregrounding effect of eschewing the normative categories of identity label in this genre can only boost the 'obvious falsehood' of such choices. As a result, such obviously 'untrue' labels constitute blatant departures from Grice's (1975, 1978) conversational maxim of quality and trigger a conversational implicature. At the most general level, they implicate some kind of similarity between the characters of the writer and reader and the respective

nonliteral labels used to represent them metaphorically. Establishing more specifically what the similarity might be brings us to the second stage of decoding the metaphor.

2.1.2. *Searle's second stage.* Having recognized the possible defect that cues a nonliteral interpretation, Searle suggests, we then 'look for salient, well-known and distinctive feature(s)' of the nonliteral term (Searle 1979: 115). In the case of Example (2), the range of feline qualities made available by the metaphor is restricted by the age component built into each of the labels, *Old Tom* and *kitten*. This advertiser is quite clearly implicating his desire for a younger partner, a regular phenomenon in dating advertising (Pawlowski and Dunbar 1999; Coupland 2000).

In addition to the age-marking of *Old Tom*, this label is also marked for gender, since 'tom' applies only to male cats. More specifically, it is used to identify male cats which have not been neutered and which thus retain their full quota of masculinity and are often sexually predatory. This clear gendering within the more general feline category in turn gives rise to other associations, which are thus also potentially implicated of this ad writer. These might include, for example, toughness, independence, guarding one's own territory while roaming freely over that of others (acquiring battle scars along the way, perhaps), stealth, persistence, or dignity.

Similarly, the term *kitten* might trigger a further range of implicated characteristics specific to young cats, such as cuddliness, cuteness, vulnerability or dependence (and hence a need for protection or nurturing, perhaps), curiosity, playfulness (especially with balls of string), having disproportionately large ears and eyes, etc.—some of which would seem more appropriate than others.

2.1.3. *Searle's third stage.* Searle's final stage (1979: 115) involves restricting the range of relevant features by referring back to the entity they are to represent and rejecting any that seem inappropriate. This phase seems relatively unproblematic in relation to the characteristics implicated of the partner projected here as a kitten. It accounts for the likely ruling out in this context of balls of string and oversized ears (if not eyes) and leaves a list of attributes that are largely compatible with the female appearance and behavioral or personality traits frequently sought by more literal ad writers (Shalom 1997; Coupland 1996, 2000).

Applying the same process to the term *Old Tom* in order to refine the range of possible characteristics implicated of the advertiser, however, is more problematic. Although the list of characteristics suggested in 2.1.2 is already edited to exclude the more obviously undesirable characteristics

widely associated with tomcats (such as spraying or scavenging food), few of the additional suggested features seem straightforwardly desirable as attributes in a prospective partner. I will return to the resolution of this problem in Section 2.3. In the meantime, the difficulty in successfully generating a range of characteristics salient of tomcats and then refining them appropriately in this authentic, or naturally occurring, metaphor highlights an aspect of Searle's account that has been the subject of previous criticisms. Morgan (1979) and Gibbs (1994), for example, have both raised objections on the basis of the vagueness and lack of discrimination of Searle's (1979: 115) second step of 'look[ing] for salient, well-known and distinctive features' to incorporate in the interpretation. In the next section, I critically reconsider such objections and their causes, in order to develop a supplementary account of how the cotext that inevitably accompanies authentic examples can provide a means of discrimination.

2.2. *The contribution of cotext in naturally occurring metaphors*

Most of the criticisms of Searle can be related to his reliance on introspected and decontextualized examples, such as 'Sally is a block of ice' (Searle 1979: 97), rather than authentic examples occurring in real texts with distinct communicative purposes. One of the resulting characteristics of Searle's illustrations is that the topic of the metaphor is explicitly realized as the subject of the metaphorical predicate, whereas in the examples in my dating ad corpus the topic has to be understood or inferred via an underlying formulation such as 'the person [advertising] is an old tom' or 'the person [advertised for] is a kitten'. Making the referent of the metaphorical term explicit in this way highlights that there is not much information available about the entity it represents. This in turn means there is little information that could act as the basis for restricting the potential values of the metaphorical term in the way Searle's third stage proposes.

Similarly, Searle's examples also tend, as Morgan (1979) originally pointed out, to involve well-known metaphors that can to varying degrees be seen as frozen or institutionalized—effectively a form of shorthand, used to convey a more or less fixed set of characteristics applied to a human referent. Such readily 'transparent' metaphors do indeed occur (albeit it to only a very limited extent) in my dating ad corpus. Example (3) provides an illustration:

- (3) Affectionate theatre dir., 28. Likes snogs & brains. Looking for party animal with GSOH. Loves blue eyes. Ldn.

The label *party animal* is again strictly speaking a nonliteral reference. However, unlike *Old Tom*, this fixed collocation is so clearly associated

with a distinct social meaning that it is stable enough to provide an illustration for the seventh (and last) sense of ‘animal’ given in the Cobuild dictionary:

7 You can refer to someone as a particular type of animal in order to say what their interests are or what their typical behaviour is. *You’re quite a party animal aren’t you, out there every night . . .*

Superficially, the cat metaphor in Example (2) may seem hardly more original or creative in this particular genre than the animal reference of Example (3). Close attention to the cotext in Example (3), however, reveals a significant difference: the notable lack of any specifically party- or animal-related co-selections. This lexical isolation sets the metaphor apart from the tomcat–kitten pairing of Example (2), and also from the great majority of other ads built around metaphorical identity labels. Examples (4) and (5) provide further illustration of the more typical pattern:

- (4) Caring man, 35, seeks pussycat to pamper. Enjoy hill walks, R4, travel, laughs & purrs. N/s. Herts.
- (5) Choicest blend/Earl Grey, where is Camomile’s special cup of tea? I’m prof. 38, NW. UR caring, intellig., kind. L’pool.

The pattern of co-selection highlighted by the underlining in these examples, and also found in other dating ad metaphors, is to display a marked internal consistency in lexical choices. Thus, in the same field of feline behavior as supplies the partner label, we have the writer of Example (4) including *purrs* amongst the list of things he enjoys. The choice of *pamper* is also potentially locatable in the same field, via the implicit contrast between a domestic lifestyle, which offers protection and relative luxury, and that of more feral members of the cat family.

The lack of internal consistency in Example (3), then, might in itself be considered a possible indication that the user of this metaphor considers it an institutionalized usage, rather than a novel or creative coinage, which might call for active decoding by the reader. (It may even be that the metaphor is so conventionalized that the writer is not consciously aware in using it of its essentially metaphorical nature, thus significantly reducing the likelihood of its being extended into the cotext.⁴) Certainly, the lack of cotextual support distinguishes the relatively simple and transparent metaphor of *party animal* in Example (3) from the relative complexity of *pussycat* in Example (4), which is also a frequent enough usage to merit a Cobuild entry:

- 2 If you describe someone as a pussycat, you think that they are kind and gentle.

I would not wish to suggest that kindness and gentleness are necessarily not implicated as qualities the writer of Example (3) is seeking in his prospective partner, but I would suggest this is not a fully discriminating characterization of the intended meaning of ‘pussycat’ here. In a randomly generated mini-corpus of 50 British broadsheet usages of the word *pussycat*,⁵ it was used metaphorically on 26 occasions to describe someone or something. On 21 of these occasions, moreover, it was clearly used contrastively to mean the opposite of cotextual antonyms such as *intimidating*; *crazy*; *bully*, *tyke*; *tough*; *aggression*; *lean*, *mean*, *rude*; and *hard-nut*. In addition, *lion* and *tiger* both occurred twice each as the textual opposite of *pussycat*. Conversely, *genial*, *affable*, *fussing over coffee* and *humanist* were used to provide further detail of some of the people described as ‘pussycats’.

The semantic fields of these cotextual selections collectively suggest that *pussycat* can be used to mean the opposite of unleashed feral aggression, and to construe an image not merely of kindness and gentleness, but more specifically of pleasurable domestication and sociability. In Example (4), it is the particular co-occurrence, alongside *pussycat*, of *purr* and *pamper* that activates these productive connections.

The writer of Example (6), below, departs from dating ad norms of positive self-description (Coupland 1996, 2000) in her choice of a metaphor whose conventionalized meaning is one of physical disarray or disrepair. In spite of breaking one set of norms, though, she adheres humorously to that of providing cotextual support. By choosing *intact* and *salvage* alongside *wreck*, she resuscitates a metaphor so institutionalized as to be potentially dead and reinstates at least some of the metaphor’s figurative impact in support of the foregrounding achieved by the self-negativity:

- (6) Female wreck, 50, vices intact, needs salvage by male into opera, travel, fun. Somerset.

In the naturally occurring metaphors found in my corpus, then, the typical strategy adopted by dating ad writers is to make significant co-selections of additional lexis from the semantic field of the metaphor’s vehicle. In doing so, they return to even institutionalized metaphors a small measure of their original complexity, and revive at least an element of creativity (cf. Goatly 1997, on revitalization of inactive metaphors). Viewed from the reader’s perspective, moreover, the pattern emerging is one in which co-selections interact to hone metaphorical meaning, with items of cotext working to guide the process of interpretation even in relatively uncomplicated examples. In light of this, the next section returns to the previously problematic Example (2), in a reconsideration of its co-selected feline labels.

2.3. *Co-selection and contextual co-relevance*

- (2') Old Tom, prowling West Yorks., seeks kitten for beer & skittles & mountain pathways.

On the evidence so far, having recognized the references to *Old Tom* and *kitten* as being nonliteral, the next stage of decoding would seem likely to involve a further recognition of the general similarity of the labels in terms of their belonging to the same semantic field of cats. This might be seen as equivalent to other dating advertisers' use of the formula 'seeks similar for x and y', which would seem to be the principle behind *Camomile's* selection of *Choicest blend* and/or *Earl Grey*. In this case, given that all three types of tea might reasonably be described as superior, possibly acquired tastes, associated with refinement and appreciated by those with a (perhaps expensively) discriminating palate, they seem quite clearly to be matched predominantly for similarity.

In the case of Example (2), however, the selection of 'kitten', as opposed say, to 'tabby', suggests a relation more like antonymy. The extremes of youth and age encapsulated in the labels themselves—which form part of the items' conceptual meaning in Leech's (1974) terms—are activated as a potentially salient characteristic of either entity so represented, even considered in isolation, as they were earlier. But their co-selection can now be seen to augment this salience through textual co-relevance, which primarily establishes contrast, rather than the compatibility of 'seeks similar'. Thus in terms of connotative meaning (Leech 1974), this opposition might then be further refined and understood as an enhanced contrast between maturity and experience on the one hand and youth and innocence on the other. This generalized interpretation is reached by drawing on a culturally prevalent association between increasing age and accumulated experience, which forms part of the 'set of background assumptions which are not part of the semantic content of the utterance' but are nevertheless shared by speaker and hearer (Searle 1979: 96). (The shared assumptions behind intertextual metaphors in dating ads are also noted in a slightly different connection by Shalom 1997, as an important element of their interactivity.)

Using culturally available background assumptions in this way, then, allows a motivated reconciliation of two salient features of the primary terms of this extended metaphor. It might also, moreover, provide a framework for further incorporating a kitten's vulnerability or need for protection into the interpretation. Although old toms are not most characteristically thought of as nurturers of young offspring, the introduction of inexperienced young cats—in a domestic context, at least—can

indeed prompt them to take on a protective role until the newcomer(s) are established.

The remaining cotextual selections that accompany *Old Tom* and *kitten*, though, are less readily integrated. Old toms are not saliently known for their playfulness, yet the relevance of this characteristic is apparently confirmed by the inclusion of the reference to *beer & skittles*. The roaming and stealth associated with old toms is likewise confirmed by including *prowling*, as a description of the writer, and *mountain pathways* as one of the shared pursuits. While the latter in particular may be compatible with a kitten's curiosity, there is otherwise little further reconciliation that can be achieved and these further elements of cotext seem if anything to resist a single coherent interpretation within the posited framework of experience versus innocence.

However, in parallel with Goatly's discussion of 'field relevance' (1997: 296–299), dating ads are utterances that occur in a very specialized cultural and generic context in between the immediate cotext and the more generalized resource of cross-contextual encyclopedic knowledge. The fact of their occurrence in the particular context of a whole colony of advertisers seeking partners is one that has a direct effect on the operation of the maxim of relation. From this perspective, the set of background assumptions and shared cultural knowledge on which readers draw in decoding metaphorical identities is enlarged to include the presupposed purpose of placing the ad. Essentially, what is being communicated in dating ads is the desire for a relationship with someone, and all aspects of any ad will be assumed as far as possible to be maximally relevant to this communicative purpose. (Pratt [1977] observes that this expectation of all aspects of a message being relevant is particularly strong in relation to texts that have been carefully composed and subject to revision for publication.) In other words, the extra stage I have suggested, of drawing on cotextual selections in the process of decoding, will be additionally shaped by cultural expectations of the kind(s) of relationship dating ads are designed to result in (cf. Petrey 1990 on the effects of different literary genres on apprehension of meaning).

There are, then, at least two sets of background assumptions, or schemata (Rumelhart 1979), in play in decoding nonliteral labels such as *Old Tom* and *kitten*. The more general overarching one is that of the range of (human) relationships, social and sexual, that might constitute the goal and potential outcome of advertising in this genre. The second will relate more specifically to the array of salient, well-known, and distinctive features of the particular entity referred to by the nonliteral label. It is the interplay between these schemata, the points where they overlap, that

will be drawn on to arrive at a coherent interpretation of both metaphor and implicated meaning.

The selection from the range of possible salient features available for transfer will thus regularly, and relatively predictably, be narrowed by reference to those features that are relevant to the kinds of human socio-sexual relationships that are associated with the genre. The possible network of interconnections drawn on by any one interpreter will not be determinate, however, since associative meanings are less stable and more individual (Leech 1974: 22). A variety of meanings is therefore likely to be available (cf. Pilkington 1991; McCabe 1983; Steen 1994; Goatly 1997), albeit subject to the textual steering provided by co-selected lexis.

For example, one reading of Example (2) might combine schematic knowledge about both cats and relationships by drawing on the social and traditionally gendered aspects of the ad and focusing on the culturally stereotypical model of older man and younger woman pairings. This would allow one to reconcile some of the apparent contradictions noted earlier and interpret it as projecting a relationship involving ‘Old Tom’ as an experienced father figure, offering nurture and protection—perhaps financial—to a younger partner, while retaining his freedom, status, and independence via the choice of shared social activities. This reading selects as salient features the age of both participants; the dominant masculinity of the ad writer; and the relative vulnerability and sociability of the partner sought. It is worth noting that many of the nonmetaphorical ads found in this and other columns are explicitly oriented to older man–younger woman relationships (see, for example, Dunbar 1995; Pawlowski and Dunbar 1999), a further contributing factor of context that may predispose regular column readers toward a similar interpretation of this metaphor.

On the other hand, it could be suggested that the reading above does not exhaust all possible relevance, since it does not significantly incorporate the additional metaphorical contribution made by *prowling*. The *Co-build* dictionary entry for this item begins by offering quiet movement, for example when hunting, as the definition; it then also notes that if ‘a person is on the prowl, they are hunting for something such as a sexual partner’. Elements of hunting and sex may, therefore, also be brought to bear in decoding the metaphorical aspects of this ad, perhaps resonating with a possible collocation for the partner label in ‘sex kitten’. This would result in a rather different reading, which draws more directly on the association of tomcats with sexual activity and which might, for example, involve a construction of the desired partner as someone who may or may not be sexually experienced, but whose curiosity and playfulness equate with a willingness for sexual exploration or experimentation.

2.4. *Cotext and genre*

Of the dating ad identity metaphors considered so far, all but Example (3) (*party animal*) have illustrated the regularity with which ad writers make additional lexical selections from whichever semantic field provides their choice of metaphorical label(s). I have suggested a common function for these co-selections of guiding or focusing the reader's interpretation of the metaphorical headwords. The question that obviously arises now is that of whether cotext might be expected to play a similar role in metaphors occurring in other genres.

From one angle, it might be argued that the spatial constraints and highly structured nature of dating ads would increase the likelihood of this pattern being more widely generalizable to other text types. In this view, the additional co-selections in semantic support of the nonliteral label are presumably made at the expense of other information, which the writer has judged less crucial to convey. From the opposite angle, however, it could be countered that for precisely these reasons dating ads constitute a special case.

Goatly's (1997) survey of a mixed corpus of various genres provides a starting point in addressing this question, in its finding that metaphors take different linguistic forms, which are differentially distributed across genres. One particular point of contact between Goatly's work and the role of cotext in the metaphors I have considered so far would initially appear to support the view of dating ads as a special case. Two of his categories of linguistic realization of metaphors involve specific functions for cotextual signals that are quite closely related to the function of cotext considered here. In his category of Ground Specification, the similarities between metaphorical topic and vehicle are explicitly articulated; and in Extension or Symbolism a metaphorical term is recycled or reused to build further meanings. Goatly finds these realizations to be generically sensitive and concludes that they associate predominantly either with genres consumed at leisure (poetry and novels); or with the need of popular science texts to provide clear explanation; or with the leisurely and highly crafted composition processes of magazine advertising. He further attributes their markedly low incidence in news reports to time constraints on the writer and to the readership being more likely to scan or skim through such texts (Goatly 1997: 316–317).

There are, though, several reasons why it might be premature to conclude from Goatly's work that the guiding function of cotext seen in dating ads is a special feature of the genre and, more particularly, that it would not occur in newspaper writing. Firstly, the metaphors currently under focus are those used to project identities, a type which does not

appear to have occurred in Goatly's news report data, and which may be less frequent in this genre than other types but nevertheless does occur. Secondly, Goatly's categories of Ground Specification and Extension or Symbolism are more narrowly focused on particular functions than my more general conception of the role of cotext, which may depress the profile in his survey of the kinds of cotextual contribution reported here. Thirdly, while news texts are in general relatively ephemeral and unlikely to be retained or re-read, not all news texts are equally likely merely to be scanned for information. The news subcorpus analyzed by Goatly consisted of news reports, but soft news encompasses a wider range of sub-genres, the point of which—for feature articles especially—may be as much to entertain as to inform. Considerable stylistic care may thus be put into their composition with this end in mind.

In the next section, therefore, I offer a preliminary outline of the role of cotext in decoding metaphors used to project identities in two newspaper genres. Several previous accounts and explorations of metaphor have considered context, conceived as a general phenomenon, as a factor that contributes to metaphor processing. For instance, Gerrig and Healy (1983) show that processing times differ according to whether contextualizing information follows or precedes the metaphorical term. Picken (2001) draws attention to the importance of form and shows that metalinguistic marking plays a part in second-language understanding of metaphors. Similarly, McCabe (1983) has pointed to the importance of extended context in value judgments of how good a metaphor is, but none of these approaches considers the kind of qualitative, guiding contribution of cotext that I am suggesting here. In the first instance, then, I focus on how contextual information affects interpretation of a 'soft news' identity metaphor; and in the second, show the varying degrees to which cotext can be used to slant the interpretation of a 'hard news' identity metaphor.

3. Metaphorical identities in news genres

3.1. *Decoding an identity metaphor in a 'soft news' text*

The underlined metaphor in Example (7), drawn from the 'soft news', tabloid section of *The Guardian*, is markedly similar in several respects to those found in dating ads. It is used to characterize a person;⁶ it does so by means of a nonliteral reference; and it is apparently a relatively self-contained metaphor, realized within a single clause.

- (7) I look at his finger and ask if he bites his nails. “Yeah, don't you? Do you not?” He often answers a question with one of his own. “I'm

terrible. I'm a nervous person." Despite the posh, deep voice, he can come over quite Woody Allen. "Do you know, many of the things that make me able to make good TV make me less able to be a good human being." Such as? "Indecisiveness, taking bad direction from people around me, trying to blend into any given situation." ('This is a setup', Simon Hattenstone interview with Louis Theroux, *The Guardian*, 4 March 2002)

One immediately obvious difference between this example and those in dating ads, however, is that the metaphor is embedded in a much larger stretch of its own, text-internal cotext (as opposed to the wider cotext lent to individual dating ads by the other ads that appear in the same column). The writer therefore has more plentiful opportunity to make contextual selections that could potentially influence the interpretation of the metaphor—an opportunity that Hattenstone makes ample use of in this extract.

Among the salient characteristics of Woody Allen, which would in principle be available for transfer to Theroux, we might include his humor; his apparent insecurity and nervousness; his high-pitched, Manhattan accent and rapid speech; his self-deprecation; and his small stature. The cotext in Example (7) would appear to support the transfer of some but not all of these characteristics. Most immediately and explicitly, the opening adverbial clause element—*Despite the posh, deep voice*—alerts us to the potential relevance of the way Woody Allen sounds while speaking, while ruling out any similarity to his famous accent and high-pitched voice.

More subtly and implicitly, the initial references to biting one's nails and answering questions with questions are habits regularly associated in our culture with nervousness and insecurity. I observed earlier that individual interpretations of any metaphor are likely to be variable; possible alternative interpretations of the significance of answering questions with questions might in principle include associating this characteristic with an enquiring mind, or with nonconformity, perhaps.⁷ In this instance, though, the preceding mention of nail-biting seems likely to predispose an interpretation in terms of insecurity because of a perceived compatibility between the two behaviors in terms of nervousness. Subsequently, Theroux's own directly quoted words also confirm this interpretation, both explicitly (*nervous, indecisiveness, trying to blend in*) and implicitly, in their reproduction of the stereotypically associated speech pattern of repetition.⁸ In addition, the negative self-evaluations offered by Theroux are in effect a display of self-deprecation. Similarly, the repeated initial questions are not only asked in response to a question, as the writer

points out; they also reverse its potential accusation, deflecting it onto the original questioner in another culturally indexical reproduction, this time of defensiveness.

Of the list of Allen's attributes offered above, then, it would seem that nervous insecurity, self-deprecation, and defensiveness are cotextually supported; physical resemblance, on the other hand, is either ruled out (vocal) or not evoked at all (stature). The clear contrast in both voice and stature between Allen and Theroux means that anyone familiar with the latter is likely to rule out both of these characteristics anyway, as part of Searle's third stage of referring back to what is known already about the topic of the metaphor. Perhaps more significantly in this respect, though, there is no reference to or evocation of Allen's funniness throughout the extended cotext. Although the picture painted of Theroux here is by no means lacking in intelligence, wit (in the sense of comic humor in particular) does not appear to be an active part of it, and would thus seem a less likely candidate for inclusion in a fully contextualized interpretation.

By way of an informal preliminary exploration of the effects of the surrounding text on the interpretation of the metaphor, I gave it to five of my colleagues and acquaintances in two different versions—one being the metaphorical sentence in isolation, as shown with underlining above, the other being the longer extract, i.e., the whole of the example as reproduced here. In each case, I asked them to tell me what they understood the metaphor to mean; in the cases of those given the longer extract, I also asked them to describe how they had reached their interpretation (but did not direct their attention explicitly to the cotext).⁹ Two of the informants were asked to respond verbally to just the single-sentence version and a written note made of their responses. Two were given the short version before the longer version (both in writing, by e-mail) and asked to comment on any differences the latter made to their interpretation. (The list of Allen's salient characteristics provided above was drawn from the response of one of these informants to the short version of the text.) The final informant was given only the full version, again by e-mail. (In addition, a sixth e-mail to a colleague containing the full version drew no response.)

Of the four responses thus collected to the decontextualized version of the metaphor, three made reference to Allen's funniness as potentially available for transfer. Two of them then duly transferred the characteristic in their interpretation, as succinctly evidenced by the words of the informant who glossed it as indicating that Theroux 'shares with Allen the characteristics of being insecure, nervous and of using wit defensively and self-deprecatingly'. The informant who received only the fully

contextualized version, on the other hand, reported a clear ‘trigger’ in the word *nervous* and possibly a second in the observation about answering questions with another question. This information in the cotext steered this latter informant to a ‘reading that Theroux appears self-deprecating and rather hesitant’. Although this informant’s observations again included mention of Allen’s reputation for being funny, indicating that this characteristic was potentially available for transfer to Theroux, his final understanding of the metaphor confidently excludes it.

In sum, then, this informal investigation would appear to provide tentative support for the importance of co-relevance. Cotext appears to provide a means of filtering out nonrelevant characteristics, by prioritizing those that can be interpreted as co-relevant with other textual elements. Although Woody Allen’s success is arguably founded on his particular brand of wit, the salience of this feature appears in this instance to have been defused by lack of cotextual relevance and is therefore likely to be excluded from a reading fully informed by context.

I noted earlier Goatly’s finding of a low incidence of extension and symbolism in his subcorpus of news texts and hinted that cotext might be expected to contribute more significantly to metaphors in ‘soft news’ items because of their comparatively more leisurely composition. Discussion in this section would now seem, on the evidence of the intricately worked cotext of Example (7), to support this observation and would further suggest a counterpart mode of attentive and at least semi-reflective reading. Although the cotext here plentifully provides the necessary guidance for the reference to Woody Allen to be appropriately interpreted, the intended meaning is not explicitly spelled out and the level of inferential work required from the reader remains quite high.

Nor is this ‘more literary’ mode of composition and reading stylistically unmotivated. Goatly (1997: 300–301) notes a hyperbolic function, particularly for popular press metaphors, which can also be seen from another angle as ‘covertly’ introducing a notable degree of subjectivity into an ostensibly objective genre (see, for example, White 1997, on lexical intensification in ‘hard news’). From this perspective, it becomes apparent that while the Woody Allen metaphor in Hattenstone’s interview with Theroux does not serve to hyperbolize his subject, it does share the function of introducing relatively implicit evaluation in its characterization of him.

On the one hand, then, I have suggested that the composition and reading processes for soft news texts and features can be differentiated from those involved in hard news in a way that can be seen to explain the identity metaphor discussed in this section. In this view, the difference in composition and reading styles might lead to an expectation that similar identity metaphors would not be found in hard news, an expectation that

would square nicely with Goatly's observations. On the other hand, it might be noted that the need to characterize without overtly evaluating is not necessarily incompatible with the agenda of hard news journalists. In this view, while there would be no reason not to expect identity metaphors to occur in hard news, the different modes of textual engagement involved might lead instead to an expectation of a rather different, perhaps less subtle, role for cotext.

The next section, then, turns to consideration of a hard news identity metaphor, in a brief exploration of the part played by cotext in a now infamous reference to James Thurber's short story, 'The Secret Life of Walter Mitty'.

3.2. Cotext in a 'hard news' identity metaphor

On 4 August 2003, *The Independent* newspaper printed a story by its political editor Paul Waugh, the headline and opening paragraph of which are reproduced as Example (8):

- (8) No 10 dismisses Kelly as a 'Walter Mitty'
Downing Street will seek to defend itself over the death of David Kelly by portraying the scientist as a Walter Mitty character who exaggerated his role in the Government's intelligence case against Iraq.

This metaphor, comparing a man who had apparently recently committed suicide with Thurber's fictional protagonist, was taken up and widely reported across British print and broadcast media over the following days. In the process it became clear that its import was unanimously interpreted as negative, as witnessed by the frequent references to it as a 'slur' on Kelly's character (for example, *The Telegraph*, 4 and 5 August 2003; *The Mirror*, 5 and 12 August 2003; *The Guardian*, 4, 5, and 6 August 2003; *The Irish Examiner*, 6 August 2003; *The Edinburgh Evening News*, 6 August 2003; CNN 5 August 2003).

It is also apparent from examination of the press coverage that the producers of this metaphor chose not to rely on their readership having the requisite schematic knowledge of its fictional origin to be able to decode it for themselves. Each reporting of the comparison contributed to the interpretation by providing cotextual cues, as I will show shortly. In the meantime, the widespread coverage of this event and the outrage that greeted it may perhaps obscure the fact that a comparison with Walter Mitty need not be intrinsically negative. In principle, more positively shaded interpretations of the trope are also possible; for example, Martínez (2001) refers to Thurber's fictional character as 'the Everyman who

slips in and out of reality in the most natural way'. Similarly, Alkalay-Gut (2000) notes that in a film version, actor '[Danny] Kaye's dysfunctional Mitty proves far more correct in his assumptions about reality than all the authority figures surrounding him'.

In fact, the cotext highlighted with italics in Example (8) makes it immediately clear that the original journalist's own interpretation and intended meaning in reproducing the metaphor is the relatively mild one of exaggeration. More negative shading is nevertheless discernible on closer inspection, initially in the co-selected item *dismisses*. This item will presumably have been chosen by a subeditor, rather than the journalist (Bell 1991), and thus provides interesting evidence of the first reader's contextually guided interpretation of the journalist's use of the metaphor. It would seem that in the search for a headline of appropriately negative impact (White 1997), the subeditor has drawn not only on the cotext italicized above, but has also intensified Waugh's own gloss of the government's actions in the phrase *seek to defend itself*. For subsequent readers of the original article as it was published, then, the negative import of the metaphor is in effect doubly cued. However, this is still a fairly mildly negative slant in comparison with the considerably stronger negative shading from cotext in subsequent reproductions of the reference.

- (9) a "Walter Mitty character" with *hero fantasies*
(spiked-online.com, 13 August 2003)
- (10) a Walter Mitty *fantasist*
(*The Daily Telegraph*, 5 August 2003)
- (11) Spin chief Tom Kelly [...] called Dr Kelly a "Walter Mitty character", implying he was a *liar* and a fantasist
(*The Daily Mirror*, 5 August 2003)

Example (9) provides a partially positive counterbalance with the inclusion of *hero* but still magnifies exaggeration into *fantasies*. Example (10) shows the process taken a step further with the nominalization into *fantasist*, while Example (11) spells out one possible connotation and extension of this in its coordination with the still more damaging *liar*. Notably, too, in all these cases, the cotextual signals cuing the reader's interpretation occur in syntactic positions more closely linked to the metaphorical term than in the Woody Allen example. Thus Examples (8) and (9) respectively provide their cues firstly as part of a defining relative clause and secondly as a post-modifying prepositional phrase. Example (10) casts the metaphorical reference itself as a classifier preceding the cue (*fantasist*), which is realized as the head of the nominal group, while the nominal glosses in Example (11) occur as part of a nonfinite clause, closely dependent on the

preceding clause in which the metaphor appears as part of the object complement.

This close syntactic connection and glossing function between metaphorical term and cotextual cue renders Examples (8)–(11) much more similar to the metaphors discussed by Goatly than Examples (1)–(7) were, and effectively spells out the intended meaning significantly more explicitly. A further point of contact is also provided by the use of quotation marks to accompany three of the five instances of *Walter Mitty*, which Goatly notes as a frequent means of marking the presence of metaphor in news texts (Goatly 1997: 321). Perhaps more significant in terms of the current discussion, though, is that the quotation marks also serve to allocate the source of the subjective characterization elsewhere, thus preserving the journalist's ostensibly objective stance, as required by the 'reporter voice' (White 1997: 106) of hard news. Crucially, though, this analysis of the chain of press reproductions of the original utterance not only shows clear unanimity that a potentially ambiguous metaphor was to be interpreted negatively, but also that the negativity was unambiguously cued at best and intensified at worst by the journalists' choice of cotextual selections. The cotext in these examples, therefore, both spells out the journalist's interpretation of the metaphor, enabling speedy processing by the reader, and also provides a clear textual reflection of the importance of negativity as a criterion of newsworthiness (Galtung and Ruge 1965; White 1997).

4. Conclusion

This analysis took as its starting point Grice's cooperative principle and a close focus on textual realizations of identity metaphors, firstly in dating ads and then extending to two types of news text, in order to trace how metaphorical implicatures are triggered and decoded. It has shown how co-selected items in the environment of the metaphorical term(s) work to guide and refine interpretation in a kind of double operation. Items co-selected for textualization and which can be interpreted as co-relevant are positively focused on in arriving at a coherent and unified interpretation. However, aspects that might otherwise be available as features associated with the metaphorical entity, however salient they might be, can be backgrounded by the converse lack of cotextual support and thereby excluded from the final interpretation. I have argued that it is flouting the maxim of quality by producing an utterance that cannot be taken as literally true that triggers this process, while the maxim of relation plays a guiding role in directing the working out of the implicature. This latter

maxim underpins the role I have proposed for cotext in general and has also been seen to provide an overarching template for decoding dating ad metaphors in terms of their relevance to the genre's fundamental purpose of finding a partner.

The influence of genre has also been seen in the account developed here of identity metaphors and cotext in soft and hard news texts. In the soft news feature interview, an identity metaphor was used to introduce an implicitly evaluative characterization of the interviewee, without the journalist's overt intrusion into his text as evaluator. Plentiful cotextual support was seen to guide a quite finely discriminating interpretation that required a high degree of reader engagement and inferencing in the decoding process, in a textual reflex of the relatively relaxed composition and consumption patterns of soft news. Within the more time-constrained arena of hard news, cotextual signaling provided more explicit and less inferentially demanding guidance in interpretation, and the subjectivity was carefully attributed to a source other than the journalist. However, analysis of the cotext nevertheless revealed the high degree of negativity introduced by the journalist as a means of boosting newsworthiness.

In both types of news text, then, a clear stylistic or functional advantage to metaphor can be identified; and this brings me finally to an aspect of the corpus I began with that has so far been neglected. I noted at the outset that the vast majority of dating ads deal in 'literal' identities (Marley 2000, 2005), and while discussion here has focused on the cotextual 'help' provided for the reader by the writer, it will nevertheless be apparent that metaphorical dating ads make significantly greater cognitive and inferential demands on their reader and potential respondent than literal ones. The obvious question that arises here is that of why an ad writer should choose to take the risk of projecting metaphorical identities, the decoding of which the reader may not engage with successfully, or even fully. While this is a more complex issue than I can do full justice to here, there are two elements of the preceding discussion that point to at least a partial brief answer.

Example (12) serves as a final reminder both of the carefully crafted wordplay and also of the intertextual, culturally grounded resonances (Zinken 2003) that between them lend a literary flavor to many metaphorical ads:

- (12) Pauper seeks millionairess. Golden hearts & diamond minds accepted. Ldn & SE.

Intelligence and a sense of humor are so frequently included as attributes both sought in a partner and claimed by writers of dating ads (Shalom 1997; Coupland 1996) that their codified abbreviations—'intell.' and

'GSOH'—have probably become indices of the genre. They are, however, notably absent from the texts produced by writers of metaphorical ads. Instead of merely laying claim to these attributes, the word play involved in such ads effectively actually displays them (cf. Coupland 2000: 23–25 on metaphorical references and humor). It operates at a higher level than literal description, requires more cognitive linguistic skill, and provides a show of sophistication that seems pointedly designed to be noticed (cf. Marley 2000: 273–275 on textual foregrounding in the discourse colony [Hoey 1986, 2001] of a dating ad column; Bruthiaux 2004 on the display of linguistic sophistication in advertising).

One additional benefit of display over description lies in the greater trust that is likely to be placed in it, since it is less under conscious—and potentially deceptive—control. So the display of intelligent wit is both more convincing and more highly prized than a mere verbal claim to it. For the reader who takes notice of the wordplay and who is like-minded enough to engage in a successful decoding of it, moreover, there is an additional pay off. Montgomery (2000: 127) points out that audience laughter in response to utterances that undermine positive face—as the label 'pauper' clearly does for the writer of Example (12)—is both performative and affiliative. The smiles, and even minor laughter, with which the metaphorical examples in my corpus have regularly been greeted during presentations and informal discussions are performative in that they confirm the ad's funniness and in the process construct its 'joke status'. The moment of this happening creates the affiliation Montgomery notes between teller and hearer of the joke, a moment of connect that is also observed by Mills. She (Mills 1992: 198) points out that the act of laughing at a joke interpellates the reader into a position of shared knowledge and acceptance of the message offered by the writer.

If at any time during the reading and decoding of these dating ad examples, then, you find yourself smiling at the neatness with which the pieces of the puzzle fall into place, the joke has been executed. The shared pleasure of a finely balanced pun establishes a moment of performative affiliation—with the writer whose display of intelligence has succeeded in making you smile.

Notes

1. For detail on the distinction between hard and soft news, see for example White (1997) and Bell (1991). White's (1997: 100) thumbnail sketch of hard news identifies it as involving narrative 'reports typically associated with eruptive violence, reversals of fortune and socially significant breaches of the moral order', while Caldas-Coulthard (1992: 28–

29) characterizes it as ‘the core product’, covering recent events in the public sphere, from an ostensibly impersonal perspective. She also gives a usefully succinct outline of soft news as follows: ‘Soft news includes humor and human interest and is concerned with the private sphere’, further observing that soft news often takes the form of feature articles, which are ‘not time bound for immediacy ... [and] generally carry the writer’s personal opinion’ (Caldas-Coulthard 1992: 29).

2. All examples are retyped as they appeared in the original, including abbreviations, punctuation, apparent typos, etc. I have omitted the ‘Message Line’ contact details, as these are not relevant to discussion and, for economy of space, I have not preserved the original line breaks. Otherwise, my only editorial intervention is underlining for ease of reference.
3. The use of a capital for a noun that is potentially a name, Tom, may initially suggest a literal meaning and reference for the first label here. However, proper nouns cannot normally be pre-modified as in this case and, although this particular epithet may be used OF a person as part of the proper noun, it would be very unusual for it to be adopted and used BY that person in the same way. If a literal reading of the label is entertained at all, it seems likely that it would be revised retrospectively on encountering the additional elements (*prowling, kitten*) of the extended feline metaphor. I do not mean to imply here that the label necessarily does not have a literal reference to a man called Tom (this could be an additional aspect of the word play), but that it will be read or taken in this context as having primarily nonliteral meaning that requires further decoding.
4. I am grateful to one of my anonymous reviewers for bringing this point to my attention.
5. See www.webcorp.org.uk.
6. The person concerned is Louis Theroux, a TV interviewer who is known for his technique of shadowing interviewees over several days as they go about their normal routine, in interviews that blur the boundary between personal and professional footings.
7. I am grateful to another of my anonymous reviewers for this observation.
8. The question of whether preceding or post-posed cotext is likely to have greater influence is an intriguing one, but unfortunately beyond the scope of this article.
9. It must, of course, be noted that the results of such informal methodology, centering on individual evaluations, can only be treated with considerable caution. I report them nevertheless, and in duly cautious spirit, as a tentative preliminary indication of the potential influence of cotext.

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