Metonymy

ℹ DEFINITION

What is metonymy? Here's a quick and simple definition:

> Metonymy is a type of [figurative language](#) in which an object or concept is referred to not by its own name, but instead by the name of something closely associated with it. For example, in "Wall Street prefers lower taxes," the New York City street that was the original home of the New York Stock Exchange stands in for (or is a "metonym" for) the entire American financial industry.

Some additional key details about metonymy:

- The use of metonymy dates back to ancient Greece.
- Metonymy is found in poetry, prose, and everyday speech.
- A common form of metonymy uses a place to stand in for an institution, industry, or person. "Wall Street" is an example of this, as is "the White House" to mean the President or Presidential administration of the United States, or "Hollywood" to mean the American film industry.
- Metonymy in literature often substitutes a concrete image for an abstract concept. "Heart" can be used to mean "love," or "grave" to mean "death."

Metonymy Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce metonymy: meh-**tahn**-uh-mee

Metonymy, Synecdoche, Metaphor, and Metalepsis

Metonymy is commonly confused with three other types of figurative language:

- [Synecdoche](#)
- [Metaphor](#)
- Metalepsis

It's helpful to understand what makes metonymy distinct from each of them.

Metonymy vs. Synecdoche

Both metonymy and [synecdoche](#) create a relationship in which one thing or idea stands in for another. But the specific relationship between the two objects is much more precise and specific in synecdoche than it is in metonymy:

- **In synecdoche:** Most synecdoches occur when a part of an object stands in for the whole. For example, "ABCs" is a synecdoche,

because A, B, and C are parts of the alphabet, but the term "ABCs" stands in for the entire alphabet. A rarer type of synecdoche occurs when a broader category stands in for a subset of that category. An example of this is when the word "mortals" is used to mean humans—"mortals" technically includes all animals and plants (anything that dies), so using "mortals" to mean humans is a synecdoche that uses a category to stand in for one of its subsets. Sometimes this type of synecdoche is described as a whole standing in for a part, the inverse of a typical synecdoche in which a part stands in for a whole.

- **In metonymy:** The relationship between the two things is not part-to-whole or whole-to-part, but is simply one of being closely *conceptually* related, as in a phrase like "The pen is mightier than the sword," in which "pen" stands in for writing and "sword" stands in for physical power.

Some people actually consider synecdoche to be a subset of metonymy, since to be a part of something is, by definition, to be closely related to that thing. Other people believe that the two terms are completely distinct—that metonymy can *only* occur when it proposes a relationship between two things that are *not* part of one another, and that synecdoche can *never* be simultaneously metonymy. There's no definitive consensus on which of these two ways of seeing metonymy and synecdoche is correct, so you should just know that the debate exists.

Metonymy vs. Metaphor

Metonymy and [metaphor](#) are similar in that both are forms of [figurative language](#) that create a comparison or relationship between two different things or ideas. However, the *nature* of the relationship is different.

- **Metonymy is a comparison built on the *relatedness* of two different things.** In his poem "Out, Out," Robert Frost describes a boy who has cut himself with a saw holding his bleeding hand up "as if to keep/The life from spilling." Clearly, Frost is using "life" to refer to blood, and we know this because blood is essential to life—the two are intuitively related, so we can grasp the metonymy without confusion. The relationship, in other words, between the metonym (life) and what it refers to (blood) is one of *continuity*—metonymy proposes that these two related things can be seen, poetically, as one and the same.

- **Metaphor draws a comparison between the qualities of two *unrelated* things.** For example (to use "life" again), in Shakespeare's play [Macbeth](#) the main character observes that "life...is a tale/Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,/Signifying nothing." To say that "life is a tale told by an idiot" is a metaphor, because Shakespeare is attempting to project the qualities of a meaningless tale onto life—he wants us to consider life as a

rambling narrative that is dramatic but empty. Shakespeare is not pointing out a continuity between life and a tale (the two are not interchangeable), but rather creating a new way of thinking about life by making a comparison between the *qualities* of a "tale told by an idiot" and the nature of life.

Metaphor, then, projects the meaning of one thing onto an unrelated thing. Metonymy points out that two things are so closely related that they can stand in for one another.

Metonymy vs. Metalepsis

While metonymy proposes a relationship between two closely related things, metalepsis creates a more distant relationship between a figurative word and the thing to which it refers. This is an abstract concept, so it's best to illustrate it with an example. Take the sentence below:

- I hate it when Morris drives because he has such a lead foot.

Translated, the sentence says:

- I hate it when Morris drives because he always speeds.

The phrase "lead foot" is a metalepsis that refers to a driver who speeds. To decode the relationship between "lead foot" and its meaning of "speeding," though, you first have to understand a metonymy within the phrase itself. In this context, "lead" does not literally refer to the metal. Because lead is an uncommonly heavy material, "lead" metonymically stands in for the notion of weight. If a driver's foot is heavy, then it would press more on the gas pedal, causing the car to speed—hence, a "lead foot."

Since the relationship between "lead foot" and "speeding driver" is made not by direct association, but rather through a secondary association between lead and heaviness (a metonymy), this figure of speech is considered a metalepsis. For this reason, metalepsis is often called a "metonymy of a metonymy"—it's a metonymic association ("lead foot" with "speeding") that relies on a secondary metonymy ("lead" with "heaviness") in order to make sense.

As with synecdoche, some people consider metalepsis to be a subset of metonymy, while others consider it to be a distinct but closely-related concept.

✳ EXAMPLES

Metonymy is *everywhere* in spoken and written language—it's in poetry and prose, the political jargon that fills newspapers and radio, songs, folk sayings, and more.

Metonymy Examples in Common Idioms

Many common [idioms](link) are examples of metonymy. In fact, some of these idioms seem so common and straightforward that it might be jarring to realize that their meanings aren't actually literal.

- **"Boots on the ground"** is a phrase which generally refers to deployed members of the military, and uses "boots" as a metonym for soldiers.
- A **"head count"** is when somebody determines the number of people in a particular place—"head" stands in for people (and, thus, it's also a synecdoche, since a head is a part of a person).
- To **"lend a hand"** isn't literally to let someone borrow a part of your body. "Hand" is a metonym for helping, since hands are closely associated with labor.
- **"From the cradle to the grave"** is a common expression that means the whole of a person's life—"cradle" stands in for birth, and "grave" for death.

Metonymy Examples in Political Language

Metonymy is particularly common in speaking and writing about politics, especially within the media. This popularity may stem from the fact that metonymy allows for the replacement of long or complicated ideas with simpler (and shorter) stand-ins, and writing concisely is always a goal of journalists.

- If **"The White House declined to comment"** were understood literally, then it wouldn't be newsworthy—a building is always silent. But when used as it is in the example, "The White House" refers to the President of the United States (or the President and the President's staff), rather than to the building.
- Similarly, in England, **"Downing Street"** (a reference to the Prime Minister's residence at 10 Downing Street in London) is typically meant to stand in for the Prime Minister and his or her staff.
- **"No news from Capitol Hill"** doesn't literally refer to a lack of news from the neighborhood surrounding the United States Capitol Building. It refers to a quiet day from the U.S. Congress, which assembles in the Capitol Building on Capitol Hill.

Metonymy in Songs

Metonymy is also often found in song lyrics. This is, in part due to the fact that associative thinking is at the heart of the creative process, in part because an unexpected word can be so evocative, and also because being able to use one word to stand in for another can be convenient for rhyme.

Metonymy in "Juicy" by Notorious B.I.G

In "Juicy," Notorious B.I.G. raps:

> Now I'm in the limelight 'cause I rhyme tight

Here he's using "limelight" as a metonymy for fame (a "limelight" was a kind of spotlight used in old theaters). Biggie's use of metonymy here also sets him up for a sweet rhyme.

Metonymy in "Ebony and Ivory" by Paul McCartney and Stevie Wonder

Paul McCartney and Stevie Wonder's duet "Ebony and Ivory" has the chorus:

> Ebony and ivory
> Live together in perfect harmony
> Side by side on my piano keyboard
> Oh lord, why don't we?

These lyrics contain a double metonymy in which colors (ebony and ivory, or black and white) stand in simultaneously for piano keys and race relations.

Metonymy in "Hey Jude" by The Beatles

In another Beatles-related example, the song "Hey Jude" contains the line:

> Remember to let her into your heart.

Obviously, Paul McCartney doesn't mean this literally when he sings it—he's not advising someone to go find a surgeon. Since the heart is closely associated with love, the line uses metonymy to remind Jude not to close himself off to love.

Metonymy Examples in Literature

Metonymy is one of the most commonly-used literary devices in both poetry and prose.

Metonymy in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*

Perhaps the most iconic use of metonymy in literature comes from Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, when Mark Antony says:

> Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears

Here Mark Antony is using "ears" to refer to the act of listening—he's asking everyone to pay attention to his speech.

Metonymy in John Keats "Ode to a Nightingale"

In "Ode to a Nightingale," John Keats writes the phrase:

> O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been
> Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,

Keats is using "vintage" to mean wine, since a wine's vintage (or how old it is) is one of its essential attributes. Also, note how Keats use of metonymy here allows him to preserve the poem's meter, which is iambic pentameter. Keats' use of "vintage" instead of "wine" allows

the line to weigh in at ten syllables, preserving the proper rhythm of stressed and unstressed syllables.

Metonymy in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

In the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain (writing in Huck Finn's voice) often uses the metonym "body" to mean "person." For example:

- "He said he reckoned a body could reform the ole man with a shot-gun maybe"
- "I went and told the Widow about it, and she said the thing a body could get by praying for it was 'spiritual gifts'."

These uses of metonymy help to characterize Huck as somebody who speaks idiomatically rather than in standard English. That Huck's use of metonymy here makes him seem more authentically like a poor kid from the American South in pre-Civil War days also emphasizes how common metonymy is in everyday speech.

🛠 WHY WRITERS USE IT

Writers use metonymy for many reasons. Sometimes it's to find a poetic way to say something that would otherwise be plain or quotidian, much like a restaurant makes its food sound fancy by metonymically calling it a "dish." Other times a writer might seek to convey an abstract concept (like love or birth) through a concrete image (a heart or a cradle). The above examples from John Keats and Notorious B.I.G. show that writers—particularly poets—sometimes use metonymy to help preserve rhythm or rhyme. Similarly, a writer could use metonymy to enhance the sound of a passage through devices, such as assonance, alliteration, or sibilance. For example, if you wanted to open a dog spa, the alliterative and metonymic "Pampered Paws" would be a much better name than "Pampered Dogs."

More abstractly, though, metonymy is an example of the kind of associative thinking that allows literature to capture and express the complicated and non-literal experience of life. As a form of figurative language, metonymy is a way to get words to mean more than they normally would by layering figurative meanings and associations onto a word's literal meaning. Metonymy, then, helps to add complexity and mystery—it helps to add life—to works of literature.

🌐 OTHER RESOURCES

- **The Wikipedia page on Metonymy** has more examples of metonymy, a discussion of metonymy in ancient rhetoric, and an introduction to the importance of metonymy in 20th century critical theory.
- **The Dictionary Definition of Metonymy:** Includes a bit on the etymology of metonymy (spoiler: it's derived from an ancient Greek word meaning "a changing of name").

- **wiseGEEK** explains some concepts related to metonymy, including its specific use in Old English (Anglo-Nordic)poetry.

- If you want to dive deep, this website gives an overview of the "Four Master Tropes," Kenneth Burke's famous literary theory of figures of speech. Metonymy features prominently in Burke's theory, and the explanation gives a good overview of the differences between different types of figurative language.

HOW TO CITE

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