

Within-culture variation in English sports metaphors: A window to history, culture, and national identity?

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- (1) Around the table were representatives of some twenty countries. There were two people from the UK, two from the USA, and one from Australia, with the others all from countries where English was either a second (official) language or a foreign language. The lingua franca of the meeting was English, and everyone seemed to be using the language competently – even the native speakers. We were well into the discussion period following a paper which had generated a lively buzz of comment and counter-comment. Someone then made a telling remark. There was a silence round the table, which was broken by one of the US delegates observing: ‘That came from out in left field.’ There was another silence, and I could see some of the delegates turning to their neighbours in a surreptitious way, as one does when one does not understand what on earth is going on, and wants to check that one is not alone. But they were not pondering the telling remark. They were asking each other what ‘from out in left field’ meant. My neighbour asked me: as a native speaker, he felt confident I would know. I did not know. Baseball at that time was a closed book to me – and still is, very largely.
- One of the braver of the delegates spoke up: ‘Out where?’, he asked. It took the US delegate by surprise, as plainly he had never had that idiom questioned before; but he managed to explain that it was a figure of speech from baseball, a ball coming from an unusual direction, and what he had meant was that the remark was surprising, unexpected. There were nods of relief from around the table. Then one of the UK delegates chipped in: ‘You played that with a straight bat’, he said. ‘Huh?’, said the American. ‘Oh, I say, that’s not cricket’, I added, parodically. ‘Isn’t it?’, asked a delegate from Asia, now totally confused. The next few minutes of the meeting were somewhat chaotic. The original theme was quite forgotten, as people energetically debated the meaning of cricket and baseball idioms with their neighbours. Those who could added their own local version of how they said things like that in their part of the world – the sports metaphors they lived by. (Crystal 2003: 186f.)
- (2) “baseball, as our most venerable national sport, has something to tell us about the American mind. More specifically, in its complex representations of time, space, and action, baseball models important tensions in mainstream American culture between communitarian and individualistic values. And, in turn, baseball provides a source domain for modeling other areas of life where analogous tensions are experienced.” (Shore 1996: 75f.)
- (3a) “Nobody would argue the place of sports in American life; they are big business. And they are big business because they fit philosophically with the widely accepted American dream of open competition in a free market economy. Americans believe in competition, foster it, and encourage it. They live by its rules. No wonder the language of athletic competition has found its way as metaphor into every aspect of American life.” (Hardaway 1976: 78)
- (3b) “an underlying metaphor for life in the United States is LIFE IS PLAYING A GAME” [...] playing results in attaining the American middle-class ideal of investing our lives in competitive, risky activity that might reap rewards of enjoyment, self-esteem, and survival. We prove our worth and gain our identity through winning games. To Americans, “TO LIVE IS TO PLAY”. (Ching 1993: 43, 46)
- (4a) Any list of the top ten British grumbles about the current state of the English language would certainly have to include the complaint that linguistically, as in other respects, Britain is turning into an outpost of the USA. [...] Meanwhile our political leaders, who should surely be flying the flag for British English even if nobody else can be bothered, have been taken to task for allowing their discourse to be invaded by baseball metaphors, like ‘three strikes and you’re out’ and ‘stepping up to the plate’. As one critic of this rhetorical trend sagely observed, ‘hardly anyone in Britain understands the rules of baseball’. [...] if British politicians are going to reach for sporting metaphors, why not take them from a British sport? George Bush wouldn’t dream of addressing his fellow Americans in the language of cricket, or even what we call football and he calls soccer. For Blair or Blunkett to invoke a game their audience neither plays nor follows seems slavish – a linguistic enactment of the transatlantic ‘special relationship’ which many people feel has become more like a teenage crush, embarrassingly lacking in both discretion and reciprocity. (Cameron 2005: 102)

- (4b) Last week, the defence secretary, John Hutton, said that it was time for our European allies "to step up to the plate" and send more of their troops to Afghanistan. How distressing to see a man who shares a surname with one of England's greatest cricketers using a baseball metaphor so lazily when our own national games offer so many richer ones. People seem to be "stepping up to the plate" at an ever increasing rate these days. Guests on the Today programme, pundits on Newsnight - everyone wants to do it. Last year, there were 341 references in the national media to this term, an increase on the previous year and well up from 307 in 2006. [...]
This is not meant as a defence of cricket against American sporting imperialism. [...] But there must be sporting metaphor equivalence between nations. Only when Hillary Clinton, the incoming US secretary of state, starts talking about last wicket stands or first elevens will it be permissible to step up to any plate or throw any curveball. (Campbell 2009)
- (5a) Baseball has invaded the Australian language without most of the population ever having seen a game. Only Australians over 60 continue to derive imagery from our own sports: sticky wicket, playing a straight bat, hit for six, a free kick, dropping a catch and, at funerals: "Well, he had a good innings." The rest of us are more in tune with politicians promoting a "three strikes you're out" crime policy; businessmen talking about "ballpark figures" or "a whole new ball game"; surprises coming "out of left field"; and acquaintances wanting to "touch base" or asking for a "rain check" if they can't. [...] So let's dump cricket and make baseball our national summer sport. Then the way we live will catch up with the way we talk. (Dale 2004)
- (5b) Two weeks ago I asked readers to suggest topical modern variations on such classic Aussie expressions as "a few sandwiches short of a picnic" and "ugly as a hatful of a***holes". [...] Alert reader Morris Graham made this observation: "I fear that in hunting for a modern National Metaphor you are looking for a needle in a haystack, even flogging a dead horse. True, these were common, but not Australian, expressions, but if ever there was anything poetic in Australian language it has been replaced by foreign images. "You might expect some local colour from Australia's most dominant interest, sport, but the cliches are from baseball, not cricket: 'out of left field', 'ballpark figure'. Lleyton Hewitt was reported in a Davis Cup match as 'stepping up to the plate'. (Dale 2007)
- (6a) Several readers have commented on lazy (and at times imported) English, routinely passed off as clever shorthand in media outlets various. [...] Likewise, many correspondents deplore "step up to the plate", and we can only concur. We do not step up to the plate in this country. We "stride to the crease". (*Sydney Morning Herald*, June 18, 2008)
- (6b) "Following on from 'stepping up to the plate'," continues a relentless Morris Graham, of Georgetown, "another two un-Australian terms that should be allowed to pass through to the keeper are 'out of left field' and 'ball-park figure'." We agree, but wonder if we run the risk of being unnecessarily parochial here. It's fun to borrow the odd phrase, have our evil way with it, and turn it into something we own. But, hmm ... the point remains moot, does it not? (*Sydney Morning Herald*, June 20, 2008)

(7) METAPHORICAL EXPRESSION EXAMINED IN THE PRESENT STUDY

BASEBALL

1. *(throw) a curve(ball)* - "unexpected, surprising, even deceptive event"
As the Oscars roll towards us, the Berlin film festival has **thrown the world a curveball** by picking as best film the most thoroughly anti-Hollywood offering you can imagine. [*The Guardian* (London), Feb 20, 2009]
2. *step up to the plate* - "take on or accept a challenge or responsibility"
Some of our senators and representatives say the Iraqis should **step up to the plate** and reconcile their differences; others say we made the mess and we should stay in Iraq until there is a return to stability. [*New York Times* (USA), Apr 10, 2008]
3. *be off base* - "be completely wrong"
But, unfortunately, the party's assessment of its own strength is way **off base**. [*Hindustan Times* (India), Feb 8, 2009]
4. *out P left field* - with *in*: "a state or position far from the mainstream"; "not knowing what's happening"; with *off from*: "a source of the unexpected or illogical"
Kerry Keady, a solicitor representing three leaseholders, said the revoking of leases "came completely **out of left field**". [*Sydney Morning Herald* (Australia), Feb 15, 2008]

5. *have two/three strikes against* - “condition or situation that makes it extremely difficult to be successful”
When Jesus Montero, 28, immigrated from Peru six years ago to join his mother and begin a new life in New York, he had **three strikes against him**. Mr. Montero is deaf, he cannot speak, and he reads only "a little Spanish and less English," he said last month through a sign-language interpreter. [*New York Times* (USA), July 8, 2007]

CRICKET

1. *a sticky wicket* - “difficult or tricky situation”
The Assam Government is on a **sticky wicket** by not holding Panchayat elections within five years of its constitution as provided under Article 243(E)(3) of the Constitution of India. [*Hindustan Times* (India), Mar 17, 2007]
2. *(just) not cricket* - “unfair or unjust”
Gentlemen's agreements ought to be sacrosanct and the behaviour of the Russian leader was **just not cricket**. [*The Observer* (UK), July 22, 2007]
3. *V a straight bat* - “offer a noncommittal or evasive answer to a question”
On immigration, Ms Smith has **played a very straight bat** - acknowledging concerns about east European migration but stressing the benefits it has brought. [*The Guardian* (UK), June 29, 2007]
4. *have a good innings* - “having spent a long time doing smth., having had a long, successful life”
None of my immediate family has died early and my grandparents all **had reasonably good innings**, except for my paternal grandfather who died of a heart attack in his 60s. [*The Guardian* (UK), Dec 9, 2008]
5. *hit for six* - “score a big success”, “being astonished or amazed by smth.”, “being devastated”
The corporate regulator has had its landmark lawsuit against the world's biggest bank **hit for six** after it failed to prove the very basis of its case. [*Sydney Morning Herald* (Australia), June 29, 2007]

FOOTBALL/SOCCER

1. *play it safe* - “act carefully, avoid risks”
Michael Davison, super policy adviser at CPA Australia, says that in the past advisers would tell their clients to **play it safe** by limiting their investment to equity warrants and instalments. [*Sydney Morning Herald* (Australia), Dec 12, 2007]
2. *V an own goal* - “creating a problem by achieving the opposite effect from what was intended”
The Liberal Democrat's home affairs spokesman, Chris Huhne, said: "It beggars belief that the government could have **scored such a devastating own goal** on the very day that it was pushing draconian counter-terrorism laws through parliament." [*The Guardian* (UK), June 12, 2008]
3. *V the back of the net* - “be successful”
As Lev's Irish landlord Christy says, with some prescience: 'Life's a feckin' football match to the Brits now. They didn't used to be like this, but now they are. If you can't get your ball **in the back of the net**, you're no one.' [*The Observer*, (UK), June 10th, 2007]
4. *V the ball rolling* - “start smth. happening”
In 2001, King Jigme Singhye Wangchuck **set the ball rolling** for Bhutan's transformation from an absolute monarchy to a parliamentary democracy, which led to a new draft constitution. [*Hindustan Times* (India), Jan 1, 2008]
5. *V the goalposts* - “change the rules, limits etc for something while someone is trying to do something, making it more difficult for them”
As they try to play the game in a situation of constantly **shifting goal posts**, South Africa's mining companies are about to take some tough strategic decisions. [*Sunday Times* (South Africa), Feb 03, 2008]

(8) PHRASEOLOGICAL VARIABILITY OF METAPHORICAL EXPRESSIONS

- a) Perhaps it's time for a literateuse to **hobble up to the plate**. [*NYT*, Aug 3, 2008]
- b) Germans tend to be the strait-laced, **play-it-safe types** in financial matters. [*NYT*, Oct 4, 2008]
- c) Scolari was not up for talking yesterday, sending Ray Wilkins to **straight-bat queries** about dressing-room dissent. [*The Observer*, Dec 7, 2008]
- d) The nominations, considered important Oscar tea leaves despite their occasional **out-of-left-field nature**, were fairly predictable in the acting categories and spread the love around, with no one film dominating as has happened in the past. [*NYT*, Dec 12, 2008]

- e) Hunt-Davis, a tall, courtly grey-haired gent, **played the deadest of straight bats** to the questioning of how much he knew, though periodically, under cross examination by Michael Mansfield QC, Al Fayed's counsel, he looked as though he was thinking longingly of the Gurkhas' lethal kukri knife. [*The Guardian*, Dec 14, 2007]
- f) It's the most polarising hip-hop album of the year. Kanye West's sparse, blunt and shockingly earnest newly released album, Heartbreak, is one of this year's **musical curveballs**. [*Sydney Morning Herald*, Dec 5, 2008]
- g) Round a small table with Brown, I saw him consider the warnings of Treasury officials and of Tony Blair who argued child poverty was proving so costly to tackle that **the statistical goalposts ought to be shifted**. [*The Guardian*, Apr 19, 2008]
- h) Tonight the club and label celebrates it's ninth birthday, so expect aural party poppers and dancefloor jelly and ice cream as Master At Work Louie Vega **gets the Latin house ball rolling** with a super-sized set. [*The Guardian*, Jan 31, 2009]

(9) USE OF METAPHORICAL EXPRESSIONS ACROSS SPORT TYPES

- a) American Michael Phelps **got the ball rolling**, smashing Ian Thorpe's 200m freestyle record to claim gold. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, Mar 28, 2007)
- b) Yet, it wasn't all Williams's work. Safina **scored some own goals**, starting with three double faults in her first service game. (*Sun Herald*, Feb 1, 2009)
- c) In order to advance from a heat, many surfers take what waves they can catch and **play it safe** for sure points. (*NYT*, Nov 27, 2007)
- d) After the week Craig Pickering has had - winning his second major 100metres senior international meet in Ostrava following victory at the European Cup last weekend - the 20-year-old Bath sprinter says **the goalposts keep changing** as he prepares for his next race, the IAAF Grand Prix in Athens, tomorrow evening. (*The Observer*, July 1, 2007)
- e) Understandably, McClaren **played a straight bat**, and would only repeat that he had picked a team to beat Estonia in next week's qualifier. (*The Guardian*, May 28, 2007)
- f) Football: Championship: Wolves' promotion hopes **hit for six** but omens may provide comfort (*The Guardian*, Apr 2, 2007)
- g) The sport's leaders will be hoping that Jamaica's Asafa Powell or America's Tyson Gay can **step up to the plate** in the 100m to help bring these championships alive. (*The Observer*, Aug 26, 2007)
- h) The first was the decision, made not in haste before the Wellington Test but in the immediate aftermath of New Zealand's first-innings 470 in Hamilton, to drop not just Steve Harmison but, **straight out of left field**, Matthew Hoggard as well. (*The Guardian*, Mar 27, 2008)

(10a) LAST week, the greatest sporting event of the year in terms of audience began in Jamaica, when the West Indies beat Pakistan in the inaugural match of the 2007 Cricket World Cup. [...] The party will be attended by a raucous group of Indians and Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Brits, Australians and Zimbabweans. But of course there will be no Americans. No, it's not a case of ethnic discrimination. Call it willful ignorance. Americans have about as much use for cricket as Lapps have for beachwear. The fact that elsewhere in the civilized world grown men dress up like poor relations of Gatsby and venture hopefully into the drizzle clutching their bats invariably mystifies my American friends. And the notion that anyone would watch a game that, in its highest form, could take five days and still end in a draw provokes widespread disbelief among results-oriented Americans. [...] In any event, nothing about cricket seems suited to the American national character: its rich complexity, the infinite possibilities that could occur with each delivery of the ball, the dozen different ways of getting out, are all patterned for a society of endless forms and varieties, not of a homogenized McWorld. They are rather like Indian classical music, in which the basic laws are laid down but the performer then improvises gloriously, unshackled by anything so mundane as a written score.



(10b) It's unfortunate that an under secretary general of the United Nations would exhibit such disrespect and distaste for another culture on the ground that we don't agree with his sport of choice. Cricket has failed to interest patrons in the United States - but it's just a game. It certainly doesn't warrant a thinly veiled attack on our national character. Perhaps, when we cast off the shackles of British colonialism, we decided to toss out our oppressors' oppressively boring hobby, too. Mr. Tharoor, we, too, have a rich, complex history and also exist in a world of limitless possibilities. That is not a right of cricket fanciers alone. (Jared Roddy, St. Paul)

Shashi Tharoor not only insults "the American national character" to glorify cricket but also draws the analogy between "the dozen different ways of getting out" in that sport versus America's supposed "homogenized McWorld." Never mind that America's history is a tapestry of immigration and diversity. By the way, there are many more than 12 ways to get out in baseball [...]. (Paul Sussman, Rye Brook, N.Y.)

If, as it seems, Shashi Tharoor's goal was to make me feel stupid for preferring baseball to cricket, he would have been better served had he not included the following: "Cricket is better suited to a country like India, where a majority of the population still consults astrologers." (Tom Hitchner, Irvine, Calif.)

("Not Very Cricket, Is It?" Letters to the editor, *New York Times*, March 24, 2007)

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