

**Karolina KUROWSKA**Institute of English Philology  
University of Rzeszów

**‘DID HE GET TO SECOND BASE?’  
– BASEBALL METAPHOR AS A MEANS OF DESCRIBING  
THE DEGREE OF PHYSICAL INTIMACY IN THE FIFTY  
SHADES TRILOGY**

**Introduction**

All kinds of sexual activities are tabooed, not only as a topic for public exhibition but also as a subject for private discussion. Obviously, many human limitations are due to the standards of the society in which people live, yet, we need sex to survive and to ensure the multiplication of the species. One may argue, however that in modern times, sexual activities are often associated with hedonistic pleasures and other kinds of social purposes. Often because of immense prudery, most individuals apply various figurative expressions to disguise their seemingly impure thoughts. One of the most popular devices to do so is *metaphor*. Although there are plenty of phrases available, Lakoff (1987: 415) observes that the English language has no metaphors for healthy sexual relations. The most frequently used domains for comprehending sexual activities are HUNGER, ANIMALS, GAMES, WAR, to name just a few, whereas the SPORT domain constitutes one of the most unusual sources of conceptualisations.

As many researchers emphasise, metaphor is not only a feature of language, and it is not only a feature of language and thought, either. Kövecses (2010: 311), for instance, observes that “metaphor is a widely distributed phenomenon that encompasses all our cultural reality – including material culture and physical events”. It shapes not just our communication, but also the way we think and act. What is more, making sense of the surrounding world cannot take place without metaphor. Dobrovolskij and Piirainen (2005: 142) add that metaphor is not a mere instrument of naming, but it constitutes a significant means of con-

ceptualising the world. It also stands out as the principal device in cultural constructions. For this reason, a brief theoretical overview of this complex mechanism will be helpful in further analysis.

## Theoretical Background

The most influential accounting for the use theory of figurative language, called *The Cognitive Theory of Metaphor*, was initiated by Reddy in 1979, and has been developed mainly by George Lakoff, Mark Johnson and several other researchers (Dobrovolskij and Piirainen 2005: 121). The very framework of *Conceptual Metaphor*<sup>1</sup> was first proposed by the aforementioned scholars in 1980 with the publication of their book *Metaphors We Live By*. It constituted one of the earliest theoretical constructs considered as part of cognitive semantics, and it laid the groundwork for a great number of theoretical works written using the cognitive approach<sup>2</sup> (Evans and Green 2006: 286).

According to Lakoff and Johnson (2003), what makes metaphors conceptual rather than purely linguistic, is the fact that the motivation for the metaphor exists in the level of conceptual domains<sup>3</sup>. This means that people not only speak metaphorically, but they also think in metaphorical categories. What is more, an enormous advantage that the conceptual metaphor theory possesses, in comparison with other similar theories, is its focus on the motivation for metaphors. Tendahl (2009: 121) makes it evident that only this particular theory has made an attempt to answer the question of why people use certain metaphors and what is the main reason for choosing particular domains. Similarly, Grady (1999: 80) observes that most of the conventional metaphorical associations must be subject to some logical principles, which are “due to either something about the human organism – for instance, the metaphoric correspondences are innate and hard-wired into our cerebral structure – or the patterns must arise from something about our experiences, or possibly both.”

To sum up, Dobrovolskij and Piirainen (2005: 122) state that the phenomenon of metaphor started to be considered as “one of the basic principles of human cognition”. Metaphors regularly affect a large portion of our ordinary lan-

---

<sup>1</sup> The very name *conceptual metaphor* comes from the observation that “domains of experience are represented in the mind as concepts given as mental frames, or cognitive models” (Kövecses 2015: 2).

<sup>2</sup> See for instance: Croft and Cruse (2004), Geeraerts (2006), Kövecses (2005).

<sup>3</sup> The source domain is the one that is usually more physical and better known. Conversely, the target domain is typically considered as more abstract and less directly experienced. These observations make intuitive sense, if we want to understand an abstract concept, it is clearly advisable to use another concept that is more physical and tangible (Kövecses 2010: 7).

guage and they frequently structure our everyday experiences (Geeraerts 2010: 204). There is a clear idea shared by all members of a speech community that what is literally said differs significantly from what is meant, and that there must be a correlation between the two concepts. Consequently, metaphors are abundant in many works of literature, not only as ornamental devices, but also as a means of directing and shaping the opinions of readers.

### **The phenomenon of the *Fifty Shades* Trilogy**

The *Fifty Shades* trilogy is a series of erotic romance novels written by the British writer E. L. James. The trilogy consists of: *Fifty Shades of Grey*, *Fifty Shades Darker* and *Fifty Shades Freed*. The novels have become a publishing phenomenon and are considered to be “the fastest selling adult novel of all time” (Williams, http). As most readers will recognise, the trilogy features Anastasia Steele, a young literature student who falls in love with Christian Grey, a troubled manipulative billionaire. It tells the tale of a dominant – submissive relationship full of sexual practices that very often involve bondage and sadism.

The books, despite their immense popularity, financial success and sympathetic reviews met with wide criticism<sup>4</sup>. They are undoubtedly controversial and evoke mixed feelings. Some people view the novels as pornographic material and an act of invalidation of feminism, in which women are seen as a mere tool to satisfy men's needs and desires. Others perceive them as an actual sign of progress of millions of women, who regardless of men, try to pursue their sexual fantasies. However, one thing is certain: “James's sex scenes are not incidental, they are the meat of the plot, the crux of the conflict, the key to at least one of and possibly both the central characters. It is a sex book. It is not a book with sex in it” (Williams, http). No wonder then that female readers are so interested in this story. It is liberating, addictive and it contains a lot of sex-related metaphors, a small portion of which will be presented and analysed in this article.

### **Baseball as a Sport Discipline**

Those interested in baseball know that it is a bat-and-ball game played between two teams who take their turns batting and fielding. It is a team sport played on a diamond-shaped field over a limited period of time (nine innings),

---

<sup>4</sup> Most critics focus on the poor literary qualities of the work. Williams (http) claims that the whole series could be characterised by the slack narrative, improbable dialogues and irritating characterisation.

where each team takes turns at being defensive and offensive (see Strecker 2014). The whole game actually revolves around two players: the pitcher and the batter (Hample 2007). The batting players attempt to score runs by hitting the ball that is thrown towards them by the pitcher, with a bat swung by the batter. If they manage to hit the ball within the field, and if the ball is not caught by the defensive team, they have to run counter-clockwise around a series of four stations called: first base, second base, third base, and home plate, and safely reach them in succession (Bonsor and Gesuato, http). A run is scored when a player returns to home plate.

Given the fact that many people are introduced to the baseball metaphor long before they even know what its symbolic language can refer to, it is easier for them to understand and notice the connections between the game and the act of sex. Using linguistic terminology, it can be assumed that the conceptual domain BASEBALL comprises such subdomains as: EQUIPMENT, PLAYERS, and ACTIONS/RULES. The conceptual metaphors, mappings and some interesting linguistic expressions realising the metaphor SEX IS BASEBALL<sup>5</sup> are presented in the following part.

### **Baseball as a Concealing Mechanism to Talk about Sex<sup>6</sup>**

With the help of figurative language, sex can be depicted as a hedonistic activity through the source domains of SPORT and GAME in general. Many men are indisputably obsessed with sports and they match and integrate the sporting spirit with their lives and personal relationships, even with sex itself. Since both domains are closely linked to entertainment, a sexual encounter may be interpreted, by many, as an innocent and pleasurable pastime in which the notion of having fun is transferred into the sex domain. Nevertheless, the baseball metaphor<sup>7</sup> can also be perceived as a forceful activity, which has nothing to do with mutual desire and mutual respect.

The rules of the game of baseball clearly resemble the sexual scenario and convey the sexual values of most western cultures. As can be generally observed

---

<sup>5</sup> Traditionally conceptual metaphors are written in capital letters, while for the metaphorical linguistic expressions that realise them lower case is used.

<sup>6</sup> As mentioned earlier, the concealing mechanism of baseball is also employed to talk about other complex phenomena like: family (Sommer and Weiss 1996: 168), competition, mistakes and failures (Sommer and Weiss 1996: 401).

<sup>7</sup> Sports metaphors appear only in the third part of the trilogy, at the beginning of Chapter Seven and they refer to one particular scene in which the main characters have a conversation about Ana's previous sexual partners (James 2012: 127–139). Although the passage is very short, the metaphor that appears in it constitutes an unusual source of vivid sexual associations and allows some ambiguous interpretations.

in a variety of different sport disciplines, there are two basic mappings between the domains of SPORT and SEX. In the first one, the game corresponds to sexual activity, while in the second, people who are engaged in a sexual encounter can be compared to people playing. In the case of baseball, two opposing teams, in which one tries to gain runs, and the other one tries to prevent them from being scored, are respectively a man and a woman. The enormous value that is placed on *getting to a base*, reveals a deeply-rooted belief in people's views about sexual activities. In many cultures, men are expected to pursue their sexual desires, while women are supposed to avoid sex, but at the same time be prepared for their *bases* to be stolen. There are of course many other resemblances and shared features between the field of the game and the realm of lovemaking. The question asked by the main character of the novel: "What base did he get to?" (James 2012: 134), illustrates the essential conceptual metaphor HAVING SEX IS PLAYING BASEBALL, where different bases refer to the stages of having sex (i.e. different bases refer to different levels of physical intimacy). By asking this question, he tries to find out what the nature of Anastasia's relationship with her former boyfriend, Bradley, was, and what kind of sexual encounters they experienced together.

The second question asked by Christian in the analysed passage: "So, this Bradley – did he get to first base?" (James 2012: 134), refers to the KISSING IS GETTING TO FIRST BASE metaphor. In baseball, a hitter tries to reach first base and continue his progress to score a run. In the world of relationships, a kiss might be considered as the first base and can lead to the longer relationship or simply to the act of having sex with somebody<sup>8</sup>. The next metaphor depicted in the chapter is: TOUCHING IS GETTING TO SECOND BASE. The metaphorical expressions: "Did he get to second base?" (James 2012: 135), and "Did he make it past second base?" (James 2012: 135) pertain to the questions about skin-to-skin touching and petting. In the passage described, Ana admits that she only kissed with her previous partners and the very thought leads Christian to seduce Anastasia and shortly afterwards they make love. During the intercourse, another meaningful expression emerges: "Home run" (James 2012: 137), which may be taken as an example of conceptual metaphor: FULL SEXUAL INTERCOURSE IS A HOME RUN<sup>9</sup>. Literally, the home run belongs to baseball terminology<sup>10</sup> and is scored when the ball is hit over the outfield wall and the hitter is

---

<sup>8</sup> The perceived similarity concerns the fact that just as the batter needs to score a run by getting onto the first base, the lover who wants to have some success in dating must go through the first stage, that is kissing. In such a case, he or she is said to get to first base.

<sup>9</sup> A similar interpretation is illustrated in Wilkinson (2002: 928–929), and in Downer (<http>).

<sup>10</sup> A *home run* is considered to be the best possible hit that a batter can make. Interestingly, the expression *home run* very often refers to a highly successful operation or anything that is a great success for a person or group.

allowed to freely circle the bases and reach home plate at once, without any interference from the defensive team (Bonsor and Gesuato, http). Scoring the run constitutes the ultimate goal of the game and is undoubtedly associated with the act of copulation itself, where managing to have sex can be regarded as the ultimate goal of the date.

Essentially, baseball is a strictly organised game, where there is no opportunity for spontaneity. The players must follow a specific pattern of play and they are not allowed to skip bases or to run in different directions (i.e. they are assigned with specific tasks). In sex that usually means following a script of sexual practices and behaviour. Reaching each base and moving on to the next is what modern cultures value most. However, an exception to the abovementioned statement can be found in the book: “You know, we completely bypassed third base” (James 2012: 137), and “Let’s go to bed. We can cover third base there” (James 2012: 138), which serve as examples of the last metaphor: ORAL STIMULATION IS GETTING TO THIRD BASE. It can be acknowledged that since it denotes *oral sex*, its position is by no means accidental. This is admittedly not a novel issue, as the third base for both sex and baseball is definitely better than the second and the first one. Although baseball metaphor presents a hierarchy of sexual activities, the implication for real life can be different – sometimes some stages of a sexual scenario can simply be omitted.

In view of this, it should be once again emphasised that there are a number of correspondences and mappings<sup>11</sup> between the domain of SEX and that of BASEBALL in the metaphors presented. Below a more elaborate schematic description of some of them is portrayed:

<b>Source: BASEBALL</b> <sup>12</sup>	➡	<b>Target: SEX</b>
players	➡	lovers
first base	➡	kissing
second base	➡	touching
third base	➡	oral stimulation
home run	➡	full sexual intercourse

---

<sup>11</sup> The baseball metaphor also conveys additional correspondences, known as entailments, such as: *strikeout* – a failure to engage in foreplay or some other sexual activity; *playing for the other team* – an indication that a person is homosexual; *playing for both teams* – an indication that a person is bisexual, etc. Yet, the most interesting example constitutes *swinging the bat* as a metaphorical way of referring to masturbation. Although in order to play baseball one needs an opponent to play against, first a player must do some practise before going on the pitch and gain some useful experience. When we think of sex as a game, masturbation is like a training session; an act in which one learns about the moves, rules, and most of all about the equipment.

<sup>12</sup> *Cosmopolitan* goes even further by providing the elaborated glossary for modern sexual bases (see Breslaw, http).

Such simple concepts as sporting games, and baseball, in particular, allow people to describe the complicated notion of sex without the need to use scientific or direct terms. They are very helpful in avoiding the accompanying taboo and in stretching human conceptual boundaries.

At first glance, SPORT and GAME metaphors<sup>13</sup> focus predominantly on one aspect of sex which sees it as something pleasurable and enjoyable. The element of fun mentioned in the analysed quotations emphasises the most playful elements of sexual connection. Carrying out a deeper analysis, however, one may notice, that they have the potential to implicitly degrade the sexual act. The reduction of sexuality to the level of a sport and game may evoke some negative associations in which sex is an activity devoid of affection and intimacy. Consequently, such baseball metaphor can reinforce aggressive and competitive attitudes of men towards women, making it a poor model for viewing sexuality, though it is deeply embedded, transmitted, and frequently emphasised in contemporary media discourse.

## Conclusions

The puzzles of conceptual metaphors have many pieces and constitute an appealing way to refer to delicate issues, especially in the area of lovemaking. The analysis of some of the figurative language that is used in the book to cope with taboos provides insights into the way such taboo topics are understood within a cultural group, and it also makes it possible to gain access to different attitudes and values that are somewhat involuntarily communicated through conceptual metaphors. Although the taboo of sex is still very strong in most societies and although it still imposes certain restrictions, especially in open discussion, the notion of sex is no longer limited to implicit and vague references. As James proves in her books, the silence on sexual topics is not a common phenomenon nowadays. Sometimes it is not important how much certain subjects are forbidden, people refer to them anyway, and the cognitive device of conceptual metaphor is here extremely helpful.

One has to bear in mind, however, that the use of different types of metaphors often carries the risk of offence, discrimination and degradation of certain values<sup>14</sup>. The baseball model of talking about sex became so widespread, especially in contemporary media that people rarely notice its influence and the message it carries. They constantly talk about *getting to different bases*, *hitting a home run* or *scoring* yet, they are not aware of the influence such expressions

---

<sup>13</sup> For more examples and metaphorical associations consult St. Clair (2002).

<sup>14</sup> This suggestion goes hand in hand with what Aran (http) writes on the subject.

may have on the way they perceive the opposite sex. Like any team game, baseball has an oppositional character where only one team can win. By comparing it to sexual acts, one partner, usually a woman, loses her status, while the other partner, usually a man, gains respect in the male environment. Such a way of perceiving male and female relationships may serve as an example of gender inequality. In addition, baseball only moves in one direction. Going backwards is not an option in this particular sport discipline. When the contemporary sexual culture is built on models and assumptions derived from the game of baseball there is little room for open communication about feelings, needs and desires. Although the baseball metaphor remains open to interpretation, many elucidations focus around placing lovers in opposing teams against each other. Such a model assumes that full intercourse is the only goal of an intimate encounter.

What is even more worrying is that people not only apply baseball terminology to euphemise or hide embarrassment, but also to dysphemise<sup>15</sup>. Sport metaphors address certain negative aspects and beliefs about sex, highlighting at the same time aggressive and competitive attitudes. The concept of baseball metaphor places the entire focus of a sexual act in a context of achievement. The player's ultimate goal is to gain all the bases and get to home plate and score another run in order to ensure his team a high position on the list of winners and respect among other players. The baseball conceptualisations make sex a selfish and individual sport. There is no space for the partner's enjoyment or sometimes even for consent<sup>16</sup> itself.

With regard to contemporary times, sex is certainly one of those activities that most humans spend a good portion of their lives imagining, doing or sometimes even regretting. Despite great efforts of philosophers, religious leaders and writers, sex and sexual desire still remain a forbidden fruit. Grothe's (2008: 202) remark: "We don't teach children about sex, after all, we tell them about the birds and the bees. And we don't have sex, we make love, go all the way, do the nasty, or simply do the deed" perfectly captures the complexity of the abovementioned statement. Moreover, suffice it is to mention here that such prudery is not only confined to everyday conversations but also to the sphere of literature. Although we should not go too far in drawing final conclusions, writers' choice of

---

<sup>15</sup> *Dysphemisms* are derogatory remarks, like name-calling or various curses, directed towards other people in order to insult them. An excellent explanation of the term is offered by Allan and Burridge (2006: 31) who state: "Roughly speaking, dysphemism is the opposite of euphemism and, by and large, it is tabooed. Like euphemism, it is sometimes motivated by fear and distaste, but also by hatred and contempt. Speakers resort to dysphemism to talk about people and things that frustrate and annoy them, that they disapprove of and wish to disparage, humiliate and degrade."

<sup>16</sup> Many researchers claim that the way people talk about sex contributes to rape culture, see e.g. Allsup (<http>).



metaphors is relevant, and it influences their readers and the way they conceptualise different phenomena. While some statements remain unnoticed, some of them shape the recipients' thought processes and may have a negative impact on the way sex and intimacy are perceived. Sometimes they also form human values and expectations, which might, in turn, determine some significant decisions and choices.

## Bibliography

- Allan K., Burrige K., 2006, *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language*, Cambridge.
- Allsup M., 2017, *Does The Way We Talk About Sex Contribute To Rape Culture?*, [online] <http://thelala.com/way-talk-sex-contribute-rape-culture/>, [19.11.2018].
- Aran I., 2015, *Let's Stop Comparing Sex to Baseball*, [online] <https://splinternews.com/lets-stop-comparing-sex-to-baseball-1793848121>, [04.03.2019].
- Bonsor K., Gesuato S., 2003, *How Baseball Works*, [online] <http://entertainment.howstuffworks.com/baseball.htm>, [19.11.2018].
- Breslaw A., 2013, *A Glossary of Modern Sexual Bases*, [online] <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/advice/a5198/the-modern-sexual-bases/>, [04.03.2019].
- Croft W., Cruse A., 2004, *Cognitive Linguistics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dobrovolskij D., Piirainen E., 2005, *Figurative Language: Cross-cultural and Cross-linguistic Perspectives*, Amsterdam.
- Downer A., 2018, *Baseball Sex Metaphors*, [online] <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/baseball-sex-metaphors>, [04.03.2019].
- Evans V., Green M., 2006, *Cognitive Linguistics: An Introduction*, Edinburgh.
- Geeraerts D. (ed.), 2006, *Cognitive Linguistics: Basic Readings*, Berlin.
- Geeraerts D., 2010, *Theories of Lexical Semantics*, Oxford.
- Grady J., 1999, *A Typology of Motivation for Conceptual Metaphor: Correlation versus Resemblance*, [in:] *Metaphor in Cognitive Linguistics*, R. Gibbs, G. Steen, Philadelphia: John Benjamins, pp. 79–100.
- Grothe M., 2008, *I Never Metaphor I Didn't Like: A Comprehensive Compilation of History's Greatest Analogies, Metaphors and Similies*, London.
- Hample Z., 2007, *Watching Baseball Smarter*, New York.
- James E. L., 2012, *Fifty Shades Freed*, London.
- Kövecses Z., 2005, *Metaphor in Culture*, Cambridge.
- Kövecses Z., 2010, *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction*, Second Edition, Oxford.
- Kövecses Z., 2015, *Where Metaphors Come From: Reconsidering Context in Metaphor*, Oxford.
- Lakhwani M., St. Clair R., 2014, *Communicating in English with Baseball Metaphors*, "Intercultural Communication Studies", XXIII: 3, 164–171.
- Lakoff G., Johnson M., 1980, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago.
- Lakoff G., 1987, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind*, Chicago.
- Lakoff G., Johnson M., 2003, *Metaphors We Live By*, Second edition, Chicago.
- Reddy M., 1979, *The Conduit Metaphor*, [in:] *Metaphor and Thought*, A. Ortony, Cambridge, pp. 284–297.

- Sommer E., Weiss D., 1996, *Metaphors Dictionary*, Canton.
- St. Clair R. N., 2002, *The Major Metaphors of Western Thought – Growth, Game, Language, Drama, Machine, Time and Space*. Lewiston, New York.
- Strecker T., 2014, *Understanding Baseball: A Textbook*, New York.
- Tendahl M., 2009, *A Hybrid Theory of Metaphor: Relevance Theory and Cognitive Linguistics*, New York.
- Wilkinson P.R., 2002, *Thesaurus of Traditional English Metaphors*, Second edition, London.
- Williams Z., 2012, *Why Women Love Fifty Shades of Grey*, [online] <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jul/06/why-women-love-fifty-shades-grey>, [19.11.2018].

‘DID HE GET TO SECOND BASE?’ – BASEBALL METAPHOR AS A MEANS  
OF DESCRIBING THE DEGREE OF PHYSICAL INTIMACY IN THE *FIFTY SHADES TRILOGY*

Summary

The main aim of this article is to demonstrate the mechanism of the SEX IS BASEBALL metaphor, and to focus on its motivation, as well as on its possibly degrading effect on modern society. The concept of *conceptual metaphor* proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and further discussed by other scholars constitutes one of the most expedient devices that can be applied in this kind of research.

**Key words:** baseball, sex, metaphor, base

"CZY UDAŁO MU SIĘ DOTRZEĆ DO DRUGIEJ BAZY?" – METAFORA BASEBALLOWA  
JAKO SPOSÓB OPISYWANIA STOPNIA FIZYCZNEJ BLISKOŚCI  
W TRYLOGII *PIĘĆDZIESIĄT TWARZY GREYA*

Streszczenie

Głównym celem artykułu jest przedstawienie mechanizmu metafory SEKS TO BASEBALL oraz uwypuklenie jej możliwie deprecjonującego wpływu na współczesne społeczeństwo. Koncepcja metafory pojęciowej zaproponowana przez Lakoffa i Johnsona (1980) i dalej rozwijana przez innych badaczy wydaje się być jednym z najpraktyczniejszych narzędzi używanych w tego typu badaniach.

**Słowa kluczowe:** baseball, seks, metafora, baza