

# Metonymy

## Corpus search Part 1

### Based on the Bank of English

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Corpus search for relevant examples from 2 possible sets of metonymic cases:

Set (A)

*'The White House...'*

*'The ham sandwich'*

*'The free ticket to the opera'*

Set (B)

*'She is just a pretty face'*

*'He is just a forehand'*

## Findings

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The main problem I have had with our first corpus based search on metonymy is that it is very difficult to see how one could go about and find occurrences of metonymic expressions in the corpus.

When we were interested in pragmatic adjustments of single words or collocations, things were much easier. We could use the word in question as a keyword and see what we will come up with. And in fact, in some cases, we found a number of terms occurring metonymically (or that's at least what we thought we the use of the term 'metonymy' we were using at the time). But with our current search, it is so much harder to find any occurrences of those metonymic utterances mentioned in the literature.

My search started with the second set of examples we agreed to investigate.

I singled out the sequence **He/ She+is+just+a+** hoping that it would occur in metonymic utterances of the 'he is just a forehand' or 'she is just a pretty face' type that we are interested in. Then I thought that it might also be useful to look at the sequence **He+ is+ only+ a+**. The utterances I found in the corpus made me think that these expressions might not be metonymic after all but simply metaphorical.

What were the grounds to assume that this set of examples is a case of metonymy?  
Take for instance the utterance

1. *'He is just a stepping stone after my separation'*.

In what ways is this different from or similar to our hypothetically metonymic examples of

2. 'He is just a forehand' or

3. 'She is just a pretty face'?

Can't we just account for these cases in the same way, i.e. in (1) the denotation of *STEPPING STONE* is broadened to *STEPPING STONE\** to include individuals to whom we rely/depend on after a separation, while in (2) and (3) the denotation of *FOREHAND* and *PRETTY FACE* is broadened to *FOREHAND\** and *PRETTY FACE\** to include tennis players whose only advantage is their forehand strike and women whose only merit is the looks of their face?

// Compare for example this set of cases with a rephrased version of the cases in our first set:

As we discussed, the 'ham sandwich' example would also be a case of metonymy if in an indefinite formation:

4. 'Table 7 is a ham sandwich, Table 8 a potato wedges'

hence we could imagine two waiters saying:

5.- 'So, table 7 is a ham sandwich, a potato wedges...'

6. - 'No! Table 7 is just a ham sandwich'

The phrase **he/she is just a** in (6) is used very differently to (2) and (3). In (6) the element of **contiguity** is present, in (2) and (3) it is not. In (6) there is no element of resemblance, in (2) and (3) there is.

At the next stage, I thought I should look for cases involving **definite descriptions**.

On the one hand, instances of metonymies such as 'The White House...' (1416 occurrences in the entire corpus), 'The House of Commons' (523 occurrences in the entire corpus) etc have become conventional expressions in the journalists jargon and are hence used very frequently.

On the other hand, the likelihood of finding any examples of metonymy using as a search term expressions like 'the ham sandwich' (0 occurrences), 'the free ticket to the opera' (0 occurrences) etc seemed very little. It is reasonable that one cannot expect to find these or similar expressions occurring verbatim in the corpus. At the same time the fact that metonymy is more often an one-off occurrence ('contiguity' and dependence on immediately accessible (often perceptual) context) makes metonymy sporadic rather than recurrent.

I therefore thought that a set of examples that could be more useful and adequate for a corpus search is **musical instruments**. => I then sat out to see if, when and how often, definite descriptions involving instrument terms are used metonymically.

I looked at **424 concordances** involving some musical instrument but found only a very very small number of potentially metonymic expressions; in some cases, without the assistance of the wider discourse context the description could initially be interpreted both ways (i.e. either referring to the instrument or the instrument player). As soon as I accessed the wider context it would either become clear that the referent was the instrument and the expression was conclusively non-metonymic or

the interpretation would remain inconclusive=> Hence from the expressions that I treat as potential metonymies none is -to my mind at least- an unequivocal metonymy.

A preliminary conclusion is that metonymy in the contexts investigated is used in a minute ratio. What could this mean?

My first thought would be that metonymies are used in a restricted range of contexts; like I said above, how likely is it to find in the corpus the description 'the ham sandwich' used in the context of a conversation between hectic waiters? This raises a practical problem for the corpus investigation: we know these metonymic utterances potentially exist but we don't know what strategy we could use to find instances of them in a limited corpus.

My way of addressing this (I attempted to find metonymies using the more flexible instrument terms) did not give any significant results either. Now, what could this mean?

First, note that even in those cases, in which the speaker could have as well used a metonymy, she doesn't. So in the sample investigated speakers prefer to say something along the lines of:

7. ...dancing--square dancing and the--the guy with the violin is calling out, you know, `allemande right and please...

8. ...were not there snivelling in the dark, the other one, the flute-player, could make no joyful music as the young riders

9. It's a learning process for the guitar player to hear Mister macp sing `With Or Without You'.

10. the handful of indifferent dancers, motions to the guitar player to give up his seat and his instrument...

11. she suggested we show our appreciation of the piano player's expertise on the keys by buying him a drink.

We could interpret this in 2 different ways. One way of approach is to see what would be different in the speaker's utterance if she had used a metonymy:

*'dancing--square dancing and the--the violin is calling out, you know, `allemande right and please...'*

OK, the speaker reduces production effort by uttering a 3-words shorter sentence. In parallel the hearer's effort increases in searching for the deferred referent of 'the violin'. But the speaker here does not seem to have a good enough reason to increase hearer's effort as

- a) no significant extra effects would result from using the metonymic expression to worth the hearer's extra effort and
- b) b) the circumstantial facts are such that we cannot see a reason why it would be so important for the speaker to reduce production effort --in contrast to the

standard 'ham sandwich' example (and assuming that the metonymy is uttered neutrally, without a trace of demeaning attitude towards the customer): here, the pressurized conditions of work in busy restaurants justify partially at least the waiter's need to reduce production effort.

In the standard 'free ticket to the opera' example, on the other hand, we deal with rather different circumstantial facts: i.e.

- a) we cannot see a reason why it would be so important for the speaker to reduce production effort but
- b) b) we can think of a range of implicated assumptions (e.g. reduction of the person referred to) that worth the hearer's extra effort to identify the referent.

What is characteristic about the utterances we found in our sample (I refer to the ones where the speaker chooses the longer non-metonymic version is that they occur in contexts marked by a combination of these 2 factors: the speaker is not under pressure to reduce production effort and presumably does not want to communicate any extra effects or achieve anything other than simply referring to the player of the musical instrument in question.

## Search

[based on Wordbanks, without alphabetical shorting and including all subcorpora]

**She+ is+ just+ a+**

### No metonymic uses

- is. on phone Yes I'm sure she is. Just a moment. It's This is in
- from life." Those who know her best believe that she is just a little more serene, a little less manic, but out there
- from life." Those who know her best believe that she is just a little more serene, a little less manic, but out there
- Elaine at a pyjama party last October, adding: `She is just a work friend pound; 50,000 snatch by bike;
- any trouble. I don't care what happens to him, but she is just a child." Infatuated Detectives say
- kids, said: `I don't care what happens to him. But she is just a child." 60 twirl girls hurt in pile-up; Accident;

**He+ is+ just+ a+**

### ?3 metonymic uses

- is the unstoppable winner in the race and says he is just a handful of votes short of the overall majority he
- militants on a typical day in the Kashmir Valley. He is just a shopkeeper, just a shopkeeper. He was taken, an

*He is >>>>> just <<<<<< a shopkeeper, just a shopkeeper. He was taken, an innocent person, he*

*is not a militant and he is not supporting the militancy. If the shopkeeper did not support the militants, it's hard to find anyone in the valley who does not sympathise with their*

- would insist on others being changed. Don't think he is just a good racing driver: he's good at whatever he does. He
- 40 a month. Every little helps Christie admits he is just a stand-in managing director, shifted from his post as
- ??? I have a plot and know what I am talking about. **He is just a windbag.** Lord Wallace of Coslany Windbag

*He is >>>>> just <<<<<< a windbag. <p> Lord Wallace of Coslany <p> <h> Windbag Jessel should stop spouting fertiliser; Letter </h> <p> THE suggestion by the pompous and overfed Mr Jessel that the poor should grow their own vegetables shows the utter contempt people like him*

- is set to make his debut this summer. Carson says: `He is just a big baby at the moment. He is bred for the Flat, but
- DAVID WALLACE, Newcastle. SHEARER never cheats. He is just a very good footballer who knows how to move around the

*He is >>>>> just <<<<<< a very good footballer who knows how to move around the box. BILL PROUDLOCK, Gateshead. THE way Shearer plays makes him a winner. He is a tough cookie and nobody has the right to say he is a cheat. TREVOR SQUIRES, Newcastle. HE TRIES hard and does*

- DAVID WALLACE, Newcastle ALAN SHEARER never cheats. He is just a very good footballer who knows how to move himself
- told me my feelings for him are infatuation, **that he is just a stepping stone** after my separation. But I love him.
- the block of flats where I live. But I am worried he is just a flirt. I am in my thirties and on my own with three
- in here for a quiet pint and is never any bother. **He is just a Jack the lad.** I cannot believe he is classed as a

*He comes in here for a quiet pint and is never any bother. He is >>>>> just <<<<<< a Jack the lad. I cannot believe he is classed as a Category C hooligan." Yeomans was NOT subject to a restriction order despite being a known job. A spokesman for the National Criminal Intelligence unit said that meant he had been free to go to*

## She+is+only+a

No matching occurrences

## He+ is+ only+ a

### ?3 interesting utterances but are they metonymic?

- a bank, he is guilty of aiding and abetting, but if he is only a bystander, he cannot be prosecuted, even if he does
- by prime ministers. There is a king, of course, but **he is only a totem.** Some say he is virtually a prisoner in his own
- a servant. Write that! The Midnight Eye claims he is only a servant." Of

what?" Of history. Of progress toward the

- like to be thought of as a proletarian paladin. But he is only a heterosexual waiter. Lightbown died while
- Ken Livingstone called the new party nutters"; even **he is only a tastefully pink defender of kindly things** like the
- Fowler in my team if he was not so expensive. He is only a young lad, but is scoring goals and is full of himself
- in close-up, giving him a detached presence as if **he is only a cypher of a wider national repression.**
- United, claiming: `It was not all down to Michael. He is only a young lad and some of the things being said to him on
- tell you week after week, month after month, that he is only a game or two away from match fitness. The ones who say

## Metonymic uses of names of musical instruments

### The + saxophone

18 occurrences,

No matching

All the examples where along the lines of:

- President is also rumoured to be planning to play the saxophone at a separate party. Insiders say the Prime Minister

### The + sax

9 occurrences,

No matching

???It's all moody dissonance and extravagant, hip-swinging drive, with Johnston gasping his lyrics and the sax doing a fine demented turn as a rubber duck having its neck wrung. <p> Jake On The Make has migraine-inducing keyboard and harmonica blasts and is guaranteed to bring on a panicky hot sweat, but the anxiety level drops for Not Before Time a perfect

### The + violin

88 occurrences,

2 matching (?)

- ???were leaning back at ease reading and smoking. **When the violin began to play** they pricked up their ears, got to their
- Good Fortune! md1 MDNM/ md1 MDNM/ md1 MDNM/ MDUL/**The violin rises and the stage dims out** MDNM/ md1 MDNM/ md1 MDNM/

*md1 MDNM MDUL/Laura MDNM md1 MDNM/ What shall I wish for, Mother? md1 MDNM MDUL/Amanda .MDNM MDUL/her voice trembling and her eyes suddenly filling with tears.MDNM MDUL MDNM md1 MDNM/ Happiness! Good Fortune! md1 MDNM/ md1 MDNM/ md1 MDNM/ MDUL/The >>>> violin <<<<< rises and the stage dims out MDNM/ md1 MDNM/ md1 MDNM/ md1 MDNM/ md1 MDNM/Scene VI.md1 MDNM/ md1 MDNM/ md1 MDNM/ md1 MDNM/ MDBO Image: High-School Hero MDNM/ md1 MDNM/ md1 MDNM/ md1 MDNM MDUL/Tom MDNM md1 MDNM/ And so the following evening I*

- ??? at Gregor, now working himself slowly forwards. **The violin fell silent,** the middle lodger first smiled to his

*on the neck, which, now that she went to business, she kept free of any ribbon or collar. Mr. Samsa!" cried the middle lodger, to Gregor's father, and pointed, without wasting any more words, at Gregor, now working himself slowly forwards. The >>>> violin <<<<< fell silent, the middle lodger first smiled to his friends with a shake of the head and then looked at Gregor again. Instead of driving Gregor out, his father seemed to think it more needful to begin by soothing down the lodgers, although they were*

**Note that in those cases, in which the speaker could have used a metonymy instead, she doesn't:**

- *are dancing--square dancing and the--the guy with the violin is calling out, you know, `allemande right and please*

### The + trumpet

**40 occurrences,**

**No matching?**

- ???have worn. Give me the cups, And let the kettle to the trumpet speak, The trumpet to the cannoneer without, The cannons to the heavens,

*all the battlements their ordnance fire. The King shall drink to Hamlet's better breath, And in the cup an union shall he throw Richer than that which four successive kings In Denmark's crown have worn. Give me the cups, And let the kettle to the >>>> trumpet <<<<< speak, The trumpet to the cannoneer without, The cannons to the heavens, the heaven to earth, Now the King drinks to Hamlet." Come, begin. <f> Trumpets the while. <f> And you, the judges, bear a wary eye. <f> Hamlet: <f> Come on, sir. <f> Laertes:*

### The + piano

**326 occurrences:**

**I went through the first 100 occurrences**

**No matching**

**Note here again that the speaker prefers the non-metonymic version over the metonymic one:**

- s non-existent line in Casablanca when he tells the piano player to `Play it again, Sam". The phrase lives in
- arrest for nearly a year. Some months later, *the piano fell silent* amid rumours that she had been compelled to
- so much she suggested we show our appreciation of the piano player's expertise on the keys by buying him a drink.
- movies. You tell the waitress broad to ask the piano man what's his poison, then she delivers it to him and
- ???like an escapee from a Yes boxed set. On this record, **the piano tracks surpass the guitar ones**, mostly because he plays

*surpass the guitar ones, mostly because he plays the piano like it's his friend, and treats his guitar like shit;*

- prancing, eyelash fluttering and crawling around on the piano, seemed to lack the usual amount of energy.

*Prince himself, despite the usual prancing, eyelash fluttering and >>>> crawling <<<<< around on the piano, seemed to lack the usual amount of energy.*

- quite encouraging when they're bashing away at the piano saying right come on now. Yeah. As if it's

*But I mean I've still got so many problems with my playing I mean my singing myself that. <FOX> Yeah you don't have a piano either do you? <FOX> No. <FOX> That's probably quite encouraging when they're >>>> bashing <<<<< away at the piano saying right come on now. <FOX> Yeah. <FOX> As if it's complete silence it's a big harder isn't it?*

- in order to to do some work with the piano and also to establish the white flowers which are on

*I mean obviously the child <ZF1> is <ZF0> is taking us to the piano <ZZ1> overlapping false start codes follow <ZZ0> <ZF1> in order to erm <ZF0> in order <ZF1> to <ZF0> to do some work with the >>>> piano <<<<< and also to establish the white flowers which are on the piano*

## **The + guitar**

**162 occurrences:**

**I looked at the first 100**

**1 matching**

- the experience was made even more excruciating for the guitar hero by the fact that Patti knew nothing of his
- inspired the song. For Patti, the intensity of the guitar hero's love for her was both flattering and



- to Vietnam. ARTS **A Spanish master of the guitar THE SPANISH GUITAR**, Jose Miguel Moreno, Customs House.
- man play P-Funk'? Well, I have no problems with the guitar, but I wouldn't do it the same way anyway. I'd try a P-

*This was one of the first Clinton tracks where I heard him using the phrase `P-Funk'. I've had a long-term plan to do a cover version. Can white man play P-Funk'? Well, I have no problems with the >>>>> guitar, <<<<<< but I wouldn't do it the same way anyway. I'd try a P-Funk/House fusion*

- ???boxed set. On this record, **the piano tracks surpass the guitar ones, mostly because he plays the piano** like it's his
- make hie presence felt. It's a learning process for the guitar player to hear Mister macp sing `With Or Without You'
- all the time and I'm at school and suddenly I find the guitar He gasps for air. I found the guitar and with

*then she has a kid who has a rare chromosomal disorder and I end up raising this kid and his mother is addicted to prescription painkillers and she's a stewardess so she's gone all the time and I'm at school and suddenly I find the >>>>> guitar <<<<<< <p> He gasps for air. <p> I found the guitar and with it my identity. Suddenly I was something, up until then I felt like I was nothing and I had every reason to believe that. See what I mean?*

- the handful of indifferent dancers, motions to the guitar player to give up his seat and his instrument and, in

## The + flute

### 57 occurrences

#### 2 matching?

- generations. And Hariprasad got interested in the flute in a fairly unconventional way. On his way to school,

*Unlike almost every other Indian musician, he does not come from a musical dynasty going back several generations. And Hariprasad got interested in the >>>>> flute <<<<<< in a fairly unconventional way. On his way to school, a classmate put down his flute to take a drink. <p> Chaurasia: And then I saw the flute and I took the flute and that, you know, like anything*

- were not there snivelling in the dark, the other one, the flute-player, could

make no joyful music as the young riders

- ???Salesman, enters, carrying two large sample cases. **The flute plays on.** He hears but is not aware of it. He is past
- ???and left of Linda. She sits there, summoning herself. **The flute begins,** not far away, **playing behind her speech** MDNM/

### The + drums

**2 occurrences**

**1 matching?**

- ???spoken there but the place-names, the bagpipes, **the drums drunk at breakfast,** testify to its heritage. Bayona

*and is the opening to the Otherworld of the western ocean, to whose coast strange travellers come and go. <p> Celtic is no longer spoken there but the place-names, the bagpipes, the >>>> drums <<<<< drunk at breakfast, testify to its heritage.*

### The + cello

**22 occurrences**

**1 matching?**

- ???movements is a constantly shifting mosaic in which **the cello (Christopher van Kampen)** takes the lead often lyrically