

Pedagogical Foray: A Metaphor in MICASE

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Recent research by Mendis (2004) shows that one widely-used underlying metaphor in the MICASE corpus is ACADEMIC PURSUITS HAVE DESTINATIONS. This metaphor is used by both faculty and students. Some illustrations are: “students tend to *run out of gas* at the end of the semester”; “this development opens up a *new avenue* of research”; “some problems will only emerge *down the road*”; or “old professors sometimes *lose track* of what they are doing”.

In fact, the commonest form of this underlying metaphor in MICASE involves the word *track* (as either a noun or a verb). We offer below some activities designed to develop students’ understanding of this common realization.

As it turns out, most of the uses of *track* in MICASE are metaphorical rather than literal, but not all. Now try Task One.

Task One

Look at the way "track" is used in each of the following sentences. In each case decide whether the word is used literally (L) or metaphorically (M). Work with a partner, if possible.

1. ____ Look at those tracks over there. Raccoon?
2. ____ Sometimes people will get off the track and lose the point of what they are saying.
3. ____ The car was going around the track at 240 miles per hour.
4. ____ You can see the track of the elementary particle as a string of bubbles.
5. ____ I lost track of time and so wasn't able to print it out before class.
6. ____ The floor is hollow and has tracks so you can plug your computer in.
7. ____ They can now track dust storms coming off the Tibetan plateau all the way to Hawaii.
8. ____ She couldn't keep track of my questions at all.

Task Two

Each of the following statements can be interpreted as making a positive (complimentary), negative (critical) or neutral (descriptive) comment about something or someone. Can you identify which statements are Positive (+), Negative (-) or Neutral (N)? Are there any that are difficult to categorize? Why is this? You may work with a partner.

1. ____ I wish I had kept better track of this because I think I'm underestimating the effect.
2. ____ We're using the index to keep track of where the smallest item is.
3. ____ So you're right on track with this way of developing your paper.
4. ____ Although there are complications, I feel I'm basically on track.
5. ____ The upper peninsula of Michigan is off the beaten track.
6. ____ He couldn't keep track of my questions at all. I mean, really he was all over the place.
7. ____ Nobody seems to be keeping track of which children are reading which books.
8. ____ I don't see why you have to feel you have to be on track all the time.

*This activity show this metaphor—as well as many other metaphors and idioms—is very commonly used to express **evaluation**.*

Task Three

Prepare responses to the following situations. Use a "track" metaphor as part of your response. (This task needs a bit more preparation time and so an instructor could set it for homework.)

- A. You are late for an appointment and need to apologize.
- B. You are part of a Math study group, but for the last 20 minutes the conversation has been about football. You need to do something about this.

- C. A friend of yours is worried (unnecessarily) about the direction her term paper is taking. You need to reassure her.
- D. You have just been appointed as an hourly-paid research assistant. You need to ask the professor what details she needs about when you will be working for her and when not. What will you say?
- E. Last summer you visited a friend (Don) who lives in a very isolated part of the country. You are talking about your visit to another friend (Julie).
- F. Explain to somebody how a non-native speaker of English might be able to learn metaphors and idioms.

Task Four

Discuss these further issues with a partner.

A.

We have seen that "off track" can be used to talk about a deviation or misdirection, while "on track" can signal that the correct journey path is being followed. What other nouns can you think of that can follow *on/off* in the same way and with the same kind of meaning? When you have thought of one or two, check the occurrence of these expressions on the MICASE website.

B.

What can you say about these uses of *way*? If you are unsure, how could the MICASE website help you?

1. He is way off base on that one.
2. Way to go, man!
3. He really knows his way about the main library.
4. As a researcher, she always went her own way—often with good results.
5. With ten publications, she is well on her way to getting tenure.

6. There are no two ways about it.

Notes and comments

Task One:

Items 1, 3, 4 and 6 are literal; 2, 5 and 8 are metaphorical. Number 7, as often with real-world data, is not certainly literal or metaphorical; are they actually *tracking* the dust-storms, or are they just getting some indication of their paths through satellite images?

Task Two:

Items 2 and 5 would appear to be basically descriptive. 3 & 4 are positive, while 1, 6 and 7 are negative (or critical). The last one is a bit more problematic; however, it does seem to be offering some positive reassurance.

Task Three:

Here are some suggestions; there are obviously some other possibilities:

A. I'm sorry I'm late; I was so busy dealing with my e-mails that I *completely lost track of the time*.

B. Look, you guys, this chat about football is all very well, but can't *we get back on track* and deal with the next math problem?

C. Jane, thanks for letting me have a look at your paper. I know you feel that it wanders off the point at times, *but overall I think it's pretty well on track*.

D. So I started work today, Professor Sanchez. The one thing I need to know is *how you want me to keep track of the hours I am spending on* the research project.

E. Well, so I also took the opportunity of calling by to see Don. Wow, he lives *way off the beaten track*; I seemed to be driving around on the few dirt roads for hours before I finally found his cabin in the woods.

F. Well, one thing she might do is keep a little notebook and write down any interesting metaphors or idioms that she hears and can remember. In that way, she *could track* what expressions people are actually using.

Task Four

A.

In MICASE there are several metaphorical examples of *on/off (the) topic*; one or two of *on/off course*; a couple of *path* used in this way too.

B.

1. He is completely wrong; *off base* is a metaphor deriving from baseball.
2. A highly colloquial expression, typically used to express enthusiastic congratulations. "I got an A on my paper" "Way to go, man". ("Man" here, as a vocative, can also be applied to women.)
3. He can easily find what he wants because he knows the layout well.
4. "To go your own way" is to follow your own path, rather than that of most other people.
5. She has gone most of the distance toward getting tenure.
6. There is only one way to do this; it is no use arguing.

Reference

Mendis, D. (2004). Bathtubs, blackholes and kitchen sinks: metaphor in academic speech. Unpublished Ph.D dissertation, the University of Michigan.