
Metonymic Use of Proper Names as the Window to American Popular Culture

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Abstract

The study of proper name metonymy still needs more attention than metaphors, particularly the one related to creative metonymy from popular culture. Due to such rationale, this study examines how the proper names of famous American athletes are utilized as metonymy in English. The study objective is to identify the frequency, range period, and context or source of the metonymic use. In accomplishing this goal, three well-known American athletes become the focus of this study: Michael Jordan, Babe Ruth, and Muhammad Ali. The study is mainly qualitative, with simple quantitative analysis to measure the frequency. The data source was the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), then the collected data from the three athletes were analyzed for their metonymic use. The analysis discovered that Michael Jordan became the most famous athlete with 67 usages, 58 of which were metonymic, followed by Babe Ruth with 23 usages and 21 metonymic use, and Muhammad Ali with all 18 data as metonymic. The characteristic or metonymic concepts attached to those famous names were uniquely dissimilar; Michael Jordan was associated with greatness, Babe Ruth was related to excellence, and Muhammad Ali was linked to magnificence. The field of context for these names' utilization was not only from sports but also extended to social, scientific, art, business, law, and political areas. Meanwhile, the periods of use range from 1992 to 2018, with various sources from movies, magazine and newspaper news, TV news, and blogs. This study highlights how cultural aspects and cognition are essential in language expression, indicating how the dynamic change in society affects the dynamic shift in language expression.

Keywords: COCA, Corpus Linguistics, Metonymy, Proper Name

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is an integral part of a culture. It is limited to its culturally transmitted characteristics, and beyond that; the embedded cultural aspects are salient in a language through its linguistic expressions. Various anthropologists and linguists have discussed how language reflects culture, and some claim that it provides the “world-view” for the speakers to perceive everything around them (Wardhaugh, 2006). Nevertheless, the relationship between language and popular culture has not been studied extensively in the modern context, particularly concerning the use of proper name metonymy.

Metonymy in a language is pervasive and utilizes a particular term from the speaker's culture associated with a specific concept (Coulson & Oakley, 2003). Littlemore (2015, p. 4) defines metonymy as "a figure of language and thought in which one entity is used to refer to, or, in cognitive linguistic terms, provide access to another entity to which it is somehow related." One of the word types commonly used as a metonymy to refer to a particular entity is proper names. Proper names are considered empty if not assigned any specific referent (Kosterec, 2021). However, descriptivists believe that even an empty proper name can still be meaningful and have a sense from several definite descriptions, which come from its referent (Textor & Rami, 2015). Specific characteristics and traits from a particular person, which become general knowledge, will make it possible to use as metonymy, in one condition, that another person or entity to be described shall have the similarity of the characteristics or traits.

Kövecses (2010) asserts that cultural variation triggers many metaphors and metonymy. Popular culture is one cultural aspect that becomes the source of metonymic expression. Popular culture is a shared culture experienced by a large group of people (Kumar, 2016). Sports, music, memes, and movies are the sources of many famous people who have become widely known, not only for their names but also for their songs, films, or current happenings. Therefore, socio-cultural knowledge is fundamental to understanding the hidden meaning behind a particular metonymy. Zinken et al. (2008) claim that knowledge associated with basic level categories is projected onto the target domain in discourse metaphors, and the conventionalization of a particular projection into a discourse practice is a socio-cultural process.

Lakoff and Johnson's (2008) approach to classifying metonymy is to provide more or less complex lists of its types, such as PART FOR WHOLE (e.g., Many *hands* make light work), WHOLE FOR PART (e.g., *Australia* beat *Canada* at cricket), PLACE FOR INSTITUTION (e.g., *The White House* isn't saying anything), PRODUCER FOR PRODUCTS (e.g., I like *Shakespeare* the most), OBJECT USED FOR USERS (e.g., *The buses* are on strike), CONTROLLER FOR CONTROLLED (e.g., *Nixon* bombed Hanoi), INSTITUTION FOR PEOPLE RESPONSIBLE (e.g., *The senate* thinks abortion is immoral), and PLACE FOR EVENT (e.g., *Pearl Harbor* still has an effect in our foreign policy). Unlike metaphor, which is considered a "repressive displacement" due to the compression of meaning into a symbol, metonymy is an "expressive displacement" in that it transfers the meaning into a symbol without suppressing the context (Beith, 2023, p. 5). If metaphor is a cross-domain mapping, metonymy is emphasized by Barcelona (2004) as a conceptual projection or mapping in a single, asymmetric mapping with no counterpart matching. This view is also supported by Radden and Kövecses (2007), who use the term Idealized Cognitive Models (ICM) as the alternative term for frame and image schema. They affirm

that “metonymy is a cognitive process in which one conceptual entity, the vehicle, provides mental access to another conceptual entity, the target, within the same idealized cognitive model” (p. 3).

Few studies have discussed how famous athletes’ names are used as metonymy in discourse. However, there are several studies conducted on the metonymic use of proper names. Adam et al. (2021) studied the use of Kartini and Srikandi, which frequently appear as metonymy, especially in Indonesian political discourse, and the mapping of PERSON FOR TRAITS is a crucial element in enabling metonymic use. Thus, the traits and characteristics of those two cultural figures in Indonesia become important referents when used in metonymy. Meanwhile, Kosse (2021) found the phrase “pull a [PROPER NAME]” interesting in that it reveals how the figures used in the phrase have different associations and behavior for the whole term. She analyzed examples from Twitter and discovered that “pull a Britney” is associated with Britney Spears’ mental breakdown in 2007, while “pull a Karen” indicates the general attitude of whiny people. In another study, Vasiloaia (2018) attempted to demonstrate that the general concept of specific organizations can be reflected in the use of their names as metonymies, which are immensely narrowed down to at least the lexical level. From the study, it was discovered that company names are primarily used in ORGANIZATION FOR PRODUCT (e.g., She gulped down the proffered glass of *Coca-Cola* quickly) and ORGANIZATION FOR MEMBERS (e.g., *Microsoft* is back describing it as primarily a server operating system) to reflect the business culture of the whole companies.

Consequently, this study attempts to fill the gap and focus on using famous American athletes’ proper names. Three athlete names are taken from the top three athletes on the ESPN list (ESPN, 2020): Michael Jordan of basketball, Babe Ruth of baseball, and Muhammad Ali of boxing. Those three names were screened to find the metonymic use in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). The metonymic use of the three athletes in this study works similarly to the use of proper names in the previous studies.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study was corpus-based and utilized the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), which can be accessed at <https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/>. The first step of the data collection was to type each name, i.e., Michael Jordan, Babe Ruth, and Muhammad Ali, onto the available search column by typing the keyword “the*athlete name*of” to ensure metonymic use. The feature in COCA used to search was “Frequency”.

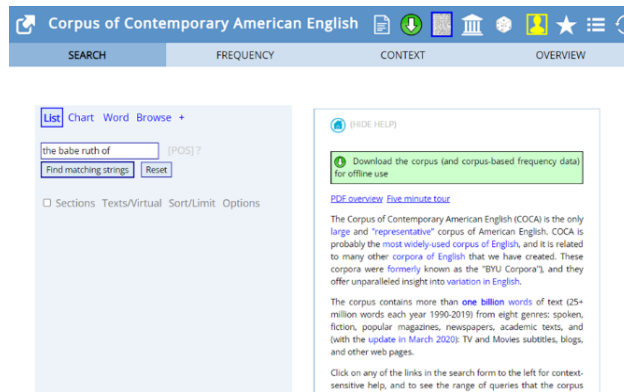


Figure 1. The First Step of Data Collection

In the second step, several strings would appear as the result of the frequency search. From the numbers of frequency step, it was continued with identification to ensure the use of the proper name was metonymic.



Figure 2. The Second Step of the Search

During analysis, a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods was employed in this study. The quantitative approach was used to analyze the frequency, section, and year of appearance. At the same time, the qualitative method was utilized to interpret the characteristics or features from the metonymic use of the proper names.

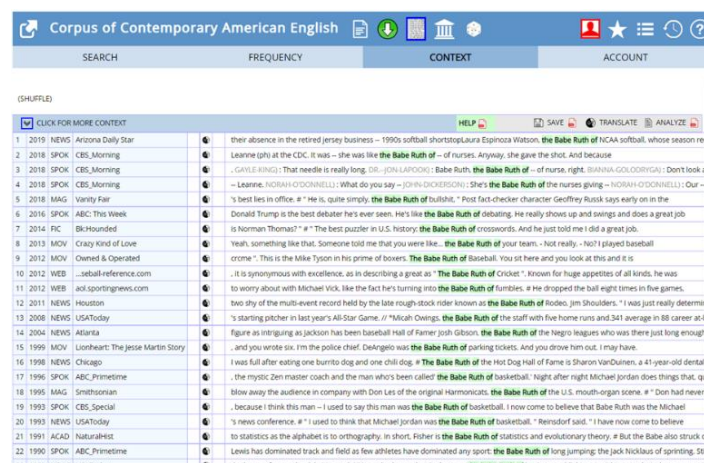


Figure 3. The Result of the COCA Search

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The initial data obtained from COCA were 67 strings for “the Michael Jordan of”, 23 strings for “the Babe Ruth of”, and 18 strings for “the Muhammad Ali of”. Then, the data was sorted out to omit the strings that emerged in similar contexts, so the data remaining were 58 for Michael Jordan, 21 for Babe Ruth, and 18 for Muhammad Ali. The data are displayed in Tables 1, 2, and 3.

Table 1. The Appearance of “the Michael Jordan of” in COCA Based on the Sections and Years

| Year | Movie | Magazine | Spoken | News | Web | Blog | TV |
|------|-------|----------|--------|------|-----|------|----|
| 1992 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 1993 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 1994 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 1995 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 1996 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| 1997 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 1998 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 1999 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| 2000 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 2001 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| 2002 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| 2003 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 2005 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 2008 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| 2009 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 2010 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| 2012 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 0 |
| 2013 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 2014 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 2016 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 2018 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

Table 1 shows that the term “the Michael Jordan of” appeared in seven sections: movie, magazine, spoken, news, web, blog, and TV. In terms of years, it appeared in 21 years, spreading from 1992 to 2018. Among the sections available in COCA, “the Michael Jordan of” was primarily mentioned in the news (34.48%) and was least frequently cited on the web (1.72%). Meanwhile, his appearance was mainly in 1995 and 1996 (10.34%, respectively).

Table 2. The Appearance of “the Babe Ruth of” in COCA Based on the Sections and Years

| Year | Movie | Magazine | Spoken | News | Web | Fiction | Academic |
|------|-------|----------|--------|------|-----|---------|----------|
| 1990 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 1991 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| 1993 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 1995 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 1996 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 1998 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 1999 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 2004 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 2008 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 2011 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 2012 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| 2013 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 2014 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| 2016 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 2018 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 2019 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

From Table 2, similar to Michael Jordan, it can be seen that the term “the Babe Ruth of” was also stated in seven sections. However, the sections mentioning the term were dissimilar: movie, magazine, spoken, news, web, fiction, and academic. In terms of years, the term’s appearance lasted 16 years, starting in 1990 and ending in 2019. Among the sections, “the Babe Ruth of” mainly appeared in the news (33.33%) and was less likely to occur in the fiction and academic sections (4.76%, respectively). Meanwhile, he showed up mostly in 2012 (14.29%).

Table 3. The Appearance of “the Muhammad Ali of” in COCA Based on the Sections and Years

| Year | Movie | Magazine | Spoken | News | Web | TV |
|------|-------|----------|--------|------|-----|----|
| 1991 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 1992 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| 1994 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 1996 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 1998 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| 1999 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| 2000 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 2001 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 2002 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| 2003 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 2006 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 2009 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| 2012 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| 2013 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 2014 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 2016 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

From Table 3, compared to Michael Jordan and Babe Ruth, the use of “the Muhammad Ali of” in COCA only appeared in six sections: movie, magazine, spoken, news, web, and TV. Yet, the emergence of the term in years appeared similar to Babe Ruth, that is, for 16 years, from 1991 to 2016. Compared to the other two athletes, “the Muhammad Ali of” was distributed equally in four sections, namely movie, magazine, spoken, and news (22.22%, respectively), and he was less likely to appear on the web and TV (5.56%, respectively). He showed up mostly in 1996 and 2009 (11.11%, respectively) for the year.

The similarity among these athletes is that “the*athlete name*of” was mainly utilized in five sections: movie, magazine, spoken, news, and web. However, noticing from the data distribution in the five sections, by calculating the standard deviation, the results indicated that Michael Jordan was more spread over the sections (7.62), meaning that the use of “the Michael Jordan of” was not evenly distributed among the five sections, with news as the section with the highest emergence (20 times) and web as the lowest (1 time). Meanwhile, Muhammad Ali’s calculation was closer to the average (1.34), meaning that the use of “the Muhammad Ali of” was almost equally distributed throughout the five sections, with four-time appearances in movies, magazines, spoken, and news. Furthermore, in terms of the year, “the*athlete name*of” for the three athletes was used in the same seven years, namely 1996, 1998, 1999, 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2016. Among these athletes, Michael Jordan’s appearance was the most frequent.

The difference between these athletes is that Michael Jordan was also mentioned in blogs and on TV, Babe Ruth appeared in fiction and academics, and Muhammad Ali appeared on TV. What is worth noting is that Babe Ruth emerged in fiction and academics, the sections that did not cite Jordan and Ali. In the fiction section under the social domain, Ruth was employed as the comparison for Norman Thomas, an American puzzler, stating that Thomas was “the Babe Ruth of crosswords” (Data B.5). Meanwhile, in the academic section under the science domain, Ruth was compared to Ronald Fisher, a British biologist, saying that “Fisher is the Babe Ruth of statistics and evolutionary theory” (Data B.19). The metonymic use of Ruth’s name with these acclaimed figures with superiority in their intelligence attempted to emphasize Ruth’s brilliance as a baseball player. He was said to have bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, making him able to pitch even when he was a mere fifteen-year-old teenager without any prior formal training in baseball (Gardner, 2008). His dexterity was even psychologically tested at Columbia University, indicating he was above average (Inglis-Arkell, 2015). Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to juxtapose Norman Thomas and Ronald Fisher with Babe Ruth with metonymic use, knowing that Ruth was a genius as an athlete.

Meanwhile, when it comes to domains, these three athletes correspondingly showed up in sports, politics, social, and art. In the sports domain, they were primarily compared to other athletes from the United States and numerous other countries. What is exceptional is that Michael Jordan and Babe Ruth were compared with each other, saying that Jordan was “the Babe Ruth of basketball” (Data B.17 & B.18). At the same time, Ruth was “the Michael Jordan of baseball” (Data A.55 & A.57). The juxtaposition between Jordan and Ruth regardless of their ranks in the ESPN list indicated that both were equal in terms of popularity and skills in their particular fields.

However, there were dissimilarities in the domains mentioning the athletes. Michael Jordan and Babe Ruth were similarly cited in science and business, while Muhammad Ali was not. In addition, Jordan was specified in nature, Ruth was in medicine, and Ali was in law. In the science domain, Jordan was compared to Richard Feynman, an American physicist (Data A.18). Richard Feynman invented a Feynman diagram, the illustration to describe the interaction and behavior of subatomic particles, and co-awarded the Noble Prize in 1965 for developing the theory of quantum electrodynamics (Gleick, 2022). Like Feynman, Jordan was also an innovator in his field, proved by the invention of Air Jordan, which has still been celebrated, and the price nowadays skyrocketed. He succeeded in branding himself with the shoes, especially with the Jumpman logo on the sneakers (White, 2019). Therefore, juxtaposing Feynman with Jordan was appropriate since both were innovators in their respective fields.

In the business domain, Jordan was cited twice. He was compared to Finnegan Wenatchee Valley, the most prominent American apple industry, as stated in Data A.33, “Washington’s billion-dollar apple industry is the Michael Jordan of crops-pervasive ...” Wenatchee branded itself to be the apple capital of the world due to its abundant production and exports of apples, and the fruit became the city’s identity (Rader, 2007). Jordan was also mentioned by Kyle Kesterson, the ex-Chief Creative Officer of Giant Thinkwell, in his interview that if he got a Nike t-shirt that reads “I’m the Michael Jordan of ...”, he would write, “I’m the Michael Jordan of Meetings” (Data A.10). The metonymic use of Jordan’s name in the business domain denoted the prominence and significance of the person or thing juxtaposed to him. In this case, Wenatchee and Kesterson were prominent in the business domain, and utilizing Jordan’s name in mentioning these were intended to highlight their prominence in the sector.

In terms of nature, what is fascinating is that, unlike the other athletes, Jordan’s name was employed to compare animals, despite their different qualities. He was compared to bulls (Data A.4 & A.6) which represent strength, a donkey (Data A.20) which symbolizes agility, and a sheepdog (Data A.34) which embodies speed. These qualities are believed to manifest in Jordan as the best basketball player in NBA history. He seriously maintained his body strength through physical exercises with his

personal trainer, Tim Grover, after losing three times to the Detroit Pistons in the playoffs. Initially, he feared that gaining muscles would slow him down in his matches, but it later helped him accomplish his achievements today (Davis, 2020). In terms of agility, he was known to be the athlete who faced his rivals on the court swiftly and agilely leaped over them to shoot his shots, hence the Jumpman logo for his brand Air Jordan (Rushcutters Health, 2022). Meanwhile, when it comes to speed, he was said to sprint the 40-yard (or 37 meters) dash in 4.3 seconds in 1982 (Alfano, 1983). However, this claim was argued later on for years on the internet, though Jordan was still recognized as a baseball legend until today (Dator, 2020). With these eminences, it was unquestionable that Jordan could win six NBA championships in his glory days.

When it comes to Babe Ruth, he was also cited in the business domain. His name was employed as a metonymy for Forbes, the world's largest media company (Data B.21). The media giant provides various news from business to sports. The magazine is also acclaimed for its ranks for corporations and people, such as 30 Under 30, the Global 2000: The World's Largest Public Companies, the Billionaires List, and so on (Kenton, 2021). Steve Forbes, the successor of Forbes magazine, thrived in increasing the magazine's circulation by initiating several modifications in the system (Augustyn, 2022). Meanwhile, in the medicine domain, on CBS Morning News, John Dickerson mentioned Leanne from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as "the Babe Ruth of the nurses" (Data B.2) because she administered the flu vaccine to him without pain. He attempted to accentuate that Leanne was a professional in her expertise, similar to Babe Ruth in his field. Both Steve Forbes and Leanne were proficient in their areas, just like Ruth in baseball. Therefore, using metonymy would be appropriate to compare skillful figures with an expert athlete.

Meanwhile, Muhammad Ali was the only athlete in the law domain. In this domain, his name was used as metonymy for John J. Flynn, an American attorney, who "was called the Muhammad Ali of Arizona for his combative courtroom style" (Data C.16). Flynn was acknowledged to defend Ernesto Miranda in the case of *Miranda v. Arizona* and won the case, which eventually came up with the rights called the Miranda warning that said suspects have the right to remain silent (Patton, 1994). Flynn was compared to Ali since both are agents of change in their respective fields. Their efforts and faith altered the public's perspective, and their impacts are still perceived today. Ali, whose birth name was Cassius Clay, made a breakthrough that shocked America then by claiming, "I'm black and I'm pretty," opposing the public's belief of black people as lowly people with no pride (Hurd, 2016). He assisted his people in regaining their self-esteem as American citizens despite their skin color, and he truly made it. What Flynn did in the law sector to enlighten the public on how suspects also had rights, albeit the accusation thrown

against them, made it acceptable for him to be juxtaposed with Ali in terms of evolving the public's perception.

The features found for these three athletes were intriguingly dissimilar. Michael Jordan was associated with greatness, claimed by Barack Obama, "Because Michael Jordan is the Michael Jordan of greatness" (Data A.2). The former president of the United States did not merely state this for no reason. It was believed that Jordan had the aspiration "to be great by working hard and always learning how to get better" (Huddleston Jr., 2020). Jordan wanted to surpass anyone in basketball and become a great athlete who went beyond the average, and he eventually made it. That is why people recognized his hard work and greatness, and Obama's statement on Jordan was not exaggerated. Unlike Michael Jordan, Babe Ruth was linked to excellence, as stated in Data B.8, "It is synonymous with excellence." As a baseball player, Ruth was widely known to have excellent pitching and hit, especially when it came to the home run (Eschner, 2017). Due to his excellence in baseball, he was acknowledged as a legend in this sport. Different from the two former athletes, Muhammad Ali was related more to magnificence, as mentioned by Ed Bradley, "Ali was a magnificent fighter" (Data C.1). For most American people, Ali was considered a beautiful and graceful athlete in his own way, and he "found beauty in fighting, beauty in winning, beauty in his pro-black politics, and beauty in his people" (Parham, 2016). Even he understood that he was beautiful himself. According to Lexico (2022), the word "magnificent" is defined as "extremely beautiful, elaborate, or impressive." Therefore, it was appropriate if Bradley regarded Ali as a magnificent fighter.

4. CONCLUSION

Quantitatively, basketball is the most favorite sport in the US. It is reflected in the use of Michael Jordan as metonymy with the highest number of 58 uses, expanding from 1992 until 2018, even after Michael Jordan did not actively play. Whereas the use of Babe Ruth as metonymy extends from 1991 to 2019 and reflects how baseball is one of the most favorite sports in the US. As for Muhammad Ali, it also shows that he is one of the most famous athletes in the US with 18 metonymic usages. A few characteristics or traits are used when the names of those three athletes are used as metonymies, such as greatness, excellence, magnificence, expertise, and achievement. Metonymic uses of their names are also found in several domains, such as sports, politics, social, science, art, law, and business. Meanwhile, the periods of usage range from 1992 to 2018, with various sources from movies, magazine and newspaper news, TV news, and blogs.

This study demonstrates the significant function of metonymic mapping, especially PERSON FOR TRAITS in American English. Also, the importance of the cultural and social influence of particular

proper names enables those names to be used metonymically across the domains across periods since the speaker or writer and hearer or reader will still be able to interpret the referent of specific traits or characteristics when a particular name is used as metonymy. This study also indicates how dynamic the language is, and it is highly dependent on the speaker's cultural development, which is, in this case, the popular culture of sports. Further study should be conducted to compare the metonymic frequency usage between American and British English, including investigating which sports or athletes use the most metonymic frequency.

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