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# THE USE OF THE WAR METAPHOR DURING THE PANDEMIC: A WAR FOR WHOM AND BY WHAT MEANS?: THE US AS A CASE STUDY

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## Abstract

War metaphors have been at the apex of political speeches. The effectiveness of these metaphors is mainly emanated from their emotional undertone which can influence and even direct action. However, the context in which these metaphors are communicated is highly important, as it may lead to positive as well as negative effects, depending on the situation. These nuanced outcomes of war metaphors entail that these tropes are highly complex and dynamic. In this regard, the aim of this research paper is to unravel the complexity of Trump's metaphorical warfare in dealing with COVID-19 and its role in unraveling the country's human security deficit. This study met its research objectives through combining the different strands of Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory and the explanation dimension of Charteris-Blacks' Critical Metaphor Analysis. The article shows that the use of the war metaphor during the pandemic did not reinforce the sense of solidarity among the people, but rather exacerbated panic and fear of an invisible enemy. This is particularly relevant given the argument that the pandemic transcends the traditional definitions of fear and threat that political leaders have been propagating throughout history, as the enemies in this case may be one's relatives, friends and even family. Even the weapons are unprecedented. Thus, it is this ambiguity that further fueled insecurity and atomization among the public and forged them to tolerate political decisions that tolerate nativist and xenophobic policies vis-à-vis certain regions along with some social groups from within.

**Keywords:** War metaphor, Traditional Security, Covid-19 pandemic, political discourse, human security.

## Introduction

"There would be no society without discourse" (Epstein, 2008). Indeed, as "a cohesive ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations", discourse plays an important role in creating harmony among the different individuals and bringing them under the same social fabric (Epstein, 2008). It is the power of discourse that creates communities and even states. This understanding of discourse draws heavily on Foucault's seminal works which emphasize the interconnections between power and discourse and their role in legitimizing certain social practices while obscuring others. Dealing with power as discourse therefore allows going beyond the statist understanding of physical power, as it widens the realms of the concept and reopens the possibilities for more sophisticated investigations of the ideological structures governing power relations between the different social groups.

This critical turn in the interpretation of text and talk promotes a more critical reading of the notion of representation in society through curving out powerful narratives and myths that consider certain social groups as threatening to the identity or the continued existence of the state (Van Dijk, 2001). A bold, sweeping scrutiny of the different discursive strategies embodied by political leaders and their role in stimulating public opinion is offered by Walton (2007) who underscores that argumentation is "a powerful force in our lives (...) that

can mobilize political action, influence public opinion, market products, and even enable dictators to stay in power.” Van Dijk (2001) moves a step further in his analysis of argumentation in political discourse suggesting that it represents “a typical superstructure of textual schemata which systematically organizes political discourse through structures and strategies.” These structures are predicated upon certain “mental models” that refer to “the specific knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies shared by the members” of a particular society (Van Dijk, 2001). For him, the focus on certain knowledge resources, including “the fundamental beliefs of a group and its members”, is what allows political leaders to successfully persuade communities and coalesce them around a particular understanding of social reality.

Under this logic, the personal experiences of the different social members and their interactions are seen as a mere reproduction of the knowledge promulgated by the dominant institutions and political actors within society. In an attempt to decipher the different ideological layers behind political discourses, a variety of approaches and research methods have been developed by linguists and political theorists (Fairclough 2012). Among these analytical tropes is metaphor which advocates a cognitive-pragmatic approach to discourse analysis (Maalej, 2007). In this respect, this article will investigate Trump’s use of the war metaphor during the Covid-19 pandemic and the role of this metaphor in (de) securitizing and hence in framing the public response towards this crisis. Consequently, the outline of this article will be as follows. The next section will be devoted to critically review the increasing body of literature dealing with metaphors as emotional triggers that aim at mobilizing the public towards a particular course of action. In so doing, the article will reflect on the importance of emotions and affects as critical elements of discourse and language and emphasize their role in exacerbating antipathy/empathy towards the “Other”. The third section will be dedicated to spell out the research strategy adopted in this article and finally the fourth section will outline the key findings of the research work.

### **Theoretical Framework and Literature review**

Before Lakoff and Johnson’s ground-breaking book *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) which marked the birth of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, metaphors were exclusively perceived as linguistic ornaments. Their work, indeed, adds another dimension to metaphor analysis, suggesting that it is a fundamental mechanism of the mind and therefore it is deeply seated in people’s conceptual system and bodily experience. In this regard, Musolff (2012) contends that Lakoff and Johnson’s foundational book establishes a new ‘cognitively’ oriented theory of meaning. Likewise, Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p.159) conclude that such rhetorical instrument has become “among our principal vehicles for understanding our physical, social and inner world by ‘mapping’ conceptual structures from a relatively familiar, experientially grounded “source domain” onto a more abstract or less well-known “target domain”. Boyd (2011) contends that conceptual metaphors construct a correspondence between various conceptual domains in a way that allows the different forms of reasoning from a particular source domain to be used in another one. An interesting illustration of this argument is offered by Kovecses (2009) through the metaphorical expression “THE ARGUMENT IS WAR”. As this metaphor implies, the argument is considered as the target domain, whereas war is, by implication, the source domain. Given the aforementioned example, it becomes obvious that the mapped domain is the source domain, whereas the recipient of mapping is the target domain. This insight emphasizes the power of metaphors as framing tools that tend to eliminate alternative perspectives and represent the world in a highly biased way. In this respect, Goatly (2007, p.402) suggests that

it is vital to be suspicious about “all metaphors, all language and knowledge if we are to be open to the realities beyond it”.

### **Metaphors as framing tools**

Lakoff and Johnson’s instrumental work brought metaphor into political speeches, by referring to it as an analytical trope that allows people to unmask the different ideological layers within political speeches. Indeed, taking into consideration the power of metaphor in transforming the abstract into the concrete, one can argue that such rhetorical tropes “represent one of the most significant instruments of persuasion and propaganda in the language of political rhetoric” (Radić-Bojanić and Silaški, 2009). In this regard, in his book *Moral Politics*, Lakoff (2002) employs Conceptual Metaphor Theory in studying political discourse in the U.S. He refers to cognitive models of morality based on two competing “idealized” interpretations of “the nation is a family” metaphor, which is, as he states, heavily used by the conservative and liberal political clouts in the U.S. political discourse (Cienki, 2005, 280).

### **Metaphors as emotionally loaded tropes**

In analyzing “how emotions affect discursive resonance, some scholars show that it is not just what is said, but how it is said that evokes the audience association and identification with the speaker’s position” (Skonieczny, 2018). As such, Steele (2010 in Skonieczny, 2018) perceives discursive messaging as an amalgam of psychological, imaginative and rhythmic layers. Accordingly, a wide range of scholars show that iteration and mainly repetition of certain ambiguous expressions in political speeches are effective tools in eliciting the audience’s feelings and harnessing their support or opposition to a particular issue. Similarly, Solomon’s (2013 in Skonieczny, 2018) explanation of the major reasons behind the popularity of the neoconservative sermon as a policy agenda among the US audience in the 2000s as opposed to the 1990s, when the ideas first appeared, further emphasizes the role of affective discourses in eliciting desire, stimulating the subjects’ feelings of lack and gaining their support. These narratives, indeed, can serve as efficient tools for legitimizing and normalizing discourses that vilify the presence of certain groups as unwanted interlopers. Gibbs et al. (2002) argue in a similar vein, suggesting that metaphorical images can be used to grant a sense of intimacy between the speaker and the audience, while stimulating anxiety and anger towards the “Other”. In this regard, De Landtsheer (2009) refers to the example of fascist or extreme right-wing discourse which is predicated mainly upon anxiety and emotive myth. As such, he discusses Hitler’s medical metaphor, which for him, provides a blatant illustration of how minds can be “invaded and even corrupted by the deliberate use of emotive language”. Likewise, Musolff (2007) underscores that Hitler’s depiction of the threats faced by the Nazi state as perilous diseases creates an illness-cure scenario that persuades the audience for the necessity to accept a particular therapy proposal which is genocide in this case. This argument, in fact, emphasizes the importance of affective politics in right-wing populism and its role in legitimizing certain security measures.

### **Metaphors as security practices**

Buzan, Wever, and de Wilde (1998) note that “the meaning [of security] lies not in what people consciously think the concept means but in how they implicitly use it in some ways and not others” (in Crawford, 2014). By referring to “the analogical reasoning” of metaphor, political leaders can legitimize and even naturalize certain policy decisions. Indeed, according to Chilton (1988 in Mutimer, 1994), metaphorical images do not simply influence people’s understandings of a particular threat or problem but “structure the way in which the image holder can think about this problem, and so shape that choice in the first place”. Therefore, the use of metaphorical images can be highly effective in addressing problems and thus in harnessing a particular course of action as a response to these problems. Saperstein (1994) takes this insight to heart, arguing “that the set of metaphors which

underline our thoughts and discussions about the political world determine our responses to matters of war and peace. Action often follows theory.” What this indicates is that the political world is shaped through words. Consequently, risks are not “fixed apriori”, as their “contours may be molded by our metaphors. Hence policy and response are easier and more effective, the more appropriate the available metaphors” (Saperstein 1995). Arguing within the American context, the use of war metaphors proved to be highly effective in mobilizing Americans against foreign threats. Accordingly, Lakoff underscores that “war metaphors were invented by the Bush administration to strike terror into the hearts of Americans and to justify the invasion [into Iraq]” (Lakoff, 1991). He pushes the discussion of war metaphors further suggesting that “the most natural way to justify a war on moral grounds is to fit the fairy tale structure to a given situation.” For him, the fairy-tale scenario is instrumental in giving rise to the implication that war is unavoidable. It creates the myth that defeating the enemies will lead to the restoration of the moral balance of the nation.

The same idea was discussed by Crawford through his attempt to emphasize the strong interconnections between security and metaphorical language. In this regard, he suggests that:

*“The concept of security has not only colonized social policies such as housing, health, education and employment/workfare (so evident in the realms of tackling anti-social behavior) - but its promiscuity has extended farther afield. From human well-being to global conflict, environmental survival and natural resources, the technologies, discourses and metaphors associated with security have become increasingly eminent features of contemporary institutions and governing bodies”.*

Additionally, considering security as primarily concerned with the well-being of the individuals and the stability of the state necessitates a careful use of metaphors that does not only “better predict, prevent and mitigate threats to security but also requires the capacity of societies, communities and individuals to adapt and live confidently with risk” (Crawford, 2014). In this regard, some scholars associate security with liquids, suggesting that threats are in a constant state of change and flux and so are the measures taken to handle them. This figurative understanding of security spawns a flexible perception of the term that moves beyond the “monopoly of physical force” and widens the scope of security measures (Crawford, 2014). However, when used in an inappropriate context, metaphorical images can exacerbate insecurities and confusion instead of security, leading to hazardous social impacts. A case in point is Trump’s use of metaphors during the Covid-19 pandemic which aggravated security problems rather than alleviating them. As such, using the Conceptual Metaphor Theory and the explanation dimension of Charteris-Blacks’ Critical Metaphor Analysis, this article will offer a minute description of Trump’s adoption of the war metaphor during the pandemic and the role of this metaphor in fanning the flames of insecurity among Americans.

## **Methodology**

To serve the analysis, some iconic speeches will be analyzed. The first two speeches were delivered on February 26, 2020, and April 27, 2020, following Press conferences on Coronavirus. The data sampling technique is systematic. The transcripts of the speeches were taken from the website of *The American Presidency Project*, a non-profit organization which gathers transcripts of presidential documents. In addition, in order to diversify the corpus for the analysis and enhance the possibility of determining the frequencies of war metaphors in Trump’s discourse, I referred to some of the other speeches that were delivered until the end of the year. Choosing to collect my data using political speeches is predicated upon the fact that speeches allow political leaders to chart their plans and their vision for the nation’s future and persuade the audience to adopt a particular vision of social reality. The process of data

collection is predicated upon the use of simple online searching codes. The result of the research includes any occurrence of the simple phrase “Trump’s speeches during the Covid-19 pandemic.” The fact that online research offers the possibility of selecting articles by relevance to the research code further facilitates the data collection process.

As I already mentioned, Lakoff and Johnson’s seminal book *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) plays a paramount role in altering the traditional approaches which perceived metaphors as mere linguistic ornaments. Accordingly, this research considers metaphor as a replica of conceptual mapping from one semantic source domain, which often includes “handy and familiar” parts of the physical world, to a different semantic target domain. In addition, the notion of “metaphorical entailments” represents a highly important component within the CMT framework. In this vein, Kövecses (2010) proposes that entailments refer to rich inferences and additional knowledge structures about the source domain that are transported to the target domain in the process of cross-domain mapping. He concludes that entailments help make sense of some possible features of the target domain.

### Analysis and findings

Trump’s campaign motto of making America great again was kernel in representing a highly fantasized and even romanticized image of the country that endows Americans with an extremely selective and exclusive memory of the past. Even during the Covid-19 pandemic, the common thread that governed Trump’s rhetoric was that America is under the threat of an invisible enemy that prevented the country from fulfilling its greatness and restituting its moral order. The heavy use of the war metaphor during Covid-19 will be further illustrated through the following quotes taken from Trump’s speeches:

*“We grieve by their side as one family, this great American family, and we do grieve. We also stand in solidarity with the Americans who are ill and **waging a brave fight against the virus.**”*

*“We also stand in solidarity with Americans who are ill and **waging a brave fight against the virus.** We’re doing everything in our power to heal the sick and to gradually reopen our nation and to safely get.”*

*“We will significantly reduce **the threat** to our citizens and we will ultimately and **expeditiously defeat** this virus.*

*“We are at a critical time in **the fight against the virus.**”*

*“As we express our gratitude for these **hard-fought gains** however, we continue to mourn with thousands of families across the country whose loved ones have been stolen from us by **the invisible enemy.**”*

Through the description of the struggle against the pandemic as “a brave fight”, Trump sought to assert himself as a decisive leader and most importantly as a providential man (warrior) who is committed to defend the symbolic building and boundaries of the nation and “bring back the country” to the American citizens and the “great American family.” However, although Trump’s previous usages of metaphors were successful in promulgating stories of peoplehood and national pride that reinforced his self-portrayal as a hero who is able “to wage wars and to win them” (Trump, 2017), his focus on the war metaphor during the Covid-19 pandemic failed to coalesce Americans around his vision for the future of the country and its citizens, as it seemed too simple for a deadly virus that hit the whole world. Thus, this narrative of war and heroism had the opposite effect, since it added to the confusion and uncertainty of the American people given the unprecedented nature of the threat and the absence of a clear and well-defined national weaponry and arsenal to combat the it and stop its spread. Indeed, instead of thinking about solutions to manage the crisis, Trump endorsed a conspiracy theory that casted elites, scientists, and the establishment into

the same mold of skepticism. Consequently, scientists and specialists were absent in Trump's crisis management strategy leading to its total failure.

Hence, as the empirical proof revealed what the American public wanted and needed in facing the pandemic was not fantasy, myths, and conspiracy narratives, but rather scientific and rational assessment of the situation. Even the very rare instances where the then-President expressed the importance of science and its importance in managing the crisis were surpassed by the various other instances which revealed his anti-scientific mode of communication. One of the boldest expressions of this communication strategy was his declaration that "the CDC is *advising* the use of non-medical cloth face covering as an additional voluntary public health measure. So, it's voluntary; you don't have to do it. They suggested for a period of time. But this is voluntary. I don't think I'm going to be doing it" (Trump, 2020).

Another major factor behind the failure of the war metaphor within the American context was the country's narrow and inherently ambiguous definition of national security which has been predicated upon a state-centric approach to threat while excluding the everyday welfare of individuals and communities. This is not to say that the traditional security agendas go against human security or to negate the importance of the state in asserting the security of its individuals, but rather to argue that these models of national security do overlook people's everyday insecurities and exclusively focus on securitizing the state against foreign threats. A good example that could be invoked in this context is Trump's over use of words like "country" and "border" which were repeated more than 20 times in the speeches under scrutiny and his disregard of words like "Americans" or "the American people" which were repeated less than 10 times. More to this point, Trump's securitization of a non-conventional threat related to public healthcare using conventional security discourse reveals the deeply rooted weaknesses within the orthodox security thinking, which has been solely based on military power, while ignoring the security needs of its citizens. Consequently, his invocation of war metaphors in dealing with Covid-19 did not only fail to mitigate the threats posed by the pandemic but also revealed the ill-preparedness of the country in facing this challenge.

Additionally, although scholars often declare that the effectiveness of war metaphors is mainly emanated from their emotional undertone which can influence and even direct action, the context in which these metaphors are communicated is highly important, as it may lead to positive as well as negative effects, depending on the situation. Since the war metaphor indicates the presence of conflict or strife between two opposing poles of good and evil in the pursuit of promoting certain values like freedom, human rights, and democracy, the use of this metaphor during the pandemic rendered the boundaries between the good and the evil and the worriers and enemies ambiguous and consequently put these boundaries into question. This ambiguity intensified insecurity and atomization among the public and forced them to tolerate authoritarian political decisions that exacerbate nativist and xenophobic policies towards certain regions. A case in point is Trump's declaration that "we have, through some very good early decisions, decisions that were actually ridiculed at the beginning, closed up our borders to flights coming in from certain areas" (Trump, 2020). Areas that were hit by the coronavirus and hit pretty hard, and we did it very early". He added that "we've stopped non-US citizens from coming into America from China" (Trump, 2020). Consequently, the war metaphor in this context is perceived as an exercise of power. This argument goes in tandem with Crawford's (2014) assertion that "this aggrandizing quality of security alerts us to the possible adverse consequences of securitization. A potential consequence is that fundamental public issues can become marginalized, except in so far as they are defined in terms of their security qualities. Other priorities may come to be viewed



as no longer vital public issues in themselves”. Following this rationale, the securitization of threats can be perceived as efficient tools in hegemonizing the public understanding of reality and thus in forging them to accept the unacceptable and think about the unthinkable. This perception of security “is the result of a move that takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames” certain issues as highly urgent while excluding others (Crawford, 2014). Hence, the linguistic constructions of threats become as dangerous as the threats themselves.

As a corollary to the above, the structural inequalities that characterized the American healthcare system made it even harder to win this war. In this context, the war metaphor which proposes “all” Americans should fight it through social distancing did not find resonance among low-income people who, due to their hard economic conditions, risked being contaminated. This is particularly relevant given the argument that the largest number of deaths have been among ethnic and racial minorities. Therefore, the security that sought to be established using the war metaphor is unequally distributed among the American people. Even the weapons proposed were not accessible to the different social groups. Indeed, drawing on the American security and healthcare system, which is heavily privatized, those who can pay for security would be safe; whereas those who cannot afford it would die. Hence, the fight that Trump was reluctantly calling for did nothing but reflecting the security deficit within the American healthcare system. Accordingly, Trump’s heavy use of the third personal pronoun “we” in the speeches under analysis deemed to be highly exclusive, as it harnessed a racialized vision of unity and nationhood that implicitly excluded non-Americans. More fundamentally, his declaration that “the number one priority, from our standpoint, is the health and safety of the American people” (February 2020) rendered the concept of security even more ambiguous, as it raised more problems than solutions to the health crisis that the country was experiencing. Among these dilemmas were “security for whom? Would it be the individual, and if so, would it be some, most or all of them? Security for which values?” Security “by what means”, and at what costs” (Baldwin, 1998). These vexing questions have been part and parcel of the debate over security practices in the US and have governed most of the thrust for the engagement in a more detailed and focused analysis of the term.

## Conclusion

Although metaphorical language of war has been highly powerful in vindicating certain policy agendas and even in shaping the public opinion about various foreign policy issues, including immigration, its use within the context of Covid-19 did not succeed at positively mobilizing the American people. Rather, a close scrutiny of the war metaphor during the pandemic unabashedly confirmed the reductionist understanding of security which exclusively focuses on the securitization of the state against foreign enemies. This state centric- approach to security overlooks the fact that the state itself may threaten the security of its individuals through widening the social, economic, and health discrepancies between them. Consequently, the pandemic serves not only as a reminder of the deeply rooted flaws within the orthodox security paradigm but also as an invitation to reconsider this security perspective in favor of a more inclusive one.

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