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Political
Language in
Motion

Metaphor, Conspiracy Theory and Crisis

Metaphors have been known at least since Aristotle to be extremely useful in social and political crises for one purpose (*inter alia*): to highlight, exacerbate, exaggerate or, in modern parlance, 'weaponize' the crisis in question. Strictly speaking, metaphors do not achieve this feat on their own: they are aided and abetted by hyperbole, metonymy, analogy and, if needed, by the whole gang of rhetorical tricks known since Antiquity as figures or tropes. Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) has tried to exonerate metaphors from the association with demagoguery; however, in the form of Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA), metaphor's power of shaping social and political processes in detrimental ways has become a central research object across several domains of study, e.g. Psychology, Media Studies and Discourse Studies.

Taking one of the many recently erupted crises, i.e. the COVID-19 pandemic and the public debates about it as an example, I explore the bad influences that turn innocent metaphors into destructive memes or "mind viruses" (Dawkins). High up on the list of suspects are "fake news" and "conspiracy theories" (CTs). *Prima facie*, they appear to have little to do with metaphors, as they purport to include *factual* information, which is denounced by their critics as deceptive. However, as we know from advertising, it is the packaging of goods or messages that matters most, which is where metaphors come in. But do metaphors package fake news and CTs or is it the other way round? I propose that whilst conceptual metaphors may be neutral in terms of evaluative and emotive bias, CTs depend on specific figurative framings in terms of scenarios to become seemingly convincing. Hence, efforts to enlighten public debate by "reframing" figurative contextualizations should focus on critiquing those figurative scenarios that specifically help to weaponize CTs.

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People and discourse in motion: revisiting metaphors for migration

In this talk, I revisit a classical concern in critical metaphor analysis: the representation of refugees in public discourse. This topic has recently gained currency due to the 2015 European migrant crisis as well as the war in Ukraine and the subsequent movement of people to and within Europe. What makes this most recent migration different from other cases is the overwhelmingly positive attitude of the public, press and politicians towards the refugees. The question I seek to answer is whether a sympathetic attitude to refugees is reflected in different metaphors than the ones recorded in the literature and how we can account for any differences or similarities. The metaphoric representation of refugees and other migrants has been well researched, both in relatively recent (Charteris-Black 2006) and in historical discourses (Taylor 2021). Thus, we know that metaphors of invasion have been used alongside dehumanising metaphors of water, animals and objects over time, and that other metaphors, e.g. of immigrants as guests, have been employed less persistently. Previous work has also shown the ideological functions of such metaphors in public discourse (Cap 2019) and demonstrated their effects on audiences (Hart 2021). The empirical part of the talk consists of a cross-genre study of political speeches, news coverage and statements by charities in the UK, which develops my previous work combining corpus-assisted methods such as semantic domain analysis (Koller et al. 2008) with manual analysis of metaphor scenarios (Koller and Ryan 2019; cf. Musolff 2006). Based on systemic-functional linguistics, I operationalise the analysis of metaphor scenarios. Another focus will be on the lexical encoding of emotions, to see if the discourse promotes empathy with refugees from Ukraine as an affiliated rather than an out-group. The results will be compared against findings from previous studies about metaphors for refugees in relevant genres, to highlight trends in public opinion in the face of conflict.

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Climate justice, Ecocide, Eco-terrorism: From metaphorical to judicial implications

In this paper, I focus on the notions of "climate justice", "ecocide", and "eco-terrorism". I demonstrate that these three notions have been extensively exploited in climate crisis discourse produced by activists and politicians. For instance, one may recall the "blood bath" protests performed by the NGO Extinction Rebellion, during which "rebels" sprayed fake blood over buildings. Such performances echo a metaphorical conceptualisation of the impacts of pollution as a BLOODY MASSACRE, for which economic and political leaders are blamed.

These have eventually generated major debates in the political realm, which led Conservative politicians – like Nigel Farage – to "deconstruct" (Musolff, 2022: 85) the activists' arguments by identifying them as "eco-terrorists" (ACTIVISM AS TERRORISM).

I investigate the "discourse history" (Zinken, 2007) attached to the narrative (Hanne et al, 2014) CLIMATE CRISIS AS A CRIME. I show that activists' calls for "climate justice" respond to political misattribution of responsibilities for the crisis. Accordingly, activists exploited CRIME-related metaphors to insist on the criminal damages caused by excessive pollution, exploitations, and uncontrolled consumption. Consequently, these instances of "climate injustice" transformed into literal judicial cases, which aimed at forcing politicians to address such "crimes" (e.g., "L'Affaire du Siecle" and petition to recognise a global "ecocide").

I investigate the process by which the CRIME narrative has generated a JUSTICE scenario (Musolff, 2016) that has been extensively exploited so that the ground of the metaphor became a literal ground for the promotion of justice.

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Data available at:

Extinction Rebellion's blood bath: Fake blood sprayed on Treasury in Extinction Rebellion protest
L'Affaire du Siecle: https://earthcharter.org/laffaire-du-siecle-the-case-of-the-century-how-climate-justice-wants-to-force-the-state-to-fight-against-climate-change-in-france/
Ecocide Petition: https://www.stopecocide.earth/press-releases-summary/greta-to-eu-leaders-support-making-ecocide-an-international-crime
Eco-terrorism: https://twitter.com/Nigel_Farage/status/1584867479100469254