

The Concept of Metaphor in Political Speeches (Metaphors in the Electoral Speeches of Donald Trump and Joe Biden in the 2020 Presidential Elections)

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Abstract

Figurative language in political speeches is an integral part of them. They are used to revive speeches and also to attract the attention of the general public. In the article we point out one such means of language, metaphor. We deal with the concept of conceptual metaphor and metaphor and the difference between these two phenomena. At the end of this article we offer a list of specific metaphors excerpted from the electoral speeches of two presidential candidates.

Keywords: political discourse, political speech, electoral speech, metaphor, conceptual metaphor.

Introduction

Language is very often seen as the most ancient persuasion device. Properly chosen language is able to influence the preconceptions, views, ambitions and fears of the public, causing people to accept false statements as true ones or support policies conflicting with their interests.

When we think of language used in politics and political speeches, we think of it mainly as prepared, accompanied, controlled, influenced, guided, justified, evaluated or criticised language (Shäffner, 1996). As Štefančík (2016) states, language and politics have always been closely linked. Language is sometimes considered a more important tool of power than any other. In relation to politics, language is not only understood as a tool of political communication, but enters as an object of politics. Several linguistic means appear in the language of politics, and metaphors are often used. Metaphors help to understand the abstract world of politics (Štefančík 2020), and metaphors are the object of my consideration.

In times of presidential (or parliamentary) elections, the language in politics is used to mobilize the constituents, to persuade the undecided and to attack political opponents. Through the language, political contents are pre-

sented, individual political figures are introduced, messages are expressed and the arguments of rivals are questioned. The electoral speeches of presidential candidates are the most concise examples of this kind of language. In order to achieve the set goals, the presidential candidate will always carefully weigh their words in their speech, and vivify them by using different language skills and strategies. Among them different means of figurative language, such as metaphors, appear widely.

In the article, we concentrate on the concept of metaphor used in the electoral speeches of the two presidential candidates in the 2020 presidential elections in the USA. Ten random speeches were chosen (5 by each candidate) in which we monitored the occurrence and frequency of metaphorical linguistic expressions.

Political electoral speeches

Charteris-Black (2018) talks about political speeches as “an orderly sequence of words delivered by an individual to a physically present audience assembled for a specific social purpose” (Charteris-Black 2018: xii). Political speeches also address a wider, remote audience via a range of communication media. Furthermore, he defines a political speech as a coherent stream of spoken language that is usually prepared for delivery by a speaker to an audience for specific purpose on a political occasion. Broadly speaking there are two main classes of political speech: the first is concerned with the making of political decisions, and the second, with establishing shared values.

Electoral speeches, whether presidential or any other, have to be persuasive and convey a clear relevant message across the public. The candidates have to convince the public that they are the right person to vote for. A persuasive and high quality electoral speech should present the ability to make changes for the better, repeat key themes and use repetitive phrases. Linguists and specialists writing electoral speeches for their presidential candidates often stress the importance of taking inspiration from the best politicians and public speakers. They also stress the appropriate use of language and different figures of speech. Figurative language and figures of speech are used to be more persuasive and impactful. Figures of speech such as metaphors or personifications go beyond the literal meaning of the words to give the audience new insights (Pavlíková 2018).

The concept of metaphor

Metaphor as a means of figurative language has been present in all kinds of, not only, political speeches and discourses. According to Merriam-Webster dictionary (2020) a metaphor is “a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them.” It draws a comparison between two terms, without using the words “as” or “like”. Comparing two things or terms which are from “different classes of experience” creates a new understanding through specific use of language (Burkholder, Henry 2009: 98). One of the two terms, called the *tenor*, is relevant to the topic under discussion. The other term, called the *vehicle*, is of a different class of experience from that topic. When these two terms are combined by a speaker forming a metaphor, the hearer is urged to understand one concept in terms of the other concept (Burkholder, Henry 2009).

Similarly Beard (2000) talks about metaphor referring to when a word or a phrase is used which establishes a comparison between one idea and another. For example, when a politician is said to “*take flak*” from an opponent, politics is being compared to warfare, with the politician metaphorically being shot at. On the other hand, it may be the politician who is “on the offensive, targeting” his opponents by “launching an attack” on their policies (Beard, 2000: 19)

According Lakoff and Johnson (1981) for most people metaphor is a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish. Moreover, it is viewed as characteristic of language alone. On the contrary, these two authors have found that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but also in action and thought. Lakoff and Johnson claim that the ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature (Lakoff, Johnson 1981: 3).

The concept ARGUMENT and the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR can be depicted to give some idea of what it means for a concept to structure an everyday activity. The conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR is reflected in everyday language by a wide range of statements:

- His criticisms were *right on target*.
- I've never *won* an argument with him.
- If you use that *strategy*, he'll *wipe you out*.
- He *shot down* all of my arguments.

In these examples we can see, that we do not just *talk* about arguments in terms of war as such. We can win or lose an argument, we see the person we are arguing with as an opponent, we attack the position of the other per-

son, or we plan and use a certain strategy. Many things we actually *do* when arguing with someone are partially structured by the concept of war.

Kövecses (2010) defines metaphor from a cognitive linguistic view. According to him, metaphor is defined as “understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain” (Kövecses, 2010: 4). Examples of this include when we talk about life in terms of a journey, ideas in terms of food, social organizations in terms of plats and many others. A convenient way of capturing this view of metaphor is: *conceptual domain a is conceptual domain b*, which is what we call a conceptual metaphor. A conceptual metaphor thus consists of two conceptual domains, where one domain is understood in terms of another. It is any coherent organization of experience.

Hereby we offer some examples Kövecses (2010) uses in his book. We use capital letters for the statement of conceptual metaphors and italics for metaphorical linguistic expressions:

AN ARGUMENT IS WAR

Your claims are *indefensible*.

He *attacked every weak point* in my argument.

I *demolished* his argument.

You disagree? Okay *shoot!*

He *shot down* all of my arguments.

LOVE IS A JOURNEY

Look *how far we've come*.

We're at a *crossroads*.

We'll just have to *go our separate ways*.

We can't *turn back* now.

This relationship is a *dead-end-street*.

We're just *spinning our wheels*.

THEORIES ARE BUILDINGS

Is that the *foundation* of your theory?

The theory needs more *support*.

We need to *construct a strong* argument for that.

The theory will *stand or fall* on the *strength* of that argument.

IDEAS ARE FOOD

All this paper has in it are *raw facts, half-baked ideas and warmed-over theories*.

I just can't *swallow* that claim.

Let me *stew* over that for a while.

That's *food* for thought (Kövecses 2010: 6-7)

These are only some examples of the possible linguistic expressions that can be employed when talking about the target domain.

Metaphors in political speeches

The use of metaphors in political discourse and political speeches have had a dubious reputation for some time. Musloff (2004) mentions Thomas Hobbes who in his work described the danger of metaphors “leading the human mind into intellectual and political confusion” (Musloff 2004: 1). However, recently in different linguistic, psychological and philosophical discussions, the relevance of metaphor for social and political conceptualization has been acknowledged. Moreover, Lakoff and Johnson (1981) state that “metaphors play a central role in the construction of social and political reality” (Lakoff, Johnson 1981: 159).

Public speeches, in which candidates present their plans, visions for the future and try to persuade the audience to vote for them, dominate every election campaign. Metaphors encountered in political speeches facilitate human understanding of complex concepts by explaining them via bodily experiences and the physical senses. Metaphors in political speeches help to both direct and constrain the audience's understanding (Pilyarchuk, Onysko 2018).

A survey on using metaphors by President Donald Trump in his speeches has been accomplished by Pilyarchuk and Onysko (2018). In this survey three speeches have been analysed; the acceptance speech, the victory speech and the inauguration speech. The authors found, that a total number of 345 metaphors were used in the analysed speeches. The authors offer a list of conceptual metaphors occurring in the speeches of president Trump, while grouping them according to the conceptual domain of the metaphor used.

As 2020 is the year of presidential elections in the United States of America the electoral speeches of the presidential candidates (Donald Trump and Joe Biden) have been analysed for the sake of this article. There were 10 randomly chosen speeches (5 by each candidate). The main purpose of this survey was to identify conceptual metaphors and metaphorical linguistic expressions used by both presidential candidates. Following is a short list of the most common conceptual metaphors and metaphorical linguistic expressions excerpted from the electoral speeches of both presidential candidates:

ECONOMY IS A BULDING

“Last week I shared the outlines in my plan *to build back better, to build an economy* of the future”

“This is our moment to imagine and *build a new American economy* for our families”

“We *built the strongest and most prosperous economy* in the history of the world”

“Before the plague, we had the greatest economy in history. And now we’re *building it back up* very rapidly.”

POLITICS IS WAR

“...it seems like our war time president *surrendered, waved the white flag and left the battlefield.*”

“Bobby, you’re also *fighting hard* to make sure that this Trump administration can’t ignore

ELECTIONS ARE WAR

“I put it out today strongly, we’re going to go and *give New York a real shot*”

“And that’s why *we are fighting* for the integrity of our elections.”

COUNTRY IS A PERSON

“She ’s expericnd, she’s proven fighter *for the backbone of this country.*”

“.....including Florida, *which saw more than 15.000 new cases in a single day.*”

“*California was saying.*”

“How badly you were being *treated by other countries*”

COUNTRY IS A PLANT

“They hate our values and they hate everything we prize as Americans, and we’re right, because our country *didn’t grow great* with them.”

COUNTRY IS A BUILDING

“But as we fight to *restore, renew and rebuild our country...*”

“Wall Street and the CEO’s *didn’t build this country*”

NATION IS A PERSON

“We are going *to be stronger* than ever before, and going to be soon.”

NATION IS A BUILDING

“We will *rebuild our nation*”

NATION IS A THIEF

“You watched as politicians let *foreign nations steal our jobs.*”

FLAG IS A PLANT

“And the United States will be the first nation to *plant our beautiful American flag* on planet Mars.”

VIRUS IS WAR

“The virus from the distant land, that spread the globe, and *invaded our shores...*”

VIRUS IS A PERSON

“So before *the plague came in*, we had the best of everything.”

“Hey, we have *a virus coming.*”

“... *but in the face of COVID-19*, we’re seeing an incredible American grit and spirit ...”

“... the next virus *has begun to prepare* for it now.”

IDEA IS A PERSON

“*We embrace the noble vision* of Reverend Martin Luther King jr.”

FEELING IS A WILD ANIMAL

“It’s the same fierce and *untamed American spirit*”

CITY IS A PERSON

“Washington *stood idly by*”

ORGANIZATION IS A PERSON / COMPANIES ARE PEOPLE

“*Whirlpool begged* the Obama-Biden administration”

“I don’t want *companies moving*”

HEART IS A PERSON

“My heart *goes out* to each and every individual, who’s suffering because of this virus.”

Conclusion

Electoral political speeches are a significant kind of political discourse. Using the appropriate language and figures of speech the candidates are able to persuade the audience to vote for them and ensure them that they are the right choice for the people. Including metaphors in the electoral speech may spark the attention of the potential voters and gain valuable votes for the candidates.

As we can see from a brief survey conducted on a sample of ten randomly chosen electoral speeches, it is more than obvious that the presidential candidates use metaphorical linguistic expressions to mobilize their constituents, attack their opponents in a non-arrogant way, and use various figurative means to evaluate and criticize the current government and president. Both presidential candidates in the 2020 USA presidential elections, Donald Trump and Joe Biden, prefer to use metaphors when they are speaking about the economy, the country and the nation. Comparing both candidates we can assume, that the current president Donald Trump uses more figurative language in his speeches than his opponent Joe Biden.

The issue of conceptual metaphor in political speeches and discourse is a very relevant one and demands a further study and research. It is more than clear that in a cross-cultural research, there would be certain differences in the metaphors used in, either, electoral, or other types of political speeches.

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