

## Figurative Language in the Speeches of the New British Prime Minister Elizabeth Truss

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### Abstract

*The paper offers an analytical overview of the speeches of the new British Prime Minister Elizabeth Truss appointed on 6<sup>th</sup> September 2022 by Queen Elizabeth II. The main aim of the paper is to analyse her speeches from the point of view of the figurative language. Our main concern is to identify the use of metaphors in the speeches of the new Prime Minister. The article analyses her speeches at her previous positions as the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Childcare and Education, Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Chief Secretary to the Treasury, and the Prime Minister of Great Britain.*

**Keywords:** language, political discourse, figurative language, metaphor, conceptual metaphor.

### Introduction

Language and politics have always been intrinsically linked. As Joseph (2006) states, a politician is by nature a political animal. Some of them take it to the extreme and become politicians. To be successful in their career politicians need to have the ability to lead others by articulating a clear and inspiring vision of the future. For the purpose of expressing ideas, and visions the mastering of language is crucial for politicians. The prototypes of great leaders with excellent language skills are Churchill, Roosevelt or Hitler (Joseph 2006). 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 (Pavlíková 2020).

Language is a key integrating element between political actors and society. The relationship between politics and language was already highlighted by the Greek philosopher Aristotle, who published his first remarks on the importance of language in politics in his *Politics*. For Aristotle, language was an important prerequisite for the conduct of politics.

Language was proof that people belonged to society and that it was through language that they distinguished themselves from other living beings. According to Aristotle, language is there to express what is beneficial and what is harmful, what is just and what is unjust (Cingerová, Dulebová, Štefančík 2021).

### **Analysing political discourse**

The first observation Van Dijk (2003) makes about political discourse is, that it is not a genre. It is rather a class of genres defined by a social domain, namely that of politics. To be more specific, the different political speeches and debates, political party programmes, parliamentary debates, are some of the genres that belong to the domain of politics. In one of his studies he states that the majority of political discourse studies is about the text and talk of professional politicians or political institutions. He argues that politicians are not the only participants in the domain of politics, however, they play a crucial role as actors and authors of political discourse. In political discourse analysis, from the interactional point of view, it is necessary to include the various recipients in political communicative events, such as the public, the citizens, and other groups or categories.

In modern times, as Wilson (2007) states, it was George Orwell who first drew the attention to the political potential of language. This can be seen in his article “Politics and the English Language”. In this article, he considers the way in which language may be used to manipulate thoughts. But manipulation is not the only issue in the case of political language, rather it is the goal of such manipulation that is seen as problematic. Politicians seem to hide the negative within particular formulations so that the population many not see the absolute truth of their statements.

According to Chilton (2004), the analysis of political discourse is not a new issue in linguistics. In the last years of the twentieth century, linguists all over the world took enormous strides, especially through the realisation that language must be seen as an innate part of all human minds. The research questions were essentially scientific, where Chomsky’s influence was undoubted. Scholarly interest in the public use of language was another issue pursued by many scholars, mainly in Europe. Some linguists, mentioned by Chilton (*ibid*), in Europe, were among the most distinguished to link language, politics and culture.

## Figurative language in political discourse

Figurative language is very often used in spoken and also written communication to express our emotions, and to affect the opinions of our audience. There is no doubt that the use of figurative language varies depending on the nature of the communicative activity and depends on factors such as topic, audience, situational context, and so on (Deignan, Littlemore, Semino 2013).

In the mid and late-20th century, metaphor and metonymy were primarily the subject matter of literature and were studied in their role as parts of literary texts mainly. Figurative language was thought of as being one aspect of what gives a text special esthetic value (Dancygier, Sweetser, 2014). By using figurative language, poets and writers convey their messages more beautifully than if they literally talked about the subject's personal qualities.

Dancygier and Sweetser (2014) furthermore state that the last four decades of research on figurative language and thought have brought a new understanding of their integral relationship to the linguistic system. Cognitive linguistics and science conferences and journals have seen a proliferation of metaphor studies, together with recognizing figures as metonymy and irony as highly productive.

### The concept of metaphor

Metaphors, according to Webster's Third New International Dictionary (1961) is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase denoting one kind of object or action is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them. It is a means of figurative language that has been present in all kinds of, not only political speeches and discourse. As Burkholder and Henry (2009) state comparing two things or terms which are from "different classes of experience" creates a new understanding through specific use of language. One of the two terms, called the *tenor*, is relevant to the topic under discussion. The other term, the *vehicle*, is of a different class of experience from that same topic. When these two terms are combined by a speaker forming a metaphor, the receiver is urged to understand on concept in terms of the other concept (Burkholder, Henry 2009).

From the cognitive linguistic point of view, Kövecses (2010) looks at the metaphor in a sense of understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain. When we talk about life in terms of journeys, about arguments in terms of war can be stated as examples. To be more specific in explaining this view, Kövecses (2010) explains that conceptual

domain A is conceptual domain B, which is what he calls a conceptual metaphor. A conceptual metaphor consists of two conceptual domains, in which one domain is understood in terms of another. A conceptual domain is any coherent organisation of experience. Thus we have coherently organised knowledge about journeys that we rely on in understanding life, for example.

Kövecses (2010) explains the parts of a conceptual metaphor as follows. The conceptual domain from which we draw metaphorical expressions to understand another conceptual domain is called source domain, while the conceptual domain that is understood this way is the target domain. Thus, *life, arguments, love, theory, ideas, social organizations*, and others are target domains, while *journeys, war, buildings, food, plants*, and others are source domains. The target domain is the domain that we try to understand through the use of the source domain (Kövecses 2010: 4).

The most significant study on metaphor was presented by Lakoff and Johnson. They explicitly explain the concept of metaphor and state that for most people metaphor is a device of the poetic imagination and rhetorical flourish. It is most often viewed as a 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).

Conceptual metaphor explained by Lakoff and Johnson (1981) presents, for example, the concept ARGUMENT and the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR. The conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR is reflected in everyday language by a wide range of statements:

- His criticisms were *right on target*.
- If you use that *strategy*, he'll *wipe you out*.
- I *demolished* all his arguments.

In these examples, it can be seen, that we do not talk about arguments in terms of war as such. Many things people actually do when arguing with someone are partially structured by the concept of war.

The use of metaphors in political speeches has had a dubious reputation for some time. However, recently in different linguistic, psychological and philosophical discussions, the relevance of metaphor for social and political conceptualization has been acknowledged. Metaphors 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).

## Metaphors in Liz Truss's speeches

Mary Elizabeth Truss is a British politician who is the current Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and leader of the Conservative Party. She was appointed Prime Minister on 6th September 2022 by Queen Elizabeth II. She previously held various Cabinet offices under prime ministers David Cameron, Theresa May, and Boris Johnson, most recently as foreign secretary from 2021 to 2022. Truss has been a Member of Parliament for South West Norfolk since 2010.

The speeches on Elizabeth (Liz) Truss vary in length, style and the language used. Some of her speeches rely strictly on facts, where the use of figurative language is very scarce. However, in there are speeches where the concept of metaphor is used in a prosperous and productive manner. For the purpose of this study, certain speeches were analysed that were presented by her since 2017 through to 2022. The main aim of the analyses was to identify the main targets and domains used for creating conceptual metaphors.

The target domains as *country*, *economy* and *world* are often found with the combination of the source domain of a *building*. Thus expressing the process of “building” or “creating” a better place to live, or describing the way of desire what the country, economy or the world should look like, or the way of improving the current state.

### COUNTRY IS A BUILDING

Our *country* was *built* by people who get things done  
 She (the Queen) was the rock on which *modern Britain* was *built*.  
 This is the *principle* our *country* is based on

### ECONOMY IS A BUILDING

We can *rebuild* our *economy*.  
 Firstly, we are reaching out to *build* new *economic* *partnerships*.  
 We are *building* a *network* of *security* *partnerships*

### WORLD IS A BUILDING

It is not the kind of *world* we want to *build*.

Another very often used source domain, in Liz Truss's speeches, is the source domain *person*. She uses this domain to talk about the country, society, different companies, history and even the government. In these metaphors she reflects the characteristics or activities of people on things and institutions as their own.

#### COUNTRY / SOCIETY IS A PERSON

The UK *opens a new chapter*.

*Britain is determined.*

*Societies turned inwards*

*Britain taking the lead*

#### COMPANY IS A PERSON

You don't see *Sainsbury's saying we're doing better this year* .....

*Deliveroo didn't come up* .....

#### GOVERNMENT IS A PERSON

Government *doesn't always have the answers*, .....

#### HISTORY IS A PERSON

*History will see him* (Boris Johnson) as a hugely consequential Prime Minister.

In her speeches, she refers to success and diplomacy as to machines, which will drive the prosperity of the country to a higher level. In these metaphors, success and diplomacy are used as target domains and machine as the source domain. Very similar to the source domain *machine*, is the use of the source domain *vehicle*. The idea of using these expressions is once again the movements to a better position.

#### SUCCESS / DIPLOMACY IS A MACHINE

In order to *turbocharge our success*...

And our formidable *diplomatic machine will be put to work*, .....

#### ECONOMY IS A PLANT

.... to cut taxes and *grow our economy*.....

#### WORLD IS A VEHICLE / IDEAS ARE VEHICLE / ECONOMY IS A VEHICLE

The *world is moving very fast*, and *ideas are moving even faster*.

..... and its people to help *drive our economy*.....

### Conclusion

For most people, metaphor is a figure of speech in which one thing is compared to another, based on the fact that the two things compared have something in common. From the linguistic point of view, metaphor is a property of words and it is a linguistic phenomenon. The theory of Lakoff and Johnson (1981) claims that metaphor is a property of concepts, and not words, and the function of metaphors is to better understand certain concepts. On the basis of this theory, metaphor has become a highly

productive means of figurative language in political speeches and political discourse.

In the current paper we highlighted only some of the conceptual metaphors found in the speeches of the current Prime Minister of Great Britain, Elizabeth Truss. The aim was to find specific target domains and source domains in her speeches delivered throughout the period of five years, from 2017 to 2022. For the sake of this paper, only five of her speeches were analysed. The conceptual metaphors mentioned in this paper are only a small part of all possible metaphors used in speeches. A thorough research of her speeches would reveal much more conceptual metaphors which she uses to underline the strength of her words and ideas for the future development of the country.

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