

The Pragmatic Power of Metaphors: Slovak Political Discourse on the War in Ukraine

Linda Krajčovičová

Abstract

This interdisciplinary research explores the metaphorical representation of the war in Ukraine within Slovak political discourse, employing approaches from cognitive linguistics, metaphorology, and political linguistics. The primary aim is to identify and analyse metaphors used by Slovak politicians to describe the conflict, examining their pragmatic potential within political communication. Special attention is given to how these metaphors contribute to political goals, public mobilization, and the construction of social narratives surrounding the conflict.

Keywords: war, Ukraine, metaphor, political discourse, media discourse, cognitive linguistics.

Introduction

The war in Ukraine represents one of the most serious European conflicts since the World War II, stemming from historical, ethnic, and political tensions between Ukraine and Russia. This conflict resonates within the domestic political scene of many countries, including Slovakia, where it influences the shaping of public opinion and political attitudes. One can even say that the war unleashed by Russia functions, in relation to the public discourse, as a discursive event, in connection with which we observe transformations in the narratives about Ukraine and Russia, which is *pars pro toto* represented in the Slovak discourse by many seemingly apolitical entities, such as representatives of culture, who are perceived as classics (Cingerová and Dulebová 2023: 150). One of the most powerful rhetorical devices used by different political groups in democratic political struggles are emotionally tinged metaphorical images (De Landtsheer 2009: 63-64). This paper will focus on the way Slovak politicians use metaphorical language in expressing their views on the war in Ukraine, and analyse how these expressions influence public attitudes.

Metaphor as a tool for cognitive and communicative modelling in media and political discourse

In modern rhetoric, linguistics, philosophy of language, and cognitive science, all areas of language are permeated by tropes. Metaphor functions as a fundamental cognitive principle that shapes and structures human perception and thought (Reisigl 2006: 598). However, the understanding of metaphor has not always been homogeneous, and views on it have changed throughout history. In antiquity, metaphor was seen as a departure from normal language and its function was mainly decorative. Aristotle, on the other hand, saw it as a linguistic mechanism applicable to everyday life and defined it as “the application of a word that belongs to another thing; it occurs either from genus to species, from species to genus, from species to species, or by analogy” (Aristotle 1932: 1457b6-9). Metaphor received wider attention, only with the advent of conceptual metaphor theory within cognitive linguistics (Gibbs 2011: 530).

Before the rise of cognitive linguistics in the 1970s, two trends dominated the field of linguistics. The first was the heterogeneous functionalist paradigm, which drew on European structuralism and regarded language as a dynamic system that can only be properly understood in the context of its communicative functions. The second direction was the formalist paradigm, represented mainly by generative grammar, inspired by the works of the American linguist L. Bloomfield. This formalist and system-linguistic paradigm gradually became dominant, while the functionalist approach receded into the background (Nuyts 2011: 48).

A pioneering work in the field of metaphor research is the work of American linguists G. Lakoff and M. Johnson *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), which introduced the idea that metaphors are essential components of our conceptual system. These conceptual mappings operate on the principle of a source domain and image schema, rooted in our conceptual system which is located in the brain. According to cognitive linguistics, metaphors allow us to understand one conceptual domain through the mediation of another (Kövecses 2010: 4).

In this paper, we analyse metaphors in media discourse, which we view as the totality of processes and products of speech activity in the media. The analysis of media discourse is primarily dealt with by media linguistics, which is an interdisciplinary science, within which research from the fields of journalism and media communication, discourse analysts, etc. intersect. Since we are analysing the utterances of Slovak politicians, we are mainly talking about political discourse, which is intertwined with media discourse, because its realisation takes place through the media. Different types of

texts or talks may be defined as political discourse. It can encompass various forms, such as political speeches, debates, interviews, policy documents, and other formats, or may consist of speech or text that addresses political topics or carries a political motivation (Wilson 2001).

Textual structures in media and political discourses express hidden meanings, opinions and ideologies, which is a characteristic feature of metaphors. In order to understand such hidden meanings in the text, we need to analyse the cognitive, social, political, and cultural contexts. The cognitive approach is based on the assumption that texts do not have meaning, but are assigned meaning by language users or their mental processes (Van Dijk 2002: 116-117).

Metaphors have strong rhetorical effects in media and political discourse and can penetrate the mind of the recipient and create new meaning in order to obfuscate and potentially change thinking. In political discourse, metaphor is used to construct a persuasive version of reality to which style and content is adapted with an appeal to emotions.

Methodology

In this paper, we analyse metaphors used by Slovak politicians in relation to the war in Ukraine from the beginning of the conflict to the present (2022-2024). Our research material consists of political utterances published in Slovak media and political discourse, which is generally “marked by a higher level of emotional charge and, hence, stronger rhetoric” (Posokhin 2023: 74). We focus on Ľuboš Blaha, Róbert Fico, and Andrej Danko, who are critical of Ukraine, and on representatives from the opposing political camp, such as Jaroslav Naď, Igor Matovič, and Rastislav Káčer.

We aim to examine how metaphors in political discourse influence and shape political attitudes towards Ukraine, Russia, the U.S., and the EU, and how they polarize Slovak society. To achieve this goal, we will employ cognitive-discursive, cognitive-semiotic approaches, and critical discourse analysis (CDA). Cognitive approaches will deepen our understanding of metaphor use and its influence on political narratives, while CDA will help reveal the power relations and ideologies embedded in metaphorical language. Contextual analysis will clarify how metaphors function within public discourse, and pragmatic analysis will help us explore the intentions behind their use.

The analysis of metaphors in the context of the war in Ukraine

Luboš Blaha, member of the political party *SMER* (Direction) and the European Parliament, is one of the most controversial politicians on the Slovak political scene. His statements are characterised by pro-Russian attitudes and criticism of the West, including NATO and the United States. In his speeches, Blaha stresses the importance of maintaining good Russian-Slovak relations: *We must have good relations with Russia and not shoot ourselves in the foot. They scared you with Covid, now they scare you with war - just to enslave you* [startitup.sk, 24/02/2022]. The metaphor of *shooting oneself in the foot* creates an image of self-destructive action and implies that the eastern orientation is logical and beneficial for Slovakia. Blaha seeks to influence the recipients' view of the situation and motivate them to support stronger ties with Russia, exploiting the dynamics of power relations between the countries. By using the concept of *enslavement*, he again employs fear as a tool to strengthen his arguments. He manipulatively presents Western institutions as a threat to Slovak sovereignty.

Blaha accuses the political party *Progresívne Slovensko* (Progressive Slovakia) of supporting Ukraine: *Of course Progressive Slovakia is on the side of Ukraine. They actually applaud Zelensky for wanting to threaten the Slovak economy and ordinary Slovaks and Hungarians. This is how collaborators behave. They attack their own state and, in difficult moments of crisis, side with those who have declared economic war on us. They hate Slovakia - that is what they are. It is Ukraine that has attacked Slovakia in the most insidious way. And while Brussels is listening, it is an accomplice and must be treated as such* [dennikvv.sk, 25/07/2024]. Blaha evaluates this aid as a betrayal of the country, thereby trying to question the legitimacy of the opposition's positions. Blaha also blames Ukraine and Brussels, demonising them as enemies, reinforcing the narrative that Slovakia is exposed to threats from outside. This approach clearly reflects the dichotomy of *us* versus *them*, through which Blaha tries to create a sense of unity and solidarity towards *us*, while *them* are labelled as traitors and enemies. His rhetoric is aggressive, suggesting that this is an attempt to mobilise his supporters and win their emotional support. Blaha reinforces the collective identity by creating an image of Slovakia as a victim and perceiving himself and his party as the protectors of the nation. His rhetoric is not only a political strategy, but also a psychological tool that shapes public discourse.

A similar idea may be observed in the utterance: *Robert Fico put it accurately - the war in Ukraine is not our war. Everyone can see it now - it is a jihad of Western Progressives against Russia. We want peace and tranquillity. We will never allow our sons to go to die in a war against the Rus-*

sians. Never! Remember, Mr. Macron, don't drive Europe into war! Slovakia wants peace [ereport.sk, 03/05/2024]. Western progressive political parties are again playing the role of the enemy of Slovakia. Blaha uses a strong metaphorical image of *jihad*, which evokes negative associations connected with radicalism and violence. This image not only increases the emotional charge, but also demonises the current political activities of the West and gives them a radical character (for a more detailed discussion of the linguoculturological peculiarities of the nominations, see Berkovets 2021: 43). The use of the concept of *jihad* suggests that the conflict in Ukraine is understood as a war of ideologies, with Blaha positioning his political party as advocating peace and a rational approach. This manipulative nature of the statement can have serious repercussions on the political atmosphere in the country, as it increases polarisation and promotes antagonism towards opposing views.

The following utterance is equally emotionally charged: *It is incredible what a concentration of warmongers there is in the European Parliament - everyone who votes for such resolutions has blood on their hands. The result could be World War III and the destruction of the planet. On the contrary, there must be dialogue with Russia, which is why we welcome all peace initiatives, including Orbán's* [teraz.sk, 19/09/2024]. Blaha uses the metaphor of *warmongers* to refer to politicians in the European Parliament who support military aid to Ukraine. This language suggests that the European Parliament is full of politicians who seek to incite military conflict. Another powerful metaphor is *blood on their hands*, which is conflictogenic in nature and implies the complicity of these politicians in killing. Blaha creates an image of political opponents as morally responsible for the violence and chaos that is currently taking place. The metaphor of *planetary extinction* assumes an apocalyptic outcome to the actions of European politicians. It represents the extreme consequences that could occur if hostilities continue, thus reinforcing his position as an advocate of peaceful dialogue. His language is manipulative because it inspires panic and hopelessness, which can lead to increased support for his political agenda. His rhetoric elicits strong emotional responses that override rational judgment and force recipients to consider protecting their own nation from its supposed enemies.

In the following utterance, Blaha suggests that Slavs have a moral duty to stand on the side of peace and to oppose American imperial wars: *And we as Slavs must say one thing - we will always be on the side of peace. And we will always reject the American imperial wars. Always! The Great War is closer than ever. If Europe continues to behave like the American puggle, we will not be able to avoid it. The US Congress has failed. It is going to be*

bad. Very bad [ereport.sk, 21/04/2024]. Blaha's appeal to moral integrity increases the emotional charge and sense of pride and solidarity. He creates an apocalyptic vision that evokes fear and panic. His language is manipulative, suggesting imminent danger and forcing recipients to reflect on the need for actionable policy. He warns that Europe, if it continues to act like an *American puggle*, will not avoid this *great war*. This metaphor reinforces the image of Europe as a passive player attempting to evade accountability. He mobilises anger and frustration towards the United States, thus creating a sense of hopelessness. Blaha portrays the Slavs as peacemakers and the U.S. as anticipators of conflict.

Róbert Fico, current Prime Minister of Slovakia and founder of the *SMER* (Direction) party, has maintained a critical stance toward Western nations regarding the conflict in Ukraine. In one of his statements, he accuses these countries of provoking the war to weaken Russia, suggesting that their ulterior motive is to manipulate Ukraine for their own geopolitical goals: *Everyone wanted to use Ukraine to bring the Russians to their knees. Don't take it the wrong way, but a Russian on his knees is just tying his shoelaces* [standard.sk, 16.10.2024]. This phrase suggests that despite external pressures, Russia remains strong, able to recover quickly, and retain its power. It reinforces the idea that its resilience and ability to retaliate should not be underestimated. Fico also implies that Ukraine is weak and cannot defend itself without the help of Western countries and the United States.

Fico further claims that peace negotiations will take place between Ukraine and the United States, suggesting a lack of faith in Ukraine's ability to act independently: *I fear that Ukraine will be a victim just as we were victims during the Munich Agreement* [postoj.sk, 16/10/2024]. By referencing the Munich Agreement, where Slovakia was sacrificed for the sake of appeasing stronger powers, he frames Ukraine as a potential victim, thus invoking historical trauma to garner sympathy and support. It is an extremely sophisticated discourse tactic of appealing to the Slovak voter, who perceives the precedent situation of the Munich Agreement exclusively as a trauma, while in other linguistic-cultural areas there are diametrically different views of this precedent situation (on the issue of reinterpretation and desemantization of precedent phenomena, see more closely Duleba, Dulebová, 2021). This narrative portrays Fico as a defender of national dignity, asserting that any peace will come at a painful cost, not just for Ukraine but for Europe as a whole.

Andrej Danko, the current Deputy Speaker of the National Council and leader of the *SNS* party (Slovak National Party), portrays Russia as a militarily dominant actor: *The Russians are in the territories they wanted to be*

*in. If they wanted, they could cross Ukraine up and down ten times. They are in areas with Russian-speaking populations and have taken control of them. If they wanted, **the whole area would have been plowed up and down by now** [spravy.rtvs.sk, 15/03/2024]. Danko's statements suggest that Russia is only interested in areas they considers Russian-dominant, and the Ukrainian army is not an equal military opponent. This stance reflects an attempt to downplay the perceived threat from Russia, implying that the Slovaks have no reason to panic. The metaphor *plowed up and down* emphasises Russia's destructive power. The use of *plowing* evokes an image of land that is destroyed, churned up, and utterly devastated. This metaphor suggests that Russia could devastate Ukraine if it wished, creating the impression that Ukraine is defenseless.*

Danko portrays Ukraine negatively, stating: *Ukraine is **one big hole where money is wasted. Ukraine should be a buffer zone** [domov.sme.sk, 21/01/2024]. Danko manipulates public opinion, reinforcing skepticism toward supporting Ukraine and undermining its credibility on the international stage. The metaphor *buffer zone* suggests a neutral area; according to Danko, Ukraine should remain a neutral country, not aligning with either the East or the West. This rhetoric implies that Danko views Ukraine as a barrier between powers, suggesting it should be isolated from conflict and military alliances. Danko's rhetoric and use of metaphors bolster the image of Russia as a dominant player while depicting Ukraine as a weak and corrupt actor, creating a polarised view of power dynamics in the region.*

Jaroslav Nad', leader of the *Demokrati* (Democrats) party and former minister of Defense (2020-2023), uses vivid metaphors to criticise his political opponents: *This proves that Fico doesn't care about the country's security—he's only interested in **bloody business**. Those missiles could have been saving lives in Ukraine for six months, but the SMER party members, with **blood on their hands**, want to **line their pockets**. And in the end, the missiles will end up in Ukraine anyway / I will not dance to the tune of Robert Fico and his entire pro-Russian propaganda. Let the parliament decide whether to accept or reject **Fico's game** [ta3.com, 16/02/2023]. In relation to the MiG-29 fighter jets, Nad' emphasises his commitment to supporting Ukraine and his resolve not to yield to Róbert Fico, highlighting his own steadfast character. He portrays Fico as an uncompromising politician who interferes with his decisions. Nad's rhetoric as a whole aims to create a contrast between his actions and those of his political rivals as he seeks to demonstrate his ethical and moral stance while simultaneously ridiculing and demonizing his opponents. Through this approach, he attempts to garner public support and strengthen his political position in the context of the Ukraine conflict.*

In the utterance, *No one is trying to force us to send our soldiers to Ukraine. Even our soldiers laugh at the idea, wondering what nonsense this Slovak Ilya Muromets is spouting* [aktuality.sk, 26/02/2024], Nad' metaphorically compares Fico to *Ilya Muromets*, a Russian hero of epic tales who embodies courage and strength. Ilya Muromets is the archetype of a traditional hero who defends his kin and country. However, in reference to Fico, this metaphor takes on an ironic tone. Nad' implies that Fico presents himself as a brave leader fighting for Slovaks and standing up to stronger nations. Referencing the fairy tale genre, for whom the radical dichotomization of *evil* and *good* constitutes one of the most familiar and frequently ridiculed clichés (Duleba 2023: 93-95), Nad' criticises Fico, suggesting that his heroism is either false, romantically simplistic, unrealistic or at least exaggerated.

Nad's utterance, *The Hitler from Moscow is exterminating millions* [aktuality.sk, 15/05/2022], is charged with emotion, metaphorically portraying Vladimir Putin as a war criminal. This metaphor carries potent connotations, as Hitler is associated with genocide, war, and mass violence during World War II. This metaphor is a powerful tool for expressing negative sentiments toward Moscow and its policies, drawing on historical parallels to emphasise the gravity of the situation and to stir emotions among audience.

Rastislav Káčer is a Slovak diplomat and politician who served as the minister of Foreign Affairs and European Affairs from September 2022 to May 2023 in Eduard Heger's government. Káčer has been a proponent of supporting Ukraine, as evidenced by his statements: *It is a fundamental rule of Christianity to help one's neighbor in need, to stand up for those who are attacked, those who are beaten and There are two reasons to prevent this. The first is to help a neighbor in need. It is a moral, human principle* [spravy.rtvs.sk, 16/02/2023]. Káčer appeals to the Christian values of Slovaks, presenting Ukraine as a victim that needs protection and defense. He employs language that enhances feelings of compassion and empathy toward Ukraine, thereby appealing to the moral values of his audience, as Christian morality has deep roots in Slovak culture. He aims to legitimise political decisions and strengthen the sense of national identity and solidarity with Ukraine.

In his utterances, *If we overlook the principles with which Russia attacked Ukraine, we would be cutting off the branch we are sitting on and If we do not stand by Ukraine, we would be shooting ourselves in the head* [plus.noviny.sk, 16/02/2023], Káčer highlights the danger that Slovakia will face if Russian troops advance toward its borders. The stance on Ukraine is not just a diplomatic issue but also an existential one for Slovakia and its stability. These images evoke a sense of threat and fear among recipients,

making the metaphor manipulative in nature. Káčer simultaneously expresses his belief that supporting Ukraine is the only logical and safe option.

Former Prime Minister of Slovakia (2020-2021) Igor Matovič expresses positive views on Ukraine: *Ukrainians are fighting and losing their own blood so that we can live here safely for the next 10-20 years. If the Ukrainians lose, it's only a matter of time before Russia **knocks on our door*** [sita.sk, 17/03/2022]. Matovič emphasises the importance of supporting Ukraine in its fight against Russian aggression. The metaphor of *knocking on the door* symbolises the threat of a security breach, evokes a sense of danger, and mobilises the public.

Conclusion

Based on our analysis, we conclude that the metaphors employed by Slovak politicians have a manipulative function and serve as a tool for shaping public opinion and scoring political points with voters. The dichotomy of *us* versus *them* is omnipresent in all analysed utterances positioning Slovakia against Ukraine, Russia, Europe, and the United States.

L. Blaha, R. Fico, and A. Danko construct an image of Russia as a dominant superpower, reinforcing the narrative of the importance of maintaining positive relations with a state that is often perceived as a threat to Slovakia and its interests. Their utterances are characterized by pro-Russian and anti-Western stances aimed at instilling a sense of threat, demonizing opponents, and mobilizing their supporters.

In contrast, J. Naď, R. Káčer and I. Matovič emphasise the moral obligation to help Ukraine and fight against Russian aggression. By appealing to values such as helping and protecting a neighbour in need, they seek to evoke a sense of solidarity and empathy towards Ukraine. They base their arguments on the fear of potential Russian occupation which is rooted in Slovakia's historical experience of having already endured Russian occupation. At the same time, they demonise political rivals with different opinions.

The analysed metaphorical images reflect how geopolitical interests and domestic political dynamics influence politicians' rhetoric and how it contributes to society's polarization. This rhetoric is evident not only in their attitudes toward the conflict in Ukraine but also in shaping the political culture and public perception of the conflict.

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Contact:

Mgr. Linda Krajčovičová, PhD.

Katedra anglického jazyka	Department of English Language
Fakulta aplikovaných jazykov	Faculty of Applied Languages
Ekonomická univerzita v Bratislave	University of Economics Bratislava
Email Address: linda.krajcovicova@euba.sk	
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1925-2673	