

Conceptual Metaphors in English Political Discourse

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ABSTRACT: Political discourses serve as an instrument for politicians and / or political organizations to pursue and execute power. To exert positive and persuasive effects on the listeners, political speakers frequently opt to using metaphors. This article investigates the use of conceptual metaphors in political discourses made in English language and attempts to present the used types of conceptual metaphors and the commonly used conceptual metaphors in the real political life.

KEYWORDS: English political discourse, conceptual metaphor, structural metaphor.

1. WHAT IS POLITICAL DISCOURSE?

Chilton (2004) holds that politics is viewed either as a struggle for power between those seeking and maintaining their power and those trying to resist it or as cooperation in an attempt to solve clashes of interest over finance, influence, freedom and the like. And to this end, there is an intimate link between language and politics at a fundamental level (Chilton, 2004: 4). Political discourse, therefore, comprises all kinds of discourse covering the management of not only the states but also varied political organizations and individuals. According to Van Dijk (1997), most studies of political discourse is about the text and talk of professional politicians or political organizations at the local, national and international levels. Political discourse is not only social or political, but also as individual text and talk which embodies individual characteristics (Chilton and Schaffner, 1997).

Political discourse is said to serve as an instrument for politicians and political institutions to pursue and execute power. And to exert positive and persuasive effects on the public, political speakers frequently opt to using metaphors.

2. CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Regarding the use of metaphor in political discourse, Vestermark (2007) takes the view that politicians use language to persuade listeners with the use of metaphor as one of the most prominent tools for persuasion and an instrument for propaganda in political rhetorical language. It can be argued that the use of metaphor in political discourse is deliberate and strategic when Beard (2000) views it as a skill to appeal to listeners' emotions in a natural way. Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 159) also believe that "metaphors play a central role in the construction of social and political reality".

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) develop the idea of cognitive linguistic view of metaphors; accordingly, metaphors are not just a property of words, but also of concepts, not just linguistic phenomena but a matter of thought. In other words, "conceptual metaphor is a natural part of human thought and linguistic metaphor is a natural part of human language" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 246-247).

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), in terms of underlying structure, there are three types of conceptual metaphors, namely structural metaphors, orientational metaphors and ontological metaphors. Structural metaphors are cases where one concept is metaphorically structured in terms of another while for orientational metaphors one concept is spatially related to another as up-down, in-out, front-back ... and ontological metaphors, based on people's experience with physical objects, identify abstract experiences as entities or substances.

This article investigates the use of metaphors in political discourse made in English language by American, British and Australian politicians, and attempts to present the most commonly used conceptual metaphors in the real political life.

3. RESEARCH DATA AND METHODS

The research data comprises 61 political speeches in English made by different US Presidents, British Prime Ministers and Australian Prime Ministers in the last 45 years with the total length of 157,423 words.

To identify the conceptual metaphors in the research data, we employ Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) by the Pragglejaz Group (2007) - a method that can help to identify metaphorically used words in discourse.

The findings show that there are 40 conceptual metaphors used in the 65 political speeches and they can be cognitively categorized as in the Table below:

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Types of conceptual metaphors	Number of conceptual metaphors	Percentage rate
Structural metaphors	21	52.50%
Oriental metaphors	4	10.00%
Ontological metaphors	15	37.50%
Total	40	100%

As can be seen from the Table above, the most frequently used conceptual metaphors in English political discourse are structural metaphors, accounting for as high as over 52% out of the total.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The research findings present 05 macro-metaphors which fall under the category of structural metaphors, namely POLITICS AS A JOURNEY, POLITICS AS CONSTRUCTION, POLITICS AS WAR, POLITICS AS A WEATHER PHENOMENON and POLITICS AS LIGHT AND DARK. Under these macro-metaphors are 16 micro-metaphors, totalling 21 structural metaphors, as mentioned in the Table above.

4.1. Structural metaphor POLITICS AS A JOURNEY

Conceptual metaphor POLITICS AS A JOURNEY with linguistic expressions as coming to a crossroads, moving ahead towards a better future, overcoming obstacles on the way... is frequently used in political discourse (Chilton, 1996).

In the saying below of President Thomas Jefferson, America is conceptualized as a ship with American people as passengers hoping that the leaders as the ship captain can steer the ship to reach the destination being peace, freedom and safety.

(1) "I look with encouragement for that guidance and support which may enable us to **steer** with safety **the vessel in which we are all embarked**" ... , let us hasten **to retrace our steps and to regain the road** which alone **leads to** peace, liberty, and safety (Thomas Jefferson, 1801).

The following saying of the late UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher is an example for the conceptualization of the nation's development as a journey and the problems as obstacles:

(2) "No doubt there will be unexpected **twists** in the **road**, but with wisdom and resolution we can reach our goal".

The Prime Minister uses the concept JOURNEY to express her belief in the nation's leaders being able to lead the nation to overcome obstacles and challenges on the journey of nation's development.

Australian Prime Minister John Howard in his speech in 2007 about the political and diplomatic relations between Australia and the US also conceptualizes the two nations being on two parallel paths, implying moving in the same direction with the same target: fighting against terrorism and promoting democracy and freedom for the world:

(3) "The **paths** of our two countries have been parallel in so many ways, in the fight against terrorism and the promotion of democracy and freedom around the world".

President Joe Biden, in his State of the Union Address in 2024, described the American political movement as a journey with the direction ahead and praised the achievements his government had gained as the distance covered:

(4) "America cannot **go back**. I am here tonight to show **the way forward**. Because I know **how far** we've **come**".

President Donald Trump, in his first speech to the Congress of the US in 2017, also used the concept of path to refer to the journey of America toward civil rights:

(5) "Tonight, as we mark the conclusion of our celebration of Black History Month, we are reminded of our Nation's **path** toward civil rights and the work that still remains".

President-elect Donald Trump in his Victory Speech in 2024 conceptualized the Presidential Election as a journey with many obstacles to face with, but he and his Republican Party managed to overcome and gained the power to make America great again:

(6) "We overcame **obstacles** that nobody thought possible and it is now clear that we've achieved the most incredible political thing".

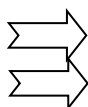
From these analyses, we can see the appearance of 06 micro-metaphors as follows: POLITICS AS A JOURNEY WITH DIRECTION, POLITICS AS A JOURNEY WITH ROUTE, POLITICS AS A JOURNEY OF PEOPLE WITH THE SAME DESTINATION, POLITICS AS A JOURNEY WITH PROBLEMS, PROBLEMS AS OBSTACLES, SOLVING PROBLEMS IS REMOVING OBSTACLES.

Conceptual metaphor POLITICS AS A JOURNEY can be illustrated in mapping diagram as follows:

a) passenger		people
b) captain		political leader
c) crew		government official/civil servant
d) way/road		political activities
e) destination		political goal

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- f) means of transport
- g) obstacle, hindrance



- government policy, regulation
- political problem

4.2. Structural metaphor

POLITICS AS CONSTRUCTION

The concept CONSTRUCTION is familiar to people since it is one of their necessities: food, clothes and buildings. Human beings have evolved from the primitive living in caves to civilized ones living in modern buildings. It can be said that construction has developed over time, marking the development and civilization of human society. Hence, the concept CONSTRUCTION is a concrete source domain to express the abstract concept NATION in its development.

Some examples of political discourse with the conceptual metaphor POLITICS AS CONSTRUCTION and the micro-metaphor THE NATION IS A BUILDING are as follows:

(7) “We **built** this Nation to serve its people” (Lyndon B. Johnson, 1965).

(8) “America was **built** on challenges, not promises.” (Bill Clinton, 1996).

In these sayings of President Lyndon Johnson and President Bill Clinton, America is conceptualized as a building for people to live in with the building ground being the surrounding challenges which can be hard but it can ensure the stability of the construction. On the contrary, promises can be ear-pleasing but like weak foundation, being unable to guarantee the stability of the building.

Also using the conceptual metaphor POLITICS AS CONSTRUCTION and the micro-metaphor THE NATION IS A BUILDING, the late UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher talked about the achievements gained after 17 months her Government in power as follows:

(9) “In its first 17 months, this government has laid the **foundation** for the recovery of the nation”.

The Prime Minister conceptualized the nation as a building with the achievements her Government accomplished after 17 months in power as the foundation of the building, which can ensure the stability and endurance of the building. It can be conceptualized that politicians like the Prime Minister are the builders and their political activities bring about different parts of the building, such as the foundation helping to form the complete building.

In 2008, the US President-elect Barack Obama said in his election winning speech that:

(10) “I will ask you to join in the work of remaking this nation – **block by block, brick by brick**, calloused hand by calloused hand”.

Again, the nation is conceptualized as a building and at the time Mr. Barack Obama was elected, the US was undergoing various problems, especially in economy and finance and the nation was like a building in ruin. Hence, the new President called the people to help rebuild the building block by block with bricks and calloused hands. In this case, the builders are not only confined to politicians, but comprise all the people living under the shared building.

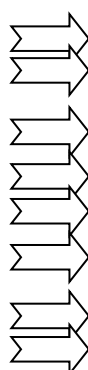
In July 2020, after winning the Presidential Election, the US President-elect Joe Biden also conceptualized the US as a building when he called American to take the opportunity to build the US a nation of prosperity and purpose as in the saying below:

(11) “We have the opportunity to defeat despair and to **build** a nation of prosperity and purpose”.

From these analyses, it can be seen that conceptual metaphor POLITICS AS CONSTRUCTION which comprises 02 micro-metaphors, namely THE NATION IS A BUILDING and POLITICIAN AS A BUILDER with popular linguistic expressions as build/rebuild/builder, cement, collapse, construct, crack/fracture, foundation/ground, shaking, solid, stable, wall, is another commonly used structural metaphor in political discourse.

The conceptual metaphor POLITICS AS CONSTRUCTION and its 02 micro-metaphors can be shown in mapping diagram as follows:

- a) ground, foundation
- b) building
- c) collapse
- d) crack, fracture
- e) stability
- f) builder
- g) build
- h) cement



- government foundation
- government
- failure of political system
- weakness of political system
- stability of political system
- political leader
- set up political system
- connection of political system

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4.3. Structural metaphor POLITICS AS WAR

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), people frequently conceptualize war, fighting and conflict in such fields as politics, love and argument; hence, conceptual metaphor POLITICS AS WAR is one of the common conceptual metaphors in political discourse, which structures the way people think about politics as a battle with two sides fighting and either winning or losing.

The concepts of WAR and FIGHTING have been familiar to human beings throughout the history of formation and development of human society since the primitive time with human fighting against the severe nature, wild animals, enemies and invaders as well as difficulties to survive and develop. Nations like the US and the UK have a long history of wars to establish the nation, fight against the invaders and occupy colonies. That may explain why words like war, fight and struggle are frequently found in political discourse to convey the conceptual metaphor POLITICS AS WAR; accordingly, the abstract concept of politics is expressed through the concrete concept of war.

In his speech to declare election victory in 2016, President-elect Donald Trump said:

(12) "I've just received a call from Secretary Clinton. She congratulated us on our **victory**, and I congratulated her and her family on a very, very **hard-fought** campaign. I mean she **fought** very hard".

Here, President-elect Donald Trump has conceptualized the American political election as a battlefield with the two candidates Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton as two warriors fighting against each other for the American Presidency. Despite Hillary Clinton fighting hard, victory belonged to the more powerful fighter - Donald Trump. However, unlike in a real war, the loser, Secretary of State Clinton, congratulated the winner, Donald Trump, on his victory and got compliments for her fighting efforts. This hardly happens in a real war when the losing side has to meet the requirements of the winner, such as paying the war fees, and receive disparagement and contempt. There would be no such things as the losing side congratulating the winning side.

The same thing was found in the 2008 Presidential Election when President-elect Barack Obama, in his winning speech, appreciated and congratulated his opponents - Senator John McCain and Governor Sarah Palin:

(13) "Senator McCain **fought** long and hard in this campaign. And he **fought** even longer and harder for the country that he loves. He has endured sacrifices for America that most of us cannot begin to imagine... I congratulate him; I congratulate Governor (Sarah) Palin for all that they've achieved".

President-elect Barack Obama also used the concept fight to depict the election efforts of Senator John McCain as of a courageous fighter willing to sacrifice for the nation and he congratulated the Senator and Governor Sarah Palin despite the fact that they lost the election.

And four years later, after winning the election to be re-elected as the US President for one more term, Mr. Obama had the same comments on his opponent - Governor Romney.

(14) "I just spoke with Governor Romney and I congratulated him and Paul Ryan on a **hard-fought** campaign. We may have **battled** fiercely, but it's only because we love this country deeply and we care so strongly about its future".

From the view of President Obama, despite the fierce battle against each other in the Presidential Election, the two opponents have the shared goal, which is to devote themselves for the benefits of the country. That explains why both the winner and the loser have respect to each other.

From these analyses, it can be seen that the conceptual metaphor POLITICS AS WAR comprises 03 micro-metaphors POLITICIANS AS FIGHTERS, POLITICAL ELECTION AS BATTLEFIELD and ELECTORAL SUCCESS AS MILITARY VICTORY and they can be shown in mapping diagram as follows:

a) battlefield		political election
b) fighter, warrior		politician
c) war, conflict		clash between political parties
d) fight, attack		political move
e) weapon		political tactic

4.4. Structural metaphor POLITICS AS A WEATHER PHENOMENON

Weather has been an indispensable factor in human's life since they led a primitive and nomad lifestyle. In daily conversations, weather can serve as an ice-breaker before people start talking business. Hence, the presence of weather phenomenon in conceptual metaphors in political discourse can be anticipated.

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In his Inauguration Speech in 1989, President George H.W Bush mentioned a weather phenomenon - a new breeze - to depict new changes in the new President's term of service:

(15) "A new **breeze** is blowing and a nation refreshed by freedom stands ready to push on. There is new ground to be broken and new action to be taken".

From what he said, America is seen undergoing new positive changes conceptualized as a new breeze. A breeze can bring about refreshing feelings and such concept can exert positive impacts on listeners' attitudes who would have positive expectations for the new government.

Speaking at the United Nations' Council in the 25th September 2012, President Obama said:

(16) "We again declare that the regime of Bashar al-Assad must come to an end so that the suffering of the Syrian people can stop, and a new **dawn** can begin".

The President described the harsh regime of Bashar al-Assad as the dark night overwhelming Syria and when the regime was ended, there would be a dawn in Syria with the country starting a new and bright future. In other words, the natural phenomenon dawn is conceptualized as a new stage in the history of the country.

The concept of dawn was also used in President Trump's first speech to the Congress of the US in 2025 to refer to a new stage in the history of America as in the following words:

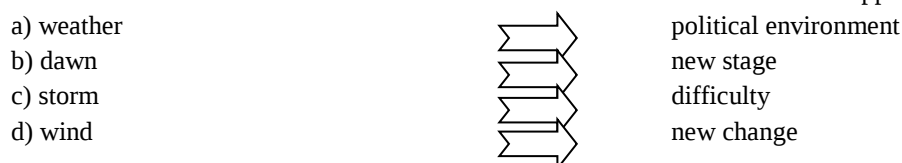
(17) "Six weeks ago, I stood beneath the dome of this Capitol and proclaimed the **dawn** of the golden age of America".

In his Address to the State in 2010, President Barack Obama had the following words:

(18) "One year ago, I took office amid two wars, an economy rocked by a severe recession, a financial system on the verge of collapse, and a government deeply in debt. Experts from across the political spectrum warned that if we did not act, we might face a second depression. So we acted immediately and aggressively. And one year later, the worst of the **storm** has passed".

The President conceptualized the various difficulties American faced as a terrible storm possibly causing damage to the economy and the people. Thanks to experts' warning which can be regarded as the weather forecast, America took timely and aggressive measures against the storm and controlled the situation.

The conceptual metaphor POLITICS AS A WEATHER PHENOMENON with its 03 micro-metaphors CHANGE AS WIND, DIFFICULTY AS STORM and DAWN AS NEW STAGE can be shown in mapping diagram as follows:



4.5. Structural metaphor POLITICS AS LIGHT AND DARK

The structural metaphor POLITICS AS LIGHT AND DARK is another conceptual metaphor often found in English political discourse as can be seen in the following Inauguration Speech of President-elect Dwight D. Eisenhower in the year 1953:

(19) "How far have we come in man's long pilgrimage from **darkness** toward **light**? Are we nearing the **light** - a day of freedom and of peace for all mankind? Or are the **shadows** of another night closing in upon us? ... Freedom is pitted against slavery; **lightness** against the **dark**".

President Eisenhower highlighted the contrast between light versus dark, between freedom versus slavery. This is embodied in the experience of human in the natural life in the primitive time when sunlight brings about life to every living creature and food for human. Light also means freedom to move to human. On the contrary, dark means danger and threats and human were afraid to move, they tended to take shelter in the cave; and therefore, dark is conceptualized as danger and loss of freedom. The discovery of fire helped human to have light even in the dark night and so the development of human can be compared to a pilgrimage from darkness to light.

This conceptualization is also found in speeches made by other US Presidents like Richard Nixon, Bill Clinton, George Bush, Barack Obama, who all conceptualize negative things as dark and good things like freedom as light and sunshine.

(20) "We have endured a long night of the American spirit. But as our eyes catch the **dimness** of the first **rays** of dawn, let us not curse the remaining **dark**. Let us gather the **light** (Richard Nixon, 1969).

(21) "Today, a generation raised in the **shadows** of the Cold War assumes new responsibilities in a world warmed by the **sunshine** of freedom but threatened still by ancient hatreds and new plagues" (Bill Clinton, 1993).

(22) "We have confidence because freedom is the permanent hope of mankind, the hunger in **dark** places, the longing of the soul" (George Bush, 2005).

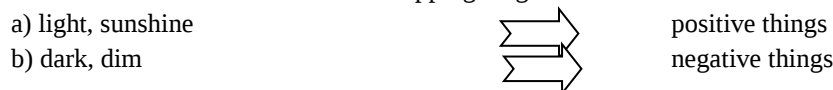
(23) "With common effort and common purpose, with passion and dedication, let us answer the call of history, and carry into an uncertain future that precious **light** of freedom" (Barack Obama, 2013).

In his first speech to the Congress of the US in 2017, President Donald Trump used the concept of torch to bring light – the positive things such as truth, liberty and justice – not just to America but also to the world.

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(24) “Each American generation passes the **torch** of truth, liberty and justice - in an unbroken chain all the way down to the present. That **torch** is now in our hands. And we will use it to **light** up the world”.

The conceptual metaphor POLITICS AS DARK AND NIGHT and its 02 micro-metaphors BAD THINGS AS DARK and GOOD THINGS AS LIGHT can be shown in mapping diagram as follows:



5. CONCLUSION

The use of metaphors in political discourse made in English language by American, British and Australian politicians has been analysed, proving the strategic place of metaphors in political discourse for the purpose of persuasion and propaganda. The most commonly used is the structural conceptual metaphors with 05 macro-metaphors, namely POLITICS AS A JOURNEY, POLITICS AS CONSTRUCTION, POLITICS AS WAR, POLITICS AS A WEATHER PHENOMENON and POLITICS AS LIGHT AND DARK, and their 16 micro-metaphors.

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