

Critical Metaphor Analysis from a Communication perspective: A case study of Australian news media discourse on Immigration and Asylum Seekers

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Abstract

Drawing on Lakoff's and Johnson's (1980) seminal work "Metaphors we live by", this paper argues that Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA) is a legitimate method of investigation that has been overlooked and underdeveloped in Communication and Media studies. Although CMA has recently gone beyond its original roots in linguistics to become a legitimate research tool across the Communication discipline, there is little empirical research providing a detailed description of how the analysis is conducted. In this paper, we report on a research project that used CMA to investigate how the contemporary Australian news media use certain metaphoric concepts to represent maritime asylum seekers and boat arrivals. The research suggests that the way social policy problems are metaphorically constructed may influence how the public conceptualise the issue, thereby offering discourse towards a particular policy solution. Using this research project as a case study, we aim to first demonstrate how Critical Metaphor Analysis could provide access to rich, meaningful discourse data, and secondly, to develop and demonstrate an informed, concrete method of CMA for future research in Media and Communication. The paper calls for a structured, rigorous coding procedure, yet contends that a more flexible approach in the interpretation stage can yield valuable insights into media discourse about important policy issues.

Keywords: Critical Metaphor Analysis; Discourse; Communication; News Media; Asylum Seekers

Introduction

The surge in interest in Cognitive Linguistics (especially metaphor study) over the last few decades has seen more research effort towards integrating Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), giving birth to Critical Metaphor Analysis as an established field method. The powerful implications of metaphors have long been recognised, yet there is still limited published research that provides a detailed description of how the analysis is conducted. This lack of attention to the fundamental aspect of the research method arguably contributes to the overall low popularity of CMA in Communication and Media studies, particularly in the context of Australia. In this paper, we attempt to make both a methodological and an empirical contribution to fill in this gap. Specifically, we examine two key questions:

- 1) How can CMA improve our understanding of important political and social issues? – and
- 2) What can we do to enhance the transparency and effectiveness of CMA in Communication and Media research?

To effectively address these questions, we first discuss the key theoretical framework of metaphor studies, then move on to a detailed analysis of a recent project that used CMA to investigate Australian news discourse on boat arrivals.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory

The term “metaphor” originates from the Greek words “meta” (“beyond”) and “pherein” (“carrying”). At its most literal level, metaphor is:

a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable” (The Oxford English Dictionary 2005, p. 1103).

More so, it is “a transference of meaning” (Jordan 1974; Mahon 1999), “a device for seeing something in terms of something else” (Burke 1945, p. 503), or “ways of understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, p. 5). In simple terms, there are always two distinct ideas involved – and as a signifying device, metaphor establishes a link between those ideas.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) introduced the “Conceptual Metaphor theory” (CMT) in their innovative work, *Metaphors We Live By*. The theory argues that metaphors largely structure human conceptual systems, enabling people to understand complex areas of experience in terms of more tangible ones. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 10) explain, metaphors consist of a source (a physical, literal meaning) and a target domain (an abstract meaning). Each metaphor is capable of inaugurating a “mapping” path between the source and target domain, allowing people to experience the topic in terms of the source domain with which they are more familiar. It allows systematic correspondence between the source and the target in the sense that constituent conceptual elements of B correspond to constituent elements of A (Kövecses 2002, p. 6). The mapping process between two domains, however, can never be absolute because not all characteristics of concept A are transferred to concept B. As Chilton (1996) indicates, through their highlighting features, metaphors “privilege one understanding of reality over others” (p. 154). Equivalently, by hiding features, metaphors “have the effect of marginalising or excluding alternative conceptualisations” (Chilton 1996, p. 154).

Metaphor, social discourse and potential real-life consequences

Drawing on Lakoff and Johnson’s CMT, social researchers and theorists have established a connection between metaphor, social discourse and potential real-life consequences (see Charteris-Black, 2004; Chilton, 2004; Hart, 2010; Hobbs, 2008; McEntee-Atalianis, 2011; Musolff, 2000; Santa Ana, 2002; Semino 2008; Spencer, 2012; Thibodeau and Boroditsky, 2011). According to Charteris-Black (2004), metaphors are both individually governed and socially motivated; different metaphors may correspond to different interests and perspectives and may bear different ideological values. Metaphors have the capacity to simplify and make issues intelligible, resonate with underlying symbolic representations, provoke emotions and bridge the gap between logic and the emotions (Charteris-Black 2004; Hart 2010). Metaphors are powerful because they ‘limit what we notice, highlight what we do see, and provide part of the inferential structure that we reason with’ (Lakoff, 1992).

In their recent work “Metaphors We Think With: The Role of Metaphor in Reasoning”, Thibodeau and Boroditsky (2011) demonstrate how metaphors can influence the way people think about an issue and attempt to resolve an issue. Coinciding with Price et al.’s argument that there has been a “cognitive turn” in the domain of public opinion (1997), and the growth in the cognitive paradigm in framing research (D’Angelo 2002), the study shows that metaphors “frame” social issues (such as crime) in certain manner, and using such metaphorical framing often leads to inferences that are consistent within the frame structure. Via five experiments that involved more than 500 participants, Thibodeau and Boroditsky found substantial empirical data that suggests metaphors could trigger a particular cognitive schema, simulating perceptions of aspects of objects or experiences and suggested different causal interventions for solving the problem.

Although Thibodeau and Boroditsky’s (2011) study mostly refers to examples of the construction of crimes as a social issue, its principle could be applied to investigating other public policy problems, including the debate over immigration and asylum seeking. The way social policy problems are metaphorically constructed may influence how the public conceptualise the issue, and offer the discourse to reach a desired solution (Schön 1979; van Dijk 2009). As Chilton and Lakoff (1999, p.57) neatly summarise, metaphors are concepts that can be acted on; they define a major part of what people consider “reality”, and subsequently “form the basis and justification for the formulation of policy and its potential execution.” Metaphors structure the way people define a phenomenon and thereby influence how they react to it; they limit and frame perceived policy choices because they determine the basic reality upon which decision-making depends (Chilton 1996; Milliken 1999; Mio 1997).

Critical Metaphor Analysis – an integration of cognition and discourse studies

As van Dijk (2009) argues, there is no direct relationship between discourse structures and social structures; it is the individual social actor and the social cognition that mediates the two. Wodak (2006, p.184) supports this view, claiming that there exists “a cognitive link between language/ discourse and society”, and that an understanding of metaphors could bridge the individual and the cultural, and link wider societal discourses to individual cognition. Unfortunately, practitioners of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in Communication and Media research seem to pay relatively little attention to the cognitive/ language side of discourse, but tend to focus more on the context-function (Mesthrie et. al. 2004). According to Fairclough (1992), this could be problematic because discourse analysis essentially needs a functional model of language, one that can show how the resources of the language system are organised to meet the needs of the “whos” (context) and the “whats” (function) in actual communication. Because discourse is in part linguistically constituted, language as a central sign/symbolic system supplies the resources from which representations are formulated. As a significant feature of language, metaphors provide that important linguistic resource – one that could perform cognitively to generate social implications.

The paradigm of CMA embraces two distinct approaches. The first approach focuses on the agents who generate particular metaphors (Fairclough 1992, p. 184), with questions revolving around who is

responsible for metaphor X, and the intentions/ ideology metaphor X carries. In this sense, CMA aims to “demonstrate how particular discursive practices reflect socio-political power structures” (Charteris-Black 2004, p. 29). The second approach is a “structure-focused” approach. Relying on Foucault’s study of discourse, this version of CMA is concerned with how metaphor shapes and structures reality, rather than attempting to reveal covert agendas. The followers of this approach do not see metaphor as a pure reflection of a pre-existing objective reality, but rather as an important facet of reality, through its highlighting and hiding features (Goatly 1997). Despite these diverse approaches, CMA practitioners unanimously face a number of challenges and criticisms when employing this methodology, which partly explains why the utilisation of CMA in Communication Studies is still limited. In the following section, we will elaborate on the difficulties that we encountered during our project, in which we adopted a structured-focussed CMA to examine the discursive practice across a range of media texts. We will also discuss the strategies that we implemented to tackle those issues.

Australian media use of metaphor on boat arrivals – A case study

In July 2013, the Australian Rudd Government introduced a “Regional Resettlement Arrangement” with Papua New Guinea (PNG), which declared that all asylum seekers arriving by boat on and after 19 July 2013 would be transferred to PNG while their refugee status was determined (APH 2014). People found to be genuine refugees would be permanently resettled in PNG without an opportunity to set foot on the mainland of Australia.

As the first policy in Australian history that officially made the country a zero-tolerance zone towards all boat arrivals, the proposed “PNG Solution” immediately attracted extensive media coverage and provoked a great deal of controversy in public debate. News stories around immigration and asylum seekers were frequently featured across a wide range of news outlets during this period. Identified in previous literature as an important framing tool (see Chilton 1996; Hobbs 2008; Milliken 1999; Mio 1997; Price et al. 1997; Thibodeau & Boroditsky 2011), metaphorical language emerged as a significant trend in media reporting concerning boat arrivals during this timeframe. Our initial analysis identified language describing asylum seekers arriving on boats as a “scourge” or “invading hordes”, and their arrivals as a “wave” or an “influx” that is “overwhelming” Australian society.

With an interest in the possible political and social consequences of such metaphor use, we conducted a study that applied a structure-focused approach of CMA to examine data collected from both print and online media platforms across three major news outlets nationwide, namely ABC News Online, The Age and The Daily Telegraph. The selection of those news outlets was primarily based on their dominance of readership, disparity in political views and differences in format and ownership. Despite the current rapidly changing media environment, mainstream news journalism remains an important forum of influence, playing a significant role in shaping public policy debates and where policymakers particularly attend closely to a narrow range of influential journalists (McCallum & Waller 2013). In Australia, due to the remote locations of the detention centres where maritime asylum seekers are detained, few people have first-hand experience, leaving the news media as a key arbiter to the social construction and understanding of boat arrivals (Greer & Jewkes 2005). Our study encompasses the period from the

introduction of the “PNG Solution” on 19 July 2013 till the latest Australian Federal Election on 7 September 2013—a period of intense media coverage. The analysis is conducted via the lens of media reporting, with a particular focus on how metaphors are used and perpetuated.

Metaphor identification

The first step in CMA is the identification of metaphors across the dataset. Due to the unclear boundaries between the basic literal meanings and the conceptual connotations, the decision of whether to classify a lexical item as a “metaphor” may not always be straightforward. Despite some scattered attempts at developing a step-by-step procedure for metaphor identification (see Steen 1999), those models were often designed for cognitive linguists and could be difficult for those with little linguistics background.

Linguists Cameron and Maslen (2010) state that the essence of the operational definition of linguistic metaphors “are two meanings of a word or phrase which are incongruous in some way, and a transfer of meaning within the discourse context that enables the incongruous word or phrase to be made sense of” (p. 103). This definition effectively summarises the characteristics that comprise a word or phrase as being “metaphoric”, and thereby creating a strong basis for an appropriate procedure of data coding, as displayed in the figure below. Note that in this study we do not limit metaphors to single, isolated words, but also include a “whole phrase” that makes up a discourse unit. As we envision, this widened scope may bridge the gap between the cognitive linguistic approach and the discourse analysis approach, accommodating both the former’s emphasis on conceptual structure and the latter’s focus on the contextual side of metaphors.

The first two steps of this procedure were created on the basis that, within a Critical Discourse Analysis framework, the metaphoric use of words or phrases is not an isolated phenomenon, but is most effectively identified against background knowledge of the entire discourse event (Cameron & Maslen 2010). It was therefore necessary to read through the sample first to become familiar with the activity of discourse and the context in which potential metaphors are used. Potential lexical items were then considered against the concrete criteria as listed in Step 3 for final coding. This step is there to ensure transparency, reduce reliance on analysts’ intuition and thereby increasing the ability of our project to produce valid, repeatable results.

Another methodological concern that occurred during this stage was that the majority of coding was conducted by only one researcher. While having a sole researcher strengthens internal validity (Bryman 2012, p.169), strategies must be implemented to ensure data are identified and coded consistently due to the many grey areas of metaphoric language. During the coding process, we came across a number of questionable examples that could be both literal and metaphoric. For example, consider the following extract:

Another witness, Chris Watson, says authorities worked quickly to get the asylum seekers into four-wheel drives and onto their next destination. “It was all pretty quiet and they were in and out pretty quick”, he said. “Within half-an-hour the boat was gone and everybody was off”.

Mr Rudd has been under growing pressure to deal with the dramatic increase in asylum seekers attempting to enter Australia by boat.

In this instance, whether or not to classify “in”, “out”, “enter” as “metaphoric” is a matter of debate. Even though “in”, “out”, “enter” are so conventionalised in everyday discourse and do not imply any well-known second meaning, they create a spatial schema that depicts Australia as a bounded area, construing a “containment” schema across the texts. They contribute to forming the conceptualisation of one’s country as a closed container that can be sealed or penetrated” (Chilton 2004, p. 118).

As a second researcher was not available at the time (and in reality, it may often be the case for many Media and Communication projects), crosschecking was not feasible. We then made a decision that each article would be read and analysed twice, with at least one week in between. This was a form of self-moderation to ensure that the same dataset was considered under different settings, at different time, with a fresh eye and mind. Data from those two coding sessions were then compared, contrasted, and re-evaluated if necessary. Although this strategy is not entirely unproblematic, we believe that it substantially complemented the coding procedure as outlined above. Close attention was paid to ensuring the researcher approached the analysis reflexively. Strict adherence to the proposed guidelines and practice ensured the results were confirmable and remained useful, with memory and psychology having negligible effect. It is important to make it clear that this second session of coding was not a form of traditional reliability check, as our project focused more on qualitative data and naturally had little interest in reliability statistics. Rather, what we aimed to do was to analyse the coding differences (if there was any) to further question and self-challenge the ideas of our data.

As a final result, 32 out of 62 articles examined were found with relevant metaphors, comprising more than half of the dataset. The next challenge is interpreting those metaphors and grouping them into themes based on shared semantic features.

Metaphor interpretation

As a qualitative study, our project used thematic, rather than numerical data as a basis of analysis. Instead of relying on the frequency of metaphor tokens, the study provides an overview of the major themes that emerged. Since only one researcher oversaw the majority of analysis, we are aware that there was a possibility of “over-interpretation” of the data, or of the project being “too impressionistic” (Bryman 2012, p.405). To alleviate this perceived problem, we conducted the analysis in concert with existing literature, as a comparative and contrastive means of reference. However, since metaphors are not universal and varies across different socio-political and cultural context, (Chilton & Ilyin 1993; Musolff 2000; Semino 2008), the analysis of the metaphors – particularly in media texts where socio-political power is present and exercised – still needs to be considered within an Australian socio and political climate.

The final dataset includes 32 qualified articles, with 13 from The Age, 10 from ABC News Online and The Drum, and 9 from The Daily Telegraph. Although the Australian media discourse under investigation is

replete with metaphors, the great majority of these fall into a limited number of themes, namely 1) asylum seekers are water/ water catastrophe, (2) Australia is a container and asylum seekers are violators of the container, (3) asylum seekers are burdens, (4) boat arrival is war, and (5) asylum seekers are diseases. In order to demonstrate how CMA could supply meaningful, legitimate discourse data, we will, in what follows, offer a sample analysis on one of those emergent themes – Australia is a container and asylum seekers are violators of the container.

The ‘contained’ Australia

Consider the following extract:

E.1 Asylum seekers trying to get to Australia could be stopped at the door and permanently resettled in developing countries under a secret deal being negotiated to ease the regional refugee crisis mounting on our shores.

The primary implication of the house metaphor (via the image of the “door”) is that Australia is a private property and Australians are the “residents” who have the right to determine who should be allowed “in” and who should not. Or, in Howard’s words, “we will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come” (cited by Museum of Australian Democracy 2001). All the italicised words in the above extracts—such as “stopped at the door” and “mounting on our shores”—depict Australia as a bounded area, construing a “containment” schema across the texts. As Chilton (2004) states, the main consequence of using this metaphor is that it creates a contrast between what is “inside” and what is “outside”, encouraging an interpretation that “what is inside is close to the self, and what is outside is also outside the law”. Chilton (2004) argues that, particularly in the political arena, the container metaphor is widely used as “a spatial schema which grounds conceptualisations of one’s country as a closed container that can be sealed or penetrated” (p. 118). In the context of Australia, this does not only imply a libertarian ideologies that privilege freedom of choice and private property rights, but also creates space for the justification of hardened policies concerning granting “permits” to those who wish to enter Australia – as demonstrated in the example below:

E.2. As Immigration Minister in the Rudd government, Mr Burke now has a completely different message for asylum seekers arriving by boat. “One, they remain in detention. Two, they return to their home country. Three, they get settled in another country where they have a right of residence. They don’t have a right of residence in Australia”, Mr Burke told the ABC on Monday.

An important point that emerges from Extract 2 is the use of the word “home” and that asylum seekers are suggested to return to “their home country”. As some studies suggest (see Schegloff 1972; Chilton 1996), the use of the word “home” in discourse is a concept that is closely related to that of group membership, signifying cultural assumptions about geography and the expectations of who rightly “belongs in” certain locations. Specifically, Australia is seen as “our home” and asylum seekers are prohibited invaders—those who “do not have the right” to reside in that home. Other than highlighting xenophobic ideologies, such metaphoric construction of “Australia as a family home” arguably evokes a sense of resistance and need for protection of one’s family against external perceived threats. This metaphoric use has profound implications because security is a basic human need, and this need significantly drives people’s decision making in response to what they perceive as a “security problem” (Charteris-Black 2006, p. 576).

As mentioned in the analysis of Extracts 1, the “container” metaphor conceptualises Australia as a closed container that can be sealed and also penetrated. A sealed container offers security to those inside, while a penetrated container does not, and hence needs to be sealed. In the context of immigration discourse, the container is sealed by “shutting the door.” Extract 1, 2 and 3 all emphasise the need to maintain Australia as a bounded area and to keep the nation away from external threats. They also emotionally equate boat arrivals with invasion—or, in metaphoric terms, with the penetration of our home as a container. This suggested violation of geographical border connotes “transgressions”, implying the movements across boundaries. It reminds us that our physical borders are fragile, and the violation of our physical border insinuates the violation of non-physical borders. The movements of boat arrivals across borders, in this sense, corrupt the certainty of moral/cultural borders such as civilised/primitive, order/chaos, humanity/depravity. It weakens the container in many aspects and creates a loss of security. In such cases, the “loss of security” can be metaphorically constructed as the “outsiders” entering the container in large quantities, thereby causing problems that are described as “overwhelming” the country:

E.3. Rudd expects his will to be challenged by the people smugglers, and you can expect them to try to overwhelm a country whose capacity to treat just a couple of hundred asylum seekers has already been found wanting by the UN [United Nations] refugee agency.

It was previously established that metaphor is a significant part of discourse and that this study treats discourse as part of a structural system that goes beyond individuality. In this sense, it is not adequate to analyse metaphors as just individual instances, but significantly, in terms of their interactions with other metaphors in the discourse context. The lexical items “overwhelm” and “capacity” used in Extract 4 are the most apparent examples where metaphors are blended to effectively conceptualise the topic of immigration. As Charteris-Black (2006) argues, there exists a connection between the “natural disaster” and “container” metaphors, with the former concerning fluid and the latter implying limited capacity. This connection simplifies the relationship between people and inhabited areas, contributing to naturalising the common belief that Australia, as a bounded area, cannot accommodate any newcomers because it is getting “full”:

E.4. Despite protestations that they want to stop people drowning [...], neither Rudd nor Abbott is trying to appeal to better angels. They have moved from peace and love and rock “n” roll to a rallying call to the modern knuckleheads who drive around with bumper stickers blaring “F--- Off, We’re Full”.

In this sense, the Government’s plan to “keep them all out” (as in the PNG Solution) is made to appear sensible, acceptable, legitimate.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated the ability of CMA to provide complex, rich, meaningful discourse data on the construction of social realities and their possible solutions. While our project does not purport that metaphors create policy in a positivist, causal manner, it illustrates and reaffirms how metaphors can significantly contribute to the discursive construction of important political and social issues such as immigration and boat arrivals. The contemporary media discourse sees immigrants as invaders of our

home, potentially triggering a feeling of insecurity and uneasiness that gives credence to discourse of responsibility and border control. Although this finding neither evinces a direct causation between metaphors and social actions nor rejects public's ability to think outside discourse, it identifies the discursive possibilities that are made available to the Australian public via the metaphorical language in use. Metaphor analysis resonates strongly with cognitive approaches to understanding the implications of news framing. Our research demonstrates that such fine-grained, language-based studies contribute both methodologically and theoretically to the framing research in Communication and Media studies. Critical analysis of metaphor use in news media texts justifies itself as a legitimate platform to open up complex discourse data on the construction of social realities.

Ultimately, the study has developed and demonstrated a complete, well-informed framework of CMA that allows increased transparency and systematicity in data coding, as well as more flexibility in data interpretation. Although the procedure is far from perfect, we hope to make a step closer to initiating a more rigorous discussion and serious research effort in utilising and developing CMA in the field of Media and Communication.

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