COVID-19 and metaphors: the correlation between political preference and metaphor use

Bachelor Thesis

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Abstract

This study was conducted to find out whether there is a difference in the use of metaphors depending on political preference. Articles about COVID-19 from two liberal and two conservative American newspapers were analysed. Past research led to the hypothesis that liberal newspapers most frequently use war metaphors and conservative newspapers most frequently use religious metaphors. The results did not support this hypothesis. There was no difference in the use of metaphors between liberal and conservative newspapers regarding war and religious metaphors. However, there was a significant difference between the number of other metaphors used in both types of newspaper. Although this is not in line with past research, it could be explained by the lack of political topics discussed. On top of this, all the articles discussed COVID-19, which does not give a good overview of the use of metaphors in all newspaper articles. Furthermore, war and religious metaphors are only two specific types of metaphor. Other metaphors include every other type of metaphor that exists. Therefore, it is not surprising that a difference was found in this category. Lastly, although there was a distinction between liberal and conservative newspapers, the sample size was quite small. Only four newspapers were analysed, considering only one subject. Future research should focus on more different newspapers and analyse articles about different topics. Additionally, it is of the essence that more types of metaphors are identified and not all classified in the same category.

Keywords: COVID-19, coronavirus, metaphors, political preference, newspapers

The start of the COVID-19 pandemic led to an extensive amount of news articles discussing the issue. One way in which newspapers describe COVID-19 is by making use of metaphors. A metaphor can be described as "understanding one domain of experience in terms of another" (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008). This definition by Lakoff and Johnson is different from the Oxford English Dictionary definition, "The figure of speech in which a name or descriptive term is transferred to some object to which it is not properly applicable." Instead of considering a metaphor the wrong use of a word, Lakoff and Johnson explain it as an intentional literary device. It is used to explain complex things, giving meaning to things we might not understand otherwise. Metaphors establish our perspective and define how we see the world around us (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008).

Authors often use metaphors to convey a specific message to their readers. This is also the case for authors of newspaper articles. Frequent use of a specific metaphor can be expected to have an effect on the perception of the word in the mind of a reader. This is shown by Boke, Aker, Alptekin Aker, Sarisoy, & Sahin (2007) with the word 'schizophrenia', which the Macmillan Dictionary describes as: "a serious mental illness in which the way that you think and feel is not connected with what is really happening". In the Turkish language, 'schizophrenia' is often referred to in a negative setting. It can be argued that this negative perception is reinforced by the metaphorical use of the word in newspapers. Instead of using words like 'desolation' or 'rage' authors use the word 'schizophrenic', which only strengthens the negative perception that people already have about the word. In their analysis of newspaper articles found by word search, 44.1% of the times the word 'schizophrenia' or 'schizophrenic' was used, it was used metaphorically. This means that almost half of the times the word is used, it is not even used in its literal sense. As mentioned in the conclusion of this paper, this strongly increases the stigmatisation of the word (Boke et al., 2007). It is clear that the frequent use of a specific word used in a specific context can lead to a different perception of the word in the mind of the audience. This raises the question whether metaphors have a negative effect on their audience.

According to Horowitz (2002), metaphors do have a negative effect, more specifically, dehumanization. In his article, Horowitz criticizes George Lakoff's 'Metaphors of Terror' about 9/11, arguing that Lakoff's use of metaphors shows a lack of empathy towards victims and therefore, dehumanizes the experience that many Americans went through during and after the attacks. Horowitz asks the question: "Has metaphor blotted out reality?". The answer to this question is not a straightforward one, as the effect that a metaphor has on its audience partly depends on the intentions of the author. An analysis of cartoons in newspaper editorials about the global crisis by Bounegrou and Forceville (2011) showed that this is in fact the case. This analysis consisted of a small sample and the identification of different types of metaphors. Out of 30 cartoons, 21 contained a metaphor. Although these metaphors were not in the form of text, the same types of metaphors were found as the ones that can be found in any other corpus. In total, the cartoons made use of 4 different types of metaphors: catastrophe/natural disaster, illness/death, begging, and others. The most frequently used metaphor was catastrophe/natural disaster. To explain the intention of these metaphors, it is important to look at the source domain. This is the conceptual domain where the expressions are retrieved from (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Looking at the most frequently used source domain in cartoons, it became clear to Bounegrou and Forceville that authors often chose source domains that lack intentionality. When something is described as a catastrophe, it implies that there was no intent by anybody to cause a problem. Therefore, when the author uses a catastrophe/natural disaster metaphor they are trying to convey the message that nobody is at fault, that it was out of human control (Bounegrou & Forceville, 2011). This means that if an author wants to shift the blame away from a person, they can use the natural catastrophe metaphor. This kind of rhetorical strategy by an author leads to a different thought process in the mind of the reader. Assuming that different metaphors have different effects on the audience, authors can strategically use metaphors to their advantage.

One important goal that many authors have when using metaphors is related to political preference. Using a specific type of metaphor conveys how the author views a particular subject and what they want the audience to believe (Musolff, 2016). In the United States, there is a clear distinction between liberals and conservatives. Liberals are progressive and value things as equality, freedom, and rights, whereas conservatives are more traditional and usually value things like authority, hierarchy, and tradition. These concepts are quite abstract since personality plays a major role in the formation of political opinions. Nevertheless, Americans American newspapers can be classified as either liberal or conservative.

According to Howe (1988), American political discourse in general consists mainly of two types of metaphors, the first one being sports metaphors. When discussing political issues, politicians tend to use sports references to include the audience in their story. This allows for an easier understanding of what is being said. For example, the metaphor "team" can be used to create the feeling of involvement. It makes the audience feel as though they are part of "the game". The second type of metaphor is the war metaphor. When it comes to convincing an audience, a war metaphor is a frequently used phenomenon. An example of a

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war metaphor is "point man", which in military terms refers to the member of a patrol who is most likely to encounter the enemy. This term is also used to describe politicians who are the closest person to deal with opponents, their enemies. Both these metaphors are used by politicians during their campaign, as a way to win over their audience. The metaphors are deeply rooted in the American culture; however, they draw on more commonly shared experience from American males than from American women (Howe, 1988).

A corpus analysis by Stojan and Mijic (2019) revealed the same results for newspaper articles from Croatia, Italy, and the United States. The American news articles that were analysed came from the USA Today and New York Times. According to Mitchell, Gottfried, Kiley, and Matsa (2014), both these newspapers lean towards the left of the spectrum, being more liberal. The most frequently used type of metaphor was the war metaphor, whereas the sports metaphor was the second most frequently used one. Stojan and Mijic also believe that these metaphors are a way to connect with the audience, because they are largely understood by the public. This analysis suggests that the most frequently used type of metaphor.

In contrast, newspapers that lean more to the right and are therefore considered conservative, tend to use religious metaphors. Woods, Fernández, and Coen (2012) analysed 122 British newspaper articles from three different newspapers. The newspapers in question are The Daily Telegraph, Daily Mail and The Times, all considered conservative newspapers. The topic of the articles was climate change, and more specifically, the denial of it. By using religious metaphors, the authors of the newspaper articles try to denigrate climate change. Firstly, they undermine scientific status by posing it as an irrational faith-based religion. Secondly, they exonerate climate change by portraying it as a sin. Instead of debating on the topic of climate change, these papers distract the audience from scientific evidence and theories. Although in this instance conservative newspapers used religious metaphors, Woods et al. did not analyse any liberal newspapers to compare their results with.

Another corpus analysis of online British newspapers by Atanasova and Koteyko (2017) did show the same results when also looking at a liberal newspaper. The first newspaper that was used was Guardian Online, a liberal newspaper. The second newspaper used was Mail Online, a more conservative newspaper. Similar to Woods et al., the articles analysed in this corpus analysis all discussed the topic of climate change. Using Critical Metaphor Analysis, the types of metaphors used in the articles were analysed. Again, the liberal newspaper most frequently used war metaphors. In this case, the goal of using this type of metaphor is to communicate the urgency to address climate change and conceptualize

climate change politics. The conservative articles on the other hand, mainly used religious metaphors. This type of metaphor is used by conservatives to downplay climate change and shift the opinion of the audience from climate change belief to climate change scepticism (Atanasova & Koteyko, 2017).

When it comes to diseases, not many studies have looked into the use of metaphors to describe a virus, especially about COVID-19. Chaing and Duann (2007) analysed the types of metaphors used to describe SARS, an epidemic. The corpus consisted of news articles from three different newspapers from Taiwan and China. Their main goal was to define whether it was possible to identify political stances from the text. The corpus contained articles from the beginning of the epidemic too, which is shown in the results. At first, the virus did not have a name and therefore, newspapers used a variety of words to describe it. The analysis made a distinction between three dominant types of metaphor: 'SARS is a disaster in general', 'SARS is a natural disaster', and lastly, 'SARS is an opponent in a war'. The last metaphor, the war metaphor, was the most frequently found type of metaphor. This suggests that it does not depend on the country what types of metaphor are used most.

Another epidemic researched is the Ebola epidemic. A corpus analysis of news articles about Ebola by Trčková (2015) showed that also in this case, the war metaphor was the most frequently used one. The only other two types of metaphors found were 'Ebola as an animate/human being' and 'Ebola as a natural catastrophe'. The analysis consisted of 282 articles from The New York Daily News and 218 articles from The New York Times covering Ebola. Both of these newspapers are liberal American newspapers. The use of the war metaphor directs the blame at the virus itself (Trčková, 2015). In this scenario the virus is the enemy that needs to be fought. This is the opposite of the 'Ebola as a natural catastrophe' metaphor, which takes the blame away from everything. The goal of using the war metaphor could therefore be to unite the audience against their mutual enemy.

From beforementioned articles, it becomes increasingly more clear that regarding newspapers, the liberal ones most frequently use war metaphors, whereas the conservative ones mostly use religious metaphors. When it comes to politics, newspapers will use metaphors to convey the message they want the audience to believe. Even though past research shows the use of different types of metaphors used for different subjects, close to no research has been done regarding the use of metaphors to describe COVID-19, or any pandemic for that matter. It is not clear whether metaphors were also used to convey political interests about the virus. More knowledge on this subject will give insight into the effect of the coronavirus on strategies used by newspapers to convince their audience. Furthermore, more research into the use of metaphors in newspapers will broaden the existing views on metaphor use and give a more thorough perspective. This leads us to the research question: To what extent does political preference (liberal or conservative) correlate with types of metaphors used in American newspapers about COVID-19?

Past research would suggest that liberal newspapers mostly use war metaphors, whereas conservative newspapers are expected to mainly use religious metaphors.

Method

Materials

In order to test whether there is a correlation between political preference and types of metaphors, American newspaper articles about COVID-19 were analysed, published from March 1st, 2020 through October 31st, 2020. These were the months before the 2020 elections, which means they presumably gave the best portrayal of political preference. The articles were retrieved from four different newspapers, two liberal (New York Times and Bangor Daily News) and two conservative (New York Daily News and Pittsburgh Post-Gazette). The political stances of these newspapers were defined based on the research guide found on BU Libraries (Research: WR150: The U.S. Presidential Election of 2016: A Retrospective (Shawn): Newspapers - which way do they lean?, 2021). Trčková (2015) considered New York Daily News a liberal newspaper, however the source used to define the political preferences in this study is continuously being updated and was therefore more reliable. In total, 400 articles were analysed, 100 per newspaper. The articles were retrieved from NexisUni, an online database available for university students to find newspaper articles from national and international newspapers ("NexisUni", 2021). In order to retrieve the same number of articles from liberal and conservative newspapers, the sampling method used was stratified sampling. Articles were selected by using the search terms 'coronavirus' and 'COVID-19'. A distinction was made between liberal and conservative newspapers.

Instruments

The metaphor identification was done using the "metaphor identification procedure" (MIP) (Pragglejaz Group, 2007). The MIP consists of the following steps:

- 1. Read the entire text-discourse to establish a general understanding of the meaning.
- 2. Determine the lexical units in the text-discourse
- A. For each lexical unit in the text, establish its meaning in context, that is, how it applies to an entity, relation, or attribute in the situation evoked by the text (contextual meaning). Take into account what comes before and after the lexical unit.

B. For each lexical unit, determine if it has a more basic contemporary meaning in other contexts than the one in the given context. For our purposes, basic meanings tend to be

- —More concrete [what they evoke is easier to imagine, see, hear, feel, smell, and taste];
- —Related to bodily action;
- —More precise (as opposed to vague);
- —Historically older;

Basic meanings are not necessarily the most frequent meanings of the lexical unit.

C. If the lexical unit has a more basic current–contemporary meaning in other contexts than the given context, decide whether the contextual meaning contrasts with the basic meaning but can be understood in comparison with it.

4. If yes, mark the lexical unit as metaphorical. (Pragglejaz Group, 2007)

Procedure

The newspaper articles were retrieved from NexisUni by each coder. In total, 4 coders analysed the articles, 100 each. In order to sample the same way, all coders used the search terms 'coronavirus' and 'COVID-19' and divided the 100 articles evenly over the eight months in question. After filtering the right newspaper, search term and date, the first articles found by the database were used.

Next, the newspaper articles were analysed using the MIP as explained before. In order to find the basic meaning of words, Macmillan Dictionary was used (Macmillan Dictionary, 2021). Coders used the same codebook. First of all, each coder noted down the identifier of their newspaper (e.g., BDN1 for the first article from Bangor Daily News), the name of the newspaper and the date, and the length of the article. On top of this, liberal newspapers were coded as '1' and conservative newspapers as '2'. Words identified as metaphor were coded as '1' and words that were not metaphorical were coded as '2'. After the identification of the metaphors, the metaphors were categorised into different types of metaphors: war metaphors ('Type 1'), religious metaphors ('Type 2'), and other metaphors ('Type 3'). A metaphor was identified as a war metaphor if its source domain was related to war and a metaphor was identified as a religious metaphor.

Besides 100 articles of one newspaper, each coder also separately coded 10 articles from another newspaper (in pairs) to test the interrater reliability. To test the interrater reliability, 2 Cohen's Kappa's were calculated. The interrater reliability for metaphor identification was very good, $\kappa = .82$. The interrater reliability for type of metaphor was also very good, $\kappa = .87$.

Statistical Treatment

To answer the research question, a repeated measures analysis was carried out with 2 independent variables. Type of metaphor was the repeated measure and type of newspaper was the non-repeated measure. The dependent variable was number of metaphors per 100 words. This determined whether there was a difference in the types of metaphors used between liberal and conservative American newspapers.

In order to interpret a possible interaction between type of metaphor and type of newspaper, independent samples t-tests were carried out with which the difference between newspapers per type of metaphor per 100 words was analysed.

Consequently, a frequency analysis was conducted to get a clear overview of the total numbers.

Results

Length of articles

Table 1 contains the average length of articles for each of the newspapers.

М	SD	
524	160.6	
491	235.3	
567	251.5	
662	352.3	
561	265.9	
	524 491 567 662	524 160.6 491 235.3 567 251.5 662 352.3

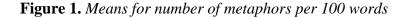
Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations for length of articles

Number of metaphors

The total number of metaphors identified was 3463. Of this number, 230 were war metaphors, 23 were religious metaphors and 3210 were other metaphors.

Type of metaphor and political preference

A repeated measures analysis for metaphor type and type of newspaper with metaphor type as within-subject factor and type of newspaper as between-subject factor showed a significant main effect of metaphor type (F(1.10, 436.83) = 688.99, p = .000) and a significant main effect of type of newspaper (F(1, 398) = 78.19, p = .000). These main effects were qualified by a significant interaction effect between metaphor type and type of newspaper (F(1.10, 436.83) = 63.47, p = .000). Figure 1 shows the interaction effect. The results of the analysis are summarised in Table 2.



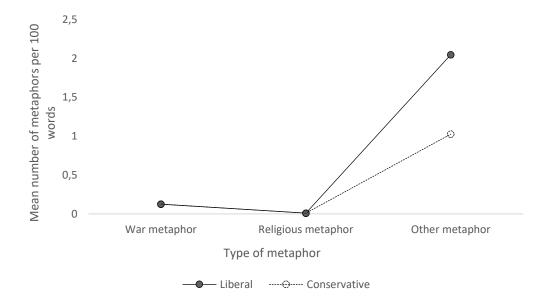


Table 2. Repeated	measures analysi.	s type of n	netaphor and	l type of	newspaper

Type of metaphor	War		Religion		Other	
	М	SD	М	SD	М	SD
Type of newspaper						
Liberal	.13	.02	.01	.01	2.05	.08
(n = 200)						
Conservative	.13	.02	.01	.01	1.03	.08
(n = 200)						

To further analyse the interaction, an independent samples t-test was carried out for number of metaphors in article of type 1, number of metaphors in article of type 2 and number of metaphors in article of type 3, and type of newspaper. The t-test showed no significant difference between liberal and conservative newspapers with regard to war metaphors (t (397.89) < 1) and religious metaphors (t (381.64) < 1), but a significant

difference between liberal and conservative newspapers with regard to other metaphors (t (375.83) = 8.41, p = .000). The number of other metaphors used in liberal newspapers (M = 10.71, SD = 7.10) was significantly higher than the number of other metaphors used in conservative newspapers (M = 5.35, SD = 5.54). Results of the independent samples t-test are summarised in Table 3.

Type of metaphor	War		Religion	Other
	Μ	SD	M SD	M SD
Type of newspaper				
Liberal	.62	1.00	.06 .40	10.71 7.10
(n = 200)				
Conservative	.53	1.01	.06 .33	5.35 5.54
(n = 200)				

Table 3. Independent samples t-test metaphor type and type of newspaper

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to find out whether there is a correlation between political preference and types of metaphors used in American newspapers. Newspaper articles from four different newspapers, two liberal and two conservative, were analysed using the MIP method (Pragglejaz Group, 2007). Past research led to the hypothesis that liberal newspapers would prove to use more war metaphors, while conservative newspapers were expected to use more religious metaphors.

The results did not support this hypothesis. There was no significant effect between liberal and conservative newspapers for war and religious metaphors, however, there was a significant difference between liberal and conservative newspapers regarding 'other' metaphors. Liberal newspapers used roughly double the number of 'other' metaphors that conservative newspapers used, whereas the amount of war and religious metaphors were not significantly different depending on the type of newspaper.

Regarding liberal newspapers, the results of this study contradict the results found by both Stohan and Mijic (2019) and Atanasova and Koteyko (2017). The results of both studies suggested that liberal newspapers most frequently use war metaphors, which was not found in the results of the current study. The same occurred for conservative newspapers. Although Wood et al. (2012) suggested that conservative newspapers mostly use religious metaphors, the current study did not support this. Instead, both liberal and conservative newspapers mostly used other metaphors. Looking at the method of all these studies, the main difference with the current study is their lack of 'other' metaphors. While other studies identified each type of metaphor, the current results only make a distinction between war, religious and 'other' metaphors. Therefore, there are many other types of metaphors that were put into one single category, which did not allow for a more extensive analysis. On top of this, COVID-19 is a fairly new phenomenon, which might mean that people have not yet developed a view on it and therefore, they might not refer to the virus as something other than itself.

The main limitation of this study, which was already mentioned as an explanation for the difference in results compared to other research, is the use of the 'other' category. Identifying only two types of metaphors and putting all other metaphors into the same category does not give enough information to explain the use of metaphors. Although this method allowed for results that answered the research question, it was not able to explain the unexpected findings in detail. All articles that were analysed in this study involved the same subject, namely COVID-19. Depending on the subject of the article, authors might use different types of literary devices, as they might have different intentions. Consequently, anyone could have written the articles that were analysed. Even though they were retrieved from well-known newspapers, this does not ensure quality of the writing. This could be seen as a limitation, although the goal of this study was to identify the correlation between use of metaphors and political preference, which was still achieved.

The current corpus analysed newspaper articles, which is only one type of language. In this study, but also in previous studies regarding metaphors and political preference, spoken language was usually not involved. The use of metaphors could have a different pattern or a different effect on the audience. The lack of research into this leaves a gap in the knowledge on metaphor types and political stances. Additionally, whether a newspaper is considered liberal or conservative partly depends on the source that is chosen. The current study considered the New York Daily News a conservative newspaper, whereas Trčková (2015) used it as a liberal newspaper. This demonstrates the subjectiveness of political preference, which makes it hard to classify newspapers the right way. If it is possible to find a source that supports a newspaper being either liberal or conservative, it is possible to manipulate the study to get to the wanted results. This ability to manipulate the results is a threat to the reliability of the research. Therefore, there should be a compelling justification as to why a specific source was used to classify newspapers.

Another limitation was the availability of newspaper articles, or the lack thereof. Even though it was still possible to find two liberal and two conservative newspapers, many well-known newspapers were not available on NexisUni. This only allows for a limited number of newspapers to be analysed. A different database might contain different newspapers that have a stronger political preference than the ones available on NexisUni, and which possibly use metaphors more frequently. Even if this is the case, it is still challenging to ensure the right classification of the type of newspaper.

Regarding the instrumentation of this study, the MIP is a very detailed method to define whether a word is a metaphor. Since every coder used the same online dictionary to determine whether a word was used metaphorically, this part of the analysis did not allow for much difference. However, the identification of the type of metaphor was not agreed upon as clearly. There was no specific guide on identifying war or religious metaphors, other than the source domain of these words being related to war or religion.

As the findings of this study contradict the findings of other studies, more research is needed to reveal the reason behind the contrast in results. In order to get a more detailed result, future research should look into a larger range of metaphors and include more than just war and religious metaphors. Since there is a lack of research done on the use of metaphors in spoken language, future research should dive deeper into this. Furthermore, there is a need for a clear way to establish the type of newspaper, other than simply finding the right source that supports the wanted results.

The present study has contributed to the theory on metaphors and political preference by offering a new point of view. The unexpected results present an opportunity for future research to dig deeper into the types of metaphors used in newspapers. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate the importance of a larger range of categories to identify metaphors as. In particular, the findings suggest that war and religious metaphors are not always the most frequently used type of metaphor in liberal and conservative newspapers.

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