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The linguistic metaphor *storm clouds* in public discourse on COVID-19

Abstract

Employing Steen's three-dimensional model of metaphor analysis (2008, 2011b), the paper examines the use of the linguistic metaphor storm clouds as a perspective-changing cognitive device in public discourse on COVID-19.

Sažetak

Koristeći Steenov trodimenzionalni model analize metafora (2008, 2011b), rad ispituje upotrebu lingvističke metafore storm clouds ('olujni oblaci') kao kognitivnog mehanizma koji utiče na promjenu perspektive recipijenta u javnom diskursu o COVID 19.

1. INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 is a serious respiratory infectious disease caused by a new type of coronavirus that was first identified in 2019. It affected greatly our lives during 2019 and 2020, but most certainly the effects of COVID-19 pandemic have a long-lasting effects on our mental health¹ and how we perceive the world around us. Thus, cognitive linguists try to determine how the pandemic shaped the way we see the world metaphorically² and how metaphors are

1 Cf. Hammami et. al. (2021), Qing et. al. (2021), Serafini et. al. (2021).

2 e. g. Abdel-Raheem (2021) elaborates on the effect of coronavirus on metaphor use, and Panzeri et. al. (2021) investigates how metaphors influence our reasoning (under the slogan 'Metaphors we are convinced by'). For the role of metaphor in reasoning about socially relevant concepts see Štrkalj Despot and Ostroški Anić (2020).

exploited in the segments of real discourse on COVID-19.³

A variety of conceptual metaphors are used to talk about the pandemic, e. g. covid 19 is a monster, covid 19 is a storm, covid 19 is a war, covid 19 is a tsunami, corona virus is a wild animal, corona virus is a criminal, corona virus is an unwanted guest, covid-19 is catastrophe, covid 19 is a race, covid 19 is a dance⁴. Each of these metaphors addresses different aspects of the topic given the fact that different aspects of a concept are being highlighted or hidden with the use of a particular metaphor. For example, the figurative use of negatively connoted linguistic expressions (such as those from war domain) by the media may cause discomfort, insecurity, fear, and/or panic, persuading the public there is an urgent need to take action. Metaphorical conceptualization of a country fighting COVID-19 leaves real consequences in terms of the nature of the response to the metaphorical enemy, as “we define our reality in terms of metaphors and then proceed to act on the basis of the metaphors” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 158). Therefore,

[I]f we want to understand how people use metaphorical language, its functions, in what kind of situations and in what ways it is used, how people understand metaphorical language and what kind of effects it might have on them, we need to look at real language as it is used and produced in everyday life (Krennmayr, 2011: 12).

In sections that follow, we describe the examples of storm clouds usage identified in The Guardian, in which the UK is threatened by ‘the storm and flood of the pandemic’. The phrase storm clouds echoed public discourse in the UK after the British Prime Minister Boris Johnson used it in his statement about the possible increase in the numbers of COVID-19 infections and the

3 In this regard, the use of metaphors about COVID 19 in different types of discourse is investigated (business news: Kozlova, 2021; social networks: Wicke & Bolognesi 2020; newspaper headlines: Sirait et. al. 2020; political cartoons: Abdel-Raheem, 2021; articles: Craig 2020), on examples from the monolingual (English: Semino, 2021; Duarte Silva 2020) or bilingual corpus (English and Croatian: Štrkalj Despot & Ostroški Anić 2021).

4 Cf. Wicke and Bolognesi (2020), Sirait et. al. (2020), Duarte Silva (2020), Štrkalj Despot and Ostroški Anić (2021), Štrkalj Despot (2020).

importance of taking booster shots of vaccines.⁵ It instantly appeared in media headlines in British and foreign newspapers.⁶ We focus on its persuasive function and analyze its perspective-changing effect on recipients.

2. THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodological basis of this paper is Steen's (2010: 59, 2015) three-dimensional metaphor analysis model, which distinguishes three dimensions of metaphor: the linguistic dimension of (in)directness, the conceptual parameter of conventionality, and the communicative dimension of (non)deliberateness. Therefore, metaphor is analyzed at three levels: linguistic, conceptual, and communicative levels. Within his three-dimensional model, Steen (2007, 2008, 2009a, 2011b) classifies metaphors at the linguistic level as indirect, direct and implicit⁷; at the conceptual level as conventional and novel,⁸ and at the communicative level as deliberate or non-deliberate. Steen et al. (2010: 25) have developed MIPVU, the six-step procedure for identifying potentially metaphorical linguistic expressions (i.e. linguistic metaphors) at the first level of the aforementioned three-dimensional model.⁹ The application of MIPVU is explained in detail in Steen et al. (2010: 25–26).

The identification of linguistic metaphors using MIPVU is the basis for the subsequent analysis at the conceptual level, i.e. we determine the corresponding conceptual domain that the linguistic metaphor belongs to. In this respect, we distinguish conceptual metaphors (i.e. ways of thinking) from linguistic metaphors (i.e. ways of talking), which are actually manifestations of the conceptual metaphors. At the conceptual level, we distinguish conventional and novel metaphors. The criterion of conventionality is

5 Source: The Telegraph's video of the statement available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vvonPpYF9ks>; Last accessed on April 12, 2022

6 E. g. <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2021-11-12/uk-pm-johnson-wary-of-covid-storm-clouds-over-europe>; <https://startbih.ba/clanak/johnson-upozorio-na-olujne-oblake-pandemije-iznad-evrope/169350>; Last accessed on April 12, 2022

7 For the identification of linguistic types of metaphor, see Krennmayr (2011) – i. e. for indirect, direct, and implicit metaphors see pages 51–52, 58–59 and 59–60, respectively.

8 The criterium of conventionality is also studied by Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 139), Lakoff (1993), Steen (2007), Charteris-Black (2011, 2004), Semino (2008).

9 MIPVU is an improved version of the metaphor identification procedure MIP, designed by the Pragglez Group (2007). MIP was subsequently elaborated to meet the challenge of identifying a deliberate metaphor in communication (Steen 2007, 2008, 2011a, 2011b; Steen et al. 2010).

applied to both linguistic structures (metaphorical linguistic expressions, or linguistic metaphors) and conventional metaphors (the domains underlying the metaphorical expressions). Therefore, we recognize conventional linguistic metaphors as clichéd ways of talking, and conventional conceptual metaphors as clichéd, deeply entrenched ways of thinking. On the other hand, we recognize novel linguistic metaphors as innovative and creative ways of talking, and novel conceptual metaphors as innovative and creative ways of thinking. Novel linguistic metaphors are metaphorical linguistic expressions whose contextual meanings are not listed in dictionaries. As an example, Kövecses (2010: 36) cites the song ‘The Road Not Taken’, in which Robert Frost uses the expressions from the conventional conceptual metaphor life is a journey in an unconventional way. In other words, conceptual metaphor is conventional, but metaphorical linguistic expressions are novel. On the other hand, it is difficult to find conventional linguistic metaphors for a novel conceptual metaphor. Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 139) mention a novel conceptual metaphor love is a collaborative work of art, but they do not offer any conventional linguistic metaphor to substantiate their example. However, Kövecses (2010: 36) gives life is a mirror as an example of a novel conceptual metaphor: “Life is a mirror. If you smile, it smiles back at you; if you frown, it frowns back.”

At the third-level analysis, we relied on the IDeM protocol for the identification of deliberate metaphor, which contains several clearly defined steps¹⁰ to identify deliberate metaphor use in discourse.¹¹ A decision on the deliberate use of a metaphor is reached by determining “whether the metaphorical expression that has been identified by MIP/MIPVU is meant to change the recipient’s perspective on the topic of the text” (Krennmayr, 2011: 154).

Deliberate metaphors are used as metaphors and involve mandatory attention, i.e. “a metaphor is deliberate when addressees must pay attention to the source domain as an independent conceptual domain (or space or category) that they are instructed to use to think about the target of the metaphor” (Steen, 2011b: 84). Deliberate metaphors are perspective-changing cognitive

¹⁰ cf. Krennmayr, 2011: 154-155

¹¹ Deliberate metaphor is the focus of the recent cognitive-linguistic studies (Krennmayr 2011; Kaal 2012; Steen, 2009a, 2009b, 2010, 2011a).

devices in terms that “when a speaker or writer uses a metaphor deliberately, that is, as a metaphor in order to make the addressee to attend to the source domain as a domain that lies outside the current domain of discourse and to view the target domain from that perspective” (Steen, 2011a: 54). On the other hand, “non-deliberate metaphors stay ‘on topic’, and the recipient does not have to attend to the source domain of the metaphorical utterance” (Reijnierse et. al., 2018: 133).

Deliberate metaphors may imply the use of certain types of signals (quotation marks, direct metaphor signals) or innovative language (novel metaphors, and extended metaphors).¹² “Using different types of signals for deliberate metaphor leaves room for the manipulation of concepts and signals, using different discourse strategies to achieve the desired rhetorical effect. By deciding what to emphasize with signals or what concepts to elaborate on creatively, the author manipulates the addressee in a certain way, influences their reasoning and change of perspective” (Mujagić & Berberović, 2019: 31). However, this paper presents examples of deliberate use of metaphors that are neither signaled¹³ nor novel.

Applying this metaphorical framework, we gain more insight into cases “when language users attempt to take voluntary control over the way they use metaphor for highlighting and hiding in expression, conceptualization, and communication” (Steen, 2017: 2). In sections that follow, the metaphorical linguistic expression *storm clouds* is analyzed at the three levels: the linguistic, conceptual, and communicative levels. The dictionaries used for annotation are *Macmillan* and *Collins Cobuild* online dictionaries.¹⁴ We focus on persuasive function of the linguistic metaphor *storm clouds*, its interplay with the surrounding metaphorical expressions from the compatible conceptual domain, and proceed with offering concluding remarks on our research findings.

12 For deliberate metaphor signaling see Steen (2009a, 2009b, 2010), Krennmayr (2011), Musolff (2011), Herrmann (2013).

13 Reijnierse et. al. (2018: 135) themselves state that “the presence of a source domain referent in a metaphorical utterance can be suggested in many different ways, not just by lexical signals.

14 On multiple advantages of using dictionaries in identifying potentially metaphorical linguistic expressions see Krennmayr (2008, 2011) and Dorst & Reijnierse (2015).

3. THE CORPUS ANALYSIS

The sentences containing the lexical unit *storm clouds* is excerpted from newspaper articles from *The Guardian*. In order to avoid the use of decontextualized examples, we have excerpted the entire paragraph in which the lexical unit is detected, for instance:

- (1) “PM expresses concern over worsening situation in continental Europe, saying: ‘We’ve been here before’. Elderly and vulnerable people must get their booster jabs if a rise in Covid cases in the UK is to be prevented, the prime minister has said, as he warned of “*storm clouds*” forming over parts of Europe.” (Boris Johnson urges people to get Covid boosters as he warns of ‘storm clouds’, *The Guardian*, November 12, 2021)

Then we analyzed *storm clouds* at the linguistic level by applying the MIPVU. First we identified its basic and contextual meanings. The basic meaning of *storm cloud* is “a very dark cloud” (*Macmillan*), i.e. “Storm clouds are the dark clouds which are seen before a storm” (*Collins Cobuild*). Its contextual meaning is “something very bad that is starting or happening” (*Macmillan*), i.e. “You can use storm clouds to refer to a sign that something very unpleasant is going to happen” (*Collins Cobuild*). Detailed guidelines for determining contextual and basic meanings, as well as determining some form of similarity and distinction between the two, are presented in Krennmayr (2010: 51-57). Given that the lexical unit has two separate, numbered sense descriptions found in the consulted dictionaries, these senses are regarded as sufficiently distinct. However, some form of similarity between the two senses does exist, i.e. the similarity is based on metaphorical mapping from concrete (‘a very dark cloud’) to abstract (‘a bad situation’). Thus, *storm cloud* is marked as a metaphorical linguistic expression (i.e. linguistic metaphor), which has a negative connotation.

Given the classification of linguistic metaphors into indirect, direct and implicit metaphors within the three-dimensional model, we marked *storm*

clouds as indirect metaphor.¹⁵ After we identified the type of linguistic metaphor, we determine the corresponding conceptual domains to which the linguistic metaphor belongs. The linguistic metaphor *storm clouds* belongs to the conceptual metaphor ADVERSITY IS ADVERSITY DUE TO BAD WEATHER (WEATHER being the source domain, and ADVERSITY being the target domain).¹⁶ Given that the basic and contextual meanings of the linguistic metaphor *storm clouds* are listed in dictionaries, we marked *storm clouds* as a conventional linguistic metaphor. Furthermore, (bad) weather is a common way of thinking and talking about (bad) situations.¹⁷ Therefore, ADVERSITY IS ADVERSITY DUE TO BAD WEATHER is marked as a conventional conceptual metaphor.

So far, we have established that the *storm clouds* is indirect metaphor, which implies that it is unsignaled and its effects in discourse are covert (unlike direct metaphors, which are overt). Furthermore, *storm clouds* is a conventional expressions belonging to the conventional conceptual metaphor. This implies that it does not trigger less familiar concepts in the recipients' minds to talk about bad situations. Journalists manipulate familiar concepts (in our case, bad weather) and easy-to-remember language ('storm' and 'cloud') so that recipients have no greater difficulties in processing it because it is based on established concepts.

Now we proceed with the analysis at the third level of Steen's model, where deliberate and non-deliberate metaphors are distinguished. Krennmayr (2011: 154-155) presents the protocol for the identification of deliberate metaphors (IDeM), claiming that not only signaled metaphors (with *MFlag like* or *as*, i.e. direct metaphors) or novel metaphors are used deliberately. Krennmayr (2011: 155) claims that "the metaphorical unit surrounded by metaphorical expressions from compatible semantic fields, which are somehow connected", "the metaphorical units which participate in word

¹⁵ It is not used directly in terms that it does not include signaling or topic shift. The direct use is explained by Krennmayr (2011: 58).

¹⁶ See Master Metaphor List: <http://araw.mede.uic.edu/~alansz/metaphor/METAPHORLIST.pdf>; Visited on April 14, 2022;

¹⁷ In addition, the conceptual metaphor *adversity is adversity due to bad weather* is listed in the Master Metaphor List – a compilation taken from published books and papers, student papers at Berkeley and elsewhere, and research seminars – which means that the metaphor is in wide(r) use. Weather metaphors are also included in the thesaurus of traditional English metaphors (Wilkinson, 2002).

play”, and/or “elicit rhetorical effects such as, for example, persuasion or humor” are also instances of deliberate metaphor use.

1. Germany, Austria, Slovakia and Croatia are among countries that have recently seen a *surge* in Covid cases, with the former recording its highest coronavirus case numbers since the start of the pandemic. Speaking in a broadcast clip, Boris Johnson said the situation was of concern. “I’m seeing the *storm clouds gathering* over parts of the European continent. And I’ve got to be absolutely frank with people: we’ve been here before. We remember what happens when *the wave starts rolling in*,” he said. (Boris Johnson urges people to get Covid boosters as he warns of ‘storm clouds’, *The Guardian*, November 12, 2021)
2. The World Health Organization’s Europe head, Hans Kluge, has said a lack of uptake of Covid vaccines is behind the increase. While Johnson noted that cases in the UK had been “*drifting down* for a while”, he said it was unclear if the trend was set to continue. “I’m looking at what’s happening overseas, and I’m simply saying to the British people ... this is the moment to get your booster,” he said. (Boris Johnson urges people to get Covid boosters as he warns of ‘storm clouds’, *The Guardian*, November 12, 2021)
3. As Covid infection rates *surged* again across Europe, Boris Johnson spoke this week of “*storm clouds gathering*” over parts of the continent and said it was unclear when or how badly the latest wave would “*wash up on our shores*”. (‘Storm clouds’ over Europe – but UK Covid rates remain high, *The Guardian*, November 19, 2021)

Our pre-existing knowledge of fluids enables us to describe the less familiar concept (the pandemic) with the familiar one (how water behaves when affected by bad weather). When we say water will fill something, we are aware that throughout that process of fluid rising, the container will become full. Therefore, when we say the number of COVID-19 infections surges or flows, we compare the increase of pandemic cases with an increase in water quantity. We compare the COVID-19 phenomenon with a natural disaster (flood). When influential media persist in presenting the pandemic as a destructive force (as a natural force, i.e. dangerous water), they instill fear and uncertainty among readers.

4. CONCLUSION

The research shows that weather is an important experiential basis for conceptual metaphors about social problems resulting from the COVID 19 pandemic. We described the linguistic metaphor *storm clouds* that belongs to the conceptual metaphor ADVERSITY IS ADVERSITY DUE TO BAD WEATHER, where weather conditions are metaphorically presented as problem indicators. The concept *storm clouds* specifically denotes a difficult period ahead of us, i.e. it refers to a particular length of time that is not easy for somebody, while the concepts that result from bad weather (waves rolling in and washing up on our shores) refer to the force or suddenness of something.

Furthermore, the fact that the identified metaphorical linguistic expressions from WEATHER domain are different parts of speech – a noun (*a wave, a surge*), a compound (*storm clouds*), verbs (*surge, rolling in, gathering over, drifting down, wash up*) – is evidence that there is a systematicity in the figurative use of weather concepts in the segments of real discourse. The analyzed metaphors make up a patchwork of covert, well entrenched, cliched, easy-to-remember concepts with a perspective-changing function in media discourse. This well established conceptual framework has a significant impact on public perception of an important social and health topic such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Dictionaries

Collins Cobuild Online Dictionary: <http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english>

MacMillan Online Dictionary: <http://www.macmillandictionary.com/>

INTERNET LINKS

Master Metaphor List : <http://araw.mede.uic.edu/~alansz/metaphor/METAPHORLIST.pdf>

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