

# Analyzing War Metaphors in the Context of the COVID-19: A Critical Metaphor Analysis

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**Abstract**—The emergence of the coronavirus, officially known as SARS-CoV-2, posed an immediate threat to national security and public health. Despite initial attempts to downplay its seriousness, the pandemic swiftly induced widespread fear worldwide. President Donald Trump positioned himself as a "wartime president", advocating for a comprehensive campaign and declaring war on SARS-CoV-2. This novel framing was widely embraced by the media to help the public grasp the severity of the virus. Consequently, coverage of COVID-19 proliferated across various media platforms, making it one of the most dominant topics of discussion. This paper applies Critical Metaphor Analysis to examine the utilization of war metaphors in American media discourse during the global health crisis caused by the novel coronavirus, COVID-19. Focusing on The New York Times' political journalism between June 1 and July 1, 2020, the study scrutinizes twenty news articles to assess the prevalence and implications of war analogies in pandemic coverage. The analysis reveals a diverse and vigorous deployment of such metaphors, highlighting their pervasive influence in framing COVID-19 as a conflict. Additionally, the paper presents a conceptual model of the war metaphor in this context, supported by various mappings of the conceptual metaphor, elucidating the portrayal of COVID-19 as a war-like scenario within the broader global health crisis caused by the novel coronavirus.

**Index Terms**—Critical Metaphor Analysis, conceptual metaphor, global health crisis, novel coronavirus

## I. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic, which originated in December 2019, has inflicted significant human and property damage, profoundly impacting daily life worldwide. In response, politicians globally employ various communication strategies to garner public support and instill a sense of security amidst the crisis. Central to these strategies are conceptual metaphors used in political discourse disseminated through the press.

Political discourse analysis theory scrutinizes linguistic elements, including vocabulary, syntax, and text structure, to elucidate how discourse shapes political decisions, conveys political ideologies, and exercises power. Furthermore, it examines how language is wielded by politicians, leaders, and the media, serving as a framework to analyze the impact of discourse on policy formulation, electoral management, and the cultivation of political culture. Thus, this research is pivotal in comprehending the role of metaphorical language in political communication during public health crises like COVID-19. By shaping images and ideas, these linguistic constructs wield considerable influence over public opinion and political action.

This study aims to delve into how news media utilize metaphors to articulate their responses, policies, and narratives concerning the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing upon established conceptual metaphor research theories such as Critical Discourse Analysis Theory by authors Van Dijk (1993) and Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999), the Theory of Conceptual Metaphor Analysis by Kövecses (2017), and the Theory of Political Discourse Analysis by Van Dijk (2008), the study explores the intricate dynamics of news media communication.

To captivate readers' attention amidst the pandemic, media outlets have extensively employed war metaphors, imbuing COVID-19 discourse with renewed significance. Globally, the notion of a COVID-19 war has gained widespread acceptance among politicians, scientists, and journalists, serving as a rallying cry for collective action against the virus. This trend is evident in various forms of media, including scientific publications, journals, mass media, and social platforms, where phrases like "*virus the enemy*," "*front-lines*," "*heroic doctors*," and "*battle against Covid-19*" have become commonplace. This study aims to address the prevalence and implications of war metaphors in framing COVID-19 issues, examining twenty political media discourses published between June 1st and July 1st, 2020, by The New York Times, a prominent American newspaper. Through Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA), the study seeks to elucidate the usage and functions of war metaphors in political media discourse.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Metaphors From the Perspective of Critical Metaphor Analysis

Charteris-Black (2004) introduced the Critical Metaphor Analysis approach in *Corpus Approaches to Critical Metaphor Analysis*. This is a meaningful continuation and complementarity for both Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Conceptual Metaphor Analysis (CMT). This approach combines CDA, corpus linguistics, pragmatics, and cognitive

linguistics to offer new perspectives on both CDA and CMT. Its goal is to reveal the potential underlying intentions of speakers, while also acknowledging the interplay between ideology, power dynamics, and language within social and cultural settings.

Charteris-Black (2004) asserted that metaphor analysis should incorporate semantic, cognitive, and pragmatic criteria since a single theory alone cannot fully explain the complexity of metaphor. In other words, the framework used for metaphor analysis must combine the following three components: semantics, cognition, and pragmatics, since any single component is inadequate to fully explain the metaphorical expressions.

CMA is an approach to analyzing metaphors that aims to uncover a hidden (consciously or unconsciously) intention of language users (Charteris-Black, 2004) but does not deny the conceptual nature of metaphor. CMA is founded on the central tenet of CMT, which posits that metaphor plays a fundamental role in shaping our cognitive processes and patterns of thought.

In addition, this approach is also close to the traditional viewpoint of metaphor, in which metaphor is perceived as a way of reasoning as well as plays a certain role in discourse structure and style. Speakers choose to use metaphorical expressions rather than other literal words not only because it is a means of decoration, but also for persuasion purposes. The fact is that the main function of metaphors in certain contexts is to influence listeners' psychology and thoughts. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of metaphors requires contextual consideration. The pragmatic view of metaphor holds that cognitive semantics alone cannot give a complete explanation of metaphor because it would be impractical to understand what metaphor means without basing on its context. To reinforce this, Levinson (1983) argued that the pragmatic approach will be based on the assumption that metaphorical content of the words will not derive from the principle of semantic explanation; instead, Semantics primarily deals with the literal or conventional meaning of words, providing characteristics of their straightforward content. In this framework, along with contextual information, pragmatics becomes essential for explaining metaphorical expressions by elucidating how language is used in specific contexts to convey intended meanings beyond literal interpretations.

On the above-mentioned facts, CMA has been chosen as theoretical framework for metaphor analysis in this study, which consists of three phases: i) metaphor identification: in this stage, the identification process for metaphors is listed by Charteris-Black (2004) who ascertains whether there is conflict between the literal source domain and the metaphorical target domain; Phase ii) is known as metaphor interpretation, and it entails identifying the ways in which metaphorical expressions are systematically related to one another both on the textual and conceptual levels. Phase iii) is known as metaphor explanation, and it entails both the identification of these relationships as well as a discussion of the pragmatic and rhetorical elements that influence them.

### *B. War Metaphors and Their Impacts on US Political Discourse*

Linguistic analysis shows that one of the main functions of war metaphor is to evoke a sense of fear (Alexandrescu, 2014; Coleman, 2013; George et al., 2016; Mirghani, 2011). In political discourses, politicians prefer using war metaphor as a hyperbole, paired with superlatives to highlight common social political issues such as poverty, drugs or terrorism in order to attract public attention and create influence (Bartolucci, 2012; Larson et al., 2005).

War metaphors themselves are a powerful rhetorical tool for politicians. By using war metaphors to imply the country is at war, presidents could quickly gather armies and other resources to fight against the enemies. There would be little time and opportunity to consider and choose the right policy because above all the country is at war. During the war, the president is a commander in chief and domestic policy will shift from the leadership of Congress to the White House.

Being in several wars and a state of national emergency has dramatically changed the way political policy is implemented in the US. In particular, presidents have found that declaring war and a state of emergency is an appropriate way to wield greater executive power. Instead of having to get involved in long-term policy development, presidents can quickly formulate a domestic policy through speeches and declarations of domestic war. These domestic wars never seem to end, from the fights against poverty to unemployment, from battles against diseases to economic war, etc... But basically, very few domestic problems are fully resolved. Inevitably, battles against enemies like poverty, crime or drugs become the long-term framework for policy formulation and decision-making. However, political leaders have fully embraced war metaphors in an extreme way that they sometimes ignore pre-policy considerations, instead, have largely given way to urgent decisions, emergency action and war declaration.

### *C. The Usage of Metaphors Related to COVID-19 Pandemic*

In June 2020, COVID-19 pandemic spread around the world, unveiling skeletal fragility of the healthcare systems, the local government ineffectiveness and global health agencies' incompetence in their ways of handling the pandemic. In this chaos, many people were concerned about inequalities and injustices happening globally. The endless conflicts related to Covid-19 issues between countries led to violent actions against human values. Politics turned brutal when some countries tried to seize personal protective equipment (PPE) from other countries. The world witnessed vigorous attacks and interference by governments on aircrafts carrying essential goods and PPE during the pandemic. Stockpiling essential goods for selling at higher profitable prices and raising prices of medical equipment and medicine became common things in COVID-19 pandemic. In other words, humanism can no longer be a veil for the healthcare system's failure and government ineptitude in controlling the situation.

Conceptual metaphors are frequently employed in political and news media discourse to tackle pressing societal issues like crises, political dilemmas, or diseases (Nerghes et al., 2015; Semino et al., 2018). Previous studies have demonstrated that the use of different metaphors can influence individuals' reasoning, emotions, and behaviors (Cienki & Müller, 2008; Gibbs, 2014; Lee & Schwarz, 2014; Nicaise, 2014; Thibodeau & Boroditsky, 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic discourse has recently drawn substantial attention to the social impact of metaphors (Oswick et al., 2020; Rohela et al., 2020; Sabucedo et al., 2020; Semino, 2021).

Firstly, research has investigated the utilization of conceptual metaphors in political discourse worldwide. Studies by Tran (2021) reveal the widespread use of war metaphors by political leaders like President Xi Jinping, French President Emmanuel Macron, Queen Elizabeth, and President Donald Trump through news media. These leaders have employed wartime language to underscore the seriousness of the pandemic situation. Similarly, Rajandran's (2020) study explored the use of conceptual metaphors by the Prime Ministers of Malaysia and Singapore, shedding light on how metaphors contribute to the political communication of these nations. This study also examines metaphors related to direction, journey, and flexibility adopted by politicians in political and news media discourse.

Secondly, research delves into how conceptual metaphors have influenced individuals' psychology and perception of the COVID-19 pandemic. Tran and Ha (2021) suggested that studying metaphors in epidemic-related news enhances our understanding of the impact of communication on public health and explores the interplay between epidemiology and national culture in specific social contexts. Additionally, Doquin de Saint Preux and Masid Blanco's (2021) study found that metaphorical framing influenced the intensity of negative emotions and fears among Spanish speakers. The research by Sabucedo et al. (2020) opposes the use of war metaphors in COVID-19 media reports, citing its potential to exacerbate negative emotions and influence readers' behavior. Similarly, Scherer et al. (2015) noted that metaphors can influence vaccine acceptance, a critical aspect of COVID-19 response. At the individual level, Wicke and Bolognesi (2020) highlight the persuasive power of metaphors in the healthcare sector, impacting patients' health and well-being.

### III. RESEARCH METHODS

#### A. Data Collection

The corpus in this descriptive study included 20 political media discourses. They are the online news reports in The New York Times published from June 1<sup>st</sup> to July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020. The data collection method consisted of three steps. The first step was collecting randomly twenty political media discourses on the website of The New York Times ([www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)). Secondly, these political discourses were read carefully to understand the general meaning of each of them. The last step of the data collection was identifying conceptual metaphors using Pragglejaz Group (2007) theory about Metaphor Identification Procedure.

#### B. Instrument

Quantitative methods were used to identify proportions of lexical tokens in the corpus. After that, qualitative methods were mainly employed to analyze the data collected. Methods of classification, description and analysis were also used to find out the main features of metaphorical usage in the corpus. The last step was making conclusions on the analysis of the data based on Critical Metaphor Analysis which was chosen as a discursive approach in this study and mainly focused on the interaction of social political context and metaphor usage.

### IV. FINDINGS

After analyzing the data, the study found that there were total of 48 metaphorical expressions with 22 types of lexical tokens containing metaphorical concepts. The most dominant type of token was '*protect*' taking a percentage of 14.6% in the total number of tokens. To make it clearer, a table with frequency and percentage of the lexical tokens was provided below:

TABLE 1  
LIST OF METAPHORICAL LEXICAL TOKENS AND THEIR FREQUENCY IN THE CORPUS

Lexical tokens	Source Domain	Frequency	Percentage
batter	WAR	3	6.25
battle	„	2	4.17
combat	„	3	6.25
confront	„	2	4.17
destroy	„	1	2.08
enemy	„	2	4.17
failure	„	2	4.17
fight	„	3	6.25
force	„	2	4.17
front-line	„	4	8.33
hero	„	1	2.08
hit	„	1	2.08
match	„	1	2.08
mobilize	„	1	2.08
onslaught	„	1	2.08
protect	„	7	14.6
shield	„	1	2.08
surrender	„	2	4.17
sword	„	1	2.08
threat	„	6	12.5
victory	„	1	2.08
wartime	WAR	1	2.08

Under the following analysis, the study looked into the conceptual metaphors reflected through a few excerpts cited from the corpus, since space constraints preclude a more in-depth analysis.

#### A. Metaphor 'COVID-19 War'

The metaphor 'the war against Covid-19' appears to be one of the most common conceptual metaphors used in media discourse in pandemic context. A wide range of war-related lexical terms can be found in COVID-19 news like 'battle', 'march', 'threat', 'damage', 'risk', 'combat', 'surrender'... This metaphor gives a sense of urgency in the pandemic and through it writers want to send a call to health agencies and the public in order to raise people's awareness about the COVID-19 dangers. In addition, it also implies the assumption that the government has prepared enough manpower, national strategy, weapons and protective measures to deal with the war.

(1) While everyone is facing the **battle** against coronavirus, black people in America are still facing the battle against racism and coronavirus,"...

(2) ... the rate of new coronavirus infections could more than double to 100,000 a day if current outbreaks were not contained, warning that the **virus's march** across the South and the West "**puts** the entire country **at risk**.""

In the examples (1) (2), words belonging to war field such as 'battle', 'march', 'put at risk' were found to form a conceptual framework for the metaphor of the war against viruses.

#### B. Metaphor 'Virus the Enemy'

It is necessary to determine who the enemy is in a battle. In the case of a pandemic, the opponent is the Coronavirus. Around the world, politicians have declared war on SARS CoV-2. Great efforts have been made to find ways to stop its spreading, as well as research has been done to develop medicine and vaccines. But so far there is not yet a truly effective countermeasure. It is easily to find in political media discourses metaphorical expressions that illustrate 'virus - the enemy':

(3) Now, they see his behavior as self-defeating and his bursts of both anger and self-praise as futile against an invisible **enemy** like the virus...

(4) "The **enemy** is the riots and COVID-19 and whatever else is going on in the government they aren't telling us."

In some other metaphorical expressions exemplifying the COVID-19 war, the image of the incumbent President Trump appeared as a commander in chief who declared war on the Coronavirus. He was described as a 'loser' with metaphorical expressions such as 'surrender', 'failure to defend', 'termite potential coronavirus threat' etc... This fact indicated that the New York Times holding a consistent liberal view has downplayed and criticized the policies made by the incumbent Republican President in the war against Coronavirus, as it was described in the following examples:

(5) Biden says Trump '**surrendered**' to coronavirus in a blistering speech.

(6) President Trump's Democratic opponent criticized him for **failing to protect** the American people from the virus...

#### C. Metaphor 'Victory Over COVID-19'

When the country is at war, victory is the most expected outcome. Winning pandemic means returning to normal life; public health is guaranteed; social security and freedom of movement are restored; politics and economy is stabilized

like before the pandemic. Therefore, the metaphor of victory over the pandemic appeared frequently in media as in these examples:

(7) After a week of unrest in the capital, Mr. Trump had gone to the Rose Garden to declare **victory** over a coronavirus pandemic that has ravaged the economy...

(8) This year, diplomats have already had to grapple with representing a president and government that have been widely criticized for their **failures** in handling the coronavirus pandemic...

#### D. Metaphor *MEDICAL STAFF IS HERO/ SOLDIER*

The metaphor *MEDICAL STAFF IS HERO/ SOLDIER* helps to illustrate a positive icon while empowering the medical staff. However, this metaphor also indirectly acknowledges the significant risks that health-care workers face in the war against COVID-19, including their health safety and their families' security. The metaphorical expressions '*heroes fighting*', '*the doctors and nurses on the front lines*' are symbolic forms of praise. But at the same time, it puts certain pressures on doctors and medical staff. As heroes, they do not have the right to give up the fighting position in COVID-19 war. Even they have to sacrifice both their health and life to fight and save patients' lives. These following examples supported this fact:

(9) Meet the **heroes fighting** on the **front lines** against COVID-19.

(10) As the first COVID-19 patients started showing up in New York City emergency rooms, **the doctors and nurses on the front lines** were resolute. After months fighting the coronavirus's early **onslaught** — often without adequate protection and support — they were confused, frightened and exhausted.

In examples below, the study found that there was an army with '*task force*', '*the head*', '*wartime president*' who were in the battle to '*combat the coronavirus*':

(11) ... where he aimed to rebrand himself as a "**wartime president.**" But those efforts quickly devolved into fights with reporters as the president made stunningly inaccurate claims; including a suggestion that injecting disinfectant into the human body could help **combat the coronavirus**.

(12) As **the head** of the administration's virus **task force**, Mr. Pence has frequently used his public appearances to play down the seriousness of the pandemic.

Metaphor '*soldiers*' or '*task force*' fighting in the '*front-lines*' emphasizes the risk of infection from those who actually come into contact with the virus. On the flip side, this metaphor increases the ignorance of people who are not really exposed to the virus. Thus, it can reduce the risk that medical staff and other health-care staff are facing and decrease the importance of their work.

Therefore, it should be recognized that the metaphor *MEDICAL STAFF IS HERO/ SOLDIER* implies that health-care workers choose to put themselves in danger and accept the possibility of COVID-19 infection, although many of them do not want this. In addition, this metaphor emphasizes the important role of healthcare staff while degrading the effort of people working outside the healthcare field. This is exactly the point where the war metaphor is recommended not to be overused when it comes to health and medical issues.

#### E. Metaphor *PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT IS ARMOR and TESTING IS WEAPON*

Examples below illustrate how personal protective equipment (PPE) was metaphorized as armor by the terms '*shield*' and '*protect*', as well as testing is considered to be a '*sword*' serving as weapon to fight against the virus:

(13) The West Point band played with plexiglass **shields** to **protect** against the virus.

(14) Testing was derided as a "double-edged **sword**," ...

Obviously, the metaphor *PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT IS ARMOR* highlights the urgency of the lack of PPE in local and national health agencies. However, this metaphor could exacerbate the lack of PPE as it might increase a higher demand on PPE from the public and at the same time creates fear by developing an assumption on the spread of the disease.

#### F. Metaphor *THE ECONOMY AND POLITICS ARE COVID-19 VICTIMS*

Not only threatening public health, COVID-19 indirectly but strongly affected the economy and politics. Trading and traveling were all delayed resulting in unemployment and layoffs in many of the companies. COVID-19 did have a serious impact on the economy, politics and society, illustrating by the metaphorical expressions '*battle*', '*hit*', '*ravage*'... showing the severity of the crisis:

(15) **Fighting for their political lives** amid twin domestic crises — **a pandemic that has battered** the economy...

(16) He suggested that the leftover money in the Paycheck Protection Program should be repurposed **to help industries** that had been **hit hardest by the pandemic**...

(17) After a week of unrest in the capital, Mr. Trump had gone to the Rose Garden to declare victory over a coronavirus **pandemic that has ravaged the economy**...

#### G. Metaphor '*Front-Line*'

The front-line is the fiercest battleground in a war. In the pandemic, the front-lines included many different places such as: airports and border gates where there was a high possibility of spreading diseases; quarantines where people

returning from epidemic areas temporarily lived waiting for test results; hospitals, clinics where doctors and patients were fighting against the virus. These were all illustrated in detail in the following metaphorical expressions:

(18) His organization has received about \$10 million so far to help **front-line** coronavirus responders in the West Bank, Italy and Haiti.

(19) Trina Moore, 61, drove 10 hours from Denver to attend the rally. Her children are essential workers on the **front lines** of the pandemic, she said.

## V. DISCUSSION

Conceptual war metaphors are universally perceived and commonly associated with illness in many cultures. One of the most popular conceptual metaphors is FIGHTING DISEASES IS A WAR. In this conceptual metaphor, a variety of mappings can be identified including: A DISEASE IS AN ENEMY, MEDICAL STAFF IS ARMY, BODY IS BATTLEFIELD, MEDICINE AND MEDICAL EQUIPMENT ARE WEAPONS, etc. Therefore, this conceptual metaphor appears in media discourse on topics about COVID-19 and other fatal diseases such as cancer. We can observe the encounter between doctors (warriors) and viruses (enemy); the different targets of the two forces and the diverse battlefields that humans must fight. It is not just the battles between viruses and healthy cells on the 'body battlefield'.

The emotional stimulation generated by the metaphor is probably the most important feature. This stimulation depends on the context in which the metaphor is created, and is shaped by the way it is perceived and shared. In conceptual metaphors with the source domain of illness, politics, human relationships, business etc..., basically our understanding of the target domain is not necessarily entirely based on the source domain. It partially depends on the context and the communicators' background knowledge. Definitely, the influence of these conceptual metaphors is enormous since they create a strong impact on people's perception and acts as a whole.

War metaphors are context-dependent: they can create a positive or negative emotional effect depending on how they are used. For example, war metaphors used in COVID-19 pandemic context can stimulate people's emotional psychology, help them be aware of a dangerous threat to public health, and make them respect their community obligations like in wartime rather than satisfying their individual needs. In addition, this projection can create a defense mechanism: fears and worries are mapped into the concept of war between human vs. tiny virus, providing a sense of outstanding government power and their capability to take control of the situation.

However, the matter is if it is practical to abuse war metaphors in media discourse? By using war metaphors, news writers have reduced various options into 'war', and thus divide the world into I/ We (Good) and They/ It (Evil). The complexity and diversity of the ethical category have condensed into Yes/ No; True/ False. Consequently, the abuse of war metaphors can result in an excessively simple combative worldview that might evoke provocative violence. It can limit the way people discuss and argue about a problem, prevent or delay examining and searching for more effective solutions. In addition, as in this case study, the analysis showed that war metaphors can bring undesirable consequences. Perhaps the most obvious outcome can be seen in the mapping MEDICAL STAFF IS HERO. During the war, soldiers would never be asked to fight without proper protective equipment. However, the doctors and medical staff which are mentioned as 'soldiers' in COVID-19 war were not well-equipped during the time this research was conducted (as mentioned in theoretical background). In June 2020, the lack of N95 masks and other medical protective equipment widely reported around the world. But these 'heroic warriors' - doctors and medical staff do not have the choice to give up fighting since they were titled as heroes by the public. They had to take risk of their life and health to save the lives of others.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The usage of war metaphors in media discourse regarding the COVID-19 outbreak can have unanticipated negative implications, although initially inspiring a sense of urgency and unity. COVID-19 is portrayed as a war, with winners and losers, which could exacerbate tensions and impede coordinated efforts to effectively combat the virus. Furthermore, the idealized portrayal of medical personnel as warriors could mask the structural obstacles they encounter, like insufficient safety gear and dangerous working environments. In addition to downplaying the complexity of healthcare, this representation puts frontline workers' wellbeing at risk.

It is crucial to reevaluate the usage of war metaphors in media discourse about COVID-19 and other health emergencies in light of these worries. Other conceptual metaphors that provide more beneficial frameworks for comprehending and tackling public health issues include "TREATING AN ILLNESS IS A JOURNEY" and "ILLNESS IS DOWN, HEALTH IS UP." Media sources may encourage greater empathy, teamwork, and resilience in handling the ongoing pandemic and beyond by embracing more complex and inclusive metaphors. This change toward more deliberate and accountable communication can enhance the wellbeing of people and communities everywhere by fostering a more comprehensive awareness of health-related concerns.

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