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ILHAM BEZZAOUCHA - Université Alger

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Métaphores politiques dans la couverture médiatique du COVID-19 : Déclarer la guerre aux métaphores trompeuses

ILHEM BEZZAOUCHA

UNIVERSITY OF ALGIERS

1. Introduction

An enemy, a mugger, a tsunami, a fire, a race, and even aliens: just a few of the metaphors used to describe different aspects of the Covid-19 pandemic since it began in early 2020. Now is the perfect time to pause and take stock. The world was brought to a halt to realize our potential, to relinquish our limiting beliefs, and to step into the space of imagination.

The leaders of the first infested countries faced the problem of explaining to the population the threat posed by this disease and the necessary precautions that everyone had to put in place to slow the rate of a rapid contagion. The virus is invisible, and the preliminary symptoms of COVID-19 are flu-like : the difficulty was then to find a strategy to convince the population of the risks of this invisible, yet to be known virus.

Drawing a parallelism between abstract concepts we are unfamiliar with and more tangible events we have experience of allows to access knowledge and to understand what seems at first as inaccessible concepts. It is possible through metaphors and simile where we liken these complex and abstract issues to relatively simpler ones. War seemed to be at the time the perfect match.

As a result, the use of bellicose metaphors describing the coronavirus pandemic invaded political speeches:

On 17 March 2020, Boris Johnson described coronavirus as “an enemy” that “can be deadly” but was “also beatable”, and hinted at the resources and sacrifices that would be needed to “win the fight”. President Macron stated a day earlier that “We are at war”. This bellicose rhetoric that betrays a readiness to fight an elusive enemy was often criticised by social agents.

New York Governor used the war metaphor:” this is war ... the soldiers in this fight are our health care professional. It is the doctors, it’s the nurses,

it's the people who are working in the hospitals, it's the aids. They are the soldiers who are fighting the battle for us.”

UN secretary General Antonio Gutierrez embraced the war metaphor: “We are at war with the a virus-and not winning it ... this war needs a war-time plan to fight it...”

While war metaphors may sometimes be effective in conveying urgency and mobilizing resources, they breed fear. Fear can in turn be weaponized by governments to promote militarized responses, which focus more on social control than on public health. (Upadhyay,2020).

For all the criticisms that have been rightly levelled against them, war metaphors have long been known to be effective at persuading people that a problem is serious and urgent enough to require collective effort and a change in behaviour: if we are at war with a dangerous enemy, we need to pull together and be prepared to play our part in defeating it. Since many war related concepts can be used to talk about illness, this constitutes a “structural metaphor” in Lakoff and Johnson’s terms (2008): The source domain “war” provides a rich niche of notions that might be associated with the target domain “pandemic”: there are several structural correspondences, such as “the virus and an enemy; health professionals and an army; sick or dead people and casualties; eliminating the virus and victory” (Semino, 2021 :51).

In response, #ReframeCovid was born as an open, collaborative and non-prescriptive initiative to collect alternatives to war metaphors for COVID-19 in any language, and to reflect on the use of figurative language about the virus. The paper summarises the background, aims, development and main outcomes to date of the initiative, and launches a call for scholars within the metaphor community to feed into and use the #ReframeCovid collection in their own language.

1. The purpose and methodology of the reseach

The material used in this research consisted of random metaphoric manifestations of the Covid 19 pandemic.

The analysis of cognitive metaphors of the pandemic was based on the data collected from different news websites. This method is considered valid in the subject of political news; it has also revealed varied metaphoric manifestations as they deals with various fields of life.

As to ways of cognitive and linguistic selection, we ensured the presence of word-related pandemic expressions in the vicinity of other salient lexical units. The linguistic data was used to unveil the source domains of metaphorisation.

It should be pointed out that metaphors have always been considered as major aesthetic and ornamental devices in literary texts. Metaphors also infuse a delightful sense of movement in the exuberant realm of lofty, florid texts of politicians. The conceptual metaphor approach, developed in the eighties and beyond, outlines that metaphors operate at the level of thinking and can serve as potential tool for unveiling underlying meanings in the text.

The metaphoric interplay occurs between a source domain and a target domain. The former contains revealing information with which a new abstract knowledge is identified. The structural correspondences between the two domains are called metaphor maps.

2. Results and discussion

The war on the war metaphor was launched: the virus as strong as it might can be conceptualized as an enemy, but it surely does not have any “intention” and cannot sign an armistice. It also caused infected people to be vilified than empathised with. Not only that, the wartime frame was activated, together with all the related salient entailments. Moreover, not only these entailments will become cognitively relevant, but they will also lead individuals, simple citizens to become “imaginary soldiers” in a fierce conflict, politicians will advocate obedience rather than awareness and appeal to the sense of patriotism, and not only to solidarity”, and this might favor “shifts towards dangerous authoritarian power-grabs” (Musu,2020). This is particularly relevant in the Covid-19 crisis, where whole populations are required to passively stay at home.

Still, there are plenty of shared experiences to draw on that *don't* particularly involve war. So, in search of new metaphors, we went hunting for experts attempting to develop a new lexicon around coronavirus, and we came across professors, writers, and thinkers doing exactly that.

Under the #ReframeCovid hashtag, linguists from different countries are collecting and discussing various alternatives on Twitter. Using the #ReframeCovid hashtag on Twitter, started in Spain, linguists are discussing the array of possible metaphors that could help us better understand the different aspects of life during the pandemic.

Two linguists at the University of Lancaster in England, Veronika Koller and Elena Semino, are seeking alternative ways to talk about coronavirus. They've collected more than 200 metaphors from languages around the world and, with the help of others, gathered them in a giant spreadsheet.

Semino's findings (2021) for instance pointed out to the adequacy of the "fire" metaphors in communication about contagion and public health measures resulting from the analysis of news articles in English.

Here are some examples from their collection, and from around the web.

2.1. The corona virus not as a foe but as natural disasters, emerging economy, queen Elsa and a bullet train and Lord Voldemort

Variant conceptualizations of the COVID pandemic appeal to divergent but more or less related cognitive domains.

Our overheating planet is fuming. And climate change sputtered horrid hurricanes, floods, and fires. Conveniently enough, natural disasters are also frequently used to describe the pandemic. You may have heard that COVID-19 outbreaks may come in "waves," or that hospitals are weathering a "tsunami." Whereas warlike language gets people geared up to fight, the tsunami metaphor sends a message to hide and retreat, making people even more anxious against a more concrete entity. It has also been suggested that water was only way to contain the raging fire of coronavirus. But who could contain water when it turns to floods and tsunamis.

Most recently, Stephen Powis, the national medical director of the NHS in England, talked about "green shoots" to tell the country that the self-isolation measures were showing some first effects.

The sense of an impending disaster was also expressed by New York governor Andrew Cuomo, who quotes a forecaster saying that the public health crisis used to be a freight train coming towards them but is now a bullet train.

A UK commentator, Neil Crowther, has drawn from a children's film to suggest that public messaging could "cast us all as a potential 'Queen Elsa' from Disney's Frozen, unaware of our newly acquired power to cause harm by touching things and each other".

A storyline from the Harry Potter books can help illuminate the Trump administration's slow response to coronavirus. Late in the series, the Ministry of Magic—the governing body for wizards—refused to acknowledge that the villain, Lord Voldemort, had returned with a vengeance. By the time the evidence was impossible to deny, the ministry had lost its chance to prepare for the worst, and all hell broke loose.

China and the rest of the world are sailing in the same river, which is churned up by storms and waves, and we hope that more people will swing

the oar together to steer the ship through the dangerous water, instead of watching indifferently from afar” (Opinion article from BJ News, 26/02/20, provided by Jianan Zhang in the #ReframeCovid collection)

2.2. Reboot, reframe, and reimagine Covid-19

The aforementioned examples show how neutral words and cultural references are infused with a new sense of meaning and energy to the quite morbid tale of Covid-19.

Thinking flexibly about Covid-19 does not entail denying the stressful and depressive aspects of the outbreak. It simply provides another exit to an emergency situation.

What makes a certain metaphor appropriate or inappropriate is not the metaphor itself but the way in which it is used in a specific context for a specific purpose for a specific audience (Semino et al, 2018a).

Conclusion

In recent times, many alarm bells have begun to ring: the metaphorical presentation of the COVID-19 emergency as a war might be belligerent, because it could affect the way people conceptualize the pandemic and react to it, leading citizens to willingly accept quiet authoritarianism and limitations to civil liberties.

Leaders when relaying information are those more conditioned by the COVID-19 war metaphor, thus more inclined to prefer bellicose options.

This is a time where sensitivity and creativity are required to develop a range of metaphors that can appeal to the widest possible variety of people and circumstances.

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Upadhyay S. The problem with saying we're "at war" with the coronavirus <https://www.afsc.org/blogs/news-and-commentary/how-to-talk-about-covid-19-pandemic>

Abstract

COVID-19 has in subtle and not so subtle ways permeated the discourse of politics. Metaphors of wars have remarkably prevailed at the onset. The virus has been described, for instance, as an « enemy » to be « beaten », a « tsunami » on health services and even as « glitter » that « gets everywhere. » The present paper discusses different metaphors for the pandemic, and explains why they matter. War metaphors are considered first, as they were particularly abundant and controversial when the pandemic started. An overview of alternative metaphors is then provided, drawing from the « #ReframeCovid » crowd-sourced multilingual collection of metaphors for Covid-19. The results of the study reveal a plethora of lexical means to account for the dynamic image of the pandemic that exhibits a gradual shift from the war metaphor to variant interpretations. Finally, based on both the #ReframeCovid collection and a systematic analysis of a large corpus of news articles in English, it is suggested that the other metaphorical combinations might be appropriate and versatile in communication about different aspects of the pandemic, including contagion and different public health measures aimed at countering it.

Abstract

conceptual metaphors, pandemic, war, alternatives, interpretation

تغلغل فيروس كورونا بطرق خفية وغير دقيقة في الخطاب السياسي. سادت استعارات

مستخلص

تغلغل فيروس كورونا بطرق خفية وغير دقيقة في الخطاب السياسي. سادت استعارات الحروب بشكل ملحوظ في بداية الجائحة. تم وصف الفيروس، على سبيل المثال، بأنه عدو تجدر هزيمته، وتسونامي على الخدمات الصحية وحتى بريق ينتشر في كل مكان.

تناقش هذه الورقة البحثية الاستعارات المختلفة للوباء، وتشرح سبب أهميتها. تقصينا استعارات الحرب أولاً لانتشارها وإثارها للجدل عندما حل الوباء. ثم قمنا بتقديم نظرة عامة عن الاستعارات البديلة، جمعناها من فيض الاستعارات الموجودة من مدونات متعددة اللغات.

كشفت نتائج الدراسة عن عدد كبير من الوسائل المعجمية لتفسير التصور الديناميكي للجائحة التي أظهرت تحولاً تدريجياً من استعارات الحرب إلى تأويلات مختلفة.

أخيراً، استناداً للتحليل المنهجي لمجموعات كثيرة من المقالات الإخبارية باللغة الانجليزية، اقترحنا سدم مجازية أخرى قد تكون مواتمة ومتعددة الاستعمالات في التواصل فيما يخص الجوانب المختلفة للوباء، بما في ذلك العدوى والتدابير الصحية الهادفة لمواجهتها.

Résumé

Le COVID-19 a imprégné le discours politique de manière subtile et moins subtile. Les métaphores de guerre ont remarquablement prévalu dès le début. Le virus a été décrit, par exemple, comme un « ennemi » qu'il faut « abattre », un « tsunami » pour les services de santé et même des « paillettes » qui « s'infiltrent partout ». Le présent article examine différentes métaphores de la pandémie et explique pourquoi elles sont importantes. Les métaphores guerrières sont examinées en premier lieu, car elles étaient particulièrement nombreuses et controversées au début de la pandémie. Un aperçu des métaphores alternatives est ensuite fourni, en s'appuyant sur la collection multilingue de métaphores pour le Covid-19 « #ReframeCovid », alimentée par des corpus. Les résultats de l'étude révèlent une pléthore de moyens lexicaux pour rendre compte de l'image dynamique de la pandémie qui présente un glissement progressif de la métaphore de la guerre vers des interprétations variées. Enfin, sur la base de la collection #ReframeCovid et d'une analyse systématique d'un vaste corpus d'articles de presse en anglais, il est suggéré que les autres combinaisons métaphoriques pourraient être appropriées et polyvalentes dans la communication sur différents aspects de la pandémie, y compris la contagion et les différentes mesures de santé publique visant à la contrer.

Mots-clés

métaphores conceptuelles, pandémie, guerre, alternatives, interprétation