



## COGNITIVE METAPHORS IN POLITICAL SPEECHES: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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**Annotation:** *This article explores the use of cognitive metaphors in political speeches through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Political language is rich in metaphorical expressions that serve cognitive, rhetorical, and ideological functions. Drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Theory and discourse-analytical frameworks, the paper examines how metaphors shape public perception, frame national issues, and reinforce ideologies in English-language political discourse. The findings highlight that metaphors such as “the nation as a family” or “war against problems” are not merely stylistic devices but tools for persuasion, identity construction, and power negotiation.*

**Keywords:** *Cognitive metaphor, political discourse, critical discourse analysis, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, ideology, framing, persuasion*

### Introduction

Political language is inherently strategic and symbolic. One of its most powerful features is the use of cognitive metaphors, which allow abstract ideas to be understood through more concrete, familiar concepts. For instance, when politicians refer to the economy as a “ship” or national security as a “battle,” they are not simply being poetic—they are shaping how audiences conceptualize complex realities.

This study investigates how metaphor functions in political speeches by examining common metaphorical frameworks and their ideological implications.



Grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995), this paper reveals how metaphors influence not only how policies are discussed but how reality itself is perceived in the political arena.

### **1. Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Its Political Application**

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) posits that metaphor is not just a linguistic ornament but a cognitive mechanism by which we understand and experience the world. In this view, metaphors consist of a source domain (concrete) and a target domain (abstract). For example, in the metaphor “time is money,” time (abstract) is understood via the more tangible concept of money.

In politics, such metaphors help audiences process abstract ideas like freedom, government, economy, or international relations. Crucially, these metaphors are ideologically loaded: they frame how problems are defined and what solutions seem reasonable.

### **2. Common Cognitive Metaphors in Political Speeches**

#### **The Nation as a Family**

This metaphor frames the country as a household, with leaders as parents and citizens as children. It supports both nurturant and strict-father models of governance:

- *“Our founding fathers built this great house.”*
- *“The government must care for its people like a good parent.”*

Depending on the political ideology, this metaphor can justify welfare policies or demand discipline and order.

#### **Politics as War or Sport**

Political competition is often described in terms of war or games:

- *“We must fight for our values.”*
- *“Our campaign strategy is a winning play.”*



This metaphor frames opponents as enemies or rivals, turning political discourse into a zero-sum conflict, often at the expense of dialogue and compromise.

### **Economy as a Machine or Living Organism**

The economy is frequently conceptualized as a machine (“*we need to jumpstart growth*”) or as a patient (“*the market is recovering*”). These metaphors evoke urgency and technocratic solutions, directing attention to experts and mechanical interventions.

### **Immigration as a Natural Disaster or Threat**

In controversial policy debates, immigration is sometimes framed metaphorically as floods, waves, or invasions:

- “*We are being overwhelmed by a tide of migrants.*”

These metaphors create fear, suggesting danger and loss of control, and often support restrictive policies.

## **3. Metaphor and Ideological Framing**

The use of metaphor in political language is rarely neutral. Metaphors can mask inequality, naturalize ideology, and reframe issues to align with political goals. For example, if poverty is described as a trap, the solution is escape and individual effort. But if it is framed as a systemic illness, then structural reform is implied.

George Lakoff (2004) argues that liberals and conservatives in the U.S. differ fundamentally in the metaphors they use—especially those related to family, morality, and governance. This divergence results in different moral narratives, which explain why political groups often talk past one another.

## **4. Case Examples**

### **Barack Obama (Inaugural Address)**



Metaphors such as “*we must pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and begin again the work of remaking America*” position the nation as a resilient individual—emphasizing personal responsibility, unity, and hope.

### **Donald Trump (Campaign Speech)**

Use of metaphors like “*drain the swamp*” and “*build the wall*” suggest cleanliness, defense, and protection—constructing outsiders as threats and casting the government as corrupt.

### **Theresa May (Brexit Speech)**

Phrases like “*we are leaving the European Union, but we are not leaving Europe*” draw on metaphors of movement and journey—balancing separation with cooperation.

These metaphors influence how people interpret national identity, crisis, and change.

## **5. Cross-Cultural Variations in Political Metaphor**

While cognitive metaphors appear globally, the cultural framing and political traditions shape how they are used. For example, American political discourse frequently uses frontier or war metaphors to convey dominance and freedom due to its historical context of expansion and conflict. Phrases like “*battle for the soul of the nation*” reflect a deeply ingrained metaphorical connection between politics and combat.

In contrast, Scandinavian political rhetoric often uses metaphors of sailing, balance, or home-building, reflecting social cohesion and cooperation. For instance, speeches in Sweden may include phrases like “*navigating the storm together*”, which emphasizes collective responsibility over adversarial framing.

Understanding these variations highlights how metaphors are not just cognitive tools but ideologically and culturally situated discourse strategies.

## **6. Emotional Resonance and Symbolism**



Cognitive metaphors gain power by connecting policy to emotionally charged imagery. Politicians often choose metaphors that evoke safety, fear, family, sacrifice, or morality. This emotional appeal influences public opinion more effectively than technical explanations.

For instance:

- “*Our healthcare system is on life support*” implies crisis and urgency.
- “*We must feed the future*” (used in education funding speeches) positions children as hope and investment.

Such metaphors bypass rational analysis and appeal directly to moral intuition, which is especially effective in media soundbites and televised debates.

## **7. Metaphor Clusters and Strategic Repetition**

Metaphors are rarely used in isolation. Successful political speeches build metaphor clusters—repetitive and interlinked metaphors that reinforce each other and create a consistent worldview.

Example from Winston Churchill:

*“We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds...”*

This repeated war schema metaphorically mobilized the public for moral resilience during WWII. Repetition solidifies metaphorical framing, making it part of the public's shared understanding.

In contemporary usage, campaigns like “*Build Back Better*” combine construction metaphors (building) with healing metaphors (recovery), forming a composite message of progress through repair.

## **8. Manipulation and Framing Through Metaphor**

Cognitive metaphors can also obscure responsibility or frame biased perspectives as logical truths. This is often seen in policy debates:

- “*Welfare dependency is a disease*” implies that recipients are sick and need treatment—justifying strict reforms.



- “*Tax relief*” frames taxes as a burden or injury, rather than a civic duty.

Such metaphors are persuasive because they hide value judgments within familiar language. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) examines how these choices serve hegemonic interests, subtly reinforcing the worldview of dominant political or economic classes.

## 9. Metaphor and Identity Politics

In multicultural societies, metaphors are also used to construct or contest collective identities. Phrases like “*real Americans*,” “*British values*,” or “*the heartland*” create imagined communities while excluding others (e.g., immigrants, urban populations, or minorities).

Metaphorical language is thus instrumental in both nation-building and othering. Political actors can mobilize voters by tapping into shared metaphors of belonging or threat, as seen in Brexit discourse (e.g., “*take back control*”).

## Conclusion

Cognitive metaphors are not merely linguistic flourishes in political discourse; they are central to the way political realities are constructed and communicated. By framing abstract concepts in familiar terms, metaphors help politicians gain support, simplify complexity, and embed ideological values within everyday language. A critical understanding of these metaphorical frameworks is essential for informed political engagement. As media consumption grows more global and rapid, analyzing political language through metaphor becomes increasingly vital for resisting manipulation and fostering transparent democratic discourse.

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