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Conceptual Metaphors in Boris Johnson's Speech about Fighting COVID-19

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Abstract:

Metaphor is originally perceived as a rhetorical device in discourse. In 1980, Lakoff and Johnson put forward the conceptual metaphor theory and explained metaphor from the cognitive perspective, which become a milestone in metaphor research. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), conceptual metaphor, in essence, is understanding one kind of thing in terms of another. And it's not confined just in our language but also in our thought and action. Political speech, in general, aims to convey information, illustrate personal viewpoint or making political decisions, but above all, to persuade the public and encourage them to take actions as the speaker wants. This paper analyze the former British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson's speech about fighting COVID-19 on April 27th, 2020, and aims to identify the conceptual metaphors adopted in his speech as well as the distribution of them and the functions they realized. Through analysis, War Metaphor, Journey Metaphor, Human Metaphor and Machine Metaphor can be identified in his speech. And these metaphorical expressions are mainly used to facilitate comprehension, evoke resonance and realize persuasive functions.

1. Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic broke out at the end of 2019 and has spread rapidly throughout the whole world since then, creating a world-wide public health crisis. Every country in the world took actions in response, launching a war against this invisible enemy. But the public is still under its threat until now. The United Kingdom, as one of the most severely hit areas in Europe, went into lockdown for three times. Former British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, announced that England would go into lockdown on March 23rd, 2020. This is the first lockdown during the outbreak. And on March 27th, the Prime Minister got infected with the coronavirus and was admitted to the hospital. After weeks of treatment, he was able to recover and come back to the desk. On April 27th, the Prime Minister made an important speech at 10 Downing Street, which was his first speech after he returned to office. After a month's lockdown, the British people were anxious and looking for answers, and the Prime

Minister, through his speech, needed to share information with the public, alleviate their anxiety and convince them to keep following the social distancing measures. In the eight minute's speech, the Prime Minster adopted many metaphors, which, to some degree, helped achieve the purpose of this speech.

The conceptual metaphor theory proposed by Lakoff and Johnson is regarded as one of the guiding theories to study metaphors in discourse. The essence of metaphor is to understand one concept in terms of another, and it enables people to grasp abstract concept through one which is more familiar in the cognitive system. Under the guidance of this theory, this paper makes a analysis of the conceptual metaphors used in Boris Johnson's speech On April 27th, and aims to find out what kinds of metaphor were employed, how they were distributed and what functions they realized. With detailed analysis, this paper hopes to provide the findings in a vivid and clear way, and thus enriches the study of conceptual metaphor and its application in discourse analysis. Furthermore, this paper analyzes the functions of conceptual metaphor, which is an effective perspective for the study of political discourse and may help the public better understand political discourse as well as the politician's intentions.

2. Political Discourse

Political discourse has always been a hot topic of research. Foreign scholars have studied political discourse from different perspectives. Bitzer [1] studies the concept, technique, theme, evidence and situation of political rhetoric. He believes that rhetoric is a effective approach to study political communication, the purpose of which is to exert influence on the audience's ideas and attitudes. Chilton and Schaffner [3] point out, political discourse usually carries the functions of coercion, protest, dissimulation, legitimation and delegitimation. According to Gill and Whedbee [6], parallelism is the most representative rhetorical device in political discourse. Through parallelism and complex sentences, the syntactic structure becomes more intact and the persuasive power will be enhanced. Partington [10] explores the use and function of parallelism by analyzing a large number of examples from different types of political discourse.

Many scholars study political discourse from the perspective of critical discourse analysis(CDA). Wodak [11] explores the relationship between political language and ideology and then reveals the mechanism of political power. Van Dijk [12] believes that critical linguistics should analyze discourse from the political aspect so that power and ideology in political discourse can be revealed. Thus in his early works, his study mainly concentrates on political discourse. Later he explores this theory in the cognitive perspective and finds that language used in discourse can change people's value and thoughts through cognition which can determine their attitude towards society. Fairclough [5] points out CDA is an interdisciplinary approach to analyze written and spoken texts, and he views language as a form of social practice and focuses on the way in which social and political domination are constructed, reproduced, or challenged, by text or talk.

In terms of the language in political discourse, according to Connolly (1993:1), "the language of politics is not a neutral medium that conveys ideas independently formed; it is an institutionalized structure of meanings that channels political thought and action in certain directions". This means that the language is the tool that helps politicians to achieve their goals either in an open or implicit way and to manipulate the audience. Charteris-Black [2] believes, in all types of political system, politicians

attempt to convince their target audience "of the benefits that arise from their leadership". Therefore, political language typically adopts a variety of linguistic means to persuade, such as metaphors, parallels, similes, etc.

3. The Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Conceptual metaphor was first introduced in 1980 by Lakoff and Johnson in their book *Metaphors We Live By*. They define metaphor from the cognitive perspective and they believe that "the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" [8]. The conceptual metaphor theory explains that metaphor is a cross domain mapping from the source domain to the target domain. The source domain is usually more specific and easy to understand while the target domain is relatively abstract and more difficult to describe. In addition, the characteristics of one domain must fit those of the other one as to achieve systematic correspondence.

Lakoff and Johnson [8] categorize conceptual metaphor into structural metaphor, orientational metaphor and ontological metaphor. Structural metaphor means that one concept is metaphorically structured in terms of another. These two concepts are different in the cognitive system but their structures are similar, that is, the components of these two concepts are in a way correspondent. For example, the classic "ARGUMENT IS WAR" metaphor, "argument" is called the target domain and "war" the source domain. The components of the source domain can be mapped onto the target domain and expressions used to describe war can be used to talk about argument. For instance, "He *attacked* every weak point in my argument." Thus structural metaphor is to use a clear and more familiar concept to construct another concept that is vague or more abstract.

Orientational metaphor is based on space and orientation. It is a metaphorical type that expresses the cognition of abstract concepts by referring to people's spatial experience. Such spatial experience is grounded in people's cognition so the expressions used in description are not random. Some abstract concepts such as mood can be described by mapping the concrete concepts onto the abstract ones to form metaphorical expressions. For example, "HAPPY IS UP, SAD IS DOWN" and there are English expressions like "I'm feeling *up* today." This corresponding relation between metaphors and language is not arbitrary, rather, they have a basis in people's physical and cultural experience.

Ontological metaphor includes entity and substance metaphor, container metaphor and personification. Our perception of substance or objects provides a foundation for us to understand abstract concepts not only in terms of orientation. We can view thoughts, emotions or ideas as entity so that they can be described in a way this is easier to understand. Lakoff and Johnson proposed that "understanding our experience in terms of objects and substances allows us to pick out parts of our experience and treat them as discrete entities or substances" [8]. Take "inflation" for example, "*Inflation is lowering* our living standard", here "inflation" is viewed as an entity that can affect our life.

Lakoff also discusses conceptual metaphor in political discourse. In his book *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*, Lakoff [9] emphasizes the important role that "Family" metaphor plays in American politics. This metaphor enables people to perceive the politics in terms of a much more familiar concept: family. In this "family", government is the parent and the people are children. He proposed that the

Conservatives adopt the "Strict Father Model", while the liberals believe the "Nurturant Parent Model", and their viewpoints, policies as well as language are consistent with their model. Other scholars also conducted some research concerning metaphors in politics. Charteris-Black [2] believes that conceptual metaphor bears the power of persuasion because it can exert influence on people's attitudes and thoughts through both the rationality of the familiar concept and the emotional connotations the metaphor carries. Therefore, conceptual metaphor in political speeches plays a significant part in achieving the politicians' intentions. Goatly [7] makes a conclusion that metaphors reflect hidden ideologies.

4. Conceptual Metaphors in Boris Johnson's Speech

Based on the conceptual metaphor theory, this part makes a detail analysis of the metaphors in former British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson's speech on April 27th. The metaphors adopted in Johnson's speech are categorized according to their source domains, which are mainly War Metaphor, Journey Metaphor, Human Metaphor and Machine Metaphor. Distribution of these metaphors is presented as follows. And this part also discusses the functions of these metaphors as well as how they are realized.

Table 1. Distribution of Conceptual Metaphors in Johnson's speech.

Categories	Number	Percentage
War Metaphor	14	41.18%
Journey Metaphor	10	29.41%
Human Metaphor	7	20.59%
Machine Metaphor	3	8.82%

We can see from this table that War Metaphor plays a major part in this speech, taking up about forty percent, while Machine Metaphor occupies the smallest proportion, about only eight percent. And Journey Metaphor ranks the second, accounting for almost thirty percent, just a little less than War Metaphor. Human metaphor takes up about twenty percent in this speech, a little more than Machine metaphor. And below is the analysis of these metaphors and their functions.

4.1. War Metaphor

FIGHTING COVID-19 IS WAR

One of the most prevalent conceptual metaphors in this speech is the War Metaphor. Boris Johnson describes the fight against the coronavirus as war. According to *Oxford English Dictionary,* "war" means a situation in which two or more countries or groups of people fight against each other over a period of time. War can be seen as an armed combat between different entities, with the intention of gaining certain political benefits by using violence. As for us human beings, war is more than a familiar concept. People always fight or start a war to obtain what they want along the course of history. Because of the cognitive features of war, many other concepts or phenomena which carry the meaning of conflict can be conceptualized and discussed on the basis of war. We can see from the data that War Metaphor is the most used metaphor in this speech, which depicts the coronavirus as the enemy and indicates the brutality and extreme danger of this fight. Below are some examples:

(1) And letting the reproduction rate go back over one, because that would mean not only ***a new wave of death*** and disease but also an economic ***disaster***. (Johnson, April 27th, 2020)

(2) But I refuse to throw away all the effort and the *sacrifice* of the British people and to risk a second major outbreak and *huge loss of life* and the overwhelming of the NHS. (Johnson, April 27th, 2020)

(3) And in spite of all the *suffering* we have so nearly succeeded. (Johnson, April 27th, 2020)

In the above examples, the Prime Minister tries to convince the British people to keep following the social distancing measures, and he adopts words such as "death", "loss of life", "sacrifice" and "suffering" which are often used to describe the horrible consequences of war to express the cruelty and destructive nature of COVID-19. This virus has killed many people in this worldwide pandemic, causing many to lose their loved ones. It also wreaked havoc on national and global economy. The consequences of war are mapped onto the damage and disaster this virus has caused. In this way, the public would feel as if they were in an actual war and further realize the serious threat this virus poses. And they are likely to be more willing to stay at home and keep themselves as well as their family members safe.

(4) And on the contrary we have so far collectively *shielded* our NHS so that our incredible doctors and nurses and healthcare staff have been able to *shield* all of us from an outbreak that would have been far worse. (Johnson, April 27th, 2020)

(5) So I say to you finally if you can keep going in the way that you have kept going so far, if you can help *protect* our NHS to save lives...(Johnson, April 27th, 2020)

In examples (4) and (5), War Metaphor is expressed with the help of the words "shield" and "protect". NHS as the British healthcare system occupies the most important position in this battle and the medical staff are the main force to fight against the coronavirus. They help shield the people from this deadly virus, which is regarded as the enemy in this metaphor. The Prime Minister needed to persuade his people to keep social distance so that the NHS wouldn't be overwhelmed and he uses "shield" and "protect" to emphasize the crucial importance of this matter, that is, the public must protect the main force and themselves from the enemy as to win this war.

(6) I can tell you now that preparations are under way, and have been for weeks to allow us to *win* phase two of *this fight* as I believe we are now on track to *prevail in* phase one. (Johnson, April 27th, 2020)

(7) Then I have absolutely no doubt that we will *beat* it together... (Johnson, April 27th, 2020)

In examples (6) and (7), the Prime Minister states that the government is making preparations and he also mentions some positive results that have been achieved so far. He uses "win" "this fight" to show his confidence in the government's actions and "prevail in phase one" indicates the positive results they've gained are a victory. This helps to position the Prime Minister himself as the leader who leads this country to triumph. What's more, employing these words "win", "prevail in" and "beat it" also helps to resonant with the public who has suffered a lot because of the coronavirus and are eager to see some light. It can lift up the spirit of the public and strengthen their confidence because employing such metaphorical expressions creates the impression that the virus will be defeated and the people are going to win.

4.2. Journey Metaphor

FIGHTING COVID-19 IS A JOURNEY

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Journey Metaphor takes up the second largest proportion in Boris Johnson's speech. Journey means the process of traveling from one place to another. It includes the starting point and the destination. The travelers are moving forward toward the destination or may sometimes get stopped in the way due to obstacles. And they'll feel a sense of fulfillment after covering several miles of this journey. Because of such experience of our own, the fight against COVID-19 can be conceptualized in terms of Journey. In this speech, it is metaphorically constructed as a journey which includes several phases and eliminating this disease is the destination, and the British people are the travelers. Below are some of the examples:

(8) I ask you to contain your impatience because I believe we are ***coming now to the end of the first phase*** of this conflict. (Johnson, April 27th, 2020)

(9) Then that will be the time to ***move on to the second phase***, in which we continue to suppress the disease and keep the reproduction rate, the R rate down. (Johnson, April 27th, 2020)

(10) And of course, we will be relying as ever on the science to inform us as we have ***from the beginning***. (Johnson, April 27th, 2020)

(11) And so I say to you finally if you can ***keep going in the way*** that you have kept going so far...then I have absolutely no doubt that we will beat it together, we will ***come through this all the faster*** and... (Johnson, April 27th, 2020)

In example (8) and (9), the Prime Minister uses the expressions "coming to the end" and "move on" to emphasize that they are moving forward toward the destination, suggesting the measures they take are effective and they have gained some positive results. In example (10), "from the beginning" can associate with the starting point of the journey. Here Johnson uses it to express that the government has relied on science since the pandemic broke out and he attempts to tell his people they are going in the right direction with science as the compass. In example (11), "keep going" also implies that they're moving forward and "come through this all the faster" gives the impression that the British people will soon get to the destination as long as they comply with the government's instructions. The employment of this metaphor helps facilitate the public's comprehension of the current situation and affect their actions accordingly.

4.3. Human Metaphor

COVID-19 IS A PERSON

Human metaphor is a general category in which non-human entities can be described as a person. Because of the fact that human body, movements, emotions and behavior are the most familiar experience for us, human being is often used as a medium, as the source domain to help perceive unfamiliar domains. In this speech, the coronavirus is described as an attacker, someone very dangerous for the society and the public.

(12) I know that this virus ***brings*** new sadness and mourning to households across the land... (Johnson, April 27th, 2020)

(13) If this virus were a ***physical assailant***, an unexpected and invisible ***mugger***, which I can tell you from personal experience it is, then this is the moment when we have begun together to ***wrestle it*** to the floor. (Johnson, April 27th, 2020)

"Assailant" means a person who physically attack others and "mugger" is a person

who threatens or attacks someone violently to steal things. Such kind of person poses great danger to the public and society and also brings sadness and death. The characteristics of the coronavirus are consistent with those of an attacker, and thus the metaphorical correspondence is established. Johnson uses this metaphor to create a clear image of the virus, which enables the public to view it as a villain who needs to be brought under control, evoking a sense of fear and hatred. And "have begun to wrestle it to the floor" indicates that the government has taken action to fight this virus and will beat it in the end. This helps to depict the Prime Minister himself and the government as the protector of the British people.

COUNTRY IS A PERSON

In this speech, the United Kingdom is also metaphorically conceptualized in terms of human in order to facilitate understanding and evoke resonance. Below are two examples:

(14) ...and it is still true that this is the biggest single challenge this country has *faced* since the war. (Johnson, April 27th, 2020)

(15) ...we will come through this all the faster and the United Kingdom will emerge *stronger* than ever before. (Johnson, April 27th, 2020)

"Face a challenge" and become "stronger" are usually human activities. Describing a country with these expressions help the British people see their country as a living person who now faces a very huge challenge. And only by overcoming this challenge can this person become stronger. The public can easily understand and resonate with the situation because everyone encounters challenges in their life and hopes to overcome them. In addition, "will emerge stronger than ever before" also indicates that the current situation is temporary and in the end the virus will be defeated. This helps to restore the public's faith and can evoke the feeling of unity.

4.4. Machine Metaphor

ECONOMY IS A MACHINE

Machine Metaphor is commonly adopted in discourse because people literally use machines everyday. They have become an indispensable part of people's daily life. Therefore, an abstract or unfamiliar concept can be easily understood if it is metaphorically structured in terms of a machine. According to *Collins COBUILD Advanced Learner s English-Chinese Dictionary*, a machine means a piece of equipment that uses electricity or an engine in order to do a particular kind of work. Machines need engines and power to function, and are stopped by a brake. In this speech, the economy of the United Kingdom is described as a machine, which facilitates the comprehension of this concept.

(16) We would be forced once again to *slam on the brakes* across the whole country and the whole economy, and reimpose restrictions in such a way as to do more and lasting damage. And so I know it is tough, and I want to *get this economy moving* as fast as I can. (Johnson, April 27th, 2020)

(17) ...but begin gradually to refine the economic and social restrictions, and one by one to *fire up the engines* of this vast UK economy. (Johnson, April 27th, 2020)

In these two examples, the Prime Minister describes the UK economy as a machine, or more specifically, a car, which is a very familiar concept in our daily life. He adopts this metaphor to explain to the British people that the economy will be forced

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to a stop like a car if the reproduction rate goes up. And boosting the economy is metaphorically expressed as starting a car and get it moving, which can be easily linked to people's own experience. Hence using this metaphor helps the public better understand such an abstract concept as the economy.

5. Conclusions

Linguistic expressions of the following conceptual metaphors FIGHT COVID-19 IS WAR, FIGHT COVID-19 IS A JOURNEY, COVID-19 IS A PERSON, COUNTRY IS A PERSON and ECONOMY IS A MACHINE can be identified in Boris Johnson's speech. And from the above analysis, it can be seen that War Metaphor plays a dominant role in Boris Johnson's speech and Journey Metaphor ranks the second, while Human Metaphor and Machine Metaphor are relatively less adopted. The functions of these metaphors are mainly facilitating comprehension, evoking resonance and achieving persuasive goals. The employment of these metaphorical expressions enables the public to perceive the fight against this disease as an actual war and to regard the Prime Minister and the government as their leader and protector who lead them to victory, which can help restore the British people's faith and exert subtle influence on their thoughts and actions.

Although this paper makes a specific analysis of conceptual metaphors in Boris Johnson's speech, there are inevitably some limitation of this study. First, the corpus is limited and can not fully demonstrate the features of distribution and functions of conceptual metaphors in political speech about fighting the coronavirus. Therefore, the corpus can be more comprehensive for further study. Second, the identification and classification of conceptual metaphors can be more scientific because some vague classifications still exist because of cognitive differences.

Conflicts of Interest

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