Lifting the Dark Threat: The Impact of Metaphor in the War Against Terror

Christine M. Halverson

Faculty Sponsors: David L. Miller, Department of Philosophy &
                    Robert Freeman, Department of Political Science

ABSTRACT

Prevalent not only in political rhetoric, but also in foreign policy, metaphor has an impact on the way we define and carry out war. In my research I investigated the following themes: the purpose and meaning of metaphor in language; how metaphor shapes foreign policy; how metaphorical rhetoric was used by politicians from September 11, 2001 to President Bush's State of the Union Address in January 2002; and the benefits and objections to metaphor use in theory and practice as it relates to the War Against Terror. In looking at the impact of metaphor as it is used both in shaping foreign policy and in application to the War Against Terror, this study encompasses an even broader range of disciplines – linguistics, anthropology, sociology, psychology, communication studies, and military science.

INTRODUCTION

Since September 11th, political discourse about terrorism has largely been a pastiche of metaphor. President George W. Bush has described Osama bin Laden, the suspected mastermind behind the Sept. 11th attacks, as the "ultimate parasite"[1] who is "wanted dead or alive"[2]. Countries that support terrorism have been identified as the "axis of evil"[3]. Secretary of State, Colin Powell, has described the two-staged war on terror as a "global assault on terrorism in general"[4]. Arizona Senator, John McCain, *R*, spoke of the costs of war as a "sacrifice [of] American treasure"[5]. Bush optimistically described the action of the US as one that will "lift this dark threat"[6] of terrorism.

What is the purpose of metaphor in foreign policy? Certainly metaphorical rhetoric captures headlines: CNN commentary on the attack has included such captions as "Taliban: U.S. 'thirsty for bloodshed'"[7] and "Maj. Gen. Don Shepperd: Noose is tightening around Taliban"[8]; but metaphor also plays a significant role in shaping foreign policy. Metaphor serves as a useful tool in comprehending abstract or difficult concepts. Much of foreign policy pertaining to the war on terror is constructed of a system of metaphors.

A widely accepted definition of war is a metaphor offered by Prussian general, Karl von Clausewitz: "war is politics pursued by other means". In his article, "Metaphor and War: The Metaphor System Used to Justify War in the Gulf", noted linguist, George Lakoff, has described this metaphor as having an implicit meaning: war is politics; politics is business. In this light, according to Lakoff, Clausewitz's metaphor then becomes the foundation for the metaphorical system in foreign policy: a cost-benefit analysis "defining beneficial "objectives", tallying the "costs", and deciding whether achieving the objectives is "worth" the costs."

The frequency of metaphor use in politics leads to a variety of questions and potential problems to be examined. What is a metaphor and why use it? Defining metaphor is simple; it is an implicit description of one thing in terms of another. The *meaning* of metaphor, however, has often been the subject of philosophical debate. Philosophers

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[1] Presidential Address. 13 March 2002. <http://www.whitehouse.gov>
[2] Speech to Congress. 20 Sept. 2001. <http://www.whitehouse.gov>
[3] State of the Union Address. 29 Jan. 2002. <http://www.whitehouse.gov>
[4] Ensor, David. "The Challenge to Crush bin Laden". *CNN.* 9 Sept. 2001. <http://www.cnn.com>
[5] Ensor, David. "The Challenge to Crush bin Laden". *CNN.* 9 Sept. 2001. <http://www.cnn.com>
[6] "A Nation Challenged; In President's Words: 'Lift This Dark Threat'". *The New York Times*. Late Edition. 11/07/01
[7] "Taliban: U.S. 'thirsty for bloodshed'" *CNN*. 11 Oct. 2001. <http://www.cnn.com>
[8] "Maj. Gen. Don Shepperd: Noose is tightening around Taliban" *CNN*. 14 Oct. 2001.
        <http://www.cnn.com>

going back to Aristotle have wrestled with theories about metaphors. One theory, "the substitution theory", assumes that metaphors are equivalent to literal terms. In contrast, the "interaction theory" points out that metaphors are interpreted differently by different people.

Secondly, Lakoff (1991) describes the metaphorical structure of foreign policy as being composed of four parts:

> STATE-AS-PERSON – State as a conceptualized person which engages in relationships with the world community.

> FAIRYTALE OF JUST WAR – Belief that wars are fought by the "good guys" against the "bad guys".

> CAUSAL COMMERCE SYSTEM – The system used to explain actions which are intended to be positive but may be negative.

> RISKS AND GAMBLES – Strategy aimed at certain gains but subject to risks and the possibility of losses.

How does the use of a metaphorical system affect foreign policy? What happens when this system is applied to the War Against Terror?

Finally, a serious question to be addressed is this: is metaphor a satisfactory medium for conveying political messages and creating political policy? In the *Leviathan*, philosopher and political theorist, Thomas Hobbes, argues against the use of metaphor in politics, but at the same time the book is a complex metaphor. Even if there are concerns about its use, metaphor does seem to be the most practical mode to comprehend the myriad of complex or abstract facets of political policy. Are we then left to perform a cost-benefit analysis of metaphor use? If so, do the benefits of metaphor use outweigh the costs?

METHOD

This research examines the uses of metaphor and how metaphor influences political language and decision-making. The central questions being explored are *what is the War Against Terror*, *what is metaphor*, and *what is the impact of metaphor use*. Theories and empirical research on metaphor, foreign policy, and political rhetoric were studied with an emphasis on the cognitive-linguistic theory of metaphor.

DISCUSSION

Language has often been considered to accurately correspond to, and convey, reality. The idea that language could articulate science and that science was the key to abolishing ambiguity was most pronounced in the first half of the twentieth century during the peak of logical positivism. According to the positivist notion of verifiability, or the *verification principle*, non-literal uses of language that were not clear, unambiguous or testable were deemed meaningless. The dominance of positivism was short-lived but its impact on language in western philosophy was profound.

The eliminative nature of logical positivism only represents one end of a spectrum of metaphor theories. At the other end is a different approach in which the central conception is that mental construction results in cognition. In this method, our knowledge of reality is a result of going *beyond* what is given. This belief is the foundation of the relativist view of language and, as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson write in *Metaphors We Live By*, its goal is to supply "an alternative account in which human experience and understanding, rather than objective truth, [play] the central role." Drawing from the works of Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf[9], relativists hold that the objective world is mediated through the constraints of human knowledge and language.

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[9] This belief is best embodied in the following passage known as the "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis":

> Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication and reflection. The fact of the matter is that the "real world" is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group.

Mandelbaum, D. G. *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir.* University of California Press. 1949.

Recently, a myriad of language theories have emerged along this spectrum from various disciplines including anthropology, sociology, linguistics, cognitive psychology, epistemology, philosophy of science, and literary theory. Andrew Ortony refers to the opposing conceptions of language within the different areas as "constructivism" and "non-constructivism." Admitting that the distinction and terminology is less than ideal, he notes that the labels are necessary in demonstrating the two alternative approaches to metaphor—the belief that metaphor is "an essential characteristic of the creativity of language"; and that language is "deviant and parasitic upon normal usage."

According to Ortony, the constructivist account of metaphor entails an important function of metaphor in both language and thought. Nevertheless, he faults constructivists with clouding the distinction between metaphoric and literal language. Because meaning is constructed, interpreting non-literal uses of language does not pose any problems. However, this ultimately turns language comprehension into a subjective and creative process devoid of any absolute meaning. Conversely, nonconstructivists hold that metaphor is in violation of linguistic rules, and hold no place in scientific discourse. The breadth of metaphor, in nonconstructivism, is limited to rhetoric and poetry. Its role is merely as "window dressing" and provides no possibilities for capturing an accurate description of reality.

In the area of rhetoric, the study of metaphor began with Aristotle. In the *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle wrote that metaphors are implicit comparisons, based on the principles of analogy. For Aristotle, the role of metaphor was basically unnecessary and metaphor served primarily decorative purposes. In the *Topica*, Aristotle addressed the meaning of metaphor, and argued that metaphor was more ambiguous and obscure than actual definitions. This significantly and negatively impacted metaphor theory. Because Aristotle "essentially elevated metaphor from the prosaic to the esoteric," (Gregory) the study of metaphor theory was moved to rhetoricians whose only focus was literature. Metaphor theory remained in this reduced state until the beginning of the twentieth century when I. A. Richards rejected Aristotle's theory and proposed a new way of looking at metaphor.

The types of questions that theorists attempt to answer in metaphor theory deal with both microscopic and macroscopic views of metaphor. Microscopic views tend to focus on metaphor at the word or sentence level. The focus of these views is the nature of metaphor and the "theoretical machinery" necessary to account for it. By contrast, macroscopic views of metaphor concentrate on *systems* of metaphors and metaphoric models. These theories, primarily constructivist accounts, examine the uses of metaphor and how they impact scientific language, learning, and decision-making. In both of these views the essential questions being asked are *what are metaphors* and *what are metaphors for*.

We know a metaphor when we see or hear it—especially if it is in literature or poetry—but what exactly is metaphor? The simplest (and over-simplistic) definition of metaphor is *describing one thing in terms of another*. Some theorists take a very broad definition of metaphor, using it to describe nearly all instances of non-figurative language, while others use the term more narrowly to pick out only a small class of words. Max Black notes that "[m]etaphor is a loose word, at best, and we must beware of attributing to it stricter rules of usage than are actually found in practice." (28-29) Look at the following metaphor:

"George is a rat."

According to Black, we point to the whole sentence as a case of metaphor, but there is really one word that is the cause of this belief. In calling a sentence a metaphor, Black states that at least one word must be used metaphorically and at least on word must be used literally. When we discuss metaphors, we need to speak of them in terms of the *target* and the *source*. In this statement the target—what is being spoken of—is *George* and the source—image that is being conjured to describe the target—is a *rat*. (Target and source are also commonly referred to as vehicle and tenor.)

One view, the cognitive linguistic theory, focuses on metaphor at the macroscopic level. In *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue that metaphor has a larger role in language than most people would grant it. Their function, they suggest, is more than just adding vividness and imagery to poetry. It is also the fundamental way in which our conceptual systems are composed. They further argue that these metaphorical conceptual systems shape language, thought, and action.

Lakoff and Johnson offer an expanded definition of metaphor. Using the example of the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR[10], they define metaphor as "understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another." (5) In the case of ARGUMENT IS WAR Lakoff and Johnson contend that the various ways in which people discuss arguments illustrate the way thinking about arguments presupposes a concept of what arguments *are* that we are not even conscious of.

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[10] The small capital letters here are used to signify that this is a conceptual metaphor and not one used in language.

It is important here to distinguish conceptual metaphors from other types of metaphor. Perhaps you have never heard any instances of the metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR. Conceptual metaphors may never be articulated; instead they underlie the metaphoric expressions. Look at the following examples of metaphoric linguistic expressions stemming from conceptual metaphors:

> **AN ARGUMENT IS WAR**
> Your claims are *indefensible*.
> He *attacked every weak point* in my argument.
> His criticisms were *right on target*.
> I *demolished* his argument.
> I've *never won* an argument with him.
> You disagree? Okay, *shoot*!
> If you use that *strategy*, he'll *wipe* you *out*.
> He *shot down* all of my arguments. (Kovecses 5)

In all of these expressions, we are speaking of arguing as if it were war. This conceptual metaphor system does not only shape the way we think and speak of arguing, it also shapes the way we act. There are winners and losers in arguments. We attack our opponents while defending our own views. But what would happen if we thought of an argument in a different way? Lakoff and Johnson attempted to imagine the possibilities of viewing arguments differently in the following passage:

> *Imagine a culture where an argument is viewed as a dance, the participants are seen as performers, and the goal is to perform in a balanced and aesthetically pleasing way. In such a culture, people would view arguments differently, experience them differently, carry them out differently, and talk about them differently.* (1980, 5)

Metaphor use in the War Against Terror

The enemy in the War Against Terror are terrorists or, more precisely, "those who would conduct terrorist acts against the United States, those who sponsor them, those who harbor them, those who challenge freedom wherever it may exist." (Bush, 9-24-01) However, this leads to the dilemma of defining what terrorism is, and that is where an exploration of the metaphor usage in the war must begin.

What is terrorism? Actually, it is a lot like metaphor – you know it when you see it, but it is hard to define. Observe the following definitions:

(1) *[An] act of terrorism, means any activity that (A) involves a violent act or an act dangerous to human life that is a violation of the criminal laws of the United States or any State, or that would be a criminal violation if committed within the jurisdiction of the United States or any State, (B) Appears to be intended (i) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population, (ii) to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion, or (iii) to affect the conduct of a government by assassination or kidnapping. (U.S. Code of Congressional and Administrative News, 98th Congress, 2nd Session, 1984, Oct. 19, Vol. 2, as qtd in Chomsky, 2001)*

(2) "Premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience." (22 U.S.C. 2656f (d))

(3) "Evil-doers so emboldened that they feel like they could attack the great bastion of freedom." (Bush, 9-17-2001)

Definitions (1) and (2) are literal definitions, but they are both difficult to understand. (1) is wordy and vague, by this definition some of the actions of the U.S. government may be classified as terrorism. (2) is a narrower definition, but the language used is complicated. The simplest definition is (3). While it is considerably more vague than the other two, the words are easier to understand, and the *gist* of the definition is more accessible. It is also the metaphorical definition.

There are two main areas in which metaphor is used in the discussion of war – rhetoric and foreign policy. Metaphor use in rhetoric is easier to identify, but how we *talk* about war has a significant impact on how we *carry it out*.

Metaphor use in rhetoric

The primary conceptual metaphor used in rhetoric is the FAIRYTALE OF A JUST WAR (Lakoff 1991). In the War Against Terror, this has consisted of the belief that this is a war pitting "good" against "evil." As President Bush plainly words it, "Make no mistake about it, this is good versus evil." (9-25-2001) The FAIRYTALE OF A JUST WAR metaphor also implies that the most justified side will win, and justice is always for the "good guys" as illustrated in the following statement: "•I view this as a fight between good and evil, and good will always prevail." (Bush, 11-28-2001)

Another metaphor is the ANTHROPOMORPHISM OF VALUES. In this conceptual system, values are represented as conceptualized people engaged in world relations. For example, "freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war." (Bush, 9-20-2001) *People* fight wars, not ethical or metaphysical assumptions. Nonetheless, conceptual systems of the FAIRYTALE OF THE JUST WAR and the ANTHROPOMISM OF VALUES do not speak of people, but wage war between values.

Metaphor use in foreign policy

Inscribed on the Korean War Memorial in Washington, D.C. is the statement, "Freedom is not free." This inscription embodies the COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS OF WAR metaphor that underlies much of today's war-related policy and was discussed above. President Bush has spoke of the "price" that Afghanistan will have to "pay" for harboring Osama bin Laden. Furthermore, he has noted that price for the United States is not only the monetary costs of increased military spending, but also the sacrifice of life.

Another metaphor used in the war is the conceptual QUICK AND EASY WAR. Military action is simplified to appear as a swift and straightforward effort. In the war in Afghanistan, the President repeatedly referred to the action as "smok[ing] them out of their caves."(Bush, 9-15-2001, 9-17-2001, 9-18-2001, 9-19-2001, 9-24-2001, 9-25-2001, and 11-28-2001) The following passage is an excellent example of the QUICK AND EASY WAR:

> *I know the Governor likes to hunt rabbits down in Louisiana. Sometimes those rabbits think they can hide from the Governor. But, eventually, he smokes them out and gets them. And that's exactly what is happening to Mr. bin Laden, and all the murderers that he's trying to hide in Afghanistan.*
> (Bush, 12-19-2001)

Impact of metaphor in the War Against Terror

Metaphor is often used to discuss complex or abstract issues. It is easier to convey complicated ideas via metaphor, especially to a general audience who lacks the lexical knowledge necessary to understand the densely, esoteric language used in literal discussions of war. This is further enhanced by the novelty and appeal of metaphor. When faced with a limited amount of time to convey a message—which is often the case as the majority of citizens get their news primarily or exclusively from television—metaphor does a better job of capturing attention and emotionally moving people (i.e. the definitions of terrorism above).

Metaphor is capable of highlighting elements of the message, but it conceals others. The FAIRYTALE OF A JUST WAR offers only a one-sided view of justice. The other perspectives are completely overlooked—most importantly the Arab perspective which is the target of much rhetoric. The COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS OF WAR obfuscates the other "costs" of war—loss of property, lives, and culture on *both* sides. Finally, the QUICK AND EASY WAR implies that there will be victory. However, it would be difficult to say that the war in Afghanistan has been victorious. There are still troops stationed there, and the country's government and economy remain unstable.

Should metaphor use be avoided? Not necessarily, but care should be used. Since conceptual frameworks are mainly unconscious, consumers of messages need to critically evaluate messages in order to determine not only what is highlighted but also concealed. Military and government officials also need to use caution. The excessive religious undertones and "cowboy rhetoric" of President Bush were criticized by much of the world. The reference to the war as a crusade, perceived as a reference to the crusades of the middle ages, angered much of the Arab world. The original name for the military action in Afghanistan, "Operation Infinite Justice", caused further upset. Finally, the President's allusion to several "rogue" countries as "the axis of evil" in his State of the Union Address upset foreign relations for both the United States and Britain, especially in North Korea.

LIMITATIONS

There is very little sound empirical data on metaphor at this time. This is due, in part, to the difficulty of transferring philosophical theories of metaphor, which are often conflicting, into testable studies (Waggoner). Recently, however, researchers have been using working definitions of metaphor, and this continues to be the best option available. An interdisciplinary approach to metaphor theory—by philosophers, linguists, psychologists, and neuro-researchers—should yield additional clues to the impact of metaphor on language comprehension.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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