

## Through the prism of metaphor: a case study of the us and uk political discourse on the ukraine conflict

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**ABSTRACT.** Much has been said about the role of metaphor in constructing the meaning of political discourse. The seminal work of G. Lakoff showed how a particular choice of metaphors allowed political agents to take a stand on important issues and achieve their rhetorical goals. This paper focuses on the identification of the most productive means for semantic configuration of the metaphors used by British and American media given the ideological perspectivization of North-American politics towards recent conflicts in Ukraine. Drawing on critical discourse analysis and conceptual metaphor theory, this paper argues that the metaphorical system offered by Lakoff is insufficient for conceptualizing the US policy regarding the Ukraine conflict, and claims that the choice of cognitive construals is governed by the context in which they are used and by the perspective adopted.

**Keywords:** figurative meaning, metaphoric mapping, Conceptual Metaphor Analysis.

### Pelo prisma da metáfora: um estudo de caso do discurso político dos estados unidos e do reino unido sobre o conflito na ucrânia

**RESUMO.** O papel da metáfora na construção de significado do discurso político tem sido muito discutido. O trabalho seminal de G. Lakoff demonstrou como uma escolha particular de metáforas permitiu a agentes políticos se posicionar sobre assuntos importantes e atingir seus objetivos retóricos. Este artigo tem como foco a identificação dos meios mais produtivos para a configuração semântica das metáforas utilizadas pelas mídias britânica e americana, dada a perspectivação ideológica da política norte-americana diante dos conflitos recentes na Ucrânia. Utilizando a análise crítica do discurso e a teoria da metáfora conceitual, este artigo afirma que o sistema metafórico oferecido por Lakoff é insuficiente para conceituar a política americana com relação ao conflito ucraniano, e defende que a escolha de interpretações cognitivas é regida pelo contexto no qual elas são utilizadas e pela perspectiva adotada.

**Palavras-chave:** sentido figurado, mapa metafórico, Análise da Metáfora Conceitual.

#### Introduction

Linguistic units are not innocent. Reigning ideologies and political systems have always made use of this phenomenon. Language as a means of social pressure has been in the focus of various disciplines, such as philosophy, political science, sociology, socio-psychology, and so on. A theory of language contributing to the identification and analysis of hidden ideologies, cognitive linguistics, has shown the ideological dimensions of conceptual metaphors. In this paper, we adopt the definition of ideology as “[...] basis of the social representations shared by members of a group [...]” offered by Van Dijk (Van Dijk, 1998 p.8)

This means that ideologies allow people, as group members, to organize the multitude of social beliefs about what is the case, good or bad, right or wrong, for them, and to act accordingly (Van Dijk, 1998).

Critical discourse analysis provides analytical methods to decode deep-seated ways of thinking embodied in conceptual metaphors. Traditionally, political discourse has provided a fertile field for such kind of research. Presentation of the Ukraine conflict in the online press of the US and the UK is no exception. Identification of the metaphorical expressions in news reports and opinion pieces provides a means to separate reality from reality-as-

described, in other words, reality created by interest groups to maintain ideological control.

The conflict in Ukraine is presented in the US and the UK media as 'pro-Russian unrest', requiring interference on the part of the international community. American online press presents Yanukovitch's abandonment of the agreement to strengthen ties with Europe as the starting point of the conflict. The country then split into two parts – proponents of closer ties with Russia, and those who sought cooperation with Europe. Yanukovitch was ousted after his unwillingness to compromise. The referendum held in Crimea was declared a violation of international law, and its results were alleged to be debatable.

Soon afterwards, the president of the US signed an executive order authorising sanctions against individuals and entities deemed responsible for violating the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, or for stealing the assets of the Ukrainian people. The first round of the sanctions, as well as the others, was initiated by the US government. However, in theory, the primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security is borne by the United Nations Security Council. Thus, Article 41 of the UN Charter reads:

The Security Council may decide what measures not involving the use of armed force are to be employed to give effect to its decisions, and it may call upon the Members of the United Nations to apply such measures.

In some cases, the Security Council can resort to imposing sanctions or even authorize the use of force to maintain or restore international peace and security (United Nations Security Council, 2015).

None of the provisions of the UN Charter says that the US or the EU has the authority to impose sanctions without a mandate from the Security Council. The question of whether the decision of the US president can be regarded as a violation of international law is not an objective of this study.

An inherent part of any international conflict is information warfare that aims to manipulate its opponents and the public. The US and the UK online press describe Russia's involvement into the conflict as a 'hybrid war', an action combining a variety of tools. Information war is among them:

The practical use of this manipulation of local and global opinion, a primary feature of Russian Strategic Communications, is apparent in the

events leading up to the Russian annexation of Crimea in March 2014 (European Leadership Network, 2015).

On the other hand, Resolution 758, adopted by US Congress declaring the economic and information war against Russia, states that

[...] the House of Representatives calls on the President and the United States Department of State to develop a strategy for multilateral coordination to produce or otherwise procure and distribute news and information in the Russian language to countries with significant Russian-speaking populations which maximizes the use of existing platforms for content delivery [...] Congress.gov. (2015).

This kind of 'strategy to produce, procure and distribute news and information' could provide the grounds for justification of the policy followed by the government by changing the way people think. The focus of this paper is to identify the metaphorical construals used to portray the international policy of the USA in the US and the UK online media, to explain the metaphorical patterns and effects they generate, and to describe what these patterns may reveal about the values underpinning and informing this policy.

## Literature review

Figurative meaning is pervasive. Metaphor as a category of figurative language is based on the conventional extension of word meanings. Extensive research of the past decades has revealed that metaphoric patterns are not merely linguistic, as they reflect cognitive patterns. Metaphor is based on the projection of one conceptual structure onto another, which is called mapping.

Metaphoric mapping: a unidirectional relation between two conceptual domains (the source domain and the target domain) which sets up links (mappings) between specific elements of the two domains structures. A conceptual connection of this kind can be further reflected in metaphoric expressions, linguistic users of source-domain forms to refer to corresponding aspects of the target domain (Dancygier & Sweetser, 2014). The domain is a chunk of conceptual matter, which either contains structure to be projected into another domain or receives such a projection (Dancygier & Sweetser, 2014).

Some linguists describe metaphor as mappings between frames (Croft & Cruse, 2004; Sullivan, 2013). Metaphor can also be characterised as the mapping between 'less accessible or intersubjective' domains (the target domain) and more accessible or intersubjective domains (source domain) (Dancygier & Sweetser, 2014). For mapping to become possible, the source and the target domains need to have a matching or shared frame structure. Metaphoric expressions surfacing linguistically in linguistic metaphors evoke conceptual metaphors, and recent research has shown that a conceptual metaphor is a language independent of cognitive phenomenon (Boroditsky, 2000; Matlock, 2004; Casasanto & Dijkstra, 2010; Williams & Bargh, 2008; Jostman, Lakens, & Schubert, 2009).

The purpose of any figurative category is to persuade the reader to accept a certain viewpoint. The metaphor is viewed as well, as it helps to create cognitive construals shaping intended opinions on relevant issues. The metaphor can serve the purpose of a speaker, as metaphorical expressions in different source domains for the same target domain can allow for different inferences. This function of metaphors is widely exploited in political discourse where the choice of metaphoric construals is determined by various factors, from purely decorative rhetoric to ideological stance. The political discourse of the online press in presenting the conflict in Ukraine is no exception.

The method of detection of naturalized ideological stereotypes or patterns was presented via Conceptual Metaphor Analysis (CMA) (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980-2003). Drawing upon the cognitive approach in linguistics and critical discourse analysis, CMA provides a lens for decoding the underlying meaning of linguistic units. This view is based on the claim that any situation can be conceptualized in a variety of ways, but the linguistic units of each will necessarily encode a particular pattern of thought. CMA offers a theoretical framework for the identification and classification of metaphorical expressions.

Andrew Goatly claimed that our conceptualization and, consequently, our actions are unconsciously biased to serve the interests of established power (Goatly, 2007). His crucial contention is that the reconstruction of metaphorical patterns allows for the decoding of latent ideologies that affect personal, social and political behavior (Goatly, 2007).

The role of metaphor in creating and reproducing ideological stereotypes is decisive. T. Van Dijk claimed that ideological stereotypes, such as ethnic inequality or group dominance are a form of power abuse, and media discourse is one of the most effective means of its reproduction (Van Dijk, 2006).

The application of CMA to the understanding of the US foreign policy was suggested by G. Lakoff (2004). He argued that the US policy is structured by a worldview based on the model *World is Community*. Within this community, there are 'nations-persons' maintaining social relationships, including neighbors and friends, enemies and rogue states. Military force is necessary to 'police' the community. The 'Maturity is industrialization' metaphor allows for the division of 'nation - adult'/'nation - child'. This division is associated with the 'strict father' model, which is informed by traditional conservative values whereby supporting this moral system is the highest value, and the 'strict father' must teach his children right from wrong (Lakoff, 1996, 2002). The aim of this paper is to identify the role assigned to Russia within this conceptual system, and to consider its implications for international relations.

#### Data and methodology

The objective of this study is to identify the most productive metaphorical models used to present the US political engagement in the conflict over Ukraine in the American and British online press. The analysis of these models allows for the construal of hidden ideology.

First, a small-scale corpus of texts on the topic under study, which comprises approximately 30.000 words, was constructed. As this approach allows for a manual search of the most productive metaphors in the corpus, it is often adopted in the studies within the framework of discourse analysis and CMA (Charteris-Black & Musolff, 2003; Burnes, 2011), which is why this approach has been used to achieve the above-mentioned objective.

The corpus of texts consists of online media reports, as

[...] media combine reasoned persuasion with emotional appeal. Both of them incorporate culturally entrenched cognitive models and conceptualized personal, social and cultural experiences (Charteris-Black, 2011, p. 21).

The texts were extracted from the websites of the Financial Times, the Washington Post, the Daily Beast, the New York Times, Forbes, the USA Today, the Washington Times, the Guardian, the Telegraph, the Economist, and the Daily Mail. Both commentary and reporting articles presenting the US foreign policy in Ukraine were examined to identify the most common metaphorical models without addressing the issue of culture-specific differences between American and British patterns of metaphorical expressions.

The identification of metaphorical expressions was based on the procedure developed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007) (MIP). It is an explicit and reliable method for the identification of metaphorical expressions in a text. The mechanism requires determining the contextual meaning of a linguistic unit in the text, and then ascertaining whether this unit has a more basic contemporary meaning (that is, more concrete, related to bodily action, more precise, or historically older). The lexical unit can be marked as metaphorical if its contextual meaning contrasts with the basic meaning, but can be understood in comparison with it (Pragglejaz Group, 2007).

An example is “The goal of the U.S. policy vis-a-vis Russia appears to be to increase the economic pain until President Vladimir Putin backs down” (Washington Post, 2014, August 7).

The word ‘pain’ means “[...] highly unpleasant physical sensation caused by illness or injury; mental suffering or distress” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2015). In this context, the noun describes the deterioration of the economy as a result of the measures aimed at weakening it. Thus, as the contextual meaning “[...] contrasts with the basic meaning and can be understood in comparison with it” (Pragglejaz Group, 2007, p. 3), it can be marked as metaphorical.

The texts on the topic under study were extracted from the websites and kept in Scribble Library. They were analyzed and the metaphorical meanings of the linguistic units were identified by following the MIP procedure (Pragglejaz Group, 2007). Then the identified metaphorical expressions were then coded according to the underlying conceptual metaphors to decode latent ideological values.

## Results

The way in which people and even nations act in a given situation is determined by the way the particular situation is understood. However, as we do not have direct access to our conceptualization system, the importance of the mechanism for decoding this system, provided by cognitive linguistics and by CMA in particular, cannot be overestimated. Thus, analysis of the way in which the foreign policy is understood by Americans may shed light on the way how this policy is pursued.

This study has shown that the most common conceptual metaphor used in the online press is *World is Community*, which implies the existence of neighbors, friends and enemies. According to Lakoff (2000), this metaphor is always used to justify the US involvement in a conflict. International relations are perceived as social relationships that need protection, which should always be taken into account by its members:

1. And the European Union will stand by its neighbors and partners (The Guardian, 2014, July 29).

As a community, nations may demonstrate disapproval of what is perceived of as anti-social behavior:

2. The British leader, with French support, has also demanded that Russia be kicked out of G8 meetings of global powers when he and other world leaders, including Barack Obama, hold a nuclear security summit in The Hague on Monday (The Telegraph, 2014, March 20).

Any attempt to impair or undermine the integrity of the community poses grave danger:

3. We will face over the coming days and weeks, Russian retaliatory action and an attempt to divide and expose the vulnerabilities of the EU (The Telegraph, 2014, March 20).

An inherent part of the metaphoric system here is the metaphor ‘Nation is Person’:

4. Republican policymakers seek measures that will reverse Russia’s annexation of the Crimea, while President Obama vaguely speaks of sanctions changing Putin’s ‘calculations’ (The Daily Beast, 2014, May 13).

“It is part of an international community metaphor, in which there are friendly nations, hostile nations, rogue states, and so on” (Lakoff, 2004, p. 69). This metaphor lays the groundwork for justification for the involvement in conflicts, as Americans are told that the war is not waged against people, but only against this person (Lakoff, 2004, p. 69):

5. They show that he [Putin] is clearly a desperate man, willing to make a clean break with Ukraine and Europe, risk an acceleration of Georgia's membership in NATO.... cripple his own economy and suppress yet another indigenous population (Forbes, 2014, march 1).

The members of this community have their individual interests, but following these interests may not be approved of by other members:

6. European diplomats want to keep the negotiations top secret, amid fears that in the coming days and weeks Russia will exploit different economic and national interests within the EU to split the West in its response to the Ukraine crisis (The Telegraph, 2014, march 20).

7. With so much of Europe beholden to Russia for energy resources, the U.S. has found few partners, despite some verbal support from allies (Forbes, 2014, april 4).

When the interests of the members do not coincide, or when they clash, tensions may arise:

8. The relief rally in global stock markets is likely to be tested this week as EU leaders ratchet up sanctions against Russian president Vladimir Putin and embrace Ukraine as part of the West's political bloc, deepening the fundamental rift with Russia (The Telegraph, 2014, march 20).

There is no equality in this community, as some members seem to be superior to others. According to Lakoff (2004), the international community is populated by 'nations – adults' and 'nations-children'. The level of 'maturity' determines their standing in the society. Superpowers acquire the right to teach and discipline 'developing' nations:

9. The West cannot and must not turn a blind eye (The Telegraph, 2014, march 18).

10. Initially, EU leaders talked tough and warned Russia not to tighten grip on Crimea urging Mr Putin to pull all his troops out of the Ukrainian peninsula. (The Financial Times, 2015, february 16).

One of the most effective tools used in the process of 'teaching' is sanctions. Sanctions are considered to be an efficient means of punishment:

11. Sanctions are a tool, not a strategy. Like military force, diplomacy, and economic assistance, sanctions need to be coupled with other tools to form a cohesive strategy (The Daily Beast, 2014, may 13).

The 'Sanctions is Punishment' metaphor implies that Russia deserves punishment for its behavior:

12. The potential Congressional sanctions, however, seem to have kicked Moscow into action (The Guardian, 2014, december 15).

The sanctions may be metaphorically presented as corporal punishment, intended to inflict pain:

13. But Russia is paying a heavy price for what it views as additional military security. The sanctions are very costly and will hurt more through time (Forbes, 2016, february 17).

14. Rep. Adam Schiff... called the sanctions an 'important step' but said ultimately Obama will have to hit key Russian business sectors for Putin to feel real pain (USA Today, 2014, april 28).

According to Lakoff (2004), a nation-adult can teach and discipline any nation-child if it misbehaves. The dominant value that should be fostered by the community is 'moral strength':

15. NATO Chief to Putin: "Don't test us" (The Daily Beast, 2014, september 15).

In these terms, Russia must be perceived as a nation-child, but this study reveals a different image of the country in the online media:

16. Russia is still – feels itself in its bones – the humiliated loser of the Cold War. Great Powers are wise to be magnanimous with other Great Powers, because they never stay weak for long (Forbes, 2014, september 1).

17. The empire wants its groove back (Forbes, 2014, november 24).

18. But Russia is no such thing, just a major regional power sick of being humiliated and pushed around by ignorant outsiders (The Daily Mail, 2014, march 2).

19. Russia has had a generation of humiliation as the Warsaw Pact nations deserted to Nato, with the former Soviet Baltic states rubbing more salt into its wounds (The Telegraph, 2014, march 18).

These examples present Russia as a nation-person, a great power which, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and faced with difficult economic times, is struggling to return to its former status. This image of Russia has nothing to do with the role of a nation-child that needs to be taught right from wrong; instead, it can be defined in terms of the nation-rival metaphor that is absent from the metaphorical system, offered by G. Lakoff (2000, 2004):

20. By violating the treaty, Putin is signalling that all agreements signed during Russia's period of weakness in the 90's are null and void (Forbes, 2014, march 1).

21. But a century after 1914, the risk of unintended consequences should be obvious enough – as the threat of a return of big-power conflict grows. Pressure for a negotiated end to the crisis is essential (The Guardian, 2014, april 30).

22. The Obama administration can and should pursue a similar strategy designed to maximize American energy at Russia's expense (Forbes, 2014, april 4).

23. The American attitude to Crimea shows a degree of double standards. Or are they exasperated at losing the use of Sevastopol's port? (The Telegraph, 2014, march 19).

24. Brussels and Washington sanctioned individuals involved in the take-over. A few months later, they sanctioned Russian energy and financial firms like *Rosneft*. What Rosneft had to do with Ukraine is a mystery... (Forbes, 2016, february 12).

This nation-rival metaphor presents the conflict over Ukraine in a different light; in other words, the sanctions-punishment metaphor can no longer reproduce the USA image as the 'strict father of a backward child'. The term sanctions as punishment imposed by the rival-state acquires a new meaning that is supported by another productive metaphorical modal, 'International Affairs is War':

25. Putin will also see a military buildup in his backyard.... The port of Batumi..., could also serve as an important military asset (Forbes, 2014, march 1).

26. The shooting down of MH17 has escalated the diplomatic war between Washington and Moscow and made that scenario more likely because it could result in more sanctions and legal action against the Russian government (The Daily Beast, 2014, july 18).

According to G. Lakoff (2000, 2004), this model is always used to present a picture of a just war. This scenario typically involves such characters as a villain, a victim and a hero. In the present conflict, Ukraine is assigned the role of a victim, while Russia is described as a criminal:

27. Your picture of a resentful, mistrustful, heavily armed, bullying and lawbreaking – but not revanchist – Russia was spot-on (The Economist, 2015, february 28).

28. The most benign reaction to such threat would be to cut off energy supplies to Ukraine; more likely would be endless military skirmishes and small territorial grabs that would sap Ukraine's resources and eliminate any hope for

prosperity; and failing that, a conquest of Ukraine (The Economist, 2015, february 28).

This 'just war' has been declared by the US and its allies, performing the role of the hero:

29. ...any sign of weakness on the part of the EU, or any suggestion that it lacks the will to punish Russia for its transgression of the most basic norms of international law, will only serve to encourage Mr Putin (The Telegraph, 2014, march 18).

The victims here are Ukraine and some other post-Soviet states:

30. ... And there are plenty of other enclaves, or former vassals, that are now living in fear of coming under Mr Putin's 'protection' (The Telegraph, 2014, march 18).

However, in the light of the 'rival state' metaphor the ultimate objective of the 'just war' is not that clear. One more metaphorical model revealed in the material under study is 'Foreign policy is a game of chess' with its players, strategies, moves and outcomes:

31. The geopolitical chessboard seems to cry out for bold new moves (The Financial Times, 2014, december 8).

32. Russia and the West have been playing a tit-for-tat game of sanctioning either economic sectors or individuals since the 2012 passing of the Magnitsky Act. (Forbes, 2016, february 12).

33. Russia tends to react to the West, rather than be a first-mover (Forbes, 2016, february 12).

## Conclusion

The conceptual models provided by the American and the British online press appear to be quite conventional at a first glance. Three metaphorical models prevail in the current political discourse devoted to the unrest in Ukraine.

The most productive model in the material under study is *World is Community*. The community is described as recognizing its moral norms, one of which is 'moral strength'. This metaphor is described by Lakoff (1996, 2000, 2004) as a part of the 'strict father' family model, presenting the world community as a family. Just as the strict father is responsible for teaching his family right from wrong, by disciplining and punishing his children, the industrialized nations dictate to and teach the non-industrialized, the Third World nations. As the *Sanctions is Punishment* metaphor seems to be in line with this model, a question may arise here, however,

concerning the role of Russia in this story. Numerous metaphorical expressions portray Russia as a rival state rather than as a Third World country, or as a 'backward child'. Example include "Russia is no longer a defeated power of the Cold War era", and "[...] it's against our interests geopolitically to let Russia feel that they all of a sudden have won all the turf without firing a shot" (Washington Times, 2014, October 23). This portrayal is predominantly negative, reflecting that the prospect of restoring a bipolar world is viewed as highly undesirable. In this case the 'strict father' metaphor is not productive, and is replaced by the 'long-standing rival' model. Thus, the world community metaphor implies that, in addition to the nation – adult and nation – child models, there are also nations – rivals who compete: "The Kremlin is certainly behaving as if it has nothing to fear from the United States or European Union" (Washington Post, 2014, November 25). The metaphor 'Nation is Person' is extended by the metaphor 'National Interest', according to which 'Strength is Military Force':

However, the new aggressive tone coincides with an extensive upgrading of Russia's nuclear weapons, reflecting Moscow's renewed determination to keep pace with the US arsenal (The Guardian, 2015, January 4).

Thus, the metaphorical model provided by G. Lakoff (2000, 2004), seems to be incomplete with regard to conceptualizing the US foreign policy in the conflict over Ukraine. The metaphor *Nation is Rival* revealed by this study is used by online media to portray the state of affairs in the community. According to this view, another productive source domain identified by this study, 'war', can be seen as supportive of the rival model.

The source domain 'war' has traditionally been used in American political discourse to justify the government's policy during various conflicts. The source domain implies the manifestation of physical power, a straightforward competition between its winners and losers. This 'war' is presented as a struggle between the forces of reason and the forces of irrationality. The forces of reason, the USA and the EU, have to resist the irrational actor, Russia, which is 'terrorizing' Ukraine and other post-Soviet states. This war has broken out on diplomatic, trade, and ideological fronts. Within this model, sanctions are perceived as weapons. This 'rescue story' could appear unembellished were everybody

unaware of the role of these 'forces of reason' in similar conflicts; for example, in Kosovo. "But frames once entrenched are hard to dispel" (Lakoff, 2003, p 1).

The metaphorical model of *Foreign Policy is a Chess Game* is a part of the conceptual metaphor *Politics is Sport*, which presents politics as a set of moves (political decisions) played by strategists or grandmasters. The player's goal is to checkmate the opponent's king. As the outcome of the game is completely dependent on the skill of the player, this metaphor may have negative implications. As the pieces that a political player manipulates are human beings and human lives are at stake, mistakes can cost too much.

The conventional 'strict father' model implies that the conflict is over when the nation-child learns its lesson and obeys the authority; the possible outcome of a long-standing rivalry story, involving sanctions as punishment or sanctions as weapons, is, however, not easily predictable. Moreover, the 'strict father' model, sufficient to justify involvement of the US in a variety of conflicts, falls into pieces if this 'strict father' teaches right from wrong to his own rival.

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