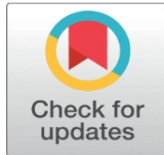


CORONA IS AN ATTACK, ELECTIONS ARE BATTLES AND SPORTS IS WAR: UNIVERSALITY OF WAR METAPHOR AND EMBODIMENT OF COGNITION

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ABSTRACT

The human conceptual framework is metaphorical and plays an important role in giving meaning to our everyday reality. The publication of the book *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson brought out a paradigm shift in the traditional conceptualisation of metaphor as a linguistic, ornamental phenomenon, as they argued that metaphors are conceptual in nature, pervasive in thought and govern our everyday reality. Generally, disease, sports, and elections are presented in terms of war in popular media as well as in other public discourses. Thus, in our discursive domains, the Covid-19 pandemic is often portrayed as an attack, sports competitions are wars, elections are battles, and this conceptualisation makes complete sense to people globally regardless of language or cultural background. This article examines, with recourse to the theoretical formulation of Cognitive Cultural Theory, the reasons for the universality of the war metaphor in popular discourse. The study employs the notions of conceptual metaphors, embodiment of cognition, primary metaphors, and mirror neurons as theoretical tools for the analysis.

Keywords: Conceptual Metaphors, Embodiment of Cognition, Mirror Neurons, Primary Metaphors

1. INTRODUCTION

Pandemics, elections, and sports events are conceived in terms of war in various discourses worldwide. It perfectly makes sense when the newspapers globally use expressions such as; We are under *attack* by a deadly coronavirus breaking the *fortress of human defence* or Corona has *attacked each weak point* causing death and devastation to describe the Covid-19 pandemic. Newspapers often report that the world powers are *fighting a fierce battle to defeat the enemy, using all their weapons* without much success. The *front-line warriors* are struggling as the *enemy undergoes mutations and war gets prolonged*. After the *outbreak* of the

disease, countries have *imposed lockdowns*, urged their citizens *to wear masks*, and enforced *strict quarantines* to curb the spread of the disease. *Covid protocol* was in place, and measures were imposed to *break the chain*, vaccination was on a *war footing*, and one of the vaccines is called *Covishield*. *Covid volunteers*, *Covid brigade*, *self-isolation* and the picture of coronavirus resembling a *grenade* all evoke the concept of war. The terms related to war, italicised above are metaphorically used and perfectly fit into the conceptual schema of disease. It is almost impossible to think and express disease without the conceptual metaphor of war, and this is irrespective of language and cultural variance and indicates the universality of the war metaphor. (Linguistic Metaphoric Expressions related to war are italicised in this article)

2. ANALYSIS

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, two significant thinkers of our times introduced the idea of conceptual metaphor which was a radical break from the traditional concept of metaphor as a linguistic, ornamental phenomenon. Lakoff and Johnson argued that majority of the abstract concepts can be expressed only in terms of metaphor, by mapping them against a more concrete idea. To Lakoff and Johnson, these metaphors are conceptual in nature, embodied in origin and find expression in everyday speech and language. In her article “Conceptual Metaphors of Corona Virus in Business News”, published in 2021, Tatyana Kozlova of Zaporizhzhia National University, Ukraine analysed the conceptual metaphoric representation of the corona pandemic in a leading business newspaper *New York Times* and she quotes several headlines from the paper to suggest the frequent use of war metaphor in business news. Asnita Siraist and co-authors in the article “Conceptualising Corona Virus Metaphor in Media Headlines: A Cognitive Semantic Approach” examined the depiction of coronavirus in the headlines of two leading online English media in Indonesia, *The Jakarta Post* and *Kompas.id* published from March to May 2020 found that “the virus is mostly described as a war and enemy” [Irzam et al. \(2021\)](#)

Political elections are mapped as fierce battles in a battleground to usurp power and rule the nation. Winning and losing an election or forming a coalition government is perfectly understood in terms of war. This is evident in media headlines and other popular discourses. Thus, we have Narendra Modi won the *battle* for India and Biden won the *battle* for America. Rahul Gandhi and Donald Trump *lost the fight* badly. Elections in India are always portrayed as great Indian war with deliberate symbolism as Indira Gandhi is portrayed as Durga Devi, Narendra Modi as an incarnation of Rama, or Pinarayi Vijayan, the left chief minister of Kerala as the *captain*. Thus, elections are *battles*, political parties are *armies*, politicians are *soldiers*, political strategies are *war strategies* and Prasanth Kishore, an election strategist is running *war rooms* for different political parties in Indian elections. Success and failure in elections are winning and losing battles and those who win, rule the country.

In sports, teams *clash* for the title and it is a war for supremacy. We have *attackers*, *defenders* and *midfield generals*, under *commandants* (captains and coaches) in football. Brazil is on the *attack* from the word go, and Messi is leading the *fight back* or Argentina *won* the battle in Maracana *defeating* Brazil in the *penalty shootout*. Thus, penalty kicks are *penalty shootouts*, fast kicks are *bullet* kicks, the ball missing the post is *off the target*, and the players in the forward position are attacking the *enemy post*. In cricket, we use war terms such as *death overs*, *power play*, *punished* for a six, *attacking batter*, *hard hitters*, *defending the target*, *disciplined*

attack, brutal hit, brutal delivery, killer instinct etc. to describe the game. Cricket gear with arm guard, jersey, helmet, pads, bats, and balls also evoke the conceptual metaphor of war in spectators. India- Pakistan cricket match is invariably portrayed as an India-Pak war that neither of the countries can afford to lose. Here teams represent respective countries, players are soldiers, the playground is the battleground, game strategies are war strategies, and winning and losing matches are winning and losing wars.

Justification for the universality of war metaphors in media discourse is provided by various thinkers. In the article “Deconstructing the War of All Against All: The Prevalence and Implications of War Metaphors and Other Adversarial News Schemas in Time, Newsweek, and Maclean’s” published in the *Journal of Peace and Conflict Studies*, found that “17 per cent of all articles published in *Time Magazine* and 15 per cent of all articles published in *Newsweek* between 1981 and 2000 used at least one war metaphor” [Karlberg & Buell \(2005\)](#). In their article “War Metaphors in Public Discourse,” Stephen J. Flusberg and others, describe the universality of war metaphors based on “widely shared schematic knowledge” [Flusberg et al. \(2018\)](#) and, their reliability to “express an urgent, negatively valenced emotional tone that captures attention and motivates action” [Flusberg et al. \(2018\)](#). Quoting various metaphor theoreticians Stephen J. Flusberg and others further suggest that the effectiveness of war metaphor draws from the simultaneous presence of both the source domain and the target ideas in the cognitive domain and the aptness of these metaphors to fit into the cultural practices of specific communities [Flusberg et al. \(2018\)](#). The structure of the war metaphor evokes the salient features of many target domains and this awareness is deeply entrenched in the human brain as the experience of war or conflict is so familiar to humans, irrespective of cultural differences.

The universality of the conceptual metaphor of war can be further explained by employing the Neural Theory of Language (NTL), using the concepts of the embodiment of cognition, simulation semantics, mirror neurons, structured connectionism, and primary metaphors. George Lakoff explains the basic premises of the Neural Theory of Language in the article “Neural Theory of Metaphor” published in the book *The Cambridge Hand Book of Metaphor and Thought* edited by Raymond Gibbs Jr. Lakoff says, “Every action our body performs is controlled by our brains, and every input from the external world is made sense of by our brains. We think with our brains. There is no choice. Thought is physical. Ideas and the concepts that make them up are physically computed by brain structures” [Lakoff \(2008\)](#). Human beings possess an enormously complex brain with approximately a hundred billion neurons and each neuron makes thousand to ten thousand other connections making it about one trillion synaptic connections. When human beings interact with the environment they inhabit with their species-specific bodies, signals are sent to the brain through the activation of sense organs. Action potentials are created and ions flow across synapses giving rise to neural activity. Thus, the human brain is a super highway of electro-chemical impulses and these signals are processed in different regions of human brain and communicated back to the body. The neurons that often participate in the neural activity get strengthened at both transmitting and receiving ends and become more efficient. There is considerable evidence that brain functions are emergent properties and are localised or distributed simultaneously to maximise energy efficiency within the system.

Nancy Chang, Jerome Feldman, and Srini Narayan in their article “Structured Connectionist Models of Language, Cognition, and Action” argue that the concept of cognitively motivated language suggested by Lakoff and Johnson and structured

connectionist models suggested by Feldman and Ballard are linked by an embodiment hypothesis, which states that “1. Many concepts are directly embodied in motor, perceptual and other neural structures, 2. All other concepts derive their inferential structure via neural mappings to these embodied structures, and 3. Structured connectionist models provide a suitable computational formalism for such neutrally grounded representations and mappings” [Chang et al. \(2005\)](#).

The theory of simulation hypothesis in cognitive neurosciences makes the significant observation that the neural structures that are used to conceive or imagine an action are also used to perform that action. The research of Giacomo Rizzolatti and others from the University of Parma, in Italy, suggests that there exist mirror neurons in the human brain, that is the same neurons that get fired when we engage in action, also fire when we observe or imagine the same action performed by others.

George Lakoff in his article “Neural Theory of Metaphor” cites the research of Sreeni Narayan, Joe Grady, and Christopher Johnson that gave real impetus to the “Neural Theory of Metaphor” to explain universality and embodied nature of primary metaphors. In the case of primary metaphors both source and target are active and as Grady puts it, “they are learned by the hundreds the same way all over the world because people have the same bodies and basically have the same relevant environments” [Lakoff \(2008\)](#). The experiences human beings undergo in their daily life play an important role in shaping human brains, neural structures, and neural mappings. Thus, functioning in the social environment we inhabit which is exposed to basic and repetitive brain activations will produce primary metaphorical system, where source domain and target domain are active at the same time, enabling the production and understanding of metaphors related to the human body universally.

This article analyses the universality of war metaphors, using insights from cognitive neuroscience, especially the theories outlined in the previous paragraphs such as the embodiment of cognition, mirror neurons, primary metaphors, and neural connectionism. War is a basic human experience. War is connected to emotions of fear, aggression, conflict and competition. Its roots can be traced to human evolution, and our instinct for survival and domination. Ancient humans living in dense forests might have been frightened by elements of nature and wild animals. Engaging in conflict, and showing up aggression must have been a common experience in their life. From an evolutionary perspective of human beings, competition, conflict, and the struggle for food, mate and safety might have played an important role in shaping their neural circuits. It is important to make quick decisions in such eventualities. It is possible only through direct neural circuitries within the human brain. War has fascinated human imagination which is evident in the epics and literature around the world. Our history is one of deadly wars and we have lost innumerable lives and witnessed devastation and trauma. We have been taught about wars from our primary curriculum and the heroic efforts and valour of the soldiers are kept alive by regimes around the world to reiterate the feeling of nationality and these discourses are part of our everyday experience. The books and newspapers we read, the movies we watch, and the political discourses we are part of keep our brain regions active where this particular information is processed. Newspapers bring news of war from around the world. We have televised wars, war films, war games, and cartoons. Apart from these external wars we engage in, we also experience constant conflicts and arguments within ourselves, ego clashes, mental games, and competitions to survive in our modern-day lives. Thus, the experience of war is a deeply entrenched concrete experience in the neural circuits of the human brain which acts as a rich source domain for a variety of target domains.

The Neural Theory of Language (NTL), explains the specific reasons for disease, elections, and sports events, expressed and understood in terms of war in popular discourse. Neural Theory of Language cites the emergence of conceptual metaphors from the neural structures of the brain and are directly related to the species-specific body of humans. War is primarily a bodily experience and as Yu Ning in the article "Metaphor from Body and Culture" puts it, "experientialist and universalist basis of metaphor is constructed around the core of human body" [Yu \(2003\)](#). Newspapers are meant for casual general reading and the publishers need to ensure that their headlines are attractive and easily comprehensible. The metaphoric linguistic expressions of war, which derive greatly from the experience of the human body are highly evocative and can invoke related memories. Bodily experiences make it easy for the readers to process these metaphors as they are hard-wired within the human brain.

Though each human being is unique, we share species-specific bodies which are universal in their features. The basic image schema of war metaphor is hardwired within the human brain and is a rich source of conceptual metaphors where an abstract target is understood in terms of a more concrete concept of war. But here in the case of war metaphors for diseases, elections and battles both domains are active within the brain of people and this will produce primary metaphors, which represent metaphorical conceptualisation of the most fundamental sort. Ning Yu in the article "Metaphor from Body and Culture" quotes various cognitive linguists to suggest that human beings interact with physical surroundings and culture to produce meaning [Yu \(2003\)](#). Disease, sports, and elections are understood in terms of the primary metaphor of war, as both the source and the domain are active simultaneously and as the Hebbian principle suggests, neurons that are stimulated together have a greater possibility of getting wired together. Thus, strong neural connections are formed, synaptic gaps are minimised and these connections act like physical connections as they arise from basic bodily experience. When one domain is activated, it will automatically give rise to the other target domains and thus comprehension takes place quite easily. These war metaphors are hard-wired within the human brain and fixed circuitries are formed through experiences, making it easy for the brain to process information utilising minimum energy for maximum efficacy.

A lot of things happen under the hood as we engage in even simple activities, hence it is assumed that most part of the brain's processing is parallel in nature. The metaphors of war that we discuss here are primary metaphors and they are networked by structured connectionism. Structured connectionism "takes into account the local structures that exist in the brain" [Chang et al. \(2005\)](#). The structured connectionism sheds light on the universality of primary metaphors and the remarkable directness in grasping disease, sports, and elections in terms of war to the sensory-motor motivation and straight hard-wiring within the brain. Acquisition of primary metaphors can be compared to acquiring skills, though it requires conscious cortical thought at the beginning, once these skills are learned, the control is shifted to subcortical regions where they are processed automatically. The theory of mirror neurons in cortical areas of human brains further explains the universality of primary metaphors. Mirror neurons provide a convincing explanation for the universality and embodied nature of primary metaphors with direct motivation. It is found that the same neurons will be firing when we imagine, witness or perform the same action. The same mirror neurons will be fired when we perform an action or watch others doing the same action. Thus, it is the same neurons that get fired when we engage in real war or we read about, think or imagine wars and the same neurons are active in other groups where we

conceptualise disease, elections, and sports. This further explains the universality of the conceptual metaphor of war.

3. CONCLUSION

The conceptual metaphor of war is universally used to express several abstract notions that include disease, sports and elections. The ubiquitous nature of the war metaphor can be understood in terms of the embodiment of cognition as human beings share a species-specific body that has gone into the formation of the human conceptual system. War as a concrete experience is ingrained in the human conceptual system and acts as an experiential framework into which other more abstract concepts can easily fit.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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