

Metaphors for Brexit in the European public discourse

Abstract:

Rather than being mere figures of speech that characterise the language of the poet, as proposed by traditional theories of language, metaphors have recently been recognised as essential cognitive instruments that determine and shape the way we think, act and express our thoughts in language (Reddy 1993; Lakoff, & Johnson 2003; Kovecses 2002). Conceptual metaphors are based on the experience we have with our bodies, on the interaction with our physical and cultural environments, and they help us make sense of the world by mapping the abstract on the concrete, the unfamiliar on the familiar, the new on the old. The existence of these metaphors that organise our entire conceptual system can be inferred from their lexical realizations, language providing valuable insights into the way we conceptualize the world.

An important characteristic of metaphor is its partial character – a metaphor will always highlight one aspect of a concept while downplaying or hiding others. As a consequence, various aspects of the same idea can be described by different and often contradictory metaphors. The viewing of the economy as an organism, a machine, a ship/the ocean, a building – all ways of thinking about certain aspects of the economy in concrete terms, each of them offering different perspectives on the same reality and providing different frameworks for its understanding and interpretation – is an example in this respect. Due to the partial understanding they provide conceptual metaphors can result in a sort of “cognitive myopia” (Schon 1993), constraining our mental models, guiding convictions as to what is true or false, legitimate or not, even distorting reality in order to make it fit the metaphor, and thus leading to a harmful or dangerous view of the world. Metaphors used in order to conceptualize economic and political situations can, in this way, acquire an important role in planning foreign policy and in justifying the government’s actions or hiding the consequences of these actions (Lakoff 1991).

The present paper analyses the metaphors employed in the public discourse to talk about Brexit and the related negotiations between the UK and the EU. The speeches of the most important actors in these negotiations are analysed with a view to identifying the conceptual metaphors they employ in order to describe and justify their actions, as well as the lexical realizations of these metaphors. On the other hand, the press coverage of the negotiations is assumed to be done from a more neutral position, and thus use a different set of metaphors. It is hoped that the contrastive analysis of these texts will illustrate the essential role metaphors have in shaping a way of acting towards a complex political and economic situation.

Keywords: *Metaphor; Metaphorical expression; Conceptual domain; Brexit.*