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LACUS FORUM XXXVII

COMMUNICATION AND COGNITION: MULTIDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES

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XI

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Political
Discourse

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METAPHORS AND LIES:
A COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVE
ON POPULIST POLITICAL DISCOURSE

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Abstract. Metaphor is used to analyze and explain some of the mechanisms of populist rhetoric that allow politicians to make popular statements without actually committing themselves to any concrete opinions or actions. We build on our research on populist rhetoric and, in particular, on our analysis of election promises as parasitic speech acts. In analysing examples from the speeches and electoral platforms of a number of politicians in Italy and Poland, we focus on the way they use metaphors in order to produce conversational implicatures and trigger connotations, and how they exploit both direct (literal) and indirect interpretation of metaphorical statements. We further examine how the use of metaphors in political discourse blurs the separation of indirect discourse from lies and comment on the properties of metaphors that make them such a suitable vehicle for populist rhetoric.

Keywords: Metaphor, Cognitive Frames, Implicature, Connotation, Political Discourse, Populist Rhetoric, Lies

Languages: Polish, Italian, English

POLITICAL DISCOURSE IS, ALMOST BY DEFINITION, FOCUSED ON PERSUASION. Thus, politicians should not be expected to present facts or opinions in an unbiased way, since the majority of their public speeches serve a specific purpose: to persuade the audience to vote for them in the next election and to help keep them in power (cf. Cecchetto & Stroińska 2005, Cecchetto 2009 and Stroińska 2006, 2007 and in press). In addition to this goal-oriented nature, contemporary political discourse is also shaped by its sound-bite presentation format. Politicians who are able to condense their views into an interesting or memorable one-liner have a much greater chance to have their opinions presented by the media and, thus, heard by the general public and especially potential voters.

Metaphors are perfectly suited for the above-stated purposes of political discourse for two reasons (cf. Dobrzyńska 2010). They offer a way to present complex, often abstract, ideas in terms of familiar and concrete experiences and, in addition, if used in skillful and creative ways, allow for a quick visual representation or some other sensory association in the hearer's mind. A metaphorical presentation of ideas is therefore more easily understood and better remembered, which is precisely what politicians strive for.

A metaphorical expression presents one object (or person or idea, referred to as the tenor) by identifying it with something it is not (the vehicle) in order to explain a complex phenomenon in terms of something simpler and more familiar or to make

the hearer perceive it in a specific way. Thus, metaphors focus on certain aspects of the object being described while ignoring its other features. While it is usually left to the hearer to interpret the intentions of the speaker, the very use of a metaphor assumes that the hearer has enough knowledge of the object used as the vehicle and enough knowledge of the tenor to understand what motivated the speaker's choice of expression.

2. LAKOFF AND JOHNSON'S APPROACH. In the now classic *Metaphors we live by* (1980), George Lakoff and Mark Johnson introduced what was then a new way of looking at metaphors. Metaphors were no longer seen as rhetorical devices used mostly to create artistic effects or to add to the sophistication of one's expression, but as conceptual frameworks that allow us to give concrete and understandable shape to abstract or vague ideas in everyday communication. It was the realization of the omnipresence of metaphors in our daily lives, as well as their profound effect on our understanding of reality that made Lakoff and Johnson's observations so illuminating. Later work by Lakoff, in particular his comments about the use of metaphor in the political and journalistic discourse about both Gulf wars (Lakoff 1991 and 2003), stressed the power of metaphors in our understanding of political affairs. "Metaphors can kill," says Lakoff in the opening sentence of his 1991 paper and provides ample linguistic evidence for this forceful accusation.

In this paper, we look at the use of metaphorical language by both the politicians and the media in Poland and in Italy in order to show that the abuse of the literal meaning of words can be and is systematically exploited for political purposes. Politicians can use non-literal devices as a handy way to hide unsubstantiated claims and accusations, lies, in essence, and get away with it with impunity. After all, they claim, they were just speaking in a metaphorical way.

3. METAPHORICAL EXTENSION OF MEANING AND THE PROBLEM OF EMERGENT PROPERTIES. The idea of using an existing expression to name something else, especially something that does not yet have a name, is referred to as metaphorical extension or catachresis. With time, such expressions become part of the lexicon and no longer require from the hearer a conscious act of interpretation: when talking about a magnetic field or electric current, the hearer treats *field* and *current* in the same way one would process any polysemous expression and only realizes that a meaning shift has occurred in their development if required to ponder their etymology. On the other hand, in the process of interpreting a productive or developing metaphor (i.e. one that has not yet been fossilized in the lexicon), the hearer has to figure out how the expression used by the speaker relates to the object or person or idea under discussion and must, at some point, process the connotations of the literal meaning of the words used (cf. Dobrzyńska 1994 referring to the work of Apresjan & Jordanskaja).

Yet, as has been observed, (cf. Wilson & Carston 2008), in many cases the metaphorical use of an expression produces meanings that are not part of the literal interpretation of the words or phrases involved. These elements of meaning only emerge when the expression is applied in a metaphorical sense. Thus, if someone, talking

of a colleague, says *Robert is a bulldozer* (Wilson & Carston 2008:16), the hearer would need to establish which features of "the powerful machine for pushing earth or rocks, used in road building, farming, construction, and wrecking" (Britannica Encyclopedia on-line), normally referred to as *bulldozer*, could be figuratively applied to a human being. The hearer will likely extrapolate the characteristics of "powerful pushing machine" and "able to obliterate all objects in its path" as salient ones for *bulldozer*. These characteristics are then converted to ones applicable to human behaviour, i.e. "pushy, inconsiderate, and forceful." At the end of the process the hearer may arrive at the conclusion that Robert is likely a ruthless person, inconsiderate of the needs or aspiration of others, features that cannot be attributed to a bulldozer. If in doubt about the meaning so constructed, the hearer may ask for an explanation, e.g., "Do you mean he is ruthless?" If this is not what the speaker had in mind, an explanation of the speaker's intended meaning may follow: "No, I meant that he is extremely strong."

Since such emergent properties cannot be assumed as part of the regular meaning of the words used in constructing metaphors, it is our belief that because of this feature they are particularly useful in political contexts: politicians cannot be responsible for associations that are not in a conventional sense implied by the metaphors they use.

4. IMPLICATURE. The first step in the interpretation of a metaphorical expression (or most instances of non-literal discourse) is the realization that the literal meaning cannot be the one the speaker intended. Considered in terms of conversational implicature, as proposed by Grice (1975), metaphorical statements simply violate the maxim of quality (to say what one knows to be true and for which one has evidence) and often also the maxim of relevance, forcing the hearer to search for an alternative interpretation. As the hearer assumes that the speaker intended to communicate something meaningful and relevant to the topic (i.e., follows the co-operative principle) and that the speaker also believed that the hearer would be able to figure out those intentions, they will try to draw a contextually appropriate inference from the speaker's words to what their intended meaning might be. As stated above, in order to proceed along that path, the hearer must first examine the literal meaning of the utterance. We can therefore assume that the literal interpretation of a metaphorical utterance is at some point available to the hearer, if only to be later rejected.

5. EXAMPLES OF THE EFFECTS OF METAPHORICAL EXPRESSIONS. Let us first consider a few examples to illustrate the thesis that a metaphor not only creates a cognitive frame, as proposed by Lakoff & Johnson 1980, but also activates the connotations related to the literal meaning of the expressions and some additional emergent properties. We draw our examples from speeches of Polish and Italian politicians available in the public domain.

5.1. THE COGNITIVE FRAME OF *THE STATE AS A BRIDGE TABLE*. The fragment below comes from an on-line collection of quotes representative of Polish political discourse during the government of the Kaczyński brothers and their party *Prawo i*

Sprawiedliwość 'Law and Justice', in power between 2005 and 2007. The then Prime Minister Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz (from 'Law and Justice'), in his first parliamentary speech indicated that:

(1)   "Poles urgently need a state that will not be *a bridge table* [stolikiem do brydża][1] for games played among politicians, business people, current or former functionaries of special services, and common gangsters." (our emphasis).

These words were immediately commented on by Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of 'Law and Justice':

(2)   "*That bridge table* [ten stolik do brydża] that the Prime Minister was talking about here would still be standing and the game played on it would still be going on. *This table has to be overturned* [trzeba wywrócić ten stolik] because this is the first condition of change. The Polish state *must be cleansed* [trzeba oczyścić polskie państwo]." (our emphasis)

The metaphor of 'the state as a bridge table' activates a cognitive frame related to card games, with bridge, a rather sophisticated game, not commonly associated with some of the players mentioned. This relatively positive association is immediately cancelled by Marcinkiewicz, who says that the game is being played by, among others, the secret service and common gangsters. The natural ideation or visual representation in the hearer's mind could then be something like a scene from a gangster movie or in a casino, with money on the table, men with poker faces and guns in their pockets. A link to criminal activities, implicating political leaders as participants in crime, is thus established.

Kaczyński brings a new element to the interpretation of the table metaphor: the table needs to be "overturned" because the state needs to be cleansed. The elicited image of the one who cleanses a corrupt establishment will for many people in a Christian country be reminiscent of that of Jesus Christ overturning the tables of the greedy moneylenders in the temple and forcing them to leave, thus cleansing the house of God of dirt and corruption.

It is not entirely clear to us what intended meaning the audience of these two speeches was to get from the bridge table metaphor as used in the above examples. In a style reminiscent of communist propaganda, Prime Minister Marcinkiewicz uses a negated metaphor ("Poles urgently need a state that will *not* be a bridge table…"): since the absurdity of the literal affirmative interpretation is obvious – no one would want a state that is a bridge table – it is virtually impossible to arrive at a meaningful interpretation for the negated metaphor.

As Jarosław Kaczyński enters the debate, he implies, by the use of the subjunctive, that the Polish state in fact used to be a bridge table, ("the table would still be standing"), but no longer is. He then demands that the table be overturned – which contradicts the implied meaning of the preceding statement (that the table is no lon-

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[1] Because the Polish contexts are quite lengthy, we have decided to include only the relevant components of the metaphor in the original. Translation of Polish original provided by MS.

ger standing) – and that the Polish state be cleansed. This last demand may imply that the Law and Justice party be given the role of the one who cleanses the state. The need for order and cleansing follows from the metaphor of overturning the table, which elicited the association with Jesus driving the moneylenders from the temple. While this may have been the desired effect, it comes from associations related to the literal meaning of the expression used and not from its metaphorical extension, which must have remained obscure for most audiences.

Yet, even an obscure metaphor has the potential to linger on in political discourse and, if evoked again, may bring to light a barrage of previous associations. Five years after the concept of the state as a bridge table was introduced into the public discourse in Poland, during the 2010 presidential election, the newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* reported on the need for a better strategy for election debates:

(3)   "Only then will the audience be able to see that 'agreement builds.' This is indeed a good invitation to enter a debate for an opponent who plays according to the same rules. But it becomes a toothless slogan vis-à-vis someone who, *when 'their hand' is called* [kto wywołany "sprawdzam!"], is rather prepared – as he did in the past – *to kick the table from under the elbows of the players* [wykopać stolik spod łokci grających] and show, underneath, not cards but a revolver…" (Stasiński 2010, our emphasis; translation MS).

Here we find reference to the original metaphor of the card table with gangsters and guns, indicating that the cognitive frame established in 2005 is still available to Polish readers in 2010. Furthermore, the card table metaphor has been expanded to include calling someone's hand, i.e. demanding to see what the other player really stands for, and to kicking over the table, a much more violent turn of phrase than the original *overturning*. According to Lakoff (2004), frames are mental structures that shape the way we interpret the world because they provide us with ways to link together individual entities in our mind (cf. Bloor & Bloor 2007: 11). Thus, anyone who is familiar with card games and gangsters knows that, put together, they do not represent an ideal model for the functioning of society, let alone the state. By casting opposition politicians as participants in that card game, the speakers are suggesting to the audience that they behave like gangsters and are thus not suitable to rule the country. However, they never actually say anything close to this.

5.2. THE COGNITIVE FRAME OF *ACTING AS A BULLDOZER*. For several months after the April 10, 2010, catastrophic crash of the plane carrying Polish president Lech Kaczyński and close to 100 others of Poland's elite, Polish public discourse was dominated by cognitive frames related to death and mourning. The unquestionable tragedy briefly united Poles, irrespective of their political affiliations. However, very soon it became clear that the old rule of *not speaking ill of the dead* could easily be exploited by some to score political points.

In this context, the mayor of a city where activists wanted to establish a memorial to the late president was quoted as saying:

(4)   Lech Kaczyński has not done anything for our city and was a weak president
       of the country. This idea is an attempt *to make a political bulldozer out of a
       casket* [próba zrobienia z trumny buldożera politycznego]. An action of this
       kind will divide and antagonize.
       Gazeta Wyborcza, April 29, 2010. (our emphasis.)

The concept of using a physical casket as a bulldozer could be interpreted literal-
ly, but the bulldozer metaphor is lexicalized to the extent that it is easy to grasp the
intended meaning. Someone is using the argument of the president's death to push an
unpopular idea through bureaucratic red tape.

5.3. Necrophilia. Around the same time, Władysław Bartoszewski (historian and
former Minister of Foreign Affairs), in an interview for the Austrian daily *Der
Standard*, commented on the use of the tragedy by Lech Kaczyński's twin brother
Jarosław to gain public sympathy. His comments were subsequently the topic of his
interview for the Polish daily *Gazeta Wyborcza*:

(5)   If Jarosław Kaczyński will – and in recent days this has already started to
       be the case – exploit the tremendous loss that he suffered as an election
       argument, then I will have to say: I am opposed both to pedophilia and to
       necrophilia [nekrofilia]. (Leszczyński 2010, our emphasis)

Attacked for the use of the word *necrophilia*, Bartoszewski explained:

(6)   I used 'necrophilia' as a metaphor and not as a label. … I have always called
       things by their name, even if I had to pay a price for it. (ibid.)

It is interesting to note that what Bartoszewski says is actually contradictory: he
is not calling something by its name since he himself says the word is a metaphor.
One may actually agree with his explanation, since Bartoszewski defines necrophilia
not as a sexual attraction to dead bodies but rather, more generally, as the sentimental
appeal that the dead elicit in those still alive, and the use of this appeal for ulterior
purposes[2] (ibid). This, in itself, can be seen as a metaphorical extension of the literal
meaning but this extension is not a natural one and would likely not be available to
the audience. Thus, it can be assumed that Bartoszewski used the term necrophilia
with the intention of making the hearer interpret it literally, with all of its negative
connotations. Only then would the hearer try to make sense of this clearly bizarre
accusation and try to come up with a more plausible (extended) meaning.

5.4. Berlusconi's corporate metaphors. Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi
is a media mogul who owns or controls about 75 – 80% of Italian TV and print media.
He is also the leader of the populist right-wing party *Popolo della Libertà* 'People of
Freedom', now in power in Italy. His media industry brought American style politics
to Italy and he himself uses American tabloid style sensationalism in his speeches
and interventions. His campaign song *Meno male che Silvio c'è* translates into a
boastful "Thank God for Silvio!" He is known for using so-called party agitators
placed in the audience of his highly emotionally charged public speeches in order to
promote what some label as mob mentality. The effectiveness of Berlusconi's rallies

[2] We thank one of our reviewers for pointing out this valid interpretation.

has pushed the opposition parties to describe them as *squadrismo* 'squads', reminiscent of Mussolini's tactics. Berlusconi's own speeches often seem purposefully ambiguous and predisposed to multiple interpretations. His public appearances usually become a spectacle where political discourse is simply part of the performance. The high frequency of metaphors in his speeches is part of this design. Berlusconi uses a number of established cognitive frames that can then be activated in his speeches and that allow him to direct the audience's understanding of his political maneuvers in the desired way.

It must be recognized that Berlusconi is a very successful businessman and that his corporate success is his most powerful instrument of political suasion. It is therefore quite understandable that by using the metaphor *the state is a corporation*, Berlusconi can present himself as an experienced manager of that corporation who can be trusted with leading it to success. The second metaphor used by Berlusconi to talk about the state is that of a *team*. Here, the speaker is again using self-reference, as he is the owner of the Italian soccer team AC Milan. Running the state business as if it were his soccer team allows him to score points based on Italian sports achievements (cf. Semino 2008: 98-99). Just as the metaphor *the state is a soccer team* transfers the features of one entity to the other, Italian soccer success translates into the political success of the team's owner. Simone Tomirotti tries to answer the question, how will Berlusconi win again in Italy? He explains:

(7)   "Why is Ac Milan so important for Mr. Berlusconi's political life? Because in Italy, there are 11,4 million of people that are fans of Ac Milan, and at the last election in 2008, People of Freedom collected about 13 million votes. If Mr. Berlusconi didn't do anything for his football team, Ac Milan fans could use their vote against his party." (September 12, 2010, Tomirotti blog entry. Original spelling and grammar maintained.)

By financially supporting AC Milan and talking about the Italian state as if it were a soccer team, Berlusconi is almost sure to score points among sports fans during the upcoming election. And even if the team loses, the loss can be blamed on a left wing referee (cf. Tomirotti blog) and still benefit Berlusconi.

5.5. BATTLE METAPHORS FOR SPORTS AND THE LANGUAGE OF POLITICS. The use of a sports metaphor to describe an honourable political struggle for victory is not new and by no means restricted to Italy. Goebbels and Hitler had already used an abundance of sports metaphors in their political speeches (cf. Klemperer 2000, German original published in 1947). One of their most frequent frames was that of the boxing ring, as it is more acceptable to compare the political arena to a match in the boxing ring than to a fistfight. Berlusconi's preference for soccer shows in his adoption of the football cheer *Forza Italia* ('Go Italy!') as his party's name. (*Forza Italia* amalgamated with *Alleanza Nazionale*, the remnants of the former Fascist Party, to form *Popolo della Libertà*). But soccer is also a team sport played on a field, thus allowing for statements such as this:

(8)   *dobbiamo scendere in campo per l'Italia*
      'we have to take the field for Italy'

With the popularity of soccer in Italy, soccer metaphors belong to the set of es-
tablished dominant metaphors and provide an excellent cognitive frame for political
activities.

Conflicts and battles in Italian politics are not always disguised through the use
of sports language. Examples of war metaphors and military language such as those
below can also be found, especially in the discourse of the *Lega Nord* party and its
leader Umberto Bossi:

(9)   *Silvio ha la spada affilata*
      'Silvio has a sharp sword'

(10) *...prepariamo lo scudo fiscale*
      'we are preparing a fiscal shield'
                                    il Giornale.it, July 16, 2010

These types of metaphors, however, have been in circulation for so long that they
no longer require the hearer to go through the stages of interpretation that are char-
acteristic for productive metaphors. They do not trigger conversational implicatures,
as hearers do not even try to interpret them literally. In other words, the extended
meanings have already become part of the core meaning of the expressions used.
However, the abundance of these metaphors reinforces the visual image that had fad-
ed with their lexicalization and serves to make them productive once again. A similar
revitalization of metaphors connected with the concept of *falling down* as applied to
finances could be observed during the recent *crash* of the global financial markets
and the *collapse* of world economies.

5.6. RELIGIOUS METAPHORS. Another domain that provides very productive connota-
tions for political discourse in Italy is the Christian tradition. By comparing himself
to Jesus Christ, Berlusconi naturally implies that he is the only one destined to save
Italy. Thus statements such as those below, fit perfectly with this rhetorical strategy:

(11) *Sono il Gesù Cristo della politica italiana.*
      'I'm the Jesus Christ of Italian politics.'

(12) *Mi sacrifico di continuo per voi.*
      'I continue to sacrifice myself for you.'
                                    Claudio Tito, *la Repubblica*, February 12, 2006.

While the roles in this cognitive frame are pre-assigned and Jesus/Berlusconi is
the Saviour, the unexpected use of an iterative form of the verb somewhat disturbs
the illusion: Christ sacrificed himself only once while Berlusconi is doing it contin-
uously. Although this makes Berlusconi seem ineffective in comparison with Christ,
he is highlighting to the Italian people that the political circumstances are such that
his continuous sacrifice is required. Thus, he presents himself as more of a martyr
and saviour for Italy than Christ was for the world!

6. How to argue with a metaphor. Dobrzyńska (1994:140) points out that suggestive metaphors like the ones discussed above are not neutral from the axiological point of view, as the concepts they employ invoke specific values in the intended audience. Dobrzyńska further notes that, for this reason, metaphors are a very handy instrument of persuasion for politicians and the media, especially because the value judgments are passed on through connotations and therefore cannot be easily contested. In linguistic terms, opinions expressed through metaphors cannot be debated because metaphors cannot be negated.

If someone were to say that Silvio Berlusconi is not the Jesus Christ of Italian politics, this statement would be a truism and not a suitable polemical response. At the same time, one cannot negate the implied meaning – that Berlusconi is the saviour of the Italian people – because that message has only been expressed indirectly, i.e. through the connotations of the Christ idea (Dobrzyńska 1994:141; cf. also Black 1979).

If accused of making false statements or allegations, the politician can always claim that he or she did not intend his words the way they were interpreted (cf. Bartoszewski's explanation quoted in 5.3). If a statement by Berlusconi causes an uproar, he usually recants almost immediately (or at the very latest the following day), or he accuses his opponents of lying, as illustrated in the examples below, which have become familiar refrains in the last two years of Berlusconi's mandate:

(13) *Mi avete fainteso!*
       'You misunderstood me.'

(14) *Inaccettabili menzogne su di me!*
       'Unacceptable lies about me!'
                        il Giornale.it, June 2 2010

Dobrzyńska suggests that a better way of fighting powerful metaphors is by either replacing them with competing metaphors, or – if that *exchange of fire* fails to change the audience's perception – by *disarming* them, metaphorically speaking. Thus, while there is no point to arguing that Berlusconi is not the Jesus Christ of Italian politics, one may suggest that he may rather resemble Judas Iscariot or another known persona from the Christian tradition. This means staying in the sphere of non-literal communication and putting the metaphorical *ball in the court* of the opponent. Semino (2008: 84) quotes empirical studies by Mio 1996 and 1997 that "have shown that, in political debates, metaphorical expressions that extend an opponent's metaphor have a particularly high persuasive power."

7. Metaphors promote intimacy. An interesting observation about another effect of using metaphors was made by Cohen (1978), who suggested that the very fact of engaging jointly in the process of meaning creation and interpretation instills a feeling of closeness between the speaker and the hearer. Being able to figure out the implicatures and arrive at the indirect interpretation of a metaphorical expression assumes a certain level of similarity and mutual understanding. The hearer becomes an accomplice in producing the intended interpretation even if he disagrees with the

message. This may be of particular importance or usefulness in political discourse, where the speaker's goal is to attract the audience. One could compare this to the situation of someone hearing a racist joke and being able to understand what makes it funny. Even though he or she may be offended by the views of the speaker, by seeing the point that joke was supposed to make, they become an accomplice in deriding the racial minority[3]. Understanding a metaphor used by a politician makes the hearer share that politician's point of view, if only for an instant.

8. CONCLUSION. It is impossible to ban metaphors from political discourse as even our everyday communication is permeated with non-literal expressions. In everyday discourse, the hearer uses context and knowledge of the world in order to arrive at the most relevant interpretation of the metaphor. In political discourse, on the other hand, the speaker often uses a metaphor that invites a wide range of associations and counts on the hearers to activate those associations in order to strengthen the effect of the message. We all know that metaphors cannot be interpreted literally as they present objects by labeling them with names that belong to other objects. Thus, metaphors, by definition, are not true when interpreted literally. They are so popular among politicians, though, because, as George Orwell aptly observed, "political language … is designed to make lies sound truthful …" and metaphors have become invaluable tools for blurring the distinction between what is said, implied, or understood, and what is true or false.

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[3] We are using the terms *racist* joke and *racial* minority here to differentiate the negative and nasty connotations and sometimes overt attacks on representatives of particular racial groups as opposed to the terms *ethnic* joke or *ethnic* minority which often play on known stereotypes.

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