

# Analysis of Political Metaphors in Donald J. Trump's State of the Union Address in 2020

**Tang Bingyu**

School of Foreign Languages China Three Gorges University, Yichang Hubei, China

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## Abstract

On the basis of Conceptual Metaphor Theory proposed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, this paper conducts a cognitive analysis of conceptual metaphors in Donald J. Trump's State of the Union Address in 2020, aiming to explain the metaphors in the State of the Union Address, reveal the political intentions hidden behind the metaphors, and construe the relationship between politics and metaphor. It is found that the metaphors in this State of the Union Address are: CONFLICT metaphors, BUILDING metaphor, JOURNEY metaphors, ORIENTATIONAL metaphors, and PLANT metaphors. Through the analysis, this paper concludes that conceptual metaphor has the function of persuading the masses and shaping the image of politicians. At the same time, this paper also finds that politics restricts the choice and application of metaphor.

**Keywords:** Conceptual metaphor; Political discourse; Donald J. Trump; State of the union address.

## 1. Introduction

Politics and language are inextricably linked. Lakoff (1996), points out that politics is language, and meanwhile, language is politics. Politics is stated and reflected by language. Political discourses boast a strong feeling of political purpose. Metaphor serves for this kind purpose. Politicians have a disposition to convey their ideas and beliefs through political discourses. Jeffrey Scott claims that "metaphors have assisted politicians in communicating more effectively by addressing latent symbolic themes residing in segments of the public consciousness" (2009, 113). Metaphors also contribute to processing political information by breaking down abstract and intangible concepts into more simplified patches of messages that can be easily understood by the public.

Donald J. Trump, who is regarded as the most controversial president in America's history, is a politician, businessman, writer, host as well as the former president of the United States. His various performances and actions after winning the election have received lots of challenges. According to American tradition, the incumbent president should make a speech annually and state the administrative outline of the government, which is known as the State of the Union Address. It is the policy agenda of the U.S. government which mainly clarifies the domestic and foreign situations faced by the president every year, as well as the policy measures to be taken by the government. It is argued that State of the Union Address is also important to the development of American foreign policy. So, in addition to its importance to the United States itself, the State of the Union Address' important role in the world's most influential countries can have a broad impact. So, it can be concluded that conducting research on the State of the Union Address is definitely meaningful and necessary. It is universally known that 2020 is an unusual year because of the world-wide epidemic COVID-19. As one of the most influential country in the world, the attitude and policies of the U.S. Government are bound to draw attention of the world. Meanwhile, due to the presidential election in 2020, Trump definitely thinks highly of the State of the Union Address to be delivered before the election in which he can conclude his contributions and future plans that are beneficial to America and its citizens in order to win more votes. Therefore, this paper chooses to examine political metaphors in Trump's latest State of the Union Address in order to find out the real political intentions behind the metaphors.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Traditionally, metaphor is considered as a type of rhetoric device utilized in poems to improve the beauty of poetic language. The publication of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* subverts people's conventional understanding of metaphor. In this book, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) hold that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not only in language but in thought and action, and that the conceptual system on which our thought

and action are based is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. At this point, the study of metaphor has been turned into the field of conceptual thinking and cognitive function. And Conceptual Metaphor Theory possesses an essential position in the cognitive linguistics. According to Lakoff and Johnson, metaphor is considered as a powerful cognitive tool for people to conceptual the world and it structures how we perceive, how we think and what we do. Lakoff and Johnson (1980). Since the essence of metaphor is to comprehend one aspect of a concept in terms of another, it can be concluded that there are three basic elements in metaphor consisting the source concept, the target concept and the metaphorical projection between the two targets. Specifically speaking, from the perspective of conceptual mapping, metaphor is a cross-domain mapping from the source domain to the target domain, and maintains the reasoning structure in the target domain.

Based on Conceptual Metaphor Theory, this paper will analyze different kinds of metaphors in Trump's State of the Union Address including CONFLICT metaphors, JOUENEY metaphors, and BUILDING metaphors, PLANT metaphors, RELIGION metaphors and DISEASE metaphors and explain them in detail.

## 2.2. Metaphors in Political Discourses

For several decades, western scholars have attached great importance to the study conceptual metaphors employed in political courses. Eugene (1979), believes that speech texts in the field of politics are brightened up and polished by the persuasive effect of metaphors. Thompson (1996), claims that politics without metaphors is like a fish without water, which manifests the profound significance of metaphors in politics. Lakoff (1996), carries out a systematic research on metaphors in political discourses and argues that conceptual metaphors hidden in American politics is an effective way to convey the politicians' intentions and lead their citizens to follow their political stands. Charteris Black (2005) holds that metaphors serve as an incredible means to solve political problems. Metaphorical expressions guide people to agree with politicians' thoughts and policies and follow their attitudes subconsciously. Taking advantage of metaphors is a strategy to illegalize the policies and political intentions. Anjuman (2020) gets the idea that politicians are more likely to use stronger languages to get resonated and achieve the persuasive effect. She also holds that by employing conceptual metaphor, the political leaders can shape better images and degrade their opponents' ones. To conclude, the views on conceptual metaphor in political discourses vary from scholar to scholar. But there is still a consensus that making full use of conceptual metaphors helps people understand the abstract political concepts so that the politicians' words can achieve an effect of persuasion.

## 3. Data Collection and Analysis

### 3.1. Research Questions

- 1) What kinds of political conceptual metaphors are employed in Donald Trump's SUA?
- 2) How does he employ conceptual metaphors in his SUA to express his political intentions? And what are his political intentions?
- 3) What's the relationship between politics and conceptual metaphors?

### 3.2. Data Collection

There are rich conceptual metaphors in Trump's State of the Union Address. The following part is the detailed and systematical analysis of the conceptual metaphors including war metaphors, joueney metaphors, building metaphors, orientational metaphors and plant metaphors, and explain the reflecting processes from source domain to target domain.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

#### 3.3.1. War Metaphors

It is ubiquitous to find war metaphors in politics. There is always victory or defeat in a conflict, and it is the result of a conflict that draws people's attention most. Employing WAR metaphors can dramatize the antithesis of two opposing parties in politics and foreground the opponents' aggressiveness to arouse the citizens' empathy. Besides, America, as one of the superpowers in the world, has engaged itself in many conflicts both at home and abroad. Therefore, it is no surprise that a great portion of war metaphors are employed in Donald J. Trump's State of the Union Address. Utilizing war metaphors makes comparisons of America's social problems, economic problems and political problems, which leads people to feel closer to these problems and have profound understanding of them. Under the conceptual metaphor "AMERICAN ARE SOLDIERS", Trump paves the way to express his intentions and legalize his policies. Here are examples of war metaphors in Trump's State of the Union Address (2020):

1. From the instant I took office, I moved rapidly to revive the U.S. economy — slashing a record number of job-killing regulations, enacting historic and record-setting tax cuts, and *fighting for* fair and reciprocal trade agreements.
2. To *safeguard* American liberty, we have invested a record-breaking \$2.2 trillion in the United States military.
3. *Protecting* Americans' health also means *fighting* infectious diseases.
4. Just as we believe in the First Amendment, we also believe in another constitutional right that is under *siege* all across our country. So long as I am President, I will always *protect* your Second Amendment right to keep and bear arms.

In the above examples, the common goals for Americans to fight for are job growth, the capitalist system, freedom, Americans' health, their promising future and America's dominant position in the world. In example (1),

Trump thinks the *North American Free Trade Agreement* (NAFTA) is the worst agreement in American history, and believes that NAFTA is unfair to the United States because a large number of manufacturing industries have moved to Mexico, resulting in the loss of jobs in the United States. Since Trump took office, he has repeatedly threatened to terminate the North American Free Trade Agreement and called for renegotiation. And in 2018, Trump signed *United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement* to substitute NAFTA. In this example, Trump compares the process of winning a trade fair to fights in a battle field, and he is the conductor in the perilous and arduous war. In this regard, Trump underlines his contribution and can win the citizens' trust more easily. Likewise, in example (2), (3) and (4) Trumps make full use of war metaphors to highlight the efforts he has made for Americans' freedom, health and rights to carry arms.

### 3.3.2. Building Metaphors

Building metaphor is based on the conceptual metaphor "A COUNTRY IS A BUILDING". The accomplishment of a building requires plenty of resources, including materials, funds, and joint efforts made by people like the designers and workers. This point is of great significance in politics, because it can remind people that solidarity and patience are needed to achieve a common goal.

5. The vision I will lay out this evening demonstrates how we are **building** the world's most prosperous and inclusive society.

6. Now we want to **rebuild** our country, and that's exactly what we're doing. We are **rebuilding** our country.

7. The next step forward in **building** an inclusive society is making sure that every young American gets a great education and the opportunity to achieve the American Dream.

8. We must also **rebuild** America's infrastructure.

9. To **build** on these historic gains, we are working on legislation to replace our outdated and randomized immigration system with one based on merit.

10. Our ancestors **built** the most exceptional Republic ever to exist in all of human history. And we are making it greater than ever before!

11. We **built** the modern world.

As the examples show, building metaphors are also Trump's preference. Example (6) is the representative of encouraging American people to devote themselves to creating the most prosperous and inclusive society. On the other hand, example (11) and (12) also focus on the contributions of the ancient people. Trump can narrow the distance between himself and people by showing his respect and gratitude to his ancestors. In addition, the frequent occurrence of the words "rebuild" can't be ignored. By adding the prefix "re-", Trump cleverly gives the hint that American society under the previous government's administration is like a broken building that needs urgent renovation. By doing so, he shapes a positive image for himself in front the public by condemning the misconducts of the former government.

### 3.3.3. Journey Metaphors

Journey metaphors are also common in political discourses. [Goatly \(1997\)](#) describes life in terms of journey, pointing out the darkness and obstacles on the journey are just like the failures and difficulties in life. [Lakoff and Johnson \(1980\)](#) also lists the mappings between love and journey in *Metaphors We Live By*. Journey metaphors depict political life as a period of journey in which the citizens that are citizens can march all around together with their state leaders. When it comes to a journey, people can simply think of the components of a journey that include a starting point, a destination, the travelers, transportation as well as the burdens, obstacles and risks. Since during a long journey people can experience both joy and sorrow, the ends are always valuable. The following are examples of journey metaphors:

12. We are **moving forward** at a pace that was unimaginable just a short time ago, and we are never, ever going back.

13. We are **advancing** with unbridled optimism and lifting our citizens of every race, color, religion, and creed very, very high.

14. Our roaring economy has, for the first time ever, given many former prisoners the ability to get a great job and **a fresh start**.

15. The American Age, the American Epic, the American **Adventure** has only just **begun**.

In journey metaphors, Trump emphasizes that the development of their country is a long process. And from these modified words like "*unimaginable*", "*unbridled optimism*" and "*fresh*" in the examples, it is concluded that the end of the process being conveyed is bright and promising. For one thing, Trump intends to imply that it is under his administration that America can develop in such a quick and steady condition. For another thing, it is a must for him to describe a incredible blueprint for his citizens before a presidential election to win more votes. While in example (16), the key words "adventure" and "begin" also suggest that there are still a number of unknown troubles in the journey. Nevertheless, Trump is meanwhile conveying the message that the results of the adventure will be a splendid wonder under his administration. By employing journey metaphors, people are easily involved in the country's process of development and can get the idea that President Trump's instruction is essential in the journey.

### 3.3.4. Orientational Metaphors

The so-called orientational metaphors are in the relation with spacial directions, like up-down, in-out, front-back, on-off, deep-shallow, and central-peripheral that are concluded by [Lakoff and Johnson \(1980\)](#). They also draw

the conclusion that in our traditional cognition “up” represents “good” while “down” symbolizes “bad”, which is deeply ingrained in our mind. In Trump’s State of the Union Address, orientational metaphors are widespread.

16. Jobs are *booming*, incomes are *soaring*, poverty is *plummeting*, crime is *falling*, confidence is *surging*.

17. After decades of flat and *falling* incomes, wages are *rising* fast — and, wonderfully, they are *rising* fastest for low-income workers, who have seen a 16 percent pay increase since my election.

18. Our *roaring* economy has, for the first time ever, given many former prisoners the ability to get a great job and a fresh start.

19. And as the wall rapidly *goes up*, drug seizures *rise*, and the border crossings are *down*, and going *down* very rapidly.

Based on the conceptual metaphor “GOOD IS UP; BAD IS DOWN”, it can be easily got from the key words that represent “up” like “boom”, “soar”, “surge”, “rise”, “roar” and “up”. The opposite ones are “plummet”, “fall”, “down”. Trump frequently uses such kinds of metaphors in order to put the result that “good things are increasing and bad ones are decreasing” in the foreground. At this point, he can naturally convey that it is under his government that America’s economy gets restored and developed rapidly and the social stability gets maintained. It is necessary for him to summarize his contributions before a presidential election.

### 3.3.5. Plant Metaphors

Metaphors from the domain of plants are often used for positive evaluations because plants are symbols of hope and vitality. Tenorio (2009) says that metaphorical plants are the people, the community, various sectors and companies, the economy, and partnerships.

20. Jobs are booming, incomes are soaring, poverty is plummeting, crime is falling, confidence is surging, and our country is *thriving* and highly respected again.

21. Our families are *flourishing*.

The key words “thriving” and “flourishing” shows that plant metaphors are used positively. What is also noteworthy is that both the two examples are in the present progressive tense, which implies that the plants are in good growing condition so that people will get rich fruits in the end. By plant metaphors, Trump also draws a wonderful blueprint that under his government, America will be stronger and the American people can attain more benefits.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Expressive Effect Achieved by Metaphors

As mentioned before, the State of the Union Address of the United States needs to be reported in front of the public. So Trump must express and explain his thoughts clearly, so it is required to realize the expressive effects. Metaphors can help him conceptualize some political concepts so that he can convey the information and their thoughts distinctly, vividly and strongly. In Trump’s State of the Union Address, his skillful application of metaphors is helpful to express his ideas and intentions effectively and deliver his emotions powerfully. Expressive effect can be achieved easily by employing metaphors in political courses. Since political concepts are always monotonous and speculative, metaphors make these concepts be lively and tangible. For instance, people can easily associate the well growing with the good condition of America’s development through the plant metaphors.

### 4.2. Emphatic Effect Achieved by Metaphors

According to Lakoff and Johnson, “In allowing us to focus on one aspect of a concept, a metaphorical concept can keep us from focusing on other aspects of the concept that are inconsistent with that metaphor” (1980: 17). Simply speaking, one of the effects of the metaphorical system is highlighting and hiding. As mentioned before, war metaphors dramatize the antithesis of two opposing parties in politics and people can get more empathy toward their own country.

### 4.3. Persuasive Effect Achieved by Metaphors

The most important effect brought by the metaphor is persuasive effect. Persuasion is a process of the mutual communications. During the process, the sender of the information attempts to the receiver’s influence the thoughts, manners and attitudes. With the guidance of metaphors, Trump can persuade people to accept his policies more easily. For example, in journey and building metaphors, Trump intends to encourage and persuade people to be more united and make contributions to their country.

### 4.4. The Relationship between Politics and Metaphors

From the above analysis, we can make the conclusion that metaphors are significant in political discourse. And it is also worth nothing that politics influences the choice and application of metaphors.

In war metaphors, the positive words like “fight for”, “safeguard” and “protect” show the government’s efforts and devotion to guard the country and citizens’ rights. While the negative words like “siege” underlines the adverse factors. In building metaphors, through the repeated use of the word “rebuild”, Trump implies the previous government’s misconduct and his effort to recover America’s economy and the society’s stability. Therefore, it is not difficult to conclude that because of different political purposes, Trump adopts different metaphors. Even if the same political metaphor has different political needs, its prominent aspects are also different.

## 5. Conclusion

Based on Conceptual Metaphor Theory, this paper analyzes the political metaphors in Trump's State of the Union Address, exhibits the effects achieved by employing metaphors, and finds out Trump's political intentions and the relationship between politics and metaphors. By applying metaphors in political discourses, politicians can make the abstract concepts specific and vivid to be understood, which is more beneficial for them to shape their images, publicize their policies and convey their political intentions. The paper also argues that the relationship between politics and conceptual metaphor is dynamically interactive — conceptual metaphors help politicians construct political ideology and politics shows the restrictive function on the application conceptual metaphors. What's more, analyzing both the metaphorical effects and the relationship between politics and metaphors can provide a new insight for the study of political metaphors since there is little research clearly construe the relationship. It will also remind readers to adopt a rational or critical attitude towards political discourse, and improve readers' critical thinking ability.

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## Appendix

President Donald J. Trump's State of the Union Address:  
2020:

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-state-union-address-3/>