

Revealing More Than Intended: On Metaphor Shifts, Clashes and Contradictions in Public Discourse

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Abstract: Abstract: This paper applies the theoretical framework of analysis provided by the Cognitivist school and the concept of metaphorical shift (Shen and Balaban, 1999) on a corpus of public speeches and statements issued by local authorities (political and church leaders) and media reporters between 2024 and 2025. The corpus is multilingual, consisting of English, Italian, Spanish and Romanian fragments. The analysis points out cases of metaphorical incoherence, but also cases of real metaphorical ‘clash’, that is, partial or total incompatibility between the chosen metaphors (Kimmel, 2009). These situations often have visible semantic and pragmatic consequences for the audience: it becomes manifest, for the attentive hearer, that the speaker, often involuntarily, expresses the opposite meaning of what he or she pretends to sustain.

Keywords: Cognitivism, conceptual metaphor, lexicalized metaphor, shifts, clashes

Metaphor has long been considered a mere rhetorical device, mostly used in literary works as a tool aimed at restyling a plain reality, providing it with the artistic touch that seemed connatural to literature. However, this point of view has been proven wrong by the Cognitivist school (see Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), which convincingly outlined that our conceptual system is rooted in our sensory perceptions and in the information we obtain from our bodily interaction with the environment. In this light, metaphor is

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not a simple trope, an example of figurative speech, but a real instrument of thought, that, through a conceptual mapping between a source domain (the one from which we extract the metaphorical image) and a target domain (the one upon which we project it), enables our conceptual system to develop abstract concepts from the concrete information provided by our senses. From this point of view, a common expression like “let’s move on to the next point” is actually a Cognitive metaphor of SPEECH SEEN AS A SPATIAL MOVEMENT.

Cognitive metaphors can be found, therefore, in any form of speech, including, or especially, in everyday speech, in public discourse, in the newspapers or in the social media. They are frequently chosen by their author because they fit a certain thought pattern he or she wants to outline. Not always is this choice voluntarily made: sometimes the metaphor is the common or even the only way of conceptualizing a certain aspect of our realities. Moreover, in certain cases the speaker is not fully aware of the inferences produced by the metaphor or of the implications that it triggers. Shen and Balaban (1999) identified many instances of metaphorical incoherence in the same speech: situations in which the speaker abandons a certain metaphor and uses a new or even contradictory one. These are precisely the instances that the present paper wishes to explore, on the basis of a multilingual corpus consisting of speeches and declarations pronounced by different political and church leaders throughout 2024 and the first months of 2025¹.

¹ This article is the written version of a plenary talk I gave at Dhaka University, Bangladesh, in February 2025, at the Dhaka University Linguistics Conference. DULC 2025 explored *Language as a Cultural Bridge: Insights from Variationist Linguistics, Metaphor Studies, and*

Theoretical Framework. A Cognitivist Understanding of Metaphor

This paper is rooted in the findings of the Cognitivist school, which states there is a strong bond between our conceptual system – our mind – and the entire surrounding environment, comprising our bodies, the elements around us, the other people and the whole range of experiences we have (see Casadei, 2007). Our cognitive system collects the information gathered through our sensory perceptions and begins to elaborate it in order to produce abstract concepts. This achievement would not be possible without cognitive processes like metaphor or metonymy. Cognitivist linguists consider, therefore, that metaphor is not a simple rhetorical device, as was commonly held before, but rather that it is an instrument of thought which grants us the possibility of evolving abstract concepts from the concrete experiences we have (see Croft & Cruse, 2004).

A milestone in the study of metaphor was Lakoff and Johnson's 1980 *Metaphors We Live By*. This book summarizes the main findings of the two scholars, which, though amended or slightly revised by other voices, still prove valuable to this day. Lakoff and Johnson state that metaphor can be described as a mapping between two main domains: a source domain, the one from which we take the metaphorical image, and a target domain, the one upon which we project it in order to conceive it in another perspective (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; as cited in Croft & Cruse, 2004). They also outlined that, besides the so-called *image metaphors*, that is, new metaphors, undoubtedly perceivable as examples of figurative speech, our languages contain lots of *lexicalized metaphors*, that is, common phrases, used by speakers on a daily basis, but no longer

perceived as 'figurative' due to their extensive use throughout the centuries. For instance, an expression like "I couldn't beat his argument" activates a metaphor of CONVERSATION IS A FIGHT (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Many occurrences selected for the present investigation are common, lexicalized expressions, no longer perceivable as metaphors from a literary point of view.

Of course, Lakoff and Johnson's theory did not remain exempt from criticism (see Kövecses, 2008 for some amendments). While this paper basically applies the main Cognitive concepts as outlined by the two linguists, it could certainly benefit from being integrated with more recent approaches and findings, such as the 'cultural variation' theory (Rakova, 2002), or the 'ecological cognition' theory (Jensen and Greeve, 2019) which claim that metaphors, rather than being universal and embodied, as Lakoff and Johnson had proposed, are somehow culturally dependent, or, at least, their production is related to context and culture. Another intriguing proposal belongs to Yetman (2025), who connects conceptual metaphor theory to (meta)philosophy, an approach that might shed some light on the reasons people tend to use metaphor in general, and to produce shifts and clashes, in particular, in the construction of a speech. It would be interesting to apply the aforementioned perspectives on this multilingual corpus, which is certainly something I would like to pursue in the future investigations. However, this is something that would require a more thorough discussion, that exceeds the limits and purposes of the present inquiry, which is why this article limits itself to the theoretical framework already discussed.

It was considered, for many years, that these metaphorical occurrences, be they lexicalized or new ones, were subject to some sort of *metaphorical coherence principle* (Shen and Balaban, 1999: 144). In other words, if the speaker has selected a certain phrase that activates a specific conceptual metaphor, he or she will be

more likely to use another occurrence activating the same metaphor, which should bring coherence to the discourse and help the speaker drive the message home. There can even appear metaphorical chains, in which the same idea is illustrated through a variety of metaphorical occurrences, all belonging to or activating the same conceptual metaphor.

However, many linguists, including Shen and Balaban (1999) from the University of Tel Aviv, have called into question the coherence principle and decided to test this hypothesis through a series of experiments. Their findings show that planned speech, like opinion articles on political subjects, for example, tend to be far more coherent than spontaneous speech, but even there does some incoherence occur. The conclusion of the two Israeli linguists (*ibidem*) is that natural discourse tends to use many lexicalized occurrences with lots of metaphorical shifts, while planned speech tends to display less shifting from a metaphor to another, but much more image occurrences, that is, new expressions created *ad hoc* in order to elaborate on a given metaphor.

Kimmel (2009: 106) also conducted some research on metaphorical coherence in speech and discovered that there are several degrees of conceptual connectedness between adjacent metaphors, such as:

- a) Conceptual complementation and elaboration, where the occurrences enrich each other conceptually because they still belong to the same conceptual metaphor;
- b) Conceptual overlap, where the target domain is the same, but the source domains are slightly different, though still overlapping at some degree (these are basically Shen and Balaban's previously mentioned *shifts*);

- c) No conceptual coherence, where the two metaphors can either be understood independently and raise no incoherence, or they can clash with each other and create some perplexity in the receiver's mind, who thus acknowledges the presence of some sort of contradiction.

Kimmel (*idem*: 112) also pointed out that sometimes the grammatical hints that prompt the reader to integrate the two or several metaphors, *i.e.* to interpret them as related to one another, may conflict with the semantic content of the metaphors. If the reader processes the metaphor only at the propositional level, no real conflict or perplexity should occur, but if the reader cannot refrain from dual processing (a term used by Gibbs, 1999, with regard to the action of understanding both what is said and what is implied through that particular word choice), the metaphor will be perceived as infelicitous because of the unavoidable clash.

I decided to explore the validity of the aforementioned theoretical approaches on a multilingual corpus, in order to find out what exactly the effects of these shifts and clashes might be, especially in terms of pragmatic content delivered to the receiver. I assumed a set of political and religious speeches pronounced to a conspicuous audience would represent a good choice for the corpus, as the speaker, in such cases, tends to be highly interested in persuading the audience – a goal that is usually achieved also through a consistent metaphorical density.

Methods and Corpus Description

I chose a multilingual corpus of contemporary, very recent speeches, belonging to political and church leaders, in four languages, English, Romanian, Spanish and Italian, pronounced either at the beginning of the current year (2025) or throughout the previous one (2024), which both proved extremely eventful, both in

Europe and across the ocean. The linguistic choice was dictated by the fact that these are the main idioms I normally use for scientific activity: as a native Romanian, a teacher of Italian and a user of Spanish on a daily basis, I naturally developed both a personal and a scientific curiosity regarding the linguistic strategies employed in the *media* in order to convey a specific viewpoint on daily topics of certain interest. The English language, on the other hand, was chosen more as a “control” language – that is, in order to verify whether similar strategies are present in a language that has become an international vehicle of communication. Bearing in mind the theoretical viewpoints previously discussed, I felt that a multilingual corpus would represent a more balanced choice, as it would allow me to decide whether the presence of shifts and clashes in discourse transcends the linguistic and even cultural barriers. Of course, this paper only focuses on the particular findings occasioned by the corpus in discussion – but the study could be subsequently enriched by including other speeches and providing even a quantitative analysis, which would enable us to obtain a broader perspective.

In this paper, I try to identify cases of metaphorical shifts and comment them in terms of discourse implications, in order to determine whether the metaphorical change is beneficial or harmful to the communicational purpose of the speaker. Metaphors are manually selected from the corpus and categorized according to their target domain, in so-called equation *formulae*, such as X is Y , where X is the target domain and Y is the source domain. Despite the fact that this method raises certain concerns in terms of objectivity (see, for example, Kövecses, 2008), because the researchers’ intuition tends to be the one that prompts them to select or discard a specific metaphorical occurrence, I feel that the results obtained following this path, rather than other strategies (e.g. computational ones), are not only consistent with the general

findings in the field but also, in a certain measure, more 'trustworthy' than a mechanical selection procedure, which might select or reject a certain word chain without considering aspects that a human receiver directly perceives upon hearing or even watching the performance of the speech (I am referring to issues like irony, sarcasm, vagueness, significant gestures or relevant contextualization). That is why I choose, in this paper, to follow a four-step process in order to build the corpus: a. Selection of the speeches eligible for the corpus (*vide supra*) b. Identification of the phrases or sentences which depart in a certain degree from literal decoding c. Deciding whether the selected phrase can be deconstructed into a conceptual schema following the Lakoffian model d. Ascribing the phrase to a corresponding metaphorical scheme (which does not precede the occurrences, that is, it only begins its existence with the first occurrence, it is not selected from a pre-available list of conceptual metaphors, like those mentioned by Lakoff and Johnson).

For the Spanish language, I chose the speech pronounced by the Argentinian president, Javier Milei, at Davos, in the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting, in January 2025. The text is taken from the official website of the Argentinian Presidency, contains 4563 words and is essentially a powerful critique of progressive, 'woke' ideology.

The Romanian speech I selected for the present paper belongs to His Grace Ignatie (Ignatius), Bishop of Huși, who, in his Pastoral Letter addressed to the clergy and to the community of believers on Christmas (December 25, 2024), also referred to some political aspects that had been haunting the Romanian society during those weeks. The letter was written in order to be read aloud by the clergy instead of the usual sermon at the end of the religious service and it contains 2549 words, excluding references. The text is

quoted from the version available on the official website of the Huşi Bishopric.

For the Italian language, I chose President Sergio Mattarella's latest New Year speech, traditionally pronounced in front of the Italian nation and live broadcast on New Year's Eve (December 31, 2024). The text is taken from the official website of the Italian Presidency, it contains 1928 words and represents an outline of the main political and social events of the previous year, along with hopes and wishes for the future.

Finally, for the English language, I selected a speech from across the ocean, namely Kamala Harris' speech at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, pronounced in August 2024, when she formally accepted to run for President on behalf of the Democratic Party. The full transcript of the speech was taken from the New York Times website, it contains 3562 words and it also refers to some of the most important current challenges on the worldwide political front.

All speeches proved to be impactful at the time of their delivery, that is, they were repeatedly quoted and discussed in the local or international media, which is why I decided to include them in the present analysis.

Qualitative Analysis

This section analyzes some of the most representative conceptual metaphors identified within the corpus, along with the examples extracted from the corpus and accompanied, where necessary, by my English translation. The conceptual metaphor activated by a specific phrase is mentioned in brackets, conventionally typed in small caps.

SPANISH

As previously mentioned, for the Spanish language, I chose the special address pronounced at the World Economic Forum of Davos by the Argentinian leader Javier Milei, on January 23, 2025. The speech was chosen primarily due to its huge media impact (over 1,700,000 hits on Google search engine) and wide coverage during the following weeks (TV, Facebook, Twitter, newspapers in all of the four languages considered for the analysis either reproduced or quoted from the Argentinian leader's speech). The speech presents several categories of change in metaphor choice, which will all be addressed in the following lines.

A first example that deserves our attention can be seen in the following excerpt²:

- (1) Un presidente de ese país se para en este estrado y le dice al mundo entero que están equivocados, que **se dirigen al fracaso** (WORLD IS A SHIP), que **Occidente se ha desviado** (WEST IS A SHIP) y que **debe ser reencauzado** (WEST IS A SHIP).

=A president of such a country arrives WEST on this stage and tells the entire world that they are wrong, that they **are heading for shipwreck** (WORLD IS A SHIP), that **the West had gone astray** (WEST IS A SHIP), and that it needed to be **redirected** (WEST IS A SHIP).

In this case, there is obvious common semantic content between metaphors, which is why no apparent clash can be perceived between them at a first glance. Milei is using a version of the JOURNEY scheme, where at first the entire world, then

² In this and the following examples, I provide the exact quote in the original language, followed by my personal translation into English, in order to make the content available to the broadest audience possible. I should mention that I kept the English translation as close to the original as possible, that is, where necessary, I chose a literal rather than literary approach. The significant phrases are in bold, followed, between brackets, when relevant, by the conceptual metaphorical schema I identified.

specifically the West is seen as a ship in danger of wreckage if no action is taken in order to redirect it. The term ‘reencauzar’, ‘to rechannel’ is also compatible with the source domain of the rivers: a river is usually rechanneled so that it does not provoke any harm to agriculture or human settlements, but, given the previous instances of the WORLD AS SHIP metaphor, the reader seems co-textually preconditioned towards this interpretation.

- (2) les dije que era el comienzo de **una nueva Argentina** (COUNTRIES ARE OBJECTS), que **Argentina había estado infectada de socialismo** por demasiado tiempo (COUNTRIES ARE PEOPLE, IDEAS ARE DISEASES) y que con nosotros iba a volver a **abrazar las ideas de la libertad** (SOCIALISM IS JAIL); **un modelo que nosotros resumimos en** la defensa de la vida, la libertad y la propiedad privada (KEY QUALITIES OR FEATURES OF A MODEL)
 =I told you it was the beginning of **a new Argentina** (COUNTRIES ARE OBJECTS), that Argentina **had been infected with socialism** (COUNTRIES ARE PEOPLE, IDEAS ARE DISEASES) for far too long, and that with us it would once again **embrace the ideas of freedom** (SOCIALISM IS JAIL); – **a model that we summarize as** the defense of life, liberty and private property (KEY QUALITIES OR FEATURES OF A MODEL)

What we can notice here is a cyclical structure, where first the country is seen as an object, more specifically a new one, a new version, a new model, with new features that will be exemplified at the end of the excerpt. Afterwards, the speaker seems to abandon this metaphor in order to adopt a new one: he portrays the country as a human being affected from an illness, a virus represented by the leftist ideology. There does not seem to be much of a clash in here as to the interpretation of the message, although the two metaphors seem diametrically opposed: COUNTRIES ARE PEOPLE is essentially different from COUNTRIES ARE OBJECTS. A reason of the fact that here the metaphorical cluster remains tight and coherent is the overwhelming presence of the MACHINES-AS-PEOPLE metaphor in

today's society: if computers, for example, grow old or get infected with a virus just as people do, then also countries can be conceptualized first as objects and, consequently, as people.

Socialism, on the other hand, is first seen as a disease, as an infectious agent, then as an entity that deprives citizens of freedom, such as a prison, for instance. Between these two metaphors, the only common element, apart from the target domain, seems to be the negative connotation of the source domain: people normally wish to be both healthy and free, so a negative ideology can be seen as a disease and also as a prison. In the end, the speaker retakes the initial model-metaphor and explicitly states some of its features, the key values he considers of the essence.

- (3) es nuestro deber moral y nuestra responsabilidad histórica **desmantelar el edificio ideológico** (IDEOLOGY IS A BUILDING) del **wokismo enfermizo** (IDEOLOGY IS A DISEASE)
 =it is our moral duty and our historical responsibility to **tear down the ideological building** (IDEOLOGY IS A BUILDING) of **sick woke ideology** (IDEOLOGY IS A DISEASE)

Two apparently conflicting metaphors appear here: IDEOLOGY IS A BUILDING (seemingly strong and solid) and IDEOLOGY IS A CONTAGIOUS DISEASE (as 'enfermizo' can mean both 'sick, in a delicate state', and 'harmful to the others'). The speaker is outlining two different ideas with the same word: on the one hand, woke ideology is itself sick, ill, delicate, feeble (thus this metaphor is clashing with the previous one, of the building), on the other hand, woke ideology is harmful to the rest of the society, is a contagious disease that needs to be stopped. I think that the clash is not perceivable at a shallow processing of the phrase because the verb 'desmantelar', 'to destroy', already activates the idea of a negative direct object: what we need to destroy is something bad, be it solid like a building, or less visible, like a virus or disease.

Let us proceed to a final excerpt, where lots of mixed metaphors occur:

- (4) Pero buena parte del mundo libre aún prefiere **el confort de lo conocido** (IDEOLOGY IS A HOME), aunque sea **el camino equivocado** (IDEOLOGY IS A JOURNEY) e insiste en **aplicar las recetas del fracaso** (IDEOLOGY IS A RECIPE). Y **el gran yunque** (IDEOLOGY MEANS RESHAPING) que aparece como **denominador común** (IDEOLOGY IS A MATH PROBLEM) en los países e instituciones que están **fracasando** (IDEOLOGY IS A JOURNEY) es **el virus mental de la ideología woke** (IDEOLOGY IS A DISEASE). Esta es **la gran epidemia de nuestra época que debe ser curada** (IDEOLOGY IS A CONTAGIOUS, YET CURABLE DISEASE), es **el cáncer que hay que extirpar** (IDEOLOGY IS AN INCURABLE DISEASE).

=But much of the free world still **prefers the comfort of what is familiar** (IDEOLOGY IS A HOME), even though **it may be the wrong path** (IDEOLOGY IS A JOURNEY). And they will insist on **applying the recipes of failure** (IDEOLOGY IS A RECIPE). And **the great anvil** (IDEOLOGY MEANS RESHAPING) that is **the common denominator** (IDEOLOGY IS A MATH PROBLEM) among the countries and institutions that **are failing** (IDEOLOGY IS A SEA JOURNEY) is the **mental virus of woke ideology** (IDEOLOGY IS A DISEASE). This is **the great pandemics** of our time that must be **cured**. (IDEOLOGY IS A CONTAGIOUS, YET CURABLE DISEASE). This is **the cancer we need to extirpate** (IDEOLOGY IS AN INCURABLE DISEASE).

Here the speaker is making a strong case against the leftist ideology, also known as ‘woke’, which is still defended by many people despite the fact that it leads to catastrophe. This idea is first activated by the phrase ‘the comfort of what is familiar’, which triggers a metaphor of the IDEAS seen as parts of a cozy HOME. The reasoning would be as follows: we are familiar to the objects surrounding us in our home, they bring us comfort, therefore changing them would be a difficult task, which we tend to procrastinate even when it seems mandatory. From this metaphor

of IDEOLOGY SEEN AS A COMFORTABLE HOUSE, the speaker shifts to a JOURNEY scheme: 'it may be the wrong path', where ideology is the direction that guides our life – if the direction is mistaken, our entire life is nothing but a mistake. A new shift takes us to a chemical metaphor: 'applying the recipes of failure', where the woke ideology is seen as a recipe which, if followed consistently, will produce a terrible result. The image is interesting, because the image that comes to mind is that of the political leaders conceptualized as stubborn scientists or cooks, who obstinately stick to the same recipe over and over again, despite being already aware of the result.

A new shift is produced, this time to a metaphor that takes us to a wholly new world: woke ideology is 'the great anvil' that is common to many countries, says Milei. An anvil is a heavy object on which metal can be hammered and shaped. Woke ideology is like a stencil on which many countries and civilization are being violently shaped until they lose their original form and identity and become what the ideology wants them to be. Thus we are actually activating the ARGUMENT IS FORCE metaphor, where making someone embrace a point of view is usually conceptualized like some sort of struggle or war.

There are still two other metaphors within this phrase that shift to new images. In the first place, woke ideology is the common denominator of the countries that are identified by the speaker as having the same issues; IDEOLOGY IS THUS A MATH PROBLEM, which should be carefully and strategically addressed. Then, the countries are seen as ships in danger of wrecking – a reactivation of the scheme IDEOLOGY IS A JOURNEY, in this case a sea journey.

The last three occurrences are actually a metaphorical chain referring to the target domain of woke ideology and conceptualizing

it as a disease. However, the source domains are not exactly the same in terms of features. In the first case, woke ideology is a mental virus, that is, the agent responsible for introducing and spreading the disease in the organism. In the second phrase, woke ideology is the pandemics of our time that needs to be cured. In other words, it is a terrible, contagious, hard disease, spreading fast all around, but still curable if promptly and strongly addressed. However, this idea seems to fade in the last example, where woke ideology is conceptualized as a cancer that is no longer curable, but needs to be extirpated, that is, drastically removed from the body, before it affects vital organs. These three disease-metaphors are setting a vivid pace of the speech, thus making us aware of the rampant pace of these social changes whose effects might be fatal or irreversible.

ROMANIAN

For Romanian, I chose the Pastoral Letter addressed by His Grace Ignatius (Romanian: Ignatie), the Orthodox Bishop of Huși, to his diocese on Christmas, 2024. As briefly outlined in the previous chapter, it is customary for the Orthodox hierarchs to address a Christmas message to their local congregations, both as a greeting in occasion of the holidays and as a summary of the recent activities of the Church. I chose His Grace Ignatius' message because, unlike most pastoral letters, which tend to stick to church-related topics, he also addresses some political issues that had been troubling the Romanian society during the past months and are still valid today. Another reason for this choice was the fact that, just as President Milei's speech, this Pastoral Letter also raised lots of media discussions and debates – among which I mention Romanian theologian Bogdan Alexandru Duca's very accurate analysis³, which inspired me to conduct a thorough investigation on these aspects.

³ Published online on December 27, 2024 (two days after the Pastoral Letter was released) and available at https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=9038086046278825&id=100002325596324 (retrieved April 10, 2025).

The excerpt I would like to analyze is as follows:

- (5) Ne găsim într-o societate fragmentată de „pasiuni politice”, susținute de cei care hrănesc „ura socială”; de cei care transformă credința în capital electoral; de cei care iau numele Domnului în deșert; de **cei care vor să evadăm** (EU IS A PRISON) **din citadela** (EU IS A CITADEL), **fie ea chiar imperfectă, a valorilor europene și nord-atlantice.**

=We find ourselves in a society divided by political passions, promoted by those who feed social hatred; by those who turn faith into election capital; by those who pronounce the name of the Lord in vain; by **those who want us to escape** (EU IS A PRISON) **the citadel** (EU IS A CITADEL), **imperfect as it may be, of the European and North-Atlantic values.**

A little context might be needed in order to fully grasp the gist of what His Grace is referring to in these words. On December 8, 2024, Romanians should have elected their president; after the first round, the race seemed to go on with two diametrically opposed figures – Călin Georgescu, an independent, nationally-oriented candidate, promoting Romanian interests over those of the European Union, and Elena Lasconi, a pro-Europe candidate, widely known for her leftist views. Two days before the second round, on December 6, 2024, the elections were undemocratically cancelled by the Constitutional Court of Romania, allegedly due to foreign involvement, but with no substantial proof thereof. This is why a majority of the public opinion in Romania considered this an undemocratic measure taken in order to prevent a nationally-oriented candidate from winning the elections.

In his Christmas speech, the Bishop clearly situates himself on the pro-Europe side, activating the metaphor EU IS A CITADEL, which in turn activates several inferences and implications, all positive: ‘EU brings defense’, ‘EU is safe’, ‘EU grants protection’ and so on. We could assume, therefore, that the Bishop is promoting a

positive view of the European Union, projecting an image of safety and protection on this political organism. Nevertheless, if we take a closer look at his speech, we notice there might be something that contradicts this image, or, in other terms, that openly clashes with the inferences activated by the CITADEL metaphor. His Grace employs the word ‘citadel’ as a direct object of the verb ‘to escape’, which has a semantic content that brings forward primarily negative inferences (Duca, 2024), like these:

- (a) People escape something negative, e.g. a prison;
- (b) People escape something that keeps them entrapped, i.e. that restricts their freedom;
- (c) Escape is usually a difficult and risky process, which might not be successful.

The metaphorical clash originated by this lexical choice did not remain unnoticed by the public opinion. Lots of bloggers and journalists in Romania commented His Grace’s speech, pointing out that, instead of projecting a positive view on the European Union, as an invincible defense of human rights, his words seem to confirm the fears of the nationally-oriented electors, who complain of this precise aspect: that the European Union has become some sort of prison that prevents its citizens from democratically exercising their right to elect or be elected. It is one of the cases when a metaphor – maybe employed unconsciously – allows the speakers to reveal more than intended or perhaps to bring their real opinion to light. We have to keep in mind that there is currently some degree of social stigma associated to the detractors of the European Union, who are usually labeled as extremists or even Nazis by the very people who do not hesitate to hail to antidemocratic measures like, for instance, the cancellation of the Romanian presidential elections on a mere suspicion-basis. Therefore, people are not very eager to publicly express their opinion, which might emerge, nevertheless, in a more subtle manner, like, for example, a metaphorical choice.

Did the Bishop actually think that the European Union still was that invincible citadel of freedom and democracy which it used to be? Apparently, he began by conveying this very message, only to contradict himself by – deliberately or unconsciously? – using a metaphor that clashed with the first one. If we pursue the analysis of the Pastoral Letter, we notice that His Grace’s list of ‘negative actors’ goes on, and among them we can find also:

- (6) de cei care propovăduiesc **ideologia nocivă a progresismului totalitar**
 =those who profess **the harmful ideology of totalitarian progressivism**

another apparent oxymoron, because real progress, real progressive thinking is incompatible with the idea of totalitarianism and dictatorship. Through this formula, the bishop might wish to outline the idea that even the other side, the allegedly pro-Europe parties, need to be aware of the fact that certain political measures, like the illegitimate cancellation of the elections, are in open contradiction with the idea of democracy.

ITALIAN

Another case in point can be found in the Italian President’s past New Year speech, a tradition that for the Italian society is an intrinsic part of the New Year’s rituals and celebration. Some Italians even gather to listen to the President’s address before proceeding with the other moments of the celebration, and throughout the following hours and days the speech enjoys wide media coverage.

The excerpt I would like to refer to was pronounced in the very opening of the speech, where President Mattarella states that on the threshold between the old and the New Year we are more than ever looking for serenity, and he continues as follows:

- (7) Lo facciamo, dobbiamo farlo tanto più in quanto viviamo momenti difficili. Quando **migliaia di vittime civili delle guerre in corso turbano tragicamente le nostre coscienze**
 (VICTIMS/WARS ARE DISTURBING AGENTS)

=We do that, we must do that even more now that we are living difficult times, that **thousands of civilian victims of the ongoing wars tragically disturb our consciences.**
(VICTIMS/WARS ARE DISTURBING AGENTS)

When we refer to aspects that trouble our consciences, these are normally negative: sin, for example, in a religious view, injustice, from a social perspective, a harmful action or word, from an interactional point of view. War, of course, should be on that list, as an abomination in itself, which should primarily bother the consciences of those generating conflicts and secondarily the consciences of those promoting or justifying them. However, in President Mattarella's speech it is not the wars themselves that are bothering our consciences, but rather the civilian victims of the ongoing conflicts. I presume that the intended meaning is that no responsible citizen should be celebrating and partying while somewhere in the world people are being killed in absurd wars. However the word choice is subtly – and probably unconsciously – shifting the burden of guilt from the cause – the wars – to the effect – the deaths and casualties.

This shift of focus triggered by the metonymy – effect for cause – brings about some different inferences and implications. If we say that the war troubles our consciences, then we are condemning military conflict with all that it involves: weapon trade, economic sanctions, destructions, death and so on. On the contrary, if we say that civilian victims of the wars trouble our conscience, then the condemnation of the war suddenly becomes less heavy, because what we are involuntarily implying is that if nobody were killed, war would not be so contemptible, the other effects of the war would be in a certain way more justified. It is no longer an absolute condemnation – war is always negative, no matter how it is carried or for what reasons – but a relative one – war is negative because of the deaths, but otherwise it could be justified. I am

convinced that President Mattarella only wanted to point out the most tragic and abominable effect of war: the loss of human lives, but whether he managed to drive this or the opposite message home remains to some degree debatable, because what was intended as an assertion of the importance of human lives can easily turn into the very contrary.

ENGLISH

A last example I would like to take into consideration for this analysis is taken from the former Vice President Kamala Harris' speech at the Democratic Convention Speech in Chicago in 2024, when she formally accepted to become the Democratic Candidate for the Presidential Elections in the United States of America. As in the previous cases, this speech was also considered for the present investigation in the light of its wide media coverage and the fact that it gave birth to heated debates, especially retrospectively, after Harris' defeat in the presidential race.

- (8) As commander in chief, **I will ensure America always has the strongest, most lethal fighting force in the world** (USA IS A FORCE). And I will fulfill **our sacred obligation** (POLITICS IS RELIGION) to care for our troops and their families. (...) President Biden and I **are working to end this war**, such that Israel is secure, the hostages are released, **the suffering in Gaza ends** (WAR IS A NEGATIVE ELEMENT THAT NEEDS TO END) and the Palestinian people can realize their right to dignity, security, freedom and self-determination.

This excerpt raises a few issues in terms of coherence. Firstly, the initial phrase can be understood both metaphorically, with 'lethal' intended as 'invincible', and non-metaphorically, with the adjective 'lethal' referring literally to the destructive capability of the military equipment of the American troops. No matter what reading we adopt, it should be noted that the term 'lethal', which etymologically means 'able to produce death' is here used in a

positive sense, enabled by its position, next to the superlative 'strongest', which already introduces a positive expectation, and by syntax itself: the phrase depends on the verb 'to ensure', which usually takes positive objects or clauses, as we tend to ensure, or promise, to do something good rather than the opposite. This is *per se* a semantic-syntactic conflict, because we would normally associate death and death-producing devices to something negative, which is definitely not the case in the analyzed excerpt.

Another conflict appears as the speaker introduces a metaphor of POLITICS AS RELIGION, very common in the context of political elections, by saying "I will fulfill our sacred obligation". Political duties and commitments are seen as religious rites that must be performed, the political leader thus becoming some sort of religious figure endowed with the power, and the obligation, of performing these ritual actions in order to achieve a good result or to avoid a catastrophe. In a Christian-shaped world, it is hard to associate the word 'sacred' to anything conflicting with the Christian moral code. Therefore, pronouncing this word right after having promised to ensure that the American troops get the necessary means to produce as much death as possible becomes, for the attentive listener, a contradiction in terms. It is what Kimmel (2009: 106) called an infelicitous association, or a metaphorical clash. If these two adjacent phrases were not enough in order to prejudice the internal coherence of the speech, a few phrases further, the speaker announces her commitment to end the war in Israel, and to put an end to the suffering in Gaza, which, right after the first phrase of the excerpt, may produce some perplexity among the listeners as to the method envisioned by the speaker in order to achieve that goal. As the Romans used to put it, it is a case of 'si vis pacem, para bellum', a well-known paradox referring to the frequent inconsistency of politicians, who claim that they want to

achieve, preserve or promote peace, but that, at the same time, they need to be prepared for the war.

Conclusions

At the end of this brief outline of some cases of metaphorical incoherence in public discourse, *i.e.*, shifts, clashes and contradictions, a fair conclusion that should be driven is that metaphor has an enormous communicational role and also a psychological impact on the receiver, whose views on society and life it might reveal. Sometimes the use of a metaphorical occurrence allows us to perceive certain underlying aspects, opinions or values, which might not be openly professed, but rather implied through a specific word choice.

As we were able to notice from the examples provided by the corpus, the analysis of a given metaphor may reveal implications that could be unknown even to the speakers themselves, but which become manifest if we identify the original source domain and other possible instances of the same conceptual metaphor.

While shifts are frequent and usually produce no inappropriateness, clashes and contradictions in metaphorical choice may suggest a conceptual conflict in the speakers' cognitive system: they either believe something, but say something else, or, quite the opposite, they reveal what they actually think despite trying, through other linguistic and discourse devices, to hide or conceal their actual point of view. These mechanisms are well represented in all four languages, which can only reinforce the idea that metaphor is actually an instrument of thought, a tool which allows us to develop abstract reasoning with all that it takes.

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