



Metaphor studies as a bridge between linguistics and political science: Theoretical implications and methodological challenges

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Metaphor is a central component of human cognition and communication. While metaphors can be studied for their own sake from a linguistic perspective as a process of meaning extension at various levels (be it morphological, lexical or syntactical) or as a rhetorical device used in argumentation, metaphor studies have broadened their scope and touched upon many other scientific disciplines among the cognitive and social sciences. As a result, metaphors have become a central topic in many disciplines, including linguistics, philosophy, psychology, psycholinguistics, neurolinguistics, communication studies, political science, education science or translation studies.

Among these disciplines, politics remains one prominent area where to find metaphors, as has been highlighted by many scholars (see among others Carver & Pikalo, 2008; Charteris-Black, 2011, 2013; Lakoff, 2002; Musolff, 2004, 2016). This can be explained by two main factors. On the one hand, most of our political concepts are metaphorical in nature (Lakoff, 2002, 2004). This means that our understanding of complex and abstract political concepts and processes relies on conceptual metaphors that ‘provide ways of simplifying complexities and making abstractions accessible’ (Semino, 2008:90). On the other hand, metaphors are central to the domain of politics because they have the potential to frame the debate (Lakoff, 2004) and indirectly convey hidden ideologies (Goatly, 2007). Using a particular metaphor to depict a given reality will activate a particular frame and highlight some aspects of this reality while hiding others. Through framing, ‘metaphor helps construct particular aspects of reality and reproduce (or subvert) dominant schemas’ (Koller, 2009: 121). This framing function of metaphors suggests that they influence or even determine the representations of a given reality in the receiver’s mind. This framing function of metaphors can be associated with their persuasive role in rhetoric (see Charteris-Black, 2011).

In this talk I will report on the results of two sets of studies we have been conducting as part of an interdisciplinary project on the evolution of the discourse about Belgian federalism. The first set of studies (Perrez & Reuchamps, 2015b; Reuchamps et al., 2018) tackle the framing effect of metaphors and aim at understanding under which conditions metaphors might influence citizens’ representations and preferences about Belgian



federalism. Among other things, I will highlight the methodological issues related to these types of behavioral experiments and discuss the mediating role of political knowledge on the framing effect of metaphors.

The second set of studies propose semiotic analyses of metaphor use in different types of political corpora, including citizen discourse, institutional discourse and media discourse about Belgian federalism (see for instance Heyvaert, 2019; Perrez & Reuchamps, 2015a). In this part of the presentation, I will question the notion of political discourse itself (see Randour et al., 2020) and focus on the notion of variation in political metaphor use, e.g. understanding why particular metaphors emerge in particular political contexts (or which type of metaphors are produced by which of type political actors?) and how they evolve in one or several discourse communities. Building on the results of these studies, I will also argue that Deliberate Metaphor Theory (Steen, 2008, 2017) provides an appropriate theoretical framework to account for the rhetorical potential of political metaphors.

By focusing on these two interrelated dimensions of metaphor use in political discourse, I will try and highlight the cross-fertilization potential of such interdisciplinary research, by showing what metaphor studies can gain, as well theoretically as methodologically, from privileged contact with political science, in the hope that this can be a source of inspiration for any kind of interdisciplinary enterprise.

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