The Metaphorical Modeling of COVID-19 Pandemic Crisis in Infosphere Online News Articles

Mohamed A. Al Husain, PhD  
Semantics (Cognitive Semantics)  
University of Basra \ College of Arts,  
Department of Translation  
mallami65@gmail.com  
Mohamedr / الباسورد GG1234567890

Abstract

The article addresses the process of metaphorical modeling of Coronavirus (COVID-19) during COVID-19 Pandemic Crisis (CPC) by Infosphere Online News (INFON) articles and stories. It is a cognitive semantic analysis of the language of online news based on the theoretical constructs proposed by Lakoff & Johnson (1987) Conceptual Metaphor Theory. INFON articles embody a process of transferring verbalized knowledge between two active parties (News Authorship and Readership) with unequal knowledge accessibility and propensity to transfer and disseminate such knowledge. The mechanism of metaphorization is one of the key ways of verbalizing how the authorship categorizes and conceptualizes the experience of the world with COVID-19. The results unfold: the predominant COVID-19 perception in INFON discourse is “COVID-19 is an ENEMY” and the metaphorical modeling, utilized by INFON discourse, a two-edged tool: positive by objectively informing the readers about that world or negative, by manipulating their conceptualization to create an aggressive image of world, therefore circulating anxiety, fear and panic.

Key words: modeling; conceptual metaphor; COVID-19 mappings; manipulation.
المستخلص
يتناول البحث عملية النموذج المجازى للعالم الخارجي بوجود خطر تهديد جائحة كورونا بواسطة الأخبار في الفضاء المعلوماتي الافتراضي. البحث عبارة عن تحليل&Dash;2019 لدلالية مقالات الأخبار بالاعتماد على المباني النظريّة لنظرية المجاز الزهبي لجورج لايكوف وصامويل جونسون، وكتاب إعلام جماهيري، و yardım الموضوعات الإخبارية في الفضاء المعلوماتي الافتراضي عملية نقل المعلومة بين شريكي (الكاتب والقارئ) بمتلكهم فرصة وصول وموغلا متكافئة لنشر وتوزيع الأخبار. يعتبر المجاز وسيلة فعالة للكاتب للتعبير اللفظي عن المعلومة وعملية ادراكه وتصويره للعالم الخارجي بوجود خطر تهديد جائحة كورونا بصورة العدو. عكست نتائج التحليل الدلالي لمادة البحث بأن المجاز المستخدم في إخبار في الفضاء المعلوماتي الافتراضي لتصوير العالم الخارجي بوجود تهديد جائحة كورونا &quot;COVID-19&quot; يجب النظر البية على أنه سيف ذو حدين: إيجابية من خلال نقل معلومة موضوعية صحية لرفع مستوى وعي القراء، عن جائحة كورونا &quot;COVID-19&quot; وسيلة الوقاية أو يتحول المجاز إلى ادآد تلاعب سلبيّة من خلال خلق فهم مربك وصورة مرعبة تبعث على الشعور القلق والخوف والذعر.

كلمات دالة: التصوير المجازى، جائحة كورونا، تعبيتات المجازية، الخوف، التأثير.
1. Introduction

Metaphorization is a key mechanism for human cognition: it supports our representation and conceptualization of reality. It offer us a way to see things which we can't see with other things that we see: It hosts a dynamic interface between concrete and abstract representational systems of world: we perceive the abstract concepts through the features and events of the concrete concepts. The metaphorization modeling is at the core of conceptualizing and categorizing COVID-19 as a threat-source enemy, simply because we are unable to see it. This article seeks to identify the peculiarities of the metaphorical modeling of the concept of COVID-19 in the INFON discourse. COVID-19 outbreak took place between the end of 2019 and early 2020, in Iraq and worldwide. The research material involves a discursive sampling of electronic articles in Arabic from online news journals and portals, between 2019-2020.

Metaphorically modeled as an ENEMY, COVID-19, we believe, has become an object for negative manipulation: it could clearly evoke anxiety, fear and panic to the public. The INFON discourse could turn out a “Echo Chamber of Fear Culture” (Altheide & Michalowski, 1999).

According to the World Health Organization, COVID-19 "can be regarded as a pandemic", for it is customary to speak of an pandemic if the epidemic significantly exceeds the level of usual morbidity in a given territory to neighboring states, and sometimes many countries worldwide. From February 24 to March 1, the list of countries where COVID-19 cases have been reported has doubled in size (WHO, 2020). A state of emergency, restrictive measures and prohibitions were introduced all over the world. The rapid growth raised serious concerns that the crisis is global. “[F]ear affects the markets,” says Neil Wilson, lead analyst with markets.com.

2. Theoretical Background

Reports of an epidemic fall within the scope of “Crisis and Emergency Risks Communication” (CERC) (see Reynolds & Seeger, 2007; Lwin, Lu, Sheldenkar, Schulz, 2018). CERC is a “focused process for exchanging information about various types of crises, emergency and risk causes,
preventive measures and remedies (Reynolds, Galdo & Sokler, Lynn.2002: 5). Online website started to embrace a role in CERC to inform and educate and sometimes to manipulate through disseminating news articles.

2.2. Infosphere Online News Discourse

The term "infosphere" refers to a space which involves the collection, processing, production, distribution, and consumption of information. The virtual infosphere is gigantic informational network infrastructure, exchanging information objects (Floridi, 2003; 2014). Today, public pages and forums, social networks sites, blogs, news portals, etc. are connecting people over the globe, circulating information flux and judgments over the digital sphere. Sadly, however, a growing industry of mass media news may take it as a venue to misinform rather than to inform, spreading fake news (Guess, Nyhan & Reifler, 2018). Readers confronted with such orientation may engage passively, tolerating and consuming uncertainty: readers simply read and share the headlines without reflecting on the objectives and content truth of what they are exposed to. This behavior is usually referred to as the "Echo Chamber Effect" (Sasahara, K. Et al., 2019; Choi, & et al, 2020). The overflow of information mostly makes it hard for the readers to make objective judgments.

News messages can be perceived through the prism of who sends what to whom for what purpose, where the production, dissemination of messages are governed by individual, institutional, cultural and ideological background. (van Dijik, 1989). Since INFON messages inhere all of the elements that normally constitute a discourse, this allows us to call infosphere news articles as INFON discourse.

Manipulation is a process of achieving an impact on individuals via communicating information for them to commit unconsciously to beliefs, opinions, intentions, states of mind or behavioral changes, contrary to their own (Fairclough, 1994). The manipulative venue of INFON discourse will be viewed through the prism of the cognitive semantics, specifically through the construct of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff, 1987).
2.3. Metaphor as a conceptual modeling device

In modern cognitive semantic, it is customary to define a metaphor as a mental operation, a way of cognizing, conceptualizing, categorizing, evaluating and explaining the world by analogy. The principles of similarity, analogy and comparison are basic for the formation of a metaphor, e.g., “Love is a Journey”.

Metaphor allows to comprehend a certain area of reality in terms of conceptual structures, using the experience gained in other areas, often more specific or accessible to carriers. This is because metaphor is based on the establishment of associative connections, similarities and differences between the phenomena of the world, creating on this basis new personal meanings representing the subjective attitude of the individual to the world, his vision, his interpretation of a certain fragment of reality (Kövecses, 2010).

Metaphors and metonyms are the results of applying this scheme to obtain conceptual via mappings (Lakoff, 1993; Sadock, 1993). Modeling is a reduced reproduction or schema of a phenomenon. Linguistically, a model in its most general sense could be defined as a generalized schema of constructing meanings. A common understanding of metaphor is that refers to the processes of building synthetic models based on significant structural similarities between two domains, source and target (Charteris-Black, 2006). Metaphorical conceptualization is built according to the following scheme: dynamic mappings of transferred information, from the Source Domain to the Target Domain to come up with innovatively emergent conceptual structures (see Figure. 1).
Figure (1): Cross-domain mapping in LOVE IS A JOURNEY (Lakoff, 1993)

The theoretical assumption here is that INFON discourse recoursed to metaphorically modeling to assign a referential identity to COVID-19 due to its microcosmic nature. Modelling COVID-19 as ENEMY and human encounters with it as a BATTLES resulted in the actualization of emergent conceptual structures, a rather aggressive perception of the world. Indeed, the semantic associative mappings of conceptual field (battle, weaponry, victory, casualties, conspiracies, etc.), may result in such aggressiveness of worldview, accelerating negative responses such as anxiety, fear and panic.

3. Analysis: COVID-19 in Arabic INFON Discourse

This article deals with the representation of COVID-19 as the object of metaphorical modeling in modern INFON discourse. Metaphorical modeling signals the entire iconic environment and covers a multi-level system of embedded representations which allow greater semantic accessibility and dynamic conceptual structures, via verbal and/or imagistic conceptual metaphor (Lakoff, 1987).

The pragmatism of the discursive analysis of language units from INFON discourse stands out as a methodology for establishing sign-triggered conceptualisations in a communicative process: signs are formed by a person,
to a person for a purpose. The pragmatic manipulative potential of metaphors, exerted on the recipient’s consciousness, is associated with the assessments of the underlying source of metaphorical mappings. The dominant metaphorical analogies put forward by language use in INFON discourse is that (COVID-19 as an ENEMY at our doors which has declared WAR against us to destroy our lives, therefore it is necessary to take actions in this BATTLE).

Imagistic Metaphor as a modeling device is a very simple, yet highly novel and suggestive source of conceptualisation. To exemplify, it is worth to mention the controversial news article which has been recently published in Jyllands-Posten. The Danish Jyllands-Posten newspaper modelled COVID-19 via an imagistic metaphor (illustrated in Fig. 2): a cartoon of the Chinese flag (on the left) with its stars replaced by COVID-19 particles\(^5\) (on the right). This modeling surged diplomatic rage in China due to the compressed conceptualization of that symbolic representation. China is modelled as a CONTAINER of COVID-19, with loss-end interpretations of whether the enemy is the virus itself or China. These are very likely interpretations at a higher level, due to SOURCE-TARGET and PATH metaphors.

Figure (2): Adopte from the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten

China as, CONTAINER, is SOURCE of infection whose threat takes a specific trajectory from PATH to TARGET. Such conceptualisation of animated enemy derives from the mappings: China flag the big star emitting small stars and big COVID-19 particle emitting small particles (see Figure 3). Now, the question is “Who is the ENEMY?”
3.1. War against Enemy

The war metaphor is a recurrent theme to create the image of the viruses (enemy) in the recipient’s mind: intruder, harmful, dangerous, etc. agent, (Marc, 2006), that needs to be defeated immediately. The president of the United States, Donald Trump, explicitly stated his worldview of the virus as the world enemy as in (1):

ترامب: فيروس كورونا عدو للعالم ويجب التغلب عليه

Trans: “Trump: Coronavirus is an enemy of the world and must be defeated”

COVID-19 as the WORLD EMEMY is a universal metaphorical structure that can be found in across-linguistical and across cultural contexts .

3.2. Container Metaphor

The CONTAINER metaphor is a universal metaphor based on the projection of spatial relationships onto non-spatial domains. The concept of a container was first introduced by M. Johnson (1987). In his opinion, this figurative scheme is involved in the processing of human experience and is understood subconsciously (Lakoff (1993; Lakoff and Nunez, 2000: 30)

In 2,3 & 4, the scenario depicts China and Iran as containers of the COVID-19, therefore, it becomes safer to be isolated from such containers as a defensive measure. In 2, Iraq embraces such measure by closing “Mandeli border crossing”, as an alert to the virus outbreak (see 3). The open doors, it suggests, could lead to Iraqi cities becoming containers
new foci for the COVID-19, themselves, and a source of threat to self and others, a warning .. Iraq cities are turning into new foci for the Coronavirus

Trans: “Iraq closes Mandali border crossing with Iran, fearing the spread of Corona”

The spreading of COVID-19 assumes a trajectory path moving from source to destination: (X moves from A to B).

3.3. Path metaphor

The metaphor of the PATH implies a plurality of movements from source to target. The order in such movement plurality determines its implementation, building a series of metonyms. COVID-19 has a path whose trajectory destination is Iraq as 5 suggests. However, metonymic mappings are also very likely, primarily of the “part-whole” type. Metonymy relates to the underlying procedure of reducing the whole to its part: it involves profiling of one or another element “Diyala governorate” of a conceptualized area, and focusing attention on it along de-profiling the familiar elements (Iraq) due to contiguity/proximity. The primes the path of enemy threat: the weak link front of the battleground. Such contiguity of the interpreted phenomena in reality arises from some real (temporary, spatial, causal, etc.) connections between them, Diyala governorate and Iraq.

Trans: “..: Corona arrives at Diyala”

Continuity is a vivid mental image representation of the journey metaphor by transferring the structure of well-known events and activities (e.g., moving along a path). In (6), the proximity, reinforced by the lexical items “continue”/ مستمرة باتخاذ سلسلة, asserts the continuous movement of the journey trajectory between source-destination points.
Trans: “continues to take a series of new decisions against “Corona”

In the example above, in their path of war engagement against (Corona)virus, the Kurdistan Regional Government kept taking series of measures to win the war. Such metaphorical mapping gives a dynamic image of continuity of actions during the war to stop the spreading of the virus. The syncretic locative meaning of the preposition ‘against’, assumes attached and well as detached proximity whose spatial semantic contents suggest two conceptual structures, confrontation and opposition as prototypical. The connections between the opposing parties are fundamentally important. Measures and precautions are required in case of any preconceived forms of fight (battles).

3.4. Battle Metaphor

A metaphorical representation of patients in a battle against fatal diseases via expressions such as “dying after a ‘long battle with cancer” have become common, yet controversial (Marc, 2006; Semino, Demjén, Demmen, et al, 2017). A form of battle is a characteristic of the cold war, a geopolitical political, ideological and diplomatic war, or hot war, military war. Micro-macro war opposition as metaphorical modeling applies to many examples.

The scale of the military operations, combat and missions against COVID-19 extends to humanity, in (7), which makes it a hard battle to engage in (see 8) and indeed needs to finish with. The battle extended intercontinentally to Europe, Africa, South America North America and Australia wrote the BBC online. Now, Europe is actually in a battle, (see 8).

Trans: “Corona: The Great Battle of Humanity”

Trans: “Israeli fears ... The battle against Corona is difficult and needs time”

Trans: “Europe in a battle against the Corona Virus”
Australia sarcastically has a by-product fierce intracontinental battle to buy toilet paper in (10). Interestingly evident, it is very logical to imagine the volume of irrational fear the Australian citizens experience due to COVID-19 threat, that their priorities of consumption tendency have gone mad. It is logical to fight for food and medication and preventive hygiene equipment

Trans: “A fierce battle in Australia on toilet paper because of Corona”

The battle has more than one front wide open (see 12), where the leaders, “we”/Xi Jinping metonymically refers to the collective plurality of the state offices, officials, etc. The troops are the people as the Chinese ambassador suggests in (13), to reap victory (11).

Supplies are not of the least concern for the sustainability of the battle to embrace victory. Inter-national support necessitates making allies in the war and sometimes sending medical supplies to allies is a strategic action, to Italy in the case as in (14), to help them win the battle along the hot front there. The same that Qatar has done to help Iran in her fight against the outbreak in 15.

Qatar announced on Friday that it was sending urgent medical aid to Iran, in support of it, in the fight against the Corona Virus

In a state of war, various weaponry is a must. Against COVID-19 medical preventive measures, travel restrictions, isolation, antiviral therapies medical
expense copayments, etc. are possible weapons but sure verified remedy is not an available option so far.

3.5. **Weapon metaphor**

Weaponary metaphor as a subset of the WAR, THREAT, BATTLE is used for constructing the meanings of utility and defense (Cochran-Smith, 2006). It is a common expression in health-related topics, e.g., treatment represents the armor and weapon of patients.

As we are in a state of war with COVID-19; what is our weapon? So, the first intuitive thing to do about conquering a microbial cosmic enemy is to get expertise in the form of query seeking information, i.e., what is the strongest weapon that we have/can to defeat COVID-19? (see 16). One answer was “sterilisation” as in (17), or coordinating international efforts (18), quarantine, etc.

16 ما هو أقوى سلاح نملكه ضد تفشي فيروس كورونا
Trans: “What is the powerful weapon we have against …Coronavirus?”

17 التعقيم.. سلاح ضد كورونا
Trans: “Sterilization .. a weapon against corona”

18 تنسيق الجهود الدولية سلاح فعال ضد كورونا
Trans:Quarantine ... The only real UK weapon against Corona

Ironically, the enemy itself becomes the new weapon to win internal political battles (20) or weapon in the hands of other enemies as in (21).

19 الحجر الصحي... سلاح المملكة المتحدة الحقيقي الوحيد ضد كورونا
Trans:Quarantine ... The only real UK weapon against Corona

The world’s battle against a fierce rival, COVID-19, also suggests contingency plans, e.g., retreat, truce and ceasefire options as well as possible defeat and casualties.
3.6. **Battle Casualties: Victims of COVID-19**

The generic concept of “victim” is defined as an individual who has suffered harm, damage, or loss: death is a possible end scenario. “WE ARE VICTIMS” metaphor represents the affected public. Using the metaphorical modeling, news messages prime risks of having casualties. Humans are the most significant casualty of the CPC. Human casualties of war are synonyms with negative connotations – hits, casualty and prey, etc.

A human casualty in the war against COVID-19, victims of war, could be mass victim, i.e., “أرقام قياسية/records of corona victims” (see 22), or calculated in numbers (thousands, hundreds, etc) as in (23)

22 أرقام قياسية لضحايا كورونا في أوروبا
Trans: “European records of corona victims”

23 ضحايا كورونا: آلاف الاصابات والوفيات في العالم
Trans: “The last toll of the victims of Corona...thousands of injuries and deaths in the world”

The victims could include high-rank personnel as in (24), or a newly-born baby. However, the mass death toll is the latest world count. We are losing the war, seriously.

24 كورونا تقتل عضو في مجلس تشخيص مصلحة النظام في إيران
Corona kills a member of the Expediency Council in Iran

25 ولد مصاباً.. رضيع بريطانى أحدث ضحايا كورونا
An infected boy: a new-born British boy is Corona's latest victim

Euphemisms are “expressions used in place of words or phrases that otherwise might be considered harsh or unpleasant” (Allan & Burridge, 1991). Euphemism is usually understood as emotionally neutral words or expressions used instead of words synonymous with them and expressions that seem to the speaker indecent, rude or tactless. Dysphemism, on the other hand, involves a negative connotation of meaning and denotes the concept in
a harsher and rough form (Ibid). The perception of COVID-19 as an enemy and battle rival can be euphemized or dysphemized.

Interestingly though, there are instances where victims are euphemized or dysphemized. For instance, the expression “losses” possibly comes to express sincere sympathy. The Islamic concept “Martyrs” (see 24) was used to signal the Islamic holy concept of war sacrifices against the virus. Others call them “the dead”, “the deceased” or “the corpus” (see 26).

Scholars … issues a fatwa … **victims of Corona as martyrs**

.. photographer arrest .. published pictures of Coronavirus corpses in Qom

3.7. **Truce and Ceasefire**

A truce is a contingency plan in wars. It could be military or political, e.g., Will the political “Corona Truce” succeed?, military in Afghan situation, The Afghan defense minister proposed a truce for the Taliban fight against the Corona epidemic, economical, The trade truce between Washington and Beijing is threatened by Corona or ecological, Corona gives the earth a truce and a 25% decrease in carbon dioxide
Figure (4): the overall metaphorical mappings of COVID-19

So far, in the light of the above cognitive semantic discursive analyses of INFON news articles, the overall dynamic image of the event of COVID-19 outbreak as a battle against the vicious enemy has become complete, as illustrated in Figure (4).

4. Conclusion

The study allowed us to identify the specifics and the functions of conceptual metaphors and metaphorical modeling used in crisis risks discourse. Although the use of metaphors supports the conceptualization and verbalization of a worldview of the CPC, metaphorical modeling may have unexpected malfunctioning and serious side effects. Using military metaphorical structures with “WE ARE IN A WAR”, “X IS OUR ENEMY,” etc. in a non-military context imposes an aggressive image of the reconstructed world. This metaphorical modeling may stimulate anxiety, fear, panic and possibly prompts irrational actions. Such intentional conduct, we
firmly believe, invests more in spreading horror of risks than in building awareness of such them.

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مargins

1. This term is used interchangeably with its contracted form “Corona”, especially in English translations of Arabic texts.
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