ARGUMENT IS WAR Metaphors in Current Politics

Chelsea Coe & Bodo Winter
University of California, Merced

ARGUMENT IS WAR is a classic example of a conceptual metaphor that structures the way we think and talk about arguments in discussions and debates (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980: ch.1; cf. Gibbs, 1994: 249). There are many other metaphors for arguments (e.g., ARGUMENT IS BUILDING, ARGUMENT IS JOURNEY, see Lakoff & Johnson, 1980: ch. 16-17; cf. Kövesces, 2002: 80), but ARGUMENT IS WAR is used especially in context of politics. In the 2012 U.S. presidential election, swing states were turned into "battleground states", and the image of the candidates physically hurting each other was reinforced through progressively violent language, such as when the Daily Telegraph described Romney and his opponents as putting up "a fierce if ungentlemanly fight (biting and scratching were allowed)".

In this study, we report the results of two corpus analyses and a pilot experiment on variations of the ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor. In the first corpus analysis, we analyzed a random sample of 60 newspaper articles over the time period between November 2011 and April 2012. Within these articles, there was a total of 141 instances of the ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor. Across these instances, the source domain was described with a diversity of different scenes (e.g., schoolyard fights, boxing matches, old battlegrounds). Moreover, the degree of violence implicated by the different instantiations of the metaphor varied widely: candidates were portrayed from a range of just "attacking" each other to violently "slaughtering" each other.

The second corpus analysis focused on articles discussing the three presidential debates. We again found a large variety of different instantiations of the source domain WAR. Some of these metaphors, such as "data-driven attack", "verbal jousting" or "damaging phrase", directly mixed descriptions of arguments and physical fights within a single expression. Interestingly, in the third presidential debate, which was focused on foreign policy (e.g., civil war in Syria, American casualties in Libya), there were noticeably less instances of the ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor. This is perhaps because in this debate, the source domain was talked about in a concrete fashion (talking about actual wars), potentially pre-empting the use of metaphorical expressions that use WAR as a source domain.

In a small follow-up study on these corpus analyses, we asked university undergraduates to read a short text that either contained no ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor, a mildly violent ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor, or a very violent ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor such as the following one:

> "As we approach the election, Romney and Obama are at war for the Presidency. The recent debate left the opponents with bloody wounds and gashes. In the media, they are slaughtering each other with negative ads. A fight to the end."

Subsequently, we asked participants how they felt about politics. While there was no difference between the mildly violent and the no- ARGUMENT IS WAR condition, we found that people who reported that they would vote for Obama in the upcoming election were turned off by the strongly violent text, and Romney voters were not affected as much. This provides one telling example of how a metaphor can have a variety of effects on different language users, and how differences within the source domain play a role in forming political opinions and attitudes. We will discuss these results with respect to research on emotional and embodied reactions to politics (in line with Lakoff, 2008; Lakoff & Wehling, 2012).

References

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