

## Original Paper

# A Critical Analysis of Conceptual Metaphor in Inaugural

## Address by Joseph Biden

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Received: July 28, 2023      Accepted: September 15, 2023      Online Published: September 27, 2023  
doi:10.22158/eltls.v5n4p126      URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/eltls.v5n4p126>

### **Abstract**

*Metaphors play a crucial role in political discourses. This study critically analyzes conceptual metaphors found in inaugural address by the US President Joseph Biden in 2021. It is found that Biden has employed different conceptual metaphors to simply complex political views, making them more relatable and understandable to the public. At the same time, the president tries to use the power of metaphors to influence public perception and political ideologies in achieving social goals, highlighting the significance of personal sacrifice and unity. The incorporation of metaphors in political speeches is not a mere rhetorical flourish but rather a deliberate strategic choice. Therefore, it is essential for audiences to critically evaluate the underlying meanings and biases the speech may carry.*

### **Keywords**

*critical analysis, inaugural address, conceptual metaphor, political discourses*

### **1. Introduction**

Metaphor, as a matter of words, referring to words or expressions meaning different from their literal definition, is an effective rhetoric device often found in literature. In 1980, the idea of conceptual metaphor proposed by Lakoff and Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By* has opened doors to study metaphors in thinking and acting. Conceptual metaphors are “enduring conceptual mappings from source to target domains that motivate a wide range of linguistic expressions” (Gibbs, 2002, p. 80). This kind of conceptual mappings from source to target domain is conventionalized across a speech community to conceptualize the world. The more conceptually accessible and concrete source domains tend to represent inaccessible and abstract target domains. That reveals metaphor is not only a matter of

words, but also a matter of thought hidden in language. Therefore, apart from literature, it is not surprising to see metaphors are pervasive in political discourses which are an inevitable way for many politicians to make their ideas and propositions accepted.

Political speeches embodying thought, policy decisions and strategies, inevitably represent certain political stance and group interest. As a kind of typical political speeches, the inaugural address of a political leader marks a pivotal moment in their tenure, setting the tone for their administration and outlining their vision for the future. That political speeches are dull and abstract, however, makes it hard to understand and accept by many audiences. This makes speechmakers consciously employ more accessible and salient matters to represent exclusive things. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), the fact that people in part conceptualize things systematically influences the shape they take and the way people talk about them because metaphorical concepts are systematic. Thus, there is no wonder that conceptual metaphors are commonly found in inaugural address. Politicians often use metaphors that resonate with people's underlying views, and the repetition of such metaphors blunts people's conditioned, non-critical underlying predispositions and internal response (Sun & Li, 2019) so they can present their vision of the country, set forth their goals for the nation, and prompt people to support their political beliefs.

This study aims to critically analyze the use of conceptual metaphor in the inaugural address delivered by Joseph Biden, the 46th President of the United States, intending to gain insights into the underlying ideologies, values, and goals of his presidency. By critically analyzing these metaphors, ways in which Biden framed and conceptualized his ideas will be delved into.

## 2. Literature Review

Conceptual metaphor explores how metaphors shape our understanding of abstract concepts by mapping them onto more concrete domains. Numerous scholars have contributed to the development of this theory, and there is a substantial body of literature on the subject.

One influential work of conceptual metaphor is *Metaphors We Live by* from Lakoff and Johnson published in 1980. In this seminal work, Lakoff and Johnson argued that metaphors were not just linguistic devices, but fundamental to our conceptual system, which structured our understanding of the world and shape our thoughts and actions. This study shed lights on the importance of metaphors in thoughts. *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction* by Zoltán Kövecses is another significant work to conceptual metaphor theory. By discussing various conceptual metaphors in different domains such as emotions and politics, Kövecses (2002) provided a comprehensive overview of the theory and its applications, showing that conceptual metaphors in political discourses examine how conceptual metaphors shaped political discourse and influenced public opinions. In *Don't Think of an Elephant*, Lakoff (2004) studied how metaphors were adopted in political communication to conceptualize issues and shape political debates. Based on Lakoff's Framing Theory, Wang (2011) conducted a contrastive study of Bush and Obama's speeches on U.S. policy toward the Islamic world, which revealed the

power and persuasion of conceptual metaphors in political speeches and formed a theoretical foundation for promoting China's foreign policy, news communication, etc. In 2008, Gibbs presents a comprehensive overview of research on metaphor and thought in a wide range of topics, including the cognitive processes involved in metaphor comprehension and production, the relationship between metaphor and culture, etc. In the same year, Semino (2008) proposed that a variety of metaphors were employed in discourses, with different appearances and functions, attaching great importance to political discourses.

Political discourses are important in linguistic studies. In the early stage, researches on political discourses focus on critical analysis (Liang & Wang, 2013). For example, the way that political discourses reflect and shape social structures and ideologies was studied by Fairclough in *Discourse and Social Change* in 1992. Fairclough (1992) provided valuable insights into the relationship among language, power, and social change in a critical way. In recent years, studies of political discourses employing cognitive linguistic theories has risen, particularly those related to metaphor. Charteris-Black (2004) proposed a critical approach to researching metaphors, an integration of cognitive linguistics, pragmatic approaches to metaphor, critical discourse analysis, and corpus linguistics. Charteris-Black (2004) examined the use of metaphor in both manifestos and political speeches and found that metaphors drawing on the source domain of religion were motivated by a conceptual metaphor *POLITICS IS RELIGION*, which constituted a new "ethical" political discourse, showing the significance of metaphor in political discourse. His studies and findings provide a practical guidance on how to analyze metaphors in political texts and offer insights into the complexities of political discourse. Zhang and Liu (2022) employed a corpus-based analysis of *Report on the Work of the Government in 2020*, in which they identified and summarized three types of metaphor: ontological metaphor, directional metaphor and structural metaphor. This study uncovered functions of metaphors used in political discourses, aiming to enable readers to interpret political correctly in terms of cognition and pragmatics.

In this chapter I have reviewed previous studies on conceptual metaphor and metaphors in political discourses. It can be concluded that metaphor has a significant persuasive role in constructing political meanings and thus influencing public cognition, ideologies, and persuasions. A combination of corpus and critical approach to political discourses is vital for the analysis of conceptual metaphors in the inaugural address.

### 3. Research Method

As one of conscious linguistic choices, metaphor uncovers hidden social processes. The analysis of conceptual metaphors in Joseph Biden's inaugural address is based on Critical Metaphor Analysis proposed by Charteris-Black in 2004. According to Charteris-Black (2004), Critical Metaphor Analysis aims to shed lights on the covert and possibly unconscious intentions of language users. Therefore, it helps to conceal the underlying way of constructing the discourse and dominating his audiences by

Joseph Biden. In order to achieve the goal, the inaugural address by Joseph Biden is treated as a small corpus at first, and conceptual metaphors are identified through close readings and deep understanding of the corpus. The conceptual metaphors are then analyzed by categorizing them into different types according to Charteris Black (2004): conflict metaphor, religious Metaphor, human metaphor, journey metaphors, building metaphors, physical environment metaphors, etc. The interpretation and explanation of conceptual metaphors in Joseph Biden's inauguration in 2021 are conducted successively in specific examples.

#### 4. Data Analysis

Joseph Biden's inaugural speech was coldly realistic about the bleak prospects ahead—from the pandemic, from economic collapse, from the climate crisis, from the assault on democracy and truth. He signaled how he would approach his job by employing metaphors source domains that are commonly understood such as conflict metaphors, religious metaphors, journey metaphors, etc. This chapter focuses on analyzing the conceptual metaphors used in Joseph Biden's inaugural address after close reading the discourse and the identification of the conceptual metaphors. Table 5. 1 provides an overview of the source domains and resonance of the metaphors used in the inaugural address.

**Table 4.1 Types and Resonance of Metaphors in Joseph Biden's Inaugural Speech**

Source domain	Types total	Total tokens	Resonance	% of total resonance
Conflict Metaphors	25	40	1000	52.44%
Religious Metaphors	16	35	560	29.37%
Human Metaphors	11	15	165	8.65%
Journey Metaphors	6	12	72	3.78%
Building Metaphors	7	9	63	3.30%
Physical Environment Metaphors	4	5	20	1.05%
Plant Metaphors	4	4	16	0.84%
Illness Metaphors	2	3	6	0.31%
Object Metaphors	2	2	4	0.21%
Fire and light Metaphors	1	1	1	0.05%
Total	78	126	1907	100%

The second column lists the number of different types of word in the metaphor, and the third column shows the metaphorical tokens, namely the actual number of metaphors. The resonance provided in the fourth column is working out by multiplying the number of types and the number of tokens. According to Charteris-Black (2004), the resonance indicates the extent to which metaphor source domains are

found in the discourse, enabling us to measure and to compare the productivity of source domains. In other words, higher resonance of the source domain means higher frequency of the metaphor.

It can be seen from Table 5.1 that conflict metaphors and religious metaphors are the two most resonant domains, accounting for 52.44 percent and 29.37 percent respectively. In the following section, the author takes a close look at the five top resonant domains: conflict, religion, human, journey, and building.

#### *4.1 Conflict Metaphors*

Since the resonance of conflict metaphor ranks the top in Table 5.1, this section centers on conflict metaphors in Joseph Biden's inaugural speech. The analysis of conflict metaphors employs the subcategories proposed by Charteris-Black in his book *Approaches to Metaphor*. They are metaphors of defense, metaphors of attack and metaphors of struggle. This classification is based on the semantic orientation of the metaphor keyword. For instance, words such as retreat and defend are associated with the notion of defense. Politicians adopt conflict metaphors to highlight the personal sacrifice and physical struggle necessary to achieve social goals (Charteris-Black, 2004).

(1) Today we celebrate the triumph, not of a candidate, but of a cause, the cause of democracy. The people, the will of the people, has been heard, and the will of the people has been heeded.

(2) And each of us has a duty and a responsibility as citizens, as Americans, and especially as leaders, leaders who have pledged to honor our Constitution and protect our nation, to defend the truth and defeat the lies.

(3) I will defend the Constitution. I'll defend our democracy. I'll defend America.

(4) Through Civil War, The Great Depression, World War, 911, through struggle, sacrifices, and setbacks, our better angels have always prevailed.

Example (1) indicates Biden's election marks the triumph of democracy and is the choice of Americans, showing his political message revolves around the idea of win or lose sacrifice and fight, deriving from a general metaphor—Politics is Conflict.

To explain the following examples, it should be noted that at the beginning of Joseph Biden's address, he made a point of telling his audience that the pandemic, climate crisis, economic downturn, and the violation of democracy are not only challenges for the government, but also crisis for everyone's lives, example (2) suggests that everyone is responsible for overcoming the above challenges, emphasizing personal duty to protect the nation, which maps politics onto the domain of conflict and thus the negatively evaluated social phenomena are conceptualized as enemies. Then there is a call to an action in which allies are summoned, and a struggle against pandemic, climate crisis, economic downturn, etc. "Defend" is used three times in example (3), signifying that the Constitution, democracy, America, and truth are valued and being under attack from the social phenomena that are negatively evaluated. The mapping of politics onto conflict enables the president to indicate his determination to protect the public good, trying to gain the public approval.

Attack metaphors and struggle metaphors are employed by Biden to conceptualize his political

objectives in example (4). The so called “better angels” prevailed wars, economic downturn, terrorism through struggle and sacrifices, highlighting that personal sacrifice and physical struggle are necessary to achieve social goals.

#### *4.2 Religious Metaphors*

Religion is a significant social culture in the past and present of the United States (Wang, 2008) since it can strongly influence an individual’s ideologies by shaping their values, morals, and beliefs. It has also played a significant role in shaping American politics. Religious expressions can be easily found in politic discourse. For example, George Washington proposed “fervent supplications to that Almighty Being who rules over the universe” in the nation’s very first inaugural address (Coe, 2016). Joseph Biden is the second Catholic president in American history after John F. Kennedy. It’s not surprising the resonance of religious metaphor lies second in his speech. This section focuses on religious metaphors in the discourse.

(5) This is democracy’s day, a day of history and hope, of renewal and resolve.

(6) So now, on this hallowed ground, where just a few days ago violence sought to shake the Capitol’s very foundation, we come together as one nation, under God, indivisible, to carry out the peaceful transfer of power as we have for more than two centuries.

(7) But the answer is not to turn inward, to retreat into competing factions, distrusting those who don’t look like you or worship the way you do or don’t get their news from the same source as you do.

(8) Many centuries ago, St. Augustine, a saint in my church, wrote that a people was a multitude defined by the common objects of their love.

(9) May God bless America and may God protect our troops.

It is known that the United States is officially secular as the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution prohibits the government from establishing or favoring any religion. However, many American politicians still draw upon their religious beliefs for personal guidance. The use of “renewal”, “hallowed”, “worship”, “sacred”, “God”, etc. in the above sentences forms a chain that underpins a strong religious theme in the speech, showing that the conceptual metaphor—Politics is Religion—is used systematically to create coherence in the inauguration speech and serves as a source domain to invoke spiritual aspirations into the political domain and links the president with a commitment to his faith. A critical function of metaphor is the “‘achievement of intimacy’ in which the maker and the appreciator of a metaphor are drawn closer to one another” (Cohen, 1978, p. 6). For example, only those who are familiar with Catholicism can understand “Many centuries ago, St. Augustine, a saint in my church, wrote that a person was a multitude defined by the common objects of their love.” Thus, the president’s religious expressions not only avoid proposal that seem overly calculated, but also make audience feel authentic.

#### *4.3 Human Metaphor*

Human metaphors “allows us to comprehend a wide variety of experiences with nonhuman entities in terms of human motivations, characteristics, and activities.” (Lakoff, 1980, p33). Hence, they are often

used in political discourse to simplify complex political ideas and make them more accessible and understandable to the general public. These metaphors draw parallels between aspects of human behavior or experience and the political realm, allowing for a more vivid and relatable discussion. Here are examples from Joseph Biden's inauguration speech:

(10) And I know the resilience of our constitution and the strength, the strength of our nation, as does President Carter who I spoke with last night, who cannot be with us today, but whom we salute for his lifetime in service.

(11) A cry for survival comes from planet itself.

(12) Democracy and hope, truth, and justice, did not die on our watch, but thrived, that America secured liberty at home and stood once again as a beacon to the world.

(13) The work and prayers of centuries have brought us to this day.

In example (10), the United States Constitution is being compared to a person that can withstand and bounce back from challenges or difficulties. Meanwhile, the United States is being compared to a person that possesses strong physical power. "Resilience and strength" introduce the notion that America always has great power to be strong again. Using human metaphors allows Biden to make his message more resonating with his audience.

In example (11), "cry" usually refers to a loud sound without words that expresses a strong feeling. "A cry from planet" shows that the planet is personified as speaking or expressing its distress, indicating the urgency and seriousness of the environmental issues. Similarly, "democracy", "hope", "truth", and "justice" in example (12) are being personified as entities that can either live or die. Death in political discourse can symbolize a significant change, downfall, or termination of a particular political entity, system, or policy. The combination of the notion that these ideals didn't die and the notion that America secured liberty at home and stood once again indicates that the nation has not only survived but has flourished and made itself a guiding light for others.

"Have brought" used in example (13) shows the power of "the work and prayers" over a long period of time, which enables the president to emphasize the profound and lasting impact of the collective efforts and faith of generations.

#### *4.4 Journey Metaphor*

In the inaugural address, the number of journey metaphor ranks the fourth. A journey source domain involves a starting point, destination, travelers, setbacks, etc. Therefore, reaching the destination is of positive value. According to Lakoff (1980), metaphorical expressions are tied to metaphorical concepts in a systematical way, which can be seen from the following examples:

(14) This is our historic moment of crisis and challenge, and unity is the path forward.

(15) Politics doesn't have to be a raging fire, destroying everything in its path.

(16) History, faith, and reason show the way, the way of unity.

(17) And if we are this way, our country will be stronger, more prosperous, more ready for the future.

(18) Are we going to step up, all of us?

In the above examples, metaphors from the domain of journey are systematically employed to describe a purposeful social activity. In example (14), Biden emphasizes the idea that navigating through a crisis and overcoming challenges requires unity, positioning unity as the path or route to a better future. In example (15), however, a destructive and chaotic political environment is contrasted to a raging fire that destroys everything in its path, or unity, suggesting the need for a more controlled and constructive approach to politics. Next, metaphors in example (16) and example (17) help to invoke history, faith, and reason as guiding forces that lead to unity which is conceptualized as the desired destination on the political journey, and to posit that being united as a country will result in strength, prosperity, and preparedness for the future. In example (18), collective action and contribution to the political journey are required by inviting all individuals to step up. The use of journey metaphors in the inaugural discourse serves as a strategy to convey the importance of collective effort to overcome a set of challenges like epidemic, repairing alliances, etc.

#### *4.5 Building Metaphor*

Building metaphors are frequently employed in political discourse to convey ideas and shape public opinion. In Joseph Biden's address, they serve to construct a mental image that helps explain the significance of his party and the unity to make America strong again.

(19) So now, on this hallowed ground, where just a few days ago violence sought to shake the Capitol's very foundation, we come together as one nation, under God, indivisible, to carry out the peaceful transfer of power as we have for more than two centuries.

(20) Much to repair, much to restore, much to heal, much to build, and much to gain.

(21) Within the guardrails of our republic, it's perhaps this nation's greatest strength.

In example (19), the word "foundation" refers to the fundamental principles or values upon which a political system or ideology is built. As a Democrat, Biden employs building metaphor here to accuse the Capitol attack launched by a mob of supporters of Republican Donald Trump, who attempt to undermine the core values and principles on which the nation stands. At the same time, he emphasizes the strength and resilience of the Capitol as the foundation of democracy.

In example (20), the phrase "much to repair, much to restore, much to heal, much to build" represents the idea of rebuilding the United States after it has experienced difficulties and adversity. The nation is conceptualized as a damaged building requiring repair, which "implies social co-operation since buildings are rarely constructed single-handedly" (Charles-Black, 2004, p96).

The word "guardrail" refers to a railing guarding (a building component) usually against danger. In example (21), "within the guardrails of our republic..." conveys a positive valuation of American republic because it protects the nation from danger or foes. The building metaphor is used to highlight the stability and structure of the nation's democratic system, suggesting that the framework of laws and institutions provides support and direction for the nation's functioning.



## 5. Conclusion

This study has analyzed the significance of conceptual metaphors identified in Joseph Biden's inaugural speech in shaping public perception, and political ideology. Through the identification of metaphors, a great many of the metaphors are found in reference to source domains like conflict metaphor, religious metaphor, human metaphor, building metaphor, journey metaphor, plant metaphor, etc. The author focuses the top five source domains-conflict metaphor, religious metaphor, human metaphor, building metaphor and journey metaphor-in accordance with the total resonance of each source domain, which helps measure and compare the productivity of source domains. It is found that through systematically associations of words, these metaphors are selected to help the president show his determination to rise to the negatively evaluated social phenomena and make the America strong again. In addition to highlighting the necessity of his party in the nation's functioning, the president also stresses that personal sacrifice and unity are of great importance in pursuing the public good, in a persuasive way by employing religious metaphor. Hence, it can be concluded that metaphors are not just linguistic devices, they are strategic choices employed by politicians to make their ideas and policies more relatable and understandable to the public since they can provide individuals with mental shortcuts to understand complex political ideas.

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