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CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF POLITICAL REALITY: THE OPPOSITION “THE PEOPLE” VS. “THE ELITES” IN TRUMP’S INAUGURAL DISCOURSE

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The article analyzes conceptual metaphors in Donald Trump’s inaugural speeches that construct the opposition between “the people” and “the elites,” with a focus on their role in shaping political reality and creating ideological frames for its interpretation. To identify and interpret metaphorical models in political discourse, the study employs the method of conceptual metaphor analysis based on the approach of Lakoff and Johnson, as well as on the modified version of Conceptual Metaphor Theory proposed by Kövecses. As a result of the analysis, the following structural and ontological conceptual metaphors are identified: GOVERNING IS MINING, PEOPLE ARE A MINEABLE RESOURCE, MORAL DECAY IS STRUCTURAL COLLAPSE, CORRUPTION IS HARVESTING, GOVERNMENT ACTIVITIES ARE HARVESTING, FINANCIAL COSTS ARE BURDENS, which at a deeper level derive from general-level conceptual metaphors such as: ACQUIRING BENEFITS IS TAKING PHYSICAL OBJECTS, POWER IS A PHYSICAL RESOURCE, PROBLEMS ARE PHYSICAL LOADS, SOCIETY IS A BUILDING. It is argued that conceptual metaphors establish an interpretive frame of political reality in which the elites are portrayed as a source of threat, the people as victims, and the president as the one who must restore balance, purge corruption, and return what has been stolen to the people. Through conceptual metaphors, the inaugural speeches construct a symbolic narrative of struggle against the “usurpation” of power by the elites, the restoration of a just order, and renewal. Thus, the metaphorical framework of presidential discourse shapes a political mythologeme of crisis and salvation, legitimizes the need for renewal and mobilization, and assigns to the president the role of the restorer of order. The prospects for further research include identifying and systematizing various metaphorical models in Trump’s speeches in terms of their impact on the construction of political meanings, as well as comparing Trump’s conceptual metaphors with those of other American presidents from this perspective.

Key words: conceptual metaphor, inaugural speech, Trump, construction of political reality, narrative, political mythologeme.

Ставцева Вікторія, Жихарєва Олена. Концептуальна метафора в конструюванні політичної реальності: опозиція «НАРОД» VS. «ЕЛІТИ» в інавгураційному дискурсі Трампа

У статті аналізуються концептуальні метафори в інавгураційних промовах Дональда Трампа, які конструюють опозицію між «народом» та «елітами», з погляду їхньої ролі в конструюванні політичної реальності та створенні ідеологічних фреймів з її інтерпретації. Для виявлення та інтерпретації метафоричних моделей у політичному дискурсі залучається метод концептуально-метафоричного аналізу, що ґрунтується на підході Лакоффа і Джонсона, а також на модифікованій

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версії теорії концептуальної метафори, запропонованій Ковечесом. У результаті аналізу ідентифіковані такі структурні та онтологічні концептуальні метафори, як *GOVERNING IS MINING*, *PEOPLE ARE A MINEABLE RESOURCE*, *MORAL DECAY IS STRUCTURAL COLLAPSE*, *CORRUPTION IS HARVESTING*, *GOVERNMENT ACTIVITIES IS THE HARVEST*, *FINANCIAL COSTS ARE BURDENS*, що в більш глибокій структурі є похідними від концептуальних метафор загального рівня: *ACQUIRING BENEFITS IS TAKING PHYSICAL OBJECTS*, *POWER IS A PHYSICAL RESOURCE*, *PROBLEMS ARE PHYSICAL LOADS*, *SOCIETY IS A BUILDING*. Обґрунтовано, що концептуальні метафори задають фрейм інтерпретації політичної реальності, в якому еліти виявляються джерелом загрози, народ – жертвою, а президент – тим, хто має відновити баланс, очистити від корупції та повернути вкрадене народу. За допомогою концептуальних метафор інавгураційні промови конструюють символічний наратив боротьби з «узурпацією» влади елітами, відновлення справедливого порядку та відродження. Отже, метафоричний каркас президентського дискурсу формує політичну міфологему кризи та порятунку, легітимізує необхідність оновлення та мобілізації та закріплює за президентом роль відновника порядку. Перспективою подальших досліджень убачаємо виявлення та систематизацію різноманітних метафоричних моделей у промовах Трампа з огляду їх впливу на конструювання політичних значень, а також порівняння в цьому ракурсі концептуальних метафор Трампа з метафорами інших американських президентів.

Ключові слова: концептуальна метафора, інавгураційна промова, Трамп, конструювання політичної реальності, наратив, політична міфологема.

Problem statement. In contemporary political discourse, conceptual metaphors “play a central role in the construction of social and political reality” [1, p. 159], functioning as one of the key instruments for shaping public perceptions of events, social processes, and political actors. Through metaphorical models, evaluative frames are established, interpretations are formed, and emotional responses are elicited, all of which directly influence public opinion and political behavior.

In this sense, the linguo-cognitive approach to the study of metaphor intersects with the discourse-theoretical perspective, in which metaphor is viewed not as a means of argumentation but as an “agent” of discourse, reflecting shared representations within particular social groups and exerting a substantial impact on the construction of social reality. Since social experiences are conceptualized in metaphorical terms, politics, as part of the social sphere, must likewise be perceived and constructed metaphorically [2, p. 2]. According to Ankersmit, “no field is richer in metaphor than political theory” [3, p. 155].

In the context of increasing media coverage of public communication and the spread of symbolic influence strategies, the analysis of metaphors becomes an important way to understand how political reality is constructed and which meanings become dominant in public perception. Therefore, the study of the role of conceptual metaphors in inaugural discourse is highly relevant both for linguistics and for

interdisciplinary research in the humanities concerned with the mechanisms of political communication and influence.

Literature review. In recent decades, research on political metaphors has acquired a new linguo-cognitive orientation linked to the emergence and development of Conceptual Metaphor Theory [1; 4; 5], which views metaphor as a cognitive operation underlying linguistic metaphor. Contemporary studies focus on various aspects of conceptual political metaphors as a mechanism for constructing political reality. In particular, scholars analyze the systematic use of metaphor as a rhetorical tool in creating political meaning [6; 7], appealing to emotions often bypassing rationality. In this regard, the analysis of metaphors “provides particular insight into why the rhetoric of political leaders is successful” [7, p. 197].

Researchers substantiate the function of metaphor in political mythmaking [8; 9; 10], arguing that in political contexts metaphor, like myth, provides a link between people’s unconscious cultural and physical experience and explicit ideology and policy. Other studies highlight the pragmatic role of conceptual metaphors as “tools of persuasive communication” [11, p. 24] that “symbolically suggest a course of action” to the audience; “if audience members accept the applicability of a metaphor, then the course of action suggested by the metaphor is seen as a viable option” [12, p. 5].

An important focus of contemporary research is the identification of the cognitive effects of

conceptual metaphor in political argumentation [13; 14; 15]. The analogical relationship between source and target domains implies not only the transfer of semantic structures but also emotional and evaluative dimensions into the domain of politics. Drawing on deeply entrenched cultural schemas, politicians employ conceptual metaphors (realized in discourse through linguistic metaphor) as one of the key mental operations that structure and explain political processes and realities [6].

In *Moral Politics* [4], Lakoff applies Conceptual Metaphor Theory to political discourse and convincingly demonstrates that, due to deeply internalized conceptual systems, metaphors exert a direct influence on the construction of political reasoning. Lakoff notes the high productivity of the family-based morality metaphor, which conceptualizes the nation on the basis of what we know about the family, through such metaphorical mappings as: the Nation is a Family, the Government is a Parent, and Citizens are Children [4, p. 154–155]. At the same time, this high-level metaphor is systematically connected with other metaphorical concepts, such as well-being is wealth, moral action is giving something of positive value, and immoral action is giving something of negative value [4, p. 44–47].

These theoretical insights provide a productive framework for the analysis of contemporary political discourse, where such metaphorical systems are not merely abstract cognitive structures but are actively employed as tools of ideological positioning and symbolic boundary-making. Within this perspective, particular attention should be paid to how conceptual metaphors are used to construct fundamental ideological oppositions, including the division between “in-groups” and “out-groups”, “the people” and “the elites”, or “moral” and “immoral” political actors. These oppositions are not merely rhetorical devices but cognitively grounded mechanisms of political meaning-making.

To the best of our knowledge, the metaphorical models in Donald Trump’s inaugural discourse that construct the opposition between “the people” and “the elites” have not been the subject of a focused academic study, which establishes both the novelty and relevance of the present article.

The purpose of the article is to determine how conceptual metaphors structuring the

opposition between “the people” and “the elites” participate in the construction of political reality in Donald Trump’s inaugural speeches [16; 17] and what ideological and interpretative effects they produce.

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- (a) to identify the key conceptual metaphors used in the inaugural speeches;
- (b) to describe their cognitive mechanisms;
- (c) to analyze how metaphorical models form oppositions, frames, and political narratives;
- (d) to determine the role of metaphor in constructing political mythologemes and strategies of legitimation.

Methods. The methodological framework of the study is grounded in the principles of cognitive linguistics and Conceptual Metaphor Theory [1], including its modified version proposed by Zoltan Kövecses [5]. The research employs qualitative content analysis and conceptual-metaphorical analysis to identify and interpret metaphorical models in political discourse. Elements of Critical Discourse Analysis are also applied to establish the ideological functions of metaphors and their role in forming oppositional frames in the construction of political reality. The analysis is based on the systematization of metaphorical expressions, reconstruction of their conceptual structure, and identification of their communicative and pragmatic effects within the context of inaugural discourse.

Analysis and Discussion. Trump’s discourse is saturated with intense metaphorical imagery which, as researchers note, predominantly activates connotations of unhappiness, insecurity, and dissatisfaction, “associated with constructing the frame of ‘threat’ with the dominant emotion of fear and with the opposition between demonized ‘others’ and the group or (leader) who is presented as having the strength to confront them” [15, p. 263]. The metaphors employed in Trump’s speeches draw on source domains such as traps, crime, cemeteries, massacre, disease/pain (both physical and psychological), destroyed buildings/structures, violence, war, and illness.

Let us examine one of Trump’s metaphorical statements, which includes several metaphorical expressions grounded in a set of conceptual metaphors and submetaphors:

For many years, a radical and corrupt establishment has extracted power and wealth from our citizens while the pillars of our

society lay broken and seemingly in complete disrepair [16].

The phrase *the pillars of our society lay broken and seemingly in complete disrepair* activates the structural conceptual metaphor SOCIETY IS A BUILDING, which conceptualizes social, political, and moral phenomena in terms of construction, stability, foundation, and collapse. The core semantic focus of the source domain here is on strength versus destruction. The conceptual submetaphor MORAL DECAY IS STRUCTURAL COLLAPSE is manifested in the expression *lay broken and in complete disrepair*, which conceptualizes moral and political crises as physical destruction and creates the atmosphere of systemic collapse.

Through the strategy of extending, new contextually motivated frames are introduced: the agents of destruction, the victim, and the need for reconstruction and a restorer. Through the strategy of elaboration, these frames further expand the source domains of BUILDING and STRUCTURAL COLLAPSE, enriching their interpretative potential.

The metaphorical expression *a radical and corrupt establishment has extracted power and wealth from our citizens* activates two conceptual metaphors: (a) GOVERNING IS MINING, which presents power and wealth as valuable resources that can be extracted, drained, or mined; (b) PEOPLE ARE A MINEABLE RESOURCE, in which citizens are conceptualized as a source from which wealth can be extracted.

At a deeper level, both metaphors are grounded in the ontological conceptual metaphor POWER IS A PHYSICAL RESOURCE, which conceptualizes power as a material substance that can be possessed, transferred, or taken from others.

In Trump's discourse, these metaphors construct a clear dichotomy between "we", that is the nation unified under the President (explicitly marked through collective identity markers such as *our citizens*), and "they" – internal enemies (the political establishment), represented as carriers of moral decay, injustice, and evil. This dichotomy is further intensified through explicit antithesis, which is marked by a conjunction *while* and reinforces the moral opposition between the people and the corrupt elite.

The metaphorical representation of the elite as coldly exploiting the people as a material

resource, while remaining indifferent to the structural collapse of society, contributes to the construction of a political message aimed at mobilizing the nation around the President in a struggle against the elites and for national renewal. At the same time, it symbolically legitimizes the possibility of radical measures intended to "purify" and "restore" society.

The elaboration of metaphorical meanings promotes the construction of political mythologemes of sacrifice and salvation, based on a narrative structure that includes the following components: the victim – "our citizens"; the villain – the "radical and corrupt" establishment; and the messianic hero-liberator called upon to restore the "pillars", eradicate corruption, and reclaim what has been stolen.

A similar dichotomy of "elites versus people", representing the conceptual metaphors ELITES ARE PARASITES and PEOPLE ARE VICTIMS, is constructed through a metaphorical expression from Trump's 2017 inaugural address. In this case, the left pole of the opposition includes not only the people but also the government, implicitly aligning the people and the government against the elites:

For too long, a small group in our nation's Capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost [17].

In this fragment, two metaphors are employed, marked respectively by the phrases such as *a small group in our nation's Capital has reaped the rewards of government* and *the people have borne the cost*. The elites, implicitly designated as *a small group in our nation's Capital*, are metaphorically compared to harvesters, corruption is conceptualized as harvesting, and government activity is framed as a crop yielding benefits.

These relations may be formalized as the metaphorical models CORRUPTION IS HARVESTING, which are derived from higher-level metaphors such as ACQUIRING BENEFITS IS TAKING PHYSICAL OBJECTS and POLITICAL POWER IS A RESOURCE that can be appropriated.

The expression *the people have borne the cost* activates the conceptual metaphor FINANCIAL COSTS ARE BURDENS, which in turn derives from more general experiential metaphors such as DIFFICULTIES ARE PHYSICAL WEIGHT and PROBLEMS ARE PHYSICAL LOADS. Social and economic hardships are thus

metaphorically conceptualized as physical loads carried by the people.

The combination of these two metaphorical scenarios – the elites reap the benefits of power and the people carry the burden of costs – forms a clearly structured opposition between “elites” and “people”. Within this oppositional frame, the elites are represented as agents who appropriate the outcomes of state activity, whereas the people are portrayed as those who suffer the consequences. Importantly, this configuration does not merely describe a social situation but constructs a specific political reality in which the government, contrary to traditional populist framing, is metaphorically positioned on the side of the people. This creates an implicit coalition of “people + government against corrupt elites”, morally legitimizing presidential power as a force for restoring justice.

The metaphorical models CORRUPTION IS HARVESTING and FINANCIAL COSTS ARE BURDENS not only give vividness to representations of social inequality but also structure the interpretation of the political situation in terms of asymmetrical resource distribution, in line with basic experiential metaphors, such as DIFFICULTIES ARE PHYSICAL WEIGHT and ACQUIRING BENEFITS IS TAKING OBJECTS. As a result, metaphors function as tools for constructing a morally charged political narrative in which the elites appear as a source of threat, the people as victims, and the president as the figure destined to restore balance.

Such metaphorical framing, on the one hand, intensifies the emotional impact of the statement and, on the other hand, performs an important conceptual and structuring function by establishing an interpretative frame for political reality in which the inaugural address becomes an act of restoring a just order and a symbolic beginning of resistance against the “usurpation” of power by elites.

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Conclusions. The analysis shows that conceptual metaphors in Donald Trump’s inaugural addresses perform a pivotal role in constructing political reality by setting interpretive frames for the perception of the socio-political situation. Metaphorical models establish a value-laden opposition between “the people” and “the elites”, in which the former are portrayed as victims of systemic injustice and the latter as the source of moral and political decline.

Metaphors of resource distribution and burden structure the representation of unequal load, intensifying the sense of an unjust political system. Structural conceptual metaphors that depict society in terms of solidity, breakdown, and restoration create an image of a country in crisis requiring decisive intervention. Complementary ontological conceptual metaphors conceptualize power as an extractable resource and citizens as objects of exploitation and produce a morally polarized narrative in which political struggle is framed as a confrontation between the “victim” and the “internal enemy”.

Thus, the metaphorical framework of presidential discourse not only enhances the text’s emotional expressiveness but also performs structuring and ideological functions. It constructs a political mythologeme of crisis and salvation, legitimizes the need for renewal and mobilization, and assigns the president the role of a restorer of order. Aforementioned notions this confirms that conceptual metaphors are a crucial mechanism in shaping political reality and influencing mass consciousness.

We see the prospect of further research in identifying and systematizing all metaphorical models in Trump’s speeches in terms of their impact on the construction of political meanings, as well as comparing Trump’s conceptual metaphors with the metaphors of other presidents in this regard.

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