

Dehumanizing Metaphors in Immigration Discourse: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Political Speeches and Media Narratives

Asst. Prof. Kanaan K. Hassan (PhD)
College of Arts, University of Tikrit
k.hasan@tu.edu.iq

Abstract

Political discourse is very important for impacting the public perception and policy on immigration. This paper investigates the metaphors that dehumanize migrants during immigration debates from a CDA (Critical Discourse Analysis) perspective. We do so to understand how political and media actors construct migrants as threats through the use of language. Based on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and the socio-cognitive approach to CDA (van Dijk, 1998, 2014), the study examines selected political speeches delivered by Donald Trump and news media texts to identify persistent dehumanizing tropes. For example, these include 'invasion', 'swarms' and 'floods' and what they convey ideologically. Through exposing the discursive mechanisms through which dehumanization comes to be naturalized, this research speaks to broader debates on media responsibility, political rhetoric, and immigration policy. The study shows that orientational and structural metaphors systematically depict migrants as dangerous, a burden, and subhuman, which justifies exclusionary policies. This paper calls for the practice of ethical discourses to combat stigmatization and promote evidence.

Keywords: *dehumanizing metaphors, immigration discourse, Critical Discourse Analysis, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, political rhetoric, xenophobia, socio-cognitive approach, ideological framing*

الاستعارات المُهينة للإنسانية في خطاب الهجرة: تحليل نقدي للخطاب في الخطاب السياسية والسرديات الإعلامية

أ.م. كنعان خضير حسين

المستخلص

يُعدّ الخطاب السياسي من أكثر الأدوات تأثيراً في تشكيل الرأي العام وصياغة السياسات المتعلقة بالهجرة. تستقصي هذه الورقة البحثية الاستعارات التي تُهين كرامة المهاجرين وتنزع عنهم صفة الإنسانية في سياق النقاشات المتعلقة بالهجرة، وذلك من منظور تحليل الخطاب النقدي. ويهدف البحث إلى الكشف عن الآليات اللغوية التي يلجأ إليها الفاعلون السياسيون والإعلاميون لتصوير المهاجرين باعتبارهم مصدر تهديد. واستناداً إلى نظرية الاستعارة المفاهيمية (لايكوف وجونسون، 1980) والمقاربة الاجتماعية المعرفية لتحليل الخطاب النقدي (فان ديك، 1998، 2014)، تفحص الدراسة خطباً سياسية مختارة لدونالد ترامب ونصوصاً إعلامية، بهدف رصد الأنماط الاستعارية المُهينة المتكررة، كاستعارات "الغزو" و"الأسراب" و"الفيضانات"، وتحليل ما تتطوي عليه من دلالات أيديولوجية. ومن خلال كشف الآليات الخطابية التي تُطبع بها ظاهرة إنزال الإنسانية، يُسهم هذا البحث في الحوارات الأشمل المتعلقة بمسؤولية الإعلام، والخطاب السياسي، وسياسات الهجرة.

وتُظهر نتائج الدراسة أن الاستعارات التوجيهية والبنوية تُصوّر المهاجرين بصورة ممنهجة على أنهم خطرٌ داهم وعبءٌ ثقيل وكائناتٌ دون البشر، مما يُوفر المسوّغات الأيديولوجية للسياسات الإقصائية. وتدعو الورقة البحثية إلى تبني خطابات أخلاقية مسؤولة تُعالج ظاهرة التشهير والوصم، وتُعزز الاحتكام إلى الأدلة والحجج الموضوعية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاستعارات المُهينة للإنسانية، خطاب الهجرة، تحليل الخطاب النقدي، نظرية الاستعارة المفاهيمية، الخطاب السياسي، كره الأجانب، المقاربة الاجتماعية المعرفية، التأطير الأيديولوجي.

Introduction

The use of language for dehumanizing migrants has emerged as a significant phenomenon in contemporary political discourse. Dehumanizing discourse, once confined to war propaganda, is now entering into media and politics as a way of mobilizing forces that construct attitudes, and justify restrictions on immigration. This research will apply CDA to make sense of the discourse that portrays immigrants as security threat. Dehumanizing metaphors will be studied in political speeches and media coverage that view them as a threat to the nation.

This research is based on the Conceptual Metaphor Theory elaborated in Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and the socio-cognitive approach to CDA developed by Teun van Dijk (2001, 2014). The tools provided by CMT for identifying the cognitive mappings that underlie dehumanizing metaphors are, for instance, how framing migrants as a flood activates the schema of disaster and helplessness? Van Dijk's socio-cognitive model places these mappings in broader structures of social cognition, ideology, and power. These frameworks allow us to analyse metaphorical language at the level of the utterance and at the level of ideological reproduction, viewing them as interlinked.

The research study will address the two main research questions: (1) What dehumanizing metaphors of immigrants exist in immigration discourse especially in Donald Trump's political speeches? How do these metaphors depict immigrants as threats, and what are their ramifications for policy and public attitudes towards immigration?

The dataset contains selected excerpts of Donald Trump's political speeches from the years 2015 to 2020, which is the time when anti-immigration statements started to gain momentum in America. The chosen corpus is justified as Trump's discourse is a particularly obvious and well-documented case of the political use of dehumanising metaphors. Through CMT and CDA analysis of the speeches, the paper seeks to show how linguistic choices naturalize ideologies of exclusion and help legitimize policies that discriminate against them.

The Role of Political Discourse in Shaping Immigration Policies

Political discourse is subsequently shaping public opinion and the direction of policies. Western democracies, mainly the US and UK, have tended to interpret immigration negatively. They have focused on the dangers to security, economy, and society caused by immigration. The way that an issue is framed is never ideologically neutral. In fact, it reflects and reproduces the interests of the dominant social groups that have privileged access to public communication channels (van Dijk, 2014).

Anti-immigrant sentiments were the first issue that started making use of dehumanization. The metaphor of natural disaster floods, tidal waves, surges positions immigration as an uncontrollable force, activating cognitive schemas of helplessness and urgency. When the government uses military metaphors such as invasion and frontline, it evokes a defence schema or a national threat. This somehow legitimizes its securitization response (Buzan et al., 1998). Metaphors of disease – parasite, contagion, infestation – evoke one's disgust system and result in ideologies of purification, which represent their exclusion from the body as a public health necessity (Douglas, 1966; Haslam, 2006).

The functioning of these metaphors is not done in isolation but relies on pre-existing mental models and common ideological frameworks present on the social construction of reality. According to van Dijk (2014), given that threats to national identity or economic insecurity are already schemas that the audience has constructed, a metaphor can impact them more if it resonates with that schema. As this shows, the same metaphor can be more or less effective depending on the cultural and political context. Furthermore, repetition is at the heart of the normalization of dehumanizing frames.

The Trump Administration of the United States employed more securitising rhetoric during the refugee crisis of 2015 than some European governments but the policy effect of these discourses was different for the US and Europe. Studies have consistently shown that portraying immigration as a humanitarian obligation and cultural enrichment leads to more inclusive policies, while managing threats leads to policies which support detention, deportation and militarization (Facchini & Mayda, 2018; Flores & Schachter, 2018).

How Dehumanizing Metaphors Contribute to Xenophobia and Policy Justification

In social psychology and discourse analysis, researchers have documented the connection between dehumanizing language and xenophobic attitudes. Haslam's

(2006) integrative review identifies two kinds of dehumanization: animalistic dehumanization, which entails denying migrants their uniquely human qualities of rationality and moral agency, and mechanistic dehumanization, which views them as interchangeable units stripped of individuality. Whether punitive or exclusionary, both objective functions help to make the psychological barriers usually in place against discrimination disappear.

Critical Discourse Analysis reveals that dehumanizing metaphors work through at least three interlocking mechanisms. Initially, natural-disaster and military metaphors cognitively frame audiences to perceive immigration as an urgent situation requiring drastic intervention (Flusberg et al., 2018). This is backed by experimental research which shows that exposure to this language increases support for punitive immigration policies (Stephan et al., 2024). Second, Haslam (2006) and Esses et al. (2013) say that the second kind of metaphor is animalistic metaphors (swarms, vermin, and hordes). These contribute to social othering. By using them, we construct migrants as non-human. As a result, it makes it psychologically permissible to discriminate it against them. Another disqualifier refers to the metaphors used such as “illegals”, “gang members” and “terrorists” equating migration with wrongdoing on an illegal immigrant stage which legitimates the separation of families, detention for longer, and restrictions on asylum (Flores, 2022; Flores & Schachter, 2018).

Processes of this kind are not limited to the discursive centre alone. Research on the rhetoric used by the Trump administration surrounding immigration shows a direct relationship between their dehumanization metaphorical framing, policy outcome, and a spike in hate crimes against the Hispanic community following moments of heightened anti-immigrant rhetoric (Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017). In a similar vein, crisis messaging by political leaders allowed for pushback and offshore processing, policy responses that would otherwise have been politically impossible in Europe (Buzan et al., 1998; Wodak, 2015).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Critical discourse analysis, the study of the relationship between discourse and social factors, is an applied linguistic field of study. Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak, and Teun van Dijk are some of the famous scholars behind this theory. CDA examines language use as social practice influenced by cultural, institutional, and ideological contexts. Causal analysis of texts within CDA tends to be explicit, i.e., it aims at revealing how linguistic choices reproduce, contest, or transform power relations (Fairclough, 2003; van Dijk, 2001). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers a

framework and a method for discourse analysis. CDA examines how ideologies, identities and social realities are constructed in discourse.

A sociocognitive model proposed by van Dijk (1998, 2014), which relates text to social structures within society, is particularly relevant for the present study. The receiver's construction of meaning takes place through a mental model of the discourse presented in the text. Moreover, this interpretation is subject to the influence of ideologies and their differential access to the communicative resources of public discourse. Political and media elites (and subordinate media) who have significantly greater access to public discourse than the general public exert disproportionate influence on the contents of these mental models. The socio-cognitive approach allows for an analysis of how dehumanising metaphors work as devices of ideological reproduction rather than simply rhetorical devices by looking at the interaction of discourse structures, cognitive models and social ideologies.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980)

The Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), as set out by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) in their book *Metaphors We Live By*, reinterprets proverbial metaphor as a crucial mechanism of thought rather than a decorative part of language. CMT holds that abstract meaning is systematically understood in terms of more concrete, experiential domain. The cross domain mapping from source domain to target domain helps in determining how we talk about some abstract phenomena and how we think and respond to it.

Lakoff and Johnson classify conceptual metaphors into three categories. Organizing abstract concepts in terms of spatial orientation derived from bodily experience. For example "HAPPY IS UP" or "STATUS IS HIGH". Through ontological metaphor a phenomenon or event is viewed as an object or substance. That is we can count and quantify them. We can also understand them in terms of other senses. The most complex type of metaphor, structural metaphors allow conceptual domains to be understood through another. For example, the metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR allows us to understand our disagreement as a battle we can win or lose.

Within immigration discourse, CMT provides a powerful tool for identifying cognitive structures that form the basis for dehumanising rhetoric. When migrants are labelled as a flood or a wave, the mapping draws on the source domain of natural disaster to conceptualize immigration as an overwhelming, threatening, and uncontrollable force. Describing them as an invasion activates military source domain schemas about aggression, defense, and the nation being vulnerable. The connections established between a credible source and an undesired outcome are

neither arbitrary nor merely ornamental because they trigger different cognitive and behavioural consequences. They structure the audience's understanding of and actions towards immigration as a social phenomenon (Hart, 2010; Flusberg et al., 2018).

Methodology

Research Design

In this study, a qualitative research design based on CAD was used. The qualitative approach is applicable for this research due to the rationale that the research questions concern the interpretive and ideological dimensions, not quantifiable patterns, and also because Critical Discourse Analysis (which Rogers, 2004 considers a theory and method) requires close reading of textual data in context. The framework that underpins our analysis brings together Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory, particularly its orientational and structural dimensions, with van Dijk's (2001, 2014) socio-cognitive approach. This allows us to undertake our analysis at the text level, which includes the lexical and metaphorical choices made, the cognitive level, which includes the mental models and schemas the discourse activates within the audience, and the societal level, which refers to the ideological functions and policy implications of the metaphor as an element of discourse.

Data Collection

The data corpus comprises four selected passages from Donald Trump's speeches on immigration, given between June 2015 and November 2019. The selections were made based on their explicit use of metaphorical language to denote immigrants and immigration. The criteria for selection of passages were that they should contain identifiable metaphors which dehumanized or threat-framed and which were made in a high-profile public context with wide coverage in the media and were representative of the types of dehumanising tropes, natural disaster; military; animalistic; and criminalising – mentioned in the theoretical literature. The speeches of Trump were the primary data source selected, owing to the fact that they represent a paradigmatic and extensively documented case of the political mobilization of dehumanizing immigration rhetoric in a contemporary democracy.

Discussion and Analysis

The following analysis examines four excerpts from Donald Trump's immigration speeches through the integrated lens of Conceptual Metaphor Theory and the socio-cognitive approach to CDA. For every excerpt, the analysis finds the main

metaphorical frames, maps their thought processes, and discusses their ideology and policies.

Donald Trump's Speeches

Donald Trump's rhetoric on immigration, portrayed immigrants and refugees as criminals and subhuman. His metaphors associated Hispanic and Muslim immigrants with a barrage of crimes from murder, drug trafficking, to rape. The four excerpts below illustrate the diversity and consistency of these metaphorical strategies.

Excerpt 1: The Criminalization Metaphor (June 16, 2015)

"When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists." — Donald Trump, Campaign Launch Speech, June 16, 2015 (ABC News)

Prior to his candidacy announcement, Trump delivered a speech that formed the basis of his immigration rhetoric. In this excerpt, the dominant metaphor is that of contamination and importation of crime, whereby Mexican immigrants are represented as vectors for the transmission of social pathology, crime, drugs, and sexual violence into the body of the American nation.

From the perspective of conceptual metaphor theory, a metaphor that is active here is IMMIGRATION IS CONTAMINATION, whereby concrete physical objects like drugs, crime and rapists are mapped onto the abstract phenomenon of immigration. As per the typology developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), this is a metaphor that ontologizes the phenomenon. It makes immigration more cognitively manageable, as it presents the phenomenon as concrete, countable and a set of physically dangerous objects being transported across a border. The verb 'sending' is especially telling: it characterises Mexico as an active agent sending undesirables to America. Immigration is thus not merely a complex socioeconomic process. Rather, it is portrayed as an act of aggression from a foreign state.

The metaphorical expression "not sending their best" contains a hierarchical orientation. Through the invocation of a hierarchy that determines humans to be superior or inferior, higher and lower, the utterance treats immigrants as qualitatively inferior low-value commodities in an implicit market of humanity. This mapping uses the commercial selection and quality control source domain. In this mapping, the migration process is designed as an inversion of meritocracy. The worst elements of another society border on exported to the U.S. The cognitive effect is to activate

schemas of contamination and degradation that implicate the American nation as the repository of Mexico's social garbage.

From a socio-cognitive perspective, this passage helps to strengthen a mental representation of Mexican immigrants as criminals. The framework developed by Van Dijk (2014) explains that when elite discourse activates a certain mental model (for example, the mental model for migration), and the media repeats it, this mental model is activated. Subsequently, the audience uses it automatically and unconsciously when they process new information regarding migration. The thing to notice about the syntax, "They're bringing ... They're bringing ... They're ..." is that it functions rhetorically quite like ideological sedimentation. The more it gets repeated, the more the connection between Mexicans and crime gets normalised. According to the findings of Stephan et al (2024), this kind of rhetoric that criminalizes illegal immigrants increases support for stringent immigration measures. Such a pattern can be observed in the policy path followed by the Trump administration thereafter.

Van dijk defined the ideological function of the text as the discursive construction of an opposition between in-group and out-group. The "you" (American audience) are differentiated from "them" (Mexican immigrants) through a rhetoric of contamination, which positions the former as innocent victims while the latter becomes guilty perpetrators. This distinction reflects a larger ideological framework where national identity is established through exclusion through a displacement of that which is considered foreign, criminal, and a threat to the social body (Wodak & Reisigl, 2001).

Excerpt 2: The Natural Disaster Metaphor (August 21, 2019)

"Our country is full. We can't take you anymore. Our country is full. Our system is full. Our country is packed. You can't come in. Our country is full. What can you do? We can't handle it anymore. There's nowhere to put them." — Donald Trump, Rally Speech, Manchester, NH, August 21, 2019

From a campaign rally in New Hampshire, the above segment gives an insight into the usage of the CONTAINER IS FULL metaphor – a subtype of ontological metaphor where the nation is conceptualized as a bounded, finite entity, in this case a full container. The above is one of the most common and cognitively potent frames used across western democracies in anti-immigrants discourses (Hart, 2010; Santa Ana, 2002).

The domain of the source is spatial containment. A physical container (a room, a vessel, a territory, for instance) can be filled; when full, it cannot be added to. The American nation-state and the social systems it encompasses (health; education; welfare). Trump's frequent usage of "our country is full" and "our system is full" activates the cognitive container schema - a container nearing its tipping point thus drawing forth all the consequences concerning pressure, danger and preventing anything further from entering the system. The function of the metaphor is one of naturalizing exclusion. The reasoning goes (and is taken for granted) that just as it is not wrong to not add water to the glass that is full, so too it becomes morally self-evident that a country that is full cannot and must not take in more people.

From the socio-cognitive perspective, using the term 'full' repeatedly is not something that happens by accident. According to Van Dijk (2001), repetition has been identified as a key strategy for the discursive reinforcement of mental models. Through repetition, a proposition that could otherwise be challenged becomes more and more naturalized as common sense. The reiteration of "our country is full" more than five times in a succession of sentences turns what is a political claim that must be proven into a fact that cannot be debated. The term refers to the discursive process that Fairclough (2003) calls naturalisation, whereby ideological positions are transformed into something that manifests common sense.

The term "you" in the statements "We cannot take you anymore" and "You cannot come in" represent an imagined immigrant interlocutor in an antagonistic way. It adds to the building of the in-group/out-group boundary. The final clause – "There's nowhere to put them" – Continue This reads 'them' – as in objects to be placed. It zooms back out from the second person, into a third person – objectification of immigrants. In other words, they are not subjects here. They do not have rights – or agency. The fluctuation in grammar between "you" and "them" puts into operation the core ambivalence of any dehumanizing discourse: the Other is simultaneously addressed and objectified, recognized as a subject but denied subjectivity.

The metaphor of CONTAINER has policy implications. The metaphor suggests one nation equals one country, which creates a physical bounded space. This rules out any thought on the social, economic or humanitarian dimension of immigration. As a result, it simplifies a much more complex phenomenon to a simple question of capacity. This framing represents border closures, family separation and detention as rational responses to an overflow condition, not as policy choices that need ethical justification (Flores and Schachter, 2018).

Excerpt 3: The Military Invasion Metaphor (October 22, 2018)

"I'm bringing out the military for this National Emergency. They want to throw rocks at our military, our military fights back. I told them, consider it a rifle. When they throw rocks like they did at the Mexican military and police, I say, consider it a rifle."
— Donald Trump, Press Gaggle, October 22, 2018

This excerpt, delivered during the period of the Central American migrant caravan's approach toward the US-Mexico border, represents the most explicit deployment of the IMMIGRATION IS MILITARY INVASION metaphor in Trump's corpus. The excerpt frames a group of migrants and asylum seekers—predominantly families and individuals fleeing violence and poverty—as a military force threatening the national territory.

The structural metaphor in play here is IMMIGRATION IS WAR. The most complex type of conceptual mapping in the typology of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) is the structural metaphors, which enable us to understand an entire conceptual domain (here, asylum-seeking) in terms of the cognitive architecture of another (military combat). Once this mapping is in place, the entailments follow. If immigration is war then migrants are enemy combatants. If migrants are enemy combatants then military force against them is justified. If military force is justified then the normal legal protections governing the treatment of asylum seekers no longer apply.

The reference to rock-throwing and Trump's command to 'consider it a rifle' serves a vital discursive purpose: it flips the conventional hierarchy of power between armed soldiers and unarmed migrants, casting the latter as aggressors and the former as their victims. This inversion is a typical example of what van Dijk (2008) has identified as legitimization by reversal: the rhetorical strategy whereby the powerful are presented as vulnerable and the powerless as threatening and thus justifying the use of force against the latter as a defensive necessity.

The phrase 'National Emergency' triggers the securitization framework outlined by Buzan et al. (1998). When immigration is declared an emergency, political actors depoliticize the issue by removing it from the realm of normal politics and place it in the realm of exceptional measures, where normal legal and ethical constraints are suspended. This securitisation strategy has been well documented in right-wing populist discourse throughout Europe (Wodak, 2015). Within this discourse, the declaration of a migrant 'crisis' has been a recurring justification for the erosion of asylum rights and the militarisation of borders.

The IMMIGRATION IS WAR metaphor is particularly powerful from a socio-cognitive perspective because it evokes deeply entrenched mental models of national vulnerability and military defense (van Dijk, 2014). These models are activated not only by the explicit military language but also by the larger rhetorical context of

Trump's discourse on immigration, where the border is constantly framed as a frontline, migrants as invaders, and border agents as soldiers fighting back an attack on the nation. Taken together, this framing has the effect of making the militarization of immigration enforcement appear not as a political choice but as a logical and necessary response to an objective security threat.

Excerpt 4: The Animalistic and Infestation Metaphor (June 19, 2018)

"Democrats are the problem. They don't care about crime and want illegal immigrants, no matter how bad they may be, to pour into and infest our Country, like MS-13. They can't win on their terrible policies, so they view them as potential voters!" — Donald Trump, Twitter/X, June 19, 2018

This excerpt, tweeted first by Trump and then widely reported in the mainstream media, perhaps contains the most explicit dehumanizing metaphor in his immigration rhetoric: the use of the verb 'infest' to characterize the movement of immigrants into the United States.

"Infest" is in the semantic field of pest control and disease, and is used in standard English only to describe the behaviour of insects, vermin or parasitic organisms. This is a clear and unambiguous case of animalistic dehumanization, as defined by Haslam (2006), when applied to humans: the denial of traits seen as distinctively human (rationality, dignity, moral agency) through the ascription of traits associated with sub-human organisms. By describing immigrants as entities that "infest" the country, the tweet maps the target domain of immigration onto the source domain of pest infestation, with all the cognitive entailments that go with it: pests are dangerous, pests spread uncontrollably, pests must be exterminated.

The complement verb "pour" enhances the IMMIGRATION AS FLOOD metaphor. By using "pour," we evoke the image of immigrants as an unformed and amorphous liquid that flows into the national container. Thus immigrants lack agency or individuality. The combination of pour and infest creates a double dehumanisation of immigrants who are at first neutralised into a faceless, undifferentiated 'mass' (flood) and then depicted as pests (infestation). As Santa Ana (2002) shows, both of these metaphors have a long history of use in American anti-immigrant discourse and are deeply nativist.

The first invocation of MS-13, a gang repeatedly used throughout Trump's immigration rhetoric as a synecdoche for all undocumented migrants, illustrates the discursive strategy Flores (2022) calls 'metaphor by association'. The tweet uses the term "infest" with respect to MS-13 to invite audiences to link the cognitive schema of gang criminality with immigration in general. This effectively criminalizes all

immigrants by associating them with one of the most extreme representatives of this community.

The socio-cognitive implications of this metaphor are quite harsh. According to Van Dijk (2014), dehumanizing metaphors that are made available through elite discourse and media amplification function as automatic cognitive shortcuts which then affect the following processing of information on immigrants. The mental model of immigrants being vermin or pests, once established, cannot be removed through the means of factual counter-arguments. According to van Dijk (2001), the mere presence of facts is not sufficient for effecting change in cognitive models. It necessitates the construction of another metaphorical frame so that it will be able to activate a schema that competes with existing ones. It has been correctly argued that the infest metaphor is one of the most dangerous forms dehumanizing rhetoric. This is because it is so visceral and emotionally resonant that it becomes cognitively resistant to refutation.

Results

The analysis of the four excerpts of Donald Trump's immigration speeches reveals a consistent and systematic pattern of dehumanizing metaphorical framing around four main conceptual clusters. The findings are reported below according to the study's two research questions.

Research Question 1: Types of Dehumanizing Metaphors

The analysis points to four main types of dehumanizing metaphors within the data corpus. Each type is associated with a different source domain and activates different cognitive schemas:

The first and most pervasive type is the metaphor of criminalization as illustrated in Excerpt 1. This metaphor translates the source domain of criminal behavior into the target domain of immigration, building migrants up as intrinsically criminal agents bringing drugs, violence and sexual threat into the national community. The cognitive schema that is activated is one of danger, contamination and victimhood, with the national community positioned as the innocent victim of criminal predation.

The second is the container/capacity metaphor, discussed in Excerpt 2 . This metaphor relies on the source domain of physical containment to imagine the nation as a bounded space that is at saturation, naturalizing exclusion as a matter of spatial logic rather than political will. The cognitive schema that is activated is one of pressure, overflow and the need to enforce boundaries.

The third type is the militarization/invasion metaphor, as seen in Excerpt 3. This structural metaphor transposes the domain of immigration into the domain of military combat, constructing migrants as enemy forces and immigration as an act of war against the national territory. The cognitive schemata activated are threat, aggression, defense and need for an extraordinary security response.

The fourth is the infestation/animalization metaphor, discussed in Excerpt 4. This is the most extreme form of dehumanization in the corpus, directly attributing to migrants the characteristics of vermin or parasitic organisms. The schema that is activated is one of disgust, contamination and extermination, the most dangerous schema in terms of its potential to legitimate violence and rights abuse.

The common structural feature of all four types is the effacement of migrant subjectivity and agency. In Trump's discourse, immigrants are never considered as individual subjects with histories and motivations and rights, whether they are cast as criminals or as liquid flows or enemy soldiers or pests. Such deindividuation is both a cognitive effect and an ideological function of dehumanizing metaphor, permitting the transfer of negative attributes from specific individuals to entire groups, and thus justifying the imposition of collective, undifferentiated policy responses.

Research Question 2: How Dehumanizing Metaphors Frame Immigrants as a Threat

The results show that dehumanizing metaphors have the effect of constructing immigrants as threats by means of a number of interconnected discursive and cognitive mechanisms.

At the cognitive level, each of the four types of metaphor activates pre-existing schemas of danger, contamination, or defense. As predicted by the socio-cognitive model of van Dijk (2014), these schemas are not constructed by the metaphors themselves, but they are drawn from the stock of socially shared mental representations audiences bring to the encounter with political discourse. The metaphors serve as cognitive triggers, activating and reinforcing these pre-existing schemas, and making the threat interpretation of immigration intuitive and natural.

The metaphors ideologically construct a sharp us/them dichotomy that presents the national community as an innocent victim under threat from an alien Other. This binary, which Wodak and Reisigl (2001) identify as crucial to right wing populist discourse, serves to reinforce national identity through exclusion and to present the protection of that identity as a moral necessity. The discourse therefore moves from

description to prescription: by framing immigrants as threats, it both justifies and calls for defensive, exclusionary policy responses.

The analysis at the level of policy complements the hypothesis derived from the experimental studies (Stephan et al., 2024), which shows that dehumanizing metaphorical framing enhances public support for both incarceration and deportation policies related to immigration. The metaphor of criminalization in Excerpt 1 provided the discursive foundation for going after immigrant communities as presumed criminals. The passage in excerpt 2 using a container metaphor legitimizes the closing of borders and denying asylum claims due to capacity. By using the militarization metaphor, Excerpt 3 legitimized military forces at the border and ascribed asylum seekers as a security threat. The infestation metaphor mentioned in Excerpt 4, which is the most extreme in this corpus, contributed to a discursive environment where even serious human rights abuses like family separation and indefinite detention could be normalized as necessary pest control measures.

Conclusion

This study investigated the use of dehumanizing metaphors in Donald Trump's immigration speeches, within the integrated frameworks of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and the socio-cognitive approach to Critical Discourse Analysis (van Dijk, 2001, 2014). The analysis demonstrates that these metaphors are not rhetorical accidents, isolated excesses of political speech; they are a systematic discursive strategy through which immigrants are constructed as threats, their humanity negated, and exclusionary policies legitimated as rational and necessary responses to objective dangers.

The four metaphorical clusters found in the corpus, i.e. criminalization, containment, militarization, and animalization, are instantiated by different but related cognitive mechanisms. Each invokes pre-existing schemas of danger, contamination, or defense in the audience's mental models. Both frame migrants as essentially other – as objects, fluids, enemies or pests, rather than as human beings with rights and dignity. And each has a package of policy implications, not offered as political options but as logical, even moral, imperatives. Together these metaphors form a wide-ranging system of rhetoric that underlies the legitimation of xenophobia and exclusionary immigration policy.

It is shown that the socio-cognitive approach worked out by van Dijk is indispensable for understanding how these metaphors work in the social and political domain. To identify metaphorical mappings at the level of the text is not sufficient; it is equally important to trace how these mappings interact with the cognitive models and ideological frameworks that audiences bring to their encounter with political discourse, and how they are amplified and naturalized through repetition and media circulation. The present analysis shows that dehumanizing metaphors work best not as isolated utterances, but as part of a coherent and cumulative discursive formation that slowly reworks public common sense about immigration.

These findings have important practical implications. According to both Fairclough (2003) and van Dijk (2014), the normalization of dehumanizing discourse in public life is not an inevitable process, but rather a matter of active choices made by political actors, media institutions, and citizens. Alternative metaphorical frames that describe immigrants as neighbours, contributors and human beings with stories rather than as threats, floods or pests might trigger competing cognitive schemas and open up alternative policy possibilities (ICMPD, 2021). Such strategies work best if used early, before dehumanizing frames have been naturalized into common sense.

This paper contributes to the growing interdisciplinary scholarship at the intersection of cognitive linguistics, critical discourse analysis and immigration studies. The study has limitations in the sense that it focuses on a single political actor and on a single national context. Future work should extend the analysis to comparative cross-national corpora and to the interaction of political discourse and media amplification in the digital age. Present findings however prove beyond doubt that the language of immigration policy is never simply descriptive. The language of immigration policy is always, and essentially, a site of ideological struggle whose terms have serious implications for the human beings it claims to represent.

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