



Research Article

COMMON SOURCE DOMAINS IN BARACK OBAMA'S INAUGURAL SPEECH

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates Barack Obama's inaugural speech delivered on January 20, 2009, to systematically identify, describe, and analyze several prominent conceptual metaphors grounded in frequently occurring source domains. The Metaphor Identification Procedure by Pragglejaz Group (2007) was adopted as the primary analytical instrument for the identification of conceptual metaphors. The identified metaphors were subsequently described, classified, and interpreted within the theoretical framework of the relationship between thought, language, and culture. The findings demonstrate that the common source domains employed include HUMAN, JOURNEY, BUILDING, WAR, ANIMAL and PLANT, and WEATHER. These findings provide insights into how source domains shape the processes of conceptualization and categorization in political discourse.

Keywords: categorization; conceptual metaphor; conceptualization; inaugural speech; source domain

1. Introduction

Many cognitive linguists argue that conceptual metaphor (CM) reflects a mode of thinking that is fundamentally human in nature. It is therefore primarily concerned with cognition rather than language. Conceptual metaphor also serves as a crucial instrument through which humans conceptualize abstract notions (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 2003; Rosch, 1973, 1978; Charteris-Black, 2004; Goatly, 1997, 2007). As vehicles for thought, conceptual metaphors and metaphorical patterns in English help speakers process experience, understand abstract concepts, and construct discourse in accordance with their communicative intentions. In general, conceptual metaphors are widely employed in American English political discourse (AEPD), as American politicians frequently draw on them to conceptualize abstract political issues with a view to influencing their audiences and achieving political

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objectives. In doing so, they also develop distinctive personal styles in their use of conceptual metaphors.

Drawing on Barack Obama's inaugural speech of January 20, 2009, this article systematically identifies, describes, and analyzes several prominent conceptual metaphors grounded in common source domains such as HUMAN, JOURNEY, BUILDING, WAR, ANIMAL AND PLANT, and WEATHER, to clarify the role of source domains in governing the processes of conceptualization and categorization. In doing so, the study also seeks to provide further evidence for the claim that the occurrence of particular source domains, whether common or uncommon, universal or culture-specific, is typically motivated (see Deignan, 1995; Kövecses, 2005, 2010; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2016; Trinh, 2016a, 2016b, 2019; Urbonaitė & Šeškauskienė, 2007; Żołnowska, 2011).

2. Theoretical framework and methodology

This article draws on the theory of CM as developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 2003). Specifically, Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 2003, p. 8) assert that "metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another."

Furthermore, metaphor serves as an instrument for viewing one experience through the lens of another and therefore reflects particular ways of understanding the surrounding world and human experience. Abstract concepts such as argument, politics, and life, for instance, are commonly expressed through more concrete phenomena such as war, building, and journey, thereby enabling the identification of mappings for these target domains (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 2003).

In addition, Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 2003) argue that a conceptual metaphor constitutes a semantic transfer or a process of mapping the internal structure and relations of a source domain onto a target domain. In this process, the source domain structures the target domain, which is then understood through the source domain. This mapping process may be expressed through the formula "TARGET DOMAIN IS SOURCE DOMAIN" or "TARGET DOMAIN AS SOURCE DOMAIN." For example, in the conceptual metaphor POLITICS IS A JOURNEY, the target domain POLITICS, an abstract concept, is understood through the source domain A JOURNEY, a concrete concept.

A considerable body of research, both in Vietnam and internationally, has been conducted on Obama's 2009 inaugural address. Vietnamese scholars, including Luu (2025), Nguyen (2014), Nguyen (2020), Nguyen & Huynh (2020), have respectively investigated conceptual metaphor in American political discourse, conducted critical discourse analysis of Obama's 2009 inaugural address, identified common source domains in AEPD, analyzed source-to-target mappings in AEPD, and examined conceptual metaphor in Obama's 2009

inaugural address. International scholars, including Moustafa et al. (2021), Pilar (2011), and Risdianto (2016), have likewise analyzed conceptual metaphors in Obama's inaugural discourse. Although existing studies have primarily analyzed conceptual metaphors and their functions in political discourse, less attention has been paid to the source domains on which these metaphors draw. The present article therefore identifies, describes, and analyzes common source domains in Obama's inaugural address and demonstrates that the selection of source domains in political discourse is motivated. It explains this motivation from cognitive, linguistic, and cultural perspectives, thereby contributing to research on political discourse.

A descriptive approach is used to identify and classify conceptual metaphors and their source domains. Discourse analysis is also employed to account for contextual interaction and the role of language users within the cognitive environment, with particular attention to analytical procedures derived from relevance theory.

The analytical procedures adopted in this article include the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) developed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007) and the Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije Universiteit (MIPVU) developed by Steen et al. (2010), as well as inductive and deductive procedures grounded in systemic polysemy and linguistic metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003; Trinh, 2016).

The analytical data comprise Barack Obama's inaugural speech delivered on January 20, 2009. The speech was obtained from an authoritative source to ensure the authenticity and completeness of the text under analysis.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. HUMAN source domain

Consider the following examples:

Ex.1: "In the year of **America's** birth, in the coldest of months, a small band of patriots huddled by dying campfires on the shores of an icy river."

Ex.2: "A nagging fear that **America's** decline is inevitable, and that the next generation must lower its sights."

Ex.3: "They saw **America** as bigger than the sum of our individual ambitions; greater than all the differences of birth or wealth or faction."

Ex.4: "At these moments, **America** has **carried on** not simply because of the skill or vision of those in high office, but because We the People have remained faithful to the ideals of our forbearers, and true to our founding documents."

Ex.5: "And that **America** must **play its role** in ushering in a new era of peace."

Ex.6: "Know that **America** is **a friend** of each nation and every man, woman, and child who seeks a future of peace and dignity, and that we are ready to lead once more."

Obama conceptualizes America as a person, endowing it with distinctly human attributes and actions. Accordingly, he employs conceptual metaphors such as NATION AS A

PERSON/NATION IS A PERSON, NATION WITH HUMAN ATTRIBUTES, and NATION ACTING HUMAN. Specifically, Obama frames America as a person with a birth, the capacity to grow, and the potential to decline; as an entity capable of characteristically human actions such as persevering (carry on), fulfilling a role (play its role), and assuming leadership (lead); and as possessing human qualities such as friendliness, dignity, and a commitment to peace. Through this framing, Obama seeks to emphasize that America, from the moment of its founding, has endured countless hardships and challenges to become the powerful nation it is today. This framing presents America as a nation that does not yield to domestic or global adversity, and that stands ready to forge friendships and assist other nations in the service of world peace and freedom. Furthermore, America is portrayed as committed to the ideals of friendship, dignity, and peace and as acting in accordance with these values to cultivate a distinguished image on the world stage.

It may be argued that Obama's primary intention is to appeal to national pride and galvanize the resolve of the American people, given that Americans have historically united in the face of danger and hardship to resist and overcome adversity.

In a manner consistent with other American political figures such as Franklin D. Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan, and George H. W. Bush, Obama maps the HUMAN source domain onto the target domain of the nation (encompassing government, political institutions, and political parties) by exploiting the full range of conceptual categories associated with personhood. In particular, two conceptual metaphors are especially prevalent: NATION WITH HUMAN ATTRIBUTES and NATION ACTING HUMAN.

This mode of conceptualization is particularly effective. By associating abstract political concepts with familiar human attributes such as reason and emotion—that is, by drawing on first-hand human experience to make sense of politics—Obama makes his message more accessible and relatable to his audience. 'This approach not only helps the audience understand his message but also advances his broader political objectives.

3.2. *JOURNEY source domain*

Obama also draws conceptual metaphors from this highly conventional source domain to make his political messages readily accessible and persuasive to his audience. Based on the data collected, the conceptual metaphor POLITICS IS A JOURNEY emerges as the prototypical and governing metaphor associated with the JOURNEY source domain in Obama's inaugural speech.

Consider the following examples:

Ex.7: "Our **journey** has never been one of **shortcuts** or settling for less. It has not been the path for the faint-hearted, for those who prefer leisure over work, or seek only the pleasures of riches and fame."

Ex.8: “Rather, it has been the risk-takers, the doers, the makers of things — some celebrated, but more often men and women obscure in their labor, who have carried us up the **long, rugged path** towards prosperity and freedom.”

With JOURNEY as the source domain and POLITICS as the target domain, Obama first seeks to emphasize that the political journey is a long and arduous one, as the American government must continually address persistent social challenges including crisis, a weakened economy, violence, hatred, false promises, mutual recriminations, homelessness, unemployment, business closures, prohibitively costly healthcare, and underperforming schools, alongside the many other challenges that will inevitably arise in the course of America’s development. Furthermore, Obama frames political activity as an ongoing journey that no politician can undertake alone and that requires the collective effort and participation of the American people if the nation is to continue moving steadily toward its intended destination.

Consider the following additional examples:

Ex.9: “Where the answer is yes, we intend to **move forward**. Where the answer is no, programs will end.”

Ex.10: “Let it be said by our children’s children that when we were tested we refused to let this **journey end**.”

Ex.11: “This is the **journey** we **continue** today. We remain the most prosperous, powerful nation on Earth.”

Moreover, when confronted with difficulties and obstacles along the political journey, politicians and the American people must not falter or turn back; instead, they must respond constructively and chart a new course capable of meeting those challenges. Obama presents himself as capable of charting such a course.

Consider the following examples:

Ex.12: “So let us mark this day with remembrance of who we are and **how far we have traveled**.”

Ex.13: “As we consider **the road** that unfolds before us, we remember with humble gratitude those brave Americans who, at this very hour, patrol far-off deserts and distant mountains.”

Ex.14: “To the Muslim world, we seek **a new way forward**, based on mutual interest and mutual respect.”

Within the political journey, the actions of political figures are deliberate and goal-oriented. The objectives of political activity are conceptualized as the destination of the journey. In these examples, Obama directs the American people toward the destination of the political journey, represented by a new life, prosperity, and freedom.

Consider the following examples:

Ex.15: “For us, they packed up their few worldly possessions and **traveled across oceans** in search of **a new life**.”

Ex.16: “Rather, it has been the risk-takers, the doers, the makers of things — some celebrated, but more often men and women obscure in their labor, who have carried us up the long, rugged path **towards prosperity and freedom.**”

In sum, Obama conceptualizes political activity as a journey that encompasses its constituent elements, including the traveler, the path or road, the length of the journey, the obstacles encountered, and the destination to be reached. Through this framing, he seeks to call on the American people to trust in and support the policies of his administration and to join him on a long and demanding political journey with steadfast determination to reach its goals.

From this analysis, several additional conceptual metaphors can be identified: AMERICAN PEOPLE ARE TRAVELERS, PROSPERITY IS A DESTINATION, FREEDOM IS A DESTINATION, A NEW LIFE IS A DESTINATION, and, subsuming all of these, the overarching metaphor SOCIAL GOALS ARE DESTINATIONS.

3.3. *BUILDING source domain*

With respect to this source domain, the conceptual metaphor NATION IS A BUILDING serves as the prototypical metaphor and is employed with considerable frequency in Obama’s inaugural speech.

Consider the following examples:

Ex.17: “Starting today, we must pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and begin again the work of **remaking** America.”

Ex.18: “To those leaders around the globe who seek to sow conflict, or blame their society’s ills on the West, know that your people will judge you on what you can **build**, not what you destroy.”

Ex.19: “...because only then can we **restore** the vital trust between a people and their government.”

Obama draws on the BUILDING source domain in his inaugural speech primarily to emphasize the reconstruction of America and the restoration of peace, security, employment, trust, promise, and prosperity for the nation and its people. He articulates the view that improving the economy and creating jobs will lay a new foundation for development. In particular, building roads, bridges, and electrical grids will facilitate commerce and unite the American people; harnessing energy from the sun, wind, and soil will fuel transportation and power factories to generate material wealth; restoring science to its rightful place will allow scientific innovation to reach its full potential; improving the quality of healthcare while reducing its costs will make high-quality medical services accessible to all citizens; and reforming schools, colleges, and universities will meet the educational demands of a new era.

From this analysis, several additional conceptual metaphors can be identified: PEACE IS A BUILDING, SAFETY IS A BUILDING, EMPLOYMENT IS A BUILDING, SCIENCE IS A BUILDING, HEALTHCARE IS A BUILDING, and EDUCATION IS A

BUILDING, all subsumed under the overarching metaphor SOCIAL GOALS ARE BUILDINGS.

Through the conceptual metaphor NATION IS A BUILDING, Obama seeks to convey to the American people his firm determination to rebuild America, to address the persistent challenges facing American society, and to restore the nation's image on the world stage, thereby calling on them to support his policies and actions. The concept of building and rebuilding America is a recurrent theme in American political discourse.

3.4. WAR source domain

Obama conceptualizes political activity as war and draws extensively on this source domain throughout his inaugural speech. The conceptual metaphor POLITICS IS WAR emerges as the most frequently employed and governing metaphor within this domain.

Consider the following examples:

Ex.20: "Our nation is at **war**, against a far-reaching network of **violence** and **hatred**."

Ex.21: "Our Founding Fathers, **faced** with **perils** we can scarcely imagine, drafted a charter to assure the rule of law and the rights of man, a charter expanded by the **blood of generations**."

Ex.22: "Today I say to you that the **challenges** we **face** are real. They are serious and they are many."

Ex.23: "In the **face** of our common **dangers**, in this winter of our hardship, let us remember these timeless words."

Ex.24: "Recall that earlier generations **faced down fascism** not just with missiles and tanks, but with sturdy alliances and enduring convictions."

Ex.25: "Guided by these principles once more, we can **meet** those new **threats**."

Ex.26: "With old friends and former **foes**, we will work tirelessly to lessen the **nuclear threat** and **roll back** the specter of a **warming planet**."

By conceptualizing perils, challenges, dangers, fascism, nuclear threats, and global warming as enemies, Obama employs a series of conceptual metaphors in his inaugural speech, including PERILS ARE ENEMIES, CHALLENGES ARE ENEMIES, DANGERS ARE ENEMIES, FASCISM IS AN ENEMY, NUCLEAR THREAT IS AN ENEMY, and GLOBAL WARMING IS AN ENEMY, all subsumed under the overarching metaphor SOCIAL PROBLEMS AND DISEASES ARE ENEMIES.

Through this framing, Obama helps the American people identify the enemies they must confront to protect themselves and their nation. In doing so, he calls on Americans to join him in confronting and ultimately defeating these enemies and, above all, to refuse to be intimidated by them.

In addition to the governing metaphor POLITICS IS WAR, Obama further conceptualizes himself and the American people as warriors through the metaphors OBAMA IS A

WARRIOR/FIGHTER/SOLDIER/DEFENDER and AMERICANS ARE WARRIORS/FIGHTERS/SOLDIERS/DEFENDERS.

Consider the following example:

Ex.27: “You cannot outlast us, and we will **defeat** you.”

By conceptualizing himself as a warrior, fighter, soldier, and defender, and simultaneously framing the American people in the same terms, Obama pursues a dual rhetorical objective. First, he assures the American people that he will act decisively to confront their enemies and protect them, thereby cultivating their trust in and support for his policies and actions. Second, he seeks to heighten the American people’s awareness of the serious challenges confronting their nation and to rally them to join him in its defense.

3.5. *ANIMAL and PLANT source domain*

Among the source domains examined in this article, the combined ANIMAL AND PLANT domain is both distinctive and relatively complex. Obama provides a notable example of the deployment of this source domain in his inaugural address.

Consider the following examples:

Ex.28: “These are the indicators of crisis, subject to data and statistics. Less measurable but no less profound is a **sapping of confidence** across our land.”

Ex.29: “To those leaders around the globe who seek to **sow conflict**, or blame their society’s ills on the West, know that your people will judge you on what you can build, not what you destroy.”

Ex.30: “To the people of poor nations, we pledge to work alongside you to make your farms flourish and let clean waters flow; to nourish starved bodies and **feed hungry minds**.”

In the examples above, the verb *sap*, which belongs to the plant domain and denotes the draining of sap from a plant, is used by Obama to conceptualize the erosion of confidence, yielding the conceptual metaphor CONFIDENCE IS A PLANT. Similarly, the verb *sow*, also drawn from the plant domain and denoting the planting of seeds, is used to conceptualize conflict, giving rise to the conceptual metaphor CONFLICT IS A PLANT/SEED/BUD. Furthermore, the verb *feed*, which belongs to the animal domain and denotes the act of providing nourishment to animals, is used to conceptualize hungry minds, giving rise to the conceptual metaphor HUNGRY MINDS ARE ANIMALS.

More broadly, Obama’s recurrent use of this source domain reflects his intention to call on the American people and like-minded world leaders to work collectively to address the challenges confronting America and the international community. He likens this collective effort to people cultivating a shared plot of land and enjoying an abundant harvest together, with the broader goal of peaceful coexistence and freedom for all.

3.6. *WEATHER source domain*

American politicians also frequently employ weather-related elements in their discourse to conceptualize social change by analogy with changing weather. Sunshine and

gentle breezes represent favorable conditions, while fog, storms, and freezing temperatures represent adverse ones. Just as weather conditions affect human mood and activity, so too do policy changes and reforms affect the lives of the American people and the nation as a whole. Within this source domain, the conceptual metaphor SOCIAL CONDITIONS ARE WEATHER emerges as the prototypical and governing metaphor.

Consider the following examples:

Ex.31: “The words have been spoken during **rising tides of prosperity** and the **still waters of peace**. Yet, every so often the oath is taken **amidst gathering clouds** and **raging storms**.”

Ex.32: “In the face of our common dangers, in this winter of our hardship, let us remember these timeless words. With hope and virtue, let us brave once more the **icy currents**, and endure what **storms** may come.”

Two conceptual metaphors can be identified here: ICY CURRENTS ARE DIFFICULTIES and STORMS ARE CHALLENGES. The weather-related elements of icy currents and storms are employed by Obama not merely to describe meteorological phenomena or the harshness of the climate, but to characterize the difficulties and challenges currently confronting America. These hardships must be overcome by the present generation so that the gift of freedom may be passed on to future generations. These expressions may deepen readers’ and listeners’ appreciation of freedom when understood in relation to the conceptual metaphors FREEDOM IS AN OBJECT and FREEDOM IS A SPECIAL GIFT.

4. Conclusion

This article provides a preliminary identification, description, and analysis of prominent conceptual metaphors grounded in several common source domains—namely, HUMAN, JOURNEY, BUILDING, WAR, ANIMAL AND PLANT, and WEATHER—in Obama’s inaugural speech and clarifies the role of source domains in shaping conceptualization and categorization. The findings suggest that the selection of source domains is motivated by experiential, cultural, salience, and attentional factors in native speakers’ cognition. These findings may support cautious generalizations about the patterns of conceptual metaphor construction employed by a particular politician or political party. The selection of common source domains in political discourse can thus be explained in cognitive, cultural, and linguistic terms. Furthermore, future research could extend this analysis by explaining how relevant target domains are selected. Given a sufficiently large corpus, comparative research could also examine source-to-target domain mappings across American political discourse to identify similarities and differences and inform the translation of political discourse across languages.

DATA SOURCE

Inaugural speech of President Barack Obama, 2009, *Avalon Project, Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy*, Lillian Goldman Law Library, Yale Law School. http://avalon.law.yale.edu/subject_menus/inaug.asp

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**VỀ MỘT SỐ MIỀN NGUỒN PHỔ BIẾN
TRONG DIỄN VĂN NHẠM CHÚC CỦA BARACK OBAMA**

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TÓM TẮT

Bài viết khảo sát diễn văn nhậm chức của Barack Obama ngày 20 tháng 01 năm 2009 để lần lượt tiến hành nhận diện, miêu tả, nhận xét về một số ẩn dụ ý niệm nổi bật dựa vào một số miền nguồn phổ biến. *The Metaphor Identification Procedure* (Pragglejaz Group, 2007) được sử dụng để xác định ẩn dụ ý niệm. Ẩn dụ ý niệm sau đó được miêu tả, phân loại, nhận xét và giải thích dựa trên mối quan hệ giữa tư duy, ngôn ngữ và văn hóa. Kết quả cho thấy các miền nguồn phổ biến được sử dụng bao gồm con người, hành trình, xây dựng, chiến tranh, động thực vật và thời tiết; qua đó, bài viết làm rõ vai trò của miền nguồn trong việc chi phối cách thức ý niệm hóa và phạm trù hóa.

Từ khóa: phạm trù hóa; ẩn dụ ý niệm; ý niệm hóa; diễn văn nhậm chức; miền nguồn