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From the war on Covid-19 to political wars: Metaphor and polarization in the early stages of the 2020 pandemic

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Abstract

This chapter analyses early political responses to the Covid-19 pandemic by three politicians: Pedro Sánchez in Spain, Boris Johnson in the UK and Donald Trump in the USA. All three have been criticized in the media by using war rhetoric. Thus, the chapter seeks to shed light on how the activation of the WAR/CONFLICT frames interacts with FORCE DYNAMICS in the early conceptualizations of the virus, and how these may also eventually justify polarized views of society. For this aim, the statements given by the three politicians in the month of March have been qualitatively analysed. This qualitative analysis has departed from corpus identification of concordances and has also been combined with the identification of instances of militarising metaphors. The analysis shows how the three politicians originally rely on a basic opposition schema between society and the virus. However, intertextual appeals to former historical conflicts are also activated, thus allowing for a construal of the metaphorical war against the virus as being similar to others where enemies were “visible.”

Keywords: cognitive linguistics, political discourse analysis, conceptual metaphor, framing, constructivist rhetoric, Covid-19.

Introduction

March 2020 will probably be marked in our calendars as the month when the Covid-19 pandemic erupted. From that moment on, public discourse was not only flooded with new words, but lexical and discursive choices reflected how different governments were reacting to the pandemic. The early stages of the pandemic were characterised by a prominent use of metaphors coming from the WAR domain, which mainly portrayed the virus as an enemy to be beaten and society – and its different members – as the soldiers fighting against it (Gillis, 2020; Wicke and Bolognesi, 2020). The use of the war metaphor on social media reflected not only common uses when talking about health problems (Flusberg, Matlock, and Thibodeau, 2018; Semino, 2008), but also how political responses to the pandemic were being framed.

The use of the WAR metaphor has triggered criticism both from the academic community and the media (Jenkins, 2020; Lavin, 2020; Musu, 2020; Olza et al., 2020; Sherhan, 2020). This is based on the intrinsic opposition that underlies the WAR and CONFLICT schema (Klar, Bar-Tal and Kruglanski, 1988), and on how it can evoke multiple interpretations depending on the discourse genre it is used in (Semino, 2008, p. 100-101, 164-66). Public, and specifically political, responses to Covid-19 show a use of the war metaphor which incorporates features of both scientific and political discourse. On the one hand, in a typical use of political discourse, by referring to the “battle against covid-19... a serious and intractable problem” (Semino, 2008, p. 100) is presented, and the strategies used to solve it are framed as part of the idea of seriousness and urgency. On the other hand, previous research on health communication has found that the use of military terminology to describe an illness may result in a punitive view of that illness, in which the sick person may be presented as a culprit (Demjén and Semino, 2017; Sontag, 1978). Both uses allow for polarising positions to be taken in discourse as the seriousness of the problem, or the existence of enemies, can be not only emphasised but also exploited for social or political purposes. This polarisation can be achieved by exaggerating the differences that exist between the participants involved in the pandemic, be they the difference between healthy/ill people or between the policies adopted by different political parties. The war metaphor allows for polarising strategies – which highlight negative aspects related to the others – because it constructs an

ontology which is based on the opposition between enemies and allies. Whereas some authors argue that military language could be of use when talking about individual reactions to illnesses (Reisfield and Wilson, 2004; Semino et al., 2018, p. 98-125), when those illnesses are presented as a social problem, stigmatization of patients may increase (Logie and Turan, 2020) together with fear and anxiety (Páez, 2020), as a consequence of those metaphors. These reactions may also be affected by political decisions which visually, politically and socially may evoke a real and not necessarily metaphorical war, like the deployment of the military, or press statements surrounded by military officials in Spain, the US or the UK.

In this chapter, it is argued that the WAR metaphor may result in a polarizing strategy which results from the possibility of transferring the metaphoric opposition between enemies and allies to multiply evoked US VS THEM situations (van Dijk, 1998). It is argued that activating the conflict schema allows for parallelisms to be established between the fight against the virus in the health system to confrontations between political parties – which have been particularly prominent in Spain – and even the stigmatization of particular social groups.

This hypothesis will be checked by identifying the war-related mappings that were activated by politicians in Spain, the UK and the US, particularly when the pandemic first arose. Two main research questions will be studied: a) how the war frame interacts with other historical or cultural frames and how these interactions may trigger context-specific evaluations, and b) how the war frame interacts with the activation of discursive oppositions.

Context and data

On December 31, 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) was alerted by the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission of cases of viral “pneumonia of unknown cause” in this Chinese region (WHO, 2020). In early January 2020, the WHO is informed by Chinese authorities that this outbreak is caused by a novel coronavirus. While in January and early February 2020, only a small number of cases could be found outside China, the name “COVID-19” is proposed by the WHO to refer to this virus “to avoid

inaccuracy and stigma”(WHO, 2020). Hence, references to geographical location, animals, or individuals or groups of people are avoided.

The virus soon spread to different regions and on March 11, following “alarming levels of spread and severity”, the WHO decides to call it “a pandemic.” The virus spreads world-wide and confirmed cases can be found almost everywhere. The first case of Covid-19 is confirmed in Spain on January 31. As cases are quickly multiplying across the country, and community transmission is identified in a number of regions, on March 9 the Madrid region decides to shut down all educational activities, and on March 12 a national lockdown is called. The lockdown is effective after the Prime Minister, Pedro Sánchez, announces a declaration of a nationwide State of Alarm for 15 days. This declaration is followed by a restriction of all non-essential activity, which lasts from March 28 to April 12. Restrictions begin to be lifted on April 13, and are followed by a de-escalation process that lasted from May 2 to the end of July.

A somewhat similar process can be seen in the UK, where the first case was confirmed on February 28. Whereas from February to March, the British government avoids cancelling mass gatherings and shutting down schools, on March 16 Boris Johnson advises the public for the first time to avoid unnecessary contact. What is first framed as an advice becomes legally mandatory on March 23, when the UK lockdown is announced. Isolation measures are still advised while restrictions are gradually lifted since May 13. The Health Protection Regulations 2020 come into force in England on July 4, and they replace and relax the previous lockdown regulations.

The first confirmed case in the USA was first reported on January 20, and after only seven known cases was a health emergency declared, following a declaration by the WHO in which the spread of the virus is presented as “a public health emergency of international concern” (HHS, 2020). Following the trend in Europe, it is not until mid-March that the first internal restrictions are enforced and during the months of March and April “stay at home” quarantines are imposed on the population by different US administrations. As the president of the US, Donald Trump’s discourse on Covid-19 has gradually shifted through time. In the early stages of the pandemic, he downplayed the severity of the virus, sometimes even contradicting the discourse of health officials (Superville and Woodward, 2020).

Political discourses in the early stages of the pandemic seemed to be characterised by the use of war-related language (Olza et al., 2020). However, these uses have been criticised for a number of reasons. Related to social effects, we can see that they shift the focus to “the people,” who are discursively presented as soldiers; this may result in the emergence of a “new nationalism,” which is related to each country trying to solve its own problems first, and such discourses are not sustainable in time because they may result in “battle fatigue” (Musu, 2020). Likewise, the identification of the enemy may become diffuse and may shift from the actual virus to the behaviour of other people. This shift may result in lack of social solidarity and may increase anxiety. In the political realm, having a strong leadership and associating that to the war domain may result in an authoritarian behaviour – or perception – of political leaders, hence stressing the feeling that democratic values – such as freedom of opinion – are under attack (Sabucedo, Alzate, and Hur, 2020). Even if this type of war-related language has been highly criticized, during the second wave of the virus – in the Autumn of 2020 – it has still pervaded political language. We can see this, for example, in the use of phrases such as “moral victory” or “curfew” to refer to new measures proposed in Spain during the second wave of the pandemic.

It can be argued that this constant activation of the war frame when describing not only the pandemic but also the social and political measures adopted since March 2020 stems from the multiple uses of the war metaphor and its adaptability both to the political and medical contexts (Hart, 2019; Semino, 2008; Semino et al., 2018). However, it is this adaptability to different contexts that also allows for multiple interpretation of the war metaphor in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, and its effect in allowing the construal of opposed and polarized views in which the social, medical and political actions of the self are legitimised, while delegitimising those of others. For this reason, in this chapter I will analyse the speeches that were produced by three Western politicians – Pedro Sánchez in Spain, Boris Johnson in the UK and Donald Trump in the USA – with the aim of analysing how the war metaphor is used to frame the Covid-19 pandemic in its early stages.

These three politicians have been selected for a number of reasons. As previously mentioned and reported in other fora (Filardo-Llamas, 2020; Olza et al., 2020), all three

politicians have widely appealed to war rhetoric. However, they represent different ideological beliefs, with Pedro Sánchez in Spain leaning towards the left and Boris Johnson and Donald Trump being on the right side of the political spectrum. The three politicians belong to the Western part of the world. However, their being the leaders of different countries allows us to see whether universal traits of the war metaphor are activated and how these interact with different contexts and the socio-cultural knowledge shared by citizens in each of the locations analysed (Kövecses, 2005). The analysis aims at identifying which constituents of the war metaphor were profiled at the beginning of the pandemic and how these contributed to shaping later political and media discourses on Covid-19. Thus, the speeches uttered by the three above-mentioned leaders in the month of March have been selected for the analysis. The total number of words analysed is 44330 words, as can be seen in the summary included in Table 1. For the analysis, only the time when the political leaders speak has been considered, and neither the questions asked by the journalists nor the replies to those questions have been analysed.

Politician	Code ¹	Date	Title	N. words
Pedro Sánchez	PS-01	13/03/2020	Declaración institucional del presidente del Gobierno anunciando el Estado de Alarma en la crisis del coronavirus	922
	PS-02	14/03/2020	Comparecencia del presidente del Gobierno tras la declaración del estado de alarma por el Consejo de Ministros	3250
	PS-03	21/03/2020	Comparecencia del presidente del Gobierno sobre la crisis del coronavirus	5640
	PS-04	25/03/2020	Comparecencia del presidente del Gobierno en el Congreso de los Diputados para solicitar la prórroga del Estado de Alarma	3839
	PS-05	28/03/2020	Comparecencia del presidente del Gobierno sobre medidas frente al Covid-19	2608
Total N. Words (PS)				16259
Boris Johnson	BJ-01	09/03/2020	Prime Minister's statement on coronavirus (Covid-19)	529
	BJ-02	12/03/2020	PM's statement on Covid-19 ²	1077
	BJ-03	16/03/2020	PM's statement on Covid-19	1047
	BJ-04	17/03/2020	PM's statement on Covid-19	608
	BJ-05	18/03/2020	PM's statement on Covid-19	1081
	BJ-06	19/03/2020	PM's statement on Covid-19	855
	BJ-07	20/03/2020	PM's statement on Covid-19	836
	BJ-08	22/03/2020	PM's statement on Covid-19	661
	BJ-09	23/03/2020	PM's statement on Covid-19	898
	BJ-10	25/03/2020	PM's statement on Covid-19	426
Total N. Words (BJ)				8018

Donald Trump	DT-01	13/03/2020	Remarks by President Trump, Vice President Pence, and Members of the Coronavirus Task Force in Press Conference	1351
	DT-02	14/03/2020	Remarks by P. Trump and others in Press Briefing	1398
	DT-03	15/03/2020	Remarks by P. Trump and others in Press Briefing	1359
	DT-04	19/03/2020	Remarks by P. Trump and others in Press Briefing	2808
	DT-05	24/03/2020	Remarks by P. Trump and others in Press Briefing	1964
	DT-06	26/03/2020	Remarks by P. Trump and others in Press Briefing	2863
	DT-07	28/03/2020	Remarks by P. Trump and others in Press Briefing	2559
	DT-08	30/03/2020	Remarks by P. Trump and others in Press Briefing	3606
	DT-09	31/03/2020	Remarks by P. Trump and others in Press Briefing	2145
				Total N. Words (DT)

Table 10.1. Data included in the corpus for analysis

Literature review and method

The use of WAR metaphors to refer to a disease is not new, and its significance was already identified, and criticised, by Susan Sontag (1978). Likewise, a number of studies have focused on how militaristic language is used to refer to cancer (Demjén and Semino, 2017; Hanahan, 2014; Semino et al., 2018), SARS (Chiang and Duann, 2007; Wallis and Nerlich, 2005), foot and mouth disease and avian flu (Koteyko, Brown, and Crawford, 2008; Nerlich, 2011; Nespereira, 2017), AIDS (Nie et al., 2016) or other instances of public discourse (Flusberg, Matlock, and Thibodeau, 2018). Following this, this chapter will rely on the analysis of conceptual metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) as a useful strategy for the spreading of ideological beliefs (van Dijk, 1998).

Conceptual metaphor has been a particularly fruitful area of research within Cognitive Linguistic approaches to Critical Discourse Analysis (CL-CDA) (Hart, 2008, 2011b; Hart and Lukeš, 2007; Koller, 2004). Likewise, scholars of metaphor have also focused on its analogical power and on its ability to (re-)produce reasoning processes that may have a (de)legitimising effect (Musolff, 2004, 2012). Recent research not only acknowledges the effect of metaphorical framing in reproducing a particular representation of society, but also implicitly aligns itself with constructivist rhetoric (Pujante, 2017), and explains how metaphors may “discursively construct a certain way of seeing and thinking about the events depicted” (Hart, 2019, p. 135).

A systematic method for the study of metaphor can be seen in Charteris-Black's (2004, 2005) Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMT), which, following the model of CDA (Fairclough, 1989) is based on a three-stage procedure. In this chapter, a similar methodology has been followed, although the analytic procedure at each stage has been combined with further tools from cognitive linguistics, rhetoric or CDA.

Once the corpus had been compiled, the first stage in the analysis was to identify metaphorical uses in the speeches mentioned above (Charteris-Black, 2004). First, the texts were analysed in search of keywords, frequent terms, and collocates, following Corpus Linguistics (Baker, 2006; Baker et al. 2008). To do so, SketchEngine (Kilgarriff et al., 2014) and AntConc (Anthony, 2019) were used. Once keywords were identified, war-related metaphorical uses were qualitatively analysed in each text, following the MIPVU proposal for the analysis of linguistic metaphor (Steen et al., 2010) and proposals for the study of evaluative stance (Hidalgo-Downing et al., 2020) When in doubt about the metaphoricity and/or contextual meaning of the linguistic keywords identified, the Macmillan dictionary has been checked for the English language and the dictionary of the RAE has been consulted in the case of Spanish. This follows common practice in MIPVU.

The qualitative analysis of metaphors also included their interpretation in context (Charteris-Black, 2004) and the explanation of their framing effects (Hart, 2019; Kövecses, 2005; Semino, 2008; Janicki, 2015). To do so, the most common mappings evoked by war metaphors were identified with the aim of explaining which worldview they were reproduced. Following CL-CDA understandings of metaphors as a type of construal (Hart, 2008, 2011b, 2019), the identification of actors and the participant roles associated to them within the WAR domain can not only help us explain the underlying representation and reasoning of the pandemic, but also emotional reactions to it (Flusberg, Matlock and Thibodeau, 2018, p. 6-7; Hart, 2019, p. 136). The analysis of mappings was also combined with the identification of deictics to see the proximal or distant relationship that is established between speaker and audience and the "fight against the virus" (Chilton, 2014; Filardo-Llamas, 2019; Filardo-Llamas, Hart and Kaal, 2016). Following proximization studies (Cap, 2013), it can be argued that representing the virus near the deictic centre and the combination with the WAR frame may result in an increased sense of threat, and hence increase the polarising effect of the metaphor.

Given the contextual nature of metaphor and how meanings may change depending on when and where metaphors are used (Hart, 2019; Hidalgo-Downing and Filardo-Llamas, 2020; Kövecses, 2005), the role of the situational context where the metaphors have been produced and notions related to intertextuality have also been considered in the analysis. As argued in the literature (Kelsey, 2017, 2019), intertextuality can help in identifying any other historical or socio-cultural event which may be evoked by militaristic language or co-textual relations with other references to the WAR frame, and how the latter may also influence the discourse world evoked by each instance of discourse.

Analysis

An analysis on SketchEngine of the most frequent concordances of the word “virus” in Pedro Sanchez’, Boris Johnson’s and Donald Trump’s speeches in early March already shows a different construal of the virus. As we can see in Table 2, depending on whether the word “virus” functions as a subject or an object in the speeches, different construals are emphasised.

PEDRO SÁNCHEZ	
Virus as object	Virus as subject
<p>Combatir (fight)</p> <p>La declaración del Estado de Alarma permite movilizar, al máximo, los recursos materiales para combatir el virus (PS-01).</p> <p>[‘The declaration of the state of alarm allows [us] to mobilize, to the maximum, the material resources to fight the virus.’]</p>	<p>Penetrar [enter]</p> <p>El virus has penetrado en Europa siguiendo un viaje aleatorio (PS-05).</p> <p>[‘The virus has entered Europe following an aleatory journey.’]</p>
<p>Eliminar (eradicate)</p> <p>Pero la victoria será total cuando, además de eliminarlo, contemos con una vacuna que evite futuras pandemias (PS-02).</p> <p>[‘But there will be a total victory when, besides eradicating it, we have a vaccine that may prevent future pandemics.’]</p>	<p>Distinguir [distinguish]</p> <p>El virus no distingue colores políticos, ni ideologías, ni territorios (PS-02).</p> <p>[‘The virus does not distinguish between political colours, ideologies or territories.’]</p>
	Avanzar (move forward)

	<p>El virus avanza y golpea con dureza a cada uno de los países del mundo (PS-04). [‘The virus moves forward and hits hardly each of the countries in the world.’]</p>
	<p>Ser (be – as complement) Porque ahora estamos ante nuestro verdadero enemigo, que es el virus y la pandemia (PS-02). [‘Because we are now in front of our true enemy, which is the virus and the pandemic.’]</p>

BORIS JOHNSON

Virus as object	Virus as subject
<p>Beat We will get through it together, and we will beat this virus (BJ-07).</p>	<p>Be The coronavirus is the biggest threat this country has faced for decades (BJ-09).</p>
<p>Defeat I would like to update you all on the government’s plan to defeat the virus and on the latest developments (BJ-10).</p>	
<p>Tackle Our action plan as you know sets out the four phases of our approach to tackling the virus: Contain, Delay, Research, and Mitigate (BJ-01).</p>	
<p>Identify And the answer is to remove the cloak of invisibility. And to identify the virus, and to be able to know which of us, is carrying it or who has actually had it and now got over it (BJ-06).</p>	

DONALD TRUMP

Virus as object	Virus as subject	Modifiers of virus
<p>Defeat Today, I’d like to provide an update to the American people on several decisive new actions we’re taking in our very vigilant effort to combat and ultimately defeat the coronavirus (DT-01). ...When this virus is gone and defeated (DT-09).</p>	<p>Attack Right now, this virus is attacking 149 countries, but everybody looks to us and they’re watching us (DT-05).</p>	<p>Horrible Nothing will stand in our way as we pursue any avenue to find what best works against this horrible virus (DT-04).</p>
<p>Vanquish It’s a very devastating thing, but we will vanquish this virus (DT-06).</p>		<p>Deadly We’re at war with a deadly virus (DT-09).</p>
		<p>Chinese And we continue our relentless effort to defeat the Chinese virus (DT-04).</p>
		<p>Contagious</p>

	This is a very contagious virus (DT-03).
	Terrible ...to respond to the outbreak of the terrible virus — the “invisible enemy,” as we say (DT-07).

Table10.2. Concordances with the word “virus”.

The analysis of uses of the word “virus” as the subject of sentences shows the importance of FORCE-DYNAMICS, IMAGE SCHEMAS and EMBODIED METAPHORS (Charteris-Black, 2005; Hart, 2011a; Hidalgo-Downing and Filardo-Llamas, 2020; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Langacker, 2008; Talmy, 2000; see also Romano and Porto in this volume) for the conceptualization of the virus. The words “penetrar,” “avanzar,” and “attack” do not only contribute to foregrounding the agency of the virus – while presenting it as an agonist force entity (Talmy, 2000, p. 414) –, which is construed as the primary focus of the sentence, but they also emphasise a secondary – antagonist (ibid) – focus, which is the landmark against which the virus is acting (Langacker, 2008, p. 70). This basic conceptualization is combined with embodied experiences of SPACE – metaphorically construed as CONTAINERS that are “attacked” or “entered” by the virus – and a co-textual deictic anchorage of those spaces in each of the different countries analysed. The virus thus becomes a real – but “invisible” (BJ-06, BJ-09; DT-05, DT-07, DT-08, DT-09) – threat whose existence is proximised (Cap, 2013, 2017), thus stressing its likely negative effects.

The CONTAINER image schema which is entered by the virus is metaphorically presented as the space deictic centre. The construal of the virus as a threat is emphasised by the metonymic reference to the “compatriots” (PS-01, PS-03, PS-05) of those countries, who have suffered and died as “a consequence of the pandemic” (PS-01), or whose death has been “caused by this invisible enemy” (DT-09). The causative structures in which the word “virus” – or other referential NPs indexing it – contribute to construing the virus as an agonistic force whose impact is felt at the deictic centre or by inhabitants of this deictic centre (Talmy, 2000, p. 509-46). The agency of the virus and the intrinsic opposition that underlies FORCE DYNAMICS (Hart, 2011a) contribute to creating a world-view based on the opposition between two existing entities, with one of them (“this

country” (BJ-03), “our nation” (DT-05)) occupying a deictic centre that is threatened by another, viral, entity.

The negative evaluation of the virus – and its effects – can be also seen in the use of the relational verb “to be” (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014, p. 219), which helps in representing the virus as an enemy (PS-02) or a threat (BJ-09). As can be seen in Table 2, while Boris Johnson and Pedro Sánchez tend to rely on linguistic cues such as the use of relational verbs – mainly “to be” –, in Donald Trump this negative evaluation is mostly achieved through the use of premodifying negative adjectives such as “horrible” (DT-04), “deadly” (DT-09), “contagious” (DT-03) or “terrible” (DT-07). The use of premodifiers contributes to presenting those negative characteristics of the virus as permanent (Radden and Dirven, 2007, p. 145), hence profiling those features as the natural properties of the virus (Langacker, 2008, p. 124). This has a double effect, as the negative evaluation of the virus not only implies a positioning (Hidalgo-Downing et al., 2020) of Donald Trump against the virus, but also stresses the need of urgent action to counteract it. This urgency is also emphasised by the uses of determiners – mostly definite articles and proximal demonstrative determiners – in those noun phrases, which contribute to grounding the virus as part of the current discourse world, hence profiling its existence (Chilton, 2014; Chilton and Schäffner, 1997; Langacker, 2008).

Amongst the premodifiers used by Donald Trump to refer to the virus, the adjective “Chinese” (DT-04) will be noted. By using this adjective, Trump is presenting the virus as originating in a particular location – China. As it appears in the premodifier position, this origin is presented as a defining property, hence foregrounding the geographical – and political – opposition between the USA – as the country suffering the consequence of the virus – and China – as the originating cause. This attribution gave rise, not only in the USA but also throughout Europe, to racist attacks against citizens of Chinese or oriental origin (HRW, 2020; Tavernise and Opiel Jr., 2020).

Both the conceptualization of the virus as an “enemy” (PS-02, PS-03; BJ-04, BJ-05; DT-07, among others) and its being the object of verbs which activate the CONFLICT schema (Klar, Bar-Tal, and Kruglanski, 1988), like “fight” (PS-01, PS-02, PS-04; BJ-03, BJ-09; DT-07, among others), “defeat” (PS-02, PS-03; BJ-07, BJ-10; DT-01; DT-09), “beat” (BJ-04, BJ-07, BJ-09), “vanquish” (DT-06, DT-07, DT-08), or “eradicate”

(PS-02) contribute to creating a construal which is based on the opposition between two FORCES which act as agonist (in the subject position) and antagonist (in the object position). This opposition between forces is stressed by references to the war against the virus, as we can see in Examples 1 and 2 where the actions to be performed by society – and the government – are framed as part of an ongoing metaphorical struggle against the virus. A comparison can be established, however, between the different construals of agonistic forces. When it is the virus that is the subject, its force is directed against a container, usually the country – or continent – of the politician speaking. However, when the virus is constructed as the antagonistic force – i.e. the one at which actions are directed – different social entities are presented as agonists, particularly the government (Examples 1, 2 and 3), and certain social actors (Example 4). When focusing on key workers, it will be noted that Boris Johnson tends to nominalise the verbs (Example 5), hence minimizing the complexity of the actions required to overcome the pandemic and presenting workers as a homogenized group involved in a process – “a fight” – whose existence rather than the complexities involved – are foregrounded.

- (1) “**My administration** is actively planning the next phase in an all-out war against this horrible virus” (DT-07).
- (2) “We’re using the full power of **the federal government** to defeat the virus, and that’s what we’ve been doing” (DT-02).
- (3) “**We**’re leading a campaign to fight back against this disease” (BJ-04).
- (4) “Esas medidas se dirigen a dotar de recursos a las administraciones sanitarias, esta es **la primera línea** en la que tenemos que dotar de recursos a quienes están combatiendo el virus en primera línea, a proporcionar una red social y económica que proteja de modo especial a los colectivos que son más vulnerables...” (PS-03).
(‘These measures are aimed at providing the health administration with resources; this is **the front line** that we have to provide with resources to those who are fighting the virus in the front line, to provide a social and economic network that protects specially the collective groups that are more vulnerable...’)
- (5) “And I want to thank **everyone in the NHS**, the front line of the fight against coronavirus” (BJ-10).
- (6) “**We** will beat the coronavirus and **we** will beat it together” (BJ-09).

(7) “Los agentes sociales son conscientes del enorme esfuerzo de país que todos debemos hacer ahora para combatir el virus y para reconstruirlo después económica y socialmente” (PS-05).

(‘The social agents are aware of the enormous effort of this country that we shall all make now to fight the virus and to rebuild afterwards economically and socially.’)

Although sometimes society in general is presented as having an active role (Examples 6 and 7), this is not usually specified and tends to be presented as “fighting” or “beating” the virus, without stressing the tools and measures that society has to take for overcoming the pandemic. Likewise, the Examples included in Table 2 show how the use of war-related verbs differs between the three politicians analysed. In Boris Johnson’s and Pedro Sánchez’s statements, these tend to appear as part of subordinate non-finite clauses, which contributes to backgrounding social agency, as we can see for example in “the government’s plan to defeat the virus” (BJ-10) or “recursos materiales para combatir el virus” (‘material resources to fight the virus’) (PS-01). However, in Donald Trump’s statements it is more common to find those verbs with a first-person plural subject, “we,” and the referential adjective “American” in the nearby co-text. In Trump’s speeches the geographical anchorage in the USA tends to be prominent, hence presenting the virus as a “national emergency” (DT-01) and the actions to overcome it as a “national struggle” (DT-08).

Metaphorical activations of the war frame are frequently combined with two other types of discursive strategies. On the one hand, some of the lexicon used to refer to particular policies that have been adopted by each of the governments not only have a policy-based meaning, but might also activate a conflict frame. That is the case, for example, of terms like “estado de alarma” (‘state of alarm’), which might be understood as not only referring to the constitutional policy adopted by the Spanish government to justify restriction measures, but also as co-textually evoking specific mappings of a war, such as the idea of danger or threat and the need to react and “fight” the virus. Thus, not only does the pandemic context influence the understanding of such terms, but also the co-text – and the use of war-related terminology – have a bearing on such interpretation. The fact that those terms are not used in isolation, makes it very difficult for the audience to establish a boundary between the policy and war domains (Croft and Cruse,

2004, p. 113-14), and the two of them are thus subsequently activated every time the term is used, hence increasing its potential cognitive effect and the emotions they set in motion (Citron, 2020). The relation between the policy-based and metaphorical meaning can be seen in Examples 8 and 9.

(8) “La declaración del **Estado de Alarma** permite movilizar, al máximo, los recursos materiales para combatir el virus. Pero, también me vais a permitir que haya un recurso fundamental, que está más allá de cualquier ley o decreto y al que me gustaría apelar directamente a los compatriotas. La victoria depende de cada uno de nosotros, en nuestro hogar, en nuestra familia, en el trabajo, en nuestro vecindario. El heroísmo consiste, también, en lavarse las manos, en quedarse en casa y en protegerse uno mismo, para proteger al conjunto de la ciudadanía” (PS-01, my emphasis).

(‘The declaration of the State of Alarm allows the maximal mobilization of material resources to fight the virus. But, you will allow me to refer to a fundamental resource, which is beyond any law or decree and for which I would like to appeal directly to our compatriots. Victory depends upon each of us, in our home, in our family, in our job, in our neighbourhood. Heroism is, also, washing one’s hands, staying at home, protecting ourselves to protect citizens in their entirety.’)

The activation of the WAR frame is also related to the intertextual references to other military conflicts both in Europe and Spain, thus triggering two mental constructs. On the one hand, a basic CONFLICT frame is activated (Hidalgo-Downing and Filardo-Llamas, 2020) which, as mentioned above, contributes to presenting a relational construal based on an oppositional framework which represents the struggle between two sides, namely the virus and society (Flusberg, Matlock and Thibodeau, 2018). On the other hand, and as we can see in Examples 9, 10 and 11, references by European politicians to former historical conflicts like World War II or the Spanish Civil War contribute to establishing a contextual and historical relation between past physical and overt conflicts and the contemporary metaphorical fight against the virus. In this way, a narrative is constructed in which a parallelism is established between physical and metaphorical wars, and all of them are placed in a sequential temporal continuity.

Donald Trump also activates this narrative by a simile structure (Croft and Cruse, 2004; Romano, 2017) whereby specific aspects of “a war” are profiled (see Example 12).

(9) “Estos días, líderes de países de nuestro entorno han dicho y los hemos escuchado que esta situación es la más grave que han vivido nuestras sociedades desde la II Guerra Mundial y probablemente no les falta razón no les falta razón. En nuestro país, ciertamente, solo los muy mayores, que conocieron las penalidades de la guerra civil y de la postguerra, guardan en su memoria situaciones colectivas más duras que las presentes. (PS-03)

(‘These days, some leaders from countries near ours have said, and we have listened to them, that it is the worst situation that societies have lived since World War II, and it is quite likely they are right. In our country, certainly, only the oldest people, who experienced the hardships of the Civil War and post-war period, store in their memories collective situations harsher than the current ones.’)

(10) “El propósito de evitar una tercera guerra mundial es el germen histórico de la Unión Europea. Y ha tenido éxito en ese empeño en sus casi 70 años de existencia.

Ahora Europa se enfrenta a un desafío distinto, que es librar unida una guerra contra un enemigo común que está diezmando la salud de sus ciudadanos...” (PS-05).

(‘The historical origin of the European Union was the purpose of avoiding a third world war. And it has been successful at this in its nearly 70 years of existence.

Now Europe is facing a different challenge: fighting together a war against a common enemy which is decimating the health of its population...’)

(11) “That is why we announced the steps yesterday that we did – advising against all unnecessary contact – steps that are unprecedented since World War 2” (BJ-04).

(12) “And I spoke to some of my friends; they can’t believe what they’re seeing. And I watched the doctors and the nurses walking into that hospital this morning. It’s like military people going into battle, going into war. The bravery is incredible” (DT-09).

(13) “Pero Sr. Sánchez, lo único que me preocupa ahora es qué está haciendo para luchar contra la pandemia, y por qué no se ejerce con eficacia el mando único.

Usted dijo que **estamos en guerra contra el virus**, pero en las guerras los gobiernos no mandan a los soldados al frente sin casco, sin chaleco y sin munición.

Y en esta guerra nuestros profesionales sanitarios están peleando sin mascarilla, sin equipos de protección y sin respiradores para salvar la vida de los enfermos” (Casado, 2020).³

(‘But, Mr. Sánchez, what I am now worried about is what you are doing to fight against the pandemic and why the unified command is not being effectively exercised.

You said we are at war against the virus, but in war governments do not send helmetless, vestless, and munitionless soldiers to the front.

And in this our health professionals are fighting without a mask, without protection equipment and without ventilators to save the life of sick people.’)

This equivalence, together with a pervasiveness of the binary opposition framing in politics, mainly through social understandings of politics as war (Janicki, 2015, p. 41-45; Lakoff, 2002; Thibodeau, 2016, p. 62) makes it eventually easier to re-contextualize the WAR metaphor by re-framing the war. This has happened in Spanish politics, and we can see that in the response of leader of the Popular Party, Pablo Casado, to Pedro Sánchez in Parliament where a different construal of the fight against the virus is provided (Example 13).⁴ Likewise, the appeal to the WAR frame also allows for the basic CONFLICT frame to be recontextualised and transferred to the political arena, as we can see in some media headlines found in newspapers in Spain in the month of March: “El virus enciende la batalla política” (‘The virus inflames the political war,’ El País, March 27, 2020). Likewise, the possibility of the war frame being applied to both the politics and virus target domains can be observed in Joe Biden’s Thanksgiving speech where he activates the war frame to talk about the virus and ignores its validity in the political realm.⁵ By saying “we are at war with the virus, not with each other,” the metaphorical fight against an enemy shared by the whole of society is foregrounded, and internal oppositions between different socio-political groups are minimised. These multiple reframings are possible because the WAR metaphor, and their associated FORCE

image schemas, allows for a construal in which two opposed entities are profiled, but these entities can be deictically or co-textually grounded in different historical times and/or different physical or metaphorical locations.

Conclusion

The results of the analysis show how a basic opposition schema (van Dijk, 1998) underlies the early responses to the Covid-19 pandemic by Pedro Sánchez, Boris Johnson and Donald Trump. Concordances of the word virus show that a FORCE DYNAMICS schema is activated to conceptualize the relation between the virus and society, with the latter spatially anchored in given countries and metonymically recalled by mentioning different social groups. By presenting the virus as an agonist exercising a metaphorical force against its antagonist – society – a basic CONFLICT frame is activated.

The basic conflict schema is metaphorically instantiated through references to the “war” against the virus. Thus a very specific type of conflict based on the WAR frame is discursively portrayed by the three politicians analysed. The “war against the virus” functions as a type of instantiation (Hart, 2020, p. 23) which is also culturally and historically framed as being equivalent to former struggles in each of the three countries, namely World War 2 and the Spanish Civil War. In the immediate co-text other militarising terms – such as “state of alarm,” “lockdown,” or “front line” – are found together with appeals to “national unity,” “heroism,” “patriotism” or “compatriots”. Because the metaphorical war against the virus and former historical wars are conceptualised as being similar, given policies which could have been contested – such as state intervention, the deployment of the military (also in press conferences), or the unified single command of the government – are legitimised.

However, even if the metaphorical construal of the pandemic as an opposition between us – society – and them – the virus – discursively implies an appeal to national “unity,” the activation of a CONTAINER schema to represent the countries that are being “attacked” by the virus can also be used to justify polarized views. Since the virus is presented as a proximal threat, the need of defending oneself from it have lain at the

core of xenophobic attacks suffered by Chinese citizens, given the discursive foregrounding of the virus being Chinese, or the polarization of political life, given social understandings of politics as war.

Framing the virus as a war allows for the Covid-19 pandemic to be understood not only as a metaphorical, but also as a real conflict (Janicki, 2015, p. 41). Activating the WAR frame foregrounds the socio-political existence of a binary opposition: us vs them. The conceptualisation of the “them/virus” as an enemy likewise simplifies reality and silences scientific explanations of the causes, effects and complexity of the virus as well as its relation to other social or environmental problems, and frames the latter as part of a battle against the virus. This may be eventually lead to conflict. Thus, it could be argued that the illocutionary intention of activating the WAR frame by the three politicians analysed in this chapter was to construe a specific “us vs them/it” opposition that could mobilize society as a whole against the virus. However, the analysis has shown that the combination FORCE DYNAMICS, CONFLICT/WAR frames and spatial deictics can also function as a mechanism that could result in an affective polarization (Iyengar et al., 2019) of society in which the opposing forces in the basic conflict schema are shifted through individual and ideologically-loaded understandings of the word “national” or through a deictic shift of the metaphorical war to a political war. Since basic image schemas acquire meaning in context, the activation of a CONFLICT frame could hence not only result in a short-term mobilization against the virus, but also in a long-term polarization of society.

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¹ For the sake of simplicity, reference will be made to this code when citing these sources.

² Similar titles for Boris Johnson's and Donald Trump's statements have been abbreviated for the sake of simplicity.

³ Casado, Pablo. Speech during the debate on the extension of the State of Alarm. March 25, 2020. Available at http://www.pp.es/sites/default/files/documentos/20.03.25_intervencion_casado_pleno_-_prorroga_estado_de_alarma.pdf

⁴ Further interesting examples where the war metaphor abounds in the Popular Party's discourses can be found in their YouTube channel. Amongst them, the video "Luchamos contra un enemigo común" (we fight against a common enemy") is worth mentioning as it shows the Popular party's framing of the "fight against the virus".

⁵ Evening Standard. Joe Biden says US 'at war with the virus, not each other' as he gives Thanksgiving speech. November 26, 2020. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDVOdXTSOPU>