

Metaphorical representation of fire in newspaper articles

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Abstract

Over the last years our planet has been exposed to various major catastrophic natural disasters which have had a significant effect on the social life and people themselves. In this paper, I would like to focus on the Australian fire disasters represented by the written media in English-speaking countries. The motivation for the choice of this country lies in the fact that this current phenomenon of fires rose global interest by the written media due to its scale and global environmental effect.

The newspapers which will be taken for consideration are *The Guardian*, *The Age*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The New York Times*. Based on a qualitative analysis, this paper will explore the metaphoric representation of the bushfires in the compiled newspaper discourse. The main metaphoric themes discerned are BLOOD, MONSTER, ATOMIC BOMB, SEA OF FLAMES.

Conveying experiences through language often involves comparisons and thus a metaphor is a useful tool. One type of evaluative resource, the use of figurative language and repeated patterns of metaphorical usage is of interest for newspaper analysis since it is often used in intangible and even insidious ways in persuasive argument.

The results show that metaphors are widely used in shaping news reports about significant wildfires and that their use affects the way people reason and perceive the phenomenon and their relation to it. Just as is the case with many other features of language, metaphors bond people in a joint state of meaning creation.

Keywords: natural disasters, newspaper discourse, metaphoric representation, fire

1. Introduction

1.1 Objectives, Data, and Methodology

This article explores metaphorical expressions in newspaper discourse on fire catastrophes to represent a natural phenomenon. The main aim is to reveal what ideological perspective is embedded in such a metaphorical representation. The research examines *The Guardian*, *The Age*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, and *The New York Times* newspapers published in Western English-speaking countries: Great Britain, the USA, and Australia. They all belong to broadsheet newspapers, which are perceived to be more objective and factual, and the language of which is viewed as a more neutral mediator of reality than in the case of tabloid newspapers, which overtly purport to

entertain and sensationalize. The motivation for the choice of fire disaster lies in the fact that the catastrophic bushfires had a devastating effect in the country not only naturally destroying natural habitats but also economically.

Metaphors are a particularly way of helping to reveal discourses surrounding a subject. Baker cites Farclough (1989:119) who points out that when we describe x in terms of y, all the “ideological attachments” connotations, associations and their meanings carried by y are projected on x. ¹ Lakoff & Johnson define metaphors as “*understanding and experiencing one kind of*

¹ Paul Baker (2006) Using corpora in discourse analysis, pp. 167.

thing in terms of another"². They also explain that "every experience takes place within a vast background of cultural presuppositions".³

According to Lakoff and Johnson "Metaphors as linguistic expressions are possible precisely because there are metaphors in a person's conceptual system"⁴. Metaphors thus provide a window on the ways language is structured and on the ways in which we think and learn. In this view, they are no longer regarded merely as an element of poetry but are recognized as a central device in human thought. This is the reason metaphor has become such an important topic of linguistic research. Metaphor has the ability to highlight some aspects of a concept while at the same time hiding others⁵. One abundant source of real discourse is the news. Since "society is pervaded by media language", news influences much of our lives.⁶ News is the subject of interest in this thesis, more specifically the use of metaphor in newspaper articles.

The aim of this paper is to investigate fire metaphors based on the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory developed by researchers (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) in the field of cognitive linguistics. They view metaphors not only at the language level but at the level of thinking as well.

Metaphors constitute a crucial means in shaping reality and thus, affecting one's behaviour and reaction towards a subject. Metaphor is defined as a mapping of structure from one conceptual domain, the source domain, to another conceptual domain, the target domain. This mapping is not based on the similarity between the two concepts, but rather on the correlation of our experience in these two domains and our ability to structure one concept in terms of the other.

Background Information

The ferocious fires of 2019-2020 hit Australia in a devastating way. Australia had one of the worst bush fire seasons in its recorded history. Some claim that the climate is one to be blamed due to hot and dry conditions by making the fires last longer and more dangerous. Moreover, the wind across Australia is another factor contributing to the spread of blazes and fire. The consequences were dramatic causing loss of human and animal life. It was estimated that in the first three months of the 2019-2020 bushfires, over 800 million animals died in NSW, and more than one billion nationally.⁷ Koalas were the most vulnerable

² Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M (2003). *Metaphors We live*. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press. Pp. 5.

³ Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M (2003). *Metaphors We live*. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press. Pp. 57.

⁴ Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M (1980). *Metaphors We live*. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press. Pp. 6.

⁵ Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M (1980). *Metaphors We live*. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press. Pp. 10

⁶ Bell, A. (1991a). *The language of news media*. Oxford: Blackwell. Pp. 1.

⁷ Wikipedia website:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bushfires_in_Australia#2019%E2%80%932020

because they move slowly and it was reported that about 50.000 of them died.

Analysis

The analysis of the newspaper articles reveals that all the newspapers heavily employ metaphorical expressions with reference to fires. The aim of this article is to investigate the metaphorical expressions related to fire embedded in discourse in the newspapers and employed as a tool to illustrate the severe and vast destruction of bushfires and consequently, shaping readers' attitude and beliefs towards such a destructive phenomenon.

By carrying out a close reading of the selected newspapers in order to identify candidate metaphors related to fire, four major metaphor themes are discerned in all six newspapers: the representation of the bushfires as blood, monster, atomic bomb, and sea of flames.

The Representation of Fire as "Monster"

One major conceptual metaphor theme that is used is the representation of the fire as a MONSTER. In other words, the article portrays this phenomenon as a large, powerful, frightening, violent, and cruel creature.

There can be found a number of references in the articles which directly and explicitly portray the fire as a monster. These include the employment of a simile, as in the following sentence:

"There have been fires in the past heading along Cann River, but they have also managed to put them out before they've reached Mallacoota. I'm really worried this time though because **this one sounds like a monster**." (The Age 30 December 2019).

"The Gospers Mountain fire has now destroyed an area seven times the size of Singapore - more than 444,000 hectares from the western border of the Blue Mountains to the Central Coast hinterland, north to the Hunter Valley, and south to the Hawkesbury and past the Bells Line of Road To those living in its shadow, **it is known as "the monster"**." (Sidney Morning Herald, 20 December 2019)

In other cases, the word monster has been adopted to characterize the bushfire phenomenon, as in:

Enormous mega blaze dubbed 'The Monster' (Daily Mail 21 December 2019).

'The monster': a short history of Australia's biggest forest fire

The Gospers Mountain 'mega fire' started from a single ignition point. It has now destroyed an area seven times the size of Singapore.

By Harriet Alexander and Nick Moir
DECEMBER 20, 2019



Moreover, the newspapers make reference to other discursive devices to convey the monster metaphor. The use of hyperbolic adjectives such *mega*, *giant*, *vast*, *massive*, *huge*, *colossal* is present in the articles. Their use is intentional since the author is seeking to make the readers aware of the size of the fires in Australia and their destructive character.

Three weeks ago, it combined with several fires to form a vast complex that has been dubbed "the mega-fire". (Sidney Morning Herald, 20 December 2019)

Apart from these, the great force of the bushfires is also conveyed through the connotations of the verbs used in the sentences below. The fire phenomenon is portrayed as a human being possessing extraordinary strength by tearing through, picking off, marching towards going out of control, stabbing, roaring, and swallowing. While the objects are incomparable to size or strength.

The Gaspers Mountain fire **to**re towards the coast **like a beast** on holiday. It was voracious. (Sidney Morning Herald, 20 December 2019)

.....as the Green Wattle Creek blaze **to**re through the Wollondilly Shire on Thursday. (The Guardian 19 December 2019).

Last Sunday, when the fire had grown to 350,000 hectares, a backburn **went out of control** near Mount Wilson and destroyed several houses in that town and Bilpin. It **is now marching towards the Mount Piper power plant**..... (Sidney Morning Herald, 20 December 2019)

By the end of the day, **the fire had wiped out** more than 30,000 hectares and presented peril in every direction. (Sidney Morning Herald, 20 December 2019)

On the southern front, **it picked off** a house at Colo Heights, **retreated**, and **returned** three days later to destroy several more in its first serious advance into suburbia.

..... the wind picked up over the Blue Mountains and lightning **stabbed** at the ranges.

It's useless trying to predict how blazes **will behave** (ABC news Australian Broadcasting Corporation 3 January 2020)

When the flames arrived in Cobargo, they **to**re through the main street, **roaring like the ocean**, incinerating lives and livelihoods. (The Guardian 4 January 2020)

Around the same time, fire **ripped through** the Adelaide Hills and Kangaroo Island in the central state of South Australia. (The Guardian 4 January 2020)

Another interesting expression found in the article is the idiom "take its pound of flesh"⁸ found in the newspaper below and which implies the persistence of getting something they have a right to,

⁸ Origin: An allusion to Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, in which the moneylender Shylock demands he be paid the pound of flesh promised as collateral for a loan.

even though it might not be needed, and causing problems for the people they are getting it from.⁹

But the blaze **would take its pound of flesh**. (Sidney Morning Herald, 20 December 2019)

The idiom refers to the uncontrollable blaze which would proceed further by bringing land to ashes and killing animals without mercy.

Another characteristic that is attributed to the bushfires by the newspapers is insatiability. The articles explicitly refer to the natural phenomenon as voracious and hungry. Such adjectives imply that the fires were uncontrollable and eager to swallow and burn more and more land.

..... **flames swallowed** 25,000 hectares of prime agricultural land.... (The Guardian 4 January 2020)

The Representation of Fire as "Blood"

Blood is either associated with passion or death, war or sacrifice. There are many instances in the articles of the use of the word blood referring to the consequences of the fires. The most frequent use is characterisation of the sky as blood red. The sentence extracted below from The Guardian Newspaper represents it better.

Wherever the fires rise, their approach has been foreshadowed by falling ash and the dimming of light as blue skies turn either nicotine yellow, glowing orange, or, in some cases, **blood red**. (The Guardian 4 January 2020)

As daybreak turned to night, the **sky grew red** as the flames drew near. (The Guardian 4 January 2020)

.....the sky has turned a disconcerting **shade of red**. (New Zealand Herald 4 January 2020)

Four days after a bush fire ravaged the remote coastal town of Mallacoota, forcing people to shelter on the beach under **blood-red skies**, more than 1,000 stranded residents and vacationers arrived on Saturday in Hastings, a town near Melbourne. (New York Times Australia 4 January 2020)



⁹ Internet Website: <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/take+a+pound+of+flesh>

In general, people associate blood with something painful or life-ending. The Australian skies are described in these articles as such implying that the fires were so powerful and long that transformed the sky into the red colour metaphorically conveyed by the word blood.

The Representation of Fire as “Sea of Flames”

Another metaphor used in the articles under analysis is wall of flames found in the sentence below. The discursive device being used here is the oxymoron. The sea is not associated with flames and the water puts out the fire. However, the author implies that even the water cannot control or ease the power of the fires being under flames itself.

Conditions on the ground have seen **sea of flames**, spot fires coalescing into **fire tornados** and some forefronts burning so hot they have formed their own weather systems. (The Guardian 4 January 2020).

The Representation of Fire as an Atomic Bomb

In another article, concretely in the New Zealand Herald newspaper, the fire is compared to an atomic bomb. The Online Cambridge Dictionary defines the term as “an extremely powerful bomb that uses the explosive power resulting from splitting the atom”.¹⁰ Its devastation is indescribable.

Australian bushfires: 'This isn't a bushfire, it's an atomic bomb'(New Zealand Herald 4 January 2020)

WORLD

Australian bushfires: 'This isn't a bushfire, it's an atomic bomb'

4 Jan, 2020 06:32 AM

7 minutes to read



The sky turns red over the town on January 04, 2020 in Bodalla, Australia. Photo / Getty Images

Describing metaphorically the fire as an atomic bomb leads to the belief that this is not just a fire which could be extinguished by the responsible authorities and retrain damaged objects back. On the contrary, its consequences are irreparable and long-lasting leaving behind ash, dust, or nothing. When people think of an atomic bomb, it reminds them of death, destruction, and no life. Thus, the newspapers are trying to portray the extraordinary effects these bushfires have on earth and people as well.

¹⁰ Online Cambridge Dictionary: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/atom-bomb>

Source: <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/the-monster-a-short-history-of-australia-s-biggest-forest-fire-20191218-p5314y.html>



Source: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-03/scientific-modelling-not-coping-with-current-bushfires/11839356>

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Conclusions

This paper has attempted to determine what fire-related metaphors are used in the newspapers of the English-speaking world to describe the vast Australian bushfires. By analysing fire metaphors in articles in English of five major newspapers, namely The Guardian, The Age, The Daily Telegraph, The Sydney Morning Herald, and The New York Times, it is revealed that the use of metaphorical expressions related to fire such as, like a monster, an atomic bomb, sea of flames, and blood reinforce the readers' thought of the power of the fires and their devastating effects.

Such metaphors are deliberately used in the articles of the selected newspapers. One of the reasons is to grab readers' attention and interest. On the other hand, the use of such metaphors reinforces the strength and power of fires in Australia making them devastating and fatal.

By negatively describing the Australian fires, and adopting the mythical theme of the personification of evil, the metaphors transform the phenomenon into a demon. Therefore, they cause fear, rather than reason. Consequently, the fear of something unknown becomes real, villain, that is a cruel monster.

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