ТЕОРЕТИЧЕСКАЯ, ПРИКЛАДНАЯ И СРАВНИТЕЛЬНО-СОПОСТАВИТЕЛЬНАЯ ЛИНГВИСТИКА / THEORETICAL, APPLIED AND COMPARATIVE LINGUISTICS

IMAGES OF WAR: COVID-19 IN NOMINATIONS AND CONTEXTS IN MEDIA DISCOURSE

Research article

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Abstract

The paper reveals the peculiarities of coronavirus nominations and its contexts in media discourse in British, American, and Chinese linguocultures. The purpose of the article is to show the reaction of language to modern challenges, such as COVID-19, identifying cultural differences to indicate various attitudes of the society. As coronavirus has begun to proliferate on a global scale, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the spread of COVID-19 a pandemic. Journalists have begun to use not only the officially accepted name of the disease (COVID-19), which is free from connotations, but also coin metaphors, emphasizing different qualities of the virus and trying to draw the public's attention. Moreover, they fill the immediate context with a plethora of general military terms. Such content helps to show that the disease is the enemy, which is at war with all nations. The following metaphorical expressions have been selected from British, American and Chinese online newspapers (25 articles with 70,000 signs in total): "Chinese virus", "China virus", "Wuhan virus", "Kung-Fu", "insidious force", "threat", "challenge", "invisible (unseen) enemy", "big unknown", "catastrophe", "viral Katrina", "nightmare", "ember", "plague", "killer pandemic", "mystery illness" and some others. The authors distributed them into five groups. The article demonstrates the origin of the virus's name and its link to a military sphere that manifests itself through nominations and immediate context. Such a grouping shows that in mass media discourse COVID-19 is described in various ways, which arouses a wide spectrum of emotions: from interest and excitement to fear.

Keywords: coronavirus, metaphor, political discourse, mass media discourse, attitude.

ОБРАЗЫ ВОЙНЫ: КОВИД-19 В НОМИНАЦИЯХ И КОНТЕКСТАХ МЕДИАДИСКУРСА

Научная статья

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Аннотация

Статья раскрывает особенности номинаций коронавируса и его контекстов в медиадискурсе в британской, американской и китайской лингвокультурах. Цель работы – показать реакцию языка на современные вызовы, такие как COVID-19, выявив культурные различия, свидетельствующие о различных общественных установках. Поскольку коронавирус начал распространяться в мировом масштабе, Всемирная организация здравоохранения (ВОЗ) объявила распространение COVID-19 пандемией. Журналисты стали использовать не только официально принятое название болезни (COVID-19), свободное от коннотаций, но и прибегать к метафорам, подчеркивая различные свойства вируса и стараясь привлечь внимание общественности. Более того, они наполняют непосредственный контекст множеством общих военных терминов. Такое содержание помогает показать, что болезнь – это враг, который ведет войну со всеми народами. Из британских, американских и китайских онлайн-газет (всего 25 статей с 70 000 знаков) были отобраны следующие метафорические выражения: «китайский вирус», «вирус Китая», «уханьский вирус», «кунг-фу», «коварная сила», «угроза», «вызов», «невидимый (незримый) враг», «большое неизвестное», «катастрофа», «вирус Катрина», «кошмар», «искра», «чума», «пандемия-убийца», «таинственная болезнь» и некоторые другие. Авторы разделили их на пять групп. В статье показано происхождение названия вируса и его связь с военной сферой, которая проявляется через номинации и прямой контекст. Такая разбивка на группы показывает, что в масс-медийном дискурсе COVID-19 описывается по-разному, что вызывает широкий спектр эмоций: от интереса и волнения до страха.

Ключевые слова: коронавирус, метафора, политический дискурс, дискурс масс-медиа, отношение.

Introduction

It is of language nature to react to different challenges including the situation in late 2019, when the world faced a virus which in a couple of months has spread all over the world, causing a huge, social, economic and medical turmoil in many countries. On 12 March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) announced the COVID-19 (short from "Coronavirus Disease") outbreak a pandemic [32]. And media fully concentrated their attention on the topic. Thanks to polydiscursive nature of both political and mass media discourses, politicians and journalists managed to manipulate the majority of the target audience behavior and shape its attitude using various linguistic means and stylistic devices, including metaphor. One of the methods used in the research is an analysis of metaphor.

Research methods and principles

Using this method means to think about things in the way of different categories. It involves imagining your challenge playing out in domains outside your own, and seeing what happens when you attempt to make new combinations. The approach assumes that you've begun synthesizing your verbatim notes (or raw data) by highlighting surprises over trends, taking special notice of their deep motivation to use your product/service [13]. Another method used is a semantic analysis. In the analysis of meanings, dictionaries are used to understand the definitions of terms and identify shifts in context that affect the semantics of words. Semantic analysis involves interpreting the meaning of words that represent entities, concepts, relations, and predicates within a given situation.

Main results

According to Lakoff and Johnson, metaphor is a cognitive process where characteristics of one object are attributed to another, making the second object appear as the first. Within cognitive linguistics, metaphor is seen as a way to understand one conceptual domain through another. This viewpoint can be summarized as conceptual domain A is conceptual domain B, creating a conceptual metaphor. The one object's transferred to another. This means that metaphor is an analogy when we think that two objects similar to each other, have similar shape, color, value, position or type of movement. Metaphors apply one fragment of the worlds' picture to another, and the further two categories, that the objects belong to, stand apart, the more emphatic the metaphoric contrast becomes. Whereas, pseudo-identification within one class of objects does not create a metaphor [3].

Following Austin J. L., metaphors are not only semantic phenomena, but a pragmatic notion as well [4]. Thus, a message which contains a metaphor, should be understood by the recipient paying attention to the speaker's intentions [28]. According to Goodman N., a metaphor has one interesting peculiarity – it can classify objects in a new, different way. It replaces obsolete categories with new ones, which allow us see the problem from another side, presenting new facts about it [12]. Thus, metaphor is one of the best tools, which helps to identify new characteristics in some well-known object or notion. Metaphors "explain" the nature of complex, unknown phenomena through their implicit comparison with certain familiar things [3].

Metaphors play a significant role in not only explaining familiar ideas but also in acquiring new knowledge. They help in grasping the essence of something by moving from an abstract perspective to a more specific one [11]. In the present day, the exploration of metaphors is gaining prominence as they are seen as a tool for shaping the social perception of the world and accessing non-verbal information. Various categories of metaphors exist based on their semantics, with examples including anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, phytomorphic, sport, financial, military, medical, geometric, and gastronomic metaphors [23]. Other authors also distinguish astronomical [1], socio-economic [2], morbial [27] etc. metaphors. All of them are used in mass media discourse to different extent.

Politicians use metaphors in mass media discourse to portray a state of affairs as problematic and future scenarios as solutions. They also use metaphors to represent out-groups (opponents) and in-groups (supporters) [15]. This is significant in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is often depicted as an unseen enemy in media discourse. The language used during the pandemic has had a profound impact on various languages, with many studies focusing on the lexical aspects of the crisis. That is the reason of the media image representation through various metaphors' extensive use that help to emphasize disease aspects and show different attitude to it.

The pandemic has influenced on most languages, especially on their lexical level. There are numerous studies devoted to multifaceted consideration of the lexis used during pandemic. For instance, there are researchers who study the derivational and lexical units' functional aspects [6], [25]. Several authors have delved into the role of media in shaping the language of the COVID-19 era [26], the use of coronavirus terminology in various types of discourse [17], and how lexical units reflect social and everyday life [14]. Some researchers have even attempted to create a dictionary for this period [21]. The increasing number of studies on this topic underscores the importance of examining the lexical aspects of different languages during the pandemic. However, metaphoric designations for COVID-19 have not yet been thoroughly explored. Nomination is not the only way to characterize the virus; implicit features of the coronavirus as a battleground between humanity and the disease are evident in the immediate context.

Therefore, it is essential to analyze the nuances of political and media discourses, as they significantly influence public opinion. Discourse studies encompass authentic texts of any size, written or spoken, considered within their context [5]. These studies focus on authentic language units above the level of a sentence that are analyzed in context. Political and media discourses can intersect with scientific, legal, religious, military, and other forms of discourse, resulting in strong intertextuality and hybridization of genres [19]. Political discourse often employs persuasive and manipulative language techniques, drawing from the classical tradition of rhetoric to sway and influence audiences [15].

Discussion

The World Health Organization intentionally chose a generic name for COVID-19 to prevent stigmatization and named it based on its characteristics [37]. However, various metaphorical designations for the virus have been coined by politicians and journalists, sparking debates and discussions. To understand the term "coronavirus," it is vital to note that it is a group of RNA-containing viruses causing respiratory tract infections in mammals and birds [9].

The term "virus" refers to a microscopic infectious agent causing diseases in humans, animals, and plants, with potential metaphorical connotations of poisoning the mind or soul [22]. The coronavirus is named after the crown-like spikes on its surface, resembling the corona of the sun [24].

Historically, the word "corona" was associated with military distinctions, harking back to Latin origins meaning "crown" given to honor military service. This military connotation has resurfaced in the metaphorical nominations created by politicians and journalists. The authors have categorized these nominations into five groups, as shown in Table 1. In conclusion, understanding the linguistic and metaphorical dimensions of COVID-19 discourse in political and media contexts is crucial due to their significant impact on public perceptions and behaviors. Further research into metaphorical designations and the evolution of coronavirus language is needed to comprehensively analyze the linguistic landscape of the pandemic.

Table 1 - Coronavirus nominations

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Chinese virus China virus Wuhan virus Kung-Fu	Mystery illness Plague Killer pandemic	Threat Insidious force Challenge	Invisible enemy Unseen enemy Big unknown	Catastrophe Nightmare Viral Katrina Ember

First, it is necessary to mention, that the nominations are connected with the place the virus originated from. At least three toponyms have been used in relation to coronavirus, namely, "Chinese virus", "the China Virus" and "Wuhan virus": "Trump has previously questioned China's reported numbers of infections ... and referred to the outbreak as the "Chinese virus" [46], "I always treated the Chinese Virus very seriously, and have done a very good job from the beginning..." [37], "Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has called coronavirus the "Wuhan virus" during recent public appearances" [37], "Some have called the novel coronavirus "the China Virus" [37].

All of these toponyms were largely rejected by the international community. However, another nickname for the coronavirus has emerged in the media – "kung-fu". This term is related to Chinese martial arts and implies the dangerous nature of the virus. In fact, a White House official referred to the coronavirus as "kung-flu" directly [44]. This nickname plays on words, drawing a parallel between the virus and a dangerous fight. The definition of "kung fu" suggests that the virus can use various means to spread, emphasizing its adaptability [9].

Other metaphorical nominations for the coronavirus have been forged using medical terms. When the disease was first discovered, it was referred to as a "mystery illness" [48]. This term implies that the virus was initially unknown and created curiosity and intrigue among people. The author of this metaphor also refers to the coronavirus as an "illness" rather than a "disease", indicating a personal subjective experience of the symptoms [43]. Soon after, this "mystery illness" was referred to as a "wicked respiratory disease" and a "plague" – a disease that killed millions of people in the Middle Ages [10]. These terms highlight the severity and deadly nature of the virus, equating it with one of the most devastating diseases in history.

Another powerful metaphor used is "killer pandemic" [48]. This term emphasizes the potential for widespread death caused by the virus. Killer, noun, a killer is a person who has killed someone, or who intends to kill someone. You can refer to something that causes death or is likely to cause death as a killer [9]. Pandemic, noun, an occurrence of a disease that affects many people over a very wide area [9]. By using the word "killer", the metaphor draws a parallel between the virus and a person or thing that causes death [8]. Additionally, the term "pandemic" signifies an occurrence of a disease that affects many people over a wide area. This metaphor underscores the real and imminent danger the virus poses to people worldwide.

It's important to note that the use of these metaphors and nicknames reflects how the virus was perceived and understood at different stages of its outbreak. The evolving terminology demonstrates a shift in public perception, from initial curiosity to growing awareness of the virus's severe impact. Thus, this metaphor links coronavirus to devastating results of military actions. As the virus had been spreading over the globe, politicians began to understand its danger. For that reason, politicians and journalists called the virus a 'threat': "Then Trump insisted he hadn't seen January memos by a top White House official warning about the pandemic at the same time the President was dismissing it as a threat" [40].

Threat noun:

1) something which is dangerous or hostile;

2) enemy forces;

3) a statement declaring a person's intention to do harm [8].

Besides, the virus is called the "challenge": "...Germany... is facing its greatest challenge since the Second World War in the struggle against the coronavirus ...", "There has been no such challenge to our country since German reunification – no, not since the Second World War II ..." [29]. The metaphor is supported by the immediate context, full of words, denoting military actions. Here, mentioning the greatest war in the history of humanity, the speaker emphasizes the exceptional damage coronavirus can cause. The immediate context shows that the whole world is at war with the virus.

"Challenge" is another metaphor for coronavirus. Challenge, noun:

1) a stimulating task or problem;

2) a calling to account or into question;

3) the act or process of provoking or testing physiological activity by exposure to a specific substance [22].

This definition of the word 'challenge' reveals the idea that humankind has to withstand a difficult test. What is more, it will show not only physiological and mental resistance, but it will also make people act. The metaphorical nomination also includes an adjective in superlative degree, which shows exceptional importance of the challenge. The immediate context, full of military words (Second World War, struggle), also intensifies that idea.

Also the politician called the virus "a historic task": "This is a historic task – and it can only be mastered if we face it together" [41]. The given metaphor reveals the importance of defeating coronavirus for all nations from the viewpoint of historical development: Historic, adj. 1. A historic event or place is important because it is, or will be, remembered as a part of history [20].

The looming danger of the virus is also implied in the metaphor 'insidious force': "While Mr. Newsom noted that hospitalizations and patients in intensive care had decreased slightly from the day before, he said the number of deaths should serve as a warning that even as the weather warms ... the virus remains an insidious force" [48]. Insidious, adj. Something that is insidious is unpleasant or dangerous and develops gradually without being noticed [9]. Force, noun:

1) strength or energy exerted or brought to bear : cause of motion or change : active power the forces of nature the motivating force in her life;

2) military strength [22]. The given metaphor emphasizes great future danger of the virus for people. Coronavirus is implicitly compared with numerous enemy forces, opposing people.

The fourth group of coronavirus nominations comprises such metaphors as 'invisible enemy, unseen enemy, big unknown'. All this metaphors imply uncertainty, which frightens people: "... people are panicking in the face of a big unknown. But we have a rough idea about this virus; it is highly infectious, and not as deadly as SARS" [38]. First, things, which are big, can seriously harm people, because they can have great force, dimensions, etc. Big, adj.:

1) large or great in dimensions, bulk, extent, number, quantity, or amount;

2) of great importance or significance;

3) of great force; b obsolete: of great strength [22].

And when people cannot identify how such a big thing or notion can affect their lives, usually they become afraid of such an uncertainty. Unknown, n. 2: something that requires discovery, identification, or clarification: such as a specimen (as of bacteria or mixed chemicals) required to be identified as an exercise in appropriate laboratory techniques [22].

The given noun implies something, which people have never faced before. But this unknown puzzles people due to its importance and extent: As we see, the metaphor does not have strong negative connotation. The virus proliferation has prompted the appearance of such metaphor as 'invisible enemy': "Trump set out Tuesday to cement his image of a wartime leader facing down an "invisible enemy" at a dark moment as the country waits for the virus to peak ..." [39].

Invisible adj. 1. If you describe something as invisible, you mean that it cannot be seen, for example because it is transparent, hidden, or very small. 2. You can use invisible when you are talking about something that cannot be seen but has a definite effect. Enemy adj.:

1) a national of a state which is at war with your own country;

2) a state which is at war with your own country [8].

War noun 1. an armed conflict between nations [8]; Country noun 1. land forming the territory of a nation or state [8]. The given definitions suggest that coronavirus is a dangerous small unseen unit, which combats great number of people, and the results of the battle will definitely have a certain influence on the future. During the research a similar metaphor has been found – unseen enemy: "The enemy moves among us unseen" [45]. But when the whole world had understood, that the virus had devastating effects, more emphatic metaphors have been coined. For example, a metaphorical nickname "viral Katrina" has been forged: "On Tuesday, the Trump administration, reeling from criticism of its botched national response to the crisis, which critics have labelled Trump's "viral Katrina" – a reference to George W Bush's disastrous handling of the response to the 2005 hurricane ..." [47].

Hurricane n, a violent storm, especially in the western Atlantic ocean [20]; A hurricane is an extremely violent wind or storm [9]. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, Hurricane Katrina was a tropical cyclone that struck the southeastern United States in 2005. The hurricane and its aftermath claimed more than 1,800 lives, and it ranked as the costliest natural disaster in U.S. history [10]. In other words, the metaphor implies that the virus, being a very small unit, can undermine huge systems, built by people, and first of all, economy. What is more, in British English Hurricane is a single-engine, single-seat British fighter aircraft of World War II, built by Hawker; noted for its role in the Battle of Britain (1940) [9]. This allusion is worth mentioning as coronavirus is often metaphorically related to military actions. In this case, the nomination of the natural violent force was used as a nomen in military sphere. This link demonstrates that in human mind strong natural forces are associated with enemy, and people fight them.

What is more, coronavirus is called a "catastrophe": "An outbreak of COVID-19 would be yet another catastrophe for war-torn Syria" [42]. Catastrophe, noun. A catastrophe is an unexpected event that causes great suffering or damage. In American English a catastrophe is:

1) a disastrous end, bringing overthrow or ruin;

2) any great and sudden calamity, disaster, or misfortune;

3) a total or ignominious failure [9].

The given metaphor reveals unexpected and devastating character of the virus, which causes suffering. Besides, coronavirus is implicitly compared with a nightmare: "Conflicting messages on when to reboot the economy, the need for testing and the possibility of a resurgence of the virus combined with Trump's effort to suppress facts that jar with his insistence that the end of a nightmare likely to last many more months is near" [39]. Nightmare, 1. a very frightening dream; 2. If you refer to a situation as a nightmare, you mean that it is very frightening and unpleasant; 3. If you refer to a situation as a nightmare, you are saying in a very emphatic way that it is irritating because it causes you a lot of trouble [9].

As we see, epidemic is viewed as a frightening dream, which will fade away. And here again we see that there are military terms in the immediate context (war-torn) which intensify the metaphor. Another interesting metaphor, revealing other facets of this notion, compares virus with fire: "The President also openly clashed with his top public health officials on the likelihood of the virus returning for another assault in the fall – saying only "embers" of disease were likely that could be easily put out" [39].

To decipher the metaphor, one should study the definition of the word "embers": Ember, noun:

1) a glowing fragment (as of coal) from a fire especially one smoldering in ashes;

2) embers plural: the smoldering remains of a fire [22].

This metaphor emphasizes, that coronavirus spreads like fire, burning everything on its way. But politicians hope to put it up soon (just like a nightmare).

What is more, the context includes general military terms, which also implicitly characterize coronavirus: 'clash' and 'assault'. For example, the term 'assault' is used in the following meaning in the military sphere: Assault, adjective, designed for use in combat; noun, a final stage of an attack onto an enemy position; verb, to use force in order to occupy an enemy position [8]. Manipulative functions are in force when the author intentionally uses, for example, military terms in the immediate context to demonstrate that there is a real war with coronavirus: "If people think that a hospital crisis is coming, it's important to know that it's already here," Redlener said. "It's affecting front-line health workers, who are probably the highest risk group. These are like combat troops on the front lines of a war." [48].

In this example we see military terms 'combat troops' and 'front lines' in the context, emphasizing that governments are taking offensive measures to defend people. Health workers are portrayed as combatants, when they are called 'frontline staff': "The Scottish actor described COVID-19 as 'an invisible enemy that are fighting every day on our behalf". Thus, there is a war, with its participants and the area where the battle is taking place ('war zone'): "He said: 'It's an absolute war zone and we're asking them to go and fight that war with no weaponry, no armour, and I'm sure it's going to get fixed in the coming weeks and months, but in that interim, what is happening right now, the threats that they face and the threat of them passing it onto their patients and their patients' families is huge, so you know every day that goes by without the correct PPE is an opportunity lost to save someone's life" [34].

The given context is especially important, that the war is not equal, as people do not have effective 'weapon' and working protection ('armour') against coronavirus. The fragment "lost to save someone's life" is also an allusion to military actions (precedential situation) aimed to save the lives of civilians. In some contexts, measures taken to deal with the virus are called fight: "I believe we may be ineffectively fighting the contagion even as we are causing economic collapse" [46].

And the interaction with the virus is portrayed as a battle, which implies a "prolonged engagement between large numbers of opposing troops" [8]: "As we battle the coronavirus pandemic, and heads of state declare that we are "at war" with this contagion... This can be open war, with all the fallout that portends, or it could be something more surgical" [46]. The contexts reveal the virus ability to harm all spheres of peoples' lives, including, for example, economy: "The group added that the state's economy would be "dealt a death blow" if restrictions continued" [35].

The virus can cause even bigger pain through economy, as it will cause economic issues: "That imperils their ability to tighten and loosen restrictions as the epidemic shifts, which is fundamental to easing the economic pain", "Governments will need to keep dispensing cash and bear the budget deficit pain – or accept virus consequences" [36]. Measures, aimed to stop virus proliferation are extremely tough ('draconian'). This word shows that virus is taken very seriously: "Draconian isolation policy during the 14-day incubation will help us identify more cases and hopefully the virus will burn out eventually or its impact will be mitigated when our immune systems with the help of supportive care will win out at last" [38]. And again, the virus is being compared to fire, with the expectation that it will eventually burn out. Additionally, in the context of the ongoing battle, the term "to win" is used, indicating a reluctance to retreat.

Conclusion

According to research, the discourse surrounding the coronavirus in politics and media utilizes nominations, primarily metaphorical ones, and contexts. These help politicians and journalists present the fight against the virus as a war, drawing from military discourse by incorporating terms and examples from previous situations.

The nominations discovered during the study were categorized into five groups. The first group consisted of nominations referencing nationality. The second group included nominations related to health issues. Threat-related nouns comprised the third group. Words denoting uncertainty formed the fourth group, while the last group encompassed nominations of uncontrolled notions and the aftermath they leave behind. These nominations largely conveyed people's attitudes towards the coronavirus in an explicit manner. In contrast, contexts provided additional implicit information about people's feelings and thoughts regarding discussions about the coronavirus. In Chinese media discourse, there was only one metaphor used prior to the official naming of the virus by the World Health Organization (WHO). This could be attributed to political reasons, as the government controls the media sphere and the coronavirus topic is highly sensitive. Therefore, they aim to maintain a neutral stance. However, there are metaphorical contexts of war employed to describe the efforts of doctors and related organizations.

The research findings indicate that both nominations and contexts suggest that the coronavirus is viewed as a highly dangerous enemy, with people engaged in a battle against it, framing the situation as a war. In English, the fight against COVID-19 is expressed through both metaphorical nominations and immediate contextual cues. On the other hand, in Chinese discourse, the combat with the enemy is primarily depicted through the context. Consequently, American and British media portray the coronavirus as an external enemy that has declared war on humanity.

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