

The Power of Voice: A Comprehensive Analysis of the Power of Rhetoric

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Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, political rhetoric has swayed public perception and the efficacy of policy. In the political science field, there has been a gap in literature surrounding the analyses of COVID-19 and rhetoric. This paper aims to pinpoint the three most reoccurring modes of speech used by politicians during the COVID-19 pandemic: war metaphors, motivating language model, and rhetoric through the analysis of both war metaphors and the motivating language model. In these models, gendered assumptions will be analyzed, while assessing how hypermasculinity impedes social change and promotes xenophobic sentiments.

Introduction

During COVID-19, how world leaders communicate sets the stage for how policy is understood.

- Following leaders' speeches from the early start of the 2020

pandemic, the manner in which politicians addressed their citizenry is associated with divergences in public response. In particular, this paper aims to address the following: while political science has assessed the role of rhetoric in discourse analysis, there has been a gap in literature. Using COVID-19 as a case study, how may a deeper study of rhetoric help explore its impact on public perception?

Following the rhetoric of Donald Trump, Joseph "Joe" Biden, Boris Johnson, Giuseppe Conte, Pedro Sánchez, Angela Merkel and Jacinda Ardern, I will analyze speeches given from March 2020 to June 2020, where rhetorical modes of speech were more commonly and frequently used. Trump's response to the pandemic has garnered international media attention, influencing the response of politicians such as Boris Johnson and amassing critique from politicians such as Angela Merkel and Jacinda Ardern.

This paper posits that when leaders use metaphors that evoke sentiments of war and/or collaboration, political rhetoric may not only reshape public understanding in a given country but may do so internationally. Leaders will be categorized under three modes of speech: war metaphors, motivating language model, and a combination of both, using their linguistic content to assess how the public has responded to rhetorical stimuli. Yet, given this focus on language, it is imperative to note that war framing has promoted hypermasculinity and xenophobic attitudes and is the method of framing often preferred in political speech.

Using a theoretical approach, I clarify that war framing is used not only by male politicians but also by female leaders. However, a marriage between war framing and the motivating language model may offer a more fit implementation of collective meaning around the 2020 health crisis. The aim of this paper is not to test causal hypotheses of how COVID-19 rhetoric has affected outbreak control and/or policy execution. Rather, it seeks to generate insight into the importance of speech on both group and social norms.

Rhetoric: An Introduction

To understand the function of

rhetoric during the pandemic, it is crucial to assess its meaning. Following the definition of linguist David Crystal, rhetoric can be defined as “the study of effective or persuasive speaking and writing, especially as practiced in public oratory” (Crystal 2008). Originating from ancient Greece, rhetoric has dominated the works of scholars such as Aristotle. In his *A Treatise on Rhetoric*, Aristotle defined the concept as “the faculty of discovering in any particular case all of the available means of persuasion.” In a more modern text of rhetorical theory, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* by literary critic and rhetorician I.A. Richards establishes that rhetoric is a study of misunderstandings and its remedies. He also introduces a new influential concept of the metaphor, describing it as composed of two parts: the tenor and the vehicle. For Richards, the tenor can be described as the concept, whereas the vehicle acts as the describer, the figurative language used to describe the tenor. In speech, metaphors serve as the vehicle for persuasion; they allow for an effect to be referred to another. They are not just mere literary devices; rather, they act as vortexes that pervade our internal and external modes of communication. Metaphors may either obscure or enlighten the idea that the speech giver is trying to convey.

Metaphors

Traditionally, metaphors have been studied in the literary and poetic paradigm. However, leaders have taken a liking to using metaphors in their speeches as the coronavirus has often been referred to as the “invisible enemy.” Metaphorical expressions are commonly used in language as they, on average, occur between “3 and 18 times per 100 words” (Semino 2021). Conceptual metaphor theory perceives metaphors as conceptual means of understanding human thought in cognitive linguistics (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). More importantly, “Illness, including both physical and mental illness, is precisely the kind of subjective and sensitive experience that tends to be talked about, conceptualized and even experienced through metaphor” (Semino 2021). Yet, metaphors are not neutral when perceiving reality as they may highlight some aspects of actuality while infringing on others, facilitating differing perspectives and evaluations (Semino 2021, Lakoff & Johnson 1980). For example, during health emergencies, war metaphors emphasize feelings of urgency and swift action while obscuring the possibility of adaptation. Metaphors are important rhetorical devices capable of persuading. As such, the study of metaphors during COVID-19 is crucial.

The War Metaphor

The most common conventional metaphors are inclined towards basic sensorimotor experiences. The incapability to protect ourselves from an aggressive threat pushes our need for survival. Such a scenario can be applied metaphorically to fewer tangible issues such as an illness. Belligerent military powers are the most aggressive forms of opposition, and wars are the most extreme forms of dealing with them. This may explain why new and urgent crises such as pandemics are conceptualized through metaphors of fights and battles (Semino 2021). War framing has not been a new concept; the origins and evolution of war and politics date back to ancient times. Scholars such as Augustine of Hippo saw war as necessary for peace to preside, whereas Carl von Clausewitz perceived war as the continuation of politics. War rhetoric enables listeners to view an entirely new crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and relate it to a state of armed conflict—a context with which a vast majority of the population can resonate.

Studies evaluating the effects of war framing on public perception have detected potential strengths and weaknesses depending on factors and context—war metaphors aid in creating people’s perceptiveness to urgency. Therefore, war metaphors

may be extremely helpful when used at the start of a pandemic as they create a sense of collective responsibility in fighting a common enemy. Yet, war framing has been shown to hold “potentially counterproductive framing effects” (Semino 2021). And, when used during the height of the pandemic, war framing creates discriminatory sentiments. In the U.S., President Donald Trump has heightened this response.

The Problem with “Chinese virus”

Trump referred to COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus” more than twenty times between March 16 and March 30 of 2020 (Viala-Gaudefroy & Lindaman 2020). When faced with accusations of racism against Asian-Americans, on March 18, 2020, the president responded with: “It is not racist at all. No, it’s not at all. It’s from China. That’s why. It comes from China, I want to be accurate” (Viala-Gaudefroy & Lindaman 2020). Devakumar et al. (2020) assert that: “Following the spread of COVID-19 from Wuhan, China, discrimination towards Chinese people has increased—for example Chinese people being barred from establishments” (Devakumar et al. 2020). Speech shapes our world views; thus, expressions such as “Chinese virus” or “foreign virus” imply a foreign threat. It is important to

note that war framing is not a sole conservative line of thinking.

Joe Biden has claimed that “tackling the pandemic ‘is a national emergency akin to fighting a war,’ which closely echoes Bernie Sanders’ statement that “the crisis ‘is on a scale of a major war”” (Engberg-Pedersen 2020). There is a general agreement that COVID-19 resembles a war-like climate, and this consensus has not only been noted in politics:

Not only has it proven expedient for the political leadership to speak of Covid-19 in terms of war; under the heading “Economic Policies of the COVID-19 War,” the IMF issued a series of policy suggestions both for phase 1 – “the war” – and for phase 2 – “the post-war recovery.”ⁱ From Nobel-Prize winner in economics Joseph Stiglitz to leading US immunologist Anthony Fauci, there is general agreement that “this is a kind of war” and we are currently “living through the fog of war. (Engberg-Pedersen 2020)

While it cannot be denied that other politicians, economists, and the like have followed war rhetoric, it is imperative to opine that Donald Trump has directly and publicly associated immigrants with foreign diseases.

This type of language: using expressions such as “Chinese”

or “Wuhan” virus, personifies the threat. Personification “is metaphorical: its purpose is to help understand something unfamiliar and abstract (i.e., the virus) by using terms that are familiar and embodied (i.e., location, a nationality or a person)” (Engberg-Pedersen 2020). When used accordingly, it enables a better understanding of concepts and ideas. But as cognitive linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have long shown, metaphors are more than poetic tools—they shape our understanding and outlook of the world. Using the adjective “Chinese” is highly problematic as it associates an ethnic group with an infection. When used in medical language, it is recognized as a process of othering (here and there) that has historically been used in anti-immigrant rhetoric and policy toward Asian-Americans in North America (Engberg-Pedersen 2020).

In the late 19th century, the American business class sought to accuse Asian immigrants of all that was wrong in the U.S. at the time, from the economy and low wages to the rapid increase of diseases in urban areas. As such, white supremacists began to depict Asian-Americans as both hygienically and genetically inferior (Herrera 2020). In 2020, and well off into 2021, anti-Asian hate crimes have risen by 150%

in the United States (Yam 2020). Contextualizing a virus after a geographic location or group identity implies that a foreign virus equals a foreign threat. Additionally, replacing COVID-19, or, SARS-CoV-2— the official name given to the 2020 virus by the World Health Organization (WHO)— with “China virus” hinders public perception of the disease; it links geographical location with discriminatory language, increasing xenophobic sentiments and hampering the general understanding of the virus. Accordingly, by using rhetoric that criminalizes the disease, “we are implicitly rejecting the science. By presenting a virus as an enemy we impede responsibility humans bear for driving patterns of disease” (Naumova 2020).

War framing: a Transnational Approach

Since early 2020, metaphorical descriptions of the pandemic as war have been widely used not just in the U.S. but internationally: Johnson in the UK, Conte in Italy, and Sánchez in Spain. The most notable finding is that the leaders mentioned have framed the situation as a “combat,” “battle,” “alien invader,” “fight,” and “war” (Semino 2021, Benziman 2020). By doing so, leaders have framed and contextualized this chaotic situation, portraying a picture amongst the

citizenry of war and destruction, of hopelessness and instability.

In 2018, the *Journal of Public Health Policy* published a series of warnings, stating that “When the next pandemic virus emerges, the world might be confronted with a social, political, and economic crisis of unimaginable dimensions” (Naumova 2020). As such, war rhetoric distracts the public from “pragmatic tasks aiming at preventing pandemics through strengthening the global health security agenda, restricting unsanitary wild-life markets, and decreasing environmental degradation” (Naumova 2020). The gravity of calling a health crisis a war is that these analogies call for a public sacrifice and justify interventions. Governments often portray these interferences as required to control the spread of infections, but in reality, they hurt low-income neighborhoods and minorities. Additionally, when war references are applied to health crises, “the appeal to human emotions can be easily abused by shifting public attention from thoughtful and comprehensive strategies of balancing risks and the needs for keeping communities functioning to impulsive reactions” (Naumova 2020). While critics of war metaphors have a right to be concerned, war metaphors can also have useful functions (Semino 2021).

The Positive Effect of War Framing

War metaphors emerge from a *protectionist* standpoint; often, this protection creates outbreaks of fear, as per Donald Trump's rhetoric. War metaphors, in political usage, are constantly introduced to manage a perceived societal problem. In crisis communication, war framing helps promote a general mobilization of the citizenry, as the nation is at war with an invisible enemy. Metaphors have framing effects, and when used during health crises, they may be highly effective. It must be stressed that whether they are effective depends on the context and other factors. It may be argued that war metaphors could have been appropriate at the beginning of the pandemic, “to convey the dangers posed by the virus, justify the need for radical changes in lifestyle, and generate a sense of collective responsibility and sacrifice for a common purpose” (Semino 2021). War resonates with urgency. Therefore, leaders feel the need to emphasize how to “win” it. In doing so, war framing grants politicians more leverage on how to address the citizenry. This frame has forced citizens to comply with harsher measures, but it has also allowed leaders to accept a higher number of casualties, as this is a war; therefore, wars must equal to an increased number of deaths. While they have received both criticism and praise,

war metaphors are just one factor in rhetorical speech analysis.

The Motivating Language Model

Much of the literature on crisis communication revolves around the framing of war rhetoric. However, political science and politics should address that response has various goals that should not be limited to military language only. Empathetic language may offer a successful response model when dealing with a global crisis. Effective leadership is defined as leaders ensuring good coordination, rapid response, and an evidence-based approach that is well-communicated and instills a sense of partnership. Countries like Germany and New Zealand have been praised for their decisive action, often linked to their female leaders. Effective leadership has been driven by a partnership-solidarity approach to the pandemic and transparency in sharing data and statistics from an early start. Female voices “can challenge rational approaches to crisis management” (Branicki 2020). While the pandemic has fostered “the language of the battlefield” (Branicki 2020), leaders such as New Zealand’s Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and Germany’s Chancellor Angela Merkel have taken a different approach.

New Zealand has been perceived as a successful COVID-19 response

plan, primarily due to Ardern’s compassionate leadership style. The use of language and tone, more so a motivating use of these styles, can enable a shift “in sensemaking for followers in terms of how they collectively perceive a critical and challenging situation” (McGuire et al. 2020). Ardern has managed to convince her “team of five million to alter their behavior and establish new social norms” through the use of social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook Live broadcasts (McGuire et al. 2020). In today’s society, which revolves much around popular (pop) culture, this shows how “discursive devices, images of social solidarity and information outlining both responsibilities and ‘success,’ can be used to co-create the crisis experience” (McGuire et al. 2020).

Ardern has often mixed popular culture with politics, especially during her Facebook Live broadcasts and Instagram Stories, creating a “rhetorical blending: epidemiology brightened with empathy, law leavened with mom jokes. And it has been strikingly effective” (Huang 2020). Not many politicians use “memes” or “mom jokes” to connect with the citizenry, so this blending between pop culture and politics is seamlessly done. Ardern’s politics of kindness “stands in stark contrast to some other male world leaders, who espouse and exhibit isolationism,

nationalism, protectionism, racism, and sexism” (Huang 2020). While war metaphors are primarily associated with masculinity, it is imperative to analyze compassionate responses beyond female leadership.

Selection bias has played a key role in the 2020 pandemic by selective reporting “cases where women-led countries have succeeded in pandemic management... These reports fail to acknowledge men-led countries that have done similarly well, while instead emphasizing carefully selected cases where men have not performed well” (Windsor 2020). It is all-important to acknowledge that in countries where women can attain national leadership titles, core cultural values often found in women are rewarded and accredited: “such as long-term orientation, a collectivist (rather than individualist) focus, with fewer disparities in society” (Windsor, n.d.).

As such, “women who lead these countries are able to successfully manage crises like the pandemic not because they are women, but because they are leading countries more likely to elect women to the highest executive office in the first place” (Windsor 2020). While men’s leadership is categorized as more transactional, citizens are more willing to follow the advice of leaders they can trust. This mutual trust has often been categorized as feminine.

Gendered bias in politics is problematic. Women leaders are often recognized as a favorable option during a health crisis. However, this approach is guided by role stereotypes, “according to which women tend to be communal and sharing, whereas men are agentic and independent” (Sergent & Stajkovic 2020). Empathetic language has habitually been associated with women, while bluntness and forcefulness have been linked to men. Politics should more closely analyze the overemphasized gender stereotypes that define men and women leadership. Because of this gendered and biased thinking, “macho” populist leaders continue to dominate high office.

Women make up a small percentage of world leaders. While it is convenient to associate women with being more apt to deal with crises due to their gender, it does not mean that compassionate male leadership is nonexistent. For example, Ardern’s leadership style more closely resembles Canada’s Prime Minister Justin Trudeau than Merkel’s. Both prime ministers lead through their ability to communicate sensitively, especially towards minority communities. On the other hand, Angela Merkel has often been nicknamed the “Mutti” or the “Mommy” of the nation; however, this refrains from representing her

true leadership style. Merkel does not lead as a soft and sensitive mother; her governorship is ruled by discipline and backed by her extensive scientific background rather than by her gender. Despite increased participation by women in leadership roles, there are prominent gender-related differences in the assessment of rhetorical speech that dominate the discipline of political science. An alternative evaluation may analyze rhetoric beyond a “male” and “female” lens.

An Alternative Approach

Building upon the war metaphor and the motivating language model frames, I argue that a marriage between the two may more closely represent the use of rhetoric during the COVID-19 pandemic. War framing has been present since ancient times. However, acknowledging that war framing is often directed as “male” may more closely analyze why patriarchal approaches dominate political leadership.

For centuries, scholars have argued that violence is an instrument of politics and vice-versa. Philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes have regarded violence as essential for personal and political safety, with Carl von Clausewitz arguing that war is a continuation of politics.

For Jean-Jacques Rousseau, human nature is composed of timid individuals who only become corrupt

under the influences of society and the state. James Randall, noted for “The Blundering Generation,” has argued that violence responds to miscalculation. Media outlets and scholarship have spotlighted male leadership as overusing war metaphors while neglecting the presence of other modes of speech.

While both Boris Johnson and Donald Trump have defined themselves as wartime presidents, the prominent contrast between the framing of rhetoric between Johnson and Trump is Johnson’s willingness to listen to scientific experts, which Trump has neglected to do during his time as president. For example, Johnson has invoked wartime language such as “the enemy can be deadly,” yet, he has also portrayed empathetic language in his speeches by emphasizing national unity, international cooperation, and the importance of a tight-knit community. The use of both war metaphors and the motivating language model has also been noted in politicians such as Spain’s Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez and Italy’s Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte.

Pedro Sánchez has been the prime example of using both motivational language and war framing. His speeches often begin by expressing Spain’s “war” against the virus, followed by the underlining of expert advice and how crucial it is for the country to follow said orders,

especially for the well-being of the most vulnerable. In Italy, Conte has framed his rhetoric around a famous wartime phrase by Winston Churchill; however, his speeches have mostly revolved around empathy and motivating language. The prime minister's communication presents a very influential narrative, as, by asking for "sacrifices" and a united responsibility for the "strength of our country," Conte "offers the figure of a welfare state dedicated to its children in a paternalistic and curative impulse" (De Luca 2020). While female leadership has continually been defined as overtly empathetic, placing a gendered lens on rhetoric reaffirms the role of masculine domination.

This approach often belittles women, especially female politicians, who seek to assert authority using rhetoric. Language that invokes war, when used accordingly, can be a powerful tool to impose a sense of gravity and importance. When mixed with war framing, Jacinda Ardern's and Angela Merkel's use of empathetic statements may inspire a form of unity; however, such an approach must be accompanied by mutual trust between the government and its citizens, along with transparency and social cohesion.

For instance, Ardern's subtle use of war metaphors, such as the "battle" has been "won," suggests that the

threat persists even if cases have decreased. Thus, a sense of urgency is still being evoked. Ardern's constant use of "team of 5 million" also underlines closeness, a "small" community that gave up its freedom for national unity. On the other hand, Angela Merkel has been praised worldwide for her straightforward and compassionate delivery while being disinclined toward any rhetorical grandeur. For many years, her lack of passionate phrasing has been the basis of her criticism; still, Merkel's response has been applauded for her swift and eloquent explanation of statistics. Merkel has compared the COVID-19 crisis to a challenge not seen since World War II and has placed the importance of solidarity at the forefront.

A marriage between war framing and empathetic statements may inspire a form of unity. However, war rhetoric alone allocates fear and anxiety while hurting minority populations at large. As seen by the high rate of hate crimes toward Asians in the United States, war metaphors are dangerous tools when used to influence how people interpret and assess a given situation. Fear-based approaches often instigate conflict amongst people and marginalized cultural groups. Yet, empathy appeals predominantly through a collection of compassionate social solidarity and unity.

Conclusion

While this research has been conducted as part of an undergraduate thesis project, I urge the discipline of political science to analyze the correlation between history and rhetoric and the gendered approach scholarship has been taking to define “male” and “female” political rhetoric. In identifying gender, this research did discuss a small portion of women leaders; however, I acknowledge that gender is complex, self-identified, and non-binary. Therefore, future research should include the role of the LGBTQ+ community in politics. While this research does not aim to finalize which male or female response has been deemed more effective, it provides an introduction to which rhetorical modes of speech have been more often used by leaders while providing insight into a third frame of rhetorical analysis.

Future research should also assess the role of history in political science, and the importance history has in the analysis of rhetoric, as finding common ground between the two disciplines may enhance both rhetorical and theoretical studies. Possible advances for future research may also be the role of social media and politics, as much of today’s information is written in 280 characters or less, with no proper mode of fact-checking.

Social media is shaping politics. It is

breaking the way in which politicians can directly communicate with the public through informal humanity. Online platforms have the power to shape public opinion and become hubs for the proliferation of white supremacist propaganda and other extremist groups. Interactive media is also being influenced by modern popular culture, therefore changing how politicians communicate with the public and vice versa. This aspect should be more closely monitored, as social media has created a new form of dialogue between politicians and citizens. Thus, an important research challenge would be to analyze how people seek, or rather, avoid misinformation and how those decisions affect their behavior in the management of disease outbreaks. Studies such as Cinelli, et al. (2020) may be helpful in the evaluation of social media and COVID-19 as the authors outline the term infodemic to define the perils of the spread of misinformation during global health outbursts, particularly under platforms such as Twitter.

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