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GUIDING THE NATION: METAPHORICAL FRAMING IN UK POLITICAL SPEECHES

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This paper explores the use of conceptual metaphors in British political speeches by Boris Johnson, Theresa May, and the late Queen Elizabeth II. It aims to show how metaphorical framing directs public opinion and shapes British national identity. This research contributes to the growing body of linguistic studies investigating political discourse to construct public perception and legitimise authority. The mix-methods approach utilising Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Critical Discourse Analysis, and Framing Analysis, this study examines the frequency, type, and cognitive mappings of metaphors used in selected speeches. Metaphors are classified into three categories: ontological, structural, and orientational. Findings show that each political figure employs different metaphor types to reflect their political stance. For Boris Johnson, ontological metaphors dominate (55%), with structural (35%) and orientational (10%) framing Britain as a tangible project and Brexit as a purposeful journey, evoking sentiments of liability and optimism. For Queen Elizabeth II, ontological metaphors also prevail (60%), alongside structural (20%) and orientational (20%) patterns that frame government as doer/protector and Britain as actor/scientist, projecting continuity and steady progress through public unity and trust in governmental institutions. For Theresa May, structural metaphors lead (50%) over ontological (45%) and orientational (5%), presenting governance as a journey or a battlefield, which communicates duty under constant hardships, framing her initiatives as hard-won progress. These patterns demonstrate how metaphor functions as a stylistic device and a cognitive and ideological tool, systematically framing political agency, articulating continuity, improvement, and aligning a certain leadership persona with culturally accepted narratives that construct public sentiment.

СКЕРОВУЮЧИ НАЦІЮ: МЕТАФОРИЧНЕ ФРЕЙМУВАННЯ У ПРОМОВАХ БРИТАНСЬКИХ ПОЛІТИКІВ

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Ключові слова:

концептуальна метафора, політична промова, фреймування, національна ідентичність, сприйняття, політична влада, риторика.

Ця стаття досліджує використання концептуальних метафор у промовах британських політиків Бориса Джонсона, Терези Мей та покійної королеви Єлизавети II. Поставлено мету відобразити, як метафоричне фреймування спрямовує громадську думку та формує британську національну ідентичність. Це дослідження робить внесок у зростаючу кількість лінгвістичних досліджень, що вивчають політичний дискурс як засіб конструювання сприйняття світу громадськістю та легітимізації влади. За допомогою використання кількох методів: теорії концептуальних метафор, критичного дискурс-аналізу та фреймінг-аналізу, це дослідження розглядає частоту, типи та когнітивні мапування метафор, що використовуються у вибраних промовах. Метафори прокласифіковано на три категорії: онтологічні, структурні та орієнтаційні. Результати дослідження показують, що кожен політичний діяч використовує різні типи метафор для відображення своєї політичної позиції. У промовах Бориса Джонсона домінують онтологічні метафори (55%), доповнені структурними (35%) та орієнтаційними (10%), що конструює образ Британії як конкретного проєкту та Брекзиту як цілеспрямованої подорожі, викликаючи водночас почуття відповідальності й оптимізму. Для королеви Єлизавети II характерною є перевага онтологічних метафор (60%), які разом зі структурними (20%) та орієнтаційними (20%) формують бачення уряду як захисника, а Британії – як актора чи науковця, підкреслюючи спадковість, єдність і довіру до інституцій. У Терези Мей провідну роль відіграють структурні метафори (50%) у поєднанні з онтологічними (45%) та орієнтаційними (5%), що представляє управління державою як подорож або поле битви, артикуючи обов'язок і поступ, здобутий у боротьбі. Ці результати підтверджують, що метафора є водночас стилістичним прийомом і когнітивно-ідеологічним інструментом, який систематично формує образ політичної дії, закріплює наративи спадковості й поступу та вписує індивідуальний стиль лідерства у культурно прийняті рамки суспільного сприйняття.

Introduction. In contemporary political discourse, metaphor is a stylistic device and a persuasive instrument. Both politics and the media are fields of deliberate communicative manipulation, in which words are the predominant instrument of persuasion. While an ancient phenomenon, words' capacity to construct political procedures has been critically realised recently. Under social constructivism, political ideas and linguistic statements are potent weapons of political power and valuable informational resources of political actors (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Political language, therefore, presents itself as a precious area of study of how mass consciousness is constructed, moulded, and directed.

British political oratory has held a special place in this field. "The Queen's speech during the State Opening of Parliament is part of a process which ritualistically reaffirms the status and authority of Parliament, as well as allocating particular roles and identities to the members constituting the audience" (Finlayson & Martin, 2008: 445). These analyses indicate how national identity and rhetorical convention are reinforced through public discourse.

Studies have examined how metaphors organise political events, legitimise decisions, and construct collective identities (Charteris-Black, 2011). Despite these advances, several gaps remain. First, there is limited work that makes explicit use of both metaphor analysis and framing theory in British

political media discourse. Second, while metaphor has been analysed about individual politicians, cross-comparison of the rhetorical styles of several well-known British politicians from the same period has been less common. Therefore, the study aims to investigate how conceptual metaphors in British political media discourse are employed as framing devices to shape public opinion, reaffirm cultural assumptions, and contribute to the political reputation of the speaker. The **objectives** are to identify and classify the types of metaphors (structural, orientational, ontological) used by selected British political leaders; to compare the metaphorical and framing strategies in different political actors and communicative contexts.

Material and Methods. This study employs an interpretive research analysis of metaphor in political speeches. The material comprises three speeches delivered by key British figures: Boris Johnson's first speech as Prime Minister, Queen Elizabeth II's 65th parliamentary speech, and Theresa May's resignation address. These speeches were selected due to their symbolic and political significance, each representing distinct moments in the context of Brexit and national identity debates. The approach is grounded on an integrated analytical model that integrates three complementary yet distinct approaches: *conceptual metaphor theory (CMT)*, *framing theory*, and *critical discourse analysis (CDA)*. As the most foundational layer, CMT provides the tools to identify and categorise metaphors. Based on the work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), this study treats them as fundamental cognitive processes that constitute abstract ideas. Metaphors are classified into three primary types:

- *structural* (one complex concept is structured in terms of another);
- *ontological* (abstract or non-physical concepts are understood as concrete entities or substances);
- *orientational* (organise concepts spatially, show the direction of movement).

Framing theory, a second level of methodology, looks at how the conceptual metaphors revealed by CMT are used in building "frames". A frame, as R. Entman defines it, involves selecting "some aspects of a perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (Entman, 1993: 52). Metaphors are framing devices in their initial application; e.g., thinking of Brexit as a JOURNEY simplifies a complex issue into a narrative of movement towards a familiar destination, sidelining alternative accounts of migration or disconnection (Musolff, 2022). As the final interpretative level, CDA connects

the language analysis of metaphor frames with the social and political environment in which they take place and shows how language works to create and legitimate political power (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2001). By using CDA, we move from what metaphors are to what they do at a social and political level.

Results and Discussion. This section compares conceptual metaphors used by Boris Johnson, the late Queen Elizabeth II, and Theresa May in political speeches to the people of Britain. Some metaphors are repeated throughout the speeches with different communicative goals, and some are uniquely used by an individual speaker.

1. Boris Johnson. His first speech as Prime Minister is metaphorically rich, with *structural* metaphors (55%) being the most frequent, followed by *ontological* (35%) and then *orientational* (10%) ones. One of the most prominent ontological metaphors is POLITICS IS BUILDING. Johnson opens by stating: "*I have just been to see Her Majesty the Queen, who has invited me to form a government, and I have accepted. I am building a great team of men and women*" (Johnson, 2019). Here, politics is framed as a constructive enterprise, with the Prime Minister as a builder assembling the necessary human and institutional structures for national success.

Similarly, using the metaphor COUNTRY IS CONTAINER, Johnson claims: "*With the fortitude and patience of my predecessor, this country will go forward with high hearts and growing confidence*" (Johnson, 2019). Britain is personified as a body with emotions, creating a sense of shared identity and moral resilience.

The GOVERNMENT IS SHIELD metaphor also appears in: "*My job is to protect you, your parents, or your grandparents*" (Johnson, 2019), framing the government as a guardian figure, reinforcing the idea of a well-defended nation.

Referring to the importance of Brexit, he uses the metaphor NATION IS PERSON, promising: "*We will come out of the EU on October 31, no ifs or buts*" (Johnson, 2019).

The structural metaphors in Johnson's speech are critical in framing Brexit and Britain's future role in the world. He also reflects on the referendum with the metaphor BREXIT IS JOURNEY: "*Brexit was a fundamental decision by the British people*" (Johnson, 2019). The EU is viewed as a destination to be reached and left behind, departing as a goal-oriented act rather than a disruptive break.

He employs GOVERNANCE IS PATH in: "*Our mission is to deliver Brexit, unite the country, and defeat Jeremy Corbyn*" (Johnson, 2019), suggesting that political victory is achievable through adopting shared values.

The PAST IS PLACE OF CONFINEMENT metaphor in *"We will break free of the doubters, the doomsters, the gloomsters"* (Johnson, 2019) presents Brexit as liberation from restrictive forces.

Oriental metaphors linguistically shape the direction of Britain's movement. Johnson repeatedly uses the metaphor GOOD IS MOVING UP: *"We will level up per-pupil funding"* (Johnson, 2019), *"Higher wages, higher productivity, and higher growth"* (Johnson, 2019). The upward movement in these expressions suggests progress, prosperity, and national elevation.

These metaphorical patterns allow Johnson to project Britain as a strong, unified, forward-moving nation reclaiming its rightful place in the world.

2. Queen Elizabeth II. In her 65th speech to Parliament, the late Queen Elizabeth II stated the agenda dominated by Brexit, immediately visualising the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union within the metaphor BREXIT IS JOURNEY: *"...the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union on 31 October"* (Elizabeth II, 2019). Framing Brexit as a destination, the Queen presented it as a purposeful, inevitable point on the national path rather than a sudden rupture.

The speech is permeated by the adverb *forward*, signalling the orientational metaphor LEGISLATION IS MOVEMENT FORWARD: *"New laws will be taken forward..."*, *"My Government will bring forward proposals..."*, *"My Ministers will bring forward measures..."* (Elizabeth II, 2019). Movement here is legislative progress, with *forward* implying both advancement and inevitability. This sense of progress is reinforced by the metaphor GOVERNMENT IS DOER, in fragments such as *"Steps will be taken to provide..."* and *"My Government will take steps..."* (Elizabeth II, 2019), where political action is conceptualised as a series of methodical, deliberate moves toward a goal.

The Queen's frequent use of the possessive pronoun *my* about the government, e.g. *"my Government"*, highlights the deep-rooted constitutional relationship between monarch and legislature. This subtly embeds a conservative worldview in which the monarch is the symbolic icon of authority, and the continuity of governance is unquestionable. This conservatism underpins the broader ideological framing of the speech, where political change is not revolution but measured adaptation.

In outlining her government's legislative priorities, the Queen describes the creation of *"...an independent body to investigate serious healthcare incidents, to protect individuals, families and their homes..."* (Elizabeth II, 2019).

The metaphor GOVERNMENT IS PROTECTION visualises the state as a guardian protecting its citizens' well-being. Protection is shown as an essential function of governance.

The Queen further reinforces unity and national cohesion through the metaphor NATION IS INSTRUMENT: *"...the union that binds the four nations of the United Kingdom is of the utmost importance to my Government"* (Elizabeth II, 2019).

This metaphor is extended through the COUNTRY IS A CONTAINER concept in the phrase *"the integrity and prosperity of the country"* (Elizabeth II, 2019), where the UK is presented as a single entity containing its four nations in a state of inseparable wholeness.

Political integrity also extends to democratic principles, with DEMOCRACY IS WHOLE ENTITY framed explicitly as *"...protect the integrity of democracy and the electoral system..."* (Elizabeth II, 2019).

Elizabeth II asserts Britain's role on the global stage through the metaphor BRITAIN IS ACTOR: *"...play a leading role in global affairs, defending its interests and promoting its values."* (Elizabeth II, 2019).

Leadership is not limited to politics; it extends into innovation and exploration, as seen in BRITAIN IS SCIENTIST: *"...the United Kingdom as a world-leader in scientific capability and space technology."* (Elizabeth II, 2019). These images situate Britain as a proactive actor in diplomacy and technological progress.

Domestically, the Queen invokes the orientational metaphor GOOD IS MOVING UP as a guiding principle for governance. She outlines plans to *"...improve the justice system's response to foreign national offenders"*, *"...improve safety and security in prisons..."*, and *"...improve the nation's digital, transport and energy infrastructure"* (Elizabeth II, 2019). The repeated verb *improve* signals that Britain is already a functioning, established entity; its task is not rebuilding but maintaining and refining.

Overall, the Queen's speech is measured, precise, and restrained in emotional tone. However, its reliance on metaphors of movement, unity, and protection creates a framework in which Brexit is part of a long-term journey.

3. Theresa May. Her premiership occupies a significant place in the country's recent political history. Her time in office was often described as the one *"in the wrong place, at the wrong time,"* marked by incessant efforts to make Brexit happen. She closed her resignation speech with tears and was emotional.

She extensively refers to the structural metaphor LIFE IS JOURNEY, which defines her

self-presentation as Prime Minister: *“Ever since I first stepped through the door behind me as Prime Minister...”* (May, 2019).

Another metaphor followed this journey, SUCCESS IS PERSON: *“Never forget that compromise is not a dirty word. Solutions depend on compromise”* (May, 2019). She explicitly articulates that our life journey is defined by compromise, even though it always leads to particular consequences.

She shares her opinion about democratic governance using the ontological metaphor DEMOCRACY IS CONTAINER: *“...in a democracy, if you give people a choice you have a duty to implement what they decide”* (May, 2019).

A central rhetoric in May’s speech is operating around the metaphor extensively used by Boris Johnson and the Queen, which is GOVERNMENT IS SHIELD used to frame her government’s achievements: *“...we are protecting the environment, eliminating plastic waste, tackling climate change and improving air quality...”* (May, 2019). Here, environmental policy is a marker of progress.

A similar metaphor, GOVERNANCE IS BATTLEFIELD, is reinforced when she highlights economic accomplishments: *“...the deficit is almost eliminated, our national debt is falling and we are bringing an end to austerity”* (May, 2019).

Her fight against social inequality is conveyed through the metaphor INJUSTICE IS OFFENDER: *“...the burning injustices that still scar our society...”* (May, 2019). These metaphorical mappings reflect Theresa May’s deep involvement and warriorlike approach to tackling the country’s problems, which makes her speech emotionally charged, as if proving her strength and determination to the audience.

The Brexit referendum is viewed as a necessary decision through the metaphor REFERENDUM IS WORKER, which frames it as a service provided to people by the government to transform the country *“...the referendum was not just a call to leave the EU but for profound change in our country, [...] a call to make the United Kingdom a country that truly works for everyone”* (May, 2019).

The structural metaphor GOVERNANCE IS JOURNEY frames the Conservative Party: *“...the Conservative party can renew itself in the years ahead, with security, freedom and opportunity”* (May, 2019), which presents the government’s decision as a long but successful process. Later, this metaphor is integrated into the broader CAREER IS MOVING FORWARD framework: *“Those values have pushed me throughout my career”* (May, 2019).

May reaffirms national unity through NATION IS WHOLE ENTITY: *“...this country is a union. Not just a family of four nations. But a union of*

people, all of us” (May, 2019). Her position in the government, described as *“...the job that it has been the honour of my life to hold”* (May, 2019), invokes the ontological metaphor JOB IS PRIZE, and serves as a culmination point of her career.

Although May’s metaphors are personal statements, they align with the classic framework of British political conservatism, with governance that offers people a long-term, action-oriented, and group-oriented approach.

Table 1 shows the distribution of metaphors across the speeches. The categorisation indicates how each politician employs metaphor in defining British political identity and values in media discourse.

These metaphorical mappings shed light on speakers’ communicative styles and political self-image, and how they frame particular contemporary British identities and political agendas.

In **Boris Johnson’s** address, metaphorical framing combines populist passion with performative drama. The prevalence of ontological metaphors situates him as an architect and protector of the country. Describing Brexit as a journey and the government as a path provides guidance and meaning to political actions. Jonathan Charteris-Black adds that Johnson is an “inveterate metaphor addict”, utilising metaphors ranging from “nation-as-body” to bodily confinement and liberation, fitting his populist rhetoric (Charteris-Black, 2019: 135). His communication style, referred to as “performative celebrity populism” (Čatipović, 2023: 93) with linguistic bravado, is consistent with these metaphorical traces depicted in this research.

Queen Elizabeth II’s use of metaphors reflects her disciplined but deeply symbolic voice. Her focus on ontological metaphors brings her to prominence as a defender and a representation of continuity, framing her government as active, guard-like, and unifying. Similarly, numerous structural journey metaphors frame Brexit as an emergent but controlled journey. What makes Queen’s speech special is the comparatively more frequent usage of orientational metaphors, which testifies to her aspiration to frame the new government as goal-oriented, promising solid progress in the future, and therefore should be trusted. Other works in a similar field of research confirm these observations. A comparative rhetorical study of Queen Elizabeth II’s speeches during crises, such as the death of Princess Diana or the COVID-19 pandemic, shows how her measured rhetoric “invokes the nation’s spirit in times of uncertainty”, constructing national unity through shared values and promising statements (Kassabova, 2019: 82). Thus, we can state that Queen’s metaphoric framing

Table 1

Distribution of metaphors per politician			
Metaphor Type	Boris Johnson	Queen Elizabeth II	Theresa May
Ontological	55% POLITICS IS BUILDING; COUNTRY IS CONTAINER; GOVERNMENT IS SHIELD; NATION IS PERSON; PAST IS PLACE OF CONFINEMENT.	60% GOVERNMENT IS DOER; GOVERNMENT IS PROTECTION; NATION IS INSTRUMENT; COUNTRY IS CONTAINER; DEMOCRACY IS WHOLE ENTITY; BRITAIN IS ACTOR; BRITAIN IS SCIENTIST.	45% SUCESS IS PERSON; DEMOCRACY IS CONTAINER; GOVERNMENT IS SHIELD; INJUSTICE IS OFFENDER; REFERENDUM IS WORKER; NATION IS WHOLE ENTITY; JOB IS PRIZE.
Structural	35% BREXIT IS JOURNEY; GOVERNANCE IS PATH	20% BREXIT IS JOURNEY	50% LIFE IS JOURNEY; GOVERNANCE IS BATTLEFIELD; GOVERNANCE IS JOURNEY.
Orientational	10% GOOD IS MOVING UP	20% LEGISLATION IS MOVEMENT FORWARD; GOOD IS MOVING UP.	5% CAREER IS MOVING FORWARD
Total	100%	100%	100%

is not aimed at political persuasion but at promoting shared British identity and promise of continuing institutional support.

Theresa May's metaphorical framing underscores her persona as a dutiful leader facing political turmoil through perseverance and cautious institution-building. The metaphorical mappings extracted from her speech highlight several distinctive characteristics from other speakers' characteristics, for example, a comparatively frequent use of war metaphors that depict politics as a journey or battlefield, government as a shield, which mirror her warriorlike self-image of a committed pilot steering through resistance and challenge. Interestingly, compared to Boris Johnson's and the Queen's speeches, her language had the least number of orientational metaphors, which is perhaps explained by the fact that it was a resignation speech, and the focus was on showing concrete results during the governance, with no particular reference to the future promises. These findings accord with Atkins's study of May's rhetoric, which is based on "archetypal duty and national stewardship in efforts to bring the nation together after the 2016 referendum" (Atkins, 2020: 296). Marlow-Stevens & Hayton's study of May's Brexit rhetoric notes that she intricately appeals to ethos, pathos, and logos in her communicative style, seeking "compromise but

often constrained by internal political dynamics" (Marlow-Stevens & Hayton, 2020: 874), which aligns with our findings. Her attempts to bring changes are reflected through the metaphor REFERENDUM IS WORKER, which frames political transformations as labour-intensive actions rather than occasional.

The cross-linguistic comparison of speeches by Theresa May, Boris Johnson, and Queen Elizabeth II confirms the initial hypothesis that metaphor is among the most important linguistic carriers of political influence. These results concur with recent research in critical discourse studies and political communication, in particular, analysing the rhetoric of Brexit. For example, A.Musolff argues that the BREXIT IS JOURNEY metaphor was contentious, with politicians like Johnson framing it as a quest "voyage into the open sea." In contrast, the opposition saw it as a "journey off a cliff" (Musolff, 2017: 643). The device is not special to the British context. Studies in CDA, for instance, by R.Wodak, show that European political discourse extensively employs ontological metaphors of fear (e.g., MIGRATION IS FLOOD) to construct a threatened national identity needing assertive protection (Wodak, 2021).

Conclusions. This study adds to the number of existing articles showing that metaphor choice is a strategic action, tuned to the specific political agenda of the speaker. Whether employing Boris

Johnson's ontological transformation metaphors (e.g. POLITICS IS BUILDING), Theresa May's structural war metaphors (e.g. GOVERNANCE IS BATTLEFIELD), or the Queen's collaborative metaphors (e.g., GOVERNMENT IS PROTECTION), the same aim underscores them all: to deliver complex realities in plain, persuasive terms. These are not random verbal choices but deliberate models to construct a particular image.

Further research could benefit from applying corpus linguistics methods to analyse a much larger database of speeches. Cross-study comparisons that analyse the metaphorical practice of politicians across different political regimes would also be a valuable avenue for subsequent study.

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