# A Corpus-Based Analysis of the Pervasive and Effective Metaphor Use in Donald Trump's 2016 Presidential Campaign

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Metaphors are linguistic devices generally regarded as tools used in poetics and literature. Not only do they function artistically, but they also serve as pervasive linguistic devices appearing in political discourse. These tools simplify and collapse complex and intangible ideas into easily digestible concepts for the public to consume. Metaphors frame the description of many topics, and much of our experience in life is articulated in metaphoric terms (Cameron and Low x).

Metaphors are essential tools for politicians because they help create connections with constituents on a collective level, thereby aiding in voter acquisition and increased popularity. Political metaphors can function persuasively and manipulatively, eliciting particular images and feelings from the public, subsequently influencing the way we process events or reify policies: "…there is nothing trifling about a metaphor…we must eventually think critically about the metaphors we choose—where they come from, and why they were proposed, in whose interest they represent, and the nature of their implications" (Barnes 118).

The language of U.S. President Donald Trump has been the subject of myriad discussions. Many have deliberated on his syntax, lexicon, and oration. Yet, there has been little discussion regarding his use of figurative language, especially metaphors. Therefore, the present study takes a mixed method approach, specifically one of corpus linguistics, concordancing, and critical discourse analysis to analyze the metaphors used in Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign speeches. Furthermore, an investigation into the implications of his metaphor use will also be conducted in order to highlight his underlying ideologies and attitudes.

## Creative vs. Conceptual Metaphors

In the traditional sense, a "metaphor is for most people a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish—a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language": a creative metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 3). Yet, a more mechanical definition of metaphor is "the use of language to refer to something other than what is was originally applied to, or what it 'literally' means, in order to suggest some resemblance or

make a connection between two things" (Knowles and Moon 3).

Conceptual metaphors are used conventionally, which means they are integrated into our everyday language and thought. For example, when recovering from an illness, we commonly express this process in terms of war: "to fight off an infection". We do not literally mean we are going to war with a disease, yet we use this conceptual metaphor to help simplify the idea of the healing process.

A conceptual metaphor consists of two conceptual domains, meaning the understanding of one conceptual domain (A) in terms of another conceptual domain (B). For example, ARGUMENT IS WAR; this links the concept of ARGUMENT to the one of WAR. Thus, a metaphorical linguistic expression of this conceptual metaphor would be "he shot down all of her arguments." Further conceptual metaphors include structural (war for arguments), orientational (to be on a high), and ontological (wasting time).

This paper will focus specifically on dehumanizing metaphors in U.S. political discourse, which include comparisons between human beings and animals, diseases, natural forces, and containers. Martial framing depicts the enemy as an animal or disease and subsequently capitalizes on this linguistic simplification in order to tap into the public's emotions. These metaphors strip human beings of their humanity, making them easier to disregard. The enemy is constructed through our language and this construction is streamlined through metaphor.

## Metaphors in Corpus Linguistics

The method of analysis of this paper is that of corpus linguistics. A corpus or corpora "…is a collection of spoken or written texts to be used for linguistic analysis and based on a specific set of design criteria influenced by its purpose and scope" (Weisser 14). The concordancing program used for this research, AntConc, aids in analyzing digitized texts in order to explore patterns in a corpus. The corpus used for this study contains the Corpus of Presidential Speeches (CoPS), compiled by The Grammar Lab. The aim of analyzing Donald Trump's campaign speeches is to gain insight into the different aspects of his language use and to relate the results to established theories in dehumanizing metaphor use in political discourse. While the concordancing program aids in quick and efficient collection of relevant words and their frequency, it is ultimately up to the researcher to decide which words are particularly meaningful and metaphorical, and therefore partial to subjectivity.

## Metaphors in Political Discourse

Metaphors not only aid in creating a feeling of connectedness between

politicians and the public, but they can also help the readers or listeners to relieve tension created by the incomprehensibility of complex issues. Metaphors enable both comfort and enlightenment, and they can have therapeutic effects on the receiver (Mio 121–122).

The conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR appears in much political discourse. Lakoff and Johnson state that we do not simply discuss arguments in terms of war but rather a person can actually win or lose arguments (4). According to Howe, metaphors in American political discourse revolve primarily around sports and war concepts. Yet, these metaphors are paradoxical because they do not reflect the reality of American politics. Howe states, "the destructive irony is that metaphors from sports and war can delude their users into believing that negotiations and compromise are forbidden by the rules of conflict" (99). These metaphors can discourage critical thought and yield oversimplification by using heuristic short-cuts. Meanwhile, Steuter and Wills highlight dehumanizing metaphors in Western media representations, focusing specifically on metaphors that persistently portray the enemy as an animal, vermin, or disease. Politics revolving around nationalist discourse frequently rely on notions of "otherness" and these metaphors are ubiquitous in political discourse.

## Research Questions and Aims

This research paper analyzes metaphor use in a corpus of over 400,000 words from Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign speeches. This paper aims to illuminate his most frequent metaphors, the perceived effectiveness and corollary repercussions of his metaphors, his underlying ideologies as discernible from his metaphor use, and the manipulative use of dehumanizing metaphors. Additionally, this paper is sociolinguistic in nature as it desires to highlight signified meanings. Specifically, it asks how these supposedly intangible ideas and utterances create and exacerbate real-world problems. "Effective" is measured by an idea's popularity among the public, prevalence in the news, and subsequent policy decisions.

The research questions are as follows:

RQ1: Which metaphors does Trump use the most? What does this say about his underlying ideologies?

RQ2: Which metaphors seem to be the most effective? Which have turned into slogans?

RQ3: Through his metaphor use, does he dehumanize specific groups of people and, if so, who are the targets and what are the implications of this dehumanization?

RQ4: Are there any apparent or significant patterns in his metaphor use and

does this contribute to his overall narrative of rebuilding and saving the U.S.?

## Method

The corpus-based approach identifies the persuasiveness and effectiveness of his metaphor use, in order to discern his underlying intentions and ideologies. After the identification of keywords, their meanings will be described in their context. Therefore, initial assemblage of the keywords contains words that are literal and metaphoric (conceptual and creative). After examination, the literal meanings are sorted out. The top political metaphors are chosen based on prominent metaphors highlighted, analyzed, and researched in previous literature, as well as those deemed important in the context of American politics and world events around 2016, such as the Syrian refugee crisis. The metaphors chosen pertain to: CONTAINER and DISEASE; SPORTS, WAR and BUSINESS; and ANIMAL concepts. When investigating these metaphors, different inflections of the keywords are included in order to cast the widest net possible and gather the most representative sample. The total frequency of the keywords includes metaphorical uses.

After the assessment of the data, the metaphoric language will be analyzed in a social context. Metaphors occurring frequently in the corpus will be examined in their contexts to find conspicuous patterns, followed by an investigation into their contribution to his overall narrative. These keywords are observed as potential markers for metaphors that contribute to Trump's thematic narrative of rebuilding and saving the United States.

Discursive focus will concern the relation of hegemonic power to inequality in Trump's metaphoric language and how this language marginalizes groups that are at a disadvantage in the U.S. According to linguist Ruth Wodak, the goal of critical discourse analysis is to analyze "…opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power, and control as manifested in language" (Wodak 204). Once the quantitative analysis is complete, the relationship between Trump's metaphoric language and the people it affects will be investigated.

## Analysis and Results

Six conceptual metaphors and their corollaries were chosen to run through AntConc in order to find patterns in Trump's campaign speeches. The top conceptual metaphors are as follows: CONTAINER: *pour* (*pours, poured, pouring*) + *into/ in/ across/ out/ back* (255 instances), *drain* (*drains, drained, draining*) + *into/ in/ out/ out of* (88 instances), and *flow* (*flows, flowed,*

*flowing*) + *into/ in/ across / back/ out* (60 instances). DISEASE: *Spread* (*spreads, spread, spreading*) + *into/in/across/out/ out of* (36 instances). WAR: *fight* (*fights, fought, fighting*) (160 instances). SPORTS: *win* (*wins, won, winning*) (1,208 instances). BUSINESS: *deal(s)* (710 in-stances). ANIMAL: *swamp(s)* (*swamps, swamped, swamping*) (85 instances), *unleash* (*unleashes, unleashed, unleashing*) (70 instances), and *snake(s)* (*snakes, snaked, snaking*) (45 instances).

Further investigation revealed that the CONTAINER metaphors were often coupled with ANIMAL metaphors, contributing to the idea that dangerous people or ideologies are spreading into/ across/ within the United States. The metaphors relating to the keywords *pour, flow, spread, unleash, swamp,* and *snake* related more readily to people and ideas which are considered 'other' to Americans. For example, in his address in Cleveland, Ohio on 8 September 2016, Trump stated: "Her policies unleashed ISIS, spread terrorism and put Iran on a path to nuclear weapons—not to men-tion the ransom payments—those ran-som payments" (Brown). Trump's meshing of two metaphors is prominent throughout his speeches. For example, he again uses the *unleashing* and *spreading* metaphors: "We will become a rich nation again, but to be a rich nation, we must also be a safe nation. Hillary Clinton unleashed ISIS onto the world and it has now spread into our country" (Brown).

When Trump uses the words *pour* and *flow*, it usually correlates to people, refugees, immigrants, and, according to Trump, the subsequent crime and drugs they bring with them. His use of *spread* most readily correlates to his essential-ist, monolithic categories: ISIS, cartels, terrorism, radical Islam, and Islamic ter-rorism. The assumption that these people and ideologies are pouring, flow-ing, or spreading creates the illusion through metaphor that these are cata-strophic and unstoppable forces that Americans must constantly labor against or else be consumed by, which would therefore distort, destroy, and pillage the United States and its 'noble' and 'pure' values. The metaphors associated with the keyword *unleash* tie into this same narrative. Yet, his use of this metaphor appears contradictory at times. For ex-ample, he repeatedly compares ISIS or radical Islam to something that has been unleashed, something negative and damaging; yet he also uses the *unleashing* metaphor in relation to American energy production and job cre-ation, evidently positive and hopeful. While both are forces, one cast as an evil that has been mistakenly released to cause terror, while the other is untapped potential that when released will help the American people and their society. American energy and job creation are

non-human entities, and this antihumanism does not immediately harm individuals or groups of people, whereas the comparison between ISIS still correlates to people, potentially conflating Muslims and a militant group with fundamentalist interpretations. This leads to the possibility that Muslims or refugees will be targeted politically and violently, as well as a misconception or omission of exploitative American imperialism, which exacerbates fundamentalist tendencies.

Trump also uses the *swamp* metaphor quite frequently. This catchy metaphor became recognized as a slogan by supporters and opponents alike. Most Americans and even non-Americans know of the *drain the swamp* metaphor. This metaphor became so effective for Trump during his campaign that he still capitalizes on it today as president. The *drain the swamp* metaphor alone appears 83 times in the corpus. This suggests that the metaphoric use of *swamp* is more frequent than might have been predicted using unaided intuition, and that Trump's use of the term *swamp,* or *drain the swamp,* is a particularly persuasive metaphor that collapses the complex idea of government corruption simplistically in a way that resonates with his supporters, transforming it into a pervasive campaign slogan. This highly effective metaphor casts Trump as if he exists outside of the political establishment. Once elected, he would supposedly not be blackmailed or corrupted by the

political game because he is not a part of this institution. He claims he is a cut and dry businessman who can venture into the political arena and pull the drain plug on the nasty, undesirable, and corrupt dealings of politics. This image is highly effective for him because, ironically, it paints the picture of him having similarities to the average American worker and, simultaneously, as a businessman who has worked his way into success: he is on the people's side, not the politicians'. This metaphor helps set him apart from his opponents as a candidate untouched by political corruption, a person the average American can and should trust.

Trump's most blatant dehumanizing metaphor is the *snake* metaphor. In some of Trump's speeches, he recites the lyrics of the song titled "The Snake" performed by Al Wilson and written by American civil rights activist Oscar Brown:

> Take me in, oh, tender woman, sighed the broken snake. Now, she clutched him to her bosom, you're so beautiful, she cried...and then she kissed and held him tight. But instead of saying thank you, that snake gave her a vicious bite...I saved you, cried that woman...Oh, shut up, silly woman, said the reptile with a grin. You knew damn well I was a snake before you took me in. (Brown)

Inspired by the Aesop's fable called "The Farmer and The Viper," Trump reinvents the song by drawing comparisons between immigrants, refugees, and snakes, thereby dehumanizing and demonizing

these groups of people, specifically Mexican immigrants and Syrian refugees.

The most apparent words in the corpus are the keywords *win, deals,* and *fight.* Upon closer investigation, these words appear to inspire a feeling of togetherness or a team feeling, while simultaneously manifesting an "other." Additionally, when reviewing instances of *we* plus different verb forms of *to win* or *to fight,* there are more instances of *we* rather than *they.* For example, there are only 6 instances of *they + to win* whereas there exist 156 instances of *we + to win.* This same pattern can be observed with the words *fight* and *deals.* In the latter case, it is frequently observed that *we* make deals together vs *they* or *I* make deals. In regards to *win*, Trump frequently uses the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR. For example, he states: "And during the last debate, which you know look, I want to impartial and all, which I won big league, I mean that was not even close" (Brown). In this example he not only compares the debate to war but also intertwines sports into the statement; by using the keyword *big league*, he references a baseball metaphor familiar to many Americans. "For the most part, political professionals use baseball metaphors to denote status or assess performance [and] offer a way of characterizing politicians" (Howe 93). Here, Trump wants to accentuate the nature of his win. These metaphors help listeners to feel part of American life and

to understand the latent ideas without having to think too long or critically about the subject.

While there appear to be two prominent and seemingly separate groups of metaphors in Trump's speeches—the dehumanizing metaphors which include *pour, flow, snake,* and *spread,* and the war, sports, and business metaphors, which include *fight, deals,* and *win*—they are nonetheless mutually constitutive to his overall narrative. The way in which Trump uses the latter group of metaphors revolves around the idea of an in-group, that group being predominantly American citizens of supposed European descent. These metaphors also create an "other," primarily consisting of immigrants and refugees. Trump's overall narrative is that the U.S. is in a volatile state and needs to be saved, rebuilt, and purged of sickness. He relies on fear tactics to encourage people to vote for him, lest the formerly 'great' country continue down a path of (self) destruction and chaos.

The dangerous implications of his metaphor use are that they involve an underlying premise of 'worthy' Americans. If the U.S. President encourages such abhorrent actions, then they can be systematically institutionalized in American society. For example, Donald Trump's administration has implemented Muslim bans and has additionally tried to rescind the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which is

governmental relief from deportation aimed at protecting eligible immigrant youth in the United States (East Bay Community Law Center). This then permits certain groups to be lawfully discriminated against, potentially leading to the authorization of forced removal or worse.

Trump's use of TEAM or togetherness elicits the ostracizing idea of "us" vs "them." This "they" therefore ties into dehumanizing metaphors, contributing to his narrative that the American people as the "us" or "we" combat the "they" or "other." Or worse, that "they" have already penetrated American society and therefore Americans need to not only "drain the swamp" in the political realm but also to drain the society of toxic ideologies and dangerous people.

This research has illustrated that through Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign speeches, he attempted to use metaphors to fabricate an 'other.' He created a sliding scale of humanity, where white Americans are at the top and non-white, non-Americans are at the bottom. Trump's underlying ideologies and beliefs based on his metaphor use are apparent, specifically those that dehumanize and demonize groups of people that do not fit the Western or American cultural norm. By using these metaphors, he fabricates a problem that requires a solution. The response to these dangers that Trump aims to elicit is that the American people must band together and fight against these "unnatural" forces unless they wish to see their country regress further into despair.

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## Appendix

### Table 1. CONTAINER

| Keyword | Frequency |
|---|---|
| *pour* and the different verb forms (*pours, poured, pouring*) + *into/ in/ across/ out/ back* | 255 |
| *drain* and the different verb forms (*drains, drained, draining*) + *into/ in/ out/ out of* | 88 |
| *flow* and the different verb forms (*flows, flowed, flowing*) + *into/ in/ across / back/ out* | 60 |
| *draw* and the different verb forms (*draws, drew, drawing, drawn*) + *into/ in/ out/ out of* | 9 |
| *contain* and the different verb forms (*contains, contained, containing*) | 9 |
| *flood gates* | 1 |

### Table 2. DISEASE

| Keyword | Frequency |
|---|---|
| *Spread* and the different verb forms (*spreads, spread, spreading*) + *into/ in/ across/ out/ out of* | 36 |
| *cut(s) out/cutting out/cut(s) (it) off* | 3 |
| *cancer(s)* | 1 |
| *virus/viruses* | 0 |
| *bacteria* | 0 |
| *mutation/ mutate* and the different verb forms (*mutates, mutated, mutating*) + *into/ in* | 0 |
| *eradication/ eradicate* and the different verb forms *(eradicates, eradicated, eradicating)* | 0 |

*cleanse* and the different verb forms *(cleanses, cleansed, cleansing)* — 0

## Table 3. WAR

| Keyword | Frequency |
|---|---|
| *fight* and the different verb forms (*fights, fought, fighting*) | 160 |
| *war on* | 14 |
| *hit the ground running* | 1 |
| *casualty/ casualties* | 1 |
| *annihilation/ annihilate* and the different verb forms (*annihilates, annihilated, annihilating)* | 1 |
| *point man* | 0 |
| *search and destroy* | 0 |
| *trench/ trenches* | 0 |
| *guerrilla warfare* | 0 |
| *damage control* | 0 |
| *minefield* | 0 |
| *body count* | 0 |

## Table 4. SPORTS

| Keyword | Frequency |
|---|---|
| *win* and the verb forms (*wins, won, winning*) | 1,208 |
| *big league(s)* | 42 |
| *team(-s)* | 21 |
| *quarterback* | 2 |
| *join my team* | 0 |
| *team player(s)* | 0 |
| *bad call* | 0 |
| *bad play* | 0 |
| *good call* | 0 |
| *good play* | 0 |
| *hardball* | 0 |
| *softball* | 0 |
| *blindsided* | 0 |
| *touchdown(s)* | 0 |
| *knockout* | 0 |
| *heavyweight* | 0 |

## Table 5. BUSINESS

| Keyword | Frequency |
|---|---|
| *deal(s)* | 710 |
| *great deals* | 20 |
| *make a deal/ making a deal* | 12 |
| *make/making deals* | 9 |
| *broker* and the verb forms (*brokers, brokered, brokering)* | 1 |
| *cut/ cutting deals* | 0 |
| *cut a deal/ cutting a deal* | 0 |

**Table 6. ANIMAL**

| Keyword | Frequency |
|---|---|
| *swamp(s)* and the verb forms (*swamps, swamped, swamping*) | 85 |
| *unleash* and the verb forms (*unleashes, unleashed, unleashing*) | 70 |
| *snake(s)* and the verb forms (*snakes, snaked, snaking*) | 45 |
| *hunt* and the verb forms (*hunts, hunted, hunting*) | 5 |
| *animal(s)* | 4 |
| *breeding ground(s)* | 3 |
| *monster(s)* | 3 |
| *extermination/ exterminate* and the verb forms (*exterminates, exterminated, exterminating* | 3 |
| *viper(s)* | 0 |
| *hornet's nest* | 0 |
| *vermin* | 0 |
| *rat(s)* | 0 |
| *spider(s)* | 0 |
| *cockroach/ cockroaches* | 0 |
| *beast(s)* | 0 |
| *pest(s)* | 0 |
| *den(s)* | 0 |
| *nest(s)* | 0 |
| *weasel(s)* and the verb forms (*weasels, weaseled, weaseling*) | 0 |
| *spawn* and the verb forms (*spawns, spawned, spawning*) | 0 |
| *squish* and the verb forms (*squishes, squished, squishing*) | 0 |
| *squash* and the verb forms (*squashes, squashed, squashing*) | 0 |