
Posudek oponenta habilitační práce

Autor práce: Mgr. Marek Hampel, Ph.D.

Název práce: “Metaphors and Image Schemas in Barack Obama’s Discourse on the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant”

předkládané v roce 2025 na Filozofické fakultě Univerzity Pavla Jozefa Šafárika v Košiciach

I. A brief characterization of the thesis

The habilitation thesis provides a linguistic analysis of metaphors and image schemas in the discourse of the American President Barack Obama on the topic of dealing with ISIL. The data for analysis consists of a set of political speeches produced over the course of three years (2014-2016), which are subject to a qualitative analysis within the Critical Metaphor Analysis theory. The core of the thesis consists of the three core chapters that deal with the metaphorical representations corresponding to the three key thematic areas addressed in Obama’s discourse – conflict, radicalization and territorial integrity. The premise of the thesis lies in the idea that metaphorical language serves not only as an effective component in the discursive construction of terrorists but also as a tool for the legitimation of actions against ISIL. In line with the currently dominant views in metaphor theory, metaphor is seen as a cognitive device that is crucial for forming and communicating various conceptualizations of reality. The findings of the habilitation thesis indicate that Obama’s speeches skilfully construct the representation of terrorists as an outgroup through complex metaphorical processes of othering, with Obama drawing on a number of source domains and image schemas in his discursive work to legitimize the political steps taken by his administration on the international scene. The thesis rightly shows how the metaphorical representations are grounded, inter alia, in the general situational context of the data – the register of political speeches where the president needs to assert an identity of an institutional leader who sets the political agenda. The discursive presentation of events and actors then consistently rests on metaphorical and image-schematic representation of self and others and forms a part of the successful and effective rhetoric of a political leader.

Masarykova univerzita, Filozofická fakulta

Arna Nováka 1/1, 602 00 Brno, Česká republika

T: +420 549 49 1510, E: info@phil.muni.cz, www.phil.muni.cz

Bankovní spojení: KB Brno-město, ČÚ: 85636621/0100, IČ: 00216224, DIČ: CZ00216224

V odpovědi, prosím, uvádějte naše číslo jednací.

II. A brief overall evaluation

The habilitation thesis falls within the scope of political discourse analysis, which has emerged out of the early interest of critical linguistics in the language of bias, manipulation and persuasion in the 1990s. In the past 25 years, the discipline has seen some rapid developments, which was accompanied by the emergence of convincing methodological tools in various strands of critical discourse analysis, particularly in connection with the transformation of the political climate and the public discourse after 9/11. While it might seem that metaphor has been a relatively well-researched area, political discourse analysts have been consistently developing their tools, particularly because metaphorical forms of expression are central for our understanding of the operation and the discursive manifestation and articulation of belief systems and points of view, i.e., what CDA scholars would call different ‘ideologies’ and cognitive linguists ‘conceptualizations’ of reality. The ways language organizes our thoughts, and the ways speakers use the resources (whether strategically or not) to represent and make statements about the reality, has been much in focus by scholars dealing with public discourse produced after the 9/11 military campaigns, the Brexit debates in the UK, and more recently the covid-19 pandemic. The habilitation thesis thus addresses some of the fundamental issues that are of interest to modern linguists and have relevance from an applied perspective as well. The research presented in the thesis is timely and connects well to the themes that are currently researched, making a meaningful contribution to the discipline. Methodologically, the thesis combines the approaches of cognitive linguistics and critical discourse analysis, drawing on the theoretical concepts and apparatus of the recently established Critical Metaphor Theory.

III. A detailed evaluation of the thesis and its individual aspects

Structure of the argumentation

The thesis has a logical structure, consisting of six chapters. Chapter 1 provides a theoretical framework, discussing the theory of metaphor with reference to the Conceptual Metaphor Theory proposed by Lakoff and Johnson, which provides the grounds for a cognitive linguistic framework where attention shifts from the traditional view of metaphor as a figure of speech to metaphor as a pervasive component of cognition and thought. The chapter discusses the central theoretical concepts of how metaphorical mappings are realized from source domains to target domains, and discusses

the relevant image schemas involved in such mappings. The chapter then discusses metaphor in (political) discourse and in relation to its pragmatic functions and ideology, quite appropriately interconnecting metaphor with argumentative processes and (political) legitimization. The section on metaphor in political discourse tends to emphasize the link between metaphor and emotional response (p. 21), and could elaborate a bit more on the implications of the transmission of unconscious and thus unquestioned conceptualizations (i.e., the underlying ideologies). Some of those ideas appear later in the thesis, when the critical dimension is brought into play, e.g. in relation to the ‘common-sense assumptions’ and the naturalization of beliefs following Fairclough’s views (p. 25). Also, the text could incorporate the later developments in metaphor theory – it would be welcome if it integrated the insights by Kövecses (his theory is briefly mentioned on p. 35) or Steen (particularly his contribution to Deliberate Metaphor Theory). The theoretical issues are eventually taken up in Chapter 4, where the author chooses Critical Metaphor Analysis as his analytical approach. The approach is well chosen and elaborated in detail but there appears a certain degree of disconnection from the initial two chapters, where conceptual metaphors and image schemas are discussed – it would be good to at least briefly reference Critical Metaphor Analysis earlier than on p. 50. Chapter 2 opens with a discussion of image schemas, linking them to bodily experience. It would help if a specific definition and some more explanation was provided (e.g. how our “everyday bodily experience” is related to some orientations such as PART-WHOLE). Chapter 3 describes the data for analysis and explains the rationale for the research. The author starts by setting the “key discourse topics”, which are then traced in the dataset, with the metaphorical expressions related to those discourse topics being identified. Chapter 4 is the first of the three substantial analytical chapters that provide an explanation of metaphorical representations in Obama’s discourse. These chapters deal with the representation of conflict (CH4), radicalization (CH5) and territorial integrity and losses (CH6). The chapters identify the metaphors and the image schemas, juxtaposing the findings with relevant recent literature in the field. There are many interesting findings throughout, e.g. related to the construction of ingroups vs. outgroups. I also appreciate how the image schemas are represented in relation to syntactic structure; indeed, it appears that in many cases the metaphorical expressions seem to fit into very specific (almost predictable) syntactic templates. In one case (ex. 27 and 29 on pp. 74-75), Obama even uses exactly the same formulations on two occasions (“*Ideologies are not defeated with guns, they’re defeated by better ideas – a more attractive and compelling vision.*”). I wonder what that tells us about his speech writers. In this connection, it would be interesting to see how much metaphor use is deemed as acceptable and where it might, even, turn into a cliché, particularly if exactly the same formulation is recycled on multiple occasions (i.e., not purely rhetorically within a single text). As stated above, the analytical chapters of the thesis are substantial and insightful; the specific examples will motivate a further discussion (see some of the questions below) and the analysis will serve as an inspiration for further research.

Formal elements of the thesis

The thesis is presented in a coherent manner, it has a very logical structure and a clear progression. It sets out the research questions, adopts appropriate methodological framework and carries out a convincing analysis of the data. In some places, the author might consider improving readability by shortening some of the very extensive paragraphs (exceptionally running to three pages, cf. pp. 66-68) but that is a minor stylistic issue that does not detract from the value of the thesis. Overall, the author's usage of language, sophistication of argument, work with sources, referencing, and consistency of citation standards shows a very high level across the whole thesis and indicates that the work is the result of a knowledgeable scholar with an acute attention to all formal details. The thesis provides a review of some canonical literature on the topic as well as the latest publications in the field.

IV. Questions for the defence

1. While it is stated that “metaphors also define political personalities”, the discussion elaborates only on the role of metaphor as “conceptualizing political issues and constructing world-views” (p. 19). While metaphor has been (not surprisingly for cognitive linguistics) researched heavily in relation to conceptualizations and world-views, what is the current position in the discipline on the link between the use of metaphor and one's (personal / political / etc.) identity?
2. How do different kinds of metaphor operate in political discourse aimed at shaping viewpoints and achieving persuasion – is there a difference between conventional conceptual metaphors (which are less noticeable since they organize our view of the world as the ‘natural one’) and novel metaphors (which are likely to attract attention due to their creativity, and thus be prone to a more active deconstruction)?
3. I would be interested more in the author's conclusions concerning the register of political speeches (p. 46) in his contextual interpretation of the operation of metaphor, particularly in relation to the three constituents (field, tenor, mode). This is an interesting issue which, to my knowledge, has not been adequately addressed by previous research in the field.
4. There is a very convincing argument concerning the metaphorical representation of the global coalition as a ‘gardener’ and a ‘surgeon’. Given that ISIL is metaphorically represented as a PLANT (or more specifically, UNDESIRABLE PLANT), the gardener then performs negative actions (‘rooting out’, ‘eliminating’, etc.) that are meant to improve the situation. In this connection, I wonder about the generality of the metaphor – are those two distinct metaphors or are they, on a more refined

level, actually realizations of some other, more global metaphor (say GLOBAL COALITION IS A CARER)? (A possible unification of the two metaphors appears to be hinted at by the author in a summary on p. 78, where he states that “both roles... feature a certain form of a direct contact with the ‘substance’ – either with plants and their parts or with various forms of living organisms”). How does metaphor theory handle the different levels of generality, e.g. determining which of the set of related concepts constitutes the metaphor and which one does not? I ask this question in connection with the identification of the PLANT and CANCER metaphors: the PLANT metaphor appears to be more general than the possible more specific WEED metaphor (or, UNDESIRABLE PLANT), and it is vice versa with the CANCER metaphor, which appears more specific and could be subsumed under a more general DISEASE/ILLNESS metaphor. Is it because the lexical item ‘cancer’ actually occurred in the data, i.e. are we using a concrete linguistic realization of a more global metaphor here? Why is the CANCER (more specific) more appropriate than the ILLNESS (more general) metaphor?

5. There are some good observations concerning the WAR metaphor, also in connection with Demjén and Semino’s suggestions that military metaphors around cancer (i.e. as a non-metaphorical concept) encourages a punitive view of the illness (p. 64). The author then identifies the metaphor THE SERVICEMEN AND WOMEN ARE SURGEONS – would you, in this context, agree that we might also have at play the metaphor WAR IS TREATMENT/MEDICINE? In that case, would we be justified the suggest that the SERVICEMEN AND WOMEN ARE SURGEONS is not an actual global metaphor but simply a metaphorical mapping between the source and the target domains?

6. A similar question relates to the discussion of the HUNT metaphor (pp. 68-72), which suggests the existence of the GLOBAL COALITION IS A HUNTER metaphor. It seems to me that this centrally depends on the conceptualization of terrorists as non-human, i.e. TERRORISTS ARE ANIMALS, which then justifies the use of the lexical items related to hunting. While it is briefly noted that “the hunter exercises the power over the entities that are being hunted (e.g., prey), the argument about dehumanization of the opponent is not explicitly taken up in this section. Is there a reason for that, given the fact that the metaphorical construction of outgroup members as animals (aka the strategy of dehumanization) has been previously addressed in critical discourse analysis since it appears as one of the central discursive constructions of delegitimizing one’s opponents?

7. Concerning the WAR metaphor (section 4.3.4), it is interesting that some of the examples mix non-metaphorical (‘ideologies are not defeated with guns’) and metaphorical uses of lexis (‘they’re defeated by better ideas’). How to handle such examples when, as stated in the thesis, “the Global Coalition is metaphorically involved in a direct fight with ISIL, its ideology, violent extremism or with the propaganda...’, p. 74), but then actual military action is involved? It seems paradoxical that legitimization in political discourse may start with language grounded in the WAR metaphor, only to move on to actual physical war, describable in non-metaphorical language.

8. Another interesting finding concerns the conceptualization of propaganda in relation to the CONTAINER image schema and how it constitutes 'a liquid that flows from the container' (p. 85).

9. Concerning Cap's proximization theory, briefly referenced on p. 97, it could be added that the politicians' rhetoric constructs the THEM group not only on the basis of physical distance but combines spatial, temporal and axiological axes. The metaphor analysis carried out in the habilitation thesis convincingly shows that it is the axiological axis that is subject to a particularly strong metaphorical conceptualization in Obama's political discourse.

V. Conclusion

In sum, the submitted habilitation thesis "Metaphors and Image Schemas in Barack Obama's Discourse on the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant" meets the requirements placed on habilitation in the field of philology. Thus, I recommend that the habilitation committee accepts the thesis and proposes the appointment of Mgr. Marek Hampl, Ph.D. to the position of "docent".

Předložený habilitační spis „Metaphors and Image Schemas in Barack Obama's Discourse on the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant“ splňuje požadavky kladené na habilitační práci v oboru filologie. Na základě výše uvedených skutečností doporučuji habilitační komisi práci přijmout a navrhnout jmenování Mgr. Marka Hampla, Ph.D., docentem.

Brno, 31.12.2025

prof. Mgr. Jan Chovanec, Ph.D

Reviewer contact details:

prof. Mgr. Jan Chovanec, Ph.D.
Department of English and American Studies
Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Brno
Arna Nováka 1, 60200 Brno, Czech Republic
chovanec@phil.muni.cz