

Cognitive Linguistics Meets Language Ideologies:
Should liberals use conservatives' metaphors?

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Cognitive linguistics has increasingly focused on the use of metaphors in political discourse in recent years. Lakoff (1995, 1996) and Nunberg (2006) point out that conservatives and liberals on the national political scene use different metaphors to express their political views. Their propensity to talk about moral issues using perceptually based metaphors is often pointed to as evidence of greater savvy on the part of conservative speakers and ideologues than their liberal counterparts. But is this just a difference in rhetorical tactics, or is it also a reflection of the different linguistic practices and language ideologies of people on different ends of the political spectrum?

We address this question by investigating attitudes towards two varieties of conceptual metaphors. Participants saw five faces (males and females, varying ethnicities) and four sentences, and provided a numerical response for each face and each sentence “to indicate how likely this person is to have spoken the sentence” on a scale from 1 (not at all likely) to 9 (very likely). Target sentences contained either a dark/light metaphor or a similar up/down metaphor, as in (1).

- (1) a. We all want to make a difference, but there's a *dark side* to entering politics.
- b. We all want to make a difference, but there's a *down side* to entering politics.

Participants also rated their own political orientations on a scale from 1 (very liberal) to 7 (very conservative), and other standard demographic information was collected.

Responses were analyzed using a 2-way repeated measures ANOVA with Metaphor Type (dark/light, up/down) as a within-subjects factor and Political Orientation (liberal, conservative) as a between-subjects factor. Preliminary results showed an interaction of Metaphor Type with Political Orientation ($F(1,258)=4.77, p=0.03$), with no main effects. Post-hoc independent samples F-tests showed that liberal participants' ratings of how likely speakers were to use up/down metaphors were higher than conservative participants' ratings ($F(258)=8.71, p=.003$), whereas the opposite pattern was found for dark/light metaphors ($F(258)=4.30, p=.039$). This was true irrespective of the social characteristics (i.e., gender, ethnicity) of the faces that participants rated.

An implicit (and sometimes explicit) suggestion in the popular literature on politics and metaphor is that the recent success of conservative politicians can be partly attributed to their use of metaphor, and that liberals should consider adopting some of the conservatives' rhetorical strategies to garner public support. However, very little consideration (if any) has been given to the role of language ideologies in the public's interpretation of these linguistic practices by public figures. If, as our results suggest, conservatives have a higher expectation of the use of certain metaphors than liberals do,

then the use of these metaphors may only produce its purported positive effect on conservative constituents. That is, the use of specific metaphors may not be just a rhetorical strategy, but also an identificational strategy used by conservatives to index their conservatism – a move that liberals would potentially suffer from emulating.

References

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