# CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS VERBALIZING WAR IN UKRAINE IN MEDIA DISCOURSE

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## CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS VERBALIZING WAR IN UKRAINE IN MEDIA DISCOURSE

**Abstract.** This study provides an in-depth analysis of the cognitive metaphors employed by major English-language mass media outlets to depict the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. The research employs a corpus linguistics approach to identify and analyze the prevalent metaphors in news articles and opinion pieces from prominent news outlets.

The article offers a valuable contribution to the academic discourse on the intersection of language and conflict, specifically in the context of the Ukraine-Russia war. The analysis of war-related metaphors in English mass media provides a deeper understanding of the ways in which language is used to construct and shape the conflict, and how it can influence public opinion and policymaking. The research has significant implications for a wide range of stakeholders, including scholars, journalists, policymakers, and the general public, who seek to engage with the conflict in a nuanced and informed way. By shedding light on the role of language in shaping our understanding of the conflict, this research can help promote more accurate and responsible media coverage, as well as contribute to the de-escalation of conflicts in the future.

The results of the analysis indicate that the war in Ukraine is frequently represented as a game or a battle between good and evil, with Ukraine and Russia often portrayed as opposing teams. Furthermore, the conflict is frequently framed as a struggle for dominance over territory or resources, with metaphors pertaining to power, control, and ownership featuring prominently in media discourse. These findings have significant implications for the perception and comprehension of the ongoing war in Ukraine among English-speaking audiences.

**Keywords:** conceptual metaphor, war-related metaphor, mass media, source domain, target domain, war.

**Problem Statement.** The war in Ukraine has received extensive coverage in the English-language mass media. News outlets such as The New York Times, The Guardian, BBC News, etc. have published numerous articles and opinion pieces on the conflict, covering a wide range of topics including politics, diplomacy, and military strategy. One aspect of this coverage that has received less attention, however, is the use of cognitive metaphors to frame and interpret the conflict.

Cognitive linguistics posits that language is not only a means of communication, but also a reflection of how we think and perceive the world around us. Metaphors are an important part of this process, as they allow us to understand complex or abstract concepts in terms of more concrete or familiar experiences. For example, we might talk about an argument as a "war of words" or a difficult task as a "mountain to climb". In the context of the war in Ukraine, cognitive metaphors can shape how we understand and interpret the conflict, and can influence our attitudes towards the parties involved.

**Analysis of recent research and publications.** The cognitive metaphor theory, also referred to as the theory of conceptual metaphor, provides a theoretical framework that seeks to elucidate the interconnectedness of language and thought. According to this theory, abstract concepts like knowledge, time, and love are often understood in terms of more concrete physical experiences, such as spatial orientation, sensory perception, and movement. One of the most influential works on cognitive metaphor is Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) book, "Metaphors We Live By" [1]. This seminal work argues that metaphors are not just linguistic expressions, but are fundamental to our everyday thought processes. The authors argue that metaphors shape the way we think about and experience the world, and that our understanding of abstract concepts is grounded in metaphorical mappings from more concrete domains.

Since the publication of "Metaphors We Live By", there has been a wealth of research on cognitive metaphor in various fields, including linguistics, psychology, philosophy, and cognitive science. One major area of study has been the identification and analysis of conceptual metaphors in different languages and cultures (e.g., Kövecses, 2002 [2]).

Another line of research has focused on the neural and cognitive mechanisms underlying metaphor processing. For example, studies have found that metaphor comprehension engages similar brain regions to those involved in processing literal language (e.g., Lai et al., 2009 [3]), and that metaphors can affect our perception and attention to the world around us (e.g., Thibodeau, et al., 2019 [4]).

There has been significant interest in applying cognitive metaphor theory to understand the ways in which war is discussed about and conceptualized. A number

of scholars have explored the use of war-related metaphors in political discourse, media representations, and public opinion. One influential study in this area is Sabbah's (2009) analysis of war metaphors in the press covering the Iraq War which aimed to exhibit how political parties with conflicting ideologies perceive war cognitively by utilizing conceptual metaphors [5].

Other studies have focused on the use of war metaphors in political speeches and debates. For example, Lakoff (1992) analyzed the metaphor system of language arguing that war-related metaphors were used to construct a moral framework for military action and to justify the use of force [6].

In addition to analyzing the use of war metaphors in public discourse, some scholars have explored the ways in which these metaphors may shape public opinion and attitudes toward war. For example, Salem et al. (2022) analyzed the use of "us" and "them" metaphors in British newspaper articles about the Syrian refugee crisis, finding that such metaphors were often used to construct refugees as a threat to national security and to justify the use of force [7].

The research on cognitive metaphor and war has demonstrated the power of metaphors to shape the ways in which we think about and experience the conflict. The theory of cognitive metaphor has been a fertile ground for interdisciplinary research, and continues to be an important area of study for understanding the relationship between language, thought, and culture.

This paper presents a timely and pertinent contribution to the study of contemporary discourse and media, addressing a pressing issue in the ongoing war in Ukraine. The conflict has drawn considerable media attention, and the language employed to describe it is frequently fraught with political tensions and emotional intensity. As such, the analysis of war-related metaphors in this context provides valuable insight into the complex interplay between language, thought, and political ideology in contemporary media discourse.

The **aim** of this article is to identify and analyze the cognitive metaphors used by the English-language mass media to depict the war in Ukraine. Specifically, we aim to answer the following research questions:

1.      What are the most common conceptual metaphors used to describe the war in Ukraine in the English-language mass media?
2.      How do these metaphors frame and interpret the conflict?
3.      What are the implications of these metaphors for how the war in Ukraine is perceived and understood by English-speaking audiences?

**Methodology.** In order to address the research inquiries, a corpus linguistics analysis was carried out on news articles and opinion pieces from five preeminent English-language news outlets, namely The New York Times, CNN, The Washington Post, BBC News, The Guardian, and The Independent. The choice of these outlets was made on account of their worldwide reach and established standing for producing journalism of exceptional quality.

A thorough investigation of each outlet's digital archive was conducted to identify articles and opinion pieces published between February, 2022, and February, 2023, that referenced "Ukraine" and either "war" or "conflict" in the title or first paragraph. A comprehensive corpus of 134 articles was thereby assembled. The corpus was scrutinized to identify instances of metaphorical language based on a set of conceptual metaphors delineated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). The examination yielded a total of 187 instances of metaphorical language. The metaphors were then meticulously categorized into distinct conceptual groups, based on their underlying cognitive mappings. Additionally, we conducted a detailed scrutiny of the context in which each metaphor was employed, in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how it functioned to frame and interpret the conflict.

**Results and Discussions.** The analysis conducted brought to light several recurrent cognitive metaphors utilized in depicting the war in Ukraine. Predominantly, the target domains include the war itself as well as its main actors, the effect it produces globally and the world's reaction to it while the metaphorical source domains are linked to the notions games, battles, and sports, incorporating elements such as winners and losers, points, goals, and tactics, as well as a human body, illnesses, natural phenomena and disasters, mechanisms and arts. The media discourse frames the Russian-Ukrainian war through the use of structural metaphors, which serve to represent complex concepts by mapping the qualities of a known domain onto an unknown one. Specifically, these metaphors include WAR IS SPORT, WAR IS GAME, WAR IS CRIME, WAR IS MECHANISM, WAR IS HUMAN BODY, WAR IS A DISEASE, WAR IS NATURE / NATURAL DISASTER, WAR IS ART, and WAR IS A ROAD. By using these metaphors, the media discourse offers a vivid and accessible representation of the Russian-Ukrainian war. This discourse underscores the negative aspects of war while simultaneously providing a framework for conceptualizing the conflict in a manner that can be understood by a wide audience.

*Table 1*

**Conceptual metaphors representing WAR found in the research corpus**

| Conceptual Metaphor | Count | Frames war as: |
|---|---|---|
| WAR IS SPORT | 40 | warfare as a contest/competition, the battle for victory, the war effort, the playing field of battle |
| WAR IS GAME | 38 | war as a game of cards, q high-stakes game, rolling the dice, the luck of the draw |
| WAR IS CRIME | 32 | the crime of illegal war, war as terror, a peaceful neighbor, a war criminal |
| WAR IS MECHANISM | 24 | war as a mechanism or its parts, operations performed by a mechanism, breaking down of the mechanism |

| WAR IS HUMAN BODY | 19 | war as fatigue, war as parts of the body, human physiological actions |
|---|---|---|
| WAR IS A DISEASE | 15 | war as a disease, war as a virus, war as symptoms |
| WAR IS NATURE / NATURAL DISASTER | 9 | war as natural elements, war as a disaster, earthquake, tsunami, torrents, rain, scorching heat |
| WAR IS ART | 5 | war as music, war as a chorus, war as a painting |
| WAR IS A ROAD | 3 | war as a path, war as a road |
| | 187 | |

The information presented in Table 1 relies on the detection of linguistic expressions in the dataset to determine the count of each conceptual metaphor. It's important to note that a linguistic expression refers to the manifestation of cross-domain mapping that serves as a path from the source domain to the target domain, as defined by Lakoff [8, p. 203]. The presence of a linguistic expression within the dataset signifies the presence of the corresponding conceptual metaphor, regardless of the number of times it appears.

The WAR IS SPORT metaphor has been a popular comparison throughout history, used to describe the strategic and competitive nature of warfare. In academic literature, there has been much debate over the validity and usefulness of this metaphor. One criticism of this metaphor is that it can oversimplify the complex and often devastating consequences of war. It can also downplay the real-world consequences of military conflict by framing it as a competitive game, which may be seen as trivializing the loss of human life and the destruction of communities. Additionally, some scholars argue that the metaphor perpetuates harmful gender stereotypes, as it suggests that violence and aggression are inherent to masculinity and competition.

Sports metaphors are commonly utilized in the English mass media to portray the war in Ukraine. In these metaphors, the conflict is frequently depicted as a game or competition, with each faction contending for supremacy. For instance, the war is often referred to as a "battle" or a "clash" between two opposing sides, with each faction endeavoring to acquire an advantage. Although the usage of these metaphors engenders a feeling of thrill and suspense around the war being a brutal and devastating conflict, it also implies that the war is an equitable and evenly balanced competition, for example: *"In the stretch of Europe from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, where Moscow and the West* **have competed** *for influence for decades, the threat of a new military conflict is growing"* [9].

These metaphors situate the conflict as a competitive event involving two adversarial teams, wherein the ultimate aim is to emerge victorious or face defeat.

Another frequently recurring group of metaphors pertained to power, control, and ownership, encompassing references to territory, land, and resources. A CNN

article characterizes the conflict as a "tug-of-war over Ukraine's future", while an Al Jazeera opinion piece describes the annexation of Crimea as a "land grab". These metaphors depict the conflict as a competition for control over territory or resources, with Russia depicted as vying for domination or ownership: *"The **tug-of-war over Ukraine's future** has sent relations between the West and Russia to lows not seen since the end of the Cold War, with Russia's annexation of Crimea sparking a round of sanctions against dozens of Russian and Ukrainian officials"* [10].

WAR IS GAME. A noteworthy instance of mapping war in terms of a game is a New York Times article which refers to "Putin's aggressive moves on the chessboard of Eastern Europe", whereas a Guardian opinion piece describes the conflict as a "game of brinkmanship". The war is often described as a "chess game", with each side making strategic moves to gain an advantage over the other: *"President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia has, increasingly, **put his cards on the table**: He is willing to take ever-greater risks to force the West to listen to Russian demands"* [9].

The metaphor employed in the context of war implies that the enemy's intentions and strategies are apparent, akin to a poker player revealing their hand by laying their cards on the table. This suggests that he is prepared to take perilous actions to attain his objectives and is challenging the West to reciprocate in kind. Consequently, the metaphor conveys the notion that Putin is not restrained in his approach to international relations and is prepared to adopt bold and aggressive measures, even at the risk of provoking confrontation with the West.

WAR IS HUMAN BODY. As an instance of conceptual metaphor theory, the metaphorical understanding of war as the human body involves the use of the source domain of the human body to conceptualize and describe various aspects of warfare. In this regard, we often use expressions such as the "heart" or "soul" of a nation being endangered during a war, or the "lifeblood" of a military unit being vital to its success. This metaphorical mapping of the human body onto the domain of war serves to highlight the significance of emotional and psychological factors in warfare, in addition to the requisite resources and support that contribute to success. Other examples of the "war is human body" metaphor might include describing military forces as a "body" of troops, discussing the "health" or "strength" of a military unit, or referring to a successful military campaign as a "surgical strike", etc., e.g.: *"The Russian invasion has **breathed new life into an international justice system** widely seen as **toothless** and ineffectual"* [11].

The phrase "breathed new life" in the given sentence is a metaphor that suggests that the invasion has revitalized and reinvigorated an international justice system that was previously perceived as ineffective and lacking in power. The metaphor is often used to describe a situation where something that was considered to be outdated or irrelevant has suddenly become relevant and meaningful again. The use of the metaphor suggests that the international justice system is now being

seen as more capable of addressing and punishing violations of international law, particularly in the context of the Russian invasion. The metaphor highlights the potential of the justice system to act as a deterrent against future violations, and the renewed belief in the system's ability to bring justice and accountability to those responsible for the invasion.

The metaphoric expression "seen as toothless" is also a metaphor used to describe the previous state of the international justice system. The word "toothless" implies that the system was lacking in power and unable to effectively address violations of international law, while "ineffectual" suggests that the system was ineffective in bringing about positive change or meaningful results. In general, the use of metaphors in this sentence serves to emphasize the notion of invasion as a catalyst for change in the international justice system. The metaphor highlights the renewed faith and belief in the system's ability to hold violators accountable and bring about justice, signaling a potential shift in the global attitude towards international law and justice.

Overall, the WAR IS HUMAN BODY metaphor is a useful example of how we use concrete and familiar concepts to understand more abstract and complex concepts like war. By drawing on the source domain of the human body, media discourse creates a more vivid and accessible picture of war, helping the recipient to understand its different aspects and the factors that contribute to its success or failure.

WAR IS A DISEASE metaphor is used to illustrate how different news outlets have employed a range of metaphors to articulate the calamitous outcomes of the conflict in Ukraine. These include likening the war to chronic ailments, viruses, cancer, and infectious diseases, all of which evoke an impression of something uncontrollably spreading and inflicting harm on the body or society: *The **violence in Ukraine is infectious, spreading like a disease** and threatening to engulf the entire region in a spiral of destruction" [12].* The metaphors serve to emphasize the widespread and damaging effects of the war, highlighting the difficulty of containing and resolving it.

The WAR IS NATURE/NATURAL DISASTER metaphor is another example of how conceptual metaphor theory can be used to understand the way we think and talk about war. In this metaphor, the domain of war is understood and conceptualized in terms of the domain of nature or natural disasters. Mass media also employ metaphors related to natural elements ("water", "fire") and calamities, such as a "tsunami" or "earthquake" of violence, "torrent of propaganda", etc., for example: *"Here's the latest on the war and its **ripple effects** across the globe" [11].*

The phrase "ripple effects across the globe" highlights the far-reaching impact of the conflict, just as a stone thrown into a pond causes ripples to spread outwards. The use of this metaphor suggests that the conflict in Ukraine is not just a localized

issue, but one that has the potential to affect other countries and regions, both politically and economically. The use of the metaphor of war in this context emphasizes the gravity of the situation in Ukraine and its potential to have significant and widespread consequences. It serves to draw attention to the urgent need for resolution and highlights the impact that the conflict could have on the world stage.

The phrase "Russian missiles rained down on Ukrainian cities" in the given sentence is a metaphor used to describe a sudden and overwhelming attack by Russia on Ukraine: *"Russian **missiles rained down** on Ukrainian cities in a major attack Saturday, killing at least 12 in a strike on an apartment building in the central city of Dnipro — the latest salvo in a brutal war that has convinced Kyiv's Western allies to send increasingly advanced military equipment to Ukraine"* [11].

The metaphor emphasizes a large and uncontrolled number of missiles falling from the sky, which can cause significant destruction and loss of life. The metaphorical expression emphasizes the scale and intensity of the attack, which suggests that the conflict has escalated to a very violent level. Such metaphors highlight the destructive and unstoppable nature of the conflict, signifying that it is an uncontainable force of nature that cannot be readily resolved.

The phrase "murderous path" verbalizing the metaphor WAR IS ROAD in the given sentence describes the Russian army's destructive and deadly actions as it advances through the country. The metaphor compares the army's offensive to that of a murderer, highlighting the senseless and brutal nature of their actions: *"They were soon having to operate not only as the leading centre in the country for patients in need of lifesaving cancer treatment, but a refuge from the **Russian army's murderous path**"* [13].

The use of the term "murderous" suggests a deliberate and intentional act of killing, rather than accidental or unintentional harm. The metaphor emphasizes the severity of the situation and the danger faced by those caught in the path of the army's advance. The metaphor highlights the devastating impact of the army's advance, as it leaves a path of destruction and death in its wake. The phrase "a refuge from the Russian army's murderous path" also suggests that the centre is a place of safety and protection for those seeking shelter from the enemy's violence.

WAR IS ART. The English mass media also employs art-related metaphors to depict the war in Ukraine. One such example is the metaphor of the "symphony of destruction", which implies that the conflict is a complex, chaotic composition, with each side playing its part in the larger work. Another metaphor used in this context is the "drumbeat of war", which suggests that the conflict is a steady and rhythmic process, with each side taking turns making aggressive moves. These metaphors, derived from the arts, add a layer of nuance to the war's depiction, emphasizing its complexity and unpredictable nature: *"The conflict in Ukraine is like **a tragic opera, with the chorus of gunfire** and the solos of pain and suffering blending together in **a heart-wrenching melody**"* [14].

These metaphors using artistic expressions such as symphony, canvas, and opera, etc. to depict the war in Ukraine suggest that the war is a complex and tragic composition, with different elements blending together to create a devastating whole. By using art and music as metaphors, these expressions also convey a sense of emotional depth and complexity to the conflict, highlighting the impact of the war on people's lives and emotions.

The metaphoric phrase "in a chorus of condemnation" in the given sentence describes the united and synchronized response of world leaders against the invasion: *"But in a **chorus of condemnation**, world leaders, including President Biden, have decried the invasion itself as unjust and illegal"* [11].

The metaphor compares the collective voice of world leaders to a musical chorus, where each member is singing in unison to produce a powerful and harmonious sound. The use of the term "condemnation" further emphasizes the strong disapproval of the world political figures towards the invasion, highlighting the severity of the situation. Thus, the use of the metaphor suggests that the response from world leaders is not just an individual reaction, but a coordinated effort to express a unified stance against the invasion.

The cognitive metaphor WAR IS MECHANISM is a common way of understanding and discussing armed conflict. This metaphor is based on the idea that war can be seen as a complex machine with various parts that work together to produce a particular outcome. In this metaphor, the parts of the war machine might include things like soldiers, weapons, tactics, strategy, and logistics. Just like the parts of a machine work together to produce a particular function, the different parts of a war machine work together to produce military victories, territorial gains, or other strategic objectives, for example: *"An unprecedented global effort to probe and prosecute war crimes is underway, with local and international investigators fanning out across the war-ravaged country to gather evidence of Russian atrocities — even as the fighting **grinds on**"* [11].

The metaphor compares the conflict to a mechanism that is slowly and relentlessly grinding away, without any sign of stopping or resolution. The use of the term "grinds on" suggests a sense of weariness and exhaustion, as the conflict continues to drag on and cause suffering and destruction.

The phrase "even as the fighting grinds on" also implies that the efforts to probe and prosecute war crimes are taking place in the midst of ongoing conflict, highlighting the difficulties and challenges faced by investigators in gathering evidence and holding perpetrators accountable. It emphasizes the sense of urgency and importance of the investigation, as it takes place in the midst of a continuing and devastating conflict. Thus, the use of the metaphor in this sentence serves to highlight the arduous nature of the conflict in Ukraine, as well as the persistence and determination of investigators to uncover the truth and hold perpetrators accountable despite the ongoing challenges they face.

The WAR IS CRIME metaphor frames war as a type of criminal activity. In this metaphor, the domain of war is conceptualized and understood in terms of the domain of crime. For example, mass media outlets employ expressions such as "war criminal" or "war crimes" to describe violent or brutal actions carried out during a war. Phrases such as "illegal war" or "war of aggression" are also be used to depict conflicts perceived as unjust or unethical, for example: *"Legal experts on both sides of the Atlantic see this overarching crime — the **crime of illegal war** — as the best chance for someday putting Putin on trial"* [11].

This metaphor highlights the idea that war is often seen as an illegal or immoral activity that causes harm and suffering to individuals and society as a whole. It also suggests that military actions should be subject to the same legal and ethical standards as criminal actions, and that those who engage in unlawful military actions should be held accountable for their actions: *"Mr Sunak insisted the world must **"hold Russia to account"** for alleged **war crimes** and criticised agreements of the "post-Cold War era" for failing Kyiv"* [14].

However, this metaphor also has the potential to oversimplify the complex and often political causes of war, as well as to downplay the complexity of military decision-making and the role of international law in regulating armed conflict. Additionally, it may also perpetuate harmful stereotypes about individuals or groups who engage in military conflict. Overall, the WAR IS CRIME metaphor can be a useful tool for promoting ethical and legal accountability in military action, but it should be used with awareness of its limitations and potential drawbacks.

The cognitive metaphors employed in media representations of the war in Ukraine have profound implications for the comprehension and perception of the conflict among English-speaking audiences. These metaphors, which frequently depict the conflict as a game or battle, may promote an oversimplified understanding of the war as a binary contest between two opposing sides, disregarding the multifaceted political and historical factors that underpin the conflict.

To elaborate, the prevalence of metaphors related to sickness and natural disasters in the media discourse on the war in Ukraine may contribute to a sense of fatalism and inevitability among English-speaking readership. Such metaphors suggest that the conflict is a force of nature, uncontrollable and resistant to human intervention. As a result, the recipients may feel that there is little that can be done to address the situation, leading to a lack of engagement and apathy.

On the other hand, the use of metaphors that highlight the agency and responsibility of political leaders and decision-makers may promote a more active and engaged response to the conflict. Such metaphors emphasize that the conflict is the result of conscious decisions made by individuals with power and authority, and that it can be addressed through human intervention and action. By using such metaphors, the media may encourage the audience to hold political leaders

accountable for their actions and to push for effective measures to resolve the conflict.

The implications of these findings are far-reaching, and warrant careful consideration by researchers and media practitioners. As a significant driver of public opinion and discourse, media representations of the conflict play a crucial role in shaping the perception and understanding of the war in Ukraine. By critically examining the cognitive metaphors employed in media discourse, we can gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which language shapes our comprehension of the conflict, and work towards fostering more nuanced and informed public discourse on this important and pressing issue.

**Conclusions.** The analysis revealed that English language mass media commonly employ metaphors from the domains of sports, power, illness, natural calamities, and the arts to depict the Ukraine-Russia war. Sports-related metaphors such as battles, games, and tactics portray the conflict as a competitive event between two adversarial teams vying for victory, while power-related metaphors highlight the competition for control over territory or resources. Illness and natural calamity metaphors emphasize the widespread and damaging effects of the conflict, signifying that it is a force of nature that cannot be readily resolved. Art-related metaphors add a layer of nuance, suggesting that the conflict is a complex, chaotic composition. The use of these metaphors helps the media to shape the public's perception of the war and engage their attention, thereby highlighting the importance of studying metaphor usage in news reporting.

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