BUSINESS LANGUAGE: A LOADED WEAPON?
WAR METAPHORS IN BUSINESS

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RESUMEN: El uso de metáforas relacionadas con el campo semántico de la guerra cuando se habla de negocios es una práctica amplia, conocida y de larga data. Revistas, comentaristas e incluso textos de enseñanza de la lengua emplean metáforas de la guerra tales como "cazadores de talentos" o "mercados cautivos". Por una parte, esto puede ser considerado una manera de facilitar la comprensión de los lectores / la audiencia. Por otra parte, sin embargo, desde una perspectiva posmodernista, el uso del lenguaje como mera representación ha sido ampliamente cuestionado. Este trabajo analiza, a través de diferentes extractos de textos comerciales escritos, cómo el lenguaje crea, en lugar de reflejar, una realidad. Se concentra en el poder subyacente de las metáforas como armas para esconder o para revelar.

ABSTRACT: *Business Language: A Loaded Weapon? War Metaphors in Business*

The use of metaphors related to the semantic field of war when talking about business is a widespread, well-known and long-standing practice. From "headhunters" to "captive markets", business magazines, commentators and even language textbooks make use of these war metaphors. This can be seen, on the one hand, as a way to facilitate the readers'/listeners' understanding of the world. On the other hand, however, from a postmodern standpoint, the use of language for mere representation has been widely challenged. This work analyses, through different business writing excerpts, how language creates, rather than reflects, a reality. It concentrates on the underlying power of metaphors as weapons to hide or to reveal.

> *War is not an instinct. It is an invention.*
> *The metaphor is probably the most fertile power possessed by man.*
> José Ortega y Gasset

This paper analyses the widespread use of war metaphors in business language. The research is based on the theories that sustain that metaphors create, rather than reflect, reality. Therefore, the aim of this paper will be to present examples of business texts containing war metaphors, and to analyse the implications of this rhetorical choice.

Metaphors as Creators of Realities

Postmodern thinking is permanently challenging the ideal of representation that dominated our perceptions of the world for so long. Postmodernists now conceive of their work as exploration, testing, creation of new meanings, rather than as disclosure

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or revelation of meanings already in some sense "there", but not immediately perceptible. In a postmodern era, the idea of any stable or permanent reality or objective truth disappears. Language does not escape this conception. G. Lakoff (1980) refers to metaphors as "self-fulfilling prophecies". Lakoff explains that metaphors create reality, rather than reflect it. Ultimately, they even become guides for future actions, and these actions will predictably fit the metaphors. This, in turn, reinforces the power of the metaphor to make experience coherent. For example, a "head-hunter" nowadays is no longer a person who cuts off his enemies' heads and keeps them, but a person who tries to attract specially able people to jobs, especially by offering them better pay and more responsibilities[1]. However, the person who first coined the expression certainly did not imagine its new meaning would fit the original meaning so closely. The "fight" among multinational companies and renowned consultants to keep high-fliers with them is now as hostile as the fight in the past to cut and keep the enemy's head. The metaphor has created, rather than reflected, a reality.

George Orwell, in his famous essay "Politics and the English Language" (1945), also acknowledges the power of metaphors as creators of reality, and many of his reflections are still valid, even though the piece dates from the 1940's. He states:

> ...But an effect can become a cause, reinforcing the original cause and producing the same effect in an intensified form, and so on indefinitely... In prose, the worst thing one can do with words is to surrender to them... When you think of something abstract you are more inclined to use words from the start, and unless you make a conscious effort to prevent it, the existing dialect will come rushing in and do the job for you...[2]

War Metaphors In Business

The power of metaphors is evident in the world of business, which is rich in lexical items from the *war* semantic field. One needs only to open any Business English textbook to discover the great number of words that the field of business and negotiations shares with the battlefield. "Strategy", "action", "operations", "campaign", "force" (as in "sales force" or "task force"), "division", "Chief", "Officer", "aim", "target", "conflict", "hostile", "defeat", "capture", "captive", "strengths", "weaknesses", "threats", "resources" are only a few of the most well-known examples. Now two inevitable question arise:

Why is business so closely associated with war? And

What reality, if any, do war metaphors create in the business world?

Lakoff (1980) provides a feasible answer to the first question. He states that one of metaphors' main functions is to act as vehicles for understanding. They define reality through a coherent network of entailments that highlight some features of reality and hide others. The acceptance of the metaphor forces us to focus only on those aspects of our experience that it highlights.

Lakoff attempts to explain how we understand the very complex and abstract concept of *argument* by associating it with the structural metaphor of *war*. He states that in an argument, each participant has an opinion which is meaningful to him, but which the other person does not accept. As

each of the participants wants the other to give up his opinion, the resulting situation is one where there is something to be won or lost. Thus the participants acquire a sense of being embattled, because they are in a war-like situation, even though it is not actual combat. In that way, "structural metaphors" are created; in this case, for example, *argument is war*.

The same parallelism could be established between a business negotiation and war. There is always an exchange of opinion; each participant generally has a proposal which is convenient for him, but most probably not the most convenient for the other negotiator; there usually exists the need to defend one's position, and thus attack the other person's position. Therefore, we see that the different steps of a negotiation correspond themselves to some elements of the concept *war*. These elements are: to have different positions, to have a conflict, to plan a strategy, to marshal forces, to evaluate the opponent's strengths and weaknesses, to attack, to manoeuvre, to defend, to retreat and to counterattack, to defeat or to surrender, to sign a truce (or agreement).

Our understanding of companies and markets, then, is largely structured by the metaphors *business is war* and *markets are battlefields*. These "structural metaphors" not only allow us to orient and quantify concepts, but also, and most importantly, allow us to use one highly structured and clearly delineated concept to structure another one. By those metaphors, we share an understanding that companies fight battles over market territories that they attack, defend, dominate, yield or surrender. Business activities are viewed as analogous to military tactics.

So far, this is a possible explanation

to why business is so closely associated with war. But it has also been claimed that metaphors are not innocent carriers of meaning, but that they themselves create meaning and a reality. The second question remains unanswered: What reality, if any, do war metaphors create in the business world? For that purpose, various examples of business texts will be presented, to analyse both the creation of a war metaphor[3] and how this metaphor shapes reality and the readers' interpretation of it.

The Creation of Similarity

Many of the similarities we perceive are a result of conventional metaphors that are part of our conceptual system. Ontological and structural metaphors[4] also make similarities possible. But metaphors do not depend, as an objectivist may claim, on pre-existing similarities based on inherent properties. The similarities arise as a result of conventional metaphors and thus must be considered similarities of interactional, rather than inherent, properties.

An article entitled "Still mad about cows", which appeared in the November 15 1999's edition of *The Economist* magazine, deals with the conflict between Britain and France because of France's decision not to buy British beef, even if it has been declared free from the "mad-cow disease" for some time. As an introduction to it, we read the following:

> *REMEMBER the battle of Crécy? Perhaps not. There were many battles* in the Hundred Years' War against the *French. But it is only a matter of time* before Britain's newspapers force you *to. Just about every other folk memory of Anglo-French enmity has been stirred into the sludge which the*

nation's tabloids have been feeding to *their unsuspecting readers this week. A famous victory in which Edward III's longbows made hamburgers out of the French cavalry is too juicy a tidbit to leave out.*

This introduction, which would have no apparent connection to the theme of the article for an ordinary, non-British reader, makes immediate sense to a British reader. To begin with, there are some conventional metaphors that are part of the readers' conceptual system, which make the similarity evident. The first one is their background knowledge of the circumstances, participants and events of the Hundred Years' War and the resulting enmity between Britain and France. Without this knowledge, they would not be able to associate the long-past war with the present International Commerce conflict.

But it is not only that. Without the structural metaphor *business is war* in their conceptual system, the image would not have been complete. The use of the words "battle", "Hundred Years' War", "force", "enmity", "stirred", "sludge", "unsuspecting", "victory", "made hamburgers out of" and "cavalry" not only evoke in the readers the structural metaphor *business is war*, but also create new, interactional, similarities. The whole picture is one of power and aggressiveness. The British newspapers will "force" you to remember the battle. Memories of the Anglo-French enmity will be "stirred", and the British tabloids will be feeding "sludge" into their readers (two ontological metaphors). This idea of power and aggressiveness is further sustained by the evocation of the result of the battle: the British soldiers "made hamburgers out of the French Cavalry" (another ontological metaphor). There are

two new meanings that are created through the choice of these images. The first one is that the British are strong, powerful, and ready to take action. The second one is that they will be as successful in the beef negotiations (not surprisingly, also known as the "beef war") as they were in the battle of Crécy.

Personification

In an ontological metaphor, an abstract concept is seen as a substance or an entity. When the physical object is further specified as being a person, it allows us to comprehend a wide variety of experiences with non-human entities in terms of human motivations, characteristics, and activities. But each personification differs in terms of the aspects of the people that are chosen. The following is the introduction to the 1994 Annual Report Essay of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis.

CONGRESS SHOULD END THE ECONOMIC WAR AMONG THE STATES

Recently, St. Louis, Mo., pursued an aggressive economic development initiative to lure a professional football team, at a cost to state and local taxpayers estimated as high as $720 million. Last year, Amarillo, Texas, decided to undertake an aggressive economic development initiative using a different strategy. Some 1,300 companies around the country were each sent a check for $8 million that the company could cash if it committed to creating 700 new jobs in Amarillo.

What is so remarkable about these two initiatives is that they are not remarkable. Competition among states for new and existing businesses has become the rule rather than the

exception. A 1993 survey conducted by the Arizona Department of Revenue found that states' use of subsidies and *preferential taxes to retain and attract specific businesses is widespread. The survey found that half the states had recently enacted financial incentives to induce companies to locate, stay or expand in the state. Targeted businesses have ranged from airline maintenance facilities, automobile assembly plants and professional sports team to chopstick factories and corn processing facilities.*

From the very beginning, we are made aware of the similarity established between war and the economic conflict, since this is called "The economic war" in the title. The words "aggressive", "initiative", "strategy", and "targeted businesses" further sustain the analogy. But furthermore, there are a few instances of personification. The city of St. Louis, Mo. has the inherently human abilities of *pursuing an initiative* with the intention of *luring a football team,* and the city of Amarillo, Texas has the human capacity to *decide to undertake an initiative.* Companies are also a subject with the capacity to receive ("were each sent") a cheque and *cash it* if they take the human decision to *commit to creating 700 new jobs.* The Arizona Department of Revenue (not its employees) *conducted a survey,* and specific businesses can be *retained and attracted*, and companies can decide by themselves to *locate, stay or expand in the state.*

In each of the cases we are seeing something non-human as human. But personification is not a single unified general case. The personification of businesses as if they were people actually taking action or that of institutions carrying out surveys is far more common than the personification

of cities. However, the prevailing structural metaphor in the two paragraphs, as said before, is that of the *economic war*. If the writers of this essay (staff of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis) see the economic conflict as a war, the cities from the other states are not just seen as people, they are seen as "the enemy". They are described with words with negative connotation, such as "aggressive" and "lure". This not only gives people from Minneapolis a very specific way of thinking about these cities, but also a way of acting towards them. They are made to think of these cities as adversaries that can attack them, hurt them, steal from them. The companies in Amarillo, which were sent money if they agreed to the creation of 700 new jobs, are seen as "accomplices" of the states, though not as bad as them: the use of the passive "were each sent" makes the subject recipient and not actor[5], or guilty. The same effect is gained by placing the noun "companies" after the verb "induced", and the noun phrase "specific businesses" after the verbs "to retain and attract". Both the companies and the specific businesses are the goals of the actions portrayed by the verbs, as if they were not totally responsible, but in a way, victims, not "actors" or "doers" of the actions, but their "goals".

Finally, the personification of "the Arizona Department of Revenue" may result from the need to give credibility to the findings, thus making an institution, rather than a person, responsible for the task.

Consequently, if we see each personification individually, we will not go any further than seeing metaphors as a way to understand reality. But seen in the frame of the *business is war* metaphor, each personification fulfils a function in order to support the idea the writers want to convey,

the reality they want to create: that the other cities are enemies, helped by companies, which are destroying the businesses of Minneapolis.

Euphemism, Naming and Dead Metaphors

According to George Orwell (1945), "(t)he whole tendency of modern prose is away from concreteness"[1] . He believed that most modern writing consists in gumming together long strips of empty words which have already been set in order by someone else. This is a case in point in modern business writing, and it is seen in the use of euphemism and dead metaphors. Orwell also claims that by using dead metaphors, idioms, and euphemisms, you save mental effort, and leave your meaning vague both for yourself and for your reader, and this reduced state of consciousness is indispensable for political conformity.

Orwell said: "In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible. Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness ". In an era of extreme capitalism, the same can be said about business language- in fact the dividing line between politics and business is becoming thinner and thinner.

The international cover story of the November 15, 1999 issue of the *Businessweek* magazine starts with the following paragraph:

For Renault, A New Chance To Take On The World
Renault Chairman and Chief Executive Louis Schweitzer looks relaxed for a man who has just flown in from a tough week in Tokyo. Schweitzer had arrived in Japan just after Carlos Ghosn announced his radical restructuring plan for Nissan Motor Co., and had feared an avalanche of criticism. Yet, the reaction among Japanese officials, union leaders, and Nissan's managers was decidedly measured. "A Japanese *newspaper put it best: It was a tough* plan, but not a cruel plan," Schweitzer *says in his eighth floor office* overlooking the Seine. "And since *Nissan has been through a lot of* restructuring attempts in the past, it's *important that this one work.*

The title is war-like enough not to deserve any further comment. An experienced reader would expect to read about a very aggressive policy implemented by Renault, if their decision is "to take on the world". But the tone of this first paragraph is far from aggressive. Mr. Schweitzer seems to be "relaxed" in "his eighth floor office overlooking the Seine", and the restructuring plan his company presented in their newly owned company is described as "radical", and "tough" but "not cruel". The use of euphemism and vagueness in this paragraph is crucial: "a tough week", "his radical restructuring plan", "a tough plan, but not a cruel plan", "a lot of restructuring attempts in the past" are, in Orwell's words, phraseology needed "to name things without calling up mental pictures of them". It is very difficult, if you read just "a tough week", to imagine that many people may have lost their jobs, for instance. Or if you read that Ghosn announced "his radical restructuring plan", to bear in mind that the whole culture and working style of a company may change overnight because of a shift in shareholders. Calling a plan "tough" but "not cruel" is not

precise enough, either, for the reader to figure out how radical the changes were, nor is the word "measured" explicit enough to describe the level of reaction or discontent of the Japanese managers.

It is obvious, then, that this article does not intend to focus on the traumatic effects of a take-over. Instead, in a very pro-Renault attitude, it tries to understate the effects of the deal on the company that has been taken over through the use of euphemism.

Naming is another metaphorical use of the language which serves the same purpose: to be vague and euphemistic. According to D. Bolinger (1980), most naming consists in "coming upon something new and trying to fit it to our previous experiences, deciding whether it belongs under Label A or Label B". This classification is not casual, of course, it is another mechanism through which reality is organised and created, and the whole construct of language is built.

Further on in the article about Renault's take-over of Nissan, the latter is referred to as "the ailing Japanese giant", and the former is referred to as being "a state-owned behemoth" when Mr. Schweitzer joined the company in 1986. These names reinforce the image of Nissan as a company in problems, but with a huge potential, and the idea that Renault has always been very large and powerful, but used to be dangerous and irrational until Mr. Schweitzer took over in 1986. This article's bias pro-Renault and pro-Schweitzer becomes evident.

Conclusion

By accepting war metaphors in business contexts, we are acknowledging the existence of a set of obvious similarities between the two fields (business and war), but we are not always fully conscious of the extra load these words carry. Political and economic ideologies are framed in metaphorical terms. Like all other metaphors, we have seen that political and economic metaphors can hide aspects of reality. But in the area of Politics and Economics, metaphors matter more, because they constrain our lives.

Most people would evade an open lie. No society that made deception the rule could ever endure. However, this paper has tried to prove that, through the use of metaphors in business language, a different reality, an extra layer of meaning, is created, but it is in no way overt: it is hidden and latent. Although many people will agree there is no objective way to measure how "truthful" this new reality is, there is no doubt it has been constructed, created with the powerful weapon of language.

Power nowadays resides chiefly in the economic system. Dwight Bolinger (1980) sustains that traditional authority "secures itself by ritualizing what it approves and tabooing what it does not. The rituals are less obvious than those of religion, but more numerous and sometimes just as powerful." These days, an economic decision can have severe effects upon many aspects of our lives.

But the politician is not the only person who believes that if reality is going to be fabricated anyway it might as well be fabricated to one's own advantage. In a society that views itself as fundamentally an *economy,* economic beliefs and practices guide the metaphoric structuring of reality.

For this reason, the use of metaphors

is so widespread: they stand for a larger pattern of cognitions, or they highlight a similarity to something familiar while masking other critical features. In doing so, they legitimise a specific kind of authority while preserving the established order by avoiding criticism and reaction.

Business language is a loaded weapon, and just like any war weapon, it is used to hold and keep power. And this can best be done with language's most effective ammunition: metaphors.

NOTES

[1] *Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture*. England, Longman Group U.K. Limited, 1992, page 607.

[2] GOSHGARIAN, Gary. (ed) *Exploring Language*. New York. Harper Collins College Publishers. 1995. Essay: "Politics and the English Language", George Orwell, 1945, p. 147.

[3] I have used the term "metaphor" in its ample sense, the way Lakoff (1980) did, to refer to all the rhetorical devices which use a figurative mode of expression.

[4] Ontological metaphors are ways of viewing events, emotions, and ideas as entities and substances. Structural metaphors allow us to use a clearly delineated concept to structure another one; for example, *Business is War*. Cfr. LAKOFF, 1980, pp. 25 and 61).

[5] HALLIDAY, M. A. K. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. New York, Longman, 1974. Chapter 7: *Language Structure and Language Function*.

[6] GOSHGARIAN, Gary. (Ed) *Exploring Language*. New York, Harper Collins College Publishers, 1995. Essay: ORWELL, George. *Politics and the English Language*, 1945, p. 152.

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