



# *When a Liberal Use of Metaphor Is Really a Conservative One: The Case of Boris Johnson's Televised Press Releases<sup>1</sup>*

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**ABSTRACT:** The Covid-19 pandemic has generated a number of studies on the use of metaphor to frame the disease and the trope has been presented as a prominent feature of Covid-19 discourse. The metaphor of war has been identified as the master metaphor for framing the health emergency, prompting reflections about its possible drawbacks and feasible alternative framings in order to generate a more constructive stance among the general public, politicians and administrators.

Such studies largely refer to corpora drawn from heterogeneous sources, combining official statements with coverage in mainstream media, blogs and opinion pieces. The present study is based exclusively on a homogeneous single-genre corpus, namely the official Covid-19 announcements made by the former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson from the beginning of March 2020 to December of the same year.

Using automated interrogation routines, frequency and keyword functions were examined to define the extent and expose underlying patterns of metaphor use in this genre. The quantitative data was also subjected to qualitative analysis from the

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<sup>1</sup> While both authors are jointly responsible for the general design of this study, Dermot Heaney has authored sections "Background and Aims", "Salient Features of the BoJo corpus", and "Concluding Remarks and Reflections", and Giorgia Riboni has authored sections "Method", "First Wave vs Second Wave", and "Unusual Metaphors and Popular Culture".



perspective of Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory, which led to insights into contextual constraints and cultural facets of metaphor use in this genre.

The results obtained could be considered surprising. It emerged that Boris Johnson resorted to metaphor only sparingly in this genre. The results highlighted that, on the rare occasions when he did rely on this trope, his usage was very predictable and conventional. However, despite the low frequency and keyness of metaphor in his Covid-19 announcements, this rhetorical figure was seen to offer diverse resources and produce multiple effects, even when used so conservatively.

KEY WORDS: Covid-19; metaphor; Boris Johnson; single-genre corpus; contextual constraints; cultural resonance

## BACKGROUND AND AIMS

There has been no shortage of studies on official, government and media communication on Covid-19 since the onset of the pandemic, and a significant number of them have considered the use of metaphor in this discourse (e.g., Charteris-Black, *Metaphors of CoronaVirus*; Garzone, "Metaphors"; Semino, "Soldiers"; Lorenzetti; Kirk and McDonald; Semino *et al.*). In a 2021 paper in the journal *Health Communication*, prominent metaphor scholar Elena Semino began by focusing on the role of "metaphorical descriptions" in official UK government communication about the Covid-19 pandemic. The starting point of her paper is the importance of metaphor in public information. The trope is effective in this sphere because of its inherent ability to transform complex and abstract Target Domains, such as specialized medical information about the epidemic of a hitherto unknown virus, into "relatively simpler, more image-rich and intersubjectively accessible experiences (such as motion, combat, people and animals)" (Semino, "Soldiers" 51) which constitute what are known as Source Domains. This operation is of obvious use in official information campaigns or emergencies like the Covid-19 pandemic. The usefulness of metaphor in the process of popularization, be it for descriptive, prescriptive or argumentative ends, has long been recognised in the relevant literature (cf. Calsamiglia and van Dijk; Garzone, *Communication*). Additionally, the advantages it offers in terms of persuasion at one extreme and coercion at the other are clear.

Illness, be it mental or physical, consistently "tends to be talked about, conceptualized and even expressed through metaphor" (Semino, "Soldiers" 51). Of the metaphors (source domains) drawn on for this operation in the realm of health, the metaphor of WAR and its many associated images have been singled out by metaphor scholars as the predominant one. The conceptualization of the Covid-19 epidemic in official UK public health discourse was no exception to this rule. The starting point of Semino's paper is a public statement by the then British Prime Minister Boris Johnson



announcing the introduction of lockdown measures. She includes this as an example of the typical war framing of a public health issue and backs it up with further quotes from Johnson and other world leaders to demonstrate how ingrained this tendency is in official public health emergency discourse across the world and cultures.

Albeit from differing methodological approaches and analytical perspectives, recent studies also concur on the centrality of war metaphors in official and media communication about Covid-19 (cf. also McVittie; Musolff, "Responses"). However, Semino sees such reliance on war metaphors as potentially problematic and refers to the scholarly debate that has grown up around this issue. On the one hand, researchers (cf. Scherer *et al.*; Landau *et al.*; Demjén and Semino) have posited that war metaphors can encourage acquiescence with therapy by framing a pathology as serious and urgent, thus encouraging people to be reactive and change their behaviour accordingly; on the other, it has been noted (cf. Hauser and Schwarz) that if the threat is framed as too dangerous or overwhelming, this can lead to fatalism and a defeatist attitude, "a particularly relevant concern for a long-term pandemic, especially as the clear cut victory suggested by the War metaphor becomes more and more elusive" (Semino, "Soldiers" 52). A further way in which the war metaphor can be contested is at the level of its ideological implications. Framing the official response to a pandemic as a war (on a national level) could "legitimize" authoritarian measures and also imply that forms of disobedience, rule-breaking, professional inadequacy or even mere carelessness in members of the citizenry are far more serious public security or criminal offences, deserving of commensurate punishment.

This negative view of the recourse to war metaphors in public health discourse could be said to have crystallized with the #ReframeCovid initiative (Pérez-Sobrinó *et al.*), an attempt by the international academic community to collect and propose alternatives to war metaphors for Covid-19 and to explore the potential of creative rather than conventional or stock master metaphors like war. This initiative appears to have transitioned to a "meta-" metaphorical stance, whereby scholars in various fields, in a process we might define as "metaphor engineering", reflect on the fitness for purpose of conventional conceptual metaphors like COVID-19 IS AN ENEMY (Semino, "Soldiers"), and propose "laboratory" alternatives like COVID-19 IS A FIRE as improvements on those generated by common usage. Other studies in this vein reflect on the validity of the alternatives proposed by academics (Garzone, "Metaphors"). However, a vast number of more traditional studies have also been carried out and published since the emergence of the Coronavirus disease.

It is noticeable that the data such studies draw on are often quite heterogeneous (cf. also Charteris-Black, *Metaphors of CoronaVirus*; Lorenzetti; Jarvis), including corpora comprised of written and spoken Covid-19 communication in different genres as well as media sources. Against this backdrop, the present study aims at contributing to the debate on the incidence and effectiveness of war-based metaphors in the context of the current pandemic by adopting a narrower focus trained on the political genre of the PM's televised press conference. This choice affords an opportunity to examine how metaphor is deployed as a popularization strategy in the institutional governmental sphere as distinct from the more heterogeneous and hybrid realm of journalism. Moreover, this is a context in which the use of language is consistently



under control and hence can act as an important gauge of official expectations about metaphor use in public health (and possibly other) (inter)national crises (Garzone, "Metaphors" 175).

The scripts of Boris Johnson's televised addresses to the nation, broadcast between the months of March and December 2020, will initially be examined from a quantitative perspective, with a view to identifying more exactly the most representative metaphors adopted to frame the government's response to the emergency. More specifically, the research attempts to answer the following questions: What is the incidence of metaphor as a whole in this discourse and how much of it is accounted for by the war framing? What specific cultural resonance do the metaphors used have? What could be lost or gained by framing the public health response with different frames? A comparison between metaphorical configurations adopted in the so-called "first" and "second" Covid-19 waves will complete the analysis.

Press conferences were selected as objects of study since they represent an instrument of democratic legitimacy of leaders (Scaccia). What is more, Johnson himself regarded his government's handling of the Covid-19 epidemic as a defining aspect of his administration—though his assessment has been widely contested (cf. Grierson)—and this positive assessment presumably includes the aspect of public communication on the issue. Boris Johnson, a politician with only thinly disguised literary pretensions and a penchant, if not notoriety, for memorable turns of phrase and colourful expressions, is widely recognised as a gifted user of metaphor, especially in his more polemical anti-EU journalism (Charteris-Black, *Metaphors of Brexit* 261-266; King). The analysis in this paper affords an opportunity to establish whether there are any significant differences in his use of the trope when he is called on to popularize more narrowly specialized public health information.

## METHOD

In the period considered in this study, metaphors were widely employed and arguably proved useful for those actors (e.g. virologists, economists, politicians etc.) who had to illustrate and update citizens on the situation and provide instructions as to how to behave vis-à-vis the pandemic. According to Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CPT), metaphors involve the representation of an 'aspect of a concept in terms of another' (Lakoff and Johnson 10) on the basis of observed affinities or correspondences between them. By making the unfamiliar familiar, metaphors perform a framing function for the entity they refer to (Semino, *Metaphors*): a process of selection and salience (Entman 52) underlies the metaphorical mapping, an activity which entails the highlighting of certain aspects of the target domain and the backgrounding of others (Lakoff and Johnson 10-13). As a result, different metaphors activate different ways of understanding and thinking about the same object or experience and may potentially prompt different responses and behaviour (Semino *et al.*, "Approach" 628).

No matter how conventional, metaphors are to be regarded as vital ways of governing our thought (Kövecses, *Metaphor* ix) and as such need to be identified and



classified (Lakoff and Johnson). This process of classification led to many scholarly studies aimed at tracing networks of metaphor in everyday usage. Context of occurrence can be utilized in this cataloging activity as it plays a significant role and heavily affects metaphorical conceptualization and framing. Research such as that carried out by the scholar Zoltan Kövecses (*Metaphor; Metaphor in Culture; Where Metaphors Come From; Extended Conceptual Metaphor*) attaches pivotal importance to the concept of contextual variation and explores issues connected to it. As a consequence, Kövecses's Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory arguably represents a suitable model for the investigation of Boris Johnson's televised press conferences, as it provides a perspective from which to view the interface between the PM's use of metaphors and the particular backdrop against which he delivered his speeches. In the case at hand, the notion of context includes both the culture in which the selected texts were produced and circulated as well as the genre they belong to.

In this study, the former PM's selection of metaphors will be interpreted and explained in light of the meaning-making system he shares with his audience. Additionally, when identifying and assessing Johnson's metaphors, the research will also comment on the power of this trope to tap into aspects of British history, traditions, and popular culture in the discursive construction of national identity. As it aims to present a description of language in context, the study combines the theoretical approach provided by Kövecses's Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory with the methodological tools of Corpus Linguistics, which provide a quantitative and rigorous outline of linguistic phenomena. In so doing, this paper aligns itself with research that advocates for metaphor identification and examination through a systematic inquiry of naturally-occurring data (cf., *inter alii*, Deignan; Charteris-Black, *Corpus*; Charteris-Black, *Politicians*; Musolff, "Scenarios"; L'Hôte), as it draws on the assumption that "corpus-based studies of metaphor tend to reveal linguistic patterns that are difficult to account for in terms of CMT, and of metaphor theory more generally" (Semino, "Corpus Linguistics" 468). Automated interrogation routines (Sketch Engine) are therefore relied upon in order to look into Boris Johnson's selection of metaphors. In particular, "keyness" investigations were conducted when contrasting the former PM's words with those present in other corpora used as a reference (cf. "Salient Features of the BoJo Corpus") as well as for the comparison between "first wave" and "second wave" metaphors (cf. "First Wave vs Second Wave"), as 'when a metaphorically used expression or domain is key in a corpus in statistical terms, strong claims can be made about the dominance of that particular kind of metaphor in that data' (Semino, "Corpus Linguistics" 467).

Before proceeding with the analytical part of the paper, a few words should be spent on the criteria adopted for the construction of the specialized corpus under scrutiny. The study takes into account 37 press conferences which were delivered from 1 March to 31 December 2020 ("BoJo corpus"; approximately 40,000 tokens). The speeches given in the month of March were the most numerous (eleven) and were used to build a subcorpus (the "first wave subcorpus" ca. 8,400 tokens). The first wave of the pandemic coincided with March and April 2020 but, since on 27.03 Johnson tested positive for Covid and after that had to be hospitalized for a period, he was not



able to address the nation in April. The televised updates of October and November (seven in total) constitute the “second wave subcorpus” (ca. 5,400 tokens).

## SALIENT FEATURES OF THE BOJO CORPUS

The frequency wordlist of the BoJo corpus reveals a rather unexpected lack of metaphors. The concordance lines of the top 500 items were analyzed to check whether the latter were used metaphorically in all or at least some of their occurrences and it was found that the former Prime Minister made a very limited recourse to this trope in the time span between March and December 2020.<sup>2</sup> Just under 1% of lemmas belong to metaphorical expressions and this percentage almost exclusively includes either highly conventional or dead metaphors. These findings possibly suggest that, although they can be adopted as popularization tools to aid the lay public’s understanding of new scientific discoveries and their repercussions on society, these rhetorical figures were not widely relied upon by Johnson, who seemed to prefer a more literal style of communication. This hypothesis has also been verified through an investigation of the keywords of the BoJo corpus, as described below.

## KEY LEXIS AND METAPHORS

For the keyword analysis it was decided to use the BNC corpus of English as a control corpus. This is a general corpus which can be expected to highlight key aspects of the more specific specialized corpus examined here.

Predictably, within the first approximately 500 keywords, much of the key lexis is topical: names of public health figures, politicians, institutions; the lexis of vaccination and prevention; the mention of affected places or activities. There is also a concentration of lexical items that refer to ethical behaviour, praising suitable conduct in the face of the pandemic and recommending a positive response to the restrictions introduced by the government. Intensifiers are much in evidence, particularly in the form of adverbs, communicating the official stance regarding the seriousness of the situation, the importance of measures and certain types of conduct, or to praise approved behaviours by key agents (e.g. “hospital staff”).

The keyword list indicates the presence of metaphors, but they are somewhat less frequent and key than might be expected. Even extending the search to over the first 800 keywords, metaphors account for less than 1.03% of total keywords. Some of these metaphors are taken from a variety of domains, like the journey, fire or physical geography; there is indeed a greater number of metaphors deriving from the domain of war, though they account for a smaller percentage of the total corpus than the metaphors in the other group (just over 0.2% against about 0.7%). Non-martial metaphors, shown with key rankings and scores in the table below, are:

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<sup>2</sup> After the automatic retrieval of frequency wordlists and keywords, metaphors were identified manually following the widely adopted Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP; Pragglejaz Group).



<i>RANKING</i>	LEMMA	SCORE
2	lockdown	1210,53
20	roadmap	101,609
32	outbreak	65,793
71	flare-up	35,052
80	peak	30,883
140	moonshot	23,179
185	dashboard	18,943
233	knell	14,743
251	handbrake	13,9
305	brake	11,866
336	engulf	10,853
386	foothold	8,478
490	toll	6,879

Table 1: Non-martial key metaphors.

Some, like “toll” and “knell” are so intrinsically part of collocations like “death toll” and “death knell” that they have become so thoroughly lexicalized to the point they may not appear metaphorical at all, though their connection with the concept of fatalities is unmistakable; this is also the case with the most key metaphor, lockdown, which, though originating in a martial-cum-security domain, has become part of the single-meaning terminology associated with the pandemic.

However, others in the list may appear more metaphorical by virtue of their evident relation to other meanings. Some of these have also been identified in recent metaphor studies. For example, the fire metaphor recommended by Semino can be seen in “flare-up”, though there are only two instances of that domain in the first 500 keywords. Similarly, Johnson’s famous reference to the virus as an “invisible killer”, is very near the 500 threshold and is not associated with other framings of the virus as a criminal. “Peak” is a highly conventional journey metaphor which equates A MOUNTAIN PEAK with a CRITICAL POINT; in this case, with the most difficult section of a journey. This metaphor is used to imply the power and effectiveness of government action by framing its interventions as actually circumventing the obstacles of physical geography in the following way:

1. We have come through the peak. Or rather we’ve come under what could have been a vast peak as though we’ve been going through some huge alpine tunnel. (30 Apr. 2020)

“Foothold” is a related journey metaphor, which implies a peak, and equates the onset of a phenomenon with initial purchase on difficult terrain. Johnson’s use of this metaphor implies that the UK is the peak to be scaled by COVID-19, possibly evoking and tapping into that sense of isolationism, traditionally a feature of British political life and cultural outlook.



2. We introduced enhanced monitoring at the border in an attempt to stop the virus from gaining a foothold in the UK. (30 Jun. 2020)

Transport metaphors are also in evidence in “roadmap”, “moonshot”, “dashboard”, “handbrake” and “brakes”:

3. We are continuing to follow our roadmap, while adjusting our approach as we need to. (10 May 2020)

4. Our plan—this moonshot that I am describing—will require a giant, collaborative effort from government, business, public health. (9 Sept. 2020)

5. These figures are flashing at us like dashboard warnings in a passenger jet.<sup>3</sup> (12 Oct. 2020)

6. If there are problems, we will not hesitate to put on the brakes. (10 May 2020)

7. We have substantially increased the pipeline of personal protective equipment for the NHS. (17 Jul. 2020)

Examples 3-6 convey the sense that, as a pilot or driver, the government is making progress, is in full control and also responsibly mindful of the safety of its citizen-passengers. Example 7 has been included as a transport metaphor because, although it derives from a container metaphor pipeline, in this unusual collocation (as opposed to “in the pipeline”, which refers to something that is expected to happen more or less soon) it is conceived as a vector for more efficient delivery of protective equipment.

At first sight, the source domain of the journey (and the related domain of transport) may appear highly conventional. However, close examination of the collocation lines for each of them reveals the occasional creative use of the figure. In the case of example 5 this is because “dashboard” collocates with the vivid comparison of numbers acting like flashing lights. Furthermore, although analogy has been widely acknowledged as an important strategy in the popularization of specialized information, it will be noted that these metaphors are also used to convey positive evaluations of the government's anti-Covid measures.

#### THE MASTER METAPHORS FOR COVID IN THE GENRE OF THE TELEVISED PRESS RELEASE

Despite their relatively high keyness, these metaphors and domains are not to be considered the master metaphors in this genre. Perhaps disappointingly for some metaphor scholars, individually, war metaphors account for the most extensive grouping of metaphorical keywords. However, it has to be pointed out that they occur only sporadically across the corpus and even some of the most conventional have a low level of keyness, as can be seen in the following chart.

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<sup>3</sup> The authors recognise that, strictly speaking, “dashboard” occurs in the form of a simile, though within the complete collocation it is actually generated by the initial metaphor of “flashing”. The simile is attached as a sort of gloss on the original metaphor and thus plays an explanatory role through recourse to an explicit analogy rather than an implicit one (cf. Garzone, “Metaphors” 168).





KEY RANKING	LEMMA	SCORE
27	target	80,416
40	frontline	53,847
54	overwhelm	43,932
78	fightback	31,281
83	bugle	30,374
150	shield	21,683
239	toot	14,582
416	brunt	8,069
240	deploy	14,571
460	beat	7,269
499	toll	6,879

Table 2: Instances of War metaphors in the corpus.

At first sight, some of these lemmas appear more conventional than others. It is not difficult to anticipate how images like “frontline”, “fightback”, “overwhelm”, and “beat” collocate with lexis for the pandemic to form conventional metaphors. Thus, rather predictably, we find:

8. This progress is testament to the phenomenal efforts of our NHS and social care staff working tirelessly on the frontline. (1 Jul. 2020)
9. By looking after the children of key workers they [education personnel] will be a critical part of our fightback against Coronavirus. (18 Mar. 2020)
10. We must stop the disease spreading to a point where it overwhelms our NHS. (17 Mar. 2020)
11. Remember our joint objective: to beat this virus. (20 Mar. 2020)

Other key “bellicose” metaphors form similarly unsurprising collocations: “havoc”, “brunt”, “mobilise”, “overrun”, “fight”, “withstand”. This effect likely depends on the war metaphor’s ‘global systematicity’ (cf. Cameron 16; Semino, *Metaphors* 106), which means that its linguistic patterns have become familiar because it occurs across a wide spectrum of discourse and topics where these instantiations are used regularly to frame the impact of a problem—or even a simple divergence of opinion—in terms of armed conflict.

As in the case of the first source domains analysed, closer examination of the concordance lines for many of these predictable lemmas reveals a concern with how the action of the government is framed compared with how the public is characterized.

12. It is a targeted intervention to limit the most harmful effects of the current social restrictions. (10 Jun. 2020)
13. Public Health England engaged with the local authority, mobile testing units were deployed. (3 Jul. 2020)
14. We’re going to need to mobilise millions of people to help and support each other. (12 Mar. 2020)



- 15. And it is thanks to that massive collective effort to shield the NHS that we avoided an uncontrollable and catastrophic epidemic... (30 Apr. 2020)
- 16. And let me explain why the overrunning of the NHS would be a medical and moral disaster. (31 Oct. 2022)
- 17. So we can ensure anything we do does not risk a second peak that could overwhelm the NHS. (30 Apr. 2020)
- 18. But in this fight we can be in no doubt that each and every one of us is directly enlisted. Each and every one of us is now obliged to join together. (23 Mar. 2020)
- 19. We have secured supplies of billions of items of PPE to withstand new demands on hospitals and care homes. (31 Jul. 2020)

Examples 12-14 cast the government’s actions in a positive light: interventions are “targeted”, units are deployed “rapidly”, government power is implied in agency that can mobilise “millions” of people. The picture emerging is one of focus, effectiveness and executive power, a far cry from the charges of confusion, ineffectiveness and incompetence (and corruption) levelled at the government from some quarters.

By contrast, in the framings found in example 15-19, the citizenry emerges as a possible enemy within, or fifth column, with the potential to ‘overwhelm’ and ‘overrun’ the NHS, which has to be helped to ‘withstand’ that particular threat. Moreover, the public is also framed as enlisted recruits, who must therefore obey orders and whose eventual refusal to do so can be decoded as treasonous and punishable. These examples are an illustration of the kind of negative potential some scholars have seen as intrinsic to war metaphors in public health scenarios. The above examples suggest that official recourse to metaphor is not solely in the interest of rendering new concepts in other terms. The patterns of metaphor use outlined in examples 13-20 indicate that the institution is engaged both in positive discursive identity construction and the stigmatization of possible behaviours on the part of the public.

The remaining key group of metaphors is drawn from the world of sport (cf. Charteris-Black, *Corpus* 113-134; Garzone, “Metaphors”), perhaps unsurprisingly because competition is common to both the domains, and sport itself draws much of its figurative language from the domain of war. These metaphors are ranked as follows:

KEY RANKING	LEMMA	SCORE
121	gamechanger	23,798
138	word-leading	23,179
168	world-beating	20,201
286	world-class	12,415

Table 3: Instances of sports metaphors.

These sports metaphors appear to function in two ways. Firstly, they shift the perspective from ACTION AGAINST THE VIRUS IS WAR, to ACTION AGAINST THE VIRUS IS A GAME, and therefore may be said to perform a euphemistic function. Secondly, the UK is not simply framed as defeating the virus, but as triumphing over its international competitors. This is an extension of the so-called “athletic fallacy” (cf.



Porter 35), whereby sporting achievements are interpreted as an index of the vitality and prestige of a culture.

20. And our plan means we're committed to doing everything possible based on the advice of our world leading scientific experts. (3 Mar. 2020)
21. We will buy literally hundreds of thousands of these kits as soon as practicable because obviously it has the potential to be a total gamechanger. (19 Mar. 2020)
22. And if we are to control this virus, then we must have a world-beating system for testing potential victims, and for tracing their contacts. (10 May 2020)
23. What everyone needs to recognise is that our NHS—like any world-class health service—has only limited numbers of doctors... (25 Mar. 2020)

Additionally, references to victory possibly tap into embedded cultural notions of national superiority that have been difficult to dispel since the outcome of the Second World War (particularly as sporting events are often seen as a moment of national triumph and vindication (as in England's World Cup victory against West Germany in 1966).

#### FIRST WAVE VS SECOND WAVE

As stressed above, Boris Johnson made relatively limited use of metaphors in the course of the first nine months of the pandemic. This also applies to the periods dubbed as "first" and "second wave", during which the number of televised press releases rose as a consequence of the increase in Covid-19 casualties. The frequency wordlists of the corresponding subcorpora reveal a scant recourse to metaphors both in the weeks following the outbreak of the disease and in the fall, when the circulation of the virus picked up again after some time of stability. Only ca. 5% and 3% of the top 100 most frequent lemmas of respectively the "first wave" and "the second wave" subcorpora either belong to metaphorical expressions or are used metaphorically. Such percentages go up to 8% and 7.6% if the first 250 occurrences are considered, but they still arguably indicate the then-Prime Minister's tendency to stick to a literal style of communication. On top of that, the few metaphorical instances that rank in the first 250 items of both wordlists are extremely conventional (e.g. "the outbreak") if not dead metaphors (e.g. "follow the rules").

The observation of these data suggests that Johnson did not heavily rely on figurative language to address citizens during either of the initial pandemic waves but that he possibly resorted to metaphors more in March than he did in October and November. This preliminary result may indicate that, although the Conservative leader limitedly availed himself of metaphors, metaphors in the initial stages of the emergency, he used them a little more, possibly as tools of cognition and popularization to aid the audience come to terms with new concepts and an unprecedented situation. This hypothesis has been further corroborated through an analysis of the keywords: the first wave subcorpus contains ca. 1 ½ times the number of metaphorical uses of the second wave one. These findings seem to align with those obtained by scholars (e.g. Garzone, "Metaphors" 165) who have investigated the



presence of this trope in the media and have noted a decrease in its adoption with the passing of time and the concomitant familiarizing of the population with Covid-19. Keyword lists also helped single out the rhetorical and discursive peculiarities of Johnson's communication during the first and the second wave.

#### METAPHORS OF THE FIRST WAVE

The keywords of each subcorpus highlight the existence of semantic fields and privileged ways of framing the virus and the health emergency situation which distinguish the two corresponding periods. The main metaphorical configurations characterizing the press releases of the early stages of the pandemic have to do with countering the spread and threat of the virus.

KEY RANKING	LEMMA	SCORE
1	slow	1925,31
9	delay	963,155
15	outbreak	749,343
19	buy	642,437
76	mitigate	321,718
85	invisible	321,718
94	disruption	321,718
158	enemy	214,812
162	halt	214,812
163	killer	214,812
170	disruptive	214,812
172	fightback	214,812
178	war	107,906
190	defense	107,906

Table 4: Metaphors of the First Wave.

The most frequently occurring semantic field of these speeches includes lemmas that have to do with the urgency and the necessity of slowing down the contagion:

24. This will mean there will of course be far fewer children in schools and that will help us to slow the spread of the disease. (18 Mar. 2020)

25. The more we can delay the peak of the spread to the summer, the better the NHS will be able to manage. (9 Mar. 2020)

Both these examples contain the noun phrase "spread", often metaphorically employed with reference to illness and viruses. Example 25 combines two intertwined images, that of the "peak" (cf. example 1) and that of the spread, which both originate in the journey source domain. In the keyword lists, however, it is the verbs that conceptualize deceleration that rank at the top, thus suggesting that the



government's initial policies focused on reducing the pace of the transmission of the disease.

26. We've done what can be done to contain this disease and this has bought us valuable time. (12 Mar. 2020)

27. With the time you buy—by simply staying at home—we are increasing our stocks of equipment. (23 Mar. 2020)

The reiteration of the metaphorical expression “to buy time” further reinforces the notion that the former Prime Minister framed the strategy to deal with the emergency in terms of damage limitation (another metaphor) rather than a more active and dynamic response. The utilization of this trope therefore appears in line with Johnson's appeal to the importance of “containing, delaying, researching, and mitigating”, a four-item list he originally devised and incorporated in his speeches as a sort of slogan.

The semantic field of contagion reduction and control often overlaps with that of war and provides a similar framing of the situation. Lemmas portraying a bellicose scenario are not as key as those describing the urgency to curb the speed of the virus's spread, but they are quite high on the list. This suggests that the metaphor ACTION AGAINST COVID IS WAR was still present in the press releases of the second wave but not as much as in those of the first one.<sup>4</sup> However, the kind of warfare waged by the country is aimed at shielding and safeguarding the people rather than at attacking the ‘enemy’, since the latter is impossible to target:

28. All over the world we are seeing the devastating impact of this invisible killer. (23 Mar. 2020)

29. This crisis is so difficult because the enemy is invisible. (19 Mar. 2020)

Examples 28 and 29 feature instances of the “invisible killer”/ “invisible enemy” metaphor, an image Boris Johnson used recurrently in order to depict Corona virus while advocating for his administration's tactics of containment and mitigation. In relation to this, it is worth mentioning that, especially at the beginning of the pandemic, the UK implemented less restrictive (and possibly less effective) measures than other Western countries. Therefore, framing Covid-19 as an invisible, elusive entity may have offered some justification for the British leader's choice not to “attack the enemy head-on”.

As noted above, the war the country is fighting is conceptualized as a war of containment or a defensive war:

30. The Chief Medical Officer will set out our lines of defence. We have to deploy these at the right time to maximise their effect. (12 Mar. 2020)

31. I want to tell you where we got to in our national fightback against the coronavirus. (18 Mar. 2020)

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<sup>4</sup> ‘War’ also appears among the keywords of the first wave subcorpus, although not at the top of the list.



The reliance on metaphors of defence and control diminished after the first wave but was never abandoned. However, in the autumn months, when the second wave hit the UK and the number of British Covid-19 casualties reached a record high (Reynolds), new policies were introduced by the government. This change of approach is also reflected in the metaphorical configurations utilized by Johnson in his televised addresses (cf. also Combei *et al.*), as discussed in the following subparagraph.

#### METAPHORS OF THE SECOND WAVE

Only a few months set the first and the second wave of the pandemic apart, but the general perception of the emergency, as well as institutional communication about it, underwent significant changes. More had been discovered about the virus and more extensive information about it had been disseminated to the citizens. The death toll paid by the UK soared after summer 2020, and the nation was depicted by international media as “the sick man of Europe”.

All these factors find an echo in the former Prime Minister’s speeches, as suggested by the keyword list of the second wave.

KEY RANKING	LEMMA	SCORE
7	alert	1324,627
10	lockdown	1159,173
36	furlough	497,36
85	bubble	331,907
102	light	331,907
103	wave	331,907
120	surge	331,907
158	erosions	166,453

Table 5: Metaphors of the Second Wave.

First, the number of metaphorical occurrences is even lower than in the spring press releases (cf. “Metaphors of the First Wave”) which confirms the hypothesis that this kind of trope was probably adopted as a popularization strategy when Johnson initially addressed his country fellows at the beginning of the health crisis. Secondly, most of the metaphors that do appear in the list have become part of the Corona virus specific lexicon: terms like “alert” (which typically occurs in the specialized collocation “Very High Alert”) and “lockdown” are among the ten top ranking keywords (cf. Table 5). Others, such as “bubble” and “nightingale” (cf. “Unusual Metaphors and Popular Culture”), are to be found within the first 100.

32. Single adult households can still form exclusive support bubbles with one other household, and children will still be able to move between homes if their parents are separated. (31 Oct. 2020)



The presence of specialized vocabulary among the most frequent metaphors may suggest a shift in the role played by this trope in the press releases: if in March it was a tool of cognition and knowledge dissemination, in the autumn months it was mainly relied upon to identify the terms referring to the more numerous and much stricter policies adopted by the government.

This thesis appears justified in light of the semantic field and concomitant framing prevailing in the texts of the second wave, i.e. THE VIRUS IS A FORCE OF NATURE. Lemmas conveying natural metaphors (“light”, “wave”, “surge”, “erosions”) appear within the first 200 items of the keyword list. Once again, the source domain selected is rather conventional and it construes “coronavirus as caused by non-human, ‘objective’ forces to which governments and societies needed urgently to respond” (Charteris-Black, *Metaphors of CoronaVirus* 74):

33. Since then we have been undertaking discussions with local leaders in those parts of the country which are currently bearing the brunt of the second wave of this epidemic. (20 Oct. 2020)

34. Our hope was that by strong local action, strong local leadership, we could get the rates of infection down where the disease was surging, and address the problem thereby across the whole country. (31 Oct. 2020)

35. No one, least of all me, wants to impose these kinds of erosions (sic) of our personal liberty, but I am as convinced as I have ever been that the British people have the resolve to beat this virus and that, together, we will do just that. (12 Oct. 2020)

As demonstrated by these examples, framing the Coronavirus as a natural entity (often involving “the movement of vast amounts of water”; Charteris-Black, *Metaphors of CoronaVirus* 74) emphasizes its high danger potential and, consequently, the gravity of the situation. Example 33 contains a sequence of combined metaphors (“brunt” and “wave”) which highlights how overwhelming the power of the disease can be. In particular, the image of the wave (conventionally used with reference to series of global infections) evokes a notion of irresistibility (Charteris-Black, *Metaphors of CoronaVirus* 80).

The framing of the virus as a natural force with overpowering qualities contrasts with its framing as an entity to be contained: the adoption of the former during the second wave arguably produced the effect of heightening the state of alert and concern of the population. The switch to this new frame may thus have been instrumental in making the more stringent emergency measures more palatable to the British people. Interestingly, THE VIRUS IS A FORCE OF NATURE construct prevailed in the early institutional communication of those countries (such as Italy and Spain) that had adopted very tough policies at the beginning of the crisis (cf. Combei *et al.*). As already stressed, the Johnson administration’s initial response to the health crisis was not as resolute, but it underwent a significant change between the outbreak of the illness and autumn 2020. It is possible to hypothesize that the later introduction of a different framing of Covid-19 may have contributed to reducing the accountability of the government for the significant change in its response.



## UNUSUAL METAPHORS AND POPULAR CULTURE

In spite of opting for barely figurative language featuring a limited number of predictable analogies, the Conservative leader did include a few instances of novel metaphorical expressions which mostly evoke illustrious figures of British history or popular culture tradition.<sup>5</sup>

“Nightingales”, the field hospitals set up to cope with the extra numbers of patients, are a case in point. It is not unusual to use a proper name, particularly of a historic figure, to convey a concept or to describe behaviour, a kind of mapping that is virtually indistinguishable from metaphor, and is found in comparisons of people with figures like David and Goliath or references to Judas, Brutus, or Pontius Pilate. In this case, the metaphorical usage of the word is accentuated by the use of the proper name as a plural noun. The choice of name makes a direct comparison with the military hospitals set up by Florence Nightingale during Britain's involvement in the Crimean War of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to convey, above all, a sense of sacrifice and compassion for the victims of the “conflict”. Like the use of “frontline”, this designation also consolidates the depiction of health workers as heroic, while associating the government response to the current crisis with an iconic figure widely felt to embody admired national characteristics.

Another recurring natural metaphor establishes an analogy between the virus and sea tides:

36. Yesterday I set out the ambition of this government to turn the tide against coronavirus within 3 months. (20 Mar. 2020)

37. And that is how, by a mixture of determined, collective action and scientific progress, I have absolutely no doubt that we will turn the tide of this disease and beat it together. (19 Mar. 2020)

Although the VIRUS IS A FORCE OF NATURE frame may convey a sense of impotence, here Johnson uses it transitively to imply an ability to command the waves, reversing the legend of King Canute (cf. also Charteris-Black, *Metaphors of CoronaVirus* 84-85). Examples 36 and 37 achieve this by a change of conventional transitivity and an unusual collocation (turn the tide as opposed to turn a corner). The reference to the legendary character of British popular tradition is probably very effective as it is indirect: it can be easily understood by the former Prime Minister's countrymen/women, but the name of the famous King is never pronounced. In the same way, Johnson alludes to the highly popular Harry Potter saga when he depicts the virus as an enemy robed in a cloak of invisibility:

38. This crisis is so difficult because the enemy is invisible. And the answer is to remove the cloak of invisibility... (19 Mar. 2020)

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<sup>5</sup> Johnson also makes reference to characters of the classic mythology like Pandora and Scylla and Charybdis, but, due to space constraints, they will not be discussed here.





Despite the fact that Harry Potter stories are targeted at a readership of children, many grown-ups are familiar with them so the veiled reference was probably widely understood. Incidentally, their sales went up by 28% during the first lockdown so the circulation of the books and the notoriety of their characters increased even more in that period (Combei *et al.*).

Another British hero who is evoked but not explicitly mentioned is Robin Hood:

39. ... neither mass testing nor progress on vaccines—both vital arrows in our epidemiological quiver, both key parts of our fight against Covid—are at the present time a substitute for the national restrictions. (09 Nov. 2020)

A creative use of the trope is signaled by the extended metaphor (“arrows” and “quiver”), but the fact that Johnson has to gloss it with the more conventional war metaphor “fight” suggests a certain quasi-literary self-indulgence at the expense of a more utilitarian approach. The same suspicion arises with the following example:

40. ... the scientific cavalry coming over the brow of the hill. And tonight that toot of the bugle is louder. But it is still some way off. (9 Nov. 2020)

Here Johnson is relying on an extended metaphor reprising a scene from popular culture: the arrival of the cavalry in the aid of pioneers under attack from Native Americans, an iconic moment in the Hollywood genre of the Western. The use of this source domain could be seen as a culturally tactless, in that the virus is implicitly embodied as Native Americans, thus reinforcing certain invidious stereotypes. This extended metaphor also incorporates a journey metaphor (in the form of a geographical obstacle): “the brow of the hill”, used here to convey a sense of a critical juncture that is soon to be crossed. Its novelty does not so much lie in its basic mapping of Scientists are the Calvary—after all, “the calvary is on its way” has become a conventional metaphor for “help is at hand”—rather, it depends on the ornamentation of “bugle” and “toot”. The choice of this metaphorical configuration may be an attempt to instill optimism or to lighten the national mood, but, as previously remarked, it may also represent an instance of Johnson’s self-indulgence.

To sum up, when Johnson used unusual metaphors, traditional and heroic figures of British popular culture were recalled, often indirectly, to frame the country’s response in terms of a fight between “good” and “evil”. This kind of conceptualization, together with the selection of well-known characters like Harry Potter and the adoption of unexpected source domains, may suggest that, on the rather rare occasions where the former Prime Minister indulged in non-conventional metaphors, he revealed a certain degree of condescension towards the public, who are presented with information in an infantilised form. This may be attributed to Johnson’s personal style, but it may also represent a distinctive feature of British popularizing communication (cf., for example, Heaney), which once again confirms the importance of context of occurrence in the study of metaphors and their conceptual and framing functions.



## CONCLUDING REMARKS AND REFLECTIONS

The Covid-19 pandemic has given rise to a number of linguistic studies on metaphor use. The trope has been identified as playing a salient role in understanding and interpreting the pandemic. This salience, though, has emerged in studies that have drawn on miscellaneous data, principally on media outlets of various kinds, from online newspapers to opinion websites and blogs. This provides an insight into the visibility acquired by metaphor during the pandemic. Certainly, the tendency of media outlets to replicate metaphors that increase the newsworthiness of topics can be expected to amplify its presence and resonance in this discourse.

Working on the basis that bad news is (for media outlets) good news, it is no surprise to find the metaphor war is one of the most diffuse in media contexts, along with associated source domains like forces of nature. Nor is it surprising that sporadic and less conventional metaphors, like Boris Johnson's reference to the cavalry or his metaphor of arrows and quivers, are replicated, and in some cases derided, in numerous media outlets (e.g. Rawlinson). However, when examining the very source of many news reports, i.e. the Prime Minister's updates on the anti-Covid measures in the UK, it emerges that metaphors account for a very low percentage of overall lexis. Both in terms of keyness and frequency, their incidence is low; few metaphors are found in high key positions, while most occur lower down the frequency list. The sections that analyze metaphor use in the corpus and subcorpora show, unequivocally, that Boris Johnson was, on the whole, rather restrained in his use of metaphors. It would appear that in terms of popularization, metaphor plays a more conspicuous role in the mass media than it does in the institutional context represented by this genre, in which officialdom heavily relies on non-figurative language to get its messages across.

Notwithstanding their relative rarity in this genre, the most prominent metaphors (both in terms of keyness and frequency) conform to patterns identified in other studies on metaphor use to frame the pandemic. Individually, war is indeed the most key, and its framing of the pandemic as an invading enemy is further extended by forces of nature and sporting competition metaphors. A close reading of examples suggests that even these conventional metaphors can, in a limited number of instances, work at different levels. In some cases there are suggestions that they may tap into narratives that are deeply embedded in the culture: memories of World War 2, for example, a conflict that Johnson mentions explicitly (17 Mar. 2020). At the same time, metaphors can also be involved in positive identity work by the government itself, especially since it dramatically changed its anti-Covid policies and measures between the first and the second wave of the pandemic. It is also possible to argue that in certain instances these metaphors are being used in a manner that is excessively judgemental of some kinds of potential public behaviour. However, these levels of meaning are to be found in only a few sporadically used metaphors.

Conversely, it could be argued that these domains are largely shorn of any negative implications because their constant use has substantially lexicalised them and greatly attenuated their martial and aggressive connotations (cf. also Garzone,



"Metaphors"). Additionally, their global systematicity in other target domains (cf., for instance, Lakoff and Johnson's classic example of conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR, p. 7) could be another factor that has deadened their impact.

As to the quest for alternative framings, a too evident search for them might open government officials to disapproval and criticism; when Johnson actually went beyond the confines of conventional metaphor, as he did in his analogy of the cavalry coming to the rescue to the toot of a bugle, or that of scientists as Robin Hoods with arrows in their quivers, he used framings that ran the risk of sounding patronizing and infantilizing the audience, a stance that is not uncommon in other public information contexts in the United Kingdom (see Heaney 61). Indeed Hall (92) had already seen that one of the repercussions of "low contexting" was that of "talking down to someone". This tendency is not only latent in some of Johnson's metaphor use, but more plainly visible in his instruction to "wash your hands with soap and hot water for the length of time it takes to sing Happy Birthday twice" (3 Mar. 2020). This aspect of public infantilization possibly deserves further scholarly investigation.

Metaphor has undoubtedly become a major field of research. A substantial body of literature deals with the pervasiveness of this trope in many kinds of discourse. However, this paper has encountered a much less extensive use of metaphors in an important genre of Covid-19 communication than was expected. The study therefore sounds a note of caution against analyzing metaphors without distinguishing between the genres they are being used in, which, in the end, could reveal salient facets of their use in specific discourses.

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