

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
**METAPHORS OF IMMIGRATION: AN ANALYSIS OF METAPHOR AND
METONYMY IN AMERICAN POLITICAL NEWS DISCOURSE**

By
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1. INTRODUCTION

Metaphors are abundant in discourse surrounding immigration. As has been evidenced by previous scholarly work on this topic, the overwhelming majority of metaphors used about immigration in the US context are dehumanizing and function to aid in the construction of negative views toward immigrants and immigration. Commonly noted examples of these metaphors include IMMIGRATION IS A NATURAL DISASTER, IMMIGRATION IS A DISEASE, and IMMIGRANTS ARE CRIMINALS, all of which and more will be discussed in greater detail in the third section of this paper. The purpose of this study is to investigate whether dehumanizing metaphors have become so ubiquitous in immigration discourse that they seep into texts intended to offer a positive, empathetic view of migrants. Specifically, do American news articles presenting a positive opinion on migrants and migration contain negative metaphors about these topics, and can this be taken as evidence of conventionalization of these metaphors?

In what follows, I will first provide a brief summary of American immigration law throughout history and in the modern era. This is intended to provide context for the language used surrounding immigration in recent news articles.

Subsequently, I shift to previous work on metaphor within the field of linguistics. Here, I describe previous scholarly research on metaphor use in general as well as metaphor use in immigration discourse. Finally, I will discuss the data collected during this study, drawn from recent US news reports, and will argue that metaphor tropes describing immigration as a natural disaster are approaching conventionalization in immigration discourse on both the left and right.

This paper investigates the degree of conventionalization of dehumanizing metaphors about immigration by comparing left-leaning (generally more pro-immigration) news sources and right-leaning (generally more anti-immigration) news sources. In order to do this, I began by

identifying news outlets that are considered to be generally left-leaning and generally right-leaning and selecting articles from these sources which discuss immigration, followed by locating and analyzing specific instances, or *tokens*, of metaphor found within these articles. These tokens were then categorized into tropes for further analysis. Types of metaphor tokens and their frequency were then compared between right-leaning and left-leaning news outlets. Within American politics, anti-immigration discourse is associated with right-leaning political stances. Therefore, comparing metaphor usage between right and left-leaning news outlets allows for an evaluation of the degree of conventionalization of these metaphors by determining whether or not they are significantly more frequent in right-leaning news outlets than in left-leaning news outlets. The procedures used for this process are described in the methods section.

In the results section, I describe the types of metaphors observed in right-leaning and left-leaning sources and compare the rates at which dehumanizing metaphors were used among both groups. Finally, I discuss these results in the larger context of metaphor study and the implications of the results for American immigration discourse and, by extension, media-driven understandings of immigration in the US.

2. METAPHOR AND METONYMY IN LINGUISTICS

Outside of linguistic research, metaphor is commonly thought of as a poetic device used to draw a comparison between two ideas. However, linguists have observed that metaphor goes far beyond poetic texts, permeating everyday language use and informing the ways in which things are conceptualized (Arcimaviciene and Baglama 2018, Catalano and Musolff 2019, Lakoff 1993, Lakoff and Johnson 1980, Santa Ana 2003). Metaphors utilize a more familiar and accessible concept, called a “source domain,” to aid in the understanding of a more abstract and complex concept, called a “target domain” (Arcimaviciene and Baglama 2018, Catalano and Musolff 2019, Lakoff 1993, Lakoff and Johnson 1980, O’Brien 2003). Elements of the source domain are “mapped” onto the target domain, allowing for the transfer of “inference patterns” from the source domain to the target domain (Lakoff 1993, Lakoff and Johnson 1980). An expression can be identified as a metaphor when the meaning understood from the expression differs from its more literal, technical meaning (Arcimaviciene and Baglama 2018, Pragglejaz Group 2007).

While novel metaphors are routinely constructed by language users, they are likely to be recognized as metaphors and associated with poetic speech. However, many metaphors become deeply embedded in the fabric of a language, obscuring their recognizability as metaphors and naturalizing the comparison between the source and target domains (Lakoff 1993, Lakoff and Johnson 1980, Musolff 2011). These are referred to as “conventional metaphors” (Lakoff 1993, Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Two classic examples that illustrate this are ARGUMENT IS WAR, with examples like,

“your claims are *indefensible*,”

“he *attacked every weak point* of my argument,”

“he *shot down* all of my arguments” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 124) and LOVE IS A JOURNEY, with examples like,

“we are at a *crossroads*,”

“we may have to *go our separate ways*,”

“it’s been a *long, bumpy road*” (Lakoff 1993, 4).

The entrenchment of metaphor in the mind’s conceptualization system means that the kinds of metaphors being used in discourse guide the ways in which people understand a given idea. This makes metaphor a powerful tool in political rhetoric, because as metaphors are continuously reproduced in political discourse, they impact the way that ideas are conceptualized by listeners (Arcimaviciene and Baglama 2018, Catalano and Musolff 2019, Charteris-Black 2011, Lapka 2021, Musolff 2011, O’Brien 2003, Santa Ana 2003, Zaviska 2016). Metaphors, especially when used in political speech, are highly effective in the process of “mythmaking” (Arcimaviciene and Baglama 2018, Charteris-Black 2011). Arcimaviciene and Baglama (2018) define a myth as a “social story based on certain preconceptions, knowledge, and beliefs” (3). Catalano and Musolff (2019) refer to a similar concept, which they call the “social imaginary” and define as a “way of thinking shared in a society by ordinary people...common understandings that make everyday practices possible, give them sense and legitimacy” (13). Santa Ana (2016) defines myth as a “foundational belief within a given culture at once necessary and fictive” and as a “seemingly indispensable ritual that enhances and codifies societal beliefs in order to safeguard and compel its moralities” (96). Essentially, repetition and reproduction of a metaphor enables it to be mythologized and engrained as a part of the way a culture makes sense of things. This can be a highly useful tool for pushing a particular political agenda.

Within the realm of political rhetoric, it is debated whether or not metaphor usage is *deliberate*, with “deliberate” meaning “intended to achieve a specific communicative purpose” (Musolff 2011, 14). A speaker may have a metaphor so thoroughly implanted in their conception of a topic that their use of that metaphor, while possibly revealing of their underlying ideology, is unintentional. Or, they may be using a metaphor to deliberately convey a certain message (Musolff 2011, Steen 2017). Regardless of deliberateness, metaphor and myth still function to build an ideological frame that helps to advance a particular policy position or worldview (Arcimaviciene and Baglama 2018, Catalano and Musolff 2019, Charteris-Black 2011, Lapka 2021, Musolff 2011, O’Brien 2003, Quinsaat 2014, Santa Anna 2003, Santa Ana 2016, Zaviska 2016).

While metaphor and mythmaking are features of many topics in political discourse, one area in which they are particularly prominent is discourse surrounding immigration. Much scholarly work has been done in service of documenting particular metaphors and myths utilized in discussions of immigration, most commonly using political speeches or news articles as data sources. Santa Ana’s (2003) book, *Brown Tide Rising: Metaphors of Latinos in Contemporary American Public Discourse* has become a frequently referenced text in works on this topic, with many scholars observing the metaphors he discussed in their own studies. Some of the frequently observed metaphors for immigration are IMMIGRATION IS A NATURAL DISASTER, IMMIGRANTS ARE INVADERS, IMMIGRATION IS A DISEASE, IMMIGRANTS ARE CRIMINALS, and IMMIGRANTS ARE ANIMALS. While the goal of my work is to investigate the conventionalization of negative metaphors by comparing metaphor use in right and left-leaning sources, this work would not have been possible without Santa Ana, and other researchers who followed his lead, who identified common metaphoric tropes about

immigration. The first of these tropes, IMMIGRATION IS A NATURAL DISASTER, commonly manifests in terms of “dangerous waters,” with words like “flood,” “engulf,” “surge,” “swamp,” “tide,” and “flow” (Aracimaviciene and Baglama 2018, Catalano and Musolff 2019, Musolff 2011, O’Brien 2003, Santa Ana 2003, Zaviska 2016). The next metaphor compares immigration with war, describing migrants as an “invading army” and mapping Border Patrol agents as the nation’s *line of defense* (Aracimaviciene and Baglama 2018, O’Brien 2003, Santa Ana 2003). The disease metaphor maps the nation as a body and migrants as a parasite, cancer, illness (Aracimaviciene and Baglama 2018, O’Brien 2003, Santa Ana 2003) or as “indigestible food” (Zaviska 2016). The criminal metaphor utilizes words like “illegal,” “criminal,” “detainee,” and even “terrorist” to refer to migrants (Arcimaviciene and Baglama 2018, Catalano and Musolff 2019, Santa Ana 2003). Finally, the animal metaphor uses terms such as “hunted,” “rounded up,” and “flock,” (Arcimaviciene and Baglama 2018, Catalano and Musolff 2019, O’Brien 2003, Zaviska 2016) and produces expressions that would be more commonly applied to animals, such as that migrants tend to “return in the spring months” (Santa Ana 2016, 98). While this list of metaphors is relatively consistent across the studies reviewed for this paper, some scholars have observed other metaphors such as IMMIGRANTS ARE OBJECTS (Arcimaviciene and Baglama 2018), IMMIGRANTS ARE VICTIMS, IMMIGRANTS ARE FOREIGN BEINGS (Catalano and Musolff 2019), and IMMIGRANT DEATH IS AN ECONOMIC EQUATION (Zaviska 2016). Although some metaphors that are more sympathetic towards migrants have been observed, such as MIGRANTS ARE SAINTS (Zaviska 2016) and MIGRANTS ARE VICTIMS NEEDING PROTECTION (Catalano and Musolff 2019), the large majority of metaphors used in immigration discourse are dehumanizing.

Repeated uses of these metaphors have fed into the development of cultural myths and frameworks surrounding immigration. Santa Ana (2016) found two common mythological narratives about immigration in television news, which he categorizes as “the cowboy/American western” myth and the “goddess” myth, the former of which enforces negative beliefs about migrants and the latter of which offers a more positive view. Quinsaat (2014) analyzes six key “frames” used in media discourse: “Nation of Immigrants,” “Failed Immigration Policy,” “Dangerous Immigrants,” “Cheap Labor,” “Immigrant Takeover,” and “Immigrant-as-Other,” the majority of which uphold anti-immigration sentiments. Given that metaphor usage and mythmaking construct (and reconstruct) conceptualization, the use of dehumanizing metaphors in immigration discourse is likely to encourage negative opinions of immigrants and immigration. In regards to this, O’Brien (2003) writes:

“Writings that depict marginalized groups as less than human or a threat to society constitute an important and possibly essential precursor to inhumane or adverse social policies...Justification for limiting the rights of minority groups requires the development of negative social images of these groups...When the public at large accepts these pejorative metaphorical depictions as an accurate means of perceiving group members, regressive policies may be forthcoming” (44).

The notion of *the public at large* brings up interesting questions for further study. As discussed earlier, metaphors used routinely in a language become “conventionalized,” making them difficult to recognize as metaphorical and naturalizing the comparisons they suggest (Lakoff 1993). The frequent occurrence of the same metaphors across multiple studies conducted in different years by various scholars begs the question of whether these metaphors used to describe migrants have become conventionalized, and to what degree this can be observed.

Seeing that the majority of these metaphors express an underlying negative attitude towards immigration, one way to assess their conventionalization may be to analyze texts which intend to depict migrants in a more positive light and search for the occurrence of these

metaphors there. If they are found in positive-leaning texts about immigration, especially with great frequency, it could not reasonably be concluded that they were used *deliberately* to convey a negative sentiment about migrants but would instead suggest that the metaphors have become conventionalized to a degree that authors are not consciously aware of the dehumanizing language being used. Zaviska (2016) notes an example of this in her chapter “Metaphorical Imagery in News Reporting on Migrant Deaths,” writing that, “An editorial praising human volunteers claims, ‘There are people in need wandering and staggering in the *punishing* desert.’ Another editorial casts migrants as the desert’s victims: ‘The desert *did not forgive* them their innocent ambitions, adding them instead to the growing number of illegal immigrants killed by the desert heat” (178). Despite operating from a more liberal and empathetic point of view of immigration, these examples use a VENGEANCE metaphor which acts to “depict the desert as angry and death as a punishment,” and “naturalize death by blaming the weather,” (2016, 178) and thereby remove blame for the suffering and death of migrants from policy decisions and enforcement tactics. The second example also uses the CRIMINAL metaphor by describing the migrants as “illegal.”

While Zaviska provides two interesting examples, her work as a whole does not look specifically at texts which intend to humanize, rather than dehumanize, migrants. Valente et al. (2021) looked at framings of immigration in liberal and conservative online newspapers in France, Greece, Italy, and the United Kingdom, finding minimal differences in framings between liberal and conservatives news outlets, but this study did not take a conceptual metaphorical perspective and did not analyze texts from the United States. This study attempts to determine how thoroughly dehumanizing metaphors have become embedded in American immigration discourse, specifically in left-leaning texts which as a whole express more positive sentiments

regarding immigration. To provide context for the current era, the following section examines the history of American immigration policy in relation to its portrayal in news media.

3. AMERICAN IMMIGRATION POLICY AND DISCOURSE

Since the 18th century, US legislation has narrowed inclusion and citizenship opportunities along racial and class-based lines. Simultaneously, it has positioned immigrants as a desirable labor source when migration is both temporary and strictly controlled. Attitudes towards immigration have historically been both reflected and perpetuated by news media discourse, creating a circular relationship between the press, public opinion, and policymaking.

The United States first began formally regulating its citizenship in 1790 with the 1790 Naturalization Act, which granted citizenship to all “free white persons” who had been in the United States for two or more years, and to their children under 21 years of age (Migration Policy Institute 2013). Since then, the United States’ immigration and naturalization policies have undergone many changes.

Following the 1790 Naturalization Act, the next major laws regarding immigration to be passed came in 1798 with the Alien and Sedition Acts (Migration Policy Institute 2013). These laws not only increased the amount of time one had to reside in the United States to qualify for naturalization, but also allowed for the detention and deportation of individuals who had been born in countries with whom the United States was at war, or who were considered to be “dangerous to the peace and safety of the United States” (Migration Policy Institute 2013). These laws additionally brought the rights detailed in the First Amendment into question by outlawing statements judged to be “disloyal” to the United States (Gibbs 2019, 252; National Archives 2023). Although parts of the Alien and Sedition Acts were repealed or permitted to expire (Migration Policy Institute 2013), these laws in combination with the 1790 Naturalization Act set the tone for the goals of American immigration policies to come: prioritizing immigrants of European descent (“free white persons”) who had assimilated into American culture (evaluated

through requirements on how long one had to reside in the United States to be eligible for legal permanent resident or citizen status, and later, requirements on knowledge of American history and the English language) and who did not express views critical of the United States government.

Further stipulations on preferred types of immigrants were added with later laws, such as the Immigration Act of 1882, which forbid entry to people considered to be a “convict, lunatic, idiot, or person unable to take care of himself or herself without becoming a public charge” (Immigration Act of 1882, 22 Stat. 214; Migration Policy Institute 2013). In the same year, the first Chinese Exclusion Act was passed, which continued the pattern of racial bias in U.S. immigration policy by banning any new Chinese immigrants for ten years following the enactment of the law. During this time, newspapers tended to emphasize the interests of “old immigrants” in favor of new immigrants. Those who expressed an opinion against the total restriction of immigration tended to do so from the perspective of a desire for cheap labor. Moran (2017, 210-211) found that “positive” coverage of Chinese immigrants often argued that Chinese immigrants only wanted to work, not to become citizens or vote, and it was even suggested in the *Milwaukee Sentinel* that Chinese laborers could be a “replacement” for slavery.

In this period, the press also began using early examples of the DISEASE metaphor to describe new migration and directly associating migration with the spread of illnesses like typhus, cholera, and tuberculosis in the United States (Moore 2017, 192). The press made frequent use of terms like “scourge,” “disease,” and “quarantine” in their immigration coverage (193). The CRIMINAL and NATURAL DISASTER metaphors were also beginning to take shape, with terms like “escape,” “criminal,” “guard,” “penitentiary,” “offense,” and “danger” being common, and with immigration being described in Senator William Eaton Chandler’s 1892

New York Times editorial through a FLOOD metaphor (195-199). Moore argues that news coverage of immigration “contributed to the public outcry for stricter regulations” (195) which precipitated the Chinese Exclusion Act being renewed for an additional ten years through the 1892 Act to Prohibit the Coming of Chinese Persons into the United States. This law later expanded to include additional Asian nationalities with the 1917 Immigration Act, although this law provided exceptions for students and those working in certain highly-educated professions (Migration Policy Institute 2013).

In the face of these restrictions, some immigrants resorted to arguing for their ability to naturalize by asserting their status as free white persons, as in *Dow v. United States* (226 F. 145, 4th. Cir 1915). This case saw George Dow, a Syrian immigrant, be denied naturalization because he was not deemed to meet the racial requirements in spite of his argument that Syrians should be considered members of the “Caucasian race” (Gualtieri 2009). Shah (1999) found that press coverage of immigration played a significant role in the debate over “whiteness,” tending to use negative terminology to describe other ethnicities and contributing to the ever-moving goalpost of “whiteness.” The 1921 Emergency Quotas Act was the United States’ first law which regulated specific numbers of immigrants permitted of a given nationality, which was further codified with the 1924 National Origins Act (Migration Policy Institute 2013; Office of the Historian n.d.). This quota system still exists in a modified form today, with immigrants from a given nation only being permitted to be granted seven percent of the total number of visas allotted that year (Immigration Act of 1990, 104 Stat. 4978). These laws in sum perpetuated systemic racial bias in immigration selection and additionally made education and financial status qualifying factors for admission.

In 1942, the Bracero Agreement between the United States and Mexico was put into effect. This program, as written, was a temporary worker program designed to alleviate the labor shortage in the United States and provide Mexican workers with higher wages. However, in reality, this program facilitated the exploitation of Mexican workers; Mexico renegotiated this agreement several times over the next 22 years in attempts to mitigate exploitation, and succeeded in modifying the agreement to exclude Idaho which had “approved rules forcing *braceros* to stay at their assigned job or face arrest” (Mandeel 2014, 172). Although the press had initially been largely in support of the Bracero Agreement due to the labor shortage caused by World War II, newspapers gradually began suggesting that the bracero program had coincided with increasing unauthorized immigration, leading to lower wages for all laborers (Hein 2011, Hillel 1954). Newspaper coverage portraying Mexicans as criminals and describing the entry of Mexican workers into the United States in terms of natural disasters contributed to negative sentiments towards Mexican immigrants, including both those who were part of the bracero program and those who were not (Hein 2011). The bracero program ended in 1964. Many braceros chose to remain in the United States after their contracts were up and following the end of the Bracero Agreement, and the US government deported braceros using incredibly inhumane methods that in some cases led to the injury and death of the individuals in question (McCorkle 2018).

After the termination of the bracero program, several laws were passed regarding immigration, mostly in relation to the admittance of refugees. However, the next major immigration reform did not come until 1986 in the form of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). This law increased the number of border patrol agents and introduced punishments for employers who knowingly hired undocumented immigrants. It also created new pathways

toward legal status for those who had lived in the United States since 1982 and for some agricultural workers (Migration Policy Institute 2013). Although IRCA was signed into law by a Republican president, Ronald Reagan, Haynes, Merolla, and Ramakrishnan (2016) argue that its “amnesty policy” has been portrayed as a policy failure in conservative news media in the decades since its enactment. Despite being nearly 40 years old, IRCA is the most recent immigration reform that has included the construction of new legal pathways (López 2021). The negative framing of amnesty in news media has contributed to pushback against proposed laws which would have opened up new paths for authorized immigration (Haynes, Merolla, and Ramakrishnan 2016). Laws that have followed IRCA have focused primarily on creating new limitations on admissibility and expanding the list of causes for deportation.

The history of immigration law in the United States reveals a racist, nativist past that recruits migrants as a source of labor when it is seen as beneficial and criminalizes those same migrants when their presence is deemed no longer necessary. This has been a repeated process throughout American history, from the hiring of Chinese laborers prior to the Chinese Exclusion Acts, through the recruitment of Mexican laborers during the bracero program followed by public calls for their removal, and into the contemporary era in which undocumented immigrants are frequently exploited by US businesses while under constant threat of deportation. The ebbs and flows of government policy are not exclusively top-down, they are also reactive to public sentiment about immigration. Press coverage presenting immigrants as dangerous, diseased, or disastrous has shaped the opinions of the American people, which has ultimately influenced the types of immigration policy which gain public support.

4. RESEARCH METHODS

This study analyzed 40 articles from 30 different online news publishers. Of these 40 articles, 20 came from news outlets considered to be “on the left” and 20 came from news outlets considered to be “on the right.” A further level of distinction was made separating these sources into four categories: left, left-leaning, right-leaning, and right. The articles were labeled L1-L10 for sources in the “left” category, LL1-LL10 for sources in the “left-leaning” category, etc. The categorization of news outlets was adopted from the news media bias chart created by AllSides.com. This categorization system was chosen because AllSides uses a combination of two methods to rate news outlets: 1) an editorial review board trained to spot indicators of political bias and 2) a blind-bias survey distributed to “average Americans across the political spectrum” (AllSides n.d.). This process is therefore reflective not only of academic opinions on news biases but also of the opinions of a wider group of members of the American public.

Each US-based news outlet listed as left, left-leaning, right-leaning, and right was assigned a number which was used to randomly select which outlets articles would be chosen from. Ultimately, the news sites used in this study were ABC News, AlterNet, the American Spectator, AP, Bloomberg, Breitbart, CBN, CBS News, CNN, the Daily Wire, the Epoch Times, the Federalist, Fox Business, Fox News, Huffpost, the Independent Journal Review, Intercept, Jacobin, Mother Jones, MSNBC, National Review News, NBC News, the New York Post, NPR, OAN, ProPublica, the Washington Free Beacon, the Washington Post, and the Washington Times.

For each article, following the selection of which news outlet it would come from, the year of publishing was also randomly selected from 2022, 2023, and 2024. Google was used as the search engine for locating articles. Each article was selected by a search for the word

“immigration” with results limited to only the randomly assigned news site and year of publishing. Then, a random number was generated between 1-20 which was used to select an article from the first 20 search results. Search results in video format were not included. A second random number was generated to reselect an article in cases where the first article to be selected did not have immigration as its central topic or was only discussing immigration to other countries rather than immigration to the U.S. Reselection in these cases was intended to keep the data collection relevant to the goals of the study.

Each selected article was then analyzed for its use of metaphor and metonymy. Only the body text of the article was analyzed for metaphor, because online news headlines are more subject to change than are article bodies. Pragglejaz Group’s method for identifying metaphors was adopted and amended for metaphor location and evaluation. Following Pragglejaz Group, the first step was to read each article in its entirety. Then, lexical units were recorded, listing both their meaning in context and their more basic meaning. The Oxford English Dictionary was used as a reference for basic meanings. Next, the lexical units’ contextual and basic meanings were compared to evaluate whether they differed in a way that meant the contextual meaning could be understood from knowledge of the basic meaning. Following the recommendations of Pragglejaz Group, some idioms and phrasal compounds were evaluated as a single unit.

Unlike the research conducted by Pragglejaz Group, only metaphors related to immigration were of note for this study. Therefore, while other metaphorical uses within the texts were observed, they were not included in data analysis. Further information for each immigration-related metaphorical unit was recorded in addition to that which was suggested by Pragglejaz Group, with those items being: the source domain, the target domain, the voice/speaker (article author, quoted individual, etc.), the metaphorical trope as observed in

previous scholarly works, and the positive, negative, or neutral connotation of metaphorical use. Instances of metonymy were also included in data collection, following Catalano and Musolff (2019). While some metaphor and metonymic tokens were easily categorized as dehumanizing (e.g., “illegal” and “flood,” as in “El Paso has been overwhelmed by the flood of illegal immigrants moving into the interior.” (Downey 2023)), others were not as simple. For the purposes of this study, words like “migrant” and “immigrant” were considered to be neutral, due to the difficulty in discussing immigration without the use of these terms. Metonymic uses of country of origin were also evaluated as neutral. Each article was read through a total of four times: the initial reading, two readings in deliberate search of tokens of metaphor and metonymy, and a final reading that occurred later when gathering additional information about the article.

The word count and number of sentences for each article was also recorded for data analysis purposes. This information was used to calculate the frequency with which tokens of negative metaphor and metonymy appeared in the texts. Word count is a common method of evaluating the length of a text, but it was supplemented by sentence count for three reasons: 1) some tokens of metaphor consist of more than one word, 2) sentences tend to center on a specific topic, making sentences somewhat more reflective of the number of topics discussed than word count, and 3) authors vary significantly in style, with some articles having many more words per sentence than others, even if the number of topics discussed is similar.

After data collection, statistical tests were performed to evaluate whether a significant difference was found in negative metaphor usage between articles from left, left-leaning, right-leaning, and right sources. ANOVA tests were used to compare all four categories, while unpaired t-tests were used to compare combined left+left-leaning and right+right-leaning data, as

well as to compare data between left and left-leaning sources and between right and right-leaning sources.

5. RESULTS

The most commonly observed dehumanizing metaphors from all selected articles across the political spectrum were as follows: IMMIGRANTS ARE CRIMINALS (88 total tokens), IMMIGRATION IS AN INVASION (61 total tokens), IMMIGRANTS ARE OBJECTS (46 total tokens), IMMIGRATION IS A NATURAL DISASTER (45 total tokens), IMMIGRANTS ARE ANIMALS (11 total tokens), and IMMIGRATION IS A DISEASE (7 total tokens). The DISEASE metaphor is also referred to as an ORGANISM metaphor, as it frames the nation as a living organism and immigrants as an illness, parasite, or injury to that organism. The most commonly observed example of metonymy was describing immigrants in terms of *foreign beings*, with “alien,” being an example with a highly negative connotation and “newcomer” being a less dehumanizing form of this type of metonymy. Figure 1 below shows the distribution of these tropes among left, left-leaning, right-leaning, and right news publishers.

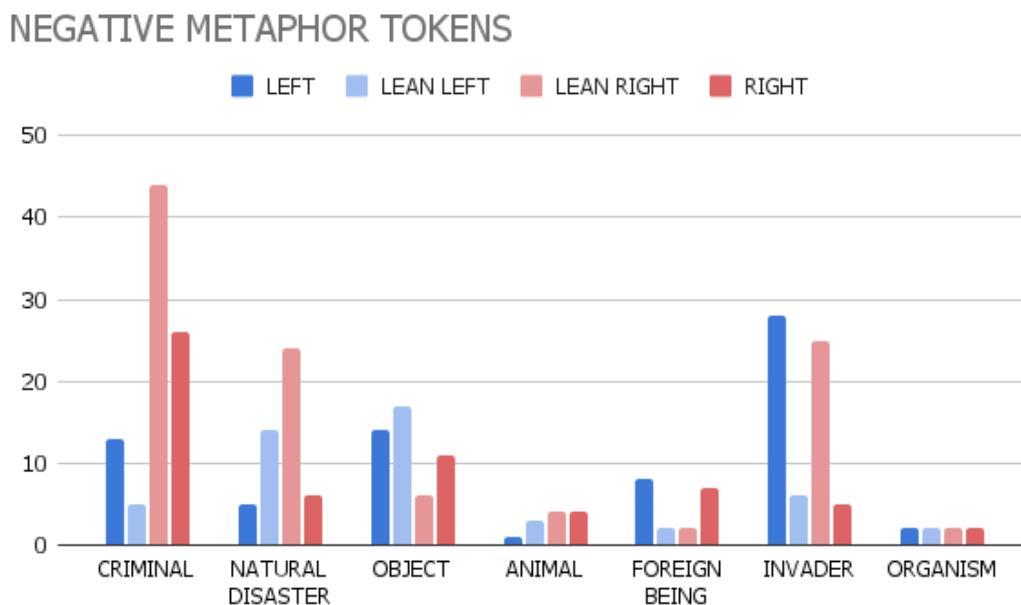


Figure 1: Negative Metaphor Tokens

Articles were evaluated for both total number of negative metaphor tokens as well as number of negative metaphor tokens by the author, as opposed to tokens observed within direct quotes cited within articles. The charts below visualize the rates of negative metaphor use for left, left-leaning, right-leaning, and right news outlets. Figures 2 and 3 show the number of negative metaphor uses by the articles' authors, while Figures 3 and 4 show total numbers of negative metaphor tokens, including those within cited quotes.

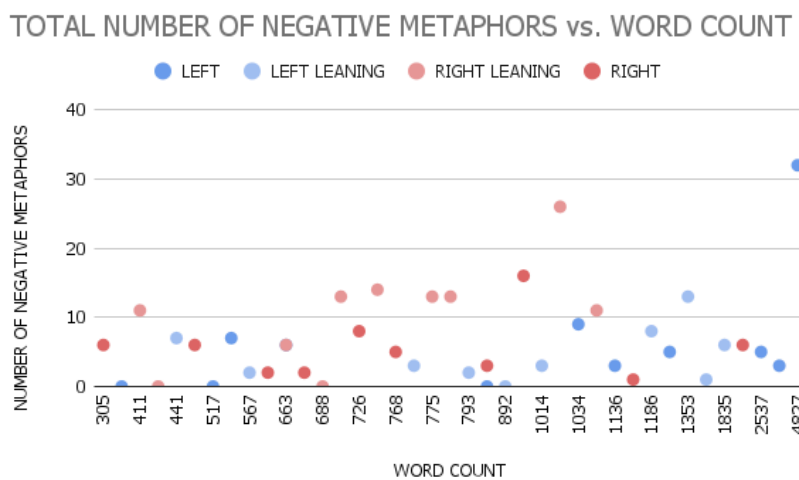


Figure 2: Total Number of Negative Metaphors vs. Word Count

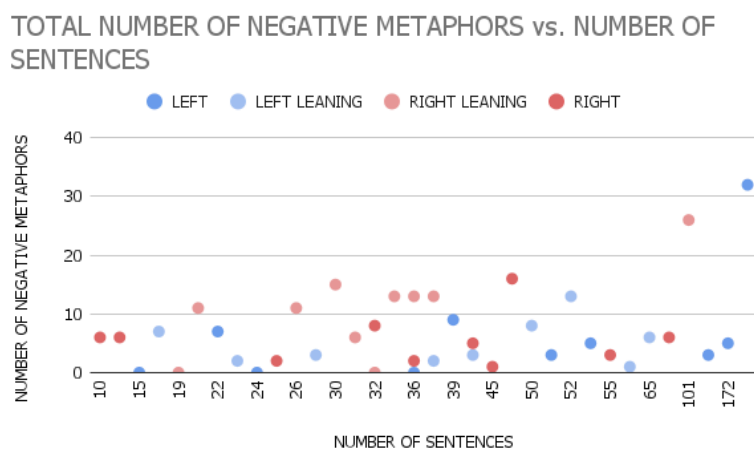


Figure 3: Total Number of Negative Metaphors vs. Number of Sentences

NUMBER OF NEGATIVE METAPHORS BY AUTHOR vs. WORD COUNT

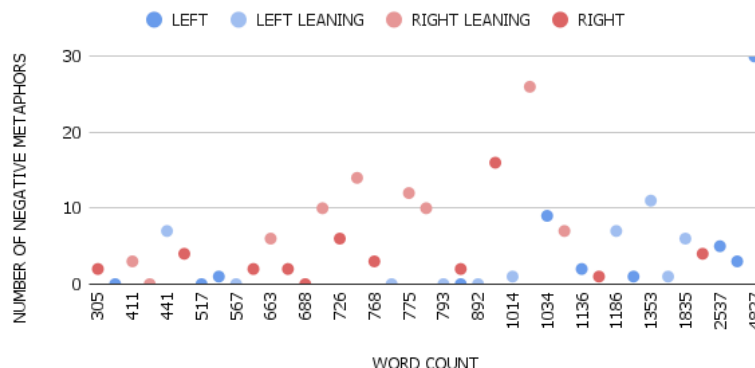


Figure 4: Number of Negative Metaphors by Author vs. Word Count

NUMBER OF NEGATIVE METAPHORS BY AUTHOR vs. NUMBER OF SENTENCES IN ARTICLE

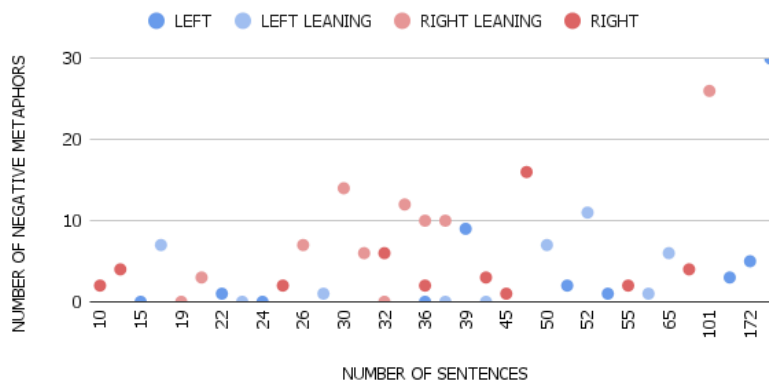


Figure 5: Number of Negative Metaphors by Author vs. Number of Sentences

Although the focus of this study was not to analyze a change in metaphor use over time, it is worthwhile to briefly make note of observed trends. A figure showing rates of negative metaphor use for each political category in articles from each of the three years included in this study can be seen in Figure 6 below.

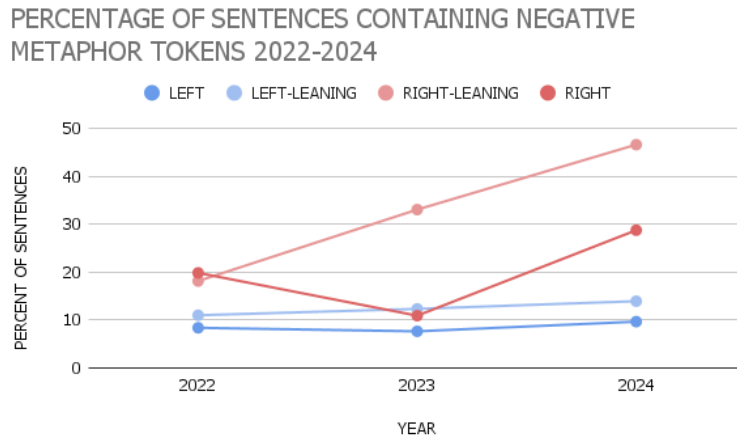


Figure 6: Percentage of Sentences Containing Negative Metaphor Tokens 2022-2024

Right-leaning sources had the highest average and median percentage of negative metaphor uses compared to both word count and sentence count of all four political bias categories, with an average of 29.96% of sentences containing negative metaphors and a median of 35.62%. The lowest average and median percentage of negative metaphor usage was seen in left sources, with an average of 8.88% of sentences containing negative metaphors and a median of 4.39%. A graph of average rates for each political bias category, as well as combined left+left-leaning and right+right-leaning negative metaphor usage rates, is shown in Figure 7.

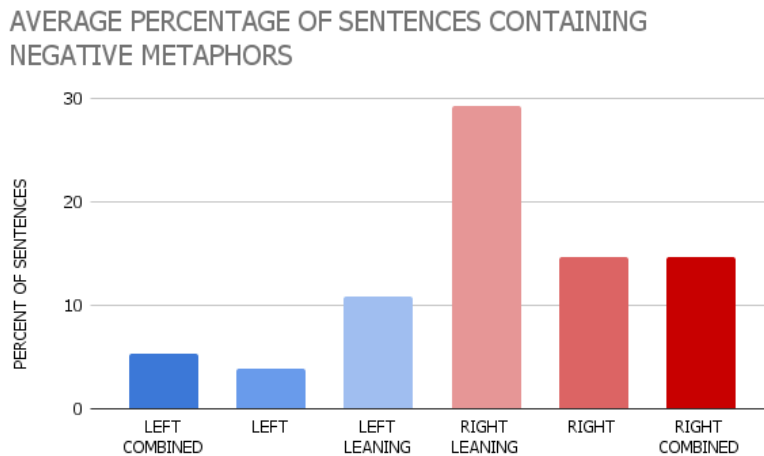


Figure 7: Average Percentage of Sentences Containing Negative Metaphors

Right-leaning sources also had the highest average and median percentage of negative metaphor uses when looking at only tokens-by-author, and left sources still had the lowest rate. Averages and medians for each political bias category are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: Average and Median Rates of Negative Metaphor Use

	LEFT		LEFT-LEANING		RIGHT-LEANING		RIGHT	
	AVERAGE	MEDIAN	AVERAGE	MEDIAN	AVERAGE	MEDIAN	AVERAGE	MEDIAN
PERCENT OF SENTENCES WITH NEGATIVE METAPHORS (total number of tokens)	8.88	4.39	12.45	8.96	29.96	35.62	20.75	10.17
PERCENT OF SENTENCES WITH NEGATIVE METAPHORS (tokens by author)	5.12	2.49	9.05	2.5	22.48	26.33	13.64	7.57

An ANOVA test comparing all four political bias categories returned an f -ratio value of 3.45503 and a p -value of 0.026367, indicating a significant difference between these groups with a p -value less than 0.05. A Tukey HSD test was then used to examine differences between each group. Only one pair returned a significant result: left and right-leaning, which returned a Q value of 4.17 and a p -value of 0.02720.

Three t -tests were also performed. When comparing rates of negative metaphor use between left and left-leaning sources, a p -value of 0.4266 was returned, which did not indicate significant difference. Similarly, when comparing rates of negative metaphor use between right and right-leaning sources, a p -value of 0.1541 was returned, which also did not indicate significance. Finally, a test was performed which combined left+left-leaning data into a “combined left” category and right+right-leaning data into a “combined right” category, and compared these two groups. This t -test returned a p -value of 0.0060, indicating a high level of significant difference.

6. DISCUSSION

Journalists across the political spectrum engaged in negative metaphor use. In total, the most frequently observed metaphors were the CRIMINAL and INVADER metaphors, with NATURAL DISASTER and OBJECT metaphors nearly tying as the third most frequent. The lowest average rate per sentence that negative metaphors were used by the article's author was found in sources from the left, and the highest rate was found in right-leaning sources. There seemed to be an increase in negative metaphor frequency from 2022 to 2024 in all four political categories, although sources on the right had a large, but temporary, decrease in frequency during 2023. While rates of metaphor use varied, negative metaphors were frequent enough within left-leaning articles that they were not found to be significantly different in their usage compared to right-leaning and right articles. It is likely not shocking to see that a significant difference in negative metaphor use *was* found between left (left+left-leaning) and right (right+right-leaning) news sources. However, there are still several interesting observations to be made about the results found.

First, the ANOVA test returned a significant difference only between left and right-leaning data, not between left-leaning and right-leaning or even between left and right. There are some possible implications of this. It is possible that news outlets categorized as left-leaning and right-leaning have shifted further to the right, although this does not explain why a significant difference was not found between left sources and sources already listed as right. It is also possible that due to the limited number of articles analyzed, a higher proportion of negative metaphors was found in right-leaning sources than may be typical at a wider scale. The most recent several election cycles have forefronted immigration as a key issue, which has likely increased the overall number of articles about immigration, as well as played a role in the high

numbers of negative metaphor tokens found in this study. The lack of significant difference in metaphor use between left-leaning and right-leaning news sources could be reflective of an increase in populist anti-immigration views among “moderates,” in the Trump-era revival of what Campani et al. (2022) term as “Middle American radicalism.” This would also help to explain the increase in the percentage of sentences containing negative metaphors from 2022 to 2024, illustrated in Figure 6, as journalists likely ramped up their immigration coverage for another Trump election year. Another factor that may help make sense of the lack of significant difference in harmful metaphor use across party lines (with the exception of left vs. right-leaning) may be found in what Haynes, Merolla, and Ramakrishnan (2016) describe as a “gap between principles and policy,” (26) that exists among white Americans, meaning that although many white Americans may profess to be in favor of equality, they continue to use racist language or engage in racist behaviors.

Second, in regards to the conventionalization of dehumanizing metaphors, each major metaphor trope was found across the political spectrum. As discussed in the historical background section, many of these metaphors have been used in immigration discourse for more than a century, and examining their prevalence across the political spectrum in the contemporary American press can provide clues about which tropes, if any, are likely to become conventionalized. While news articles from the right were more likely to describe immigrants as criminals (“illegal,” “criminal”), news articles from the left were more likely to describe immigrants as objects or materials (“dumped,” “poured”). These results are in line with research conducted by Haynes, Merolla, and Ramakrishnan (2016), which looked specifically at the use of terms like “illegal” compared to “undocumented” or “unauthorized,” after the rise in popularity of the Drop the I-Word campaign. Haynes, Merolla, and Ramakrishnan found that

although left-associated sources continued to describe people as “illegal,” they were less likely to do so than their right-associated counterparts, particularly after Drop the I-Word began gaining traction in 2012-2013.

Natural disaster metaphors were relatively frequent among both groups, particularly water-based metaphors (“surge,” “wave,” “flow,” “flood,” “tsunami,” “influx”). The NATURAL DISASTER metaphor trope has been widely used both historically and in contemporary media. Because this trope has been prevalent over a long period of time, is used regularly across the political spectrum, and is less likely to set off red-flags for pro-immigrant readers than more blatantly negative tropes like CRIMINAL or INVADER, it is a likely candidate for conventionalization. In comparison, while the DISEASE / ORGANISM metaphor was highly prevalent in late 19th and early 20th century immigration coverage, it was not commonly observed in this study in sources from either side of the aisle, likely indicating that this trope is falling out of fashion.

It is also important to note some pitfalls of this study. Pragglez group suggests a team of reviewers scan and code for metaphors independently and then discuss their findings collaboratively. In this study, I was forced to locate metaphors alone, which could have resulted in biased judgements or missed metaphors. This also led to the call on gray-areas being entirely left to the opinion of one researcher. For example, some articles from the left made frequent use of war / invasion metaphors, but were clearly attempting to imply a rallying call for immigrants and pro-immigrant allies to resist oppressive government policies and the coercive tactics of ICE agents through their use of these metaphors. I made the decision to include these tokens as instances of the INVADER metaphor under the thought process that this language still reinforces

an invasion narrative, but arguments could be made that this type of use should be evaluated differently.

7. CONCLUSION

Negative metaphors that dehumanize immigrants were observed across the political spectrum, both in explicitly anti-immigration news articles and in articles that portrayed immigration in a more positive light overall. Metaphors help speakers make sense of topics by providing a framework with which to compare. If we, as a culture, talk about immigrants as criminals, our instinct will be to criminalize and punish. If we discuss immigrants as invaders, we will want to fight a war to keep them out. If we imagine immigration as a disease, we will look for a medicine to cure it. If we conceptualize immigration as a natural disaster, we will try to build the infrastructure of our society to protect against it. As discussed in the overview of historical American immigration policy and discourse, news media in particular contributes to public opinion on hot-button topics and adds weight to their importance in the minds of voters. Although journalism is not the only factor influencing sentiments about immigration, it cannot be denied that members of the public take the bits and pieces of discourse they absorb from news coverage with them into their communities and to the ballot box. The decisions made there impact the policies that are passed, which have tangible impacts on the lives of immigrants, their families, and their communities. This is why it is important to be mindful of the language we spread - it is harmless to think of love in terms of a journey, but metaphors of immigration have harmful, real-world effects. These negative metaphors are not the only viable option to discuss migration; as stated by Santa Ana (2003), "Alternatives can be developed. Renegade metaphors can be constructed and disseminated to replace ones that produce intolerant attitudes" (11). It is my hope that authors and journalists will put in effort to be conscious of their own use of metaphor, so as not to continue to reproduce and naturalize dehumanizing conceptualizations of migrants.

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