"Please continue to be an anime lover": The use of defamation metaphors in Hong Kong electoral discourse

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Abstract

This article explores how metaphors are deployed as a tool by politicians to create a negative political identity for their adversaries. Drawing on five televised debates from the Hong Kong Legislative Council election campaign in 2012, the present study examines the use of defamation metaphors in electoral discourse from a socio-pragmatic and cognitive perspective. Our analysis reveals how defamation metaphors, sometimes with humour embedded, allow politicians to construct (as well as reconstruct) political identities for and with each other, and at the same time touch on sensitive political issues in a less face-threatening way. Our findings not only contribute to the understanding of how metaphors are adopted as a verbal indirectness strategy to yield certain political gains, but also shed light on how politicians establish common ground with the public in the unique and unprecedented political situation of "one country, two systems" in Hong Kong.
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1. Introduction

As a special administrative region since the handover of its sovereignty to China in 1997, Hong Kong is governed under a unique and unprecedented political arrangement referred to as "One Country, Two Systems". Under this system, Hong Kong has been promised a high level of political autonomy where it can have its own Chief Executive (CE), a position that in time would be elected through some form of universal suffrage. In addition, Hong Kong can also continue to maintain both an independent legislative body (the Legislative Council) and an independent judiciary (which includes the High Court and the Court of Final Appeal). To allay public anxiety arising from potential uncertainty about the political situation in Hong Kong, a clause highlighting that the basic constitution would remain unchanged for the next 50 years following the handover to China was enshrined in the Basic Law that formed part of the Sino-British Joint Declaration signed in 1984 and ratified in 1985 (see Section 3 for a more detailed discussion of the political system and recent political developments in Hong Kong). Over the past decade and a half since the 1997 handover, a generally apolitical citizenry in Hong Kong has gradually become more politically active. Particularly in light of a series of contentious socio-political issues in recent years (which include an unpopular 'national education curriculum' that was eventually shelved indefinitely), and also because of escalating demands for universal suffrage through direct elections, the recent legislative election in 2012 has proved more

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vigorous than in the previous two elections in 2004 and 2008.[1] This heightened political engagement was realised in terms of a larger pool and wider spectrum of candidates, more interest and involvement in political affairs among the general public, and also more intense propaganda by the legislative candidates. In the case of political propaganda, candidates competed aggressively with one another by constantly engaging in verbal-sparring that was designed to damage the positive image of rivals while minimising potential negative consequence for oneself. This delicate balancing act of 'enhancing one's image while criticising others' often called for the skilful deployment of verbal indirectness strategies, often involving the creative use of humour and metaphor.

The present paper will examine the use of metaphors, in particular three defamation metaphors, in the local political discourse in Hong Kong using data from five televised debates during the Legislative Council election campaign in 2012. The three defamation metaphors discussed in this study are based on fictional characters or fictional roles, and have been used in political debates to disparage rival candidates.[2] We will show how these defamation metaphors are deployed by politicians not only as a strategy to perform face-threatening acts, but also as a tool to negotiate political identities with their adversaries under a peculiar political structure where politicians need to simultaneously take care of both the local interests of the general public in Hong Kong and the power status of the Chinese central authority.

This paper will begin with a review of the theoretical frameworks and relevant previous studies in Section 2. Section 3 provides an overview of the historical background of the Legislative Council elections in Hong Kong, together with the recent socio-political situations of Hong Kong. Section 4 describes the database and methodology for this study. Section 5 provides an analysis of three defamation metaphors within the Conceptual Blending framework to illustrate how politicians' identities are shaped and negotiated through metaphors. Finally, Section 6 offers a brief summary of the findings and sheds light on how politicians use metaphors as verbal indirectness strategies to maintain civility and establish common ground with the public.

2. Background of the study

2.1. Metaphor as a figurative and cognitive linguistic device

Metaphors are traditionally defined as figures of speech that describe the characteristics of one entity, usually rather abstract in nature, in terms of certain attributes of another usually more tangible entity. In other words, metaphors are heuristic devices that assist us in comprehending a complex or thorny issue using a familiar one (Chilton and Ilyin, 1993; Chilton, 1994; Chilton and Lakoff, 1995; van Teeffelen, 1994; Charteris-Black, 2006). Cognitive theorists (e.g. Johnson, 1987; Lakoff, 1986; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Lakoff and Turner, 1989; Sweetser, 1991) have posited that metaphors are pervasive in our daily life. Indeed, according to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), "[o]ur ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature" (p. 1).

From a cognitive perspective, a metaphor can be analysed in terms of mental spaces. Lakoff and Johnson (1980), for instance, explain the set-up of a metaphor in terms of the one-way mapping from source domain to the target domain. Within their well-known Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) framework, the target domain holds the abstract or complex subject that is being described, while the source domain holds the more familiar or more tangible metaphor that is perceived in some ways to resemble the target.

Fauconnier and Turner's (1998, 2000, 2002) Conceptual Blending Theory (CBT), on the other hand, highlights the multi-directional nature of four or more mental spaces[3] and the mental process of conceptual integration, or 'blending', that arises by connecting and compressing different mental spaces. The four mental spaces consist of two input spaces with elements inter-connected by similarity mappings, a generic space which contains conceptual properties shared by the two inputs, and a blended space in which compressed elements from the two inputs interact, resulting in the rise of an emergent structure which is absent from either of the inputs. In the process of compression, elements that are conceptually not compatible in terms of space, time, etc. are transformed to unique structures that are construable to the human mind (Turner, 2006).

The network of CBT can be explained by the following well-known example from Fauconnier and Turner (1998:184):

(1)   *The surgeon is a butcher.*