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Metaphors of the Pandemic Through the Lenses of the Bulgarian Parliament[1]

Introduction

Research on conceptual metaphors in language has traditionally been associated with the work of Lakoff and Johnson (2003), though the theory of these metaphors has developed quite actively and in different directions since then. In Lakoff and Johnson (2003), it is noted that political and economic ideologies are represented by metaphors whose typical explicit and implicit representation of certain aspects of reality directly affects our lives (p. 236). This holds for the concepts of FREEDOM, EQUALITY, SAFETY, etc. The given example by Lakoff and Johnson is the metaphorical frame LABOUR IS RESOURCE. Here the nature of labour is hidden – whether it is meaningful or dehumanizing. Thus, cheap labour is viewed as a good thing, but it hides the aspects of exploitation and human degradation.
It is interesting to trace how Bulgarian parliamentarians (MPs) metaphorically framed the coronavirus as a health problem during the pandemic – that is,

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from a political perspective. It is expected that these metaphors will shed light on these MPs' attitudes towards the crisis.

The most common metaphors in political speech with regard to this topic have also been discussed in relation to other parliaments and languages; see, for example, Borčić et al. (2016) for Croatian. The authors conclude that the metaphors of *moving around, personification* and *reification* are most common in this discourse. Castro Seixas (2021) focuses on War metaphors in relation to COVID-19 in political crises discourse, employing critical discourse analysis as a method of study using speeches from the following politicians: Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, the President of Portugal; Emmanuel Macron, the President of France; Boris Johnson, the Prime Minister of UK; Pedro Sánchez, the Prime Minister of Spain; Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission; Donald Trump, the President of the USA; and António Guterres, the Secretary General of the United Nations. Castro Seixas argues that War metaphors are also the main organizing topic of these speeches. Sarfo-Kantankah et al. (2021) focus on pandemic-related metaphor usage in the Ghanaian parliament, concluding that the COVID-19 pandemic is metaphorically perceived as an enemy and, thus, part of a war.

A summary of works on metaphors with regard to socially meaningful concepts is given in Despot and Anić (2021). The processes of metaphorization in political speech are also quite well addressed from different perspectives in the Bulgarian linguistic literature. Here I will mention only a few such studies by Milanov and Mihaylova-Stalyanova (Миланов & Михайлова-Сталянова, 2011, 2012, 2014) and Eftimova (Ефтимова, 2016). In the works of Milanov and Mihaylova-Stalyanova, metaphors are mentioned as part of the language portraits of various politicians. For example, Georgi Bliznashki, who was a non-regular prime minister in 2014, uses political metaphors like *people who are not wasted in politics* (Миланов & Михайлова-Сталянова, 2014, p. 103). In Eftimova (Ефтимова, 2016), the notions of political correctness and hate speech are discussed with a special focus on euphemism usage. This relates to metaphors, as both euphemisms and metaphors involve the concealment of certain information.

This paper presents a corpus-oriented study of metaphors associated with the coronavirus pandemic, as reflected in the Bulgarian Parliament. It uses the Bulgarian part of the ParlaMint corpus (Erjavec et. al., 2025). The Bulgarian corpus includes three sub-corpora, a reference corpus (up to January 30, 2020), a COVID-19 corpus (from January 31, 2020) and a War corpus (from February 24, 2022). For my research purposes, I used the COVID-19 subcorpus, which currently contains 1,863,213 words.

The Approach

In order to perform the study, the following methodology was used: a) examining the data through the observation of words or phrases in their immediate context (so-called concordancing; for this step, the publicly available tool NoSketch Engine was used)[2]; b) extracting all contexts in which one of seven keywords occurs (the most popular names of COVID-19: *corona, coronavirus, COVID, COVID-19, epidemic, pandemic, virus*); c) classifying the examples into metaphorical and non-metaphorical usages. Then within the set of metaphorical usages, the model of Despot and Anić (2021) was applied. These authors investigated the conceptualization of pandemic-related metaphors in Croatian (social) media, with a special focus on the WAR metaphor.

The conceptual and inferential structure of COVID-19 in Croatian is presented below in Fig. 1 (Despot & Anić, 2021, p. 196). On the schema it can be seen that the COVID-19 Pandemic has Image Schemas and Disaster as subgroups. The Image schema subdivides into Event structure and Reification/Personification. Under Event structure, some other characteristics are added, such as Rare/Novel metaphors and Literary form. These are not considered in the revised schema that I use for Bulgarian. Disaster is divided further into two subframes: Danger and War. War is also specified as Combat, and under Combat comes Sports. Combat and Sports are also not considered in the schema I use for metaphor classification.

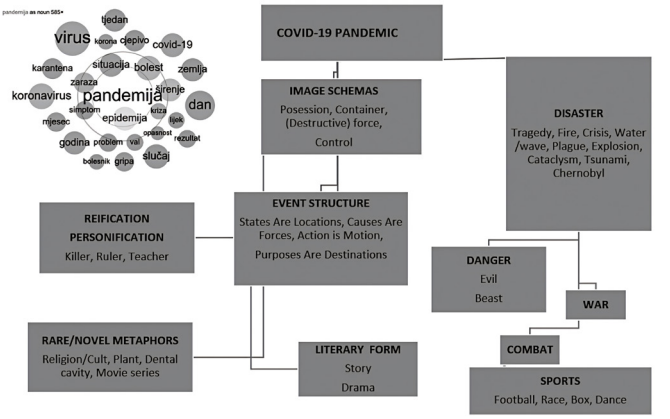


Figure 1. The COVID-19 related metaphor frames for Croatian.

[2] https://www.clarin.si/ske/#dashboard?corpname=parlamint40_bg

In step (a), the above keywords were used, aligned by left context in the concordancer, i.e., by the words and phrases that order on the left of the searched keyword. The extraction of the contexts was done lemma by lemma in order to cover all word forms of the keyword; unlike the other keywords, however, the names *COVID* and *COVID-19* have no wordforms. Initially, the word *quarantine* was also included, but it turned out that it did not have any occurrences of metaphorical usages in the COVID-19 sub-corpus.

A total of 797 lines of examples were processed with the keywords listed. Fig. 2 shows an example of the occurrence of the word *epidemic* in its immediate context. Thus, uses of this word in phrases such as *containment of the epidemic* or *outbreak of the epidemic* can be highlighted, which point us towards certain metaphorical frames.

The image does not show the full concordance line, but the leftmost part of the line has information about the MP who used the expression. Such information can be used not only for research related to the language of MPs, but also in research on certain topics and MPs' related opinions.

е окажат помощ на болен по време на	епидемия	, па
ато деянието е извършено по време на	епидемия	, па
: „ (2) Ако деянието е извършено по време на	епидемия	, па
ългарските болници по време на	епидемията	, за
свързан със следното . Избухването на	епидемия	или
бъде мобилизиран за овладяване на	епидемията	и за
които са необходими за овладяване на	епидемията	. (2
ге , които вземаме за овладяване на	епидемията	, да
о са свързани с овладяване на	епидемията	или
целта , а то е овладяването на	епидемията	и га

Figure 2. Example of concordance of the keyword *epidemic*. The examples present a variety of phrases containing the word *epidemic*, such as 'the outbreak of the epidemic' and 'handling of the epidemic'.

The frequency of each keyword as well as its degree of metaphoricity are presented in Table 1:

Table 1. Ranking of keywords by their frequency of occurrence in the corpus.

Keywords	Keyword frequency in number of occurrences	Metaphorical use in number of occurrences and percentage of all uses
COVID-19	190	91 (48%)
пандемия (*pandemic*)	189	85 (45%)
коронавирус (*corona virus*)	171	64 (37%)
вирус (*virus*)	130	77 (59%)
епидемия (*epidemic*)	99	53 (54%)
COVID	17	5 (29%)
корона (*corona*)	1	1 (100%)

It should be noted that the lemma with the highest frequency is *COVID-19*, while its variant *COVID* has a much lower frequency. The lemma *pandemic* has almost the same number of occurrences as *COVID-19*. The third and fourth places are occupied by lemmas *coronavirus* and *virus*, followed by the lemma *epidemic*. At the same time, there is only a single occurrence of the *corona* variant of the lemma *coronavirus*. In terms of metaphoricity, the highest metaphorical usage is displayed by the lemma *virus* (59%), closely followed by the lemma *epidemic* (54%). These are followed by the lemmas *COVID-19* and *pandemic*; then, with a lower metaphoricity comes the lemma *coronavirus*.

The relative ratio of occurrences of each keyword to the occurrences of all keywords is as follows: COVID-19 (24%), pandemic (24%), coronavirus (21%), virus (16%), epidemic (12%), COVID (2%), and corona (0.01%).

Table 2 shows the aggregated semantic frequency of the individual keywords. It should be noted that the (corona)virus group has the highest frequency, followed by the pandemic and epidemic groups. The term COVID-19 has the lowest frequency from all the three groups. At the same time, the percentage of metaphorical uses of the respective keyword combinations in all three groups is almost the same.

Table 2. Frequency ranking of the aggregated keywords.

Keywords	Keyword frequency in number of occurrences	Metaphorical use in number of occurrences and percentage of all uses
corona virus + corona + virus	302	142 (47%)
pandemic + epidemic	288	138 (48%)
COVID-19 + COVID	207	96 (46%)

In step (b), contexts were ordered: first by keyword, and then by the left context, i.e. by the preceding word or phrase (Fig. 2). In step (c), the metaphorical usages were classified by adopting the model of Despot and Anić (2021), which represents types of metaphors for the coronavirus in a media corpus, with a focus on the war metaphor, as mentioned above. For Bulgarian, there is also a study on the War metaphor by Todorova (2021), who considers it in the area of official communication mainly through the Bulgarian media. The author distinguishes between two stages: 1) militarization of the coronavirus crisis, which emphasizes the power of the virus; 2) the declaration of a state of emergency, which leads to the idea of a so-called "new normal", i.e., it emphasizes the duration of the war against the virus. These two stages are also covered by the parliamentary corpus which is used as a domain in this paper. Interestingly, the results of these two studies, Despot and Anić (2021) and Todorova (2021), converge on the fact that the metaphor of War clearly dominates the pandemic discourse, in both the media and parliament.

As mentioned above, the model of Despot and Anić (2021) was applied in step (c). Following the metaphor identification procedure of Pragglejaz Group (2007), this model traces types of metaphorical frames, metaphors, and the relations between them, while the annotation was done with respect to the Metaphor Database for Croatian (*Repozitorij metafora hrvatskoga jezika*, n.d.)[3].

For our purposes, the model was slightly modified and has the simplified general form shown in Fig. 3.

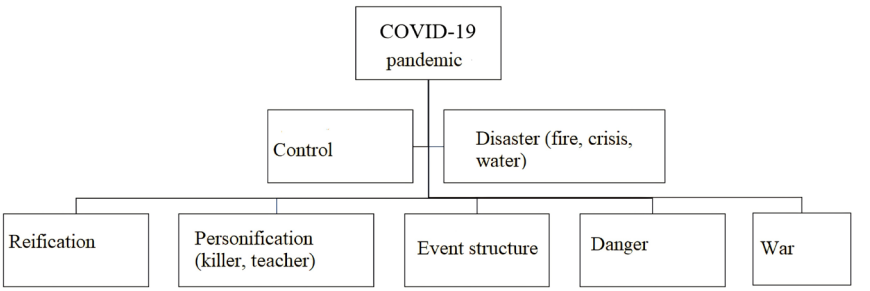


Figure 3. A simplified scheme of the metaphorical frames employed here.

The procedure I followed when classifying the keyword usages is as follows: first, I extracted all the paragraphs containing the respective keyword. The key-

[3] https://metanet.hr/en/default

word examples were predominantly sorted by their left context, as explained above. Then, using a signal word/phrase and/or context, I searched for metaphorical usages. Depending on the meaning of the signal word/context, I classified the paragraph accordingly. Here is an example with the keyword *coronavirus*: *Вие искате с изказванията на някои колегите да сме първият парламент в Европа и в света, който е пламнал от коронавирус ли?* (You want, with the statements of some colleagues, us to be the first parliament in Europe and in the world to be on fire by coronavirus?). The signal phrase is *е пламнал* (is on fire); thus, the frame is Disaster and, more specifically, Fire.

The Analysis

Fig. 4 shows the process of classifying the contexts with the selected keywords (here with the keyword *COVID-19*) into the specified metaphorical frames. When the metaphorical frame also has subframes, as in the case of Disaster (Fire, Crisis, Water), these are registered in the appropriate column: Crisis or Fire. Then, the expressions from the data that are associated with the corresponding frame are presented.

DISASTER	CRISIS	кризата от ковид
DISASTER	CRISIS	криза с ковид
DISASTER	FIRE	огнища на ковид
DISASTER	CRISIS	ковид предизвиква криза
DISASTER	CRISIS	тежки условия заради ковид
DISASTER	FIRE	избухването на ковид
DISASTER	CRISIS	криза, причинена от ковид
DISASTER	FIRE	избухването на ковид
DISASTER	CRISIS	кризата с ковид
DISASTER	FIRE	избухването на ковид
DISASTER	FIRE	адът с ковид
DISASTER	CRISIS	кризата с ковид
DISASTER	CRISIS	кризата от ковид
DISASTER	CRISIS	кризата с ковид

Figure 4. Classifying the contexts containing the appropriate keywords into metaphorical frames.

Thus, before presenting the frequency of the metaphorical frames, let us consider what kind of keywords are used to mark them. In the Control frame, the phrases are recovery from the epidemic, dealing with the epidemic, overcoming the epidemic, measures against the pandemic, preventing the pandemic. The Crisis and Fire subframes occur in the Disaster frame. There were no occurrences of the Water subframe. Under the Crisis frame, the relationship with the expressions used is more direct because it includes the lemma *crisis* itself, e.g., *The covid crisis*. In the Fire frame, the expressions are varied: *outbreak(s) of Covid*, *the hell of Covid*, *the epidemic is flaring up*, *in the centre of the COVID epidemic*, *there is danger of the virus flaring up*, *the outbreak of the virus*, *the coronavirus is an explosion*.

So far, the frames have reflected structural metaphors like Control is a Measure, Pandemic is a Crisis, or Epidemic is an Outbreak. However, the Reification and Personification frames are typical examples of ontological metaphors. Although Reification reflects a concretization of an abstract entity, here it becomes an expression of the spread of a virus as a disease. Therefore, the most frequent expressions associated with it are as follows: *the spread/expansion of covid*, *the situation degenerates into a pandemic*, *the development of a pandemic*, *viruses are spread*.

Personification shows how human characteristics are attributed to the virus as a kind of illness. It can be a killer (*the virus is killing the elderly*) but also a teacher (*the pandemic will teach us solidarity*). Other expressions related to this frame include *covid does not select by party or ethnicity*; *where the epidemic starts*; *the epidemic will pass*; *the virus is on the loose*; *the coronavirus is coming*.

The event structure reflects various structural metaphors, manifesting itself through its subframes. For example, the subframe CAUSES ARE FORCES is expressed by *the economic consequences of the epidemic*; *sectors are affected by the epidemic*; *people are affected by the pandemic*. The STATES ARE LOCATIONS subframe is expressed primarily by the *we are facing a pandemic* conjunction. The CHANGE IS COMING/GONE subframe is associated with expressions such as (*a number of) carriers of the virus*.

The Danger frame, like the Disaster frame and more specifically the Crisis subframe, is implemented through the signal word Danger, which is the same as the name of the frame, e.g., *coronavirus infection danger*.

Various expressions are found in the War frame: *fighting coronavirus*; *protecting citizens from coronavirus*; *summer will destroy the pandemic*; *on the front line fighting the pandemic*; *invisible war with the virus*; *kill the coronavirus*.

Let us now look at the frequency of the frames. This is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Frequency of metaphorical frames.

Frame	Number of Occurrences
Control	79
War	69
Reification	57
Disaster -> Crisis	56
Event Structure -> Causes are forces	50
Personification	26
Disaster -> Fire	16
Event Structure -> States are locations	6
Event Structure -> The change is coming/gone	4
Danger	3

The most common metaphorical frames in the studied Bulgarian parliamentary corpus appear to be Control and War. In this respect, my findings are similar to the those of the Croatian corpus study.

There are also a number of challenges regarding metaphor detection and classification in the corpus: 1) The scope of the metaphor – whether nested metaphors are considered or not (e.g., in the phrase [WAR fight to [CONTROL overcome the pandemic]] there are two metaphors, one of which is syntactically included in the other). It should be noted that the present study does not consider nested metaphors, only external ones. In this case, it is WAR. This means that if there is a metaphor that includes another metaphor in it, we consider only the one that contains the other – not the contained one. 2) The combination of keywords (e.g., the combination of *COVID* and *pandemic* is common). This study considers either only *COVID* or only *pandemic*. In a future work, it would be good to consider key phrases in addition to the stand-alone keywords. 3) No matter how refined a classification model is, lexicalizations of concepts can often be assigned to more than one type. For example, the state of emergency could be considered within the metaphorical frame for WAR, but also for CRISIS. Therefore, a hierarchical model in which an expression could be assigned to more than one type of metaphor would be very useful and much more informative. The model that is used here does not permit multi-frame assignments. It is deterministic and, therefore, easy to apply and understand. However, metaphor complexity could be captured better in a more relational classification schema.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study of metaphors used in the Bulgarian parliament during the COVID-19 pandemic shows a preference for the Control and War frames. At the same time, it sheds light on the variety of the metaphor types associated with the virus, as well as on the lexicalizations, syntactic variations and contexts that justify the metaphorical meaning.

The presented investigation is corpus-based. Thus, the results are objective since they are based on realistic data. However, the results are also limited to the data in the corpus, as well as to the parliamentary domain.

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Metafory pandemii widziane przez pryzmat języka obrad bułgarskiego parlamentu

Artykuł przedstawia badanie korpusowe dotyczące typów metafor występujących we współczesnym bułgarskim korpusie dyskursu parlamentarnego. Opisane zostały następujące czynności: ekscerpcja kontekstów dla wybranych słów kluczowych *wirus*, *koronawirus*, *pandemia*, *epidemia*, *COVID-19*, *COVID*, *korona*; przeprowadzenie klasyfikacji wykrytych kontekstów w celu ich podziału na odpowiednie ramy metaforyczne; powiązanie wyrażeń językowych z danym typem metafory; zbadanie częstotliwości występowania użytych słów kluczowych oraz częstotliwości występowania odpowiadających im ram metaforycznych. W artykule wskazano na pewne problemy związane z tego typu badaniem. Najczęściej występującymi ramami metaforycznymi w przeanalizowanym materiale okazały się KONTROLA oraz WOJNA.

Słowa kluczowe: współczesny korpus dyskursu parlamentarnego; metafora; koronawirus, język bułgarski

Metaphors of the pandemic through the lenses of the Bulgarian Parliament

This paper presents a corpus survey on metaphor types in a contemporary Bulgarian corpus of Parliamentary Sessions. The following processes are described: the extraction of the contexts of the selected key words *virus, coronavirus, pandemic, epidemic, COVID-19, COVID, corona*; the classification method that was employed for dividing the detected contexts into the relevant metaphor frames; the language expressions that are associated with the corresponding metaphor type; the frequency of the used key words and the frequency of the related metaphor frames. Some problems are outlined with respect to this kind of study. The most frequent metaphor frames in our data turned out to be CONTROL and WAR.

Keywords: contemporary parliamentary corpus; metaphor; coronavirus; Bulgarian language

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