



THE DEVELOPMENT OF METAPHORS IN POLITICAL
DISCOURSE ACROSS HISTORICAL PERIODS

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Abstract: *Metaphors have played a crucial role in political discourse throughout history, serving as powerful rhetorical devices that shape public perception, influence ideologies, and convey complex political ideas. The use of metaphors in political speech and writing helps bridge the gap between abstract concepts and the tangible world, allowing citizens to better understand political processes and situations. The role of metaphors in politics has evolved significantly across historical periods, shaped by cultural, social, and technological changes. This article traces the development of metaphors in political discourse, examining key historical moments and shifts in their usage.*

Key words: *Metaphor, Function, Political Discourses, The Classical Roots of Political Metaphor, The Middle Ages and the Rise of Religious Metaphors, The 19th Century: Industrialization, Nationalism, and War Metaphors, Contemporary Politics: Social Media and the Evolving Nature of Political Metaphors*

INTRODUCTION. More and more metaphors are employed in different patterns of discourses, especially in political discourses. Politics is inseparable with metaphors. This thesis makes an analysis of the functions of metaphors in political discourses from three aspects, namely, the stylistic function, the cognitive function and the social function. Vivid expression, succinct wording, clear meaning and easy understanding contribute to the stylistic function of metaphors in political discourses. For the cognitive function, metaphors have the function of guiding perception, structuralizing experience and creating new insight. The social function is that through the use of metaphors, a political discourse may easily inform people by stirring their emotions. Metaphors can serve as a persuasive device in political discourses and debates. Also, metaphors can create a sense of consolidation among people and thus mobilize people into the war. In addition, metaphors may deceive people by disguising or embellishing something. Metaphor and politics are closely interwoven. Graber once said that political communication is the “lifeblood or mother’s milk of politics because communication is the essential activity that links the various parts of society together and allows them to function as an integrated whole” (Graber). As Edelman contended, at the core of political communication is the ability of the politician to use metaphor and symbols that awaken potential tendencies among the masses[3].



In classical antiquity, political discourse was heavily influenced by rhetoric, the art of persuasion. Greek philosophers like Aristotle and Plato recognized the importance of metaphor as a means of appealing to emotions and reason. Aristotle, in his work **Rhetoric**, viewed metaphors as essential tools for effective communication, particularly in political settings. Political leaders and orators in ancient Greece and Rome, such as Pericles and Cicero, employed metaphors to inspire citizens, unite them in common causes, and rally support for policies. The metaphors they used often centered on the concepts of the state as a body, a family, or a war machine, emphasizing unity, order, and the need for strong leadership.

One of the most notable metaphors from this era is the idea of the state as a "body politic." This metaphor portrayed society as an organism, with the ruler or government serving as the head, guiding and protecting the body from harm. The metaphors of the "common good" and the "noble citizen" also played central roles in shaping early political discourse, establishing ideals of civic duty, and collective responsibility.

During the medieval period, the use of metaphors in political discourse became increasingly intertwined with religious ideas, as the Catholic Church and monarchs often held intertwined power. Political discourse often relied on religious metaphors to justify authority and maintain social order. The Church itself was frequently represented as a "shepherd" guiding the "flock," and kings were often described as God's appointed rulers, exercising divine right.

The metaphor of the "king as the father" became prevalent, emphasizing the paternalistic role of monarchs in guiding their people and protecting their welfare. The use of metaphors in this era reinforced the hierarchical structure of society, where the king, clergy, and nobility were seen as superior to the common folk. This divine and paternalistic framing provided legitimacy to monarchical rule and the feudal system.

The Renaissance and Enlightenment periods marked a shift in political thought, driven by humanism, the scientific revolution, and the rise of rationalism. The metaphors employed during these periods reflected the growing emphasis on individualism, reason, and the rejection of divine absolutism. Philosophers like John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau used metaphors to explore the social contract, individual rights, and the nature of governance.

The metaphor of the "social contract," for instance, became central in Enlightenment political thought. Rousseau, in particular, portrayed society as an agreement between individuals who collectively consent to governance in exchange for the protection of their rights[1]. The metaphor of "the state of nature" was used to explain the hypothetical condition of humanity before the establishment of social order. These metaphors helped articulate new political ideologies that emphasized democracy, liberty, and equality.

Additionally, metaphors of light and darkness became increasingly common during the Enlightenment. "Enlightenment" itself was a metaphor for the spread of knowledge, reason, and progress, while "darkness" symbolized ignorance and tyranny. Political figures began to





use these metaphors to advocate for the spread of reason and the overthrow of oppressive regimes.

The 19th century saw the rise of industrialization, nationalism, and the emergence of modern states, all of which had a profound impact on political metaphors. As nations expanded and industrialized, metaphors reflecting progress, machinery, and efficiency became widespread. The metaphor of the "nation as a machine" or the "government as a factory" was often employed to discuss how nations should be organized to achieve efficiency and prosperity.

The rise of nationalism also brought about metaphors related to the "body of the nation," emphasizing the need for unity and the idea that the nation's strength depended on the cooperation of its people. Political leaders like Otto von Bismarck in Germany used these metaphors to rally people around the concept of national identity and state-building[4].

War metaphors also became more prevalent during the 19th century, especially in the context of imperialism and the two World Wars. Leaders like Winston Churchill during World War II used metaphors like "fighting for freedom" and "the battlefield of democracy" to galvanize citizens and frame political struggles in terms of moral battles. The use of militaristic metaphors in political discourse helped to simplify complex issues, making them more emotionally charged and easier to understand.

In the 20th century, the advent of mass media, particularly radio, television, and later, the internet, transformed the way political metaphors were used. Political leaders began to realize the power of branding and public image. Metaphors became central to creating political identities and narratives that could resonate with the masses. The metaphor of the "leader as a savior" or "messiah" was frequently used in totalitarian regimes, where leaders like Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini presented themselves as the ultimate solution to national crises. In democratic nations, metaphors like "the economy as a garden" or "the market as a free space" were often used to explain economic policies and promote neoliberal ideas. These metaphors emphasized the need for minimal government intervention and the power of individual choice and competition. The 20th century also saw the rise of metaphors related to the "Cold War," with the world divided into "spheres of influence" or "ideological battlegrounds" between the capitalist West and the communist East. These metaphors framed global political conflicts as a struggle for survival and ideological dominance.

In the 21st century, the rise of social media and the digitalization of politics has given new dimensions to political metaphors. The rapid spread of information has enabled political leaders to use metaphors that are more direct, simplified, and emotionally engaging. Metaphors like "fighting for our future," "draining the swamp," or "revolutionizing the system" are common in contemporary political rhetoric, particularly in populist movements.

Social media has also allowed for the proliferation of metaphors that speak to specific issues and concerns. Climate change, for example, is often framed as a "battle" or "crisis,"





with metaphors like "the planet is burning" or "our world is on the brink of collapse" used to mobilize people around environmental causes. In modern political discourse, metaphors are also often designed to create an "us versus them" narrative, dividing society into groups of allies and enemies. This "tribal" rhetoric is highly effective in today's polarized political climate, where metaphors such as "wars on terror," "culture wars," or "battles for democracy" are used to frame complex political issues as existential struggles[2].

CONCLUSION

The evolution of metaphors in political discourse is a reflection of the changing nature of politics itself. From the classical body politic and divine right of kings to the democratic ideals of the Enlightenment and the modern-day struggles on social media, metaphors have been pivotal in shaping political thought and communication. As political environments continue to evolve, the metaphors used by leaders, parties, and movements will remain powerful tools for framing political issues, shaping public opinion, and defining the contours of political debate. Understanding the development of these metaphors across historical periods is crucial for analyzing the ways in which political language influences both the electorate and the course of history itself.

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