Metaphors in political discourse: a cross-cultural perspective

The significance of cognitive metaphor in media discourse hardly needs to be advocated nowadays. As G. Lakoff and M. Johnson clarified (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Lakoff 1993), metaphor is not just a stylistic device, but an integral tool of human understanding, an inescapable aspect of human thought. The conceptual metaphor theory holds that the metaphor is a cognitive phenomenon that is realized on the surface level of the language. Metaphor is seen as not an isolated linguistic phenomenon, but as one of the most ordinary means through which humans conceptualize the world. Metaphorization is comprehended as a mapping of features from one conceptual domain, called the source domain, to another conceptual domain, called the target domain.

A large body of work has been inspired by comprehending metaphor in terms of human conceptualization, and nowadays there exists a number of theoretical approaches derived from the conceptual metaphor theory: the primary metaphor theory [13], the connectivity theory of metaphor interpretation [29; 30], the blending theory [11; 12; 33; 34], the theory of metaphorical models [2; 3; 4; 8; 9]. Despite the variety of approaches scholars are inclined to view metaphor as a tool providing the linguistic realization for the cognitive activity by which a speaker makes use of one linguistically articulated domain to gain an understanding of another conceptual domain. In relation to politics, metaphor frames the socially determined schemata in which political sphere is conceptualized.

This article focuses on a comparative investigation of metaphors and the identification of cross-cultural differences reflected in systems of metaphorical concepts (metaphorical models), within the framework of the theory of metaphorical models [3; 5; 6; 8]. According to the theory, a complex of cognitively and semantically linked metaphors can be subsumed under the cognitive model organising knowledge into cognitive schema based on embodied, empirical, and what is more important, cultural experience. A metaphorical model serves as a culturally determined conceptual pattern, a set of linked frames used for comprehension of political reality and elaboration of metaphorical inferences.

Nowadays, studies in cognitive metaphors in political discourse are more than widely-spread. Only in the XXIst century, the quantity of such researches runs to more than 300 throughout the world [6]. Yet investigators are inclined to accentuate the factor of individual body experience, and sometimes socio-political experience, while the subject of cultural specific has hardly been modeled by researchers.

The metaphor has been predominately discussed as the universal cognitive phenomenon rooted in embodied mind. It has been argued that the body supplies the basis for a wide variety of metaphors that humans use to communicate the meaning of abstractions including the concept of political power [1]. Unfortunately, the investigation of metaphorical frames in connection with culture has not been at the forefront of modern cognitive metaphoric studies, while the necessity of taking into consideration the cultural dimension of political metaphors is evident.

The argued significance of cultural metaphors is supported, for example, by a contrastive research into metaphorical expressions used in 15 Russian and 15 British newspapers and magazines depicting post-Soviet politics in Russia, Georgia and Baltic States [5]. The study revealed that Britishmen were inclined to conceptualize the Baltic States in terms of a European family (family, brothers, to adopt, brides, marriage, estranged, etc.) whereas neither Russia nor Georgia was metaphorically seen as any kind of fami-

---

1 This project was supported by grant 07-04-02-002A (‘Metaphorical image of Russia in Russian and foreign political discourses’) from the Russian State Humanities Foundation (RGNF)
lies, except criminal concepts of Family or clans. Vice versa, Russians conceptualized Russia and Georgia through family metaphors while they did not apply a family model to the Baltic States and their relations with other countries. As far as target-domain ‘Baltic States’ was concerned, all the family metaphors in Russian corpus were either non-prototypical (“they were almost brothers to us yesterday”) or applied to Russian minorities in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia.

The study also revealed the differences between national cultural frames. The British frame of marriage is associated with a wedding ceremony in a church. There are no such metaphors in Russian political discourse as “church frames” were displaced from the Russian consciousness within 70 years of the Soviet regime. In the Soviet culture, a marriage was a civil marriage, and although Orthodox wedding services take place in modern Russia, a common-law marriage is still a prototypical one. Even if frame “wedding in church” had not been removed it would have been different from the British variant of marriage metaphors because Orthodox solemnization of marriage is different from Catholic or Protestant ones.

A similar approach has been also developed by J. Zinken [37]. The researcher promoted the integration of cultural experience into the experientialist framework in cognitive metaphor research proposing to differentiate cor- relational and intertextual metaphors. Evidence for the im- portant role that intertextual metaphors play in ideological discourse came from an analysis of Polish newspaper dis- course on the tenth anniversary of the end of communism.

So, special investigations show that culturally specific metaphors actively shape and give meaning to the national socio-political experience, and play as important role in political discourse as universal ones.

Culturally specific views are represented in political discourse, but political discourse includes a great variety of texts and speech events. What is one to analyse in order to reveal the cultural difference in the metaphorical comprehension of political phenomena? If national groups have different metaphorical views of the similar concepts (e.g. the concept of presidential power), and these views are regularly relevant, we may consider the specificity to be drawn out.

We have analysed metaphors extracted from the US (50 %) and Russian (50 %) newspapers covering internal presidential elections in the USA and the Russian Federation in 2000 and 2004. The restriction of data by electoral texts satisfies the requirement of taking into consideration the similar concepts (presidential power). Two electoral campaigns were included to meet the other requirement, i.e. regular correlation of conceptual mappings.

All metaphorical expressions were subsumed under semantically linked complexes, which served as metaphorical models. The Russian and American sets of metaphorical models were compared, so common and nationally specific features of metaphorical comprehension of power became apparent.

As data show, the majority of established Russian and American metaphorical models for presidential election are the same (ELECTION IS WAR, ILLNESS, SHOW, SPORT, COMPETITION, GAME, PATH). Both American and Russian voters typically view politicians as ‘warlords’, ‘movie heroes’, or ‘gamblers’. Scholars have already discussed American and Russian metaphors of PATH [7; 8], WAR [5; 27; 19, GAME [21; 28]. Moreover, these metaphorical models have been found in the media and political discourses of Austria [10], Egypt [26], Great Britain [24], Taiwan [35], Italy [31; 32], Ger- many [23; 25; 38], Poland [16; 36], Finland [14], Venezuela [22]. Such a prevalence of these source domains may lead to the conclusion of universal base for metaphorical conceptualization of power across cultures.

Asking the same questions on common ground of metaphors forecloses the area of prospectively fruitful in- quiry in the intercultural dimension of the phenomenon. The data suggest that there are culturally specific metaphor-ical models inherited especially in the American mind (PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IS SELECTION OF A MANAGER), and culturally rooted in the Russian mind (PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IS CROWN). Such metaphorical differences derive their persuasive force from historically and cul- turally determined cognitive models typically used for comprehending power in the USA and Russia, and they are not linked to common human experience, or the differences between the English and Russian languages.

Metaphorical model PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IS SELECTION OF A MANAGER is rather productive in the US media. The model includes the metaphor, POPULARITY IS CAPITAL. In the media, presidential contenders are conceptualized as businessmen whose activity is guided by desire to increase political assets. To increase popularity is to increase capital, and to make political mistakes or touch on unpopular issues is to spend money.

Bush wants to win some relatively quick victories on his first two priorities – a tax cut and education reform – in order to build up capital for harder fight over defense and Social Security reform (E. Thomas, Newsweek, 7.05.01).

He (Bush) may have spend more political capital defending his picks… (N. Gibbs, Time, 15.01.01).

For Bush, tackling these issues will require spending political capital (F. Zakaria, Newsweek, 7.05.01).

For Americans, to spend political capital is also to realize the power after election:

“Let me put it to you this way: I earned capital in his campaign, political capital, and now I intend to spend it,” Mr. Bush said, asserting the power he held after a decisive win and reclaiming the national stage as his own after sharing it for months with Mr. Kerry (R. W. Stevenson, The New York Times, 30.10.2004).

The system of concepts within the source domain leads to elaborating the metaphorical model: as long as popu- larity is capital, politicians are subjects of economic activity: Democratic Sen. John Breaux of Louisiana, a classic congressional dealmaker, was looking forward to cozy relationship with Bush, an old pal (E. Thomas, Newsweek, 7. 05.01).

Things “need not get personal” as bargainers attempt to reconcile the Bush – House version with the one the Senate passed, mostly with Democratic votes (H. Fineman, Newsweek, 13.08.01).

Correspondingly, interactions between politicians are viewed as deals and financial operations:

On his final day, Clinton makes a bargain to avoid prosecution (M. Weisskopf, Time, 29.01.01).

White House insiders think … – that Edwards will decide his future is better served by cutting a deal with Bush than by killing one (H. Fineman, Newsweek, 13.08.01).

But as one of his (Gore’s) top advisers admitted, “Gore wasn’t fully invested in his campaign either.” (M. Duffy, Time, 20.11.00).

Candida Perotti Wolff, his legislative aide, stood
outside as Cheney cut the deal, and then never received a report from him about what was discussed (G. Kessler, Washington Post, 05.10.2004).


The vote may have been wise politics at the time, but came with a high price – lending an aura of plausibility to the subsequent charges by Bush that Kerry is motivated by opportunism (J. F. Harris, Washington Post, 23.09.2004).

The USA is metaphorically seen as a company, and voters should evaluate whether the future manager will succeed in running the country. Metaphors employed in the media evaluate abilities of ‘businessmen’, and therefore, construct presidential election as selection of a manager. Americans consider political power to be accessible to anyone who has appropriate merits of “a manager”:

In fiscal policy, he’s (Bush) now a deficit spender, advocate of bigger government, a micromanager of a macro economy (H. Fineman, M. Brant, Newsweek, 29.11.01).

A President needs to know how big and disparate this country is. In an election driven by nothing but the nationwide popular vote, would a campaign focus on America’s geographic diversity? Or would it act like a company marketing a product and see the country as a collection of demographic subsets… (J. Greenfield / Time, 20.11.00).

This is the paradox of Kerry as a manager. When he has a clear vision of where he wants to go – he has used information and advice to become more focused and persuasive, according to colleagues and longtime aides (D. Russakoff, Washington Post, 13.10.2004).

Business metaphors bring in both negative and positive evaluations, yet the active use of economic terms for understanding presidential elections in the USA witnesses the cultural rootage of this model in American mind. The feature of US political culture is that citizens are not inclined to attribute any kind of exclusive powers or charismatic authority to their president and the nature of US political relations is close to the system of business management.

Metaphors of business are not characteristic of the Russian media. Instead, the dominant metaphorical model to attribute any kind of exclusive powers or charismatic authority to their president and the nature of US political relations is close to the system of business management.

Monarchy is traditionally associated with symbolic artefacts of power, i.e. ‘crown’, ‘throne’, ‘orb’, ‘sceptre’, ‘mantle’. All the concepts of this domain are metaphorically used for conceptualizing presidential power in the Russian media:

V etom sluchae nikakoi vertikalni vlasti ne poluchitsia: ona vyrodit’sia v skiper novogo vlastitel’ia, kotorym on smozhet i golovu promolot’ (V. Timashov, Rossijskaja Gazeta, 7.04.2000). (In this case we won’t get any vertical hierarchy of power – it will turn into a scepter of a new lord, with which he will be able to fracture heads).

Nevziraia na podavliaushie vysokoi reiting Vladi- mira Putina, kolichestvo zhelaushchikh uvidet’ sebia v prezidentskoi mantii budet prebyvat’ (S. Chugaev, Komsomol’skaia Pravda, 14.01.2000). (Despite the highest rate of Putin, the quantity of those who would like to try on the presidential mantle will be increasing).

Oni boialis’ poiavleniia na trone chzhaka (Sh. Muladzhano, Moskovskaja Pravda, 21.01.2000). (They were afraid that a stranger would be raised to the throne).

Putin i Ziyaganov – osnovnye kandidaty na tron (V. Dheprov, Izvestia, 16.03.2000). (Putin and Ziyagov are the main rival claimants to the throne).

For Russians the presidential election is a corona- tion, a transfer of power to a successor, ‘crown price’.

Yeltsin vperyve so vremen Moskovskogo tsarstva sam mirno preveral vlast’ preemniku (A. Prusak, Moskovskii Komsomolet, 2000, № 17). (Yeltsin has peacefully transferred power to the successor, and it has been the first precedent since the Moscow kingdom)

Raskrutka Putina nachalas’ v proshlom avguste, kogda nikomu ne izvestnogo rukovoditel’ia FSB nezhdannomu naznachau prem’erom i naslednym printsem (E. Maetnaia, Moskovskii Komsomolet, №10, 2000). (The promotion of Putin started last August, when the unknown leader of FSB was unexpectedly appointed prime minister and crown prince).

Putin Vladimir Vladimirovich… dolgozhdannyi naslednik tsaria Borisa (V. Zhirinovskii, Rossijskaia gazeta, 18.03.2000). (Putin Vladimir Vladimirovich is a long-awaited successor to tsar Boris).

According to the cognitive topology of the source domain, a monarch is surrounded by courtiers:

Ucastilis’ razborki sredi “blizhnikh boiar” (V. Kostikov, AIF, № 33, 2005), (Internecine conflicts within ‘the close boyars’ have become more frequent).

Samoe sil’noe otlichie – oligarkham-aborigenam ne pozhalovano mesto velikikh vizirei v rostovshchikov pri dvore, kotoroe oni obliubovali v 90-kh (V. Popov, Zavtra, 04.02.2004). (The sharpest distinction of the new order is that oligarchs-aborigines, who were the main beneficiaries in the 90s, have not been bestowed places of viziers and usurers at court).

Elaborations of the metaphorical model ELECTION is CORONATION result in comprehending the whole Russia as a feudal state. The regions of the country are viewed as feuds, ruled by feudal lords, princelings, local barons:

Upereki Moskvy v adres vozvod-zhulikov ne vygli- adiat ubichest’ nymy (M. Rostovskii, 30.03.2000). (Moscow reproaches at voivodes-thiefs do not look convincing).

Putin b’etsia za diktaturu zakona i dazhe ne podoz- revaet, chto ural’skie kniaz’ takoi noznichek u nega za spinoi tochat (F. Sergeev, Moskovskaja Pravda, 5.12.2000). (Putin is fighting for the dictatorship of law and does not guess that the Ural princelings have a grudge against him).

The comparison reveals that a metaphorical model...
not only constructs the strategies of political activity, it also reflects the conceptualization of a certain phenomenon in the national picture of the world. Otherwise it doesn’t maintain its discursive attraction and argumentative flexibility for the general public. The president of the USA may be metaphorically viewed as a ‘commander-in-chief’, ‘prizefighter’, or ‘main character’, but never as a monarch. In the USA power has never been linked to monarchical form of government as an “American monarchy” has never existed.

And vice versa, the post-Soviet history of market economy is rather short and the model of business relations is not spread for comprehending power in Russia. Russians conceptualize leaders of the state through a metaphor as an “American monarchy” has never existed.

Russians conceptualize leaders of the state through a metaphor, members of which use culturally specific cognitive systems of representations are deeply used in the US and Russian media for conceptualizationally destined to political decision-making.

Practical examples of both metaphorical models used in the US and Russian media for conceptualization of presidential elections lead to the conclusion that national cognitive systems of representations are deeply rooted not only in embodiment or common human experience, but also in the history and cultural traditions of a society, members of which use culturally specific cognitive models for comprehension of power. Revealing the metaphors which underlie national discourses, may diminish impediments to a political compromise and hopefully lead us to a better intercultural understanding.

Works Cited