

The dynamics of multimodal water metaphors in the discourse on migration in Wikipedia

A cross-linguistic and microdiachronic perspectivation

1. Contextualization

The events associated with increased numbers of people fleeing to Europe since 2015 have become part of the discourse in various thematic spaces across Europe albeit with fluctuating dynamics. In this context proto-metaphors involving flowing water (e.g. *Flüchtlingsströme* [flows of migrants]) have proved to be strikingly dynamic, with discourse participants setting up a multifaceted metaphoric field of flowing water; these key images then structure the discourse on migration and consolidate specific discursive positions. In addition, innovative metaphors like *Flüchtlingsunami* [a tsunami of migrants] appear to magnify the scale of the movement of refugees to Europe. Contrastive linguistic discourse analyses and, indirectly, studies exploring the discourse on migration in individual languages point to the discursive relevance of metaphors involving flowing water in that discourse across multiple languages. Although conventionalized metaphors are no longer that obvious due to their frequent use, it appears that their re-contextualization and evaluative quantification can still unleash negative judgements. This leads to critical discussions in both academic and public discourse in which especially the dehumanization of those fleeing their homes and their representation as a threat to the national security of the countries involved come to the fore.

This paper explores the use of metaphors involving flowing water in the current discourse on migration in Wikipedia from a multimodal, cross-linguistic and microdiachronic perspective. Research on the use of water metaphors in that discourse is augmented from multiple perspectives by exploring a discourse fragment (German and English Wikipedia articles and talk pages) that has received relatively little attention so far in comparison with the focus on media coverage but that is, nevertheless, highly relevant for the discourse. As a digital, extremely dynamic and collaboratively constructed discursive space, Wikipedia allows us to reconstruct discursive dynamics on different levels. Thanks to its great relevance in today's society as a key source of information, Wikipedia is an important digital discursive space for acquiring and negotiating knowledge. While its articles are meant to be factual, objective and neutral and illustrate the result of earlier discourse dynamics from a cross-linguistic perspective, the interaction of Wikipedians on the talk pages reveals the process of discursive negotiation. The interdependencies between articles and talk pages can be reconstructed using the version histories and in this way the dynamics of discursive metaphors can also be reconstructed.

In the first place, this paper focuses on the discourse dynamics of metaphors involving flowing water from a multimodal and cross-linguistic perspective; in other words, it investigates which metaphorical patterns have become part of the discourse in different language versions and how they are organized in metaphoric fields. Secondly, it examines the critical metadiscourse on language taking place on the German talk pages and its impact on the dynamics of metaphors in the German article in more detail with the help of version

histories. It is interesting to see how increasing social sensitization to the inappropriate use of metaphors is reflected in the discourse on migration in Wikipedia.

2. Discursive multimodal metaphors

The analysis of metaphors can be seen as an established approach to discourses nowadays: metaphors are understood as discursive patterns which shape the perspectival construction of knowledge in discourses, express the positions of participants, provide argumentative strategies and afford insights into discourse structures and dynamics. In more recent work on linguistic discourse, metaphors are not only conceived of as cognitive, context-independent abstractions but above all as dynamic, contextual, situation-related and culturally grounded phenomena with their discourse-specific characteristics, meanings and functions which should be described dependent on that discourse. As linguistic patterns, metaphors are sign complexes on different structural levels which are either fixed or can be modified.

Metaphors are not only manifested verbally but also visually and multimodally; the realization of metaphors in different semiotic modes plays an important role, particularly as digital discourses are becoming more common. In cross-linguistic analyses, special attention is often paid to the interaction of verbal images and actual images, which gives rise to semantically “dense”, highly coherent passages. In connection with their culturality, which comes to the fore in contrastive linguistic discourse analysis, it becomes clear that metaphors are not only to be understood as cross-cultural phenomena but also as culturally specific phenomena that differ on formal, semantic and functional levels as well as on the multimodal level, even within Europe. Comparing languages also makes it possible to compare cultural differences.

When investigating discourse dynamics in the use of metaphors in different languages, it is interesting to compare the systematization of metaphors in metaphoric fields and changes in the discourse process both quantitatively and qualitatively. While the predominance of a particular metaphor is indicated by its frequency in the corpus concerned, the dominance of a metaphoric field is revealed in the frequency and variety of its tokens.

3. Corpus and methodology

This paper is based on the analysis of a corpus consisting of two topic-specific articles (“Europäische Flüchtlingskrise 2015” and “2015 European migrant crisis”) and corresponding talk pages in Wikipedia (as of 30.6.2020). More specifically, it investigates the dynamics of metaphors a) at text level based on a synchronic metaphoric (field) analysis and b) based on a microdiachronic analysis:

- a) In the synchronic analysis, water metaphors were identified manually for each language. The metaphorization process was analysed semantically with the help of definitions taken from the digital dictionary of the German language *DWDS* and *Duden online* for German and *Collins Online Dictionary* for English. In the co-textual analysis, the structural patterns and collocates of inferred metaphors were analysed to determine their semantic preferences and functions. The inferred linguistic inventories of verbal metaphors on the German and English talk pages were explored in a quantitative step using the concordancer program *AntConc* in order to compare the predominant source domains in terms of their frequency across languages and

across articles/talk pages. In the next step, visual elements were analysed to identify which source and/or target domains they represented. Finally, the network of all metaphors in the metaphoric field of water was compared and contrasted.

- b) In the microdiachronic analysis, discourse dynamics were reconstructed qualitatively using the version histories. Firstly, discursive episodes were identified which had critical comments relating to language use which were relevant to the research question. Then, taking pertinent articles into account, the influence of critical comments on the (re)contextualization or deletion of metaphors was explored.

4. Empirical analysis and conclusions

The cross-linguistic synchronic analysis revealed that (multimodal) metaphors involving flowing water in the English and German discourse fragments have developed into a multifaceted, multimodal metaphoric field of flowing water in a strikingly dynamic way in which migrants are imagined to be a danger, threat and security risk. Despite the lower frequency of metaphors, the German discourse fragment has a much more varied metaphoric field than the English one, another difference between the analysed language versions are the prevailing metaphors. While multimodal metaphors of influx (*influx of refugees*) dominate in the English discourse fragment, the German discourse fragment is organized around multimodal metaphors of flow (*Flüchtlingsstrom*), which are often causally linked with metaphors of pressure (*Druck*), contributing to the image of threats and danger due to massive flows of migrants. In both discourse fragments, the multimodal metaphoric field is expanded and even magnified in scope through conventional metaphors of waves (*Flüchtlingswelle*, *wave of refugees*) and less frequently through expressive metaphors involving natural disasters like floods (*Flut*) or tsunamis (only in German). As cross-linguistic discourse patterns, the metaphors involving flowing water differ in their verbalization strategies on a morphosyntactic level: while nominal determinative compounds (*X-Ströme*) prevail in German, nominal multi-word units with slots (*influx of X*) dominate in English. In both discourse fragments, the dynamics of metaphors is influenced by uncritical reproductions of statements by relevant participants in the mass media in which metaphors involving flowing water are deployed with an argumentative function in order to legitimize their (political) actions. Verbal metaphorical patterns are often combined with negatively connoted attributive and predicative adjectives; their cumulative co-occurrence with further metaphors in this field as well as with images which depict refugees as pouring and inundating masses appears to be very persuasive. In this way, the metaphorical effect of mostly conventional water metaphors is boosted. In contrast to the German discourse fragment, it was not possible to reconstruct critical comments relating to the inappropriate use of metaphors on the English Wikipedia pages. This appears to be the reason behind the lower frequency of metaphors involving flowing water in the German discourse fragment because in the “German immigration discourse” (cf. Niehr 2020) there is a long tradition of critical metadiscourse on the use of metaphors and an ongoing process of sensitization.

In the analysis of the German discourse fragment, soon after it was first published, three discourse episodes could be reconstructed with critical reactions to controversial changes to headwords, captions and alternative texts, which indicate Wikipedians’ appreciation of the sensitive use of metaphors. To the extent that critical reactions to metaphorical mechanisms and associations are revealed, Wikipedians and their readers can feel borne out in

their sensitization to the inappropriate use of metaphors. A sensitive approach to metaphors involving flowing water and a reduction in their use in prominent positions in the German article is seen as an illustration of discourse dynamics.

References

Collins Online Dictionary = <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/> (Stand: 11.1.2022).

Duden online = Duden Onlinewörterbuch. <https://www.duden.de/woerterbuch> (Stand: 11.1.2022).

DWDS = Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache. <https://www.dwds.de/> (Stand: 11.1.2022).

Niehr, Thomas (2020): Migrationsdiskurs. In: Niehr, Thomas/Kilian, Jörg/Schiewe, Jürgen (Hg.): Handbuch Sprachkritik. Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, S. 225–232.

Wikipedia (2020a): Flüchtlingskrise in Europa ab 2015. https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fl%C3%BChtlingskrise_in_Europa_ab_2015 (Stand: 30.6.2020).

Wikipedia (2020b): 2015 European migrant crisis. https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=2015_European_migrant_crisis&direction=prev&oldid=965455982 (Stand: 30.6.2020).

Wikipedia (2022): Diskussionsseite zum Artikel „Flüchtlingskrise in Europa ab 2015“. https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diskussion:Fl%C3%BChtlingskrise_in_Europa_2015/2016 (Stand: 20.7.2022).