

Jonathan Charteris-Black, *Metaphors of Coronavirus: Invisible Enemy or Zombie Apocalypse?* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021; xvi + 301 pp., € 29.11, € 21.39 (ebook).

Reviewed by: Julia T. Williams Camus, Department of Philology, Universidad de Cantabria, Spain

Against a background of general disruption of the established order caused by Covid-19, Jonathan Charteris-Black seeks to gain insight into the moral basis of the decisions people make by examining the metaphors and allegories of the pandemic. He suggests that metaphors contribute to the moral framing of a situation so that people are tilted towards one form of action over another.

Drawing on a wide range of sources – mainly the press but also corpora, social media and literature – and methodologies, both theoretical and empirical, the author evaluates the most frequent metaphors and images associated with Covid-19 from March, 2020 to February, 2021.

The ten varied and interesting chapters, though focused in different ways according to the methodology employed, are given coherence by reference to the six moral foundations of Haidt's "social intuitionist model of moral judgement" introduced in Chapter 1: namely Care-Harm; Fairness-Cheating; Loyalty-Betrayal; Authority-Subversion; Sanctity-Degradation; and Liberty-Oppression. To these, Charteris-Black adds a further pair: Honesty-Dishonesty. Haidt's model rejects the dichotomy between feeling and thinking, claiming that emotional intuitions are a form of cognition. Metaphorically, when facing a dilemma, people tend to respond to the 'elephant' (emotional side) rather than the 'rider' (rational side), the latter providing *post hoc* justification for their actions.

Chapters 2 and 3 deal with metaphors from three 'disaster' frames readily available to communicators and readers from the outbreak of the pandemic: war (e.g., 'frontline', 'Blitz', 'invisible enemy'), fire ('ignite', 'blaze', 'fan the flames') and force of nature ('tsunami', 'surge', 'turn the tide'). In a detailed and thorough account, the author traces their origins, provides historical or literary precedents, and examines their rhetorical purpose or unintended effect in terms of their suitability to, possibly, influence behaviour. Empirical research based on the Nexis database showed that the numbers of articles with

metaphors from these frames waxed and waned with the waves of Covid-19, rising from March, 2020, through June, then declining, only to increase again in September-October with the second wave. To assess the potential influence of metaphor on behaviour, Charteris-Black conducted an online survey based on descriptions of the same pandemic situation, but couched in language from the different disaster frames. Respondents graded five actions ranging from libertarian to strict on a 5-point importance scale. Although no direct influence of the metaphors was found, the author suggests their effect on behaviour may largely be unconscious.

Chapter 4 shows how the ‘Zombie Apocalypse’ allegory and the ‘We are the Virus’ meme correspond mainly to Sanctity-Degradation and draw on fantasy and science fiction to express reactions to an existential threat. The author shows that the ‘zombie’ scenario was supported by the mode of viral spread and the sight of hazmat suits. Though pessimistic, the ‘zombie’ image suggests that the threat is manageable. The ‘We are the Virus’ meme draws attention to the potential for environmental catastrophe – underlined by the reappearance in the pandemic of wild animals in city streets and of stars shining through uncontaminated skies.

Chapter 5 looks at metaphors drawn from science and used extensively by politicians to present their policies, and by journalists to expose politicians’ failings and to criticize them. The need for clarifying scientific terms is supported by an independent public poll (published in January, 2021) of 2302 UK adults. Only around 50% could clearly explain ‘herd immunity’, ‘flatten the curve’ and ‘circuit breaker’, compared to 63% for the non-scientific metaphor ‘support bubble’. The claim that the government was ‘following the science’ was quickly shown to reflect a misleading, simplified view of science as something that is consensus-based. Individual metaphors have drawbacks: ‘herd immunity’ is associated with negative ‘herd mentality’ and ‘herd behaviour’; the humour and optimism of ‘flatten the curve’ and ‘squash the sombrero’ were seen as ill-founded when Boris Johnson had to cancel Christmas. In contrast, ‘circuit breaker’ was deemed an appropriate mechanistic metaphor for a short lockdown. These metaphors shared the common aim of shifting agency – and, therefore, blame – from the policy makers onto the data and the scientists that produced them.

Chapter 6 provides a historical overview of confinement in disease (i.e., containment) with reference to the measures imposed during The Plague ('cordon sanitaire', 'quarantine' and 'pest house'). Such preventive measures involved the moral foundations of Care-Harm, Loyalty-Betrayal and Liberty-Oppression. Western democracies placed emphasis on persuasion, rhetoric and information rather than enforcement, and this resulted in alternative conceptual metaphors CONTAINMENT IS PUBLIC SAFETY vs. CONTAINMENT IS IMPRISONMENT. Chapter 7, then, characterizes the most prevalent containment metaphors in Covid-19 (e.g., 'bubble', 'cocoon', 'protection ring'), which sought to promote social cohesion through shared values of Loyalty and Fairness and to ensure compliance with lockdown rules. For example, 'bubble' is characterized as fragile and transparent and, while allowing a degree of choice, its restriction is imposed by an external agency. Although flaws in the images and the flagrant dishonesty of the 'protective ring' were soon exposed, these metaphors continued to exert moral coercion when legal coercion (lockdown) was no longer necessary.

Chapter 8 analyses key metonyms such as 'mask' and 'hazmat suit' that reduce the complexity of the pandemic to a single object or event. 'Mask', the most frequent metonym, saw a shift from its association with religious affiliation or with female modesty to a symbol for the protection of self and others: FREEDOM IS WEARING A MASK. Critics, however, believed it could also cause harm, regarding it as an instrument to create fear or to enforce social conformity and collectivism: FREEDOM IS NOT WEARING A MASK. Thus, the metonym acquired metaphorical value in opposing arguments. Other metonyms show less potential for metaphorical extension. The hazmat suit bestowed status and authority on the wearer, but was associated with mental instability and, when worn out of context by non-professionals or celebrities, abnormality.

In chapter 9, the author examines how, in the absence of an immediate cure or vaccine for Covid-19, politicians and journalists rhetorically exploited metaphors based on magic or miracles. 'No magic bullet' implied that it was unrealistic to expect quick solutions, encouraging patience and support for policies and deflecting blame from the government. The proposal of miracle cures, often by politicians and celebrities, as if derived from some divine inspiration, reflected disillusionment and mistrust in science and authority. Journalists used metaphor and satire to expose and condemn this misinformation, as they

did with the arguments that anti-vaxxers employed to instil fear based on impurity, infertility, etc.

Chapter 10 summarizes the ground covered, interpreted from the perspective of Honesty-Dishonesty. The author claims there was a need, post-Brexit, for a change from emotion-based intuitions to behaviour founded on the moral foundations of Care and Fairness. While some metaphorical frames (war, fire, force of nature) were well-motivated and used to inspire urgency and social cohesion, others were overused ('led by the science') or misunderstood ('herd immunity'). Multiple containment metaphors ('cocoon', 'bubble', etc.) that were aimed at enforcing policies, were undermined by government members not adhering to their own rules. He concludes that there is a need for honest language (including metaphors) that reinforces reason and provides for a better life.

Charteris-Black has produced a comprehensive, informative and thought-provoking study on the metaphors of the Covid-19 pandemic. The strongest parts are the detailed descriptive studies. Less convincing are some interpretations of the empirical data. Nevertheless, the book is an entertaining and well-written account of the pandemic that should appeal to both experts on metaphor, discourse and behaviour and to a wider lay audience.