

France's "drôle de guerre": Sociopolitical polarisation and resistance to metaphor

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ABSTRACT

This paper sheds light on the sociopolitical polarisation reflected in the responses to a political metaphor, in French public discourse about covid-19. The aim is to uncover how polarisation may influence metaphorical representation of a political issue. The study focuses on the French President's metaphor "we are at war", in his announcement of the national lockdown. Responses to this "war" metaphor in public discourse are analysed following a combination of metaphor theories and argumentation theories. Results show that such responses transformed the "war" metaphor into the "phoney war" metaphor for covid-19. This yielded four main arguments which 1.established causal links between covid-19 and policies, 2.partially endorsed the metaphor, 3.focused on the President's discursive pattern, and 4.focused on the President's status. It is argued that more research is needed into public reception to political discourse, in view of the arguments derived from resistance to metaphor.

Keywords: Metaphor; Polarisation; Resistance; Covid-19; Legitimation

Words: 7,952

1. Introduction

This paper sheds light on the polarisation that can be reflected in the resistance to a political metaphor. The aim is to uncover how polarisation may influence metaphorical representation of a political issue in public discourse.

Metaphors form a significant part of political communicative strategies (Heyvaert et al., 2019). They represent a complex topic, like the covid-19 crisis, through the lens of a concrete concept. For instance, this study focuses on a particular political metaphor produced by the French President, Emmanuel Macron. On March 16th 2020, the politician described covid-19 as a "war" ("Nous sommes en guerre"; We are at war) to announce the national lockdown. This "war" declaration enabled the public to perceive the virus as an "enemy", the pandemic as an "invasion", and safety measures as their "weapons". Through this "war" declaration, Macron thus legitimised the enforcement of restricting safety measures (Butler, 2024; Rondiat, forthcoming).

However, this legitimisation strategy was impacted by pre-existing sociopolitical polarisation (Filardo-Llamas et al., 2022). This polarised context has even been referred to as a "democratic crisis" by political scientists (Bandelow et al., 2021; Rouban, 2018). It is possible to infer that the political opposition to the covid-19 crisis transformed into an opposition between politicians and the public, in public discourse about covid-19.

Political scientists and linguists identified the lack of research into the reception of political discourse as a major gap in the literature (Perrez et al., 2015; 2019; Reuchamps et al., 2018).

Indeed, no study has yet focused on the resistance to political metaphor (Burgers et al., 2019) in the context of crisis and polarisation. Through a combination of argumentation theories (van Poppel, 2018) and Critical Metaphor Analysis (Charteris-Black, 2011), this paper sets out to investigate how Macron's "war" declaration has been received and resisted within such a polarised context.

The following section provides further information regarding polarisation and relevant metaphor theories. This is followed by a detailed methodology explaining how resistance and argumentation have been identified in discourse. I then present the results of the analysis, and I offer a final discussion drawing on political legitimisation strategies in times of crisis.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Sociopolitical polarisation

In France, the presidential "war" declaration occurred in a context of sociopolitical polarisation. For instance, the covid-19 crisis was preceded by the "yellow vests crisis" which occurred between November 2018 and March 2019. This was referred to as "an intense crisis of political trust" (Grossman, 2019: 30), gathering on average 3 million protesters (including, notably, health workers; Béguin, 2019). Such protests emerged as a response to government's decision to abolish tax advantage for diesel fuel. Later, protesters also criticised the power attributed to the "elites" (Grossman, 2019:32). This was followed by a social movement against pension reforms (referred to as the "pension crisis", Andolfatto & Labbé, 2020) between December 2019 and February 2020, gathering on average 1.8 million protesters.

This context resonates with existing definitions of "sociopolitical polarisation". Following Nelson (2003), sociopolitical polarisation revolves around the ideological construction of social groups. It involves a justification of one group's actions by demonising the other group: sociopolitical polarisation thus generates an "in-group" and an "out-group" through the process of "otherisation" (Nelson, 2003: 454). Filardo-Llamas and Morales-López (2022) highlight the role played by political discourse in generating such polarisations:

It can be argued that polarisation can be seen on the surface, when it is related to a divergence of beliefs between groups, but also in the underlying discourse constructions and the evaluations and emotions triggered by them. (2022: 3)

De Cock et al. (2022: 80) add that, even if "less explicit and more mitigated" (2022:80), political discourse also includes stigmatising representations of particular social groups (e.g. immigrants) generating forms of polarisation (De Cock et al., 2022).

Therefore, the President's decisions which impacted the population's economic power have been used by protesters to depict the government as an "elite" (Grossman, 2019), or an "out-group" (Nelson, 2003). Drawing on De Cock et al. (2022), it is speculated that public discourse responding to Macron's "war" declaration during covid-19 may contain references to this sociopolitical polarisation.

2.2. Metaphor in politics

Following the claims of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff, 1993), a metaphor involves a conceptual mapping of a complex target domain (i.e. covid-19) with a more concrete source

domain (i.e. war), which leads to the conceptual mapping COVID-19 AS A WAR¹. Such a mapping can be observed in linguistic occurrences of related metaphorical expressions, “we are at war against covid-19”.

Metaphors have been of particular interest to linguists and political scientists: they represent prevalent communicative tools to promote arguments during political debates (Durović and Silaški, 2010 ; Heyvaerts et al., 2019; Randour et al., 2020). Indeed, politicians use metaphors to legitimise their decisions (Augé, 2024a; Charteris-Black, 2011) and to establish a link between their political and individual interests (Ahrens, 2009). For instance, the representation of the covid-19 crisis as a “war” in Macron’s speech served to assimilate the health threat with an imaginary war threat, and this assimilation justified the national enforcement of restricting safety measures, comparable to the measures taken in times of war (Pettit, 2021).

Psycholinguistic surveys demonstrated that metaphors had an impact on public reasoning on political issues. Thibodeau & Boroditsky (2011; 2013) asked participants to choose between “reform” and “enforcement” policies against crime. Their results show that participants who received a text with VIRUS metaphors (“crime is a *virus infecting* the city of Addison” 2011: 3) were prone to favour the reform policy. In contrast, participants who received a text with BEAST metaphors (e.g., “crime is a *wild beast preying* on the city of Addison” 2011: 3) were prone to favour the enforcement policy.

Indeed, existing research demonstrated that metaphors could change the public’s “political mind” (Reuchamps et al., 2018). Therefore, this study sets out to further investigate the reception of political metaphors, in times of crisis.

2.3. Metaphors of covid-19

The representation of the covid-19 crisis as a “war” is not limited to the French President’s speech. The metaphor also prevailed in political discourses produced in the UK (Charteris-Black, 2021), in the US (Hanne, 2022), in Belgium (Rondiat, forthcoming), in Spain (Filardo-Llamas, 2022), in Hungary (Szabo and Szabo, 2022), among many other countries (see Olza et al., 2021). Consider the following examples from US and UK discourses:

- (1) Boris Johnson declares “*war*” on coronavirus with new emergency ‘C-19’ committee.
- (2) The fight to slow the spread of COVID-19 is “*our big war*,” Trump said. (quoted after Musolf, 2022a: 76-77).

In the French declaration (“we are at war”) and in the US and UK examples, the politicians’ references to “war” may seem quite ambiguous: what kind of “war”? what “weapons” can be used? What is the “defence strategy”? Indeed, politicians focused on the identification of covid-19 as the “enemy”. Their objective can be twofold: first, the metaphor served to illustrate the scale of the danger and to legitimise politicians’ preparedness and strategies to face a threat of war-like magnitude. Second, the conceptual mapping induced by the “covid-19 war” comprises a variety of matching features (Fauconnier, 2003). These features produce new relations between the target domain COVID-19 and the source domain WAR. For instance:

¹ By convention, metaphor scholars use capital letters to refer to conceptual mapping (i.e. source and target domains), while the metaphorical expression – as observed in discourse – is referred to within double quotation marks (Lakoff, 1993).

COVID-19 AS AN ENEMY

COVID-19 MANAGEMENT AS WAR MANAGEMENT

SAFETY MEASURES AS WEAPONS

PANDEMIC AS AN INVASION

HEALTH WORKERS AS AN ARMY

POLITICIANS AS WAR LEADERS (see Hanne, 2022)

Politicians relied on these matching features to encompass the different aspects of the “covid-19 war”. These matching features have been of interest to scholars since covid-19 represents an immaterial, invisible entity: sick people carrying the virus might, in some cases, be perceived as the DEFAULT ENEMIES (Augé, 2022; Rohela et al., 2020). Notably, Musolff (2022b) demonstrates how the exploitation of the “covid-19 war” metaphor led to the spread of conspiracy theories in the US: the “war” was turned against Chinese communities blamed for the “creation” of the virus.

The studies aforementioned provide valuable critical analyses of political “war” metaphor. Yet, research into the reception of metaphor in public discourse is more limited. Brugman et al. (2022) investigated how audience perception of covid-19 metaphors depended on source domain (covid-19 as a “war”, “flood”, or “marathon”) and country context (Germany, Italy, Netherlands). They produced a survey to ask 216 participants about the preference, aptness, complexity, conventionality, and credibility of different source domains. Their findings demonstrated that covid-19 metaphors were perceived differently by participants from different country contexts. They conclude:

Consequently, when politicians, policymakers, and journalists use metaphor to describe and explain an issue, they may first need to ensure that the target audience considers the proposed metaphor apt for describing the target domain, or otherwise resistance to it may impede communicative goals. (Brugman et al., 2022: 108)

I thus propose to complement this existing research by investigating such cases of “resistance” as observed in context of sociopolitical polarisation, in France.

2.4. Resistance to metaphor

Deconstructions of metaphors performed by audience and recipients have been analysed as cases of “resistance” (Renardel de Lavalette et al., 2019). For instance, van Poppel (2018: 914-919) refers to resistance in terms of acceptability of the metaphorical content and-or the critical questions associated with the argument. In metaphorical descriptions of cancer, Wackers et al. (2021) establish that the resistance to metaphor involves the conceptual dimension (the contested role of the metaphor in the author’s conceptualisation of cancer), the linguistic dimension (metaphorical expressions that carry particular associations for the author), and the communicative dimension (resistance to what the metaphor does by relating one conceptual domain to another). Burgers et al. (2019) investigate how the meanings of the metaphor “Drain the swamp” (DTS) as used by the then US President Donald Trump have been renegotiated by two right-winged and two left-winged platforms during the presidential election. The analysis

of partisan platforms leads Burgers et al. (2019) to conclude that the DTS metaphor has been “resisted” in three main ways: no transformation (paraphrase, explanation, evaluation), transformation of the target (narrowing and recasting), and the “more radical” transformation (2019: 61) of the source (changes in the metaphorical narrative, e.g. alternative ending).

It has been argued (Augé, 2024b) that analysis of resistance to metaphor may also consider the contested use of a metaphor to form a political argument. Notably, in my analysis of the then UK Prime Minister’s, Boris Johnson, metaphor of the “climate bomb”, I demonstrated that the politician’s identity and discursive pattern also formed part of the “resistance”. For example, recipients deconstructed the “climate bomb” metaphor to sarcastically identify Johnson as an anti-hero. Recipients also referred to the discursive pattern by criticising Johnson’s numerous references to works of fiction to describe a global threat. I here complement this research by considering how resistance may also relate to sociopolitical polarisation.

3. Methodology

3.1.Data Selection

To gain further insight into the resistance to Macron’s “covid-19 war” metaphor, I composed a dataset of texts published in French news media (newspapers and online news). I relied on the database Europresse (CEDROM SNI, 1999) which allows access to news media, reports, and social media messages published as early as 1944. I used advanced options to limit the results to texts produced during the first national lockdown (16th March, 2020 to 11th May, 2020). I filtered the results using keywords, to appear anywhere in the texts: “COVID-19” or “Coronavirus” or “SARS-COV-2” or “épidémie” (pandemic) and “Macron” and “guerre” (war).

The 617 texts have been downloaded and loaded into the freeware corpus analysis toolkit AntConc (Anthony, 2023). This toolkit enables to identify concordance lines and word frequencies in the dataset. As my purpose was to analyse occurrences of resistance to Macron’s “war” metaphor, I looked for concordances of “guerre” (war) and “Macron” appearing within a 15-word limit. These concordances helped me to select texts which explicitly associated the “war” with Macron’s speech, as opposed to other instances produced by Boris Johnson or Donald Trump, among others. It is acknowledged that concordances may not provide a complete overview of all the references to Macron’s “war” declaration in the dataset. Still, they allow for a qualitative analysis of the terms used in context, recognising that concordances contribute to the meaning a word (Shchinova, 2023) and can “convey messages implicitly” (Hunston, 2002). This search for concordances reduced the number of texts to 56. This limited number enabled me to analyse each occurrence of the word “guerre” (war) qualitatively (see below).

This qualitative analysis led me to notice the re-occurrence of the phrase “drôle de guerre” (phoney war) in the dataset (24 occurrences). The heterogenous and re-occurring use of the phrase has been of particular interest. The Phoney War represents the early stage of the Second World War – from September 3rd, 1939 to May 10th, 1940 – when the war had been declared and Poland was in the process of being invaded by Nazi Germany, while France and its allies remained unresponsive (Rossi-Landi, 2022). In French, this period has been named *la drôle de guerre* (i.e. the *funny war), possibly following mistranslation (Rossi-Landi, 2022). This mistranslation comprises two different conceptualisations of this period: “drôle” (as in “*la drôle de guerre*”) is a polysemic adjective which either qualifies a concept as “funny” or “strange” (Larousse, n.d.). The latter definition provides preliminary explanations for the re-occurring

references in recent media discourse: it is possible to infer that the qualification of the historical event as a “strange” event provides ground to perceive the unforeseen characteristics of the “covid-19-war” as a similar oddity.

3.2. Critical Metaphor Analysis

The procedure established in Critical Metaphor Analysis (Charteris-Black, 2011) has been used to determine the metaphorical meaning of the occurrences of the phrase “la drôle de guerre” in the dataset. This procedure comprises three main steps: 1. Identification, 2. Interpretation, 3. Explanation. In the identification phase, I observed how the phrase “la drôle de guerre” has been related to the main topic of discourse, i.e. covid-19. I selected texts which explicitly characterised covid-19 as a modern “phoney war”. However, I discarded texts in which the connections between covid-19 and “la drôle de guerre” were too ambiguous and not developed by the text-producers. In the interpretation phase, I considered if and how the “war” metaphor initially produced by Macron was referred to and transformed through the metaphor “la drôle de guerre”. In the explanation phase, I focused on the arguments conveyed through such transformations (see below).

This procedure resulted in the identification of 13 metaphorical occurrences of “la drôle de guerre” which referred to Macron’s covid-19 declaration. Considering the negative connotations associated with the phrase “la drôle de guerre” (which refers to a lost war), it may be unsurprising to find that most occurrences appear in left-wing media, as illustrated in Table 1:

Table 1: Repartition of metaphorical occurrences of “la drôle de guerre” in French media

Editorial stances	Media	Number of occurrences
Left-wing	Le Monde (x2), Libération, Marianne (x2)	5
Right-wing	Le Figaro (x2), L’Express	3
Not Applicable	Aujourd’hui en France (x3)	3
Specialised Media	Le Grand Continent (European geopolitics), La Montagne (sports)	2

Table 1 shows that cases of resistance to Macron’s “war” metaphor prevail in left-wing media. In contrast, Macron’s politics may be described as “centre-right”. However, the metaphor has also been “resisted” in right-wing media, which are yet expected to endorse (to some extent) the governmental stance.

3.3. Identification of arguments

Burgers et al. (2019) analysed resistance following three axes: no transformation, transformation of the target, and transformation of the source. The scholars identified the transformation of the source as the most “radical” form of resistance (2019: 61). In this research, I investigate the shift from Macron’s “war” metaphor to French media’s “phoney war” metaphor. I thus focus on source transformation (“war” > “*phoney war*”). I complement existing research into resistance by establishing how “radical” this resistance has been in the dataset, in view of the arguments derived from this resistance.

The 13 texts have been analysed following van Poppel's (2018) identification of metaphors as argumentative devices. She relies on Pragma-dialectics (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 2004) to develop a procedure for argumentation analysis that identifies the discussion parties, their standpoints, the type of difference of opinions, the argument structure, the starting point and the outcome of the discussion, and the rhetorical aspirations of discussants.

This procedure led me to identify four main arguments promoted through the metaphor “la drôle de guerre”:

1. The arguments that draw a causal link between the pandemic and public health policies
2. The arguments that present partial endorsement of Macron's declaration, but consider remaining uncertainties
3. The arguments that criticise Macron's “war” metaphor (focus on the discursive pattern, following Augé, 2024b)
4. The arguments that criticise Macron (focus on the discourse producer, following Augé, 2024b)

Table 2 illustrates the repartition of these different arguments in the dataset.

Table 2: Repartition of arguments in the dataset

Arguments	Media	Number of occurrences	Number/Editorial stances
Causal link pandemic-policies	L'Express, Marianne (x2), La Montagne, Aujourd'hui en France, Le Figaro, Le Monde	7	3x left-wing 2x right-wing 1x N/A 1x specialised
Partial endorsement	Le Grand Continent, Le Figaro, Aujourd'hui en France	3	1x right-wing 1x N/A 1x specialised
Discursive pattern	Libération, Aujourd'hui en France	2	1x left-wing 1x N/A
Discourse producer	Le Monde	1	1x left-wing

Although the limited number of data does not allow for a comparative study, Table 2 still shows that, in the dataset, partial endorsement of Macron's “war” metaphor appeared in media that are in line with the governmental stance. Thus, the media which may favour an opposite editorial stance exclusively referred to “la drôle de guerre” to criticise the political statement. This criticism, in left-wing media, notably appears in arguments that focus on Macron's discursive pattern and on the discourse producer. Table 2 also shows that all types of media (left-right-N/A-specialised) used the metaphor to draw causal links between the pandemic and public health policies. In the following section, I discuss these four main arguments in more details.

4. Resistance to Macron's "war" metaphor

In this section, I thoroughly analyse the arguments derived from four representative examples. These examples have been of interest because each of them presents one of the four arguments defined in section 3.3. Additionally, these examples explicitly refer to particular cases of sociopolitical polarisation that legitimise the scopes of the argumentation.²

4.1. Causal links between pandemic and policies

The exploitation of the metaphor "la drôle de guerre" in French media discourse emphasised the pre-existing concerns experienced in the health sector. The French media responded to Macron's statement to criticise the responsibilities attributed to health workers. Instead of describing an opposition between humanity and the virus, these media favoured descriptions of an opposition between the government and the health sector. This opposition originated in the sociopolitical context preceding the pandemic: indeed, a major protest within the health sector had been held from April 2019 to December 2019 (see Béguin, 2019). This was only interrupted as the pandemic was approaching, but health workers' resentment still prevailed. This polarised context was a major argument for Macron's opponents to criticise his negligence. This is illustrated in the extract provided below:

- (1) "We are at war". The President hammered it six times in his last speech in the Elysée, and he used it again in his last speech in Mulhouse, on Wednesday, March 25th. The doctors-heroes of the government won't fall at the front of the pandemic: it is not the war against the virus that kills some of them but, more accurately, the negligence comprised in the past and present public health policies. If hospital workers ever talked about a war, they do not refer to the war declared by the President: a leaflet rather alluded to the 1940's phoney war and L'étrange défaite by Marc Bloch³, when it comes to the foreseeable and guaranteed defeat.⁴ (Marianne, 30/03/2020)

In this extract, the metaphor user denies the validity of Macron's statement. She uses the working conditions of health workers to justify her criticism. The extract starts with a quotation of the presidential declaration. This declaration is immediately contradicted through a more controversial exploitation of the "war" metaphor: the metaphor user highlights the implications of the "war" metaphor for health workers, identified as "heroes on the front". This exploitation is controversial because the metaphor user insists on the doctors' dependence on the government, as they are referred to "the doctors-heroes of the government". This association conveys an image of politicians hiding behind doctors to protect themselves while doctors suffer from the "attack".

In the remainder of the extract, the metaphor user implies that health workers are left "unarmed" against the "enemy". She does not question the defeat of these "heroes" as she mentions their forthcoming death "at the front". This stance can find its origin in the protests that preceded the pandemic in France, when health workers blockaded hospitals to alarm about their lack of means. This reference is more explicit in the end of the extract, where the metaphor user refers to a "leaflet" mentioning "la drôle de guerre" in the hospitals.

The arguments derived from the metaphor "la drôle de guerre" differ from the arguments derived from Macron's "war" metaphor: this different exploitation highlights the government's

² All original and translated examples are provided at: DOI 10.17605/OSF.IO/XZKCY

³ *L'étrange Défaite* is a book written in 1940, by the historian Marc Bloch who aimed at explaining the French defeat following the phoney war.

⁴ All translations have been produced by the author.

lack of attention to health workers' requests. "La drôle de guerre" refers to health workers' pre-existing concerns regarding their lack of means to look after a large number of patients. The "covid-19-war" is thus only perceived as a consequence of such a lack of attention. The metaphor user insists on this aspect with further resistance to the "war" metaphor: she describes the doctors' deaths, but she denies the responsibility of a "virus-enemy". Instead, she identifies a "government-enemy". This identification justifies the depiction of covid-19 as a modern "drôle de guerre" since the "enemy" is identifiable, and the lack of means within the health sector prevents "heroes" from fighting. The French hospitals are conceptually depicted as a NATION TO BE INVADED (following matching features; Fauconnier, 2003). This can lead to disputable descriptions (which are yet avoided by the metaphor user). Indeed, this might infer that the INVADERS are the hospitalised patients. Health workers' fight involves the treatment of a high number of patients, who might be perceived as the means used by the GOVERNMENT-ENEMY to "attack" the doctors. However, the metaphor user downplays this claim by foregrounding the matching features enabling her to refer to "la drôle de guerre": the foreseeable defeat. She also places the doctors in the role of historians, whose knowledge enables them to document the reasons for this conflict. The focus is on the pre-existing struggle experienced in the health sector which justifies the identification of the real enemy: the government.

4.2. Partial endorsement

In other texts, the "war" metaphor used by the President is partially endorsed. The metaphor users rely on the metaphor "la drôle de guerre" to adopt a compassionate tone and to acknowledge remaining uncertainties regarding the virus. This can be observed in the extract presented below:

- (2) To employ the expression used by the President, we are indeed in a kind of war against the coronavirus. But this is a phoney war. There have been many mixed reactions in the beginning of the crisis, between fear and doubts. The phoney war is a strange period: we need to expect and to prepare for the worst without knowing enough about what we are supposed to face. During a phoney war, one does not know the enemy before seeing it. We wait for it while trying to best prepare for what is to come next. Now, this invisible enemy is present, even omnipresent, and adjustment and emergency measures are in place. Yet, when we work within the healthcare system, the most important thing that we want to ask to our citizens is to respect the lockdown order. This is their participation in the national effort against this "war". (Grand Continent, 25/03/2020)

This extract was produced by Dr. Catherine Le Gall, a general practitioner. It starts with an explicit endorsement of the President's metaphor ("indeed"). Yet the conceptualisation of the pandemic in terms of "la drôle de guerre" is favoured. This conceptualisation is, however, not aimed at criticising the politician's metaphor. It aims at adopting a compassionate tone addressed to the readers: the doctor highlights her understanding of the confusion ("mixed reactions"). The presented argument explicitly contradicts the claims made in the extract (1), and it ignores past protests. The exploitation of the metaphor "la drôle de guerre" sheds light on health workers' preparedness to face the forthcoming "covid-19 war". Dr. Le Gall repeatedly mentions the preparation of doctors to face the pandemic: "measures are in place", "we need to expect and to prepare", "we wait for it". This insistence on the health workers' capacity to "fight" the virus might promote national relief.

Yet the doctor still represents the virus as "invisible enemy". She thereby confirms the presence of an "enemy" in neighbouring countries ("one does not know the enemy before seeing it"). The metaphor user suggests that health workers were familiar – to some extent – with the

“attack” to come, despite the “invisible” characteristics assigned to the “enemy”. The personification of the virus helps the metaphor user to attribute concrete features to a complex concept. This exploitation of the metaphor “la drôle de guerre” fulfils explanatory functions by referring to a pre-conflict historical period– when Poland was in the process of being invaded after the war had been declared – to illustrate health workers’ preparation.

The doctor’s argument relies on a partial mapping associating the covid-19 crisis with “la drôle de guerre”, because it discards France’s passivity established during this period. Furthermore, the metaphor user insists on the “measures in place” that help workers to “fight the enemy” after its arrival in France. This can be distinguished from the historical “drôle de guerre” because historical reports indicate France’s lack of preparation. This extract presents an optimistic image of the pandemic, which might be balanced by the metaphor user’s acknowledgment of the impact of the virus, turning it into an “omnipresent enemy”.

In the end of the extract, the doctor relies on the readers’ gratitude towards health workers to ask for their help in the “war effort”. The conceptualisation HEALTH WORKERS AS AN ARMY is here endorsed and exploited: the lockdown order needs to be respected.

Despite the prevalent compassionate tone adopted in the extract, the metaphor “la drôle de guerre” also relies on readers’ fear originating in their knowledge of the French defeat in 1940. Yet, the exploitation of the metaphor throughout the extract also implicit refers to the victorious outcome of World War 2, in 1945. The end of the extract, which asks readers to “participate in the war”, aims at denying the possibility of a “defeat” by identifying the readers’ participation as an essential factor permitting a future “victory”.

4.3.Focus on the discursive pattern

Texts from the dataset present particular cases of resistance, which seem to be particular to resistance to politicians’ metaphor (as discussed in Augé, 2024b). Metaphor producers refer to the status of the politician, as a decision-maker, to reflect on the impact of political communication – which is characterised by the use of the “war” metaphor. This is illustrated in the example below:

- (3) Since the start of the pandemic, it is not easy for the President to find the right tone and the right rhythm. The choice of the word “war”, pronounced during his speech on March 16th, raises questions. A former MP corrected: “he engaged in the wrong direction using a war-like communication, which does not correspond to reality. This produces a gap between a President at war and a population that stays at home, without any tools to protect themselves. The president engaged in a phoney war: he is fighting on his own”. (Aujourd’hui en France, 06/04/2020)

In this extract, “la drôle de guerre” is mentioned in opposition to the “war” described by Macron. The metaphor user qualifies the “war” declaration as being inaccurate, and this inaccuracy is corrected with reference to “la drôle de guerre”. The argument derived from “la drôle de guerre” reflects on the enforced inactivity of the population, which is contrasted with the President’s rhetoric that (also) asks the population to “fight the enemy”. Thus, the metaphor user insists on the unmatching features of the resisted metaphor: the national “fight” requested by the politician cannot take place if the population is ordered to stay indoors. These unmatching features are then extended to the “weapons” that the population cannot access (“without any tools to protect themselves”). These unmatching features thus contradict the description of covid-19 as a “war”.

Yet the leading argument focuses on the inaccurate use of the “war” metaphor as part of Macron’s political communication, but not on the actual safety measures enforced after the presidential declaration. This is explicit in the beginning of the extract, which adopts a general viewpoint on Macron’s “tone and rhythm”, “since the start of the pandemic”. The “war” metaphor is cited as an illustration of inaccurate communication.

Even if the criticism is not explicitly directed against health policies, this questioning of Macron’s metaphor still implies that a metaphor, when produced by a decision-maker, can have a major impact on the audience. For instance, the confusion and fear caused by the global pandemic (as mentioned in extract 2) may increase following the confusion caused by this inaccurate “war” declaration, while the audience is simultaneously prevented from fighting-defending themselves.

Additionally, the metaphor user implicitly refers to the pre-existing sociopolitical polarisation by mentioning the lack of “weapons-tools”. This can also refer to prior lack of political engagement toward the health sector and Macron’s refusal to satisfy the requests made by health workers, who previously alarmed about their lack of means (see extract 1).

Therefore, the lack of “tools-weapons” experienced by the HEALTH WORKERS-ARMY, the enforcement of the national lockdown, the confusion generated by the crisis, and the pre-existing sociopolitical polarisation lead the metaphor user to refer to this “war” as a modern “drôle de guerre”. Accordingly, the “covid-19 drôle de guerre” refers to a “war” that does not actually take place and to the politician’s ignorance with regards to accurate war-like strategies.

4.4.Focus on the discourse producer

Alternatively, texts can downplay the responsibilities of the government to promote individual responsibilities. In such cases, the resistance to Macron’s metaphor does not focus on the use of the “war” metaphor, but on the identification of the speaker as a decision-maker. This is exemplified in the extract presented below:

- (4) “We are at war”. Not everybody can claim to be Clémenceau. A week after the outbreak of hostilities, the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic is more reminiscent of the phoney war than of the World War. It involves plenty of carefree people who mistook the lockdown for leisure. (Le Monde, 24/03/2020)

In this extract, the metaphor-user refers to Macron’s statement to mention the pre-existing sociopolitical polarisation that, in his opinion, prevents the population to effectively “fight the enemy”. The resistance to the “war” metaphor emerges from a particular understanding of the presidential declaration. Indeed, the metaphor user re-interpreted the metaphorical conceptualisation COVID-19 AS A WAR to transform it into COVID-19 AS THE FIRST WORLD WAR.

This re-conceptualisation originates in another part of the presidential statement describing health workers: “ils ont des droits sur nous” (they have authority over us). This sentence was originally produced by the then War Minister in 1917 to refer to French soldiers fighting on the fronts (Clémenceau, 1917). Macron identified health workers as an ARMY to express his gratitude. In *Le Monde*, this historical reference justifies the metaphor user’s identification of Emmanuel Macron as Georges Clémenceau. The focus is not on the disputable description attributing “fighting” duties to health workers – like in extract (1) – but on the ineffective self-identification of the French president. By referring to the First World War, the metaphor user insists on the contrast between the French population’s confidence in the past political statement which encouraged them to continue the fight against Germany, and the present

polarised context which led to major protests. This lack of public confidence justifies the metaphor user's resistance to the metaphorical conceptualisations COVID-19 AS THE FIRST WORLD WAR and EMMANUEL MACRON AS GEORGES CLEMENCEAU. He highlights a major unmatched feature comprised in these conceptualisations: the population does not listen to governmental guidance.

The metaphor user establishes the dangerous consequences of this misleading metaphor within the French society. Indeed, the metaphorical reference to "la drôle de guerre" associates past ignorance regarding a major conflict with present ignorance regarding a major health threat. This extract insists on the President's responsibilities to inform and guide the population in times of crisis. This is evidenced in the final sentence which derides people's behaviour through the (sarcastic) metaphorical conceptualisation LOCKDOWN AS LEISURE. Therefore, "la drôle de guerre" relates to the population's lack of confidence in the government, which has led them to adopt inadequate behaviour during the crisis.

The exploitation of the metaphor produces an argument based on anachronous reasoning: first, it refers to the First World War to then refer to "la drôle de guerre" (Second World War), and it exploits historical knowledge about this event to attribute responsibilities. Second, the dispute over the metaphor EMMANUEL MACRON AS GEORGES CLEMENCEAU omits a chronological factor: in 1917, the First World War was coming to an end; in 2020, the "war against covid-19" just started, which prevented the President from receiving the same attention received by Clémenceau.

In the next section, the plurality of arguments promoted through the metaphor "la drôle de guerre" are discussed in view of sociopolitical polarisation and crisis discourse. Further perspectives address political legitimisation strategies in times of crisis.

5. Discussion and Concluding Remarks

5.1. Summary

This paper casted light on the polarisation reflected in the resistance to the French President's metaphor, during the first wave of the covid-19 crisis. The aim was to uncover how polarisation may be reflected in the metaphorical representation of a political issue in public discourse.

This research uncovered one main strategy of resistance: the transformation of the source domain "war" into "la drôle de guerre" (phoney war). The corresponding occurrences demonstrated that this resistance conveyed four main arguments.

First, "la drôle de guerre" has drawn a causal link between the pandemic and health policies, with explicit references to pre-existing sociopolitical polarisation opposing the government to the health sector. This argument thus conveys a negative view on the government – which could have responded to health workers' requests. Quantitative findings show that this argument can be observed in right-wing and in left-wing media, discarding editorial endorsement of governmental stance.

Second, "la drôle de guerre" also represents a partial endorsement of the "war" metaphor. The argument produces a contrast between the pre-conflict period (the first wave as a phoney war) and a major conflict (high peak of the pandemic as a war) that can still be avoided, if the population adopts safety measures. In such cases, the sociopolitical polarisation is downplayed to insist on the danger of the health crisis. This partial endorsement is, unsurprisingly, not observed in opposition, left-wing, media. However, the limited number of occurrences does not allow for any generalised claims.

Third, “la drôle de guerre” can focus on the President’s discursive pattern. The argument uncovers the unmatching features existing between a “typical war” where the population needs to fight and defend themselves and the “covid-19 drôle de guerre” where the population is prevented from fighting. This distinction is further justified with reference to sociopolitical polarisation which involved a lack of “medical tools-weapons”. Such cases of resistance have not been observed in right-wing media.

Fourth, “la drôle de guerre” can also focus on the discourse producer. The argument insists on Macron’s status as a decision maker, who is yet not listened to by the population he is supposed to govern. This explicitly refers to pre-existing sociopolitical polarisation as this argument shows that this polarisation eventually endangered the population, who thus refused to listen to the safety guidance proposed by the government. This argument has exclusively been observed in left-wing media.

Therefore, this paper provided evidence showing that pre-existing sociopolitical polarisation was reflected in the resistance to political crisis communication.

5.2. Polarisation, Resistance, and Legitimation

This paper confirmed the hypothesis previously made by Brugman et al. (2022). The analysis of resistance to Macron’s “war” metaphor demonstrated that arguments derived from resistance referred to sociopolitical polarisation, which could have led the audience to question and criticise the declaration (and even, the discourse producer). This eventually impeded the politician’s communicative goals: arguments explicitly identified Macron as an “enemy” (Nelson, 2003). These arguments denied the identification of “the virus-enemy” (example 1) and insisted on the government’s responsibilities (the lack of “weapons-tools” in example 3; the lack of public trust in example 4). Even when the declaration is partially endorsed (example 2), the focus is on the “doctors-army”, but not on governmental strategies. It thus appears that Macron’s declaration generated forms of polarisation (De Cock et al., 2022).

Accordingly, this paper also justified Burgers et al.’s (2019:61) claims regarding the “radicality” of source domain transformation (from “war” to “*phoney* war”). This type of resistance not only questions the original conceptualisation of covid-19 as a “war”, but it also offers thorough reflections on the causes and effects of this disputable conceptualisation. Notably, it relies on this metaphorical conceptualisation as evidence of politicians’ responsibilities for sociopolitical polarisation, and as evidence of politicians’ responsibilities for the development of the crisis (from a phoney war to a war).

The combination of metaphor theories (Charteris-Black, 2011) and argumentation theories (van Poppel, 2018) also represents a significant step in the analysis of resistance to metaphor. Indeed, this combination has casted light on the particularities of metaphors produced by politicians (Augé, 2024b) and on the significance of polarisation in crisis discourse and crisis management.

This combination may in turn provide further insights into politicians’ legitimisation strategies (Butler, 2024; Rondiat, forthcoming; Szabo and Szabo, 2022). It has been argued (Augé, 2024a) that, in times of conflict, political legitimisation may turn into cases of “overlegitimation”. Notably, the confusion, fear, and uncertainties generated by the crisis have been expressed by the population on social media. Yet this profusion of messages was also accompanied by the governmental (“legitimate”) warnings aimed at convincing the

population to acknowledge the risks and respect safety measures. It has been observed (Augé, 2024b) that this profusion also formed ground for scepticism on social media.

This leads me to argue that more research is needed into reception to political discourse (Perrez et al., 2015; 2019; Reuchamps et al., 2018), with particular attention paid to arguments derived from resistance to metaphor.

5.3. Further perspectives

Although the analysis of arguments presented through metaphors may require a qualitative scope of research and small dataset, future research may aim at improving the methodology adopted to select data so as to offer a more systematic overview of the different arguments. This would also enable me to confirm or nuance the claims regarding the repartition of different arguments in different types of media, distinguished by their editorial stances. However, it is to be noted that the editorial stance of French media is not clear-cut. Most of the media investigated in this paper are owned by private companies, and their editorial stances may shift in time (like it has been -punctually- observed in *Le Monde* and *Le Journal du Dimanche*).

Future research may also involve the design of a survey to analyse more thoroughly the various cases of resistance to the “covid-19 war” metaphor, and to uncover the influence of sociopolitical polarisation and politicians’ legitimisation strategies on recipients’ perceptions of the “covid-19 war”. It would also be relevant to examine cases where the “covid-19 war” metaphor has been exploited by the public and health workers in arguments aimed at convincing the government to support the health sector.

To conclude, this research presented relevant findings regarding the possible link between sociopolitical polarisation and resistance to political metaphor in public discourse. Although the covid-19 crisis can be considered as being over (to some extent), these findings yet present valuable insights into politicians’ use of metaphor to fulfil communicative goals. These findings may still apply to on-going and future crises.

The author reported no conflict of interest

Data availability statement

The original and translated data are provided at DOI 10.17605/OSF.IO/XZKCY

All data have been accessed from europresse.com, through institutional access [last access: 07.01.2024]

Funding

This research is part of an academic project conducted at UCLouvain, Institute of Political Sciences Louvain-Europe, funded by the Fonds Spécial de Recherche (FSR).

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