

Situationally-triggered metaphors as political arguments:

Public responses and argumentative exploitation

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes to investigate the public responses to situationally-triggered metaphors as these have been observed in political argumentative discourse. Situationally-triggered metaphors occur when a nonmetaphorical connection is made between the source domain and an aspect of the relevant situational context. The question addressed in this research is: how are such metaphors perceived by the public when these form part of the political argumentation? To answer this question, the study focuses on a particular instance of political situationally-triggered metaphor i.e., Boris Johnson's "James Bond" metaphor produced during COP26. The paper draws on Critical Metaphor Analysis and Deliberate Metaphor Theory to analyse the public comments and reactions posted on the social media platform Twitter in response to the politician's arguments. The analysis reveals that most of the public responses exploit the "James Bond" metaphor to dispute Johnson's self-identification to the fictional character and provide meta-arguments that revolve around the politician's misuse of metaphors. In contrast, responses that exploit the metaphor to convey political arguments or endorsement are much more limited. It is thus argued that situationally-triggered metaphors do not only represent a political rhetorical device, but these are also effective political tools to shift public attention towards discursive patterns instead of arguments presented in discourse.

Keywords: Situational-triggering; metaphor; political discourse; social media; argumentation

Words count: 9,745

1. Introduction

Situationally-triggered metaphors and topic-triggered metaphors (Semino, 2009) remain under-studied features of figurative discourse. These represent a particular category of metaphors which are motivated by the “communicative situation” (Kövecses, 2010). Topic-triggered metaphors can be observed when “an aspect of the topic under discussion inspires the choice of the metaphorical source domain that is evoked via the metaphorical expressions used in the text” (Semino, 2008, 27). For example, *The Guardian* referred to the conflict between South Africa and Morocco over control of Western Sahara as a “Diplomatic desert”, where the source concept “desert” applies to both the lack of diplomatic relationships and to the literal desert of Sahara (Semino, 2008, 27). In comparison, situationally-triggered metaphors can be observed when a nonmetaphorical link can be established between the source domain and some aspect of the relevant situational context (i.e., place, time of the year, identity of the speaker, identity of the addressee; Semino, 2009, 222). For example, the advertisement of the soft drink *Lucozade* relied on the metaphorical statement “Refuel your car, refuel yourself” while the advertisement was placed on small billboards in motorway service stations in the UK. The drink was thus presented as necessary to the recipient in the same way fuel was necessary to the recipient’s car, drawing on the location in which the ad was meant to be viewed (Semino, 2008, 171-175; 2009, 224-225).

This paper proposes to analyse the public appreciation of such particular metaphors when these form part of political arguments. Notably, politicians’ reliance on situationally-triggered metaphors has been observed as part of a larger-scale corpus-based project investigating the argumentative exploitation of metaphor in political discourse about the environmental crisis (Author, 2023)¹. Yet, existing literature has not discussed the argumentative use of

¹ In contrast, topic-triggered metaphors represent a typical feature of news headlines and media discourse (Semino, 2008; 2009; Silaški, 2009)

situationally-triggered metaphors in politics. In particular, the discourse produced by the then British Prime Minister Boris Johnson is of interest. The results of the corpus-based project that inspired this research have revealed that the British politician significantly relies on situationally-triggered metaphors to communicate about environmental policies.

This led me to investigate the possible reasons behind this discursive pattern. To do so, I here analyse the public appreciation of and response to Boris Johnson's situationally-triggered metaphors. The underlying research question is: how are such metaphors perceived by the public when these form part of the political argumentation?

To offer a detailed answer to this research question, I focus on a particular instance of situationally-triggered metaphor: Boris Johnson's "James Bond" metaphor (see below) produced during the 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) taking place in Glasgow (Scotland) on November 1st, 2021. The event was aimed at addressing the global climate crisis by gathering 120 world leaders, 22,274 party delegates, and 3,886 media representatives. The event lasted two weeks and resulted in the Glasgow Climate Pact which establishes political commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in almost 200 countries (United Nations, 2021).

On this occasion, the British politician drew conceptual links between the place of the event and the origins of this fictional character. This link was exploited throughout the speech to convey a metaphorical description of environmental policies and political commitments with, notably, references to a "doomsday device" that James Bond and COP26 attendees were expected to defuse:

Welcome to COP, welcome to Glasgow and to Scotland whose most globally famous fictional son is almost certainly a man called James Bond who generally comes to the climax of his highly lucrative films strapped to a doomsday device desperately trying

to work out which coloured wire to pull to turn it off while a red digital clock ticks down remorselessly to a detonation that will end human life as we know it.

And we are in roughly the same position, my fellow global leaders, as James Bond today except that the tragedy is that this is not a movie, and the doomsday device is real, and the clock is ticking to the furious rhythm of hundreds of billions of pistons and turbines and furnaces and engines.

[...] We may not feel much like James Bond not all of us necessarily look like James Bond, but we have the opportunity, the duty to make this summit the moment when humanity finally began – and I stress began – to defuse that bomb (Boris Johnson, COP26)²

This metaphorical statement has successfully attracted public and media attention (448 articles discussed the metaphor in UK newspapers; Nexis, n.d.; see also Gagliano, 2023). Notably, the political speech has then been cited by the politician himself, journalists, and citizens on the social media platform Twitter. These citations represent significant objects of research as these can not only indicate the stance adopted by the individual citing the metaphor, but they are also opportunities for the public to respond to the political argument via comments, likes, and re-tweets. Therefore, the present study investigates public comments posted on Twitter to assess the public response to and appreciation of Boris Johnson's situationally-triggered metaphor.

In the following section, I discuss the role played by metaphors in political argumentation and I provide information regarding the theoretical approaches relevant to conduct this research. I then explain my methodology to analyse public appreciation and distinguish different public responses to the metaphor. I offer a detailed discussion of the results pertaining to different

² Transcript available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-address-at-cop26-world-leaders-summit-opening-ceremony>

public responses, and I conclude this paper with a final discussion regarding the (in)effective reliance on situationally-triggered metaphors in political argumentation.

2. Metaphors and political argumentation

Following the claims of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff, 1993), a metaphor involves a conceptual mapping of a complex target domain, such as environmental risks, with a more concrete, familiar source domain, such as a “ticking bomb”, which leads to the conceptual mapping ENVIRONMENTAL RISKS AS A TICKING BOMB. Such a mapping can be observed in linguistic occurrences of related metaphorical expressions. These can, in turn, refer to a particular aspect of the context of production (i.e., place of COP26) through reliance on a particular source domain (i.e., James Bond). Accordingly, the place of the event where the discourse was produced is reflected in Boris Johnson’s choice of the source domain JAMES BOND. This process has been described as a case of situational-triggering (Koller, 2002; Semino, 2008; 2009; Silaški, 2009). According to Semino (2009),

situation-relevant source domains may be selected strategically to achieve particular rhetorical goals, such as attracting and involving hearers-readers via humour or persuading them of the validity of particular claims (2009, 232).

The source domain of the metaphor thus involves additional implications related to the context of production. This suggests a political communicative strategy that indicates that the conceptual mapping ENVIRONMENTAL RISKS AS A TICKING BOMB has been adapted to the context of production i.e., an international debate about the climate crisis. The particularity of the context – although ignored in the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff, 1993) – has thus a significant impact on the linguistic production of a conceptual metaphor (Charteris-Black, 2011; 2019). This association between the metaphorical statement and the context of production has been extensively analysed by Steen (2008; 2011) who adjusted the

Conceptual Metaphor Theory to introduce the “three-dimensional model”. This “model” includes the conceptual dimension (conceptual mappings in thoughts), the linguistic dimension (metaphors in language use), and the communicative dimension (the use of metaphors in interaction). Within the communicative dimension, metaphors can in turn be used deliberately (the Deliberate Metaphor Theory, Steen 2008; 2011). In such cases, the producer intends to change the recipient’s perspective on the target domain by exploiting the source domain. Following Reijnierse’s extensive analysis of deliberate metaphors (2017), even a conventional metaphor can be considered deliberate if it is extended in discourse (2017: 111). In view of Boris Johnson’s speech, the particularity of the situationally-triggered metaphor and its exploitation throughout the speech explicitly signal deliberateness.

van Poppel (2018; 2020) addresses relevant questions regarding the identification of metaphors as argumentative device. Her analysis combines the Deliberate Metaphor Theory (Steen, 2008; 2011) and Pragma-dialectics (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 2004) which defines a well-developed procedure for argumentation analysis that identifies the discussion parties, their standpoints, the type of difference of opinions, the argument schemes and structure, the starting point and the outcome of the discussion, and the rhetorical aspirations of discussants (van Eemeren, 2010; van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 2004). This combination leads van Poppel (2020) to conclude that deliberate metaphors are “the best candidates for having a relevant function in argumentative discourse” (2020, 248).

In the context of COP26, Boris Johnson’s use of the situationally-triggered metaphor fulfils argumentative functions by attracting the audience via humour (consistent with Semino, 2009). The identification of COP26 attendees as JAMES BOND assign them heroic characteristics, which presupposes (Wilson and Sperber, 1979) that the JAMES BOND-ATTENDEES are benevolent individuals whose main interest is to save humanity from the CLIMATE-DOOMSDAY DEVICE. Thus, the situationally-triggered metaphor in Boris Johnson’s speech

mainly provides arguments regarding the good will of the attendees, and in particular, of the discourse producer himself: this is performed through humoristic stance and the emphasis made on the heroic actions performed by the hero (e.g., “strapped to a doomsday device desperately trying to work out which coloured wire to pull to turn it off”). One may even note the lack of description of the VILLAIN within the political narrative: while nations of the Global North (which include the UK) are usually held responsible for climatic damages (see Greenpeace and the Runnymede Trust, 2022), the CREATOR OF THE DOOMSDAY DEVICE is never identified in Boris Johnson’s speech. Therefore, the leading argument derived from the metaphor aims at promoting the politician’s “positive face” (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Spencer-Oatey, 2007) in an (environmental) context which might have been face-threatening (in view of his responsibilities for the crisis).

Indeed, politicians use metaphors to “sound right”, legitimise their decisions, and persuade the population that their policies are good for the nation (Charteris-Black, 2011, 15). These help them to promote a link between their political and individual interests (Ly, 2013, 152). An illustration of this argumentative strategy can be observed in Charteris-Black’s (2019) and Musolff’s (2019) analyses of the argumentative exploitations of the phrase “having your cake and eating it”. This phrase has been attributed to Boris Johnson in his discourse about Brexit. It has then played a significant role in the political argumentation related to Brexit; the British media and British politicians have exploited this phrase in various ways to either endorse or criticise (e.g., “Stop it, Boris! This recycling is pasta joke. If you carry on, Liam Fox will want a pizza the action. Or you’ll be moved to the Minestrone of Defence”; quoted after Musolff, 2019, 138) Boris Johnson’s decision and pro-Brexit arguments (“My policy on cake is still pro having it and pro eating it” quoted after Musolff, 2019, 136).

Argumentative deconstructions of metaphors have been analysed as cases of “resistance” to metaphors (Bilstrup Finsen, et al, 2021; Burgers et al, 2019; Renardel de Lavalette et al, 2019;

Wackers, et al, 2021). For instance, Burgers et al. (2019) rely on Critical Metaphor Analysis (Charteris-Black, 2004; see below) to investigate how the existing 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 used 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. additional characters or objects, alternative ending). Alternatively, van Poppel (2018) suggests that if a metaphor were to evoke criticism, then this criticism would involve the material premise (the acceptability of the content of this premise), the connection premise (the critical questions associated with each argument scheme) or both (2018, 914-919). In the context of metaphorical descriptions of cancer, Wackers et al. (2021) establish that the resistance to (violence) metaphor can involve 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).

As will be demonstrated in the following sections, the particularities of the situationally-triggered metaphor as part of the political argumentation and the particularities of Twitter as a platform where such a “resistance” to the metaphor occurs lead me to adapt these existing findings. For instance, none of the studies mentioned above reflects on resistance to political metaphors as performed by the public (as this is enabled by Twitter). Indeed, social media enable the public to share information, opinions and experiences (Roxburgh, et al., 2019). These represent a platform that displays various opinions and arguments about environmental

decisions and scandals (Edwards, 2013). Social media users notably rely on metaphors to promote their own evaluation of the topic (Piata, 2016).

Accordingly, the analysis of public responses to and appreciation of Boris Johnson's metaphor also needs to consider the contested use of a situationally-triggered metaphor to form a political argument, the personal (as opposed to professional) motivation to comment on the metaphorical statement, and the characteristics of social media discourse.

In the following section, I discuss in more details how the situationally-triggered metaphor produced by Boris Johnson and its exploitations by social media users have been analysed.

3. Methodology

The research started with a selection of tweets referring to Boris Johnson's COP26 speech. This research primarily relies on the messages and replies provided on the social media platform Twitter as existing literature has demonstrated that the public access to such messages favours wider (and increasing) mediatic impacts, especially in discussions of political concerns (Roginsky, 2015; Roginsky and De Cock, 2015; 2022). It is to be noted that the results presented here do not reflect the appreciation of Boris Johnson's metaphorical statement by the general public, as the responses examined in this research have been produced by a particular community (Twitter users). Yet, my focus is not on the general significance of the results, but on the ways the public has relied on the functionalities provided by Twitter to argumentatively exploit the political metaphor.

The search terms "Boris Johnson", "COP26", and "James Bond" were entered in the search option on Twitter. The only selection criteria at play in this search were that 1. the tweets to be analysed received responses from social media users, and 2. the tweets to be analysed referred to the situationally-triggered metaphor (either directly by explicitly identifying the metaphor

or indirectly by mentioning the source domain of the metaphor). Five main tweets answered these two criteria:

- Sky News (01/11/2021), 15 retweets, 30 quote tweets, 54 likes, 75 replies: *Prime Minister Boris Johnson compares #COP26 to a bomb-defusing James Bond in his opening speech to world leaders.*
- Channel 4 News (01/11/2021), 30 retweets, 89 quote tweets, 51 likes, 197 replies: *“We are in roughly the same position as James Bond today, except that the tragedy is this is not a movie and the doomsday device is real” Speaking at the COP26 summit, Boris Johnson compares the world’s fight against climate change to James Bond’s missions to save humanity.*
- ABC News (01/11/2021), 30 retweets, 2 quote tweets, 104 likes, 23 replies: *UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson started the opening ceremony of COP26 with an analogy to James Bond finding himself strapped to a doomsday device threatening to destroy the world while the spy tries to defuse it.*
- The Recount (01/11/2021), 16 retweets, 9 quote tweets, 52 likes, 12 replies: *UK PM Boris Johnson opens COP26 climate summit by comparing global climate crisis to James Bond “strapped to a doomsday device...while a red digital clock ticks down remorselessly to a detonation that will end human life as we know it”*
- Yahoo News (01/11/2021), 2 retweets, 1 quote tweet, 5 likes, 4 replies: *Boris Johnson compares climate crisis to a James Bond “doomsday device” in his #COP26 opening speech*

Following these criteria, Boris Johnson’s own tweet could not be included in this research as he never explicitly cited the metaphor on Twitter:

- Boris Johnson’s tweet (01/11/2021), 167 retweets, 65 quote tweets, 744 likes, 1,106 replies: *While @COP26 will not be the end of climate change, it can, and it must mark the beginning of the end. My address at the World Leaders Summit Opening Ceremony. #COP26 #TogetherForOurPlanet.*

As a result, the replies to this tweet did not refer to the metaphor and could not provide any answer to the main research question addressed in this paper (i.e., public appreciation of the situationally-triggered metaphor used in political argumentation).

All the replies to the five main tweets have been manually analysed. Similarly, only the replies which explicitly mentioned the metaphor (either by referring to the metaphor itself or by

exploiting the source domain) have been selected for the research. The replies which exploited the source domain have been analysed following the methodology established in Critical Metaphor Analysis (Charteris-Black, 2004; see also Burgers et al., 2019) i.e., 1. Identification, 2. Interpretation, 3. Explanation. In the identification phase, I established the metaphorical use of the references to James Bond. In the interpretation phase, I considered if and how the James Bond metaphor was transformed. In the explanation phase, I focused on the (counter)arguments conveyed through such transformations (or lack of transformation). The analysis of the replies which explicitly referred to the metaphor as a discursive device (but did not exploit the source domain) focused on the users' subjective perceptions and qualifications of the metaphor in the political context (see below). This procedure resulted in a dataset of 77 replies mentioning the metaphor.

In order to analyse the different arguments presented in these responses from the public, I adapted the “sub-strategies” established in Burgers et al. (2019), i.e. no transformation, transformation of the source, transformation of the target, to the particularity of the situationally-triggered metaphor. For instance, some responses “transformed” the metaphor to similarly refer to an aspect of the situational context in which the metaphor was originally produced (i.e., humour, political context and identity of the discourse producer). This part of the research revealed four points of focus adopted by social media users: 1. Focus on the metaphorical expression as a discursive pattern, 2. Focus on the discourse producer, 3. Focus on the source concept, and 4. Environmental (counter)arguments.

These points of focus necessarily interact with each other: while this research initially focused on the environmental arguments provided by the public, the replies show that most of the Twitter users have “transformed” Boris Johnson's metaphor to the extent that such environmental arguments remain implicit. For instance, some users described the British politician as a “bomb scare”, which suggests that the focus is on the discourse producer. Yet,

it can be speculated that this description also involves environmental considerations (i.e., Boris Johnson’s environmental decisions represent a danger). Because of the word-limit imposed on Twitter or because the users did not aim at explicating their responses, such a response cannot represent a “typical” case of environmental argumentation by the public. Therefore, even though each of the responses could be related to environmental arguments (consistent with the context of production), their points of focus differ – as I aim to demonstrate in the following discussion.

In responses which focus on the discursive pattern, users do not exploit the metaphor but cite it explicitly (e.g., through references to “metaphor”, “figurative language”, “analogy”, or “comparison”) as an example of bad political rhetoric. In cases where the focus is on the discourse producer, the users change the conceptual mapping to describe Boris Johnson’s role within the JAMES BOND narrative. The responses which focus on the source concept refer exclusively to popular knowledge regarding the source concept JAMES BOND. In the responses which provide environmental (counter)arguments, the users exploit the metaphor to either endorse or criticise Boris Johnson’s statement with references to environmental concerns. Table 1 below provides more details about these sub-strategies. I shall mention that the frequencies displayed in this table are only indicative: the scope of this research is primarily qualitative as the analysis of a situationally-triggered metaphor necessarily implies “specific, individual uses of metaphor in context” (Semino, 2009, 223) and the responses associated with such a metaphor are to be examined following a similar methodological perspective.

Table 1: Public responses to Boris Johnson’s situationally-triggered metaphor

Sub-strategies	Number of replies
Focus on the discursive pattern	31
Focus on the discourse producer	28
Focus on the source concept JAMES BOND	7
Focus on the climate crisis	9
Focus on the climate crisis - endorsement	2

As indicated in Table 1, most of the replies posted on Twitter with regards to Boris Johnson's use of the situationally-triggered metaphor do not exploit the metaphor. Instead, these responses reflect on the (in)appropriate use of the metaphorical device in the political context of international discussions about the climate crisis. In such responses, the emphasis is made on the humorous stance permitted by the situationally-triggered metaphor which contradicts the significant concerns associated with the topic of discourse. Then, coherent with the findings described in Burgers et al. (2019), social media users have also transformed the source to either assign Boris Johnson a (different) role within the narrative (e.g., the VILLAIN) or reflect on the source concept JAMES BOND to discuss the metaphorical conceptualisation in terms of the different stories attached to this fictional character (e.g., the latest James Bond film). The environmental arguments are much less frequent in the responses observed on Twitter: in these responses, the users either exploit the JAMES BOND metaphor to insist on the difficulties to control the climate crisis (e.g., with references to fossil fuels lobby) or to (partially) endorse the political claim by focusing on the lethal consequences on the CLIMATE-DOOMSDAY DEVICE. These frequencies – which remain indicative of the public responses – thus show that the political reliance on a situationally-triggered metaphor to convey environmental arguments has been flagged up by a majority of users, who interpreted it as an example of bad political rhetoric. Each category of responses is thoroughly discussed in the following section.

4. Public responses to Boris Johnson's situationally-triggered metaphor

4.1. Focus on the discursive pattern

Boris Johnson's situationally-triggered metaphor has been heavily criticised by the public. Online users have referred to the JAMES BOND metaphor as an example of bad political rhetoric. In such cases, the public did not specifically criticise the politician's stance on the climate crisis, but they blamed him for his rhetorical pattern i.e., they noted that the former UK Prime Minister repeatedly relied on source concepts emerging from popular culture – such as

JAMES BOND – to discuss significant concerns. For instance, among the 31 responses which referred to the misuse of the metaphor, 12 compared the JAMES BOND metaphor to previous metaphorical statements produced by Boris Johnson, as in:

- (1) Is this the best we can do? I suppose it beats Kermit the frog metaphor?
- (2) Last time he was Kermit the Frog, now he's James Bond. Can he please leave his childhood fantasies alone and please do some real work!

The former Prime Minister's reference to the fictional character JAMES BOND led the public to recall Boris Johnson's KERMIT THE FROG metaphor also used in the context of the climate crisis. This statement was produced during the UN General Assembly held in New York (US), in September 2021. On this occasion, the British politician stated³:

- (3) And when Kermit the frog sang It's Not Easy Bein' Green, I want you to know he was wrong - and he was also unnecessarily rude to Miss Piggy. We have the technology: we have the choice before us. (Boris Johnson, UN General Assembly)

Similarly, the politician reflected on the place in which the speech took place (i.e., the US) to refer to a related source concept, KERMIT, a fictional character invented by an American puppeteer and film director, Jim Henson. This metaphor has been criticised by the public on Twitter since the ground of the conceptual mapping only hold because of the colour displayed by the source concept (i.e., a frog) while the colour "green" in environmental discourse comprises significant implications related to the protection of the environment (Author, 2019; 2023). In addition, the "discourse history" (Zinken, 2007) of the metonymy GREEN FOR THE ENVIRONMENT also involves documented misuse that rose awareness about the process of "greenwashing" (Pérez-Sobrino, 2013; Pollaroli & Rocci, 2015). Therefore, the limited ground allowing Boris Johnson to map the source concept KERMIT THE FROG with the target concept ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION was not only criticised because it was, to some

³ Transcript available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-speech-at-the-un-general-assembly-22-september-2021>

extent, deprived of environmental implications, but also because it represents an instance of such “misuses”: “green” is mainly mentioned as the only feature that links two conceptually distinct domains.

In the case of the JAMES BOND metaphor, the public compared both statements as these similarly rely on fictional characters and popular culture to describe environmental strategies. However, as mentioned in (1), the JAMES BOND version has been evaluated as being better than the KERMIT version. Indeed, in the context of COP26, Boris Johnson relies on this source concept to include it within a detailed narrative (Hanne et al., 2014) that depicts JAMES BOND-POLITICIANS trying to DEFUSE (or elaborate political strategies) a DOOMSDAY DEVICE-CLIMATE CRISIS. Therefore, the metaphor insists on the representation of the climate crisis as a tangible danger for humanity and politicians’ responsibility to prevent damages. One may note that similar metaphors have been used by the environmental Non-Governmental Organisation Greenpeace in their descriptions of the CLIMATE CRISIS AS A TIME BOMB (Doyle, 2007). Boris Johnson’s JAMES BOND metaphor thus draws on pre-existing conceptualisations endorsed by environmental activists. The criticism appearing in (1) and (2) reflects on Boris Johnson’s numerous references to works of fiction to describe a prevalent global threat. By comparing the two metaphors, online users drew on this fictional feature which prevents an accurate description of the extent of the threat: references to popular culture are thus badly perceived by the public because these are conceptually associated with public enjoyment and heroic adventures. This cognitive bias (Musolff, 2016) related to the source concept JAMES BOND eventually contradicts the main features of the target concept, which is associated with global damages and suffering.

Responses notably emphasised the conceptual association existing between the source concept JAMES BOND and British pop culture. One online user reflected on this link by promoting a different metaphor following Boris Johnson's model:

(4) The World is watching and wondering WTF is that on the stage? We're going to need Attenborough to narrate something and dramatic backing music to keep people's attention! Otherwise, it could be mistaken as an episode of Live at the Apollo on Dave!

The humorous tone adopted by Boris Johnson through his metaphorical reference to James Bond is contrasted with the "dramatic" narrative characterising David Attenborough's discourse on the environment (see below). First, the online user contests Boris Johnson's statement by disputing the reference to British fiction and by replacing it by another popular reference to British culture i.e., David Attenborough's documentaries. Sir David Attenborough is an English broadcaster and biologist famous for his BBC documentary series *Life* that address the topics of ecology and preservation of the ecosystem⁴. In (4), the reference to Attenborough is thus another way to describe environmental protection through the lens of the British culture. The online user compares the "dramatic" tone typically adopted by Attenborough with the playful tone adopted by the then British Prime Minister. The JAMES BOND metaphor is perceived as an instance of this misguided playful tone: the frivolous characteristics of James Bond's adventures (i.e., fiction) mapped with the dramatic characteristics of the climate crisis are perceived as a form of political humour (i.e., "Live at the Apollo"). However, the significant impact of the commitments produced during COP26 along with the public acknowledgment of the environmental danger represent major contextual factors that prevent public appreciation of political humour. For this reason, Attenborough is cited as a counterexample that represents a "desirable" tone to be adopted by politicians during climate summits. Second, the user also refers to another significant feature of British popular

⁴ David Attenborough's series available at: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1533395/>

culture to deride Boris Johnson's statement: Live at the Apollo i.e., a British stand-up comedy programme broadcast on the TV channel BBC⁵. The criticism is justified by a possible understanding of the JAMES BOND metaphor as a form of political humour (see Brugman et al., 2022). This part of the message exaggerates the inaccuracy of Boris Johnson's tone: the reference to the stand-up comedy programme implies that, during COP26, Boris Johnson has been identified as a comedian whose sole purpose was to make people laugh. The online user relies on Boris Johnson's own rhetorical strategy to criticise the political speech (i.e., references to British pop culture). In addition, the identification of the British politician as a comedian does not only imply that Boris Johnson did not behave as a politician, but it also implies that he exposed himself as a bad comedian-politician since the context of production prevented the audience from appreciating the "James Bond joke". Thus, the situationally-triggered metaphor has been perceived by the public as a bad pun that conflicted with the context of production.

4.2. Focus on the source concept JAMES BOND

The criticism regarding Boris Johnson's metaphor has also been communicated through public fact-checking. These responses focus on the source concept: online users explain that the JAMES BOND narrative promoted by the former Prime Minister is inaccurate, which suggests that a different narrative would have been preferred to convey environmental arguments, as in:

- (5) James Bond. Yet another thing Boris Johnson has previously displayed little knowledge of
- (6) James Bond dies in the latest film

The online users argue that the reference to James Bond is misguided. Indeed, the politician's argument is that "we are in roughly the same position as James Bond" i.e., the politician

⁵ Live at the Apollo available at URL: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b008cnxn>

identifies attendees as SPIES trying to save the world from an imminent danger (i.e., the CLIMATE-DOOMSDAY DEVICE). This narrative presupposes (Wilson and Sperber, 1979) that the conceptual mapping aims at encouraging world leaders to behave like James Bond. The politician refers to popular knowledge associated with the source concept (Musolff, 2016) to imply that the protagonist eventually saves the world from this danger. Yet, this cognitive bias induced by popular culture is contradicted by online users who refer to James Bond's "latest film": while Boris Johnson might have referred to the numerous films-books in which James Bond is victorious, online users refer to one counterexample in which the hero dies. Eventually, the death of James Bond leads us to question the ground of Boris Johnson's situationally-triggered metaphor: the narrative appears as a morbid prophecy that presents the end of humanity as an unavoidable conclusion, thereby turning environmental actions into futile occupations. The metaphor user also suggests that Boris Johnson, like James Bond, will not succeed in his mission. These public responses do not only criticise Boris Johnson's reference to James Bond, but these also criticise his own knowledge of the British culture since he presents a James Bond (presumably successful) narrative that contrasts with the real narrative. Since Boris Johnson's aim is to DEFUSE THE DEVICE, he refers to JAMES BOND as a typical character capable of defusing this device and saving humanity. He thus seems to ignore the latest adventures of the hero which forms ground for public derision.

The criticism about Boris Johnson's knowledge can be linked with an additional category of responses from the public: responses that exploit the metaphor to criticise the metaphor user.

4.3. Focus on the discourse producer

Public responses to Boris Johnson's situationally-triggered metaphor have also exploited the source domain to criticise the politician's personality. In such cases, online users did not reflect on the context of production nor the target domain i.e., climate crisis. Instead, they cited the

JAMES BOND metaphor to give the former UK Prime Minister a role within the narrative. Two tendencies have been observed. On the one hand, the public “deconstructed” (Bilstrup Finsen et al., 2021; Musolff, 2022) the metaphorical mapping to identify Boris Johnson as a VILLAIN, as in:

(7) The only bomb scare is Boris himself!

(8) If James Bond was real, he'd have stopped that mad man years ago.

The online users exploit the metaphor to depict the politician as JAMES BOND'S ENEMY. With regards to the context of production, this “deconstruction” has significant implications. In (7), Boris Johnson is identified as a “bomb scare” while in the original instance, the “bomb scare” (or “doomsday device”) describes the climate crisis. First, the online user implicitly suggests that Boris Johnson is as dangerous as the climate crisis (i.e., THE CLIMATE CRISIS AS A BOMBSCARE – BORIS JOHNSON AS A BOMBSCARE). This leads recipients to speculate that similar strategies are required to control the climate crisis and the British politician: DEFUSING THE BOMB. The online user argues that Boris Johnson represents a global danger which the population (in particular, the British population) needs to control (by voting for a different leader or political party). Second, the metaphor in (7) transforms the politician into a DANGEROUS OBJECT. Accordingly, the transformation of Boris Johnson into an OBJECT deprives him of his authority over the population. The online user attributes such authoritative powers to the British population who is given the ability to prevent the danger. Overall, the online user disputes the responsibility of world leaders and asks recipients to act on behalf of these leaders (in particular, on behalf of the British Prime Minister) to rescue the global population. Third, the “global” characteristics of the climate crisis (with reference to the context of production) are perceived through the scope of national politics: according to the online user, DEFUSING THE BORIS JOHNSON-BOMB would avert a global crisis. The response insists on the global consequences of national policies and

argues that national populations (in particular, the British population) can have an impact on global concerns, such as the climate crisis.

In (8), Boris Johnson is turned into a VILLAIN. The response starts with an explicit denial of the political argument by highlighting that James Bond is only a fictional character (“If James Bond was real”). This first part of the response disputes the topic-triggered metaphor by suggesting that the political arguments derived from the JAMES BOND narrative are similarly fictional. The argument is contested further by endorsing – to some extent – the original metaphorical mapping (“he would have stopped the mad man years ago”). This partial endorsement leads the metaphor user to argue that even if the “fictional” feature of the narrative can be ignored, Boris Johnson’s argument does not hold. Accordingly, JAMES BOND is identified as a stereotypical hero who is by definition opposed to any mischievous individual and whose purpose is to save humanity. According to the online user, Boris Johnson represents a danger to humanity and the hypothetical representation of JAMES BOND as a real character implies that Boris Johnson would be JAMES BOND’s ENEMY (“the mad man”). Therefore, Boris Johnson’s legitimacy to describe JAMES BOND’s prospective actions is questioned. Consequently, the response denies the fact that the politician and the fictional character can be in the same camp which eventually contradicts the politician’s argument: the actions that would be performed by the fictional character cannot be compared with the actions that Boris Johnson aimed at performing.

On the other hand, online users compare the politician’s capacity to solve the crisis with JAMES BOND’s capacity. This leads them to interpret the situationally-triggered metaphor as a form of self-identification: Boris Johnson is blamed for impersonating JAMES BOND. Responses highlight that such a self-identification is illegitimate, with emphasis on the unmatching features of the mapping BORIS JOHNSON AS JAMES BOND, as in:

- (9) If we are getting a new James Bond, can we get a new PM as well?
- (10) James Bond defused a nuclear warhead whilst dressed as a clown in Octopussy and we have a clown as PM.
- (11) #BorisBond "10" Ready to spring into action ... *(followed by a picture of Boris Johnson sleeping during COP26)*

In (9), the metaphor user concedes that this self-identification can be accepted on the condition that, like JAMES BOND, Boris Johnson hands over his role to another individual. The online user produces a slightly different mapping that does not rely on the source concept JAMES BOND as a fictional character but as a ROLE subsequently attributed to multiple actors. The argument does not refer to JAMES BOND'S HEROIC FUNCTIONS but qualifies "James Bond" as a function that different individuals can perform (this is observable in the use of the quantifier "a new James Bond"). This provides a different ground for the mapping BORIS JOHNSON AS JAMES BOND since this draws conceptual links between the JAMES BOND-FUNCTION and the POLITICAL FUNCTION, which is similarly performed by different "actors". The online user argues about the possibility of a new "cast" and asks the BRITISH POPULATION-CAST DIRECTOR to choose a different individual for the role – which implies that Boris Johnson is not fitted to address the climate crisis.

In (10), the "humorous" implications of the situationally-triggered metaphor are highlighted to distinguish JAMES BOND from Boris Johnson. Accordingly, Boris Johnson's humorous stance leads the online user to qualify him as a "clown" which, in the context of COP26, is associated with negative implications: this suggests an absurd image of a clown attending an international political meeting to take environmental decisions. The mapping BORIS JOHNSON AS A CLOWN and the emphasis on the absurdity related to the context of production significantly contradict the initial political argument which relied on the situationally-triggered metaphor to insist on the danger represented by the climate crisis. This contradiction is justified further with references to the identities of the two protagonists: the metaphor user insists on the negative implications involved in the mapping BORIS JOHNSON

AS A CLOWN through a comparison with JAMES BOND. This comparison reflects on the common characteristics shared by the politician and the spy: they are not “real” CLOWNS. On the one hand, this acknowledgement sheds light on the absurdity of relying on humour to convey political arguments and thus the absurdity of behaving like a clown within a political context (in the case of Boris Johnson). On the other hand, this absurdity is contrasted with a particular – yet existing – depiction of JAMES BOND AS A CLOWN in which the spy *appears* as a clown, but his actions remain typical of a spy (i.e., not humorous). This comparison thus denies the similarities that could exist between BORIS JOHNSON and JAMES BOND: the politician acts as a clown while the spy still acts as a spy (despite looking like a clown). Therefore, the then British Prime Minister’s humorous stance represents a reason for the public to dispute the mapping BORIS JOHNSON AS JAMES BOND.

In (11), the online user relies on popular assumptions regarding the typical behaviour adopted by heroes such as JAMES BOND (“ready to spring into action”). These assumptions are explicitly contradicted in descriptions of “Boris Bond” who is identified as a SLEEPING HEROE, while COP26 might be perceived as an event during which HEROES SHOULD FIGHT (i.e., defusing a bomb). This contradiction of popular assumptions about the source concept (through verbal exploitation of the metaphor and the picture associated with the message) derides the initial political statement by showing a counterexample of “heroic behaviour” as displayed by the British politician. Therefore, this message does not only dispute the mapping BORIS JOHNSON AS JAMES BOND, but it also promotes a different – yet related – mapping that identifies BORIS JOHNSON AS AN ANTI-HERO.

In the following section, I focus on the public responses which rely on the situationally-triggered metaphor to convey environmental arguments.

4.4. Environmental arguments

A large majority of responses criticised the use of the metaphor or the metaphor user. However, a more limited number of responses exploited the JAMES BOND metaphor to promote different arguments related to the context of production i.e., environmental arguments. Most of these argumentative exploitations (see Author, 2023) have been posted on Twitter to contradict the British politician's environmental claims. Counterarguments from the public can be observed in the following examples:

- (12) Unfortunately the fossil fuel lobby won't let anyone near the bomb to defuse it
- (13) Thousands of bureaucrats flew into this conference on carbon-emitting jets.
That seems kinda like James Bond handing bomb-making parts to the villain, then
professing how he needs to stop the villain from detonating the bomb

In (12), the metaphor user exploits the situationally-triggered metaphor to discuss the process of DEFUSING THE BOMB. Indeed, in the original political statement, we can see that this aspect of the narrative is not detailed nor explained to recipients. The online user draws on this missing part of the narrative to argue that Boris Johnson's aim at DEFUSING THE BOMB is an impossible task. The online user refers to the climate crisis to oppose JAMES BOND'S CAPACITIES – promoted by the former UK Prime Minister – to the CAPACITIES OF THE OPPONENT i.e., the “fossil fuel lobby”. The online user thus endorses the initial metaphorical mapping but extends it to focus on the difficulties to achieve the political goal. These difficulties are depicted through a metaphorical description of THE FOSSIL FUEL LOBBY AS THE VILLAIN. This exploitation ultimately contradicts Boris Johnson's optimistic stance that mostly relies on popular assumptions regarding JAMES BOND's HEROIC features. Here, the online user insists on identifying the climate crisis as a more complex threat which leads recipients to question such HEROIC CAPACITIES. This response may also suggest a political disagreement since Boris Johnson exclusively mentioned the responsibilities of WORLD LEADERS-HEROES but omits to mention the responsibilities of the POLLUTERS-VILLAINS. This may thus imply that Boris Johnson's narrative aims to persuade recipients

that the fossil fuel lobby has no part in this story while the online user acknowledges the power attributed to the VILLAIN that the politician does not seem to want to “defuse”.

In (13), the online user promotes a different environmental argument which refers to the pollution emitted by world leaders and “bureaucrats” attending COP26. While Boris Johnson identified the CLIMATE CRISIS AS A DOOMSDAY DEVICE, this response promotes a different mapping that associates the BOMB with the POLLUTION PRODUCED BY ATTENDEES. This emphasis on pollution generated by the political event is then used to explicitly characterise attendees as the VILLAINS (“James Bond handing bomb-making parts to the villain”). The metaphor user draws on the initial conceptual mapping to shed light on the absurdity of the political argument. Boris Johnson’s speech is thus derided: he is described as the person HANDING OVER BOMB-MAKING PARTS while asking recipients to DEFUSE THIS BOMB. The online user’s slight modification of the metaphorical mapping (i.e., CLIMATE CRISIS or ATTENDEES’ POLLUTION AS A BOMB) effectively transforms the political statement into an absurd claim. This argumentative exploitation (Author, 2023) shows that the public has deconstructed the situationally-triggered metaphor to dispute the politician’s environmental commitments and promote counter-arguments that criticise the politician’s environmental strategies.

In more limited cases, online users have exploited the situationally-triggered metaphor to promote environmental arguments that complement Boris Johnson’s initial statement, as in:

- (14) He's right in one sense, all the G20s promises are like Bond, works of fiction
- (15) Tbf, he does seem to sleep around a lot and there's a massive trail of dead
bodies currently

In (14), the online user explicitly endorses Boris Johnson’s metaphorical statement (“he is right in one sense”). However, this endorsement only applies to the use of the figurative device (as opposed to examples presented in section 4.1.) but not to the content of the metaphorical statement (fictional “promises”). This response insists on the fictive characteristics of JAMES

BOND to note that “G20s promises” also present such fictive characteristics, which thereby justifies the metaphorical mapping. The ground of the situationally-triggered metaphor is thus transformed to highlight this “fictive” characteristic while hiding the characteristics (see Lakoff and Turner, 1989) initially promoted by the British politician i.e., the danger represented by the CLIMATE-DOOMSDAY DEVICE and the JAMES BOND-LEADERS’ responsibilities to avert the crisis. While the two instances (Boris Johnson’s and the online user’s) similarly rely on the source concept JAMES BOND to promote environmental arguments, the ground of the mapping differs to the extent that these instances actually contradict each other: in (14), the focus is on the identification of the climate crisis narrative as a work of fiction while Boris Johnson relied on fiction to produce a tangible description of the danger.

In (15), the endorsement (“to be fair”) presented in the response is similarly partial. On the one hand, the online user relies on a characterisation of Boris Johnson as an ANTI-HERO (as in 11). While this may prevent any endorsement of the political claims, the online user refers to Boris Johnson’ behaviour as an additional argument justifying the narrative. Indeed, Boris Johnson’s message is related to the need for world leaders (including himself) to act like JAMES BOND, which presupposes that world leaders’ behaviour did not follow JAMES BOND’s patterns (“and I stress *began* to defuse that bomb”). In addition, Boris Johnson acknowledged the discrepancies preventing the identification of world leaders as JAMES BOND: “We may not feel much like James Bond not all of us necessarily look like James Bond”. Such discrepancies were mentioned so as to convince recipients to adopt a different behaviour, identifying JAMES BOND’S BEHAVIOUR as an example of DESIRABLE BEHAVIOUR. The online user refers to this part of the statement while endorsing the political claims: the “sleeping hero” does need to become JAMES BOND. On the other hand, the description of the politician is followed by an environmental argument: “a massive trail of dead bodies”. This extends the ground of the situationally-triggered metaphor as the climate crisis

and the DOOMSDAY DEVICE can both be associated with such a description. Yet, in the political statement, the then British Prime Minister avoids referring to this common ground. The online user's exploitation of the metaphor insists on the significant threat represented by the climate crisis by mentioning highly concrete features characterising the danger. These add to the emotional impact of the metaphorical mapping initially produced by the politician. Therefore, the responses that seemingly endorse the situationally-triggered metaphor still remain critical regarding the environmental claims and lead recipients (other online users) to question these political commitments.

In the following section, I offer a final discussion of the results and I provide possible answers to my research question – which asked about the public perception of situationally-triggered metaphors in political discourse.

5. Discussion

This paper demonstrated that Boris Johnson's situationally-triggered metaphor was mostly perceived critically by the public. First, replies posted on Twitter showed that the public significantly disputed the use of such a metaphor in the context of COP26 i.e., a global political meeting aimed at averting a global climate crisis. The situational-triggering aspect of the political metaphor was pragmatically related to an instance of political, misguided, humorous stance (Brugman, et al., 2022). This humorous stance has been related to the reference to a fictional character associated with British popular culture and the frivolity associated with the source concept used to draw conceptual links with the event (or the place of the event). However, the particularity of the context of production prevented such a humorous tone from being appreciated by the public, as the climate crisis (i.e., the target domain) represents a major global concern for the world population (e.g., see reports on "eco-anxiety", Boyd et al., 2023). Therefore, the contrast between the possibly humorous effect of the situationally-triggered

metaphor and the anxiety generated by the topic of discourse was highlighted by online users. Consequently, Boris Johnson's metaphor was perceived as discursive evidence that the British politician did not acknowledge the extent of the environmental threat.

Second, responses to Boris Johnson's situationally-triggered metaphor exploited the initial conceptual mapping to criticise the politician. Accordingly, the former UK Prime Minister has been attributed a role within his own narrative. On the one hand, online users insisted on their discontentment regarding the then Prime Minister's decisions (or election). This public discontentment was used as a justification for the identification of the politician as a VILLAIN. Online users highlighted the contrast between the popularity of the fictional character JAMES BOND (following cognitive bias regarding the stereotypical behaviour of the "hero"; Musolff, 2016) and the disputes surrounding Boris Johnson's political decisions (e.g., Brexit; Charteris-Black, 2019; Musolff, 2019). This incapacity to satisfy the public (according to online users) thus formed an effective counterargument that criticised Boris Johnson's good will. Eventually, within the JAMES BOND narrative (Hanne et al., 2014), this absence of good will placed the British politician in the role of the VILLAIN from whom the population needs to be saved. On the other hand, online users interpreted the situationally-triggered metaphor as a way for Boris Johnson to self-identify as a hero (such as JAMES BOND). In these responses, the metaphor has been exploited to highlight the unmatching features of the mapping, with some descriptions of BORIS JOHNSON AS AN ANTI-HERO (e.g., "Boris Bond"). This emphasis on the inadequacy of the metaphorical mapping mostly resulted in public derision that exaggerated (or showed) the contrast between Boris Johnson's behaviour during COP26 (i.e., humorous stance, sleeping) and the stereotypical behaviour that is to be displayed by popular heroes (according to popular knowledge and culture). However, this public derision eventually impacts the public appreciation of political arguments as it mostly focuses on the personality of the metaphor user instead of focusing on the arguments displayed in political discourse.

Third, a more limited number of responses effectively reflected on the political argumentation. The online users exploited the situationally-triggered metaphor to (partially) endorse the conceptual mapping and-or the political claims. On the one hand, the public exploited the metaphor to extend the ground of the conceptual mapping. They mentioned common characteristics existing between the source and the target that have yet been ignored in the original political statement. For instance, online users described the lethal consequences which are at play in the context of the climate crisis and in the context of JAMES BOND's DOOMSDAY DEVICE. They also adapted the narrative to explicitly identify the VILLAIN (or BOMB-MAKERS) i.e., polluters or polluting companies. Therefore, this partial endorsement of the politician's metaphor still strongly criticises the political argument: the public sheds light on particular features (deaths, fossil fuel lobby, pollution generated by the event) that the then UK Prime Minister aimed at hiding (Lakoff and Turner, 1989). On the other hand, two responses endorsed the political argument: these relied on Boris Johnson's concession regarding the unmatching features of the mapping WORLD LEADERS AS JAMES BOND. This political concession was then exploited by the public to criticise the lack of actions ("when humanity finally began – and I stress began – to defuse that bomb" – Boris Johnson; "tbf, he does seem to sleep around a lot" – online user). This persistent lack of actions – explicitly acknowledged by the politician himself – also became a feature involved in the public exploitation of the situationally-triggered metaphor: this metaphor has been endorsed since the fictional characteristic of the source concept JAMES BOND could also be mapped with the fictional characteristic of political commitments. While some online users criticised the politician for relying on a fictional character to describe the climate crisis, others interpreted it as a political recognition of inaction and "fictional" promises.

Overall, the public responses to the situationally-triggered metaphor used in Boris Johnson's COP26 speech suggest that the social concerns related to political decisions and actions

contrast with the possibly humorous implications involved in situational-triggering. As a result, the public interprets and exploits the situationally-triggered metaphor as an instance of political bad sense of humour – which results in similarly humorous (or sarcastic) responses. Yet, this public interest in political rhetoric prevents an interest in political arguments. As the topic of discourse – climate crisis – remains a highly contested issue (notably in terms of adapted solutions, see Author, 2023), political reliance on situationally-triggered metaphor may not ultimately aim at proposing a humorous description of a global concern, but it may aim at downplaying possible counterarguments by shifting the public attention from the actions required to mitigate the threat to the rhetoric adopted to communicate about such a threat.

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Data available at:

<https://twitter.com/skynews/status/1455152255792029701> (Sky News)

<https://twitter.com/channel4news/status/1455166807854260227> (Channel 4)

<https://twitter.com/abc/status/1455214820815409160> (ABC)

<https://twitter.com/therecount/status/1455153009114161161> (the Recount)

https://twitter.com/YahooNews/status/1455197592644620299?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw (Yahoo News)

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