

METAPHORS AND WAR. A LOOK AT THE ISRAEL-HAMAS CONFLICT THROUGH THE LENS OF ROMANIAN ONLINE MEDIA

Andreea-Nicoleta Soare*

Abstract

The war between Israel and the Gaza-based organization Hamas has shocked the entire world, provoking strong waves of criticism from world leaders and international organizations. The atrocities committed both in Israel and in the Gaza Strip, which affected Israelis and Gazans alike, hit the headlines immediately after the October 7th attack on Israel. This study aims at having a look at how Romanian journalists presented the conflict and its effects on civilians through metaphors, during the first month of conflict. The study will focus on the metaphors used in the headlines to describe the war, based on the two associations identified: war and religion, war and extreme weather, war and blood.

Keywords: war, Israel-Hamas conflict, online media.

JEL Classification: Z00.

1. Introduction

On Sunday morning, October 7th, the Middle East woke up in the middle of a new – yet old – conflict, after the members of the Hamas organization, mostly based in the Gaza Strip, entered the south of the Israeli territory and started to attack the civilians while a barrage of missiles was heading towards the whole country. Caught by surprise, the Israelis needed a few hours to start a defensive military operation, as a response to those attacks, and then to turn it into an offensive operation against Hamas. However, both what happened on the first day of the war, October 7th, in Israel, and what followed next in Gaza, once the Israelis entered the Strip, had a huge effect on civilians from both sides. Four months after the war started, the number of casualties on the Gazans' side rose to more than 20.000¹ – according to the Palestinians' Health Ministry – and on the Israelis' side there were more than 1.200 civilians brutally killed and tens, if not hundreds, of soldiers as well. All of these things led to hundreds of headlines in the Romanian online media, whose journalists often used metaphors to describe the war and, in that way, to get closer to the reader.

Since forever, the media has characterized reality better than any other historical document as it is essential for the development of the language. The

* Andreea-Nicoleta Soare is Lecturer at the Romanian American University in Bucharest. E-mail: andreea.nicoleta.soare@rau.ro.

¹ At the time I write this article, 2nd of January 2024.

Romanian journalistic language has also changed a lot in the last two decades. The journalists started to write articles that would give more and more a sense of familiarity and closeness to the reader, which led also to fuzzy borders between the discursive genres in the online media. After the fall of communism, the language used in the media became more modern, marked by elements of orality, the use of many verbs in the headlines, the personalization of the discourse by the journalist, the use of puns, etc. (Radulescu, 2009: 335). It is also noticed that journalists nowadays use more and more, in the headlines, the ellipse, the argotic expressions, the terms and expressions from the folk culture, ironies, warnings that provoke or anticipate certain emotions in the readers, linguistic constructions that anticipate the questions of the readers, quotes or wrong constructions used by different famous people in Romania, anaphora which provoke the interest of the readers or famous sayings (Soare, 2023). However, when it comes to big tragic events, such as wars, conflicts and natural disasters that directly affect people, journalists tend to use metaphors and metonymies to describe the events they write about and to impress the readers by creating certain emotions related to those events: compassion, fear, empathy, terror, anger, etc. Emotions lead, then, to engagement and engagement leads to more views for the articles. In this study, I will focus only on metaphors, not on metonymies.

2. Literature review

The use of more familiar entities to understand abstract concepts is something that happens daily, in different discourse types, but especially in the news headlines, as journalists are trying to impress the readers with their stories.

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 5) the essence of metaphor is "understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another". This definition of metaphor, based on cognitive linguistics, has been, however, controversial, but still important for the studies that followed on this concept. Cognitive linguistics argues that people "speak metaphorically because they think, feel, and act metaphorically" (Tendahl, Gibbs 2008: 1825). Another important direction in the studies on metaphors is the relevance theory, which claims that "human cognition is geared to the maximization of relevance, such that each act of ostensive communication conveys a presumption of its optimal relevance" (Sperber and Wilson 1995, apud Tendahl, Gibbs Jr. 2008: 1824), meaning that using metaphors while speaking is some kind of a "loose talk", as Gibbs and Tendahl call it, which is sometimes the best way to achieve relevance. According to these authors, "even though verbal metaphors do not represent a completely accurate state of affairs, listeners can efficiently infer the appropriate contextual meanings of metaphors by following interpretive strategies based on the principle of optimal relevance" (Tendahl, Gibbs 2008:

1824). Both cognitive linguistics and the relevance theory aim to present a theory of metaphor based on cognition.

Some new theories in the field argue that these two directions are, actually, complementary, not different. Metaphors have also been studied from their pragmatic perspective as well, as a "communication tool, either to deliberately create ambiguity in a deniable manner or to extend word meaning beyond the public lexicon, which puts some fundamental mechanisms of abstract thought to figurative use" (Forgacs 2022: 48).

As I was writing earlier, journalists use metaphors a lot in the headlines and this has been seen, for example, as a coercion tool (Molek-Kozakowska, 2014), hiding the intention of trying to shape the receivers' perception of the covered issue. The author claims that the use of the metaphor as a coercive strategy can be categorized as:

- a. simplification (reducing a complex entity to a simple one);
- b. imaging (using primary image schemata for abstract entities);
- c. animalization (mapping animal attributes onto humans);
- d. confrontation (presenting interpersonal relations/stakeholders' interest as inherently oppositional and conflict-laden);
- e. (de)legitimization (adding or reducing the value of something by means of representing it as a more/less positive entity);
- f. emotionalization (drawing from affect-laden source domain);
- g. dramatization (mapping routine processes/entities into extreme/superlative ones) (Molek-Kozakowska 2014: 159).

In this study, I will divide the examples based on the most frequent associations I observed in the headlines when it comes to the aforementioned topic: religion, bad weather and blood. Often, journalists described in their articles the situation on the ground, in Gaza, as apocalyptic scenarios and the use of Israeli military equipment targeting the Gazan territory as bad or extreme weather. Most likely, they chose religion and bad weather as these are common, understandable topics for the majority of the readers and so it helps them to make the correct connections between the simple topic and the abstract meaning, hence, they can correctly interpret the message. As for the categories developed by Molek-Kozakowsk, I think *dramatization* is the category the analyzed examples would fit in, as apart from the attack themselves, the statements, declarations, or the geopolitical situation in the region surrounding the war are exaggeratedly presented by the authors of the articles.

3. Methodology

The present study analyses the articles written between October 7th and November 7th in Romanian online news publications referring to the Israel-Hamas war. The data obtained was classified according to the identified associations between war and religion, extreme weather and blood.

4. Results of the study

a. Religion-based metaphors

As the situation on the ground, in Gaza, quickly turned into a desperate one for the civilians there, many of the news headlines in the Romanian media have associated the images and videos posted on social media by the Gazan journalists with apocalyptic scenes from the Bible.

(1) **Hell on Earth** in the Gaza Strip after a devastating Israeli attack against Hamas (ro. S-a declanșat iadul pe pământ în Fâșia Gaza după un atac devastator israelian împotriva Hamas), newsweek.ro, 9.10.2023.

(2) **The Gaza hell**, an open space prison with no way out (ro. În iadul din Gaza, o închisoare în aer liber fără căi de evacuare!), cronicadiasporei.ro, 12.10.2023

(3) **Hell on Earth**: images filmed on the streets of Gaza (ro. Iadul pe pământ: imagini filmate pe străzile din Gaza), stiripesurse.ro, 12.10.2023

(4) The dramatic story of a Romanian who has seven kids, who got out of the **Gaza hell**. “The house was still standing, I locked it and I left”. How they survived the hunger (ro.Drama româncei cu șapte copii, scăpată din iadul Gaza. ”Casa a rămas în picioare, am închis-o și am plecat”. Cum au supraviețuit foametei), gandul.ro 8.11.2023.

(5) The **apocalyptic announcement** of prime-minister Netanyahu: he is asking the people to leave Gaza because he will turn it into ruins (ro. Anunț apocaliptic al premierului Netanyahu: cere populației să părăsească Gaza deoarece o va transforma în ruine), stiripesurse.ro, 8.10.2023)

In (1), (2), (3) and (4) Gaza is seen as *hell* due to the heavy attacks by the Israeli armed forces and the destruction they left behind. The metaphor used here, “hell on Earth”, underlines the Bible scene becoming a reality for the people of Gaza. This metaphor is utilized to not just compare the two situations and give readers a better understanding of the conflict but also to create emotion and empathy for the reader. The lexical choice, using the worst scenario of the Bible, the “hell”, seen as a punishment for people who have done bad things during their lives, next to the noun “Earth” is deliberately used to underline that in Gaza the worst after-life scenario is developing while the readers are just continuing their lives unbothered.

In (5), an announcement made by the prime minister of Israel is seen as “apocalyptic” for the people of Gaza as it refers to the consequences of such a warning not being followed. The use of the noun referring to religion aims at creating emotion and at underlining the magnitude of the events in the Gaza Strip. All five examples can be described as novel metaphors, rather than conventional ones, as associating WAR with RELIGION is quite uncommon.

c. Extreme weather-based metaphors

Apart from using scenarios from the Bible to present the conflict from Gaza, Romanian journalists also used extreme or bad weather to discuss the

Israeli attacks targeting the Gaza Strip territory. Most often, the missile attacks were seen as heavy rains because they involved the launch of several missiles at once. The same metaphor was used also for the attacks of the Hamas militants against the Israeli territory, that took place on October 7th.

(6) **Bombs rain** over Gaza Strip. The Israelis say they have launched around 6.000 projectiles (ro. Ploaie de bombe asupra Fâșiei Gaza: Israelienii susțin că au lansat aproximativ 6.000 de proiectile), stiripesurse.ro, 12.10.2023

(7) **Missiles rain** over Israel – The Palestinians have launched a massive attack during the first hours of the morning (ro. Ploaie de rachete asupra Israelului - Palestinenii au lansat un atac masiv la primele ore ale dimineții), stiripesurse.ro, 7.10.2023

(8) **Israel thunders and lightens** after the peace summit organized by Ehypt (ro. Israel tună și fulgeră după summitul pentru pace organizat de Egipt), stiripesurse.ro, 22.10.2023.

(9) **Storm in the Persian Gulf**. The geopolitics of the Israel-Palestina war (ro. Furtună în Golful Persic. Geopolitica implicațiilor războiului Israel – Palestina), ziarulnational.ro, 16.10.2023

The presentation of missiles or bomb attacks as “rain” is something common in the Romanian online news media. It is based on the association of the launch of dozens of attacks at once, by advanced weaponry, towards the target, having huge consequences on the attacked side, with the rain, a natural phenomenon which cannot be stopped and, in some extreme cases, can produce death. In (6) and (7), the metaphor of the rain was used to describe both the attacks on Gaza and Israel, followed, in (6), by the exact number of projectiles that were fired by the Israelis in a short period. The figures underline even more the magnitude of the attack because it gives the reader a glimpse of what such an attack involves. The implicature here is that one cannot defend himself/herself or take cover when such attacks are launched.

In (8), another weather-based metaphor is used, wherein the reaction of the Israeli government is seen as “thunder and lightning”, which accentuates the disagreement, dissatisfaction and anger on the Israeli side. Another metaphor that associates the war or the consequences of the Israeli-Hamas war with weather phenomena is (9), which presents the security dynamic in the Persian Gulf as a “storm” because of the unpredictability and lack of control over the Israel-Hamas war. These examples, as well as the ones in the first category, can be included in the novel metaphors section.

c. Blood-based metaphors

Some other metaphor examples I have identified in the Romanian news articles from the first month of the Israel-Hamas war are the ones related to blood. As conventional wars, unfortunately, cause victims, the association between blood and attacks related to the war seems quite understandable, as in phrases such as “bloody attack”, because it implies the consequences of the

attack itself on the population. However, it is quite uncommon to use the same adjective "bloody" for things that somehow stay outside of the battlefield, as we see in (10), (11) and (12).

(10) VIDEO The **Bloody answer** of Israel "in the entire Gaza Strip", after Hamas released two American hostages (ro. Răspunsul sângeros al Israelului "în toată Fâșia Gaza", după ce Hamas a eliberat doi ostatici americani), stirileprotv.ro, 21.10.2023

(11) 29 dead people, the **bloody death toll** of the fifth day of bombings in Gaza. The Catholics in Jerusalem are praying for peace (ro. 29 de morți, bilanțul sângeros al celei de-a cincea zi de bombardamente în Gaza. Catolicii se roagă la Ierusalim pentru pace), antena3cnn.ro, 21. 10. 2023

(12) The Saturday attack, the **bloodiest day** since the Holocaust. "The September 11th of Israel (ro. Atacul de sâmbătă, cea mai sângeroasă zi de la Holocaust încoace: "11 septembrie al Israelului"), evz.ro, 09.10.2023.

In all these three examples, (10), (11) and (12), the adjective *bloody* is used for things that are directly connected to the war. In (10), the *answer* of Israel is *bloody* because, after enabling the implicature, the reader can understand that the answer is, actually, the attack that Israeli conducted on Gaza's territory as a response to Hamas's actions. The adjective *bloody*, therefore, is related to the consequences of the attack on the civilians: death or heavy wounds. In (11), the adjective *bloody* is used for the death toll of the fifth day of attacks because it refers to the victims of the attack. The same thing happens in example (12), where the *day* is *bloody* because it refers to the high number of Israelis brutally killed by the Hamas militants. Here as well the metaphors used in the headlines are included in the novel metaphors category.

5. Conclusions

As presented, the Romanian journalists used quite uncommon metaphors in the first month of the Israel-Hamas war to underline the seriousness and the consequences of the war on civilians, who were and are the main victims of any war. All these metaphors used familiar things such as religion, weather, or blood to talk about an abstract thing: death. The purpose of the use of such metaphors is, indeed, growing both positive and negative feelings in the readers: empathy, kindness, fear, or anger. As the war is unfortunately not over yet, I only focused on the headlines from the first month of the war, but I think that another look at all the headlines used during the war in the Romanian online publications deserves attention as well.

References

1. Forgács, Bálint, 2022, "The pragmatic functions of metaphorical language", in *A life in cognition: Studies in Cognitive Science in Honor of Csaba Pleh*, 41-57.
2. Lakoff, George, Johnson, Mark, 1980, *Metaphors We Live By*, University of Chicago Press.
3. Molek-Kozakowska, Katarzyna, 2014, "Coercive metaphors in news headlines: A cognitive-pragmatic approach", 149-173.
4. Soare, Andreea-Nicoleta, 2023, *Un subgen discursiv. Știrile umoristice*, București, Editura Pro Universitaria.
5. Sperber, Dan, Wilson, Deirdre, 1995, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, 2nd ed. Blackwell, Oxford.
6. Tendahl, Markus, Raymond W. Gibbs Jr., 2008, "Complementary perspectives on metaphor: Cognitive linguistics and relevance theory", in *Journal of pragmatics*, 40(11), 1823-1864.
7. Vintilă-Rădulescu, Ioana, 2009, "Limba presei românești de azi – o limbă de lemn", în Ilie Rad (ed.), *Limba de lemn în presă*, București, Editura Tritonic.
8. antena3cnn.ro
9. cronicadiasporei.ro
10. evz.ro
11. gandul.ro
12. newsweek.ro
13. stirileprotv.ro
14. stiripesurse.ro
15. ziarulnational.ro