

# Sport Metaphors in Political News Headlines

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**Abstract:** The research paper is aimed at investigating sport metaphors in news headlines whose contents are related to politics, more specifically, in headlines of some electronic articles on the US presidential election campaign 2012. By dint of exploring sport metaphors in such headlines, the study is expected to reveal sports whose language appears with high frequencies in political news as well as to uncover reasons underlying the mechanism of cognition in those sport metaphors. Some implications in translation are also mentioned at the end of the research paper.

*Keywords:* Sport metaphors, political, news headlines.

## 1. Introduction

The current study investigates sport metaphors in the context of politics, more specifically, in the news headlines of some electronic articles on US presidential election campaign 2012. Under the light of cognitive linguistics [1], sport and politics have a close relationship in which sport is the source domain and politics is the target domain.

Since the research article mainly focuses on sport metaphors, it obviously elaborates on a single kind of metaphor, that is, structural metaphor – POLITICS IS SPORT. The study is carried out for the purpose of exploring how the sport metaphors are used in those political news headlines as well as which sports are used for US presidential election 2012. In addition, the research paper will explain why sport language

appears so commonly in the field of politics and suggest some implications in translating metaphors.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. *Metaphors from cognitive perspective*

Contemporary theories on metaphors shed light on the pivotal role of cognitive linguistics in detecting, analyzing and decoding secrets behind this rhetorical device. Accordingly, metaphor is not purely a decorative device, but a product of humans' minds; remarkably, it is concerned with the culture and the conceptual system of a people. Likewise, metaphors exist in every corner of life, from economics, legislation, law, education, business to politics. The theoretical framework on conceptual metaphors was proposed by two scholars – Lakoff and Johnson [2]. In their work, these two researchers insisted that from cognitive

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linguistics, metaphors pervade not only in daily language, but also in thought and actions of human beings.

According to Lakoff and Johnson [2], there are 3 kinds of metaphors including structural metaphors, orientational metaphors, and ontological metaphors. The authors will not dig deeper into kinds of metaphors, the characteristics of each type and the signals to identify them, but explore the structural metaphor – POLITICS IS SPORT. In structural metaphors, an abstract concept—or the target domain is conceptualized by a more specific concept – or the source domain. By dint of using a more specific concept to structure an abstract one, the target domain will become easier to understand. The logical relationship between the source domain and the target domain is clearly demonstrated via their mapping mechanism.

## 2.2. Metaphors in politics

Lakoff and Johnson are pioneers in the standpoint that daily language is naturally metaphorical. Likewise, metaphors, as a matter of fact, appear in politics, more particularly, in political news headlines.

It is alleged that “*contemporary political discourse is packed full of metaphors, many of which reveal important aspects of the figurative nature of political thought*” [3: 140]. Gibbs further argued that “*many of the metaphors used in politics draw heavily and systematically on the languages of sports and warfare.*” Zoltan Kovecses [4] has also stated that along with “war”, “race”, and “game”, “sport” is one of the most popular source domains to refer to the structural metaphor with politics being the target domain.

Another group of researchers (Mio, Riggio, Levin, & Reese) [5] who kept track of metaphors in the contexts of politics interestingly figured out that this stylistic device was a great source of inspiration for both the political leaders and the public. These linguists suggested that it was more likely for

charismatic presidents to use metaphorical language in their inaugural addresses. Surprisingly, their study results [5: 287] demonstrated “*charismatic presidents used nearly twice as many metaphors (adjusted for speech length) than non-charismatic presidents.*” That is how these influencing politicians inspire, motivate, and even induce more followers. Therefore, metaphors have been proved to be a magnet for citizens’ supports and concerns during their election campaigns.

Tennie Matlock [6] – a very active scholar whose interest is metaphor in political campaigns also suggested “*two seemingly subtle but powerful ways that language influences how people think about political candidates and elections.*” These two ways include grammar and metaphor. Particularly, there are many phrases like “*race*”, “*run*”, “*jogging*” and “*finish line*” used in political campaigns so frequently that their literal meanings fade away. People regularly exploit them to talk about political campaigns without noticing that they are regarded as metaphorical colors.

## 2.3. Metaphors in news headlines

An article’s title or a news headline is defined as a special, typical text appearing at the top of the article, and normally being typed with bigger and bold fonts. Bruce [7] has implied that the function of report headlines is to highlight the brief content of the whole article, to help readers quickly find the pieces of news that interest them most, and to urge the readers to read more. Similarly, Studer [8] points out two pragmatic functions of news headlines: one is to advertise or polish the contents of the reports; the other is to introduce or summarize the topic of articles. As one of the commonly-seen rhetorical devices, metaphor is splashed across the front pages of newspapers, which is believed to breathe a new life into these headlines themselves and bring certain image effects to the readers’ minds at the same time.

In fact, there are few studies on the effects of metaphors in newspapers and news headlines. One of them is the research conducted by a Chinese scholar – Jian-ShiungShie [9] with the title “*Conceptual metaphor as a news-story promoter: The cases of ENL (English-as-a-native-language) and EIL (English-as-an-international-language) headlines.*” His study focuses on the realizations of conceptual metaphors in the headlines of the corresponding New York Times and Time Supplement news stories. New York Times is designed for English native speakers while Times Supplement for English-as-foreign-language learners. By analyzing the rhetorical functions of conceptual metaphors in those corresponding headlines, the author reveals the pragmatic roles of those metaphors as a news-story promoter. Additionally, he presents a noticeable discovery, which is, metaphors in New York Times tends to be sophisticated, unconventional and far away from the true messages that the headlines actually deliver to the readers. Meanwhile, metaphors in headlines of articles for English-as-a-foreign-language speakers like Times Supplement newspapers are clear, conventional and at a closer distance with the true intentions of articles’ authors. That is really a valuable finding of this Taiwanese linguistic professor; nevertheless, he has not mentioned how difficult metaphors are in different themes.

It is possible that metaphors in this field are found to be easier to understand than in other ones. The Taiwanese linguist in his article should compare and contrast metaphors in terms of their conventionality and conceptual distance in newspapers which belong to the same topic like politics, education, or economics. Therefore, it is hoped that this research paper could depict how sport metaphors are employed in the realm of politics generally and in headlines of election news particularly.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Scope of the study

This research paper only covers the headlines of American articles like The Atlantic, CNN News, Huff Post Politics, New York Times, The Washington Post, etc. with the aim of ensuring a consistent source of data. After all, the consistency of data allows us to comprehensively understand the cognitive mechanism of American people when they use sport terms to refer to political matters.

The following table describes equivalent factors in the mapping of the structural metaphor POLITICS IS SPORT:

Source domain	→	Target domain
SPORT	→	POLITICS
Sport players	→	Presidential candidates
Sport competition	→	Election campaign
Champion	→	Candidate nominated

This table can be considered a general model illustrating the mapping mechanism between any source domain(s) or any kinds of sport found in this research article and the target domain – POLITICS.

#### 3.2. Data collection methods

The procedure of collecting data consists of three basic steps. Firstly, the author finds all the headlines related to the US election event in 2012, then the author selects out ones that are posted by US newspaper agencies. Secondly, report headlines which consist of no sport

metaphors are removed. Thirdly, all the headlines containing sport metaphors are classified into specific structural metaphors whose source domains belong to different kinds of sport.

Among 100 appropriate news headlines found, 35 titles which contain sport metaphors are sorted out. It is hoped that with limited scale of data collection, the study still can provide readers with a description of how these metaphors are used and consider them in relation to the cognitive mechanism of American people. These 35 news headlines, then, are categorized into the particular structural metaphors with their source domains belonging to a variety of sports like boxing, horse race, baseball, basketball, track event, etc. The researcher makes sure that all the sport terms in those headlines are arranged into the proper source domains. Interestingly, all 35 metaphorical expressions are labeled as structural metaphors.

### 3.3. Data analysis methods

Qualitative methods are mainly employed to analyze the data collected. Methods of description, classification and analysis are also employed to find answers to the research questions. Quantitative methods are used to

identify proportions of source domains, display the most pervasive kind of sport as well as reveal the frequencies of each source domain.

### 3.4. Research questions

Within the small scope of this study, three following research questions are expected to be answered:

- Which kinds of sport are used to refer to the US presidential election campaign?
- How are sport metaphors employed in those political news headlines?
- What are the reasons underlying the mechanism of cognition in those metaphors?

## 4. Data analysis

As mentioned earlier, to ensure the consistency of the data, all news headlines are taken from American articles whose contents are related to US presidential election campaign 2012. All chosen news headlines contain metaphors related to sports. Within the small scope of this study, the author only concentrates on 35 headlines embracing sport metaphors. These headlines are arranged into specific kinds of sport, or specific source domains as follows:

POLITICS IS BOXING	POLITICS IS HORSE RACE
Romney campaign: No <b>'knock-out punch'</b> planned ( <i>CNN News</i> )	GOP attacks on <b>front-runner</b> Romney might help Obama in Nevada ( <i>New Jersey Local News</i> )
The final presidential debate: Four <b>punches</b> that <b>knocked out</b> Mitt Romney ( <i>Rolling Stone</i> )	<b>Neck and neck</b> , Romney and Obama enter <b>home stretch</b> in presidential <b>race</b> ( <i>Bay News 9</i> )
Debate ends abruptly as Obama <b>punches</b> Romney <b>in face</b> ( <i>The New Yorker</i> )	Polls: Obama, Romney <b>neck and neck</b> 6 months ahead of election ( <i>Los Angeles Times</i> )
Mitt Romney shows he's no expert on foreign policy, but seems to avoid getting <b>knocked out</b> by Obama ( <i>Daily News</i> )	Romney secures <b>front-runner</b> status with New Hampshire win, looks to take momentum into South Carolina ( <i>Fox News</i> )
Obama didn't <b>score knockout</b> but landed more <b>punches</b> ( <i>CNN News</i> )	Obama, Romney <b>neck-and-neck</b> in Wisconsin ( <i>Real Clear Politics</i> )
For the president, <b>punch, punch, another punch</b> ( <i>The New York Times</i> )	Romney on the <b>fast track</b> ( <i>The Washington Times</i> )
<b>Heavyweight</b> Ann Romney: Why Mitt Romney's wife is his secret weapon in 2012 election ( <i>International Business Times</i> )	Mitt Romney, GOP <b>front-runner</b> but wouldn't beat Obama, says poll ( <i>The Christian Science Monitor</i> )

<b>POLITICS IS BASEBALL</b>	<b>POLITICS IS BASKETBALL</b>
Romney needs to hit a <b>home run</b> in Wednesday night's debate to win the presidency ( <i>Brooklyn Young Republican Club</i> )	Why isn't Oregon a <b>slam dunk</b> for Obama? ( <i>The Washington Post</i> )
Obama hits a <b>home run</b> against Mitt Romney last night ( <i>National Catholic Reporter</i> )	Economy may not be <b>slam dunk</b> for Romney ( <i>The Fiscal Times</i> )
Convention a <b>home run</b> for Mitt Romney ( <i>US News</i> )	Is Ohio a " <b>toss-up</b> "? ( <i>The Atlantic</i> )
<b>POLITICS IS TRACK EVENT</b>	<b>Other kinds of sport as source domains</b>
Who is <b>running</b> for president? Obama, Mitt Romney and third-party candidates <b>compete</b> in 2012 ( <i>Huff Post Politics</i> )	Romney <b>drops the ball</b> on Lybia in last presidential debate – <i>Red Alert Politics</i> – (baseball, American football, basketball, or any sports use hands to play the ball)
Obama on <b>marathon tour</b> ; Romney <b>runs</b> across Ohio ( <i>Associated Press</i> )	Romney says US needs 'new <b>coach</b> ', promises ' <b>winning season</b> again' – <i>The Hill</i> – (American football or soccer term)
Obama, Romney <b>race</b> to the <b>finish line</b> ( <i>Huff Post</i> )	NBA <b>passes the ball</b> to Romney, <b>benches</b> Obama – <i>Fox Nation</i> – (American football, basketball or soccer term)
Obama, Mitt Romney <b>dash</b> to <b>finish line</b> ( <i>Huff Post</i> )	Romney says it's time to fire <b>Coach</b> Obama (any sports)
Obama, Mitt Romney <b>sprint</b> toward <b>finish line</b> ( <i>Huff Post</i> )	Obama throws <b>penalty flag</b> on Romney economic plan – <i>USA Today</i> – (lacrosse or American football term)
Obama, Romney begin final-month <b>sprint</b> ( <i>Huff Post</i> )	
Presidential <b>race dead even</b> ; Romney maintains turnout edge ( <i>People Press</i> )	
Obama wins 2012 presidential election, defeats Romney in <b>tight race</b> ( <i>VOA News</i> )	
In <b>close race</b> , Obama battles for second term ( <i>VOA News</i> )	
Barrack Obama, Mitt Romney seek foreign policy edge in final debate as <b>race tightens</b> ( <i>National Post</i> )	

It can be seen that most of the popular sports in the US take the role as source domains in those sport metaphors. With 10 headlines embracing terms in **track events** (including **marathon**, **sprinting**), the structural metaphor POLITICS IS A TRACK EVENT takes the highest proportion (28.5%).

Each of the two following metaphors POLITICS IS BOXING and POLITICS IS HORSE RACE is realized by 7 headlines, making up 20%. While 3 headlines touch the structural metaphor POLITICS IS BASEBALL (roughly 8.6%) with the presence of a very typical baseball term - **home run** (a spectacular score when the batter hit the ball and run over

three bases to reach **home**), the metaphor POLITICS IS BASKETBALL is also recognized by 3 news titles with basketball terms such as **slam dunk** (basketball player can score 2 points by jumping and smashing the ball through the hoop) and **toss-up** (referee's action to throw the ball straight up in the air when the game begins; player who jumps higher can catch the ball, seize the advantage for his team).

Other sport terms like **penalty flag** (a small yellow cloth used to signify penalties in American football and lacrosse), **coach**, **winning season**, **pass the ball**, **bench** (to push a player to the seats of the substitutes), and **drop**

*the ball* are found in different kinds of sports (*lacrosse* – the US is also this sport's hometown, *soccer* or *American football* (a rough sport: to use the strength and power of hands and body to catch and hold the ball). There are 5 metaphorical expressions considering other kinds of sport as source domains (equivalent to 14.3%).

The frequency of each source domain in structural metaphors is summarized in the table below:

Source domains	Ocurrence	Proportion (%)
1.Track event	10	28.5
2.Boxing	7	20
3.Horse race	7	20
4.Baseball	3	8.6
5.Basketball	3	8.6
6.Other kinds of sport	5	14.3

In the structural metaphor – POLITICS IS TRACK EVENT, politics or more particularly, election campaign is likened to a *race* in which presidential candidates are compared to athletes *running* as fast as they can to reach the *finish line* first – also a race between presidential nominees to the White House. The winner who winds up in office is definitely the fastest:

Who is **running** for president? Obama, Mitt Romney and third-party candidates **compete** in 2012

- Obama, Romney **race** to the **finish line**

At that time, the President Barack Obama – representative of the Democratic Party and Mitt Romney – presidential nominee from the Republican Party emerged as two political heavyweights whose competition remained tough and tense till the last minute. Whether the election campaign is considered a *marathon* or *sprint*, all contestants, in final stage, try their best to **dash to finish line**:

- Obama on **marathon tour**; Romney **runs** across Ohio

- Obama, Mitt Romney **dash** to **finish line**

- Obama, Mitt Romney **sprint** toward **finish line**

- Obama, Romney begin final-month **sprint**

Additionally, the *tight, close race* between two big competitors Obama and Romney has ever undergone tight moments when it turns **dead even**:

- Presidential **race dead even**; Romney maintains turnout edge

- Obama wins 2012 presidential election, defeats Romney in **tight race**

- In **close race**, Obama battles for second term

Similarly, the presidential election is construed as a boxing match (POLITICS IS BOXING) with continuous *punches in* the opponent's *face*. Both boxers Obama and Romney keep attacking, defending, hitting, punching and striking back each other until one of them is totally knocked out on the floor. Interestingly, a face-to-face presidential debate can be perceived as the boxing competition:

- The final presidential debate: Four **punches** that **knocked out** Mitt Romney

- For the president, **punch, punch**, another **punch**

- Debate ends abruptly as Obama **punches** Romney **in face**

- Obama didn't **score knockout** but landed more **punches**

Hence, while the championship belt is awarded to the winner, the presidential candidate whose voting rate is higher touches the victory. If a boxer scores by accurate punches on his opponent's face, tools for politicians to gain edge on political battlefields are foreign policies, diplomatic visions, and even ability to persuade the crowd by words:

- Mitt Romney shows he's no expert on foreign policy, but seems to avoid getting **knocked out** by Obama

Also, Mitt Romney's wife who supported him during the election campaign was considered a heavyweight in his team:

- **Heavyweight** Ann Romney: Why Mitt Romney's wife is his secret weapon in 2012 election

For the structural metaphor POLITICS IS HORSE RACE, we catch familiar images in the racetrack where beautiful horses are running very fast. The horse which is running in front of the others has better chance to touch the finish line earliest as well as to become the winner. In a political election, the candidate who is leading in the polls is also referred to as the *front-runner*:

- GOP attacks on **front-runner** Romney might help Obama in Nevada

- Romney secures **front-runner** status with New Hampshire win, looks to take momentum into South Carolina

- Mitt Romney, GOP **front-runner** but wouldn't beat Obama, says poll

In politics, when two candidates are very close to winning the election, they are running *neck and neck*. This remarkable statement is projected from the image of two horses are running at the same speed with their necks being so close to each other that it is difficult to tell which one would win the race. The situation often occurs when these horses enter *home stretch* – the last section of the running track. In a similar way, the competition between two presidential candidates is also *neck-and-neck* with the close voting rates in Wisconsin, as pointed out in the following headlines:

- **Neck and neck**, Romney and Obama enter **home stretch** in presidential **race**

- Polls: Obama, Romney **neck and neck** 6 months ahead of election

- Obama, Romney **neck-and-neck** in Wisconsin

The presidential election campaign is also construed as horse race in which each competitor has an equal chance to be on a *fast track*, or moving very quickly, then leaving his running mates behind. This may be the only chance for each horse to create the difference, strive to gain the advantage over the other

runners; which is equivalent to the moment when each candidate takes advantage of his golden opportunity to induce a large quantity of voters:

- Romney on the *fast track*

## 5. Findings and discussion

The data analysis has revealed that different kinds of sport like track events, boxing, horse race, baseball, basketball, etc. play the role as source domains in all structural metaphorical expressions. Among those sports, such sports as track events, boxing, and horse race appear with the highest frequencies, accounting for 28.5%, 20% and 20% of all the chosen headlines, respectively.

The findings have proved not only the popularity of these sports in the US but also their importance in American life. All the sports whose terms are borrowed to depict the political event are very popular in America. These sports are often likened to sweet soup for soul, especially at weekends when they enjoy spectacular sport events with their beloved people and temporarily forget worries, hardships in daily life. In addition, sport takes a special position in American people's minds because it treats everyone equally. Everyone has the right to enjoy watching, and even taking part in those fantastic sports. Indeed, sport is like an invisible bridge connecting people together regardless of their social status, age, sex, profession, religion, and even their racism.

Under the light of cognitive linguistics, we can achieve a deeper understand of the logical relationship between sport and a conventional, rigid realm like politics. The fact that sports like track events, horse race, boxing, basketball, soccer, etc. are popular in America proves their significant involvement in conceptualizing the concept "politics". Using a specific concept (sport) to structure a more abstract one (politics), political news headlines not only become friendlier but also linger on readers' minds, arouse their curiosity about the articles' contents.

## 6. Conclusion

The research article is expected to provide readers a closer look at the vivid picture of how sport metaphors in the context of politics generally and in political news headlines particularly. The close, logical relationship between the source domain – SPORT and the target domain – POLITICS becomes clearer than ever. Borrowing sport terms to express and deliver political messages, not only does the election news turn less rigid and less superior to the middle and low social classes, but it also illustrates the cognitive mechanism, or the conceptual system of American people as referring to political theme.

As for implications in translating, to have a good version of translation requires a comprehensive understanding of some cultural elements in the source language. A lot of sports which are found to be extremely well-known in America even do not show its signal of life in Vietnam such as basketball, horse race, baseball, lacrosse and American football. This fact insists that the conceptualization of the surrounding physical world may change across different cultures. Since Vietnamese people do not have any experiences with those sports, they do not know sport terms related to them, leading to the lack of metaphor comprehension. In such situation, it is necessary for translators to convey the true messages underlying the metaphorical statement instead of finding the equivalent Vietnamese words. For instance, two headlines “Obama, Romney **neck-and-neck** in Wisconsin” and “Obama throws **penalty flag** on Romney economic plan” should be respectively translated into Vietnamese as “Obama, Romney **bám đuôi sát sao ở Wisconsin**”, and “Obama **không đồng tình** với chính sách kinh tế của Romney”. It can be seen that the colors of

metaphorical language are partly or totally eroded, but at least the underlying messages are transferred to the target language in a smooth and safe way.

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## Ẩn dụ về thể thao trong các tiêu đề báo mang tính chính trị

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**Tóm tắt:** Bài nghiên cứu khảo sát ẩn dụ về thể thao trong các tiêu đề bài báo có nội dung liên quan đến chính trị, cụ thể là, tiêu đề của các bài báo điện tử viết về chiến dịch tranh cử tổng thống Mỹ năm 2012. Thông qua việc khảo sát các phép ẩn dụ về thể thao trong các tiêu đề như vậy, hy vọng rằng bài nghiên cứu có thể chỉ ra các môn thể thao mà ngôn ngữ của chúng xuất hiện với tần suất cao trong các tin tức chính trị cũng như khám phá ra lý do tại sao lại tồn tại cơ chế tri nhận như vậy trong những phép ẩn dụ về thể thao này. Một số ứng dụng trong dịch thuật cũng được đề cập ở cuối bài viết.

*Từ khóa:* Ẩn dụ về thể thao, chính trị, tiêu đề báo.