



VNU Journal of Foreign Studies

Journal homepage: <https://jfs.ulis.vnu.edu.vn/>

CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS IN THE PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE BETWEEN DONALD J. TRUMP AND KAMALA HARRIS IN 2024

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Received 31 May 2025

Revised 24 November 2025; Accepted 17 December 2025

Abstract: This study analyzes the conceptual metaphors employed by Kamala Harris and Donald J. Trump during the 2024 U.S. presidential debate, held in Philadelphia and broadcast by ABC News. Drawing on the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 2003; Kövecses, 2020), the research examines metaphorical language across eight key discussion areas (economy, abortion, immigration, weaponization, transfer of power, war, health care, and climate change) and classifies them according to the three main conceptual metaphor types (Structural, Orientational, and Ontological). Adopting a mixed-methods approach, it combines qualitative analysis with basic quantitative insights. Metaphors are identified, grouped, and interpreted to reveal the candidates' distinct conceptual framings of important issues. The findings suggest that while both candidates rely on metaphors to shape their ideologies, Trump employs metaphors with a markedly greater number than Harris. Structural metaphor is the dominant type overall, driven by Trump's overwhelming reliance on this category. Specifically, Trump frequently uses combative and control-oriented metaphors to emphasize strength and dominance, whereas Harris tends to draw on unity-based and care-based metaphors highlighting cooperation, protection, and shared values.

Keywords: Conceptual Metaphor Theory, mixed-methods approach, combative and control-oriented metaphors, unity-based and care-based metaphors

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<https://doi.org/10.63023/2525-2445/jfs.ulis.5534>

ẨN DỤ Ý NIỆM TRONG CUỘC TRANH LUẬN TỔNG THỐNG GIỮA DONALD J. TRUMP VÀ KAMALA HARRIS NĂM 2024

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Nhận bài ngày 31 tháng 5 năm 2025

Chỉnh sửa ngày 24 tháng 11 năm 2025; Chấp nhận đăng ngày 17 tháng 12 năm 2025

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này phân tích các ẩn dụ ý niệm được Kamala Harris và Donald J. Trump sử dụng trong cuộc tranh luận tổng thống Hoa Kỳ năm 2024, tổ chức tại Philadelphia và được ABC News phát sóng. Dựa trên lý thuyết Ẩn dụ ý niệm (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 2003; Kövecses, 2020), nghiên cứu khảo sát ngôn ngữ ẩn dụ của hai ứng viên tổng thống theo tám chủ đề trọng tâm (kinh tế, nạn phá thai, nhập cư, vũ khí hóa, chuyển giao quyền lực, chiến tranh, chăm sóc sức khỏe và biến đổi khí hậu) và phân loại chúng theo ba loại ẩn dụ ý niệm chính (Ẩn dụ cấu trúc, Ẩn dụ định hướng và Ẩn dụ bản thể). Áp dụng phương pháp tiếp cận hỗn hợp, nghiên cứu kết hợp phân tích định tính và một số tính toán định lượng cơ bản. Các ẩn dụ được xác định, phân loại và diễn giải nhằm thể hiện các khung ý niệm rõ ràng của các ứng viên về những vấn đề quan trọng. Kết quả cho thấy trong khi cả hai ứng cử viên đều dựa vào ẩn dụ để định khung hệ tư tưởng của mình, Trump sử dụng ẩn dụ với số lượng cao hơn đáng kể so với Harris. Ẩn dụ cấu trúc là loại chiếm ưu thế nhất trong toàn bộ cuộc tranh luận, với việc Trump phụ thuộc rất nhiều vào loại ẩn dụ này. Cụ thể, Trump thường dùng các ẩn dụ mang tính chiến đấu và kiểm soát, làm nổi bật quyền lực và sức mạnh, trong khi Harris có xu hướng sử dụng các ẩn dụ gắn kết và quan tâm, thể hiện tinh thần hợp tác, bảo vệ và giá trị chung.

Từ khóa: lý thuyết Ẩn dụ ý niệm, phương pháp tiếp cận hỗn hợp, ẩn dụ chiến đấu và kiểm soát, ẩn dụ gắn kết và quan tâm

1. Introduction

Presidential debates are a central feature of election campaigns, offering candidates a platform to present ideas, challenge opponents, and appeal to voters. Beyond information exchange, debates are a form of political communication where language becomes a strategic tool to shape public perception. Among these tools, metaphor stands out for its ability to simplify complex issues and evoke emotional responses. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) explain, metaphors help understand abstract concepts by linking them to familiar experiences, thereby enhancing clarity and persuasiveness in political debates, where candidates must convey big ideas within a limited time.

The 2024 U.S. presidential debate between Donald J. Trump and Kamala Harris, held on September 10, 2024, provides a compelling case for examining metaphor use in political discourse. Trump and Harris differ significantly in both rhetorical style and ideological stance. Trump frequently uses combative language, drawing on metaphors of war and competition (Lakoff, 2016), whereas Harris tends to emphasize justice, healing, and unity through her metaphorical choices (Charteris-Black, 2018). These linguistic patterns reflect deeper political strategies and values.

Although metaphors in politics have been widely studied (e.g., Lakoff, 1996; Charteris-Black, 2004; Musolff, 2016), most research has focused on speeches or social media, not live debates. Studies on Trump often analyze his tweets or public addresses (Ott & Dickinson, 2019), while research on Harris typically examines her campaign messaging or vice-presidential debates

(Mercieca, 2021). Few studies have directly compared how the two candidates use metaphors within the same debate context, highlighting a gap that this study seeks to address.

2. Aims and Research Questions

This study systematically investigates the metaphors used by both candidates in the 2024 American presidential debate. Grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT for short) (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 2003; Kövecses, 2020), the analysis moves beyond traditional rhetorical description to uncover the underlying cognitive frameworks that shape the candidates' discourse. Specifically, the research aims to identify, classify, and compare the dominant conceptual metaphors, providing a cognitive basis for their communication strategies. Ultimately, the study seeks to reveal how these metaphorical systems reflect the candidates' core political ideologies and maximize voter persuasion.

To guide this systematic inquiry and ensure the analysis addresses the key findings regarding metaphor frequency and classification, two main questions have been raised:

- 1) *What is the overall frequency and classification of major conceptual metaphors utilized by Trump and Harris in the 2024 debate?*
- 2) *How do the candidates' conceptual metaphors reflect their core political ideologies?*

3. Literature Review

3.1. Conceptual Metaphor Theory

3.1.1 Nature of Metaphor

CMT radically differs from the traditional, classical view of metaphor by shifting the understanding of metaphor from a mere linguistic or rhetorical device to a cognitive process. Introduced by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), CMT has revolutionized the way metaphor is understood, not as mere stylistic devices, but as fundamental to human thought and behavior. The authors clearly state "The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (p. 5). Contrary to the conventional view that metaphor is mostly confined to poetic, literary, or persuasive language, and thus considered extraordinary or special, CMT shows that metaphor is pervasive in our everyday life, influencing not only how we talk but also how we think, perceive, and act. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) emphasize "Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature" (p. 3).

3.1.2. Domains and Mapping Mechanism

Metaphor, or to be more exact, conceptual metaphor in CMT is considered an essential cognitive tool with which we understand one conceptual domain in terms of another. The concepts of source domain and target domain are fundamental to understanding how metaphors function as cognitive tools, not just linguistic ornaments. While the **source domain** is the more concrete, familiar, or well-structured concept from which we draw our metaphorical expressions and knowledge, the **target domain** is the abstract, less structured, or less familiar concept that we are trying to understand or make sense of. In other words, the source domain provides the framework for our understanding of the target domain. Consequently, the target domain becomes the subject matter of the metaphor.

CMT **mapping** is a unidirectional projection of structure from a source domain onto a target domain. This mechanism helps systematically transfer elements, relations, and inferences

from the source domain to the target domain, allowing understanding and reasoning about the more abstract target in terms of the more concrete source. The mapping is not arbitrary but systematic and often partial. As refined from his earlier formulation (2002), Kövecses succinctly defines mapping as “a systematic set of correspondences between two domains of experience” (2020, p. 2).

3.1.3. Types of Conceptual Metaphor

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) identify three main types of conceptual metaphors: structural, orientational, and ontological.

Structural metaphors involve mapping the structure of a more concrete, well-defined source domain onto a more abstract, or less well-defined target domain. This facilitates understanding the abstract concept by borrowing the systematic correlations from the concrete one. A classic example of structural metaphors in CMT is “ARGUMENT IS WAR”, where the language of battle is used to talk about arguments, and “a verbal battle, and the structure of an argument – attack, defense, counterattack, etc. – reflects this” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 4).

Oriental metaphors organize a whole system of concepts with respect to one another, often involving spatial orientations like up/down, on/off, in/out or front/back. These metaphors are deeply grounded in embodied experience, helping conceptualize emotions, states, and values in spatial terms. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) point out that the expression *I’m feeling up today* results from the conceptual mapping that “the concept HAPPY is oriented UP” (p. 4).

Ontological metaphors enable treating abstract things like thoughts, emotions, activities or events as if they were real, concrete things. By viewing non-physical concepts as physical objects, substances, containers, or even people (personification), this permits naming, classifying, organizing, and counting them, as well as identifying their aspects, which allows reasoning about them effectively. “Once we can identify our experiences as entities or substances, we can refer to them, categorize them, group them, and quantify them – and, by this means, reason about them.” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 25)

3.1.4. Metaphors and Politics

Lakoff (2002) asserts that metaphors shape thought, introducing the Strict Father (conservative) and Nurturant Parent (progressive) models that structure American political morality and reasoning. Charteris-Black (2004) suggests Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA), which combines CMT with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), to show how metaphors like war, journey, and religion are used in political speeches to justify policies and emotionally connect with audiences. Musolff (2004, 2006) studies EU discourse, revealing how metaphors of the European Union as a family and as marriage partners made complex integration issues relatable and emotionally charged. Hart (2010) advocates for analyzing metaphors through the lens of CDA, emphasizing the ideological and strategic role of metaphors in structuring discourse (e.g., in justifying political actions or policies).

Lapka (2021) investigates how conceptual metaphors are used as a persuasion tool in English political discourse, focusing on four common conceptual metaphors (NATION IS A FAMILY, STATE IS A BODY, POLITICS IS A WAR, POLITICS IS A GAME). Analyzing 28 public speeches, the study shows the WAR source domain is frequently used to conceptualize political activities, while the GAME source domain is the least. The research is done within the CMT framework, acknowledging that politicians strategically use language to convince audiences and gain support.

A linguistic analysis of the Trump-Harris debate on 10 September 2024 by Maierová (2024) is primarily based on CDA and van Dijk's Ideological Square. The study focuses on surface linguistic features, classical rhetorical strategies, sentence length, vocabulary density, pronoun use, and tone. The findings establish a clear style split: Harris employs longer, more complex sentences and a positive, inclusive discourse. Trump, by contrast, speaks more overall, uses simpler language, repetition, and higher negativity/hyperbole. Both candidates make use of structural rhetorical devices to persuade voters, and exemplify the Ideological Square by magnifying their own strengths while simultaneously attacking the opponent's flaws.

Kieu (2025) analyzes the conceptual metaphors used by General Secretary To Lam in his 2024 National Assembly remarks. The research specifically addresses the functions of complex metaphors (e.g., TIME IS A PATH/MOVING OBJECT, ABSTRACT COMPLEX SYSTEMS ARE BUILDINGS/MACHINES) and their role in policy orientation and public persuasion. The findings highlight the influence of specific Vietnamese cultural imprints like the Dragon and Saint Giong on conceptual metaphors usage in effectively simplifying abstract ideas, achieving persuasion and policy orientation in political discourse.

Clearly, metaphors in politics are not merely linguistic decoration; they are strategic tools of persuasion and ideological framing. Specifically, in the past few years, scholars have extensively analyzed conceptual metaphors in political discourse, highlighting how they function to frame ideologies, legitimize authority, persuade audiences, and shape public perception.

3.2. Political Discourse and Ideology

3.2.1. Political Discourse

Political discourse can be understood as discourse produced by politicians, where the actor or producer of the discourse fundamentally determines its political nature. A politician is normally understood as "a person whose job involves politics, especially as an elected member of parliament, etc." (Oxford University Press, n.d.). However, in van Dijk's explanation (1997, p. 13), politicians are defined as those "who are being paid for their (political) activities, and who are being elected or appointed (or self-designated) as the central players in the polity." He also emphasizes the necessity to pay attention to the participants of political discourse, as discourse is interactional; thus, both the producer and the receiver take part in it. As a result, political discourse participants can be anyone engaging in politics.

Furthermore, van Dijk (1997) points out the importance of the setting where political discourse is produced. There are restrictions on the circumstances in which a discourse delivered by a politician is recognized as political. A discourse produced by a politician in an informal context may not be classified as political while speeches, addressed by politicians acting in their professional roles and in institutional settings to achieve certain political aims, are labelled political discourse.

3.2.2. Ideology

While in common understanding ideology is defined as "a set of beliefs or principles, especially one on which a political system, party, or organization is based," (Oxford University Press, n.d.) specialized academic approaches in CDA offer deeper views. van Dijk (2006) sees ideology as a social and mental framework that helps people make sense of the world and act accordingly. It fundamentally supports group identity and is systematically used to justify or maintain social inequality through its control over discourse. Fairclough (2003) describes ideology as the process through which certain ideas become naturalized and accepted within

society. He highlights that language is never neutral, serving as a powerful tool that can reflect, support, or challenge power structures. Similarly, Wodak (2001) argues that ideologies are embedded in linguistic choices, demonstrated through the use of strategic metaphors and specific forms of storytelling designed to reinforce particular worldviews.

3.2.3. Ideology in Political Discourse

Within the CDA framework, ideology is conceptualized not merely as a personal belief, but as a system socially constructed and institutionally reinforced. Political language is central to the dissemination and reproduction of ideology, facilitating public acceptance of certain views as “common sense” and influencing social cognition. Thompson (1996) argues that ideology is communication used to reinforce power structures, defining it as meaning in the service of power. Fairclough (1989, 1995) links ideology to power and social control, asserting that dominant groups employ language to protect their interests.

Van Dijk (1995) further posits that ideologies serve to define group members’ identity and shared values, and these shared social ideas fundamentally influence how people think, act, and speak. Language is therefore one of the main ways for ideologies to be formed, shared, and transmitted. It is also worth noting that political discourse and ideology are two inseparable things. Van Dijk (1997) specifically argues that political discourse is a powerful instrument through which politicians manifest their diverse ideological identities, often overtly or covertly showcasing at least one of their core ideologies. Indeed, political science confirms that politicians, when engaging in political discourse, hold and express individualized, unique combinations of ideologies.

4. Methodology

4.1. Database of the Study

This study draws on a selected portion of the 2024 U.S. Presidential Debate between Donald J. Trump and Kamala Harris, held on September 10, 2024, and moderated by David Muir and Linsey Davis. The transcript, obtained from ABC News, includes only the spoken remarks of the two candidates; all interventions by moderators and the audience were excluded. The original wording was preserved, with only minor formatting adjustments made for clarity and coherence.

The debate centered on eight key topics: (i) Economy and cost of living, (ii) Abortion, (iii) Immigration and border security, (iv) Weaponization, (v) Transfer of power and race and politics in the U.S., (vi) War, (vii) Healthcare system, and (viii) Climate change. Speaking order was determined by a coin toss, with Trump winning and choosing to deliver the closing statement, thereby positioning Harris as the first speaker.

All metaphorical excerpts cited in the analysis are drawn from this transcript and are highlighted in full in Appendix 1. Appendix 2 provides a comprehensive list of identified metaphorical expressions, systematically numbered and categorized according to the eight thematic areas. For visual clarity, content associated with the Democratic Party (Harris) is marked in blue, while content related to the Republican Party (Trump) is marked in red, reflecting conventional party colors.

4.2. Data Analysis Procedure

The identification of metaphors has followed the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) proposed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007), which consists of four key steps. First, the entire debate transcript was read carefully to establish a general understanding of its overall meaning.

Second, the text was segmented into lexical units, which served as the basic elements for analysis. Third, for each lexical unit, its contextual meaning was identified, and then compared with its more basic meaning – typically the one that is more concrete, physically grounded, historically older, or easier to visualize. If the contextual meaning contrasted with the basic meaning but could still be understood in relation to it, the lexical unit was considered metaphorically used. Finally, all lexical units that met this contrastive criterion were marked as metaphorical.

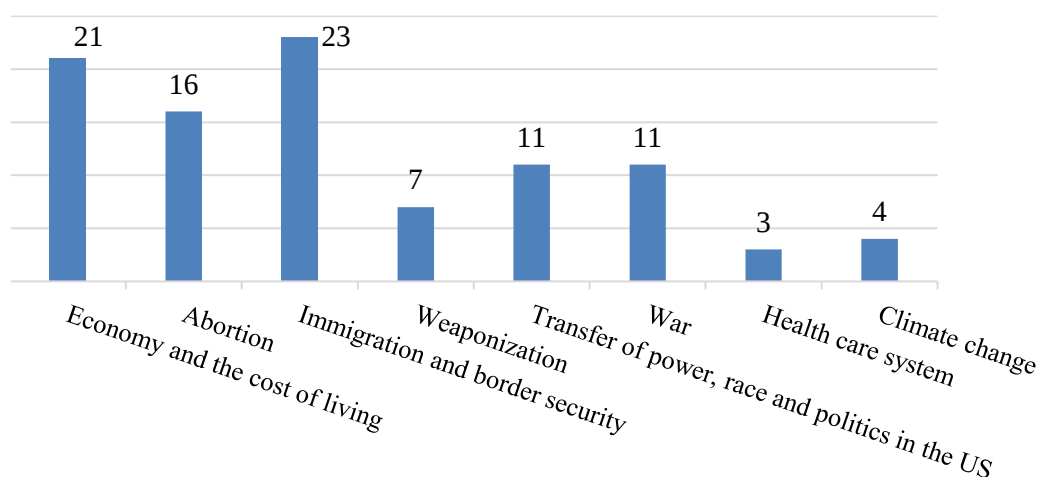
Following the identification process, the analysis has proceeded with the classification of the identified metaphors into relevant conceptual categories. Apart from classifying Trump's and Harris's metaphors according to the eight key topics, this study applies Lakoff and Johnson's original three-way classification framework from the 1980 edition of *Metaphors We Live by*. Although Lakoff and Johnson, in the 2003 edition of the book, self-corrected their stance, noting that the three-way division of metaphors (Orientational, Ontological, and Structural) is "artificial" (p. 265) and that all metaphors inherently possess structural and ontological features, this study retains the original three-part framework. This choice is based on descriptive utility and methodological simplicity. The 1980 classification offers clarity for describing and coding major metaphor types in the corpus, which is particularly beneficial for quantitative studies. Furthermore, this framework allows the research to focus on the surface structure of the metaphors and bypasses the complexity of analyzing them into Primary Metaphors. Consequently, the 1980 framework is maintained to ensure consistency and data comparability for the analysis goals of this study.

5. Research Findings

5.1. Harris's Metaphorical Expressions

Figure 1

Harris's Metaphorical Expressions by Topic



In discussing *Economy and cost of living*, Harris frequently uses metaphors (N=21) to frame it as something we can build, support, and lift – like a structure or a person (N=4). She speaks of “lifting up the middle class” and building “an opportunity economy,” emphasizing care, progress, and fairness. Small businesses are called the “backbone of America’s economy,” while harmful policies are said to weigh on “the backs” of ordinary people, implying unjust burdens. In contrast, she criticizes Trump’s agenda as a “tired playbook” and a “dangerous plan” (N=5), invoking metaphors of obsolescence and threat. She also draws on domestic

imagery (N=3), saying she helped “clean up Trump’s mess”, portraying governance as maintaining a shared home. On national security and trade, she uses war and betrayal metaphors (N=6), accusing Trump of starting “trade wars” and having “sold us out” to China. She warns his economic plan would “explode the deficit” and “invite a recession,” evoking collapse and instability. Unifying metaphors (N=3) like “where we stand” and “what brings us together” portray America as a shared community she aims to protect.

When addressing **Abortion**, Harris uses metaphors (N=16) to frame abortion bans as a form of oppression (N=9), describing them as “bans which make it criminal” and violations of women’s bodies, emphasizing the government’s invasion of personal autonomy. She portrays the restoration of *Roe v. Wade* as the reinstatement of legal protections (N=3), framing it as something unjustly taken away: “undo the protections of *Roe v. Wade*” and “reinstating the protections of *Roe v. Wade*”. Additionally, Harris employs metaphors related to surveillance (N=3) to highlight government overreach, warning that women would be subjected to being “monitored,” which implies Orwellian surveillance. She connects voting to moral expression (N=1), stating that “the people of America have voted for freedom,” and argues that Americans have expressed their support for abortion rights through their vote for freedom.

On **Immigration and border security**, Harris shows the highest number of metaphors (N=23) across all eight discussion areas. She most frequently employs metaphors of threat, containment, and control (N=9) to frame immigration and crime as forces that must be managed or resisted. She uses terms like “prosecute” and “stem the flow”, positioning immigration as an overwhelming force requiring firm intervention. Harris contrasts this active, problem-solving stance with Trump’s passivity, remarking that he “preferred to run on a problem instead of fixing a problem,” a metaphor highlighting leadership as engagement rather than avoidance (N=4). She emphasizes citizen vulnerability, advocating for a leader who listens to their “needs, dreams, and desires,” thereby humanizing the electorate and framing governance as responsive and empathetic (N=4). Political issues are simplified through action-oriented metaphors (N=4) like “kill the bill” and “turn the page”, which allow Harris to present complex policy debates in accessible, emotionally resonant terms.

Regarding **Weaponization** (N=7), Harris frames political power as something that can be misused and turned against the public. She warns that institutions like the Department of Justice risk becoming “an instrument of retaliation”, suggesting a shift from impartial law enforcement to partisan enforcement (N=3). Harris primarily uses destruction/attack metaphors (N=2) by presenting the Constitution as a living entity vulnerable to deliberate harm, using the metaphor “terminated” to describe threats to its integrity. Her repeated references to democracy being “under attack” and “at risk” reinforce the idea that foundational institutions are being destabilized. Additionally, she contrasts leadership styles by invoking physical force metaphors (N=1), with “beating people down” versus “lifting people up”, to distinguish destructive power from constructive strength. Her values are described as “anchors”, symbolizing moral steadiness amid political turbulence (N=1).

For the discussion of **Transfer of power, race, and politics**, Harris has a total of 11 metaphors (N=11), an amount equal to that of the *War* discussion area. She primarily employs metaphors of moral boundaries and democratic ideals (N=3) to underscore her stance. She depicts the January 6th attack as an attempt “to desecrate our nation’s Capital,” invoking sacred space imagery to emphasize national violation. Her statement “time to turn the page” draws on a book metaphor (N=2), signaling renewal and a shift from past turmoil. The phrase “a bridge too far” suggests Trump’s actions exceeded acceptable limits (N=1). Her calls to “stand for

country” and “stand for democracy” reflect uprightness and moral resolve, while citizens are framed as customers who “deserve better” governance (N=2). Harris also uses symbolic language (N=3) to frame race relations as a struggle between unity and division, hope and hatred. She portrays Trump’s rhetoric as a force that “divide[s] the American people”, casting the nation as a fractured body. In contrast, phrases like “a friend” and “a neighbor” promote shared humanity across racial and ethnic lines.

Focusing on **War** as well as global conflict, Harris employs 11 metaphors (N=11), matching the total for *Transfer of power, race, and politics*. She frames international crises as moral struggles and physical threats (N=3). She refers to Hamas’s attack as “slaughter”, invoking violent imagery to emphasize its brutality. The metaphor “charting a course” describes negotiating a two-state solution, highlighting the need for leadership and planning (N=2). Ukraine’s resistance is portrayed as a “righteous defense”, casting the war as a battle between good and evil. Putin is personified as a “watchful predator”, suggesting a looming threat. Harris criticizes Trump’s stance on Russia, saying he would be “eaten for lunch” by Putin, using metaphors of weakness and betrayal (N=2). Additionally, she uses metaphors of space and endlessness (N=1), describing the war in Afghanistan as “endless”, underscoring its futility. Camp David is framed as a “sacred” space for diplomacy, which she contrasts with Trump’s invitation to the Taliban, viewing it as a desecration (N=3).

Turning to **Health care system**, Harris has the lowest number of metaphors (N=3) across all eight discussion areas. She primarily uses metaphors of cultivation and stewardship (N=2) to frame the Affordable Care Act (ACA) as an organic and evolving system, emphasizing that health care requires ongoing attention, care, and development. She described the ACA as something to be “maintained” and “grown”, invoking metaphors of cultivation and stewardship. When discussing efforts to strengthen the law, she employs metaphors of reinforcement and fortification (N=1), suggesting that the ACA, though under strain, remains resilient and capable of improvement. Her phrase “capped the cost” of insulin symbolizes containment, highlighting the need to control rising drug prices and protect patients from financial burden. Through these metaphors, Harris presents health care not as a static policy, but as a living structure that demands investment, protection, and ethical responsibility.

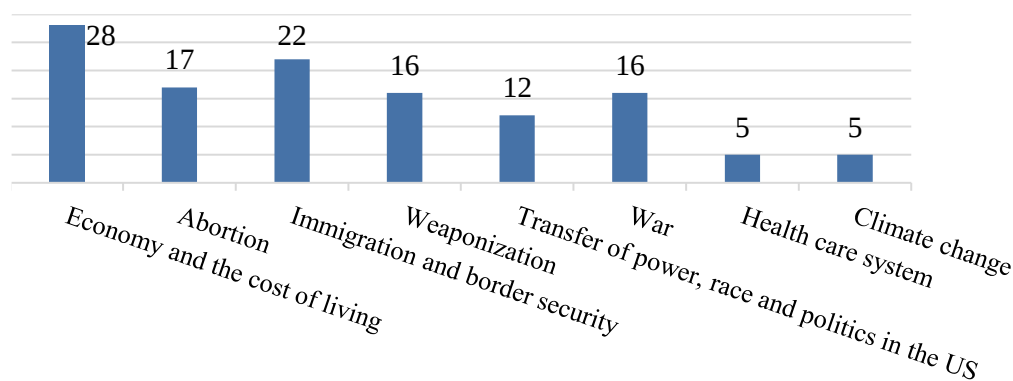
Framing **Climate change** as an “existential threat,” Harris employs 4 metaphors (N=4) for this discussion area. She primarily uses threat and destruction metaphors (N=2) to emphasize the urgency and severity of the crisis. She highlights the human cost of extreme weather by describing people as “losing their home” and having “nowhere to go”, metaphorically portraying climate change as a force that dismantles personal and communal security. Additionally, she refers to the “clean energy economy” as a construction project, casting environmental reform as something that can be built, expanded, and invested in. This construct metaphor (N=2) suggests that climate action is not only necessary but also an opportunity to create a sustainable and forward-looking future through deliberate planning and collective effort.

Across thematic areas, Harris consistently employs metaphors rooted in care, connection, and moral responsibility. Her language frames governance as stewardship, policy as protection, and leadership as a collective endeavor. These metaphorical choices reinforce her image as a compassionate and community-oriented leader, in contrast to more combative rhetorical styles.

5.2. Trump's Metaphorical Expressions

Figure 2

Trump's Metaphorical Expressions by Topic



In his treatment of ***Economy and the cost of living***, Trump has the highest number of metaphors (N=28) across all eight discussion areas. He primarily employs construct/destruction metaphors (N=8) to frame the economy as a structure or machine that can be built, destroyed, or repaired. He takes personal credit for having “created one of the greatest economies” and vows to “build it again, bigger, better, and stronger”, portraying himself as a builder and restorer. In contrast, he accuses the Biden administration of having “destroyed the economy”, suggesting structural collapse. Economic failure is dramatized as a violence/death metaphor (N=4), with a “bloodbath”, invoking imagery of violence and loss. He personifies the country as a living being, warning that “people are absolutely dying” and that current policies will lead to “the end of our country” (N=3). In international trade, he casts the U.S. as a creditor and diplomacy as a transactional metaphor (N=10), claiming he made China “pay us hundreds of billions of dollars”. Politics is reduced to spectacle, with branding metaphors like sending opponents a MAGA hat (N=3).

Discussing ***Abortion*** (N=17), Trump employs violent and militarized metaphors (N=5) to frame the issue as a moral crisis. He describes late-term abortion as “execution after birth”, equating it with murder and declaring, “it’s execution, no longer abortion”. He casts the legal battle over *Roe v. Wade* as a war, positioning himself and conservative justices as courageous warriors: “It took courage to do it.” Trump also treats abortion policy as a tangible object that can be moved or seized (N=7) stating, “they’ve been trying to get *Roe v. Wade* into the states” and “this issue has now been taken over by the states”. Furthermore, he frames the nation as a body torn apart (N=5) by the abortion debate: “has torn our country apart for 52 years”. Through these metaphors, Trump presents himself as the figure capable of restoring moral order and national unity.

When addressing ***Immigration and border security*** (N=22), Trump draws on metaphors of invasion, destruction, and decline (N=8) to portray immigration as an existential threat. He warns of “millions of people to come into our country” and claims they are “destroying the fabric of our country”, framing immigration as a force that overwhelms and corrodes national identity. The nation is depicted as fragile and failing (N=5), with phrases like “our country is being lost” and “we’re a failing nation”. In contrast, he calls for restoration (N=3), urging that the country be “made great again”. War metaphors underscore political conflict, while militarized solutions are proposed for immigration control (N=3). Shocking imagery (N=3) such as immigrants “eating the dogs” symbolizes societal breakdown, and the coined term “migrant crime” links immigration directly to criminality. These expressions reinforce Trump’s image as a strongman determined to reclaim control and defend national sovereignty.

Talking about **Weaponization** (N=16), Trump uses combative and legal metaphors (N=6) to portray legal and political actions against him as politically motivated attacks. He claims the Justice Department has been “weaponized” and refers to the charges as “fake cases”, framing law enforcement as partisan weaponry. Harris is constructed as a fixed ideological enemy (N=4), repeatedly labeled a “radical left liberal” who has “been against” key policies. Trump accuses her of aiding chaos by “raising money to get [violent protesters] out of jail,” casting her as complicit in disorder (N=3). He warns that progressive policies would “destroy our country”, and uses existential threat metaphors (N=3) like “oil will be dead” to depict them as existential threats. These metaphors reinforce a narrative of persecution, ideological warfare, and national collapse under liberal leadership.

Framing **Transfer of power, race, and politics** (N=12) as a struggle for legitimacy and control, Trump primarily uses destruction and delegitimization metaphors (N=4) to portray his opponents as agents of national decline. He repeatedly claims that Harris and the Biden administration are “destroying our country”, suggesting their policies are dismantling its foundations. He calls Biden “the most divisive president in history”, framing leadership as a source of discord (N=3). Trump insists the 2020 election was “rigged and stolen”, casting the transfer of power as an illegitimate seizure. He accuses Democrats of “playing the race card” and “trying to divide the country,” portraying racial discourse as a manipulative tactic (N=3). He also uses metaphors of identity fusion (N=2), saying “She is Biden”, erasing Harris’s individuality and portraying her as an extension of a failing administration. These metaphors serve to delegitimize opponents and elevate Trump as the singular agent of restoration.

Mobilizing metaphors of **War** (N=16), Trump constructs a political landscape defined by danger, decline, and domination. He primarily uses authoritarian/control metaphors (N=4), referring to Harris as “the border czar,” invoking a monarch metaphor to suggest authoritarian control. Domestic unrest is framed as military conflict (N=4), with protests in Seattle described as a “military invasion” and the city cast as a war zone. The nation is personified as a living body “in decline... a nation that is dying”, emphasizing vulnerability and collapse (N=3). Trump’s call to “close up the border” employs a container metaphor (N=2), advocating for a sealed-off nation under siege. In foreign policy, he warns of regions “getting blown up” and terror “spreading like a sphere”, positioning himself as the protector who can contain violence. The Taliban is depicted as a “fighting force”, while the U.S. withdrawal is labeled “the most embarrassing moment”, and “abandoned wealth” symbolizes military loss (N=3). These metaphors reinforce Trump’s image as a wartime commander uniquely equipped to restore strength and defend national sovereignty.

Condemning **Health care system** as inefficient and decaying, Trump uses the lowest number of metaphors (N=5) in this discussion area, sharing this count with Climate change. He primarily employs decay and failure metaphors (N=2) calling Obamacare “lousy health care”, portraying it as inherently flawed. Most notably, he asks “Do I save it and make it as good as it can be? Or do I let it rot?” – a metaphor of decay that suggests the system is beyond repair unless actively intervened upon. He describes health care as a mechanism that must be “run” (N=1) efficiently, implying it is a machine requiring strong managerial control. When criticizing government-run systems, he warns that people might “wait six months for an operation,” using time as a metaphor for suffering and systemic failure (N=2). These metaphors reinforce Trump’s image as a decisive leader confronting institutional breakdown and reclaiming control over vital national functions.

Undermining **Climate change** discourse through indirect metaphorical attacks, Trump

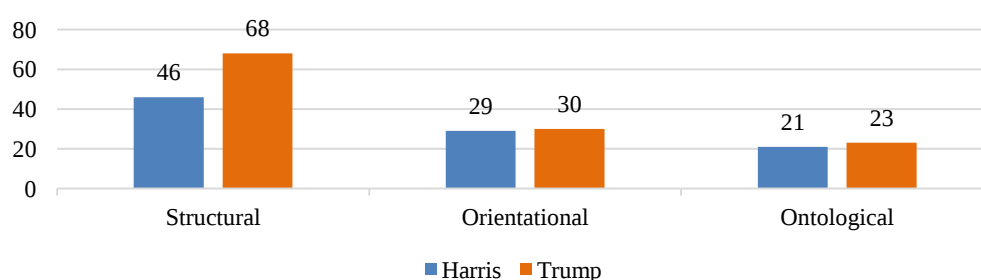
employs 5 metaphors (N=5) for this discussion area, an amount equal to that of the Health care system. He primarily uses war and threat metaphors (N=2) to frame clean energy initiatives and foreign competition as existential threats to American strength. He refers to climate policy as a “war on energy”, casting environmental reform as a hostile assault on national prosperity. The Green New Deal is labeled a “hoax”, suggesting deception and ideological manipulation (N=1). Trump warns that foreign companies will “kill the United Auto Workers” and that American jobs are “leaving,” portraying the nation as under economic siege (N=1). Describing foreign competition from China and Mexico as an “invasion” and “destruction” of American industry, he accuses Democrats of “selling our country down the tubes”, evoking imagery of betrayal and irreversible decline (N=1). These metaphors recast climate-related policy as a battlefield where Trump positions himself as the defender of national sovereignty against external threats and internal sabotage.

Across thematic areas, Trump consistently employs metaphors rooted in conflict, collapse, and control. His language frames governance as warfare, policy as machinery, and leadership as personal domination. These metaphorical choices reinforce his image as a combative and commanding figure, positioning himself as the sole agent capable of restoring a nation under siege.

5.3. Harris’s and Trump’s Conceptual Metaphor Types

Figure 3

Distribution of Conceptual Metaphor Types Used by Harris and Trump (Classification based on Lakoff and Johnson, 1980)



The comparison of metaphor types used by Harris and Trump in the 2024 presidential debate is based on Lakoff and Johnson’s 1980 classification, revealing differences in their rhetorical choices. As shown in Figure 3, **Structural metaphors** are the most prominent type in the debate, with Trump using them overwhelmingly more frequently (68 instances) than Harris (46 instances). Trump’s significantly higher use of Structural metaphors (68) indicates a more combative and action-oriented style, emphasizing strength, defense, and reconstruction. Conversely, Harris (46) tends to use Structural metaphors that frame governance as progress and collective effort, highlighting inclusion and shared purpose. **Orientational metaphors** are used almost equally (29 for Harris and 30 for Trump), reflecting how both draw on spatial imagery like up/down or forward/backward to express moral direction and emotional stance. **Ontological metaphors**, the least frequent (21 for Harris and 23 for Trump), still play an important role in giving abstract notions – such as freedom, democracy, and the nation – concrete, human-like qualities.

6. Discussions

6.1. Harris’s Ideology Through Metaphors

Harris’s metaphorical expressions consistently align with her progressive and inclusive

political ideology. Her discourse is built upon concepts of hope, change, and collective action, framing political challenges as shared obstacles to be overcome through unity and cooperation. These figurative choices reflect a vision of America that is equitable and forward-looking, emphasizing systemic transformation through continuous effort. Her language, often portraying the nation as being on a journey toward justice or a collective endeavor, signals a commitment to social reform and shared purpose.

Harris's metaphors primarily function to reinforce her progressive stance by positioning political issues as opportunities for growth and transformation. This strategic framing aligns directly with her focus on addressing racial and economic injustice, positioning her as a leader committed to reform and systemic change. Notably, her frequent use of Structural metaphors (from Section 5.3) underpins her vision, as these metaphors are leveraged for concepts like "building a better future" and "rising together", thus emphasizing collective agency. She complements this with Ontological metaphors, which assign human-like qualities to abstract ideals, reinforcing the need for the protection of democracy and shared values. As Wodak (2009) highlights, metaphors reflect and reinforce political values; Harris's metaphorical language consistently reflects her challenge to existing systems of inequality and her commitment to a more inclusive society.

6.2. Trump's Ideology Through Metaphors

Trump's metaphorical expressions align perfectly with his conservative, nationalist, and populist ideology, frequently centering on danger, threat, and division. His discourse frames political issues as crises and conflicts, emphasizing the need for national security and defense of traditional American values. This adversarial pattern is overwhelmingly reflected in his high usage of Structural metaphors (68 instances) from Section 5.3, which are used to construct narratives of war, collapse, and invasion. This rhetorical choice, which portrays opponents and policy challenges as enemies to be defeated, constructs a powerful narrative of constant struggle.

Trump utilizes a metaphorical framework to establish a moral binary of good versus evil, positioning himself as the protector against societal threats. His language frequently invokes metaphors of control and restoration, such as referring to the economy as something to be "revived" or "restored," which evoke urgency and the need for decisive action. By simplifying complex issues into stark, binary terms, he reinforces the perception that America is under attack, thereby legitimizing his role as the savior and guardian. This mirrors van Dijk's (1995) argument that metaphors shape power relations and influence social cognition, supporting Trump's image as the nation's redeemer capable of restoring its greatness.

6.3. Comparing Trump's and Harris's Metaphors

While Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) classification groups metaphors into structural, orientational, and ontological, this framework is cognitive rather than political but provides an important foundation for comparing ideological tendencies. The metaphor type alone does not determine ideology; instead, ideology emerges from how each type is strategically used to frame political issues. Thus, even when both candidates rely on structural metaphors, the content and direction of these metaphors diverge sharply, with Trump foregrounding conflict and threat, and Harris emphasizing progress and collective action. This interaction between metaphor type and metaphorical framing allows deeper insight into the distinct political ideologies expressed by each candidate.

The fundamental contrast in metaphorical framing between the two candidates reflects their divergent political ideologies. Trump relies heavily on conflict-driven metaphoric structures,

such as war and battle, which is quantitatively supported by his high usage of Structural metaphors (N=68). This framing depicts the nation as needing protection from external and internal enemies. These expressions underscore his nationalist and populist views, evoking a sense of fear and urgency and positioning him as the strong leader who will shield the vulnerable.

In contrast, Harris draws on metaphoric expressions centered on hope, change, and collective action, such as journey and growth. Her comparatively lower reliance on Structural metaphors (N=46) suggests a focus on constructive action over conflict. These figurative choices reflect her progressive ideology, emphasizing social justice, reform, and systemic transformation. She frames political challenges as opportunities to be overcome through unity and collaboration, presenting herself as a leader who believes in the power of collective effort to drive positive change and inspire optimism.

This strategic divergence in metaphorical use is consistent with established patterns in political discourse. This pattern is evident in past elections: In the 2008 U.S. debates, Barack Obama employed journey-based imagery to promote progress, while John McCain relied on military references. Similarly, in the 2016 debates, Hillary Clinton used unifying metaphors, whereas Trump invoked walls and threats to portray the nation as vulnerable and under siege.

7. Conclusion

7.1. Main Findings

This study analyzes the use of conceptual metaphors in the 2024 U.S. Presidential Debate between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris, focusing on eight key topics: economy, abortion, immigration, weaponization, transfer of power, war, healthcare, and climate change. Drawing on CMT (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), which classifies metaphors into Structural, Orientational, and Ontological types, the study identifies metaphorical expressions used by both candidates and examines their underlying conceptual mappings to understand how metaphors shape political discourse.

The findings reveal that Trump employs metaphors more frequently (total N=121) than Harris (total N=96). Structural metaphors constitute the dominant classification type overall, driven by Trump's significantly higher reliance on this category. Trump often invokes themes such as war, collapse, control, and invasion – framing issues in terms of crisis and division. In contrast, Harris uses metaphors more sparingly, emphasizing healing, urgency, construction, and collective responsibility – projecting a more inclusive and forward-looking narrative. Ideologically, Trump's metaphors align with a protectionist and confrontational stance, while Harris's reflect a progressive, collaborative, and growth-oriented approach.

7.2. Implications

The findings underscore the influential role of metaphorical framing in shaping the candidates' political ideologies and voter perceptions. Conceptual metaphors are not merely stylistic devices; they function as cognitive tools that structure how political realities are understood and emotionally processed. Trump's frequent use of metaphors rooted in conflict and threat reinforces a worldview centered on defense and urgency, potentially mobilizing support through fear-based appeals. In contrast, Harris's metaphors of healing and progress foster a vision of collective agency and inclusive transformation, which resonates with audiences seeking systemic change.

These insights carry practical implications for political communication, media analysis, and civic education. Understanding how conceptual metaphors reflect, reinforce ideological positions,

and influence audience perceptions helps journalists, educators, and voters critically engage with political discourse; they can analyze the underlying intent rather than reacting passively to discourse. Campaign strategists and speechwriters may benefit from recognizing the emotional and conceptual impact of metaphorical language in shaping public opinion; they can deliberately select frames that strategically align with their candidate's core ideology. As political polarization intensifies, the ability to decode and reflect on metaphor use becomes vital for fostering informed and empathetic participation; namely, voters can move beyond surface-level emotional appeals to critically decode the ideological framing and understand differing worldviews.

7.3. Recommendations for Further Research

Future studies could broaden the scope by examining multiple debates across different election cycles, political contexts, or countries to identify patterns in metaphor usage over time and across cultures. Researchers may also analyze the discourse of a wider range of political figures within the same debate to explore how ideological diversity is reflected in metaphorical framing. To address the interpretive nature of metaphor analysis, future research could incorporate inter-coder reliability checks or computer-assisted tools to enhance consistency and objectivity. Additionally, studies may investigate how metaphors are received by different audiences, considering factors such as political orientation, media exposure, and cultural background to better understand their influence on public opinion and voter behavior.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Full Debate: Kamala Harris and Donald Trump in the 2024 Presidential Debate



Appendix 2: Metaphorical Expressions Used by Kamala Harris and Donald Trump in the 2024 Presidential Debate

