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Metaphorizing the Discourse of Challenging Times

An Afterword

1. Linguistic creativity during the Covid-19 pandemic

The pandemic has provided fertile ground for linguistic creativity (Salamurovic 2020). During the pandemic, metaphors and similes of all sorts were produced, and surely it did not come as a surprise that a new virus, causing illness and death, requiring urgent and radical responses from governments and citizens, would be talked about through metaphors (Semino 2021). From its very beginning, the global understanding of the pandemic was a metaphorical one, as metaphor uses the better known to elucidate the less known (Black 1962).

Many frames surrounding the pandemic were thought of as an alternative to the war rhetoric that, despite the 'blanket criticism' of being misleading and/or counterproductive (Musolff 2021), was the dominant, unavoidable and inescapable frame used to describe the extraordinary global pandemic that has affected the whole world. Bearing in mind the two criteria of 'being novel' and 'of use,' the war rhetoric is certainly not novel, yet surely is of use, as it clearly indicates the sense of urgency and emergency. The recourse to the war rhetoric at the onset of the pandemic was almost natural, as in earlier health crises such as AIDS, Ebola, SARS, bird flu, etc., which were also framed as wars (Milizia 2023). One of the main reasons why the war frame was necessary when the coronavirus started to spread was to legitimize the strict clampdowns imposed by governments around the world, which increasingly emphasized that there was no alternative to their draconian measures. Thus, the TINA argument (There Is No Alternative) was used as rationalization legitimation (Wodak 2021).

Drawing on the #ReframeCovid Initiative (Olza et al. 2021; see also the #ReframeCovid Initiative webpage[1]), whose purpose was to promote non-war-related language on Covid-19,[2]

[1] https://sites.google.com/view/reframecovid/home?authuser=0. Last visited 09/04/2024.

[2] As claimed by Olza et al. (2021, 100), "War metaphors in particular have attracted an unprecedented amount of criticism from diverse social agents (linguists, historians, politicians, healthcare workers, commentators and citizens)."

with the main aim to promote metaphors and other kinds of figurative language to encourage people and unite in difficult times, here we will look at the discursive way some medical experts—Chris Whitty, Chief Medical Officer for England, Patrick Vallance, Chief Scientific Officer, and Jonathan Van-Tam, Deputy Chief Medical Officer for England—guided the British people during the Coronavirus outbreak. In particular, we will look at Jonathan Van-Tam who, with his relatable, authentic and trustworthy style, was given praise for the way he 'translated' scientific concepts into laypeople's language. His style proved to be more colloquial than Chris Whitty's, more relaxed than Patrick Vallance's, regarded as more cerebral and measured, and more creative and ingenious than his colleagues'. The British Health Secretary, Sajid Javid, said that his one-of-a-kind approach to communicating science played a vital role in protecting and reassuring the nation, making him a national treasure.

It is perhaps Aristotle whom we can credit as giving the first systematic treatment of figurative tropes such as metaphor and simile in his *Poetics* and his *Rhetoric*. Aristotle argued that we are metaphorical animals, and the greatest thing by far is to have a command of metaphor: this cannot be imparted by another (McIerny 1968). A command of metaphor is the mark of genius, for to make a good metaphor implies an eye for resemblances. For Aristotle, the definition of *metaphora* is that of transfer of a word or name from its original use to another, unusual one. He assigned three cardinal virtues to metaphor:

- being pleasing,
- being lucid,
- being strange.

At first, this might seem like a strange grouping of words, but Aristotle in a metaphor of his own explains the interconnections between them: "Men feel toward language as they feel toward strangers and fellow citizens, and we must introduce an element of strangeness into our diction, because people marvel at what is far away, and to marvel is pleasant" (Aristotle 2004, 1404 b9-12).

There has been a long intellectual history of treating figurative devices as suspicious and dangerous. We may think, for instance, of John Locke and Thomas Hobbes, who considered metaphors a means to mislead (Musolff 2017), both in general communication and in political discourse, to the point of civil war (Musolff 2005). John Locke and Thomas Hobbes were adamant that metaphors are untrue, as they deceive and mislead, so should not be used.

To make things worse, the intimate connection of metaphors, and figurative tropes more generally, to rhetoric was enough to make philosophers reject the study of tropes altogether, viewing them as inferior to literal language. Literal language is generally understood as straight and unadorned expression, free of verbal images and figures of speech: it is the language of truth and scientific objectivity. Max Black's (1955) seminal paper *Metaphor* shifted perceptions in the philosophical community surrounding metaphor. Black ushered in a new area of philosophical research about metaphors, paving the way also for other tropes, i.e., simile, irony, metonymy, moving away from the periphery of academic discourse to the centre.

Thus, the divide saw philosophers, linguists, and cognitive scientists regard metaphors as fascinating and compelling, engaging our thoughts and inciting our passions. Figurative language can add a sense of concreteness to abstract concepts. Yet, metaphors could also be seen as a double-edged sword, as they often enhance and decorate, but also obstruct discourse, where direct, literal language would be adequate.

Calls for metaphors to be avoided altogether, in view of the potential harm they can cause, have a long history. In more recent times, Sontag (1978), in her groundbreaking work about the language used in medical discourse to describe illnesses and people affected by diseases such as cancer and HIV, suggested that she was looking forward to a time when cancer would be talked about entirely literally. However, getting rid of metaphors is neither feasible nor desirable, as talking and thinking metaphorically is, along with Semino (2021), a central and often unconscious feature of human beings that cannot be eliminated nor avoided (see also Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Metaphors are too precious a resource to do without and, on the basis of extensive linguistic research, it can safely be said that metaphors have framing effects, namely they influence the way we think and feel about problems and solutions.

It cannot be denied that despite the many famous warnings against their use, metaphors have helped us understand the pandemic. Yet, it is worth highlighting that people in power, politicians and, in the case in point, medical experts, have to be careful and pay close attention to the metaphors they choose: although metaphors can be used sensitively and appropriately, and can help individuals and societies overcome overwhelming, long-term problems such as a global pandemic, if used insensitively and inappropriately they can add to confusion, disillusionment and complacency (Semino 2021b), making problems harder to overcome. There is nothing worse than a bad metaphor in a crisis, as we will illustrate in the next paragraph.

2. Communicating the need for patience and caution

As anticipated earlier, metaphors should be chosen carefully, and people in power should be able to govern not only their country but also their language. As stated on the #ReframeCovid Initiative webpage, "[u]n buen uso de la informaciòn empieza por hacer un buen uso del lenguaje,"[3] thus corroborating the idea that words matter and that the words people in power use will 'make it or break it.' We can only imagine the huge responsibility that public-facing medical experts and politicians had during the Covid-19 pandemic, given that the people, the British people in the case in point, were expecting to receive daily updates, facts and figures. More importantly, these people were scared not only of catching the virus and getting sick, but first and foremost of dying. They were literally 'scared to death,' as it were, as during the pandemic the dread of death became ubiquitous (Wodak 2021; for more details on how to survive death anxieties in liquid modern times, see Bauman 2006).

Here is one reason why there is nothing worse and more dangerous than a bad metaphor during a crisis. Let us think of Patrick Vallance, for example, who, in an early interview about Covid, used the phrase 'herd immunity'[4] when explaining that the Government's approach to the pandemic was correct. Indeed, the idea was that by broadening the peak of the epidemic (through infections), immunity could be built up among the population, reduce the transmission and, at the same time, protect the most vulnerable people. Given that this was not the case—as we have sadly experienced—in a following declaration, he admitted regretting using it, being aware of the furious criticism that the phrase had attracted. In his statement to the Covid Inquiry, he said he was trying to explain the technically complex concept of how infections reduce their impact and eventually stop, but he did so in a rather poor way. He said he regretted not taking the time to explain the concept fully, and that he had not been suggesting or advocating that the UK should loosen non-pharmaceutical interventions to increase the spread of the virus (Walker, Grierson and Quinn 2023). That was not, in fact, the official policy, and certainly it was not the advice that either he or the Sage scientific advisory board panel gave.

It is worth highlighting, in this respect, that the word 'vaccination' comes from the Latin *vacca*, and much of the early resistance to vaccination came from moral feelings about the threats to the sanctity of the human body posed by the introduction of animal products. Unconsciously,

[3] "A good way of spreading information starts from a good way of using language" (my translation).

[4] The phrase 'herd immunity' was first coined in epidemiology in 1923 and, even though it enjoys scientific status, it became a controversial expression, as people did not like to be compared to animals, especially livestock, like cows, goats, or sheep (Milizia 2023).

the animal frame triggered a negative response and encouraged anti-vaccination sentiments (Charteris-Black 2021).

As a result, and given the controversy around the herd immunity concept, Jonathan Van-Tam aptly avoided it, surreptitiously replacing 'herd' with 'community.' This alternative, 'community immunity,' sounded like a very clever linguistic technique, and was both novel and persuasive.[5] The Chief Medical Officer for England, who has also been regarded as an outstanding communicator, never relied on the phrase 'herd immunity.' Neither did Boris Johnson, who, rather, opted for "a wall of immunity" and "a huge wall of immunity" (Courea and Zeffman 2021).

Chris Whitty spoke of "a wall of vaccinated people," insisting, though, that "the wall is not quite finished yet and can be leaky" ("COVID-19: Vaccinations Only Provide" 2021). What Chris Whitty was suggesting was an image of a defensive wall that is still under construction, while at the same time is surrounded by buildings where doors are being unlocked, and water, or indeed big waves, can still get in. The wall is thus a sea-defence, that is supposed to defend us against the next surge or wave of the virus, or even against the virus conceptualized as a fire (Semino 2021). The ultimate message Chris Whitty wanted to convey is that we could all build an effective wall together by getting vaccinated and boosted.

3. Jonathan Van-Tam

Jonathan Stafford Nguyen-Van-Tam is a British-born physician of Vietnamese origin. He was Deputy Chief Medical Officer for England from 2017 to 2022. Specialized in influenza, including its epidemiology, transmission, vaccinology, treatment with antiviral drugs and pandemic preparedness, he admitted that he had been honing his rhetorical skills for some time before the pandemic began. He also said that for many years he had practiced the art of "turning medicine into stories" (Mendick 2020). Thus, he was the perfect individual to communicate abstract concepts in a fascinating and creative manner, allowing a general audience to easily

[5] Interestingly, a few months later, also in the US, the White House started to ponder a policy of immunity, but officials issued a prompt denial (Jones and Helmreich 2020). Donald Trump never used the phrase "herd immunity." He made a very idiosyncratic use of the word 'herd,' collocating it with 'mentality,' 'and 'concept': "herd mentality" and "herd concept," giving the phrases an altogether different meaning. He also coined new expressions of his own, i.e. "go herd," "go with the herd," "become herd," and "do the herd." The reason behind his linguistic behavior was that of adding a negative nuance to vaccination as a means to obtain a 'herd immunity' as asked by medical science—his idea was to follow 'the Swedish model' and the 'Swedish way,' as in Sweden a complete lockdown was never introduced, and schools, stores and public spaces stayed open (Milizia 2023).

understand a complex phenomenon, thereby engendering such a level of trust that his stories were very likely to be believed and understood by the masses. Thanks to his discursive creativity he was able to elucidate the complex and dynamic phenomenon of the pandemic, and to better enable the lay public to understand 'what's going on.' His metaphors were not meant to impress or rouse, but just to enable his audience to understand what was at stake.

As a huge fan of the Boston United, Jonathan Van-Tam often turned to sport, football in particular, but also basket and cricket to find the words he wanted. He also put his pandemic point across using analogies about trains, penalties, hosepipes, planes, and yoghurt. The yoghurt analogy worked very well, even though, *prima facie*, there is little resemblance between the yoghurt and the vaccine:

> [The vaccine] is a complex product, it's not a yoghurt that can be taken out of the fridge and put back in multiple times. (Morton 2020)

This analogy very likely raises a smile, but proves effective, and is certainly novel and of use. We do agree with Aristotle that we need to introduce an element of strangeness in our diction, and Jonatah Van-Tam managed to convey his warning against over-optimism, saying that the vaccine, differently from yoghurt, is a complex product with a very fragile cold chain, which is really tricky to handle, requiring temperatures of between -70°C and -80°C to be stored properly. In his inimitable style, he added that the vaccine was in short supply, as train seats are, thus implying that when we are offered a vaccine, we shouldn't miss our chance, as another may not come along soon (Charteris-Black 2021). In other words, he was trying to deliver a dose of reality pointing out that it was not time for a massive party, yet.[6]

We can safely maintain that Van-Tam's tropes perfectly mirror Aristotle's three cardinal virtues of metaphor, i.e. being pleasing, lucid and strange.

Of his many analogies, we will now focus on the train metaphor. In December 2020, while discussing the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) approval of the Pfizer vaccine, he used the analogy of waiting for a train to describe the process of a vaccine being developed. Thus, relying on an extended metaphor, dealing with exiting from lockdown is a JOURNEY and vaccines are the TRAIN SEATS. We are certainly not claiming that the journey metaphor is novel and original, indeed it is one of the most dominant and pervasive, conventional and hence predictable and less resonant of all metaphors (Black 1977). Indeed,

[6] When he was asked to give his opinion on Boris Johnson's cabinet, and the massive parties that had been thrown at Number 10, he ducked the question, saying that he would not be drawn on any disputes and disagreements between politicians and scientists.

Van-Tam was keen on relying on the journey frame because the government's policy for ending the lockdown was framed as 'the roadmap': in employing the journey frame, he was reinforcing the preferred frame of government communication (Charteris-Black 2021).

What is novel, instead, is the way Van-Tam likens vaccines to train seats. The frame activated is that we are at the station waiting for the train to exit from lockdown and longing for the train to arrive, and as there are not enough seats, we should abide by the rules and give priority to take a seat on the train to the people who need the seats most. Everyone will get their share, but we need to abide by the rules and wait for our turn.

> This, to me, is like a train journey where you're standing on the station—it's wet, windy, it's horrible—and two miles down the tracks, two lights appear and it's the train. And it's a long way off. We're at that point at the moment. That's the efficacy result. Then we hope the train slows down safely to get into the station. That's the safety data. And then the train stops. And at that point the doors don't open. The guard has to make sure it's safe to open the doors. That's the MHRA, that's the regulator. And, when the doors open, I hope there's not an unholy scramble for the seats. The JCVI has very clearly said which people are going to need the seats most and they are the ones who should get on the train first. (Nerlich 2020)

Van-Tam insisted on being cautious even after the vaccine roll-out, when most people felt they were already protected because they had been vaccinated and boosted. With his unique approach to explaining crucial information to the public, Van-Tam was adamant in recommending patience and caution that it was "yet not the time to relax and let our guard down" (Gutteridge 2021), and certainly not the time "to take our foot off the break" (Walker and Geddes 2021). In reiterating the efforts that the British people had been able to make, he said on several occasions that "[w]e are close, do not wreck this now. It is far too early to relax. Just continue to maintain discipline and hang on just a few more months" (Ainscough 2021). Needless to say, the British people often asked for "dates," namely for how long, how many days, or even how many months they had to be patient and cautious, to the point that the government was compelled to replace the refrain with "data not dates." Boris Johnson, in particular, insisted that it was absolutely right to take a "data not dates" approach to leaving lockdown, stressing that the UK would ease measures cautiously.

Relying on the metaphoricity of seasons, Nguyen-Van-Tam borrowed the summer/swallow metaphor from Aristotle, "A swallow does not make a summer" and changing it into "The swallow is very much not the summer," arguing that "it would be wrong to be confident that we are in a really comfortable place until we've got this winter out of the way and we're into the spring. I'm still cautious that there are more twists and turns with this virus." Echoing Boris

Johnson, Jonathan Van-Tam was thus acknowledging that the vaccine rollout represented a significant moment in the battle against the disease, and a very important scientific breakthrough, yet was also cautioning that it would be the biggest mistake at this point "to slacken our resolve" (Swinford 2020).

The analogy of the "twists and turns" on which Jonathan Van-Tam often relied was frequently echoed also by Chris Whitty, who often spoke of "bumps and twists on the road ahead," with the purpose, again, of telling the British people that it would be a colossal mistake to relax, despite vaccine breakthrough.

> It is as if there was this big express train that came down the east coast mainline, but actually, the final destination is the last stop in Scotland somewhere. And of course, as you go down that rail journey, the line speeds decrease, they get a bit more twisty and turny, there are more stops, and false endings. And it's a bit like that really—we've done quite a lot of the mainline travel, but we haven't finished the job (Davis 2021).

He goes on, adding:

> Seeing the vaccine on the final stage of its journey, having been right there in March, behind the scenes, when no one was looking or thinking except just a few of us, you know, to be there and see it into its final stages of its journey, was breathtaking. (Adams 2021).

Changing tack, Van-Tam likens the situation to climbing Scafell Pike, the tallest mountain in England:

> It's a bit like climbing Scafell Pike. There are several false summits. And they're a big heave to get there and you get to that bit, and you think 'Oh great.' And actually, you realise when the mist clears, there's a bit more and there's a bit more... We're at that kind of stage really, where it's a test of our endurance and our ability to keep focused and see it through. (Davis 2021)

Jonathan Van-Tam urged the British people to continue to avoid the so-called three Cs—closed spaces with poor ventilation, crowded places, and close-contact settings such as close-range conversations—even after being vaccinated and boosted, thus stressing the need for caution, in spite of the many measures already taken.

Right from the start there were warnings against over-optimism about vaccines, given that they might not be the magic bullet or the silver bullet (Charteris-Black 2021; see also World Health Organization 2021) that we think, nor that we could simply wave a magic wand and get rid of the virus altogether.

4. Basketball and football metaphors

Jonathan Van-Tam developed a reputation for framing the vaccine with colourful metaphors from completely different frames. In the attempt to warn the British people that they had to continue to follow the rules—stay at home, protect the NHS and save lives, Jonathan Van-Tam insisted that he never rehearsed his off-the-cuff metaphors. The flurry of metaphorical images he employed has at times blurred into a sort of mixed metaphor, including some of Boris Johnson's chosen imagery,[7] as evidenced by journalist Kevin Rawlinson (2020)'s summary: "The cavalry are coming, there's no slam dunk yet, but we've seen the swallow." Mixed metaphors have generally been criticized as indicative of poor style or even poor thought, almost instances of cognitive error (Charteris-Black 2021). However, this view has recently been challenged by specialists in the field. In particular, it has been more recently argued (Gibbs 2016) that mixing metaphors is a natural consequence of common metaphorical thought processes, thus reflecting important complexities of the metaphorical mind.

As mentioned earlier, Van-Tam often turned to sport to find the words he wanted. Allusions to sport help us a great deal to make sense of things that would otherwise be inexpressible or unknowable.

Sport metaphors are often used in politics, but they are less common in medical communication (see, for example, Seale 2001 and Campbell 2011). In Italy, virologist Roberto Burioni who, from being a respected professor became a major media personality in his defence of the vaccine, saying that "the Earth is round, gasoline is inflammable, and vaccines are not an opinion, as they are safe and effective. All the rest are dangerous lies" (Starr 2020), often used football and soccer metaphors to appeal to Italians to maintain the social distancing guidelines and to remain patient and cautious even after vaccination. He said:

> Just one person can let the whole 11-strong team down […] And if you manage to go from losing 3-0 to 3-3, that's not the moment to relax. (Seymour 2020)

Meanwhile, in the US, epidemiologist Anthony Fauci used an ice hockey metaphor to explain the need for serious measures early on to avoid a more serious situation in the future:

> You skate not where the puck is but where the puck is going to be. (Alonso-Zaldivar and Neergaard 2020)

[7] Boris Johnson used very creative metaphors, as can be seen here: "I remain buoyantly optimistic about the prospects of this country next year. I just don't want to let people run away with the idea that this development today is necessarily a home run, a slam dunk, a shot to the back of the net, yet" (Nerlich 2020).

Sport metaphors can provide a different narrative (Seymour 2020). Even though they share some features with war metaphors in the 'win or lose' frame, sport has long been recognized as beneficial and important for the good of society, and even when we lose a match, there is always a lesson about learning and improving. This is also a lesson for life, that was highly needed during the Covid-19 pandemic. All sports have rules, taught by coaches and executed by players, and every match is an opportunity to better understand the rules of the games and improve, analyzing strengths and weaknesses, yet accepting the results. Sacrifice and effort are thus needed, to move us from the current situation—stay at home, wear a mask, wash your hands, keep social distancing in the case in point, or to improve as a team and perform better and win the next match—to personal and collective improvement, always striving to win, but still learning, planning and improving after a loss.

The basketball metaphor above was used by Jonathan Van-Tam (and Boris Johnson) amid jubilation over the first vaccine efficacy results, referring to the fact that the Covid-19 vaccine would not be "a slam dunk." The frame of a slam dunk made by a basketball player, with the player jumping in the air and forcing the ball downward through the basket with one or both hands, certainly means a sure score, but not the victory in the match. In other words, vaccination would not be a plan certain to succeed and eliminate the possibility that one may test positive for Covid-19, develop symptoms, or even get seriously ill and die, but would certainly reduce these chances, just like raincoats protect us from heavy rain and seatbelts decrease the chances of severe injury (Semino 2021a). Thus, it was being continuously reiterated that vaccines are effective and worthwhile, yet they do not provide total protection.

Jonathan Van-Tam was elected 'king of metaphor' in 2020, together with the then Prime Minister, who was also defined an inveterate metaphor addict, frequently breaking the normal conventions of language and delighting in imaginative fantasy, always keen to combine humour with vigorous and innovative imagery (Charteris-Black 2019).

They were both very keen in activating sport metaphors, with the precise purpose to turn something incomprehensible into more familiar, accessible and predictable terms.

It happens at times that some of the metaphors we use originate from sport without our realizing it, as is the case of 'it is not the time to let our guard down.' This frame comes from boxing, and it is used when a boxer does not keep their arms up to shield against a possible blow from an opponent, thus referring to someone who has not paid attention or has given up on paying attention opening themselves up for attack or for danger.

The 'homerun' metaphor was a frame particularly dear to Van-Tam: a 'home run' is a term used in baseball to refer to the best possible result. By using this term, he was cautioning the British

people to stay patient, as in "it's not a home run, yet," nor was it, from the soccer field, "a shot to the back of the net" (Gallardo 2020), i.e., we cannot yet claim victory with excitement and joy. In other instances, Van-Tam frames the vaccine as a football penalty shoot-out:

> So this is like… getting to the end of the play-off final, it's gone to penalties, the first player goes up and scores a goal. You haven't won the cup yet, but what it does is, it tells you that the goalkeeper can be beaten. (Morton 2020)

or

> So this is like… scoring an equaliser in the 70th minute of a football game. … see if we can have another goal and nick it, but the key thing is not to lose it, not to throw it away, because we've got a point on the board. And we've got the draw. (Morton 2020)

Van-Tam is aptly likening the virus to the opposing team, saying that the rival team, that had previously been viewed as insuperable, has now been shown not to be invincible, thus implying that the virus can also be beaten, and is not, therefore, invincible.

5. Conclusion

I would like to conclude this Afterword which is dedicated to the metaphorization of the discourse of the Covid-19 pandemic by adding that medical experts were frustrated by being held responsible for all decisions made by politicians, which experts saw as a way to abdicate responsibility for political decisions, and as an attempt to avoid blame (Wodak 2021) and passing the buck (Charteris-Black 2021). Things became even more complicated when 'science' became '*the* science': this was perceived as a way to signal unanimity of decision, which was far from being reached. Rarely is scientific opinion unanimous, let alone during the Covid-19 crisis (Milizia 2023), as experts seemed not to agree on several fronts (Milizia and Silletti 2023). During the pandemic, we started to wonder whether the crisis had killed populism, given the reliance, indeed over-reliance, on science, as experts seemed to be back in fashion. We also started to wonder whether the reiteration that 'we are following the science' and 'we are being driven by the science' was a surreptitious way to justify the clampdowns imposed by the government.

The scientists' role was certainly a tough one, and Jonathan Van-Tam admitted in March 2022 that he felt mentally and physically exhausted. It must be acknowledged, though, that, despite all the difficulties and against all odds, he managed to creatively and clearly provide the British people with information about what was going on and what was at stake, never relying on negative nor worn-out frames. He did so with his straightforward, down-to-earth but no-nonsense communication style from the podium at No. 10 Downing Street. His metaphorical

phrases have often formed the core of sound bites that were endlessly recycled by the press (Charteris-Black 2006), especially when an-hour long speech had to be reduced to just a few phrases.

With his colorful, relatable and novel style, he managed to combine pandemic science and leadership, and to survive one of the most arduous jobs on offer during the Covid-19 crisis.

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