

Metaphors of Flood Disaster in Malaysian Media: A Cognitive Metaphor Perspective

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This paper examines the metaphors used in media discourses related to flood disasters in Malaysia from 2014-2017 in various media discourses. Flood disaster has become a serious challenge and problem to all Malaysians. The theoretical framework used in this study is Lakoff's Conceptual Metaphor Theory. The methodological framework is Charteris-Black's method of analysing metaphors in media discourses. The materials used in this study are news articles from various public media in Malaysia. This paper argues that the media used metaphors to reduce the anger and impact of the citizens. Besides, the metaphors are used to ingrain the idea that flood is not man-made but the wrath of Mother Nature. The conclusion of this article is to present the way media portrays flood disaster to the public. The paper contributes to the gap of the argument in authentic reporting about flood disasters in Malaysian media.

Key words: *Media discourse, flood disaster metaphors, cognitive metaphor perspectives.*

Introduction

Since the 1960s, public and political environmental issues have brought about various concerns. However, environmental issues were superseded by the economy and war concerns by the 1990s. One of these environmental issues is flooding. Due to unsustainable development and deforestation, the flood is a frequent visitor to Malaysia in recent years. It causes casualties, economic disruption, and many other humanitarian issues. This paper aims to contribute to the issue of media presentation, using the framework those of Lakoffian's Cognitive Metaphor Theory and Fairclough's "Language is Power position". One's perception of thought and action can be affected, thus influenced by the metaphors within the discourse community (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In addition, metaphors are not just a

language phenomenon, they provide an avenue for exploring and understanding the world in different perspectives (Dosev, 2019).

“Disaster recovery is a dynamic process of creating, maintaining, and changing the meaningful context of survivors:” (Atsumi, Seki & Yamaguchi, 2018, p.355). Thus, metaphors can be adopted as cognitive devices to facilitate better understanding and social acceptance. People recognise their daily lives somewhat like a metaphor where they can always relate and internalise based on their experience and feeling (Dosev, 2019). Thus, when people redevelop their self-reliance and assimilate themselves back into their social discourse community, it is when they move on from the traumatising disaster effect (Atsumi, Seki & Yamaguchi, 2018).

Literature Review

The United Nations defines disaster as “a serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society involving widespread human, material, economic or environmental losses and impacts, which exceeds the ability of the affected community or society to cope with its resources” (UNISDR, 2009). This definition entails ontological and epistemic derivatives as the impact of flood disasters is unpredictable and massive.

Flood disaster has claimed fatalities and economic loss. The news about flood disaster is often passively reported in the mainstream news (Eubanks, 2015). This is to reduce the political impact especially. Hence, this paper discusses the passive reporting of flood disasters in Malaysia using the Lakoffian (1980) conceptual metaphor theory. This paper seeks to answer the following questions: to what extent do metaphors help in minimising the anger of the citizens and victims? In what way does the media reduce the cognitive impact of the readers?

One of the most powerful methods of delivering a message to the public is through the media. The media is often used to convey various messages, whether it be entertainment, social, or political. Media debate is a major political practice (Van der Valkf, 2008), so politicians ought to use strategic language to conceive of the desired outcome. Rhetoric is a term used to convince people, typically by using strong words and phrases. One rhetorical technique commonly used in political debate is used metaphorically to claim and justify in a convincing manner (Musolff, 2008), such that the popular sentiment is on board with the view of the politician. Discourse's central function is to influence decisions, and metaphors are essential for its position in ideological culmination (Charteris-Black, 2004).

This work revolves around the Cognitive Metaphor Theory of Lakoffian and the Power Role of Fairclough's Language. Metaphor is present everywhere in people's daily lives and it

affects understanding, thought and behaviour (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Fairclough argues that sociolinguistic conventions are the result of power relations and power struggles and that these conventions not only reflect differences in power but 'arise out of and causes particular relations of power' (1989:2). The notion of ideology, which is the way people think of the world that surrounds them and also known as "the ruling ideas of the ruling class" (Marx in Rivkin & Ryan 1998:237), is essential to the definition of power. In short, philosophy is what people embrace as 'the natural order of things. "Therefore, to exert power, apart from forcing through means of war, one can also cultivate ideology. With ideology, consent is manufactured" (Fairclough 1989:4).

Theoretical Framework

Our daily lives are rife with metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Because the metaphor is used to describe certain objects - physical and abstract, it is quite natural that people might think and act in a certain way. This explains how metaphors crept into the discourse of politics – as a means of persuading, of being in power. Politicians are generally people in power and "get to impose their metaphors" on people in power (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 157). When people use metaphors they usually use them to mask the fact that they persuade others to agree to a particular point of view (Charteris-Black, 2004).

Metaphors give out emotions. Together with experiences, this emotion that people feel guides them in self-evaluation attitude or an attitude towards something (Hunston & Thompson, 2000). Without metaphorical influence, the direct words from a leader would sound like this "We must go to war for the sake of our oil reserves and it will cause a lot of deaths" (Ferrari, 2007). However, in the world today, a leader would employ these words "I ask for your patience, with the delays and inconveniences that may accompany tighter security; and for your patience in what will be a long struggle" (Ferrari, 2007).

A direct and literal statement would have shocked the audience while they would be able to accept the war with a metaphor for delivering the same message. Nonetheless, it is just to protect the society from harm, and the audience views death as an inconvenience — a minuscule sacrifice compared to the perceived (security) huge benefit. In addition, the emotions stirred in people's minds when it comes to war (food and games) are those of love and lust (Kövecses, 2000). Because of their love for the country and desperation for security, people are willing to sacrifice or be sacrificed. Besides that, the metaphor can be persuasive because of its power to deliver possibilities of vision creation despite the odds. It could reverse the abnormal, belittle the priorities and legalise the act of war. Israel's politicians toned down the many attacks on life, property, and infrastructure by using the WAR IS MEDICINE metaphor.

Based on their experiences, the public actively decodes the message and gets rid of the friction between the message and the intended message. The Hezbollah has been portrayed to Israel and Lebanon as some cancer, virus, and disease, so logically they need to be cleansed-destroyed. Also, medical practice in Israel is a revered practice, and thus the notion of government as professional surgeons and doctors conducting surgical strikes appeals to the public (Gavriely-Nuri, 2008). Ultimately, the horrors of war: deaths, chaos, and devastation of land and facilities disappear into the past, and they are then unfolded and portrayed by a healthy world, replaced by doctors of justice and morale.

People think and act based on what they know about the world around them – the perception of reality, as mentioned earlier. Therefore, people need to know the absolute truth because it is dependent on everything people do in the end. Nonetheless, as the researchers have discussed so far, and as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) put it, the reality is founded upon understanding. People grasp circumstances dependent on their logical framework that is extracted from their observations of course. Truth, then, is not necessarily valid, but the notion is only based on perception.

It is this very concept of truth that allows politicians to rhetorically employ metaphors so that people can condone their war plans or acts. It is a key concern of cognitive debate researchers that in political dialogue, symbols are used incessantly to deceive the electorate into behaving in a certain way: embrace war.

The more important questions are those of appropriate action. In most cases, what is at issue is not the truth or falsity of a metaphor but the perceptions and inferences that follow from it and the actions that are sanctioned by it (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p.158). In the case of these politicians, war talk to them is not a way to end the war but to start (or prolong) one, with the approval of the public.

If used cleverly, the metaphor is a means of bringing forward something (most frequently bad things) that often cannot be addressed publicly in the public sphere, to gain the approval of the audience for something (more often bad things). Those of influence are pushing their symbols upon concerning people to act upon. The importance of the metaphor in political discourse has been made clear in prior paragraphs. However, it is very apparent in these discussions that the focal point has been on the topic of war. No work has been done on the use of metaphors in the political debate on the environmental issue. There is some research on the environment and the role of the media in communicating the message of environmental concerns and also research on its discourse. The researchers find this rather appalling as the environment, if not cared for from now on, will be beyond repair.

Materials and Methods

The framework used in this critical metaphor discourse research is one that Charteris-Black (2004), focused on works by Cameron and Small, and Fairclough (cited in Charteris-Black 2004), Critical Metaphor Research (CMA), defined as CMA and is divided into three main stages, as follows:

- I. Metaphor identification
- II. Metaphor interpretation
- III. Metaphor explanation

The identification of the symbol happens in two phases. The first step is a near reading of the chosen texts to recognise nominee metaphors. The second stage is to distinguish certain metaphorical or concrete discourse from the nominee metaphors (Charteris-Black 2004). This stage caters to this study's first objective of defining the metaphors prevalent in flood disaster-related reporting. Metaphor analysis is the method of evaluating the metaphors and their associations with perceptual and logical influences (Charteris-Black 2004). Thus, at this stage identification of conceptual metaphors was executed. The third level, a comprehensive description of the metaphor, looks at the metaphors' social context—identifying the metaphors' discourse features. It explores the social factors that affect the metaphor development and the convincing position of the metaphors (Charteris-Black 2004). This is achieved by looking at the sources from which the metaphors are derived and exploring the social dynamics surrounding the event/discourse. The focus of this research is texts written in Malaysia, in the form of articles from newspapers, namely The New Straits Times, The Star, and The Sun.

Results and Discussion

Mud floods occur when heavy rain flows into the mud on the barren surface, lacking trees to uphold the soil, as such those of the incidents at Cameron Highlands in 2013 and 2014 (Ang, 2015). Mud flood disasters in Cameron Highlands in 2013 and 2014 have killed many B40 communities in Bertam valley and Ringlet valley (Berita Harian, 2013; Channel News Asia, 2014). More recently, on 17 May 2017, a heavy downpour had caused the B40 communities in Bertam valley to be inundated with a flood (Nuradzimah Daim, 2017). In this section, three dominants metaphors are discussed from the Lakoffian perspectives. The discussion focused on the 50 news articles gathered through convenient sampling.

Flood Is God's Anger and Wrath

Eubanks claims that the written word shapes all facets of life from orders, contracts, rules, and to news media. From the newspaper corpus created, the first metaphor derived from the narratives is FLOOD IS GOD'S ANGER AND WRATH. This metaphor is aimed to project the image that flood disaster is not man-made, but divine intervention. Some samples of the metaphorical linguistic expressions are as below,

- a. God is the mother of flood...
- b. This flood is God's punishment for Malaysians...
- c. We must ask God to bring away this disaster...
- d. God has shown His anger....
- e. This flood is a reminder from God....

The ideological assumption here is to divert the attention of angry citizens on the faulty developmental plans and structural planning. Instead, this diversion leaves the citizen with only one option, to lean back to religion and ask for help from God. Such passive reporting, by diverting the faults and misconducts of the authority to divine intervention leaves no room for the citizens to pinpoint the errors of the governance. This act of civility is by no means defined by "mere civility". Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679)

Flood is a Natural Disaster

Steinbeck wrote, in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), "The thing that gives me the mos' trouble was, it didn' make no sense. You don't look for no sense when lightnin' kills a cow, or it comes up a flood. That's jus' the way things is".

Contemporary mentions of floods in media are thick on the ground. It is striking – and salutary – that a flood as a natural disaster is gaining disparaging remarks in which diversion and consociation are merged to minimise the impact of the flood as faulty human errors.

Here, the second metaphor that was derived from the corpus is Flood is a Natural Disaster. The media reports that the flood disaster that the Malaysians have been experiencing is by no means caused by Mother Nature. Some metaphorical linguistic expressions which constitute this metaphor are as below,

- a. This disaster is like the wrath of Mother Nature...
- b. Nature has voiced out her feelings...
- c. Do not make the nature angry...
- d. Nature is telling us something through flood...

The equilibrium in Mother Nature suggests that flood is by no means a way for nature to sustain its equilibrium so that the balancing act is not compromised naturally. Historically, the metaphor of flood is heavily related to human beings. Shakespeare in *Julius Caesar* Act 4, scene 3, cites that:

There is a tide in the affairs of men.
Which, taken at the flood,
leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and miseries.

The epistemology of the relationship between human beings and flood is built upon the manipulation of nature by human beings. It is irresponsible to solely argue that development is not the cause of flood however minimal. Doocy et al (2013) suggest that “recent accelerations in population growth and changes in land-use patterns have increased human vulnerability to floods”.

Development is Sound and Systematic

The third metaphor that is often used in narrating the flood disaster is DEVELOPMENT IS SOUND AND SYSTEMATIC. The media chose to project the image that development does not contribute to flooding causation. Some metaphorical linguistic expressions are as below,

- a. The blocks of development in the area is systemic...
- b. EIA indicates that the area is safe for construction...
- c. Our development plan is as solid as brick...
- d. Our projects were assessed rigorously...

The media reports the systematic and rigor of the infrastructural development in the country. Media reports also avoid the mentions of any violations of Odum’s ecological framework which emphasises the importance of equilibrium and that all ecological components must be in equilibrium in the ecology that has human inhabitants (Odum, 2007). The worship of systematic development does not warrant the transparency in terms of implementation and execution. On the contrary, ethical violations such as corruption and white elephant business are often the major culprits that bring about disasters.

The epistemology of the metaphor Development is Sound and Systematic resembles the transcending idea of navigating development to one-directional propaganda. This idiosyncratic jingoism serves to promote the idealisation of precise and systemic development. However, it is equally important to emphasise the sensitivity of the

biogeochemical cycle in the minute form and functionality. Media reports often failed or tried not to mention such causalities and the inter-relationships among them.

Limitation of the Study

This study involves only three dominant metaphors that are discussed from the Lakoffian perspectives and it should not be generalised to be incorporate other metaphor theories. It was solely based on the 50 news articles gathered. This study only applies the qualitative perspective which can be further enhanced with corpus-based studies or quantitative approaches in the future.

Conclusion

Nancy Cartwright, a philosopher, in her infamous and provocative article “*The Natural and the Moral Order: What’s to Blame*” (2016), asserts that the division between natural and ethical matters is difficult to maintain when it comes to causation and fault issues. Her argument plays a role in dissecting the cause of flood disasters in Malaysia. The moral responsibility of the stakeholders, the businessmen as well as the media reporters are to be ingrained insomuch that people shall not suffer from the flood caused by human beings. The social and economic factors are not to be dismissed as one of the causes of flood disasters. The greed of the human being is always a factor in the massive development of Malaysian geography. Similarly, natural causes such as heavy flood and climate change are not the entire culprits. The balancing act, of the reporters, must be emphasised so that the public can be judgemental to the unveiled truth. It is unethical that the media chose to project the ideology that flood is caused by nature, and there is nothing human beings can do about it. It is all the almighty God’s will. Such dismayed cautions, yet another perspective in the game of Alice in Wonderland.

The media chose to divert all the causes of a flood to the almighty God, Mother Nature, and infinitely removed the roles of mankind, in this case, the authority, governance, and the greedy businessmen who are immoral and unethical. Malaysians should not be brainwashed by believing an impartial reality. Zizek once mentioned that “ [T]his readiness to assume the guilt for the threats to the environment is deceptively reassuring” (Myers, 2003). Modernism and Marxism are two key critical theories that can be used to debunk the myths of flood disaster by microscopic investigations of the internal validity of the media discourses. Future research can examine the climate change issue in a wider regional scope such as in ASEAN. The discourses of such issues might differ greatly from region to region, factored by many unforeseen forces.



Funding

This work was supported by the **BOLD 2025 Grant Funding Universiti Tenaga Nasional (Project Code – 10436494/B/2019034)**

Acknowledgment

The researchers are sincerely thankful for the support and fund provided by iRMC, Universiti Tenaga Nasional to carry out this study under the BOLD 2025 Grant Funding Universiti Tenaga Nasional (*Ref: “A Pedagogical Approach to Efficient Energy Education: Towards Energy Conservation in the 21st Century Education – 10436494/B/2019034*)

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