

A Critical Metaphor Analysis of U.S. Presidential Election Speeches: A Case Study of Campaign Speeches of Trump

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ABSTRACT: *This study takes nine core speeches (including debate speeches and victory speeches) delivered by Donald Trump in his presidential campaigns from 2016 to 2024 as the research subject. By constructing the “Trump Election Discourse Corpus” and applying the method of Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA), this study systematically explores the distribution of metaphor types, image-building functions of metaphors, and the dynamic shifts in propaganda logic in his speeches. The findings show that Trump consistently uses war-related and disaster-related metaphors as the core of his discourse. His propaganda logic shifted from the “strongman” in 2016, to the “guardian” in 2020, and finally to the “avenging chosen one” in 2024. The metaphors consistently adapt to the needs of voters at different electoral stages, reinforcing the core political stance of being “tough, pragmatic, and protective of America”. This study enriches the timeliness and dimension of research on U.S. election discourse and provides empirical support for critical analysis of political metaphors.*

KEYWORDS: Critical Metaphor Analysis, Political Metaphor, Trump, U.S. Presidential Election

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1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, metaphor has been recognized not merely as a linguistic phenomenon but as a fundamental tool for cognitive research. Its application has gradually expanded to various fields, including political discourse. At the same time, research methods have evolved. Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA) captures the relationship between metaphor users and social contexts, providing a powerful tool for the study of metaphor in politics.

Election plays a crucial role in American politics, making voters a key factor. As Aldrich and his colleagues (2024) demonstrate, the changing composition and behavior of the electorate have fundamentally reshaped the dynamics of U.S. presidential elections over the past seven decades, making voters a decisive factor in determining electoral outcomes. To promote political ideas and mobilize voters, politicians often use metaphors in their speeches. Therefore, metaphor plays an indispensable role in research on American politics. However, in the context of ongoing global conflicts and dramatic changes in the United States, research on metaphor in the election speeches of the recently elected President Trump remains insufficient.

Based on Critical Discourse Analysis, this study analyzes the metaphors used in speeches of Trump during the 2016-2024 U.S. presidential elections. It aims to update the latest political discourse and enhance the timeliness of U.S. election discourse studies. This study may also help predict the direction of the newly elected president and the United States in the coming four years.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Critical Metaphor Analysis

Proposed by Charteris-Black (2004), Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA) is a branch of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). His analysis of British political speeches before the 2003 Iraq War demonstrated that war metaphors such as “military campaign” and “fight against evil” were deliberately used to legitimize military action. It aims to analyze the ideologies and power relations hidden behind metaphors in discourse, revealing and explaining the social reality behind discursive practices. By explaining the selection of metaphorical expressions, CMA clarifies how the metaphor user effectively completes the mapping from source domain to target domain; it reveals the ideologies, beliefs, attitudes, emotions, power relations, and other ideological elements behind discourses, as well as how metaphors are used to persuade listeners. Since then, CMA has been applied to various political contexts. For instance, Wu and Li (2023) found that Trump frequently used sports metaphors to construct political identities and persuade audiences, revealing hidden political intentions in populist discourse.

Fairclough (2013) argues that metaphor carries social ideology and thus has the function of shaping the emotional attitudes of the audience in discourse. However, from a purely cognitive and semantic perspective, we cannot fully explain the motivation behind the choice of metaphors. Dąbrowska (2016) pointed out that cognitive linguistics has two problems in its four decades of development: excessive reliance on introspection and neglect of the social attributes of language. The CMA approach, which emphasizes revealing the construction of political, social, and cultural ideologies through metaphors, studies metaphors from the integrated perspectives of semantics, pragmatics, cognitive linguistics, corpus linguistics, and critical discourse analysis, thus helping to solve the above two problems to a certain extent.

However, most CMA studies have concentrated on single speeches or short time spans; longitudinal analyses of metaphor use from the same politician across multiple election cycles remain relatively rare.

2.2 Metaphor in Politics

The cognitive turn in metaphor research, initiated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), established that metaphors are not mere rhetorical ornaments but fundamental cognitive mechanisms shaping human thought and action. In political contexts, metaphors have been shown to influence public opinion, frame policy debates, and construct leadership images (Wilson, 2001; Nikolina et al., 2016). Wilson (2001) pointed out that political effects can arise from all linguistic levels, from vocabulary to pragmatics. Metaphors enable politicians and leaders to effectively communicate complex ideas and influence public opinion. Nikolina and some other scholars (2016) believe that metaphors can construct issues, shape public perception, and influence policy decisions by presenting complex political concepts in a more understandable and emotionally resonant way.

In practical research, Mokhtar (2024) studied the role of prepositions in political metaphors based on U.S. presidential inaugural addresses from 1789 to 2021. He argues that prepositions have been unjustly neglected in cognitive approaches to metaphor due to their polysemous and inconsistent nature. To address this gap, he proposes an innovative framework integrating conceptual metaphor theory, diachronic linguistics, and discourse pragmatics. The study demonstrates that prepositions play a crucial role in figurative political language, revealing how they contribute to conceptual mappings, framing, and the systematic conceptualizations that underlie political rhetoric across different historical periods. In China, Cao (2024) argues that political metaphor functions as a cognitive filter and an emotional framing device in the abstract and complex domain of international politics. By mapping culturally embedded historical narratives and archetypal stories onto present political realities, political actors can shape subjective perceptions and emotional attention of their audiences, thereby constructing favorable political legitimacy. Similarly, Shi (2023) analyzed five election speeches from 2016 to 2020 to explore the political concepts of the candidates. Her study fills the gap in diachronic metaphor analysis of U.S. elections. It provides a cognitive-linguistic framework for understanding how metaphors mediate political communication and polarization, offering insights for global political discourse studies.

2.3 Research Gaps

Although existing research has achieved a lot in the study of U.S. presidential elections, there are still gaps in three aspects.

First, timeliness. Most existing CMA studies on U.S. elections cover only the 2016–2020 period (e.g., Shi, 2023; Wu et al., 2020). The 2024 presidential election which included unprecedented events such as the Capitol riot and an assassination attempt has not been analyzed by CMA. Therefore, this study extends the temporal frame to include 2024 speeches and the 2025 inaugural address.

Second, dynamics. Prior studies treat political discourse as static, comparing different speakers or genres. Few have tracked metaphor use from a same speaker across multiple election cycles as his political role changes. This study adopts a longitudinal perspective.

Third, image construction. While earlier work (e.g., Lakoff, 1996; Charteris-Black, 2004) recognized that metaphors help construct leadership images, no systematic framework has been proposed to link metaphor types with stage-specific political identities that this study tries to build.

Based on these problems, this study comprehensively analyzes debate of Trump and victory speeches during the 2016–2024 campaigns. Using CMA, it analyzes the classification of metaphors and their roles in cognitive function, image building, and image transformation, thereby filling the research gaps to some extent.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research subject

The research subject consists of nine speeches, including debate speeches of Trump during the 2016, 2020, and 2024 campaigns, as well as his victory speeches in 2016 and 2024. To ensure reliability and accuracy, the speeches were selected from “The American Presidency Project” (<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu>). Established by the University of California in 1999, this website stores public documents of all U.S. presidents and related research data.

These speeches have both propaganda appeal and representativeness of political views, making them highly suitable for critical discourse analysis, which focuses on social power relations. Trump participated in 3 debates in 2016, 2 debates in 2020, and 2 debates in 2024, plus one victory speech in 2016 and one in 2025 (delivered after the 2024 election), totaling 9 speeches.

3.2 Research Process and Framework

After collecting the nine speech transcripts, this study built the “Trump Election Discourse Corpus” (TEDC). The structure of the corpus is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Structure of the Trump Election Discourse Corpus

File name	Description	Number of files	Word count
TEDC	Total nine speeches	9	130848
20160926	Debate in Hofstra University	1	17838
20161009	Debate in Washington University	1	16943
20161019	Debate in University of Nevada	1	17578
20170120	Victory speech in 2017	1	1424
20200929	Case Western Reserve University	1	20513
20201022	Debate in Belmont University	1	18771
20240627	Debate in Atlanta	1	17599
20240910	Debate in Philadelphia	1	17277
20250120	Victory speech in 2025	1	2905

After corpus construction, metaphors were identified and classified according to the framework of critical metaphor analysis proposed by Charteris-Black (2004) through manual identification and contextual verification. The frequency, proportion, and resonance value of each type were calculated. The “resonance value” is calculated by multiplying the number of distinct metaphorical keywords in a source domain by the total frequency of those keywords. The proportion of each type is obtained by dividing its resonance value by the total resonance value of all types. By avoiding bias from single high-frequency keywords, this method reflects the systematic use of metaphors well.

After categorizing metaphors, this study calculates their “resonance” by multiplying the frequency of each category by the number of categories, yielding the total resonance count. The

resonance frequency of a specific metaphor category represents its percentage share of the total. This approach effectively mitigates biases from single keywords. Metaphors relying solely on a limited set of high-frequency keywords may merely reflect speaker habits or linguistic conventions, failing to capture the stance of metaphor. Conversely, the presence of multiple keywords indicates systematic usage, better representing the framework of the speaker regarding the topic. The number of keywords determines the coverage of metaphor. By combining keyword frequency with resonance values, we can accurately assess the role and significance of specific metaphor categories within discourse contexts.

The calculation process consists of three steps: first, multiply the number of metaphorical keywords within the same source domain by the total frequency of these keywords; second, calculate the sum of all product terms; finally, divide the result for each category by the total sum to obtain the percentage representation of that category, rounded to one decimal place.

3.3 Identification Criteria: MIP + Context Validation

Referring to the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) proposed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007), a four-step identification process combined with context validation was constructed:

1. Convert the nine speech texts into .txt format and import them into AntConc.
2. Extract all content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs) and key phrases (e.g., “trade war”, “economic engine”) using AntConc.
3. Consult the Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary (10th edition) and the COCA corpus to determine the core literal meaning of each expression (e.g., the literal meaning of “war” is “armed conflict between nations or groups”).
4. Judge whether the expression deviates from its literal meaning in the speech context and whether there is a direct logical connection (e.g., “trade war” has no direct connection to armed conflict, so it is a candidate metaphor).
5. Verify from semantic and pragmatic dimensions. Semantically, check whether the context supports a metaphorical reading; pragmatically, judge functional appropriateness in the speech situation (debate or victory speech). Exclude fixed idioms (e.g., “break a leg”).
6. Conduct a second verification of identified metaphors to reduce subjective bias. For doubtful cases, repeatedly check dictionary definitions and context, and refer to similar studies if necessary.

3.4 Analytical Tools and Procedure

For analysis, excel was used for data statistical analysis, and qualitative interpretation was carried out through manual text analysis. There are three steps.

- (1) Basing on identified metaphor data, calculate frequency, proportion, and resonance value for each metaphor type, and form basic data tables.
- (2) Identify core metaphor types through proportion analysis, and compare differences in usage intensity across election stages.
- (3) Interpret the mapping logic and function of core metaphors in combination with specific speech contexts and election backgrounds.

4. Research Results

Across the three election periods, the image of Trump underwent a certain transformation through metaphors. In 2016, voters desired change, and the metaphors emphasized “tough challenge” to mobilize voters dissatisfied with the status quo. In 2020, against the background of the pandemic and the end of his first term, the metaphors emphasized “defense against

external threats” to consolidate his supporter base. In 2024, in the post-pandemic period accompanied by the Capitol riot and the assassination attempt, the metaphors emphasized “revenge and return to the right track” to attract centrist and stability-seeking voters.

4.1 2016: The “Strongman” of Change

A total of 217 metaphorical expressions were identified in the 2016 materials, covering 8 source domain types. The distribution is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Resonance statistics of the three 2016 speeches

Metaphor type	Frequency (A)	Keyword types (B)	Resonance (A×B)	Proportion (%)	Representative keywords (freq.)
War	65	6	390	41.3%	fight 6
Disaster	45	5	225	23.9%	disaster 8
Construction	28	4	112	11.9%	build 5
Body	23	3	69	7.3%	die 3
Game	20	3	60	6.4%	win 3
Family	15	3	45	4.8%	family 2
Religion	12	2	24	2.5%	bless 1
Animal	9	2	18	1.9%	piggy bank 1
Total	217	28	943	100%	disaster, fight, build, die, win

In 2016, Trump successfully constructed three core political images - “warrior”, “savior”, and “builder” - through his metaphor system, forming a stable “strongman” political persona.

The warrior image is the most prominent: war metaphors are the most frequent and have the largest number of keywords. The narrative places the country in a state of “war”, turning opponents into “plunderers” and “enemies”. Thus, the election becomes a “battle” in which he positions himself as the “defender”.

Second is the savior image: disaster metaphors rank second in frequency and keyword types. Through disaster metaphors, Trump portrayed the country as being on the brink of “disaster”. Also, existing politicians were portrayed as “failures”, he was the only one who can “fix” the problem.

Finally, the builder image: construction metaphors account for over 10% of the resonance value. Construction metaphors transfer his economic success to the political domain: he has experience in “building”, while his opponents only “destroy”. By applying construction metaphors, Trump used his business achievements to prove his leadership ability, countering his “experience” of his opponent and turning his lack of political experience into an advantage.

4.2 2020: The “Guardian”

A total of 97 metaphorical expressions were identified in the 2020 materials, covering 8 source domain types. The distribution is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Resonance statistics of the two 2020 speeches

Metaphor type	Frequency (A)	Keyword types (B)	Resonance (A×B)	Proportion (%)	Representative keywords (freq.)
War	28	7	196	44.5%	fight 7
Disaster	21	5	105	23.7%	mess 4
Construction	10	4	40	9.0%	die 5
Body	12	3	36	8.1%	wall 4
Game	8	3	24	5.4%	deal 4
Family	6	3	18	4.1%	disgrace 2
Religion	7	2	14	3.2%	family 2
Animal	5	2	10	2.3%	bird 2
Total	97	29	443	100%	fight, build, die, wall, mess

In 2020, although the dominance of war and disaster metaphors stayed, position of Trump as the incumbent president and his public mood were different. The image he created changed accordingly. The rise of body and religious metaphors indicates that during this election period, his image shifted toward that of a “guardian”.

Although In 2020, although the dominance of war and disaster metaphors continued, the position of Trump as the incumbent president and his public mood were very different from four years earlier, and the image he created changed accordingly. The rise of body and religious metaphors indicates that during this election cycle, his image shifted toward that of a “guardian”.

Although construction metaphors declined to some extent, the word “wall” appeared frequently, shifting from the campaign promise of “building a wall” in 2016 to the performance declaration of “I have built the wall” in 2020 (“400 miles of brand new wall”). The context of “build” changed from “I will build” in 2016 to “I built” in 2020, with the tense shifting from future to past. “Rebuild” was used only twice as a limiting word, emphasizing the protection of existing achievements rather than “rebuilding”. In 2020, Trump completely reversed his attitude from the previous election, emphasizing achievements and highlighting the importance of protecting the status quo in a complex environment to campaign for re-election.

At this time, as the incumbent president, voters were more concerned about the stability of existing achievements, and his metaphorical logic turned to “conservation and guardianship”, strengthening the image of “protecting American interests and preventing regression”.

4.3 2024: The Returning “Avenging Chosen One”

A total of 178 metaphorical expressions were identified in the 2024 materials, covering 9 source domain types. The distribution is shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Resonance statistics of the three 2024 speeches

Metaphor type	Frequency (A)	Keyword types (B)	Resonance (A×B)	Proportion (%)	Representative keywords (freq.)
War	47	7	329	40.3%	kill 7
Disaster	36	5	180	22.0%	destroy 12
Construction	25	4	100	12.2%	rebuild 4
Body	18	4	72	8.8%	blood 6
Game	16	3	48	5.9%	god 4
Family	10	3	30	3.7%	deal 4
Religion	14	2	28	3.4%	family 5
Animal	6	3	18	2.2%	frontier 2
Total	6	2	12	1.5%	puppy 2

After losing the previous election and the Capitol riot of 2021, Trump transformed himself into a new “avenger” image in the 2024 election. Metaphors related to “revenge”, such as “kill”, “crisis”, and “blood”, increased significantly. The 2025 inaugural address strengthened the phrase “tried to take my freedom and, indeed, to take my life”, portraying himself as a “victim” turned “avenger”.

Against the background of the reign of Biden and the post-pandemic era, Trump seized on the drastic changes in order and social conditions and creatively proposed exploration metaphors. He also adjusted construction and religious metaphors to campaign for his return to office. “God” and “rebuild” appeared frequently, directly linking his past governing experience and emphasizing his divine mandate and experience. Voters were both fascinated by the narrative of the “chosen one” and valuing governing experience. Metaphorical logic of Trump linked narrative with experience.

5. The Constant Core and Peripheral Adjustments of Propaganda Logic

The research results show that use of metaphors of Trump is characterized by a stable core and peripheral adjustments. The use of metaphors in his election speeches remains generally stable, but is not static; it shows clear propaganda logic shifts according to the election stage, with the core adapting to the needs of voters in different periods.

5.1 Stable Core Metaphors: The Duet of War and Disaster

5.1.1 War Metaphors: The Stable Dominant Confrontational Framework

The results show that war metaphors are the most frequent metaphor type used by Trump, accounting for more than 40% in all three elections, and always lie at the core of his public speeches. In war metaphors, Trump frequently uses keywords such as “fight” and “kill”. His image-shaping logic through war metaphors is to transform political issues such as trade, immigration, and counter-terrorism into “confrontation scenarios”, thereby defining competitors, foreign forces, and policy opponents as “enemies”.

In the September 2016 debate, regarding international trade he said: “Trade war is a fight we have to win. They’re using our country as a piggy bank to rebuild themselves, and we have a very good fight, and we have a winning fight.” This directly defines international trade negotiations as a “trade war” and a “fight”, distorting fair competition from trading partners into “plunder”, and positioning himself as “the leader fighting for American interests”. This metaphor avoids the complexity of trade cooperation and simplifies the issue with a “win or lose” confrontational logic, allowing voters to quickly empathize with the anxiety of being “plundered”.

In the September 2020 debate, he said: “We will defeat ISIS. We have to be tough on terror. They are a threat to our country, and we will knock the hell out of them.” This defines ISIS as a direct “threat”, using the expression “knock the hell out of them” to reinforce the image of “never compromise, strike hard”, echoing demand for “security first”.

In the 2025 inaugural address, he said: “An assassin’s bullet ripped through my ear. I was saved by God to make America great again”. This pushes war metaphors to the extreme. By saying “a bullet ripped through my ear”, he places himself at the center of the war narrative, as the victim of the war. “Bullet” and “ripped” thus portray Trump as a warrior returning from the battlefield. “I was saved” combines war with religion, implying that salvation comes from God. The war metaphor here completes the transformation from “victimization” to “divine selection”, and from abstract battle to concrete trauma.

War metaphors transform complex political issues into intuitive “confrontation scenarios”. Trump does not need complex policy explanations; regardless of his role, he uses war to identify enemies. The constancy of the core message - that “the answer to all problems in the three election cycles is always because there is an enemy” - ensures the emotional continuity of his supporter base.

5.1.2 Disaster Metaphors: An Ever-Escalating Crisis Narrative

Disaster metaphors account for about a quarter of the resonance value, playing a secondary role. Among disaster metaphors, words such as “disaster”, “mess”, and “destroying” appear frequently. Disaster metaphors provide an emotional foundation for his narrative from challenger in 2016 to avenger in 2024; the narrative that enemies create disasters gives him the authority to fight back on behalf of the people.

The 2016 disaster metaphor used “disaster” as its core word, a static, completed state description. In the September debate, Trump called NAFTA “a disaster”, characterizing a trade agreement that had already caused damage, destroyed manufacturing, and taken away jobs. “Worst trade deal maybe ever signed” extreme this disaster, serving the demand of challenger to overthrow the status quo. The 2016 disaster pointed to specific policy consequences: NAFTA led to job losses, Obamacare led to premium increases. The disaster was attributable and traceable to specific enemies. This feature made the disaster narrative mobilizing: the disaster was caused by “them” and must be corrected by “me”.

In the 2020 disaster metaphor, “mess” became a core word. Although belonging to the same category, “mess” is fundamentally different from “disaster”. The former is a grand, violent, destructive “disaster”, while the latter is a trivial, chaotic, need-to-be-cleaned “mess”. This shift shows that the role of Trump changes from challenger to incumbent. In the October debate, “They left me a mess” defines the disaster as “man-made”, a mess left by the Democrats. Trump is the cleaner of the disaster, working hard to clean up the mess. The 2020 disaster is “left by them” and cleaned by “me”. Trump becomes the “cleaner of the disaster”, shifting his personal image from “offense” to “defense”.

In the 2024 disaster metaphor, “destroy” appeared 12 times as a core word, among which “destroying” appeared 5 times. Unlike before, “destroying” is a transitive verb in the present continuous tense. It is not a static “disaster” or a passive “mess”, but an active, ongoing act of destruction. The opponent is not “leaving” a disaster but “creating” a disaster, “destroying” the country. In the September debate, “They’re destroying our country” personifies and activates the disaster, and Trump is the force confronting the ongoing destruction.

In each of the three elections, the evolution of disaster metaphors makes the image of “confronting disaster” more urgent, more personal, and more sacred, constantly giving rationality and stability to his campaign.

5.1.3 Binary Opposition and Emotional Framing

A recurring structural feature across all three elections is a sharp binary opposition between “us” and “them”. The specific identity of “them” changes, but the binary opposition framework stays remarkably stable.

Scholars have noted that this dichotomous structure is characteristic of populist right-wing rhetoric, which typically contrasts “the people” with either “the elite” or sundry “minorities” portrayed as inimical to national identity or security (Dorey, 2025). By constantly invoking such oppositions, Trump constructs a clear moral boundary that helps supporters quickly identify who to trust and who to fear (Hristova, 2024).

The binary opposition in 2016 was the conflict between “the people” and “the establishment”. On October 19, Trump said: “For too long, a small group in our Nation’s Capital has reaped the rewards of Government while the people have borne the cost. Washington flourished, but the people did not share in its wealth”. This opposition is class-based and geographic: the corrupt capital versus the forgotten people. Here, “a small group in our Nation’s Capital” concretizes the enemy as a geographical-power dual symbol. “The people have borne the cost” defines “us” as victims. Trump is not creating division but exposing an existing division that all problems are caused by the enemy. The war metaphor of “reaped the rewards” against “borne the cost” turns economic inequality into a moral fight.

In 2020, opposition between “law-abiding citizens” and “criminal illegal aliens” appeared. In the October 9, 2020 debate, Trump stated: “We have many criminal illegal aliens. When we want to send them back to their country, their country says we don’t want them. In some cases, they’re murderers, drug lords, drug problems.” The opposition is legal versus illegal, moral versus criminal. By describing refugees as “murderers” and “drug lords”, Trump exaggerated the threat and reinforced his role as a guardian who must protect citizens from dangerous outsiders. “Murderers, drug lords, drug problems” portrayed the refugees as dangerous criminals. This extreme rhetoric serves the “guardian” image of that year: citizens need his protection because the enemy are murderers and drug lords, not ordinary refugees. “Their country says we don’t want them” constructs the refugees as doubly rejected, making them absolutely dangerous elements floating outside any community.

In 2024, the opposition turned into conflict between “patriots” and “persecutors”. In the September 10, 2024 debate with Kamala Harris, Trump said: “They’re the ones that weaponized. Not me. She weaponized. I probably took a bullet to the head because of the things that they say about me. They talk about democracy. I’m a threat to democracy. They’re the threat to democracy with the fake Russia investigation that went nowhere”. Here the opposition is between Trump and his political opponents, namely the victim and the persecutors. The binary is no longer about class or immigration but about the survival of democracy itself. “I probably took a bullet to the head” links the debate to the July assassination attempt, pushing the intensity of the opposition to the level of life and death. “Took a bullet” concretizes political

persecution into physical harm, suggesting that the Democratic Party not only attacked with words but also tried to physically eliminate him. This expression turns abstract “injustice” into concrete “assassination”, bringing the “victim” narrative to its peak. “Fake Russia investigation” turns the “immorality” of Democrats outward, pointing directly to their evil: they fabricated a false investigation, wasted national resources, and persecuted innocent people. Bullets, persecution, and fake investigations together construct a persecution narrative that provides moral legitimacy for “revenge”.

Across these three cases, the enemy changes, but the structure of “us versus an adversarial them” remains constant. This stable binary opposition, reinforced by war and disaster metaphors, gives voters a simple cognitive framework for understanding complex political events. The consistency of this pattern across three election periods points to a deliberate rhetorical strategy for emotional mobilization.

5.2 Peripheral Adjustments: Propaganda Strategy Adaptation Based on Reality

In the three elections, the ebb and flow of construction metaphors, religious metaphors, and exploration metaphors precisely serve Trump’s propaganda needs under different political roles. From challenger to incumbent to challenger returning, each role change is accompanied by a reconfiguration of the metaphor system to accurately respond to the psychological and legitimacy needs of voters in different periods.

5.2.1 Fluctuation of Construction Metaphors: From Building to Guarding to Rebuilding

Construction metaphors account for more than 10% in the 2016 and 2024 elections, second only to the core war and disaster metaphors, but fell to less than 10% in 2020, which is an intuitive indicator of his political role change.

As a challenger, Trump used “build” as the core in 2016, transforming abstract leadership qualifications into concrete material achievements to make up for his lack of political experience and provide legitimacy for his challenger identity. “I built an unbelievable company, a great company, some of the greatest assets anywhere in the world, worth many, many billions of dollars”. This statement implies that as someone who built a great company, he has the ability to build a great nation. In 2020 as an incumbent, the construction metaphor shifted to past achievements: “I built the greatest economy in the history of our country”, “I built the wall”. The tense changed from future to past, and the function shifted from proof to declaration. The incumbent does not need to prove “I can”, but rather “I have” - performance legitimacy. “Wall” is a visual proof of performance, shifting from “building the future” to “guarding the past”, precisely corresponding to the political needs of the incumbent. In 2024 as a challenger returning, the construction metaphor took “rebuild” as its core. “We will rebuild our country and restore its promise.” The prefix “re-” in “rebuild” implies the logic of repair from destruction to life, giving himself the legitimacy of return, precisely matching his “avenger” narrative after leaving office.

5.2.2 Steady Growth of Religious Metaphors: From Ritual to Moral Judgment

The proportion of religious metaphors in the three elections rose from 2.5% to 4.1% and finally to 5.9%. Behind this change is a stepwise escalation of legitimacy and the “war” between good and evil. This shows the adaption of metaphor under the change of environment.

In the 2016 election, religious metaphors accounted for a small proportion and were only ritualistic, such as “God bless America”, reflecting the cultural background of American politics rather than the core narrative. In 2020, religious metaphors rose to 4.1%, with “disgrace” and “corrupt” as core words. In “It’s a disgrace” and “Her campaign is corrupt”, Trump

portrayed his opponent as “virtueless”, shifting the debate from the policy level to the moral level, serving the defensive needs of the incumbent. In 2024, religious metaphors almost doubled to 6.3%, and “God” appeared as a core word for the first time. After the assassination attempt, Trump bound himself to divine mandate, claiming “I was saved by God to make America great again”, thus constructing a three-in-one narrative of “victim-survivor-chosen one”. Surviving the assassination attempt provided him with the mythological logic of “divine choice”, binding his personal destiny to the nation’s destiny at the level of divinity, thereby using emotion to override doubts about procedural and performance legitimacy.

5.2.3 The Sudden Appearance of Exploration Metaphors: Deepening the Divine Mandate Narrative

The first appearance of exploration metaphors in 2024 is a future-oriented expansion carried out simultaneously with the “God’s chosen people” image created by religious metaphors. Through “We will pursue our manifest destiny into the stars, planting the Stars and Stripes on the planet Mars”, Trump projects “divine mandate” into space, a future technological hotspot, providing a transcendent goal for his “defeating evil” and “rebuilding” after taking office. Negative emotions such as disaster, war, and persecution need a transcendent outlet; the sea of stars is such a common dream that can unite voters and transcend partisan divisions. The “God” in the exploration metaphor provides the legitimacy of “being chosen by divine mandate”, and the “stars” provide the vision of “the sea of stars”, together constructing a complete image of the “chosen one-pioneer”.

6. Conclusion and Implications

Propaganda of Trump has a stable core, with details adjusted according to purpose. War and disaster metaphors are stable at the core, cooperating to mobilize audience emotions. At the same time, his metaphors change according to demand, shaping three major political images the “strongman”, the “guardian”, and the “avenging chosen one” - always adapting to the needs of voters at different election stages, demonstrating strategic and targeted communication.

Metaphor strategies of Trump in election speeches provide three implications for international discourse communication. First, adhering to a stable core metaphor system. Building stable and unified core metaphors around core positions such as “a community with a shared future for mankind” to strengthen the international recognition of stance. Second, adjusting peripheral metaphor strategies according to different communication scenarios and audience needs. For example, use concrete metaphors such as “crossing the river in the same boat” to enhance empathy when communicating with developing countries. Third, balance between emotional mobilization and rational expression. Combining metaphors with narrative storytelling to make international discourse both emotionally resonant and factually supported, thereby improving communication effectiveness.

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