



They Speak: Gender Divide in COVID-19 Metaphors Found in Online Sources

Joan Ravago*, Ken Calang, Evelita Cara, Patricia Anne Martinez and Gina Tagasa

Department of English and Humanities, College of Arts and Social Sciences, Central Luzon State University, Science City of Muñoz, Nueva Ecija, Philippines
patriciaanne.martinez@clsu2.edu.ph

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Abstract

Language and the linguistic device used in news articles is critical for it greatly influences readers' perception of COVID-19. Metaphor, as used to describe the pandemic and its difference between male and female gender is scant. Thus, this study sought to examine the various conceptual metaphors of COVID -19 employed by male and female personalities in the Philippines in online articles. It also aimed to compare the male and female use of metaphors and determine its implication to the readers. Through qualitative research design, 30 online articles written by male and female online personalities were scrutinized using the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP). After the analysis, it was found that both male and female use metaphors like enemy, beast, disaster, blessing in disguise, fight, battle, threat, and defeat where enemy was the common metaphor between the two genders. Meanwhile beast, disaster, and a blessing in disguise were the common metaphors among the male participants. With these metaphors, a dichotomy of reactions among the readers emerged, optimism, and anxiety and depression. This suggests that there is a need for speakers to be cautious in their language while discussing COVID-19.

Keywords: COVID-19, discourse analysis, gender, metaphors, language, online article.

Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 has created a global emergency¹ that ripples down to the mental and social well-being of the people who have witnessed and experienced the difficult times it brings. As Cullen, Gulati, and Kelly² opine, psychological problems like emotional distress and social disorders are likely to occur in times of pandemic. Similarly, Gök and Kara³ cites Kang et al. which stated that the consequences of a pandemic may have a lasting effect on the general well-being of individuals.

Information dissemination is vital during the pandemic, and the representation and framing of diseases are critical for it may intensify one's perception of risk and has the potential to construct, shape, and influence public perceptions in multiple ways⁴.

As COVID-19 expands across the world, online sources are deemed to be a critical medium of information⁵ and a dominant source of trending occurrences around the globe^{6,7}.

The use of language, particularly in news discourses as part of online sources, is an important component of information dissemination. Language may promote panic among the hearers and viewers⁸ or love and/or a plethora of emotions⁹ and reinforce motivation, learning, and self-esteem¹⁰⁻¹².

One important element of language employed by speakers in putting across an intended utterance that can influence one's perception of information heard is a metaphor¹³. Metaphor is known to be the most highly used figurative language¹⁴. It is not only a word-focused figure of speech but a reference of power in re-describing reality¹⁵. It communicates ideas that may be difficult or impossible to express using literal language, expresses ideas compactly and vividly¹⁶. As Lakoff¹⁷ maintains, metaphors are said to be the basis of consciousness, and they speak about the universe. Conceptual metaphors, in particular, are a significant part of human thought¹⁸ which have a significant impact on the meaning and recognition of words and phrases. Furthermore, metaphor is not only a literary trope but a major part of one's understanding of reality. By no means good or bad, the use of metaphors is the only way in which people comprehend and frame profound issues^{19,18}.

The presence of metaphorical language even in journalism is evident. In fact, Kennedy²⁰ asserts that this field has been used as an information source for metaphor analysis as it provides shaping and adapting knowledge and views while dealing with novel and current events. Newspaper headlines, for one, use metaphors to arouse readers' curiosity and excitement²¹. Similarly, its use in news articles can enhance representation in mass media⁴ and shape public perceptions in different ways⁴. Consequently, a great body of research on metaphor in news texts like that of Chiang and Duann²², Kitis and Milapides²³, Musolf²⁴, and Zinken²⁵ has extensively been explored.

Many politicians and news media have adopted metaphors to describe the challenges people are facing²⁶ like what a headline in *Globe and Mail*²⁶ reads, “We are at war with COVID-19. We need to fight it like a war.” Although the use of metaphors can be valuable in news articles, conversely, it can cause many difficulties for readers²¹. According to Escudero²⁷, in her article in Rappler.com, a good metaphor sees things in a new and different way. However, it can also be a powerful means to stereotype, dismiss, or limit a person as race, gender, or religion. Moreover, Choy²⁸ states that, like other powerful tools, metaphors can be misused and abused; thus, one must be careful in using them.

The use of metaphor in the news has been explored²⁹ but how this device is used by males and females in online articles like news, features, editorial, and announcements and how its use affects the readers’ responses during the time of COVID-19 is scarce. In this light, this study attempted to investigate the various conceptual metaphors of COVID -19 employed by local male and female personalities (politicians, journalists, and health personnel) in their online announcements and articles found in the local sites such as ABS-CBN News, GMA, Inquirer.net, and Rappler. In addition, the study identified the similarities and differences among these metaphors used by male and female personalities and determined the implications of these metaphors to the readers in this time of pandemic.

This study endeavored, too, to find out whether the metaphors used by both male and female participants contribute to this break and unbreak dichotomy effects of language as expressed by metaphors. With this, our paper aimed to promote consciousness and cautiousness among speakers in expressing their minds to the people in order to contribute comfort and solidarity amidst this pandemic.

Framework of the Study: The framework of the study was guided by language as a tool that influences thought and action, the linguistic relativity or the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (1929). This principle holds that language filters or shapes one’s perception of reality³⁰.

As shown in the figure, both males and females use metaphors to describe the COVID-19 as they appear in online announcements and articles. These metaphors are assumed to influence the readers’ responses.

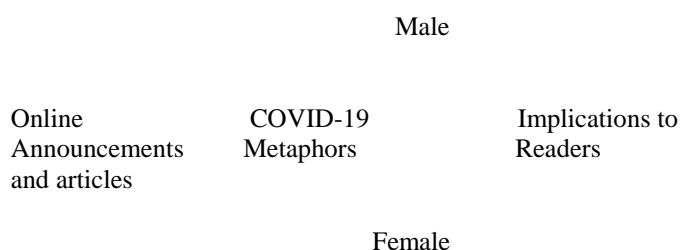


Figure-1: Conceptual Framework of the Study.

Methodology

To answer our objectives, the participants were purposively selected, comprising of five male and five female local politicians, health personnel, and journalists who have written online articles or quoted in an interview that appeared/published in local sites such as ABS-CBN News, GMA, Rappler, and Inquirer.net. The participants' online articles or quoted statements from March 2020 to September 2020 were analyzed in terms of conceptual metaphor use. Since data of this kind of study are best understood, explained, and interpreted through the researchers’ thoughtful reflections and analysis through qualitative discussion³¹, this study used a qualitative research design. Kotthoff³² furthers, understanding how the participants reconstruct meanings requires a qualitative approach.

In identifying the data taken from the 30 online articles (15 written by male group of participants and 15 by the female group), this study was anchored on definition of conceptual metaphors of Lakoff and Johnson¹⁹ and followed the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) developed by Pragglejaz Group³³: (1) read the full text of the 30 online articles to obtain a general understanding of their contexts; (2) identify the lexical units in the text-discourses and developed their contextual meanings. The basic contemporary definition is used for each of the lexical units described, and (3) analyze each of the lexical units. If the lexical unit has more to its simple contemporary meaning in contexts other than the context in question, the lexical unit was considered as a conceptual metaphor.

Meanwhile, in identifying the implications of the metaphors to readers, implied and explicit reactions from the reading public were considered and interpreted. Implied reactions include the emotional and physical responses of the people, including the government and other institutions. On the other hand, explicit reactions include the verbal utterances of the readers.

Results and discussions

Conceptual Metaphors of COVID-19 Used by Male and Female Participants: COVID-19 as an Enemy: COVID-19 was likened to an enemy based on the articles of the participants. This is evident when the analyzed data included the words *enemy*, *fight*, *battle*, *threat*, and *defeat* to address COVID-19. As an enemy, the participants see the virus as a threat that has to be eliminated and defeated, as exemplified in the following excerpts: i. Health Undersecretary Maria Rosario Vergeire (quoted/appeared in Magsino³⁴): “*The Philippines’ battle with coronavirus disease 2019 may drag on for months if proper interventions would not be implemented*”. ii. House Speaker Alan Peter Cayetano (quoted/appeared in Mercado³⁵): “*The leadership and members of the House of the People agree with the President that COVID-19 is the enemy, not the Government.*” iii. Dr. Rafael Castillo: “*We’re in a world war right now... It’s a war against an enemy; the world is ill-prepared to repel, an enemy so minuscule yet so virulent that it*

sometimes makes humanity react with impetuosity, despite scientific advancements over the centuries." iv. Senator Risa Hontiveros (quoted/appeared in Ramos³⁶): "The government should demand what is rightfully ours and use this to help the Filipino people battle COVID-19."

By treating the pandemic as an enemy, the majority of the participants employed war metaphors. These metaphors imply the magnitude of the COVID-19 and that authorities call for immediate unified action in taking extreme preventive measures to defeat it. This supports the assertion Semino³⁷ that comparing an illness to a war requires a solid and fast action to eliminate it.

Moreover, war metaphors suggest an effective linguistic tool to alert the public on the severity of the virus and stirs collective efforts from the public to eradicate the virus. As Flusberg, Matlock, and Thibodeau³⁸ state, war metaphors are widely used because they "capture people's attention, trigger emotional responses, tap into a rich source of schematic knowledge, and lead people to take a stand and form particular opinions on a wide range of issues."

COVID-19 as a Beast: Another metaphor described the virus as a beast. Like being an enemy, the word *beast* as a metaphor connotes a negative meaning implying danger. In fact, words such as rude, savage, and wild are usually attributed to it. Therefore, comparing the virus to a beast means it must be controlled as it exhibits danger and threat to human lives. The beast metaphor was found in the article by the journalist Valencia³⁹ as shown below: (5a) Renato Valencia³⁹: "First, our national strategy of continuing cycle of general lockdowns or CQs-MECQ, ECQ, GCQ, MGCQ –has failed to control the beast." (5b) "To control the beast, we have to change course and change horses."

Moreover, the beast displays varying behaviors, which make it difficult to control. Likened to a beast, the virus is hard to manage, for it is contagious, and its effects on the public vary at the same time. Thus, this suggests the government and the public must take trials and strategies to control the virus.

COVID-19 as a Disaster: COVID-19 as a disaster was another metaphor that emerged from the analyzed articles. This metaphor was found in an article written by the journalist Vinod Thomas: (6) Vinod Thomas⁴⁰: "The jolt of a new coronavirus outbreak should motivate governments to strengthen resilience to disasters, especially frequent in the Philippines."

In this context, the virus was being treated as a disaster because of its destructive effects worldwide. It was likened to natural disasters such as volcanic eruptions and typhoons that are frequent in the country. Conversely, considering the virus as a disaster enables the government to come up with precautionary measures and to invest more and better in disaster resilience⁴⁰.

According to Nerlich⁴¹, disaster metaphors are metaphors that mirror the effects of the epidemic. In the Philippine context, it is clear that the pandemic, like a disaster, disrupted everything that was once normal and brought a "new normal" that everyone tries to live with. However, it also forces the people to embrace this and create necessary adjustments and precautions that can be utilized for future disasters.

COVID-19 as a "blessing in disguise": While the majority of the participants used words or metaphors that connote negativity, Health Secretary Francisco Duque viewed COVID-19 as a "blessing in disguise." This can be seen in the following excerpts: (7a) Health Secretary Francisco Duque (quoted/ appeared in Esguerra⁴²): "This can also be some kind of *parang blessing in disguise. Serendipitous kasi parang na-accelerate itong UHC because of the COVID-19*" (7b) "It's a catalyst, although COVID-19 did expose the fissures, the cracks, the weakness of our Philippine health system."

According to Duque, it is a blessing in disguise, a catalyst, for it exposed the country's poor health system resulting in the immediate implementation of the Universal Health Law (UHL). Similarly, environmental enthusiasts and experts, although they acknowledged the damage wrought by the pandemic, considered COVID-19 to be a "blessing in disguise" for over-polluted areas around the world were reported to have reduced the pollution due to the global lockdown.

After analyzing NASA's reports before and after lockdown, Muhammad, Long, and Salman⁴³ concluded that COVID-19 is indeed a "blessing in disguise" as it provided an avenue for mother nature to heal from pollution and save itself from total damage. Guptha⁴⁴ shared the same view. It also allows human beings to contemplate and "find its soul lost" in the realm of greediness brought by capitalism and modernization.

Similarities and Differences of Metaphors Used by Male and Female Participants/Sources: In this present study, of the four conceptual metaphors found, only one conceptual metaphor, enemy, was common between male and female participants/sources. They considered it as an enemy engaging the people at war to fight and triumph. This similarity implies that all individuals, regardless of gender, share the same perspectives when it comes to adversity.

Surprisingly, no female participant/source used the metaphor blessing in disguise, which implies a positive meaning. This may be attributed to women's take of the virus as a serious health problem. It was found that women are more serious about realizing the consequences of the virus than men⁴⁵. Additionally, women are at the core of the fight against the pandemic⁴⁶. With this attitude and role, it can be inferred that they tend to view the pandemic in all negative ways compared to men.

Table-1: Conceptual Metaphors Identified in the Data.

Male Participants/Sources	Female Participants/Sources
<p>COVID as an Enemy War metaphors were used by 12 male sources composed of three male journalists, four male health personnel, and five male politicians /government officials. Use of the words: fight, battle, threat, defeat pertaining to Covid-19. War against COVID-19. Battle against COVID-19. Enemy (that has to be defeated / eliminated). Unseen (Invisible) Enemy.</p>	<p>COVID as an Enemy War metaphors were used by 15 female sources composed of five female journalists, five female health personnel, and five female politicians/government officials. Use of the words: fight, battle, threat. Enemy (that must be defeated /eliminated).</p>
<p>Beast A male journalist, Renato Valencia³⁹ from Inquirer.Net, utilized beast as a conceptual metaphor for COVID-19 in an online article dated September 28, 2020.</p>	<p>Beast No female source used beast as a conceptual metaphor for COVID-19.</p>
<p>Blessing in disguise Catalyst for change: A male official from the health sector /health personnel, Health Secretary Francisco Duque III, (quoted/appeared in Esguerra⁴²) referred to COVID-19 as a blessing in disguise in an online article published by ABS CBN dated August 22, 2020.</p>	<p>Blessing in disguise No female source referred to COVID -19 as a blessing in disguise and catalyst for change.</p>
<p>Disaster Metaphors The jolt of a new coronavirus outbreak should motivate governments to strengthen resilience to disasters. A male journalist, Vinod Thomas⁴⁰ of Inquirer.Net, referred to COVID-19 as a disaster in an online article dated March 21, 2020.</p>	<p>Disaster Metaphors No female source referred to COVID-19 as a disaster.</p>

Implications of the COVID-19 metaphors: Enemy, beast, disaster: Create panic and fear: The use of war metaphors and other negative descriptors like beast and disaster promotes panic and fear. Through these metaphors, the participants/sources were able to communicate to the readers the magnitude of the virus. Although war metaphors raise consciousness and cautiousness, the concepts of war like death, conflict, struggle, and chaos may also induce fear and panic among the people.

Flusberg, Matlock, and Thibodeau³⁸ asserted that war metaphors evoke a sense of fear resulting in a magnified perception of the threat. This proposes that war metaphors prompt a dichotomy of responses, united efforts to battle against the COVID-19 and its negative effect, increased fear and anxiety among the public, which is not good in a time of the pandemic, thus, must be mitigated⁴⁷. As Delagran⁴⁸ pointed out, living in constant fear damages people’s lives. Therefore, instead of giving the public assurance that everything is under control, the war metaphors only intensify the distress and uncertainties brought by the pandemic.

Fear was evident in the response of the Filipinos resorting to panic buying of goods and medical supplies like alcohol and facemasks. According to the news report of Madarang⁴⁹ in Philstar.com, during the first cases of Covid-19 in the country in March 2020, many Filipinos hoarded alcohol and other supplies. Panic buying has broken out among residents, especially in Metro Manila. Some people even moved to the provinces when the COVID-19 cases have surged in the metro⁵⁰.

In addition, the measures of the government fighting the virus as an enemy and a disaster result in a domino effect specifically to the public’s well-being. One of these measures was the declaration of the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) which requires the people to stay at home and observe extreme physical and social distancing. Consequently, many Filipinos, who are known to be friendly and socially attached, had experienced greater psychological impact and a higher level of stress, anxiety, and depression, as reported by Tee⁵¹.

Blessing in disguise: Promote optimism and strengthen family bonds: "Blessing in disguise," which indicates optimism, was another metaphor used in the analyzed articles. Optimism promotes positive mental health⁵² and enables people to see the best possible outcome in any situation⁵². This is evident with how the "blessing in disguise" metaphor was used in the Philippine context. By looking at the brighter side of the picture, the participant/source who used this looked on the brighter side of the pandemic resulting in policy change in the health services of the country. This attitude also mirrors Filipinos’ stand-out trait, being optimistic amidst adversities.

The pandemic has also strengthened family ties. The stay-at-home campaign and the closing of schools have rekindled connections among family members. They have learned to appreciate the emotional connections between and among them. As UNICEF⁵³ asserts that appreciation, small acts of kindness, and gratitude to other family members help to boost their emotional well-being.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global health emergency with serious consequences on health, economic, and foremost on the public’s responses.

The use of language they hear in online sources plays a critical role in how they perceive the situation. Language may elicit a dichotomy of emotions, one constructive and the other negative. Looking at the virus through the lens of war, where connotations of death, struggle, and chaos surface, panic and anxiety may be fostered. The metaphor blessing in disguise, on the other hand, promotes a positive response among the public. With this, the use of positive metaphors or any other linguistic strategies should be encouraged to inspire hope and alleviate fear among the general population. Since both males and females employed the metaphors of “war” and “enemy” for COVID-19, it might be concluded that when it comes to metaphor and perception of one's own reality mirroring language, gender is not a distinguishing characteristic.

Given the critical role language plays during times of pandemic, people in authority must create mechanisms for advising concerned agencies or individuals on the most appropriate linguistic device to deploy. The study does not represent the different domains of the general public, and the instruments and techniques may be insufficient to adequately cover the effects of the COVID-19 on the public's response; thus, a future study may focus on developing a state-of-the-art article to document the pandemic in full depth.

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