Gender and deliberate metaphor use in Belgian political discourse

Conceptual metaphors structure the way we perceive political reality (Lakoff, 2002, 2004). Many studies have confirmed the metaphorical nature of political concepts and systems (see among others Koller, 2009; Musolff, 2000, 2016) well as the influence of metaphorical framing on political representations (see among others Boeynaems, 2019; Perrez & Reuchamps, 2015b; Reuchamps et al., 2018; Steen et al., 2014). Recent developments have also suggested that looking at variation in metaphor use could provide more specific insights into the communicative functions of metaphors in political discourse (Perrez et al., 2019). Accordingly, political metaphor use has been shown to vary to variables such as political affiliation, political role or political context (Ahrens, 2019; Heyvaert, 2020; Heyvaert et al., 2019). Among the factors potentially influencing political metaphor use, gender has been studied in different contexts, such as the USA, Hong Kong, Britain, Ireland and Germany (see the different chapters from Ahrens, 2009). However, these different studies show contrasted results, sometimes pointing to gendered differences in metaphor use, sometimes not. These contrasted results suggest the role of gender on political metaphor production is still in need of further research.

Against this background, and based on Deliberate Metaphor Theory (Steen, 2008, 2015, 2017), this study investigates to what extent gender influences the use of deliberate metaphors in Belgian political discourse. Previous research by Heyvaert et al. (2019), based on a corpus of informal interviews, suggest that male politicians produce on average more deliberate metaphors than female politicians and use different source domains that are perceived as more masculine (see also Ahrens et al., 2024). Our study will broaden the scope of the study by Heyvaert et al. (2019) and analyze three corpora representing different forms of political discourse, namely citizen discourse (Perrez & Reuchamps, 2015a), television debates (Perrez et al., 2019) and parliamentary discourse (Heyvaert, 2020). The existing databases will be reanalyzed from the perspective of gender, more specifically looking at the frequency of deliberate metaphors and the conceptual source domains that are respectively used by male and female politicians.

The data are currently under analysis. Our findings will contribute to a better understanding (i) of the role of gender on political metaphor production and (ii) of the role of deliberate metaphors on political communication.

Keywords: Gender, deliberate metaphor, political discourse, Belgium

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