



LINGUE CULTURE MEDIAZIONI LANGUAGES CULTURES MEDIATION

11 (2024)

2

The Language of War: Lexicon, Metaphor, Discourse
Il linguaggio della guerra: lessico, metafora, discorso

Edited by
Edited by Anna Anselmo, Kim Grego, Andreas Musolff

EDITORIAL

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Editorial

The Language of War: Lexicon, Metaphor, Discourse

An Introduction

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7358/lcm-2024-002-edit>

1. WHY STUDY WAR DISCOURSE?

At its core, war is a tragedy that results in “the death and maiming of human beings, creates widows, [widowers,] and orphans, destroys homes and communities, and wrecks lives [...]” (Sheffield 2010, 4) both in the short and long term. War also leads to the forced displacement of people and the eradication of cultures and languages. Yet, Trotsky saw war as the locomotive of history (qtd. in Bousquet 2022, n.p.), an agent of geopolitical change. This was evident in the Revolutionary Wars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the Great Wars of the twentieth century (cf. Sheffield 2004). It seems even more relevant to today’s interconnected geopolitics: wars can not only “transform the future” (Iklé 1991, vii) of the belligerent parties but also bring about foundational changes to the international system (Gilpin 1981, 42-43; Bocquillon *et al.* 2024, 263). While wars have been shown to have a severely negative impact on ‘human capital’ (Ichino and Winter-Ebmer 2004; Slone and Mann 2016) and on the economy (cf. Bocquillon *et al.* 2024, 263), they have also been shown to have longer-term positive effects, leading to “increased efficiency in the economy [...], triggering technological innovation, and advancing human capital” (Bocquillon *et al.* 2024, 263; see also Organski and Kugler 1981; Olson 2022). Moreover, they have a role in state-building (Bocquillon *et al.* 2024, 264-265).

Why study war, then? It is controversial, at best, as it requires pitting human capital against the economy and long-term political benefits. The debatable ethics of just war theory (Lakoff 2003; Whetham 2016; May 2018) and “the discipline, industry, and creative energies responsible for nonviolent, life-enhancing innovations” (Weiss 2021, 3) must be weighed against the evident contradiction of a morality of war (cf. Lazar 2000).

It is the belief of the editors and authors of the present issue that studying war is necessary. For one, war appears to be a historically “ever-present feature of human existence” (Bocquillon *et al.* 2024, 262). As such, the study of war is expected to trigger a doubtful ability to learn from the past, even though (military) history proves slippery: “The lessons of history are never clear. Clio is like the Delphic oracle: it is only in retrospect, and usually too late, that we understand what she was trying to say” (Howard 2002, 195). More interestingly, “wars, the institutions that make them possible, and the ideas that guide their conduct form an important part of the human experience” (Paret 1993, 210; cf. Weiss 2010). So do war narratives – broadly intended as war-centred “over-arching storyline[s] that tie events together in a seamless explanatory framework” (Ochs and Capps 2001, 4; cf. Adler *et al.* 2019). In particular, what follows is inspired by both war narratives and by the notion of narrative warfare (Vlahos 2006), “the strategic use of narratives to influence public opinion and support a particular agenda or goal”, which involves “the creation and dissemination of consistent and convincing stories that portray events, issues, or individuals in a way that aligns with the desired outcome” (Kochenov 2024).

This issue of *Languages, Cultures, and Mediation* explores war from a linguistic and discursive perspective, aiming to contribute to war studies by offering diverse analytical approaches and challenging ethnocentric views (Footitt and Kelly 2012). The emphasis is on understanding war as a site of “culture mixing and hybridity” (Barkawi 2006, 170). Rather than addressing the politics, economics, logistics, or (alleged) morality of war directly, the contributions draw on previous work on language and war (cf. Footitt and Kelly 2012; Chiluba and Ruzaite 2024). They offer critical insights into how war is constructed in public discourse, understood both as the Habermasian public sphere – a space for social discussion (1989) – and as the contemporary, media-driven public sphere (Wessler and Freundenthaler 2024, n.p.). The issue also considers the political public sphere, which has historically been deeply shaped by war (Gestrich 2006). To that effect, this introduction starts

by raising critical questions concerning war, some definitions of war, the ethics of war, language, and narrative, to subsequently introduce the authors' contributions.

2. WHAT IS WAR?

A cursory exploration of selected definitions of war provides critical perspectives from which (critical) discourse analysis can take its cue. First, legal definitions of war – especially those rooted in international law – are not considered here. Instead, the focus is on critically comparing how war is defined by military historians and by scholars of war and media. Specific legal concepts such as *jus in bello* and *jus ad bellum* are also outside the scope of this discussion. The definitions that follow are not terminological in the strict sense – that is, they are not purely intensional, extensional, or based on part-whole relationships aimed at positioning a concept and its term within a specialised system: cf. Felber 1984; Wüster 1991; Temmerman 2001; ISO 704:2022(en). Rather, these definitions are partly overlapping, offering both shared elements for understanding war as a real-world phenomenon and a range of varying meanings and features that contribute to that understanding.

At its simplest, “war is the use of force by a state in order to achieve political objectives” (Sheffield 2010, 2). Such definition must be compounded by factors such as, for instance, the involvement of non-state actors in conflict (e.g. revolutionary guerrilla movements and terrorist organisations such as Al-Queda, etc.). Other elements to be factored in provide circumstantial information and allow for specifications: war can be conceptualised as armed hostility between at least two sovereign nations, with an emphasis on conflict being to a certain extent dialogic; it is, therefore, “a great socio-political activity, distinguished from all other activities by the reciprocal and legitimised use of purposeful violence to attain political objectives” (Howard 2002, n.p.). War is also civil war and therefore implies armed conflict within different areas or factions of a sovereign state (Lukin and Marrugo 2024, 4). Furthermore, war can be understood beyond mere conflict, and, according to van der Dennen, as multilayered, and “a species of the genus of violence” (1995, 69). As such it entails several qualifications: it is “collective, direct, manifest, personal, intentional, organised, institutionalised, sanctioned, and sometimes ritualised and regulated violence” (*ibid.*).

For the present purpose, the common semantic ground of definitions of war appear to be violence and politics: on the one hand, war without violence is perhaps best defined as diplomacy (Sheffield 2010, 2), on the other hand, without politics (design, strategy, tactics, and organised objectives on behalf of a country or a cluster of allied countries), war becomes mere organised crime (*ibid.*, 3). The core concepts of violence and politics are compounded by the above-mentioned dialogic nature of war, both in terms of multiple parties usually being involved, and in terms of hermeneutic dimensions which are at once personal and collective, quotidian and political, regulated and ordered as well as chaotic, and which constantly converse at times of war (van der Dennen 1995). As a working definition, then, war is “heterogeneous, organized, mutual enmity and violence between armed groups, on more than a minor scale, carried out with political objectives, possessing sociopolitical dynamics, and focused on the exerting of power in order to compel opponents” (English 2013, 36). As we know it, “it is located in the post-French Revolutionary era of nationalism, during which the interwoven dynamics of national community, struggle, and power have determined a particular form of violent conflict” (*ibid.*).

3. WAR AND LANGUAGE

In 1987, Paul Chilton stated that discourse, in the sense of “language use viewed in a critical perspective” (8), is “a part of social action, it is embedded in and facilitated by social and political institutions, and it is produced by institutional or individual agents enjoying different degrees of social and political power” (*ibid.*). This serves to contextualise his claim that it is at the level of discourse that language is increasingly militarised and weaponised. In 2023, Amal El-Maazawi reflects on the role of language at times of war and offers the following conclusion: “language serves as a weapon of war, a tool for peacebuilding, and a means of narrative control” (n.p.). It is thus at the level of discourse, the level of language use in contexts of sociopolitical power, that wars can be fought, won, lost, and, more crucially, construed for the benefit of the general public and the international political arena.

This journal issue builds on the complex definitions of war and highlights the central role of language and discourse in shaping how war is understood and used as a meaning-making trope. It offers critical

insight in two main areas. First, war is seen as “a flexible trope suitable for an allusion to any serious strife, struggle or campaign” (Dinstein 2018, 5). In this sense, war functions as a metaphor that can be used to frame and interpret a wide range of communicative situations. Second, war is approached as a narrative – both mediated and mediatised (Hoskins and O’Loughlin 2010) – that permeates the political and social media spheres, influencing how we perceive and respond to real-world conflict.

The twenty-first century has deterritorialized war (Deleuze and Guattari 2013) by manically framing several phenomena as war-like, including terrorism and public protest (Steuter and Willis 2008; Hodges 2011). Studying war as a metaphorical construct starts from the belief “that metaphoric language shapes thought and that calling something by another name can have profound implications” (Lule 2004, 179; Lakoff 2003 and 2013). Moreover, “metaphors contribute to the construction of social and political reality, specifically to the setting of social and political problems” (Chilton 1987, 8). The seminal work on metaphors and cognition by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) is key to such analyses, whereby the analyst’s task is to reveal the unconscious “system of metaphors that we use automatically and unreflectively to understand complexities and abstractions” (Lakoff 2013). The role of metaphorical reasoning during international crises has long been recognised (Lakoff 2003 and 2013). War metaphors, for their part, are key construal tools in several domains: from electoral *campaigns* to *battles* against cancer to *wars* on crime, drugs, obesity, and poverty (Flusberg *et al.* 2018, 2); more recently, *wars* have been waged on Covid-19 (Gugushvili and McKee 2021) and, during the pandemic, they have been waged on science and expertise (Rutledge 2020). The ubiquity of the ‘War on X’ frame speaks to the efficacy of the metaphorical war frame in conceptualising and reconceptualising, contextualising and recontextualising (van Leeuwen 2008) social and political action: “The use of war metaphors is a widespread strategy in public speech for framing and representing the challenges to be faced” (Panzeri *et al.* 2021, 2).

War is not only an interpretive metaphorical construct but also a narrative. This means several things: for one, that war is spun into stories that “groups tell about their own and others’ origins, identities, and beliefs” (Kochenov 2024, n.p.), stories that serve as tools to make sense of and suss out meaning from events and history. Another implication of understanding war as narrative is that of recognising war as mediated and mediatised. Wars have been openly mediated in Great Britain since

the French Revolution (Favret 1994), for instance, when “the displacement of fighting onto foreign lands and waters meant that the immediate activity of war, ‘the activity of reciprocal injuring,’ remained for the most part outside the visual experience [...]” (*ibid.*, 539) of the people; this, in turn, caused the proliferation of war accounts in the paper press, a “paper shield” (*ibid.*), so to speak. In the Western world, the experience of war is often inaccessible first hand, consequently, wars are reported through the use of media, either print or digital. This mediation causes war to be conceptualised and experienced as narrative.

War narratives are not only mediated, but also mediatised, that is, involved in long-term processes of mediation that cause radical changes to social and cultural institutions and modes of interaction (Hoskins and O’Loughlin 2010). Extreme connectivity, the media’s co-creation of a world of perpetual contingent events in which causes can rarely be explored, exposes the relevance – and increased closeness – of conflicts to the people in today’s public sphere, as well as the recognition that the planning, waging, and consequences of war do not seem to reside outside of the media (Featherstone 2009, 2). In fact, mediated and mediatised “war narratives offer a framework for understanding a conflict, for the political rhetoric that surrounds warfare, and for justifying the war in public opinion” (Kvernbekk and Bøe-Hansen 2017, 216). Moreover, war narratives are not univocal and centralised any longer, but thanks to new media hybridity – the fact that they are now differentiated, dispersed, and multimodal (Featherstone 2009, 2) – they multiply, spread rhizomatically (Deleuze and Guattari 2013), and are woven into a chaotic tapestry of storytelling.

4. ANALYSING THE LANGUAGE OF WAR

Drawing from all the theoretical suggestions presented above, this issue on the language of war opens with Andreas Musolff’s “An Unlikely ‘Traitor’ in the ‘War’ against Covid-19: Dr Anthony Fauci”. Musolff interrogates the war metaphors used in the politicisation of public health discourse, focusing on the vilification of Dr Anthony Fauci during the Covid-19 pandemic. He analyses how conspiratorial narratives appropriated militaristic language to construct Fauci as an internal enemy, illustrating how war rhetoric extends beyond military conflicts to frame crises as battles requiring enemy identification. By focusing on

the *traitor* role and the *war* scenario, the study highlights the ideological implications of this linguistic framing and its impact on public trust in institutions.

In “WAR Metaphors and Agency: The Case of the COP27 News Coverage”, Ilaria Iori examines the pervasive use of war metaphors in news coverage of COP27, illustrating how environmental issues are framed through a conflict-based discourse. In her study, she critically evaluates the implications of such framing, particularly how it assigns agency through verbs, constructs responsibility (us vs. them), and shapes public engagement (active vs. inactive countries) with climate action. This contribution extends the volume’s scope by demonstrating how war language is deployed in non-military contexts to mobilise or obscure political action, even when a universal issue such as environmental protection is at stake.

“Archetypes Geared for War: *Conversations with Leucò* by Cesare Pavese” provides a literary discourse analysis of Cesare Pavese’s *Conversations with Leucò*. Rodney John Lokaj explores how war is conceptualised as an existential condition. He examines how Pavese employs archetypal dialogues to engage with themes of violence, fate, and human agency, offering insights into the philosophical dimensions of war discourse. This contribution situates literary representations of war within broader discursive and ideological frameworks, reminding us of the power of myths, poetry and, with and within them, of music.

Analysing medical discourse in Fascist Italy, “The Italic Race and Latin Eugenics: Scientific Terms for Persecutions and War in the Medical Literature of Fascist Italy” traces the lexical and ideological construction of racial purity as a scientific imperative. Anna La Torre illustrates how eugenic rhetoric functioned to legitimise state violence and war, providing a historical perspective on the intersection of language, science, and militarism, and contributes to discussions on the role of discourse in enabling systemic violence and wartime ideology by singling out the responsibility of the health professions in this specific context in shaping the public’s perception on race.

“Children in *The New York Times*’ Israeli-Palestinian War Coverage: A Corpus-Based Critical Analysis” employs corpus-assisted critical discourse studies to investigate how children are represented in *The New York Times* coverage of the most recent stage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Authors, Laura Tommaso and Marianna Lya Zummo, show how discursive strategies construct children as either victims or symbols of ideological struggle, reinforcing particular framings of the conflict.

By situating these findings within media discourse studies, the authors highlight the rhetorical functions of child-related narratives in war reporting, which are often employed to influence audiences cognitively and emotionally and, ultimately, to legitimise war.

Valentina Di Francesco's "Voices from Conflicts: Voice-Over and Simil Sync in Italian Television News Reports" investigates the linguistic and audiovisual strategies used in war reporting. The in-depth technical analysis shows how translation techniques such as voice-over and simil sync mediate the testimonies of war witnesses in Italian television news. She argues that these choices impact the perceived authenticity and agency of speakers, thereby shaping audience reception of conflict narratives. The chapter thus contributes to discussions on media representation and the intersection of language, translation, and war discourse.

In "Militarized Rhetoric in the 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election Debate: Threats to Democratic Deliberation", Ari Musdolifah and Retnowaty present a critical discourse analysis of political rhetoric in Indonesia's presidential debates, and address the militarisation of political language, where candidates position themselves as commanders leading a war against external and internal threats. The study contextualises this linguistic strategy within Indonesia's political history, revealing how war metaphors function as a means of consolidating authority while constraining democratic debate. The findings contribute to the broader discussion of how war discourse permeates electoral politics and shapes public engagement with democratic processes: in particular, martial language in Indonesia seems to normalize not only war-like discourse but especially authoritarian governance.

"Discourse, Conflict and Cognition: Construals on the Aimara's Representation within the Peruvian Press" adopts a cognitive linguistics perspective to review the discursive construction of the Aimara people and their actions in Peruvian media coverage of recent protests. The study carried out by Richard Santos Huamán, Frank Joseph Domínguez and Rosmery Cjuno reveals how metaphorical and metonymic processes contribute to the representation of the Aimara as violent actors, demonstrating the role of hegemonic discourse in shaping public perceptions of conflict. By critically analysing perspectivisation strategies in press discourse, the authors underscore the role of language in reinforcing or challenging dominant power structures in conflict narratives.

The issue ends with an article by Mai Morsy Tawfik, "Linguistic *Impoliteness* in Online Comments on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict" (the editors' translation), which tackles the use of impoliteness strategies

in digital discourse surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, revealing how aggression, polarisation, and ideological contestation manifest in online comments. In particular, based on Culpeper's notion of conventionalised formulaic impoliteness (2011), the Facebook comments the author analyses are categorised into insults, complaints, silencers, threats, etc., and analysed accordingly. The article contributes to the study of war discourse by demonstrating how language is deployed in virtual spaces to sustain conflict dynamics and reinforce competing narratives.

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How to cite this paper:

Anselmo, Anna, Kim Grego, and Andreas Musolff. 2024. "Editorial – The Language of War: Lexicon, Metaphor, Discourse. An Introduction". *Lingue Culture Mediazioni / Languages Cultures Mediation – LCM* 11 (2): 5-16. doi: <https://doi.org/10.7358/lcm-2024-002-edit>