

Caries metaphor in Croatian media discourse: From minimizing the pandemic to name-calling

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, figurative expressions were abundantly used in media discourse to describe the impact of the unknown virus and win public support. In July 2020, the Croatian President tried to appease the citizens by comparing the coronavirus to caries thus downplaying the severity of the pandemic and portraying the virus as a minor inconvenience. This metaphor was strongly criticized by health experts and the President's political opponents as being inaccurate and misleading. During many press conferences, the Croatian Prime Minister assured the citizens that he and his government took the pandemic very seriously emphasizing that they did not support the President's view of the coronavirus being like caries. Although this novel metaphor was used for the first time in the context of the pandemic, it was later brought back into the discourse with a very different purpose. In April 2022, the President fiercely criticized the ruling party and blamed the Prime Minister for some of the country's problems. The Prime Minister immediately reacted to the criticism and described the President as *caries from Pantovčak* (Pantovčak is the President's residence), implying that the President's political views and actions were detrimental to the country. This time the President's unconventional use of a metaphor was turned against him to highlight his harmful policies and decay of integrity.

Starting with the Conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), this paper aims to investigate how the caries metaphor was employed in the Croatian media discourse. Also, based on Charteris-Black's (2004) critical approach to metaphor and Musolff's (2019) "discourse career" of a metaphor, we examine the rhetorical functions of the caries metaphor in two different contexts. The instances of the caries metaphor were extracted from a specialized corpus manually compiled for this purpose. It consists of 42 relevant articles published from July 2020 to March 2023 in Croatia's five most popular online news portals. The caries metaphor was analyzed for different mappings and its role in shaping public perception.

The results indicate that the same source domain can be used differently to frame and shape the discourse surrounding a specific topic. It seems evident that the Croatian President and the Prime Minister, two political opponents, deliberately relied on the caries metaphor to evoke different emotions and influence public opinion.

Keywords: caries, conceptual metaphor, critical discourse analysis, media discourse, Croatia

References

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