

COVID-19 through the Prism of Communication Research

War Metaphors in Bulgarian Official Discourse during the COVID-19 Crisis

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Abstract: The aim of the study is to present the use of war metaphors in Bulgarian official discourse in the period of the so-called ‘state of emergency’ because of the *SARS-CoV-2* (coronavirus) spread. War-connected metaphors were widespread at the time as even the Secretary-General of the UN used them in his speech. The rhetoric of war was announced by many world political leaders as well. However, the militarisation of the COVID-19 discourse in Bulgaria between March and May is not part of an isolated act, but a purposeful strategy which started with the choice of the members of the National Operational Headquarters and continued with the use of military uniforms during the media briefings, the lexical choice of hyperbolic words and phrases, war metaphors and other rhetoric devices as rhetorical questions, for example. The second stage of the ‘war’ was announced in mid-May when the new strategy of preparation for the silent long-lasting war was presented. The measures have been weakened and people have been prepared for a life with the virus around – the so-called New Normality. The methodology includes Critical Discourse Analysis and Critical Cognitive Analysis. The focus is on the critical examination of certain phenomena in a specific context and in the COVID-19 situation in Bulgaria. The analysis is based on selected publications in the media, which use the metaphor of ‘war’.

Keywords: war metaphors, Critical Cognitive Analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis, COVID-19, Bulgaria, New Normality.

War metaphors usage at the time of crisis

Metaphors and their rhetoric force, their function and their influence have been an object of research investigation since the Antiquity. They have been seen mainly as a rhetorical device or as a feature of the poetic language for many years. However, the contemporary development of the metaphor research is influenced by the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), represented in the *Metaphors we live by*, published by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in 1980. The revolutionary idea of the theory is hidden in the assumption that there are metaphors in mind, the so-called “conceptual metaphors.” Lakoff and Johnson claim that “metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought

and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980 (2003): 4) [1]. Moreover, conceptual metaphors “shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and **what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions** (emphasis is mine, B.T.)” (Lakoff 2004: XV). [2] Therefore when people speak their “expressions are conventional manifestations of an underlying metaphor in thought” (Gibbs 2017: 17). [3].

In this perspective “human *thought processes* are largely metaphorical” (Lakoff & Johnson 1980 (2003: 7) [4]. In any language there are large numbers of conceptual metaphors which people often use unconsciously, for example, “TIME IS MONEY”, “ARGUMENT IS WAR”, “LOVE IS WAR”, etc. Many more examples may be seen in Lakoff & Johnson, as well as in many other research papers since then – the CMT has probably been one of the most fruitful linguistic theories in the last four decades.

The so-called ‘militarisation’ of metaphors (Koller 2020) [5] is connected to many other target domains – the war metaphors are used not only in sports, arguments, games [6], etc. [7], but in medicine as well. The commonness of such a metaphoric transfer has been clear since 1978 when Susan Sontag published her book *Illness as metaphor*. [8]

Although “war metaphors are ubiquitous in discussions of everything from political *campaigns* to *battles* with cancer to *wars* against crime, drugs, poverty, and even salad” (Flusberg, Matlock & Thibodeau 2018: 1) [9], at the same time the real wars are also presented by the help of conceptual metaphors (for example Lakoff 1991 [10], 2003 [11]).

War metaphors are some of the most widespread rhetorical devices. V. Koller’s empirical research shows that in media discourse on marketing and sales “the WAR metaphor is the most frequent one in the corpus” (2004: 64). [12] Metaphors are also used in other spheres as numerous research books and articles in different languages reveal (including in Bulgarian context). Ivanka Mavrodieva analyses metaphors in Bulgarian political discourse since 1989 on verbal and visual levels [13]. Vladimir Dosev presents the characteristics of metaphor as a cognitive tool. He defends the position that metaphor is not just a rhetorical figure; but on the other hand, because of its cognitive power, metaphor is very useful for manipulative discourses. [14] The spread of war metaphors leads to critique on some researchers’ part. Their claim is that “war metaphors are misleading at best, and harmful at worst, resulting not only in increased political and cultural polarization but in risks to personal and social well-being as well.” (Flusberg, Matlock & Thibodeau 2018: 2). [15]

The weaknesses of war metaphors encouraged some linguists to work on the alternatives of them, especially in medicine (Hauser & Schwarz 2015, [16] Semino et al 2018, [17] etc.). However, these metaphors are still very popular in the mentioned discourse not only in media but in everyday speech as well.

War metaphors and COVID-19

The unprecedented in recent times COVID-19 crisis is also verbalised by the help of metaphors. As expected, the war metaphors are very frequent. Moreover, they are on the basis of the anti-virus action framing in many countries (Maesse 2020: 2). [18] Even the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres declared on 23.03.2020 that “[t]he fury of the virus illustrates the folly of war”. [19] However, some researchers have started an initiative of collecting alternative metaphors in a big volunteer project, promoted in Twitter, #ReframeCovid, where contributors from different countries collect a large number of non-war metaphors in different languages. [20]

The COVID-19 situation is extremely useful for metaphorisation [21] as it is a multidimensional crisis. It affects so many aspects of human life and increases uncertainty and danger levels even in everyday situations. Its enormous influence on the whole world population helps the use of the war-connected metaphors as war is one of the most deadly, threatening and devastating events for the people.

This is the reason why it is used in the speech of many world leaders in difficult situations. [22]. Bates (2020:1) [23] claims that the use of metaphors is a “mechanism used by political leaders to make the strange and unfamiliar more understandable and familiar to their publics”. However, it is sometimes seen as inappropriate because metaphorical use puts the accent on the similarities between the source and the target domains in spite of the fact that the difference between them is also important. For example, war divides people – the role of ‘the Enemy’ is obligatory in this kind of discourse [24] and, for example, the US President Trump uses it in his speeches (Bates 2020: 11). [25] At the same time, the COVID-19 crisis needs cooperation; war urges to action, in time when people need staying calm and physically distant. [26] Moreover, war metaphors are usually highly hyperbolic which may be helpful in some cases, and harmful in others.

War metaphors and hyperbole use in the first part of the COVID-19 crisis in Bulgaria

The aim of the study is to present by the help of the Critical Cognitive and the Critical Discourse Analysis [27] the political language used for the COVID-

19 crisis in Bulgaria, the use of war-connected metaphors in presenting the government measures concerning the pandemic and the level of ‘militarisation’ in presenting the forthcoming steps.

The first two COVID-19 cases were confirmed on 08.03.2020. Before that, on 26.02.2020 according to the Prime Minister’s [28] order [29], the National Operational Headquarters was announced. The members of this structure are two military doctors (the Chair - Major General Prof. Dr. Ventsislav Mutafchiyski, a Director of the Bulgarian Military Medical Academy, and the Secretary – Colonel Assoc. Prof. Dr. Dimo Dimov), three senior officials of the Ministry of Interior and two other doctors (the Director of the National Center for Infectious and Parasitic Diseases Prof. Dr. Todor Kantardzhiev and the Chief State Health Inspector Assoc. Prof. Dr. Angel Kunchev.). As seen, the militarisation of the Headquarters was a fact even before there were any cases of coronavirus infection in Bulgaria. Moreover, in most of the public appearances of the Chair Prof. Mutafchiyski (who became publicly popular as ‘The General’, usually positively connoted), he wore his military uniform.

On 13.03.2020 the Bulgarian government declared a ‘state of emergency’ (‘извънредно положение’) when the confirmed cases rose to 23. The term is highly unclear although it is mentioned in the Bulgarian Constitution where the expression “military or another state of emergency” („военно или друго извънредно положение”) [30] is used without clear definition of what it exactly [31] means [32]. The expected measures in the Constitution texts in both cases are not differentiated, i.e. they are expected to be the same. In the very beginning, the COVID-19 situation was accepted as close to the military threat.

The similarities between the presentation of the war-like situation and the COVID-19 crisis are not only in the mentioned point. In the next part of the paper, I will present the events and speeches reported by one of the most popular TV BG channels – *NOVA TV*. It is private, however, it is claimed to be pro-government and it presents highly elaborately the Headquarters actions. [33]

The measures include the closing of schools, kindergartens, universities, the ceasing of all kind of sports and cultural events and all kind of group activities. [34] The Prime Minister’s statement during the Parliament debates includes the following: “Това е бактериологична война. В началото всички го подценяваха. Вчерашният ден беше като бомба – с изявления на всички лидери по света. Усещането на хората и извънредните мерки носят големи поражения. Нито една държава не е приложила нито една мярка повече от нас, не е направила нещо, което не сме направили ние.” (“This is a bacteriological war. In the beginning everyone underestimated it. Yesterday was like a bomb - with statements

from all the leaders in the world. People's perception and emergency measures are very damaging. No country has implemented any measures more than us, no country has done anything that we have not done.”). Apart from the fact that COVID-19 is a virus and isn't a bacterial infection, Borissov's words are a clear manifestation of the whole government strategy to act “like in wartime”. Two days before, in the government's COVID-19 briefing, he also said: “Това е един вид война.“ (“This is a kind of a war”).[35] Some days later, on 17.03.2020 in another unplanned briefing the Prime Minister repeated: „**Ние сме във война с невидим враг.**” (“**We are in a war with an invisible enemy**”). What is important here is the fact that ‘the Enemy’ is not only the virus, but the irresponsible people as well. At the time of the state of emergency proposal Borissov said that these measures are needed because of the “undisciplined people who spread the infection” (“недисциплинирани хора, които разнасят заразата”). [36]

On 14.03.2020 the Chair of the Headquarters made a memorable speech in which he proposed stronger measures. ‘The General’ was in his military uniform and with a slow voice and stern face he said: “Задава се една епидемия, която е с невиджана ярост в човешката история. Трябва да сме изключително отговорни към нас, към нашите близки, колеги.” (“An epidemic of unseen-before fury that is unprecedented in human history is coming to us. We must be extremely responsible for ourselves, for our loved ones, colleagues.”) [37]. And later: “Предстоят ни времена на изпитания, които не са само икономически. Ще се загубят човешки животи, и то на тези, които са ни отгледали, които са ни дали живота. Тези, които се гордеят с нашите успехи. Не бива да ги разочароваме с нашето безхаберие”. (“We are facing hard times that are not just economic. Human lives will be lost, of those who raised us, who gave us life. Those who are proud of our success. We should not disappoint them with our carelessness.”) [38]

Although Prof. Mutafchiyski doesn't use military language very frequently and preferred a game metaphor in this case, the hyperbole use and his whole image suggest the situation is very complicated and war-like. His speech was warmly accepted as it is full of rhetoric figures and sounds persuasive and moving. Prof. Mutafchiyski proposed that institutions should be closed except for pharmacies and grocery stores and that strict limitations should be imposed on movement. However, the top-down moralistic discourse of the Prime Minister is replaced by the use of the *we* pronoun as a marker of solidarity. [39]

The order of the Minister of Health has been changed several times but the so-called ‘state of emergency’ continued until 13.05.2020. Then the term was changed and became ‘*emergency epidemiological situation*’ which is still

in use. The measures have been weakened and the members of the Headquarters, except for the Chief State Health Inspector Assoc. Prof. Dr. Angel Kunchev, ceased to come into public. The ‘face’ of the authorities became a civil doctor. So, the most difficult times of social isolation and movement limitation were between 13.03.2020 and 13.05.2020. That was the time of the most visible ‘militarisation’ of the coronavirus discourse, as the General Prof. V. Mutafchiyski in uniform gave briefings about the COVID-19 situation every single morning till 02.05.2020 when the measures were weakened slowly.

Hyperboles and the military metaphors were also used in a very important briefing before Easter weekend when people usually travel a lot to be with their families and friends. This year it was partly impossible as there were checkpoints at the exits of the capital city Sofia and the district centres, and all people needed permission to come and go. On 12.04.2020, a month after the start of ‘the state of emergency’ a group of doctors (some of them are directors of the biggest hospitals) made a public speech in which they presented their doubts and fears. One of them said: “Ние сме на предна линия и сме най-незащитени. В европейските държави почват да падат масово медицински специалисти. Почнем ли да ги губим, ще стане много тежко, особено в София. В провинцията по-тежките случаи ще дойдат тук.” (“We are at *the forefront* and we are the most vulnerable. In European countries, medical professionals are starting to *fall en masse*. If we *start losing* them, it will be very difficult, especially in Sofia. The more severe cases from the countryside will come here.)

Again, war or game (and sports) metaphors and rhetoric figures are used. The most hyperbolic words were spoken by future Health Minister, who at the time of the briefing was director of the biggest Bulgarian hospital *Alexandrovska*: “Виждате ли сте какво значи майка да не може да погребее собствения си син? Аз го видях със собствените си очи. Виждали ли сте, когато поръчвате чували за трупове, да ви кажат, че могат да дадат само 200 бройки? Когато тръгвате да подготвят хладилните камери в болниците, за да ги напълните с трупове, когато това се наложи, да знаете, че имате само 100 места?” [40] (Have you seen what it means for a mother not to be able to bury her own son? I saw it with my own eyes. Have you seen when you order bags for corpses, and they tell you that they can only give you 200 pieces? When you have to prepare refrigerators in hospitals to fill them with corpses, when it becomes necessary, to know that you only have 100 spots?)

These hyperbolic rhetorical questions were used at the time when in Bulgaria there were still 6 new confirmed COVID-19 cases (there had been 675 cases since the beginning of the pandemic). Most of the people were influenced by the

briefing and stayed home. However, as in Greece “people’s active engagement in the implementation of the adopted measures as well as the reorganisation of everyday life was consistently silenced in the public debate” and in public life one may see “the consequent deheroisation of the “vast majority” who consented to the suspension of its fundamental freedoms and quickly adapted to a new precarious life.” [41] As evident in the words cited above, the media and the authorities put the accent on the self-sacrifice of medical specialists, but at the same time the lack of essential protective equipment, respirators and other necessary supplies were reported. In many hospitals in the countryside medical specialists are not enough and doctors and nurses (including retired ones) have to work without a break. When on 02.05.2020 the first medical specialist Dr. Ivanova died with COVID-19, General Prof. Mutafchiyski wrote in the MMA Facebook profile, again using a war metaphor: “Лекар, който до последно изпълняваше своя професионален и морален дълг, грижейки се за своите пациенти, но загуби битката за собствения си живот!” [42] (“A doctor who to the last fulfilled her professional and moral duty, taking care of her patients, but **lost the battle** (*emphasis mine, B.T.*) for her own life!”). As already mentioned, one of the most used metaphors of the period concerning medical staff is ‘on the first line’ or even ‘on the frontline’. [43]

War metaphors in the second part of the COVID-19 crisis. The New Normality

On 13.05.2020 the second ‘level’ of the COVID-19 situation began. The ‘state of emergency’ transformed into an ‘emergency epidemiological situation’. The daily cases were still announced but less publicly, General Mutafchiyski’s figure disappears from the media and the Government’s accent was put on the survival of the tourist season and the prevention of economic recession, so public events started again and travel restrictions were removed. The war metaphor has still been used but with a different focus. Although on 19.06.2020 there was a peak of the new virus-infected people, the Prime Minister and the health specialists announced that they haven’t planned any stronger measures. “Не призовавам за по-строги мерки, а за по-голяма дисциплина. Ако сега започнем да затягаме мерки, това ще внесе паника и много по-голям риск за стопанския ни живот. Трябва просто да свикнем да живеем с това.” [44] (“I am not calling for stricter measures, but for greater discipline. If we start tightening measures now, it will bring panic and a much greater risk to our economic life. We just have to get used to living with it.”). At the same briefing, the military metaphors have been used by the director of *Alexandrovska* hospital: „Вирუსът е омаломощен. В началото

той беше изключително агресивен, с висока вирулентност. В момента тя е намалела, т.е. тежестта на заболяванията, които предизвиква, имат по-малка сила. Той трябва да се приспособи към нас, приемниците. Т.е. – да не ни убива, за да продължи да съществува”. (“The virus is weakened. In the beginning, it was extremely aggressive, with high virulence. At the moment it has decreased, i.e., the severity of the diseases it causes has less force. It has to adapt to us, the receivers. i.e. - not to kill us so as to continue to exist”) [45]

As before, the situation is still conceptualised by the help of the war metaphors. However, the Prime Minister’s words manifest the change of the strategy from the state of the open war to the situation of the silent long-lasting war which presupposes different tactics. The new ‘weapons’ announced by Borissov are the so-called three ‘Ds’ – *distance, disinfection and discipline*. The difference between the two stages is well expressed by Ruzha Smilova with the antithesis *blitz-war* and *the long race against time*. [46] This new stage of the situation is often called the New Normality.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the whole strategy of the Bulgarian government at the beginning of the crisis suggests the militarisation of the COVID-19 discourse. The most important people of the National Headquarters, the people ‘in the frontline’ serve as military doctors. General Mutafchiyski’s daily briefing which started early in the morning with him wearing a military uniform also carries the same message. The use of war metaphors and the hyperboles by the Prime Minister, the Headquarter members and by other hospital directors have been used as a disciplinary means for the time of the state of emergency. [47]

The next stage of the crisis, the so-called ‘emergency epidemiological situation’ may be characterized by different tactics. The authorities still use war metaphors. However, the hyperbolic language is not frequent and the accent is not put on the strength of the virus, but on the duration of the war with the virus, which means that people’s life will be changed for a long time. The time of the New Normality.

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