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# The strategic use of metaphors by political and media elites: the 2007-11 Belgian constitutional crisis

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> one ought to recognize that the present political chaos is connected with the decay of language, and that one can probably bring about some improvement by starting at the verbal end.
> (George Orwell, from *Politics and the English Language*, quoted in Zashin and Chapman, 1974: 290)

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## Abstract

On 9 December 2011 a new Belgian government was sworn in after a record breaking 541 days of negotiations between all democratic political forces with the aim to alter the constitution and provide more autonomy to the different regions that make up Belgium. In this article, the frequent use of political metaphors by North-Belgian politicians and journalists is analysed through a critical metaphor analysis which approaches the different metaphors at a descriptive, an interpretative and a motivational level. Four meta-categories of metaphors were identified - sports and games metaphors, war metaphors, culinary metaphors and transport metaphors. The different metaphors fed into six core-frames: expressing immobility, attributing blame, the need for unity, bargaining and teasing, the end is nigh and finally lack of direction and leadership. Metaphors were instrumental in strategies to present the Flemish demands as unquestionable and common sense, while the counter-demands of the French-speaking parties were positioned as unreasonable, impossible to accept. In other words, the strategic use of metaphors, some of which resonated throughout the long period of analysis, not only served to represent complex political issues in an easily digestible language, they also shaped and influenced the negotiations through their various mediations and the ideological intentions embedded within the metaphor.

**Keywords:**
Metaphors, Political Communication, Nationalism, Othering, Discourse, Belgium.

# 1. Introduction

Politics without metaphors is like a 'fish without water', Thompson (1996) asserts. This provocative claim builds on a longstanding fascination of cognitive psychologists, linguists, political scientists and media scholars alike with political symbolism and discourse as strategies to construct meaning, to deceive citizens or to simplify politics (Ditmer 1977; Miller 1979; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Chilton, 1985; Mio 1997; Goatly, 1997; Charteris-Black 2004/2005; Carver and Pikalo 2007; Semino, 2008).

Contrary to an Aristotelian referential view characterised by similarity and resemblance, a Nietzschean tradition not only approaches metaphors as strategies to make sense of the world, but to shape it as well (see Kofman 1972; Cantor 1982), The metaphor represents a potent rhetorical tool for all political actors to shape the political minds of citizens (Lakoff, 2008), but also I would argue to communicate with their opponents through the media. It is thus not surprising, as Beer and de Landtsheer (2004: 24) note, that politicians make frequent use of metaphors

> as tools of persuasive communication, to bridge gaps and build identification between strangers; to frame issues; to create, maintain, or dissolve political coalitions; to generate votes and win elections.

Through a critical metaphor analysis of metaphors produced by Dutch-speaking Belgian political elites – politicians and journalists – through media discourses during the 2007-2011 period of political instability and constitutional crisis in Belgium, the hidden meanings of the used metaphors will be made explicit. This profound and existential political crisis for the Belgian Federal state constituted a highly productive context for the emergence of metaphors in the political discourse and communication of mainly the Dutch-speaking politicians and political journalists.

First, the complex Belgian political context will be outlined, after which the use of metaphors in political communication will be theorised.

## 2. The Political and Socio-Cultural Context of Belgium

The crisis under consideration here extends over a rather long period of time (almost 5 years) and was the result of a complete political gridlock between Dutch and French speaking political elites; between the aspirations of the North for further regionalisation of competencies, their desire to protect Dutch speaking communities around Brussels and the contrasting demands from French speaking parties to expand bi-lingual Brussels and consolidate the national Federal level. This socio-cultural, as well as linguistic, conflict has a long and complicated history and should also be seen in the context of a past in which a French-speaking economic and political elite dominated a Dutch-speaking majority for a long time (see Witte, et al., 2009). As Blommaert (1996: 237) explains, from the very beginning in the 19th Century, Flemish nationalism was 'aimed primarily against the absence of respect and recognition for the language of the Flemish people [Dutch] among the Belgian (Francophone) establishment'.

The political crisis was further complicated and exacerbated by mutually beneficial political alliances between mainstream parties and radical forces on both sides of the language border. In the North, the Flemish nationalist party *Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie* (N-VA) was locked in a political cartel with the *Christen-Democratisch & Vlaams* (CD&V) party, while the *Front des Francophone* (FDF), advocating the interests of French speaking minorities around Brussels, joined the rightwing liberal party *Movement Reformateur* (MR) in the South and Brussels. Also within the Francophone and Flemish socialist parties we can observe a considerable proportion of *regionalistes*. All this led to highly contentious negotiations to form a government after the 2007 elections, which were won convincingly by the cartel between CD&V and the Flemish nationalists N-VA.

Attempts to forge a constitutional deal after the 2007 election were, however, doomed to fail and a government *de raison* was formed in view of dealing with the near-collapse of the global financial system in 2008. This subsequently resulted in the breakdown of the political cartel between and Christian-democrats and Flemish nationalists. The national elections of June 2010 resulted in an even more polarised political landscape as the N-VA, now running on its own, became the biggest party in the North and nationally, while the Parti Socialiste (PS) won the elections in the South. After a year of negotiating about the negotiation, the Flemish nationalists decided to leave the talks to form a new government. This meant that all other political democratic parties, excluding the neo-fascist Vlaams Belang, were required to alter the constitution. At some point, as has always been the case, a constitutional deal was struck and it was not pretty nor did it satisfy everyone, but on 6 December 2011, after a whopping 541 days without a government, the French-speaking socialist Elio Di Rupo was finally sworn in as the new prime minister of Belgium leading a grand coalition of socialists, Christian democrats and liberals.

As already hinted at, the current Belgian state is very much the product of subsequent ceasefires in an ongoing conflict between centrifugal and centripetal forces within the Belgian Federal constellation (Witte, 1992;

Hooghe 1993; Deschouwer 2006)[1]. Without addressing the distinct technicalities of each of these (partial) settlements, their common feature was an incremental shift of ever more competencies from the national level of governance towards the regions, typically a Flemish demand and more financial resources for the South and for Brussels as compensations to woe the French speaking political elite into going along with Flemish aspirations for more autonomy. Problematic in this regard is that this has resulted in a political system whereby 'all parties in Belgium only speak to the voters belonging to their own segment' (Deschouwer 2006: 909),

Belgium is therefore often described as a multi national state whereby the sub-state entities, such as Flanders and Wallonia, are considered 'nested nationalities' since they are to some extent bounded both geographically and linguistically and at the same time embedded in a larger Federalized state (Miller, 2001). Nationalist forces in the North of the country have traditionally been at the forefront of a push for institutional change, but also in the South regionalist tendencies exist. Billig (1995: 61) asserts that '[n]ationalist thinking involves more than commitment to a group and a sense of difference from other groups. It conceives *our* group in a particular way'. His notion of banal nationalism points to how routine and familiar usage of language through political discourse, but also through cultural products, continuously *flags* or reminds us in a concealed way of 'nationhood'. Flemish nationalism is no different in this regard as it constructs a rigid and pure identity of the sub-state – Flanders – and the (white) citizens living in it – the Flemings. This effort is ridden with 'issues of identity, customs and traditions' and attempts to restore a mythical 'past greatness' and a pure and homogenous Flemish identity (Blommaert 1996: 253).

Essentialist discourses of 'the Other', as well as of 'the Self' are rife in the distinct Dutch and French speaking public spaces. For example, in the South, Flemings are often depicted as intolerant racists or even worse as fascists, while in the North the stereotype of Walloons profiteering from the social security system is predominant. Such views are not only latently widespread among the subsequent populations, but are at the same time kept alive by political elites and the media, increasingly feeding a divisive process of Othering, serving to 'externalise distance and exclude the other' (Pickering 2001: 47), As a result of this, Erk (2003: 203) claims that '[t]he linguistic divisions in Belgium in fact demarcate the borders between two separate demoi, i.e. two political communities which function as the default base for democratic politics'.

Apart from surrealism, football/cycling, Belgian beer, chocolate and the royal family, there is little sense of belonging in terms of a Belgian identity, which has led to what Bailly and Sephiha (2005) have called 'cloisonnement identitaire' or identity closure between the different communities. As implied earlier, language is an important cleavage in Belgian politics and the different media thus only serve one community in one language. This has led to very separate media landscapes, with two independent public broadcasters, distinct commercial broadcasters, different newspapers, and very different ownership structures as well as regulatory regimes. Dewachter (1998: 185 – my translation) even asserts that '[w]hen it concerns media, it is obvious that

the Belgian society does not exist anymore'. This also explains why it is often claimed that the media on both sides strengthen and amplify divisive constructions rather than enhancing national cohesion[2].

**Figure 1:** Two internet-pranks relating to the Belgian political crisis



**Source:** a blog of a French-speaking journalist of the Dutch-speaking public broadcaster - URL: http://multiblog.vrt.be/christophedeborsu/2007/10/18/de-lachende-splitsing/

**Source:** published in several newpapers, but first distributed virally through email and blogs.

It is in this context that the profusion of metaphors in political communication should be understood and positioned. This requires us to analyse these metaphors in terms of their precise ideological intention and political aims. First, however, metaphors and their political use will be theorised.

## 3. Metaphors and political communication

A metaphor is described as linguistic cross-fertilisation, whereby 'the word that is used for one thing is applied to something else' (Miller 1979: 156), which results in what Aristotle called the transference of meaning from the source domain (SD) to the target domain (TD), An often-heard claim is that the extensive use of metaphors in political communication can be attributed to attempts of political leaders and elites to make politics less abstract and more tangible for citizens or to voters. Ditmer (1977: 567) argues in this regard that:

> The selection of a word from everyday language endows the symbol with an appearance of familiarity, enabling members of the mass public to relate on a more intimate level to a remote, complex and seemingly irrelevant event.

Along the same lines Schmitt (2005: 336) points out that '[m]etaphors provide schemes, which bundle together the fullness of details, making them clearer and more manageable'.

However, the simplification of complex political issues to an assumed largely ignorant public is by no means the only or arguably most important reason for the extensive use of metaphors in political communication. Metaphors are not merely descriptive by depicting for us in a straightforward way 'what is'. The use of a metaphors and selection of the metaphor often has a precise political aim; either to promote one view against another or to discredit or humiliate political adversaries or enemies. In this regard, Vavrus (2000: 194) rightly points out that '[f]ar from simply describing the world, metaphors are prescriptive linguistic devices that guide and shape thinking as well'. This concurs with a post-structuralist disposition whereby the '[m]etaphor is less in the philosophical text ... than the philosophical text is within metaphor' (Derrida 1982: 258),

At the same time this also brings political intention into play or the pragmatics of using metaphors. Intention is intrinsically linked to the choice of metaphors to describe a particular event, phenomenon or situation. Jamieson (1985: 49) defines intentionality as:

> a kind of focusing device in the imaginative consciousness; it concentrates and thus it excludes; it is a selective device, selecting an image to be raised into consciousness from a range of alternatives. Without intention, nothing has prominence, therefore one has to intend when one imagines.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) were instrumental in the shift from seeing metaphors as reflective to considering them more as constitutive by introducing a cognitive linguistics perspective. They contend that metaphors are discursive instruments for the construction of certain views, ideas, and ways of seeing the world, thereby 'creat[ing] social reality and guid[ing] social action' (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 156). This is consistent with a Lacanian view that approaches metaphors as 'creative sparks' that produce meaning and ultimately construct ideology (Lacan, 1997: 157). Lakoff and Johnson also react against the down-playing of the cognitive in some post-structuralist accounts of discourse and power. Arguing against Foucault, Balkin (1998: 272) defends that discursive 'power arises out of cognitive mechanisms as well as out of technology and social practices'.

The power of the metaphor thus lies foremost in its subliminal character, in its ability to express apparent taken-for-grantedness and common sense. From a cognitive psychology background, Moi (1997: 130) asserts that metaphors are effective instruments in political communication because they 'resonate with latent symbolic representations residing at the unconscious level'. Grey (2000) concurs with this and explains that '[e]veryday metaphors are invisible because we understand them immediately, and therefore have no need to pay attention to their metaphorical character'.

Framing theory is also useful in this regard as frames offer 'schemata of interpretation' (Goffman, 1974) to make sense of the world. From a critical framing perspective, the political use of metaphors can be seen as part of 'framing wars'– a conflict between competing and conflicting meanings and interlinked with the construction of us/them dichotomies by attributing characteristics such as good and evil, just and unjust to the different subject-

positions. In relation to metaphors, Musolff (2004) speaks of a process of 'metaphor negotiation' in this regard.

The metaphor thus enables political actors to convey certain easily digestible images and ideas, while at the same time framing the way citizens perceive a certain issue. In a study of metaphors in popular literature, Van Teeffelen (1994: 384–386) concludes that the strength of the metaphor in terms of political communication consists in its ability

> to emphasize particular elements and linkages, and simultaneously to de-emphasize others. Since they organize the understanding of cause and effect, symptom and essence, and especially praise and blame, metaphors can be employed to serve political aims or interests. When thus used as ideological devices, they privilege, and when turning into common sense, naturalize particular accounts of reality.

This is very reminiscent of how Gramsci (1971) conceived cultural hegemony. The strategic use of metaphors in the political communication strategies of political and media elites thus clearly constitutes a powerful discursive practice with the intent to hegemonize certain views, ideas and ideologies to the detriment of others and to temporarily fix meaning (Lakoff, 2008). Temporarily, as hegemony is never absolute nor inherently stable; it 'has to be fought for constantly in order to maintain it' (Giroux, 1981: 17).

As a consequence, each political actor can potentially challenge so-called common sense and develop counter-hegemonic long term strategies, which thus becomes part of a 'war of position' (Gramsci 1971: 239) aiming to hegemonize the counter-hegemony. From the perspective of political communication, metaphors can thus be approached as discursive weapons in a war of position between often divergent and conflictual conceptions of the organisation of society, of the role and nature of the state, and in relation to identities and citizenship.

In order to study the use of metaphors in political communication strategies, critical metaphor analysis (CMA), a form of critical discourse analysis (CDA), has been applied (see Maalej 2006). CDA is 'concerned with opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language' (Wodak 2001: 2). It addresses the way language and discourse are part of an ideological process embedded in history and culture. Furthermore, it considers discourse and political rhetoric constitutive of 'social identities, social relations and systems of knowledge or beliefs' and aims to expose 'how these discourses maintain power through their ideological properties' (Brooks 1995: 462),

CMA, introduced by Charteris-Black (2004), draws upon CDA, but also on pragmatics and on the cognitive approach developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). By doing so CMA seeks to combine different strands in CDA, enabling to address the cognitive, the ideological as well as the historical attributes of metaphors, thereby closing the conceptual gap between Foucauldian post-structuralism and cognitive approaches. Partly following Fairclough (1989), Charteris-Black (2004) and Maalej (2007), but also using critical frame

analysis the metaphors being used during the Belgian political crisis of 2007-2008 will be addressed on three different levels of analysis:

1. *Descriptive level:* identification and recognition, frames being addressed
2. *Interpretative level:* mapping out correspondences between frames
3. *Motivational level:* identifying political intentions

At the first level of analysis of the metaphors, broad meta-categories providing identification will be determined. Besides this, the different frames to which the metaphors speak will be identified. At the second level of analysis, correspondences between the source domain and the target domain will be mapped out. At the explanatory level of analysis the question as to why certain metaphors were chosen will be addressed, exposing the political, pragmatic and strategic intentions they reveal.

## 4. Metaphors as mediated discursive strategies during the 2007-11 Belgian political crisis

As Bruck (1992: 108) succinctly points out, '[c]rises are not real events', but rather 'evaluations of the significance of what is happening'. He views crises as media spectacles whereby certain views and elites are given preferential status above others. The specific focus on media and metaphors is therefore regarded as a relevant site of research as 'the nature of the power relations in [mass-media discourse] is often not clear, and there are reasons for seeing it as involving *hidden* relations of power' (Fairclough 1989: 49 – emphasis in original). It is in the media and through the media that metaphors are produced and disseminated. Furthermore, it is argued that these mediated metaphors conform to particular frames which are privileged over and above other frames thereby shaping our understanding of politics. As Gitlin (1980: 7) points out, the media provides 'persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation and presentation, of selection, emphasis and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organise discourse, whether verbal or visual'.

The metaphors being analysed in this article are thus mediated metaphors used in public discourse by both political elites and political journalists. Those that are being targeted by the metaphors varies; while political journalists tend to use metaphors to make a complex political process more palatable for their audiences or to voice their critique on the process, political elites use them both to speak to the electorate, as well as to their political opponents in the negotiating process.

Most mediated political metaphors emerging out of this analysis conform to the analogous type of metaphors – 'seek[ing] to put the objects of base in a one-to-one correspondence with the objects of the target so as to obtain maximum structural match' (Gentner 1988: 48). Others, however, cannot be fully understood without the socio-political context within which they are produced and fulfil criteria of (local) recognition and identification (Charteris-Black 2004: 35).

## 4.1 Descriptive Analysis

The corpus on which this analysis is based consisted of the archives of the Dutch speaking broadsheet newspapers and the archive of the public broadcaster VRT. These were searched in view of mapping out the different metaphors used by political elites. This resulted in the identification of four consistent meta-categories or clusters of political metaphors frequently used during the crisis[3]:

1. Sports- and Games metaphors
2. War metaphors
3. Culinary metaphors
4. Transport related metaphors

Within each of these categories different frames were addressed, as will be outlined below. When selecting metaphors for analysis, particular attention was paid to the manifest inter-textualities between different metaphors, the frequency of their use, their sustainment in the public discourse over time and their proprieties to be part of a meta-narrative or an 'order of discourse' (Fairclough 1992; Foucault 1981) pertinent to the particular context of the case.

*Frame 1: Expressing Political Immobility*

The first frame, which aligns with the sports and games metaphors and characterises the early stages of the crisis, could be called 'expressing political immobility'. In view of increasing recognition and resonance, sport metaphors used by political elites are usually embedded in the local sports culture

Football is one of the most popular sports in Belgium and lends itself well to metaphorical use. For example, Ivan De Vadder, one of the most prominent political journalists, compared the political crisis to **football** on his blog: 'After eight months of tackling and sliding, the ground is scattered with knackered players', he wrote, but the game is by no means over yet, as 'the players will have to dig deep into their reserves for extra time' (De Vadder 2008 – my translation). More recently, referring to the negotiations after the June 2010 elections, one of his colleagues tweeted: 'The Palace has allowed Reynders [yet another negotiator appointed by the King] to play extra time. No goal has been scored yet. Where are the fans?'[4] (Van de Looverbosch, 15/02/2011 – my translation).

The difficulties of the negotiation process were also symbolised in the frequent use of the cycling-metaphor **'surplacen'** (Rogiers 2007a). Surplacen can be traced back to the track cycling velodrome and signifies almost standing still before starting a sprint while cyclists lure at each other's wheel to see who sets off first. In the weekly magazine De Tijd (2007: 31) it read: 'Despite the will of Letterme [the Prime Minister] to move on, all protagonists kept surplacen'. In subsequent years as a settlement remained elusive, the resonance and persistence of this metaphor in public discourse strengthened as even political scientists began using it; Pascal Delwit spoke of the 'world record surplacen'

(Delwit 2011) and his colleague Carl Devos (2011) wrote about 'surplacen for the advanced':

> 'Surplacen is a somewhat silly position that is taken momentarily before the sprint starts, before an explosion of power and desire. What we need after all these months is courage. Courage to go somewhere.'

In this regard, the chess metaphor '**stalemate'** was also used at times, which denotes a gridlock, a game without winners.

*Frame 2: Blaming the other*

In such conflictual political circumstances, the key strategy often consists in blaming others for the failure to reach an agreement, as is exposed in the emergence of the game metaphor **'passing on the black jack'** (De Morgen 2007a). This strategy consisted in either blaming the other for being unwilling to compromise or condemning negotiating partners for their readiness to concede too much.

While Bart De Wever, the president of the Flemish nationalist party N-VA, declared that he 'does not want to pass the black jack to anyone', as the 'responsibility for the failure of forming a government lies with all parties around the negotiating table' (quoted in Gazet Van Antwerpen, 2010a), it should be clear that the attribution of guilt is a political strategy of prime importance for the nationalists as well as for other parties. A journalist of a North-Belgian weekly magazine observed that 'the main worry of all parties is to receive the black jack if and when the negotiations fail' (Martens 2010).

In the mean time, it also became clear that these political games of blaming 'the other' not only tainted the trust in politics in general even further, but as journalist Ivan de Vadder (2010) pointed out, 'the game of 'passing on the black jack also undermines the trust between politicians', essential to reach a negotiated political deal.

*Frame 3: United We Stand*

The third frame coincides with the introduction of war metaphors and resonates with the frame: 'united we stand'. The notion of a **'front'** is undoubtedly a very important and persistent war metaphor in the Belgian political context. The need for a front is perceived to be high as this quote from an editorial exposes: 'For the first time in six months there was a Flemish Front. And look: it works' (Gazet Van Antwerpen 2010b). In its pure form, the Flemish front needs to remain united and does not retreat on its collective demands whilst the French-speaking front is forced to keep saying no and positioned as unwilling to concede to the legitimate and reasonable Flemish demands.

Another commonly used war metaphor in the Belgian context goes back to the First World War, namely **'the trenches'**. This concurs to some extent with the sport metaphor of 'surplacen', as it refers to the different political actors being on the defensive, digging in, not taking too many risks, but above all it

denotes an unwillingness to compromise, while at the same time waging a full-scale political war of position which requires a united front against the enemy. A statement by the Flemish nationalist party leader Bart De Wever read; '**we** will have to see whether **they** leave the trenches and are genuinely ready to engage in negotiations that could lead to a solution' (quoted in De Morgen 2007b – my translation and emphasis added). Other politicians, such as the former liberal Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt, called upon all parties to 'leave the trenches in which we have dug ourselves, out of the deep mud of Belgian politics'. (quoted in VRT 2008 – my translation),

In an editorial, Yves Desmet (2007 – my translation), the then editor-in-chief of the centre-left newspaper De Morgen, warned about the detrimental effects of these war metaphors in political discourse:

> A Flemish front and placing a bomb under the negotiations, unacceptable and a slap in the face; the readiness to talk has seldom be this far away. Why have the key values of our democracy – dialogue, respect and compromise – suddenly been devalued to ultimate proofs of weaknesses?

*Frame 4: Bargaining and Teasing*

Regarding the frame 'bargaining and teasing', culinary metaphors were often used. Guy Verhofstadt noted 'a new trend: that of a metaphor politics, with declarations about nibbles and fat fish' (quoted in De Morgen 2008 – my translation). In doing so, he referred to two of the most persuasive food metaphors used by Flemish politicians during the crisis. The first one – **nibbles** – denotes small concessions that were being asked for by the Flemish negotiators, as a kind of foreplay to solving the big institutional issues. The second culinary metaphor – **a fat fish in the frying pan** – was frequently used by Flemish nationalists to indicate that they demanded a substantial institutional reform and not some tiny cosmetic changes. The fat fish metaphor persisted in political discourse over time. At some point in the negotiating process it was suggested to address one issue thoroughly, enabling the Flemish to claim their fat fish, while leaving other matters for the next elections. However, the French-speaking parties felt that there were already enough 'fat fishes lying on the negotiating table' (VRT, 2010) and deemed that the Flemish negotiators were too greedy.

Culinary metaphors were also used to adopt a more conciliatory tone in the negotiation process, indicating a willingness to bargain, but from a position of superiority. De Wever, very prolific in the production of metaphors, wanted to convey at some point in the negotiation process that his party was ready to compromise by saying that he was prepared to offer a **'tea spoon of sugar'** to the Francophones (De Morgen 2007d). This metaphor was subsequently widely adopted by the media and other political actors, being very pervasive in political discourse for several months. This frame is, however, not only about bargaining in a negotiation process, the tone and selection of metaphors also hints at a sense of entitlement and disdain versus the adversary, hence the addition of teasing to this frame.

*Frame 5: The End Might Be Nigh*

Another fairly frequently used culinary metaphor during the crisis partly related to the frame 'the end might be nigh'. Several political actors used a **mayonnaise** metaphor to indicate that a compromise was in the making or the exact opposite. The Flemish nationalist Bart De Wever at some point stated 'I never had the feeling that the mayonnaise was coalescing' (quoted in De Morgen 2007e – my translation). The interplay and ambiguity embedded within this metaphor allowed it to be interpreted in two ways: 'the mayonnaise is coalescing … or it is curdling'. More recently, a public service radio journalist asked 'Will the mayonnaise ever bind?' (Vansevenant 2011), which again shows how this metaphor became part of the day-to-day political discourse.

Addressing the same 'end might be nigh' frame, a **'landing scenario'** was a frequently used transport metaphor. Landing thereby became the end-point of a difficult journey, when an agreement between the different communities would be reached and a government formed. Despite his party blocking a final deal each time, De Wever claimed that '[l]ast weekend the compass pointed to a landing, for everyone, also for us' (quoted in De Morgen 2007g – my translation), Given the world record duration of the government formation, it is not surprising to observe that this metaphor became the object of further elaboration and became pervasive in public discourse. In November 2007 a negotiator from the Flemish liberal party anonymously posted this message: 'We are circling around Brussels, but the landing procedure hasn't started yet. There is still a bit too much turbulence'[5]. More recently, political scientist Carl Devos (2010) wrote: 'Fasten your seatbelts, and get ready for a difficult landing'. But it would still take a year and 9 months before a final agreement was made and a new government formed.

*Frame 6: Lack of Direction and Leadership*

Finally, transport related metaphors also revealed a sense of crisis fatigue amongst the population as well as the political and media elites which was related to the frame 'lack of direction and leadership'. 'Who is behind the wheel of the car that **drives** our nation?', an editorial asked (Rogiers 2007b). However, just as being in the driving seat is seen as being in control and steer the process, there is also a need to know where one is heading towards. When a new government under leadership of Leterme was finally installed in March 2008, forced by the market and without a constitutional deal, Caroline Gennez, the Dutch-speaking socialist opposition leader, used the metaphor of the train to critique the lack of any project of the new government:

> The new interim government is as a **train** that has just been put on the rails; the driver and the ticket officers are known, but the direction the train is heading to is not. (speaking on VRT-radio, 20/03/2008 – emphasis added and my translation),

And this brings us back to the game metaphors. If forming a government is not possible, then the main reason for this must be the inexperience of the current political elites and the lack of political leadership. A senior political

journalist pointed to the fact that most of the Flemish politicians negotiating a new Federal government only had experience at the regional level of governance. With an ironic note he concluded: 'they can only just play the draughts and now they have to play chess' (Pauli 2007).

## 4.2 Interpretative Analysis

The interpretative analysis of metaphors establishes discursive links between the source domain and the target domain. The different frames that were identified above are used to structure this part of the analysis. The first frame related to the immobilism and the blaming game, inherent to the negotiation process. The first frame was mostly adopted by journalists, while the second one was more dominant amongst politicians.

**Table 1:** Mapping correspondences between SD and TD in relation to frame 1 and 2 – Immobilism and attribution of blame

| Elements of the Mapping | SD: Football, Cycling and Cards | TD: The 2007-2008 Belgian Political Crisis |
|---|---|---|
| Nature of the negotiation | Tackles and Slidings | Disruptive Tactics, Defensive |
| Duration | Extra Time | Delaying Tactics |
|  | Digging deep into the reserves | Quite some way to go before a compromise will be reached |
| Lack of progress | Standing still on the cycle track | Negotiations stall, nobody moves position |
|  | Stalemate | No solution, nobody wins |
| Close observation | Watching each others' wheel | Who concedes something? |
| Attribution of blame | The card nobody wants | Who is to blame for failing to reach an agreement or who concedes too much? |

As Table 1 points out, the metaphorical use of football served to highlight the stresses of the long negotiations, the highly conflictual confrontations and the strategy to extend deadlines and buy time in the face of the inability to reach a satisfactory agreement that would (temporarily) pacify the conflict. Equally, 'surplacen' symbolised that no progress whatsoever was made and it perfectly summarised the political immobility in the period of analysis, but also the close reciprocal observation of all actors within a highly mediated environment whereby everybody was closely observing everybody to determine who moved position and who stayed purer than pure (see Rogiers, 2007a).

In relation to the black jack metaphor, all too often politicians develop strategies to refuse taking responsibility. Blaming 'the Other' for the failing of negotiations and in doing so positioning themselves beyond any blame, is a common tactic to achieve this. In order to be able to do this a process of Othering – a strategy of polarisation involving 'positive ingroup description and negative outgroup description' (van Dijk, 1998: 33) – is essential. This works in several directions; blame can be attributed to the adversary or enemy

for making inacceptable demands or rejecting so-called reasonable proposals, but also within the united front when certain actors reveal a willingness to compromise too much according to some actors.

**Table 2:** Mapping correspondences between SD and TD in relation to frame 3 – United we Stand

| Elements of the Mapping | SD: War | TD: The 2007-2008 Belgian Political Crisis |
|---|---|---|
| Speaking with one voice | The front | A strong united front of Flemish or Francophone parties |
| Irreconcilable | The trenches | Dug-in entrenched political positions<br><br>Mutual taboos that on which no compromise is possible |
| | A Bomb | A radical proposal aimed at radicalising the internal cohesion of both sides by raising the stakes |
| Othering | Theirs/Ours | Construction of essentialist political identities |

War metaphors further accentuate the difference between 'Them' – the French-speaking negotiators – having to leave their trenches, and 'Us' – the Dutch-speaking negotiators – needing to remain steadfast and headstrong, as shown in Table 2. The construction of the Other becomes constitutive for the construction of the Self, which is why some, following Derrida (1974: 39–44), speak of 'the constitutive outside' (Staten, 1985: 16-9) or 'constitutive externality' (Mouffe, 1993: 81), Hence, the necessity to remain united against the constructed enemy. The Flemish front and Francophone front refer to the strength and unity of each community in juxtaposition to one another.

Indeed, one of the major strengths of war metaphors is their ability to accentuate the conflictual and making a solution less probable (Howe, 1988), It contributes to the portrayal of any compromise as giving in, as a weakness, and as the ultimate form of treason.

**Table 3:** Mapping correspondences between SD and TD in relation to frame 4 –Bargaining and Teasing

| Elements of the Mapping | SD: Food/Cooking | TD: The 2007-2008 Belgian Political Crisis |
|---|---|---|
| Provocation | Nibbles | The small issues in the negotiating process |
| | Fat Fish | The important and most divisive issues in the negotiating process |
| Patronising | Spoonful of Sugar | Small concessions to help reaching a compromise |
| Justification for failure or potential of success | Mayonnaise curdles or coalesces | Reaching agreement is a complex matter, it can fail easily due to conflicting ingredients<br><br>Everything is coming together, it is |

| | | quite an effort, but it is happening |
| --- | --- | --- |

Food metaphors were mainly used by political elites to verbally provoke 'the other; as well as to indicate a tongue in cheek willingness to compromise, as outlined in Table 3. In this regard, the metaphor of the nibbles or a little sweetener to swallow the bitter pill were illustrative. However, what was intended as a positive signal to help the negotiations move forward, was interpreted by 'the other' as insulting, condescending and patronising. This also exposes that metaphors can be decoded in different ways by different political actors (see Hall, [1973] 1981).

The mayonnaise metaphor also has multiple possible readings embedded in itself as it embodies both an explanation for failure - the difficulty of reaching a balanced agreement that is acceptable for all and the potential for a negotiated positive outcome. Frequent use of this metaphor indicated that a compromise was close – the mayonnaise is starting to coalesce, or still far off – the mayonnaise is curdling. As good cooks know, making your own mayonnaise is not as straightforward as it seems, skill is required and the right amount of ingredients are needed. As such, the mayonnaise metaphor symbolised the complexity of the negotiations and expresses that a successful negotiation process requires several conditions to be met, conflicting ingredients mixed and political skill to forge a compromise between different political forces, fault lines and ideologies.

**Table 4:** Mapping correspondences between SD and TD in relation to frame 5 and 6 – 'The end might be nigh' and 'Lack of direction and leadership'

| Elements of the Mapping | SD: Transport | TD: The 2007-2008 Belgian Political Crisis |
| --- | --- | --- |
| End-game | Landing has started | We are near to a reaching a compromise |
| Issues of leadership and statesmanship | Who is behind the wheel? | Lack of authority and the inability of the political elites to broker a deal |
| Sense of direction | Where is the train heading to? | There is no project, no vision for the future |

At several points in the long process of negotiations there were moments when it seemed that the end of the tunnel was in sight. Landing was a frequently used metaphor by both journalists as politicians in those intermediate phases of the negotiation. However, increasingly it became apparent that some political actors, mainly the Flemish nationalists, were just not ready to make a compromise or in a position to defend a potential agreement to their members. Time and time again it became clear that the end was not nigh quite yet.

This acutely exposed the lack of leadership and sense of direction of the political elites on both sides, unable to overcome divisions that are partly shaped by discursive practices, easily amplified by the media and quickly engrained in public political discourse. The question of who is driving the car and where the country is being taken emerged as powerful discursive

metaphors used by journalists as well as politicians in the opposition to denote a lack of leadership and having no sense of direction.

## 4.3 Motivational Analysis

What is of importance at this level of analysis is the pragmatic and strategic function of the metaphor. This is bound-up with the intentionality embedded in the use of metaphors in political communication; i.e. which intent drives a political actor to use certain kinds of metaphors to describe a political situation, a mood or an aspiration?

The frequent use of sport-metaphors in political communication is not uncommon (Balbus, 1975). Sport-metaphors depict politics as a complex game, as 'a rule-bound contest between two [or more] opponents' (Howe, 1988: 89). The struggle for victory, teams pulling together, falling apart, competitiveness, and endurance are all elements that politics shares with sports, providing a high degree of correspondence. In view of increasing recognition, sports that are popular locally are being targeted; in the case of Belgium this is football and cycling, which are also prominent source domains in Italy (Semino, 2008). The intention in the Belgian context was to denote the way the negotiations were developing as a battle of opposing wills or a defensive political catenaccio.

However, the imagery of sport or games, especially thought of as bounded by rules and rituals, does not conform well all the time to the 'chaotic and unpredictable process of politics' (Howe, 1988: 94-5). Paraphrasing a quote by Raymond Goethals, one of the most successful Belgian football coaches, journalist De Vadder (2008) stated that 'Politics is as football: war'. This illustrates how sports metaphors can easily transgress into war metaphors. Howe (1988: 95) contends that sport metaphors temper the 'imagery of conflict with the promise of a peaceful resolution' and this is not always the case.

The unpredictability of actors, the at times unwillingness of some actors to play by the rules, and the irrationality of politics makes that war metaphors are often used in political discourse (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Chilton, 1987). This can remain rather civilized or even peace-oriented, but can also easily lead to a subtle shift from an agonistic disposition to an antagonistic one whereby 'the other' is constructed as an enemy, rather than a legitimate adversary (Mouffe, 1999), Examples of this in the case of the 2007-2011 Belgian political crisis were: the use of a front to denote the imagined internal unity of both sides, as well as a bomb that is placed under the negotiating table, implying an act that makes a compromise impossible and thus re-enforcing resistance on both sides to come to a political solution; better no agreement than a bad one.

The need for unity and allegiance to the self is also used to discipline those that position other identities – such as political ideology or attempts to salvage a sense of Belgianness – over and above a Flemish identity.

> There are not only cultural and linguistic contradictions between parties, there is also a left-right divide. [...] That is why forming a Flemish front is so tricky. Whenever I want to discuss something internally, it risks leaking to **the other side** (De Wever quoted in Het Laatste Nieuws, 2010 – my translation and emphasis added)

The front metaphor is thus also used to attribute blame to those attempting to question the internal integrity of the Flemish demands by condemning them to collaborate with the enemy – 'the other side'. There is a long legacy amongst Flemish nationalists to cultivate an underdog position and a sense of uniqueness and essentialism which makes that it is almost impossible to position yourself outside of the nationalist frame; 'Flemish nationalism is a case of muscled, ambitious and *normalised* nationalism, in the sense that the nationalism itself is presented as a normal ingredient of everyday politics' (Blommaert, 1996: 244), impossible to escape from.

Contrary to the sports, games and war metaphors, culinary metaphors are not that well documented in the political discourse and metaphors literature, although some examples can be found in anthropology and Feminist studies (Feldman-Savelsberg, 1994; Kaplan, 2000), Their frequent use in Belgian political discourse is not entirely surprising given the bourgondistic nature of the Belgians and their love of good food providing instant identification and cultural recognition. Food metaphors were especially used by Flemish nationalists to patronise the French-speaking negotiators and at the same time stress their own pure stance. Minor concessions - a spoonful of sugar – should suffice in order to get 'our' legitimate demands being met. The nibbles – a first package of agreements on minor issues – are fine, but we are hungry for a big fish, i.e. major constitutional change towards confederalism. In this sense the metaphor becomes the vehicle through which the self-evidence of the rightfulness of the Self is being proclaimed; the Self thereby becomes 'the origin of the epistemic true and the deontic right' (Chilton, 2004: 59).

Culinary metaphors were also used to convey the complex nature of the negotiation process, where a number of very sensitive and conflicting issues need to be balanced and reconciled. The mayonnaise metaphor allowed political elites to connect to the ever more astonished general public and ultimately to the electorate, explaining why it suddenly had become impossible to compromise and negotiate a fair deal as has always been the case at other moments of institutional crisis in Belgium's history. At the same time, the mayonnaise metaphor was polysemic, also expressing an opening towards closure and success, as the mayonnaise can potentially start coalescing at any point.

This duality also transgresses into the transport metaphors, which are often denoted as metaphors of movement, direction or journey in the literature Lakoff and Johnson (1999: 179) identify the primary metaphor: 'purposeful activities are journeys' which lead to a destination and imply the movement of objects and encountering obstacles. Charteris-Black (2004: 93) furthermore exposes how journey metaphors point to desirability destinations, i.e. policy outcomes.

Whereas the landing metaphor echoes the positive intention of the curdling process – the coming together of all the pieces, arriving at ones destinations, other transport metaphors voice a concern that resonates more with a pessimistic frame, emphasising a lack of sense of direction, too much focus on the institutional and no vision for the future beyond that. Along the same lines, a lack of leadership to pull everybody together and piece together a settlement is expressed through a train without a clear destination.

## 5. Conclusion

As shown throughout this analysis, the use of metaphors in political communication is part of a discursive strategy that is highly ideological, historically and cognitively embedded and amplified through mediation. Metaphors are vehicles of overt and hidden meanings, used by political and media actors as a discursive practice with a precise strategic aim and intent in mind; this can be to critique the 'inexperienced' political elite in the case of journalists or to discipline allies and humiliate 'the other' in the case of political elites. Especially nationalistic actors were very prolific in the production of political metaphors and in taking advantage of their particular properties. This refers foremost to the ability of metaphors to shape public discourse, to speak to particular frames and to present political 'reality' in a specific way, hegemonizing a divisive agenda, and constructing clear boundaries between us and them, between the interests of the Self and those of the Other.

However, metaphors also prove to be flexible in their use. The versatility and language of imagination inherent to a metaphor makes that it can be decoded or even recoded differently. Once they become pervasive in the public and media discourse, the meaning of a metaphor can be challenged, ridiculed and even perverted (Mio, 1997: 129). It could be argued that the frequent use of (some) metaphors by political and media elites resulted in more division rather than convergence of positions. Metaphors indicating a move towards seeking solutions and a willingness to compromise were less prominent than those that symbolised gridlock or internal as well as external conflicts and tensions. At the same time, some metaphors precisely referred to the inability of political elites to overcome the crisis or to the lack of a coherent vision for the future and leadership. Others were intentionally used to belittle political opponents and make a solution less probable.

Many of the metaphors expose a public discourse that is politically entrenched in a nationalistic agenda that positions compromise as treason, hence the need for a united front and being steadfast. The sports, games and war metaphors used by politicians contributed to the process of Othering and to a polarisation between essentialist representations of the Flemings (the Self) as reasonable, willing to compromise and of the Walloons (the Other) as unreasonable, unwilling to give in to the legitimate nationalistic demands of the Flemings – part of the 'perpetual defensive attitude vis-à-vis **others**, and this in turn warrants aggressive nationalist policies' (Blommaert, 1996: 245 – emphasis added). To quote journalist Desmet (2007 – my translation):

> Flemish negotiators who do not move an inch are given the praising description that 'they kept their ground', while French-speaking negotiators who do exactly the same, receive the epitheton 'obstinate'.

It is not being argued here that the use of metaphors are inherently bad or should be avoided in political communication, but that we must be weary if the power of metaphors in representing ideology as common sense is being used in processes of Othering (Van Dijk, 1998), geared towards exacerbating political conflict rather than seeking democratic solutions to them. Words and discourses do matter and that is why the political intentions behind the use of particular metaphors need to be exposed for what they are, not common wisdom and self-evident, but rather ideological vehicles advancing one particular view of the world whilst delegitimizing others. As Lakoff (2008: 34) points out it is our duty as social scientists and as citizens to 'make the cognitive unconscious as conscious as possible'.

## Acknowledgement:

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**Notes:**

[1] Constitutional changes to the structure of Belgium have tended to occur every 10 years since the 1960s and include: Egmont Pact (1970), Second Institutional Reform (1980), Third Institutional Reform (1988-89), Sint-Michiels and Sint-Kwintens accords (1993-94), Lambermont- and Lombard accords (2001).

[2] There are, however, notable exceptions to this. For example, the French-speaking public broadcaster RTBf used to have for many years a weekly feature in the news about Flanders. One of the main political journalists of the RTBf had at some point a blog on the site of the Dutch-speaking public broadcaster VRT. Furthermore, in the run-up and during the 2010 campaign in Belgium both public broadcasters did some efforts to show 'the other side', but

plans to organise a joint debate had to be abandoned as RTBf was not prepared to provide a platform to the post-fascist party Vlaams Belang.

[3] For reasons of space, religious metaphors, common proverbs and nicknames were excluded.

[4] See: http://twitter.com/#!/MarcLooverbosch/status/37638306292305921

[5] See: http://forum.fok.nl/topic/1097804/2/25