

**A FLOOD OF METAPHORS?
CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS IN THE 2014 BALKAN MEDIA REPORTS ON
FLOODS**

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Abstract: The paper explores the linguistic and conceptual metaphors in media reports on the 2014 floods in the Balkans, focusing on the conceptualization of floods and flood-related concepts. While natural disasters such as floods and hurricanes represent a well-known source domain within the conceptual metaphor theory, this paper aims to explore floods as a target domain drawing on online Balkan newspaper reports from May 2014. The analysis offers insight into long-standing, conventional metaphors related to floods and natural disasters as well as the specific realizations and elaborations of these and other metaphors in the context of the 2014 Balkan floods. The possible functions and effects of the predominant metaphors related to the 2014 floods are discussed.

Key words: conceptual metaphor, cognitive linguistics, floods, the Balkans, media

1 INTRODUCTION

In May 2014, a series of devastating floods occurred in several countries in the Balkan Peninsula. Due to their catastrophic proportions, the floods received significant attention in the media. Drawing on the theory of conceptual metaphor, this paper explores flood-related conceptual metaphors in the newspaper discourse on the 2014 floods in three countries whose standard languages are highly mutually intelligible – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Serbia – aiming to determine how the floods were conceptualized by identifying the most common conceptual metaphors. The possible effects of and reasons for the use of the most pervasive metaphors are also considered.

1.1 Theoretical background

The conceptual metaphor theory, formulated by Lakoff and Johnson in their seminal work *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), regards metaphors not as a poetic or rhetorical device, but as a crucial part of our conceptual system. Conceptual metaphors are thus considered to be a matter of thought, not merely language, and they are defined as the understanding of one conceptual domain – the target domain – in terms of another domain – the source domain. Target domains are typically “areas of experience that are relatively abstract, complex, unfamiliar, subjective or poorly delineated”, while source domains are normally “concrete, simple, familiar, physical and well-delineated experiences” (Semino, 2008, p. 6). The conceptual metaphor theory postulates that we reason about some concepts in terms of other concepts based on a set of systematic correspondences between or across these two domains called *mappings* which are grounded in human experience (see e. g. Kövecses, 2010, pp. 77–88).

Conceptual metaphors which underlie our thinking are manifested in language as *metaphorical linguistic expressions*, although they can have other, non-linguistic manifestations as well (see e. g. Kövecses, 2010, pp. 63–73, Rasulić, 2004, pp. 338–433). More importantly, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 3) argue:

“Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. If we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor.”

While FLOODS have been identified as a source domain in conceptual metaphors such as IMMIGRATION IS FLOOD (e. g. Cunningham-Parmeter, 2011), this paper explores floods and flood-related concepts as the target domain seeking to reveal how floods were conceptualized in the public discourse in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Serbia, and what possible implications this had for the way readers thought and felt about the disaster.

1.2 Data and methodology

Our corpus encompassed all flood-related metaphorical expressions in three most widely-read daily newspapers with online archives per country (*Dnevni list*, *Glas Srpske* and

Večernji list for Bosnia and Herzegovina, *24sata*, *Jutarnji list* and *Večernji list* for Croatia and *Blic*, *Kurir* and *Večernje novosti* for Serbia). The metaphors were extracted from all articles on floods published between May 14, when the earliest reports on floods appeared, until May 31, when the floods and subsequently the reporting on them had subsided. The choice of the newspapers was based on the assumption that the analysis of these reports would reveal most accurately how the floods were represented in the media and thus how the framework through which the readers could conceptualize the floods was shaped. The analysis included not only the lexeme ‘flood/floods’ (*poplava/poplave*), but also all flood-related lexemes referring to the water and bodies of water that constituted part of the floods. To avoid unnecessary repetition, the lexeme ‘flood/floods’ is used in all conceptual metaphors throughout this paper as an umbrella concept for all of these lexemes. Furthermore, as we found that the same conceptual metaphors were used in all three countries, we do not cite the newspapers or countries the examples were extracted from although care was taken to ensure that all the countries were represented in them.

Expressions were considered as metaphorical in those cases where it was possible to identify two domains with metaphorical mappings between them. After these expressions were extracted, they were analyzed to identify the overarching conceptual metaphors. The data is given both in the original language and translated into English while metaphorical expressions in both languages are italicized in the examples. We also adhere to the well-established custom to mark conceptual metaphors and domains by small capital letters.

2 RESULTS

Our analysis revealed that the most common conceptual metaphors used in the discourse on floods were the same in all three countries. We present and discuss these metaphors in the sections below.

2.1 *Floods as an animate being*

The conceptualization of floods as an ANIMATE ENTITY represents the most frequent metaphor in our corpus. It is based on two ontological metaphors: EVENTS ARE ENTITIES and EVENTS ARE ACTIONS. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 25), conceptualizing events, emotions, ideas and similar concepts which are not discrete or clearly bounded as entities allows us to perceive parts of our experience as separate entities and therefore reason about them. The conceptual metaphor EVENTS ARE ACTIONS enables us to understand external events we have no control over as willful actions by an entity (Lakoff and Turner 1989: 72–80).

In the majority of cases, the floods were personified and assigned “human motivations, characteristics and experiences” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 13), above all consciousness and cognitive ability:

- (1) *Voda ne zna granice, niti narodnosti, niti vjeru. Voda zna svoju razinu i pravac.*
[Water *knows* no boundaries, nationalities or faiths. Water *knows* its level and direction.]

One of the dominant characteristics of the floods was the ability of willful movement. The floods were seen as entities that were able to ‘come’ (*doći*), ‘go’ (*otići*), ‘enter’ (*ući*), ‘approach’ (*prići*), ‘cross’ (*preći preko*), ‘turn around’ (*okrenuti tok*), ‘run/hurry down’ (*sjuriti se*), etc.

- (2) Voda...*sjurila se* kroz moje dvorište i *otišla do* Živkovog.
[The water...*ran down* my yard and *went to* Živko’s.]

Another characteristic of the floodwater was its ability to exert willful physical force and consciously manipulate objects by ‘taking’ (*uzeti*), ‘carrying’ (*nositi*), ‘carrying away’ (*odn(ij)eti*), ‘grabbing’ (*dohvatiti*), ‘breaking off’ (*odlomiti*), ‘severing’ (*prekinuti/pres(j)eći*), ‘tearing down’ (*urušiti/srušiti*), etc. When physical force was combined with movement, the floods were described as ‘unstoppable’ (*nezaustavljiva*).

- (3) ...reka je *odlomila* i *odnela* deo parkinga...
[...the river *broke off* and *carried away* a piece of the parking lot...]

Very often, the physical force was accompanied by murderousness or aggression: the floods ‘threatened’ (*pretiti*), ‘destroyed/ravaged’ (*uništiti/uništavati/lomiti*), ‘killed’ (*ubiti, usmrtili*) and ‘buried’ (*sahraniti*), ‘wreaked havoc’ (*napraviti k/haos*), etc. The floods were also seen as being out of control – they ‘went wild’ (*podivljati*) and were ascribed various associated qualities or emotions such as being ‘unpredictable’ (*nepredvidiva*), ‘frenzied’ (*pomahnitala*), ‘raging’ (*podivljao*), ‘merciless/ruthless’ (*nemilosrdna*) while events they caused were seen as the results of ‘venting’ (*iskaliti se*).

- (4) ... nepokretna starica koju je voda *ubila* u njenom domu...
[... a disabled old woman whom the water *killed* in her home...]
(5) Kolubara je *podivljala*...
[The Kolubara *has gone wild*...]
(6) ...koje je Jasenica i Kubršnica *nemilosrdno* natapala, povukla.
[...that the Jasenica and the Kubršnica *ruthlessly* flooded.]

Occasionally, the floods were assigned the ability to ‘calm down’ (*umiriti se*) or ‘show mercy’ (*pokazati samilost*).

- (7) Kada se reka *umirila* problem se otvorio na drugoj strain...
[When the river *calmed down*, another problem occurred...]

Apart from physical force, the floods were also capable of exercising power and influence. The floods thus had the ability to ‘force’ (*primorati*), ‘allow/permit’ (*dopustiti*), ‘change’ (*prom(j)eniti*), ‘take over/take control of’ (*preuzeti pod svoje*), ‘postpone’ (*odložiti/odgoditi*), etc.

- (8) ... rekordne poplave koje su zadesile Balkan *primorale* su desetine hiljada ljudi u Srbiji i Bosni da napuste svoje domove.

[... record floods in the Balkans *have forced* tens of thousands of people in Serbia and Bosnia to leave their homes.]

- (9) ... ako to kiša i poplava *dopuste*...
[... if the floods and rain *permit* it...]

The conceptualization of floodwater as an animate being was also realized through the source domain of A (SEA) MONSTER or in one case through the domain of A SEA SNAKE. The monster was mostly described as ‘devouring’ ((*pro*)*gutati*) objects, people or even entire towns.

- (10) Kolubara *je progutala* grad za manje od 10 sati...
[The Kolubara *devoured* the town in less than 10 hours...]

2.2 Floods as a unifier

The floods also had one positive effect – they became a A UNIFIER which ‘united people/brought people together’ (*zbližiti ljude/ujediniti ljude/sve spojiti/udružiti*), ‘led to the collapse of ethnic barriers’ (*dovesti do pada etničkih barijera*), ‘erased borders’ (*izbrisati granice*) and made people show ‘unity’ (*jedinstvo/sloga/zajedništvo*), have a ‘heart which beats in unison’ (*srce kuca jedinstveno*), and become ‘one big family’ (*velika obitelj/porodica*).

- (11) Ovo nas *je ujedinilo*, kao što nas nevolja uvek *ujedinjuje*...
[This *has united* us the way hardship always *unites* us.]

2.3 Taking measures against floods as waging a war

The activities that were undertaken to deal with the floods were commonly conceptualized as WAGING A WAR. WAR has been identified as a source domain with a wide *scope* which applies to many target domains such as LOVE or POLITICS (Kövecses, 2010, pp. 135–146) and across different languages (see e.g. Chiang & Duann, 2007; Semino & Masci, 1996). Larson, Nerlich and Wallis (2005) studied “militaristic metaphors” in the context of invasive species and diseases. War metaphors have been identified in the discourse on *natural disasters* in at least two languages (see Trčková, 2011 for English and Zhang, 2015 for Chinese). In many cases, the war metaphors are well-established, basic, or conventional metaphors meaning that their use is “unconscious, automatic, and typically unnoticed” (Lakoff & Turner, 1989, p. 80).

Conventional war metaphors also exist in Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian. Some of these expressions are conventional within the discourse on emergencies and were therefore quite frequent in our corpus: ‘braniti/o(d)braniti’ (*defend*), ‘o(d)brana’ (*defense*), ‘(ne)branjen’ ((*un*)*defended*) ‘boriti se protiv’ (*fight against*), and ‘borba protiv’ (*fighting/struggle against*).

- (12) ... do proglašenja *redovnih mjera obrane od* poplava.
[...until *regular defense measures against* floods can be declared.]
(13) Sjeverni dio Bosne *se* još uvijek grčevito *bori s* podivljanim rijekama.

[The northern part of Bosnia *is* still desperately *fighting against* rivers gone wild.]

However, we encountered numerous other, non-conventional realizations of this metaphor. Activities done to resist the floods were seen as a ‘war’ (*rat*) in which ‘battles’ (*bitke*) could be ‘fought’ (*voditi*). The floods, AN INVADER, ‘conquered’ (*osvajati*) territories, ‘occupied’ (*okupirati*) objects, and ‘besieged’ (*opkoliti sa svih strana*) people. The destruction caused by the floods was seen as ‘aggression’ (*agresija*) while the water was even characterized as ‘bloodthirsty’ (*krvožedna*). The human fighters, some of which were ‘volunteers’ (*dobrovoljci*), and their ‘fellow-combatants’ (*saborci*), could bring in ‘reinforcement’ (*pojačanje*) but they were rarely able to ‘win’ or ‘defeat’ (*pob(j)editi*) their enemy. Sometimes, ‘heroes’ (*heroji/junaci*) emerged from this war. The areas with levees or sandbags were called ‘defense lines’ (*odbrambena linija/linije odbrane*), ‘a line of battle’ (*linija fronte*), ‘bulwarks/ramparts’ (*utvrde*), while a place safe from the floods was once described as a ‘stronghold’ (*uporište*).

(14) Paralelno s tim brani se *druga linija fronte*...

[At the same time, the *second line of battle* is being defended...]

(15) Same akcije spašavanja ljudi iz *vodom okupiranih* kuća bile su na trenutke dramatične.

[Saving people from houses *occupied by water* was at times very dramatic.]

2.4 Floods as a projectile

A very frequent metaphor in our corpus was the metaphor A FLOOD IS A PROJECTILE, realized in all three countries through the expression ‘hit’ (*pogoditi*) and its participle ‘hit’ (*pogođen*).

(16) ...pomoć za područja *pogođena* poplavama.

[...aid for the areas *hit* by floods.]

2.5 Floods as a container

Another quite common metaphor was A FLOOD IS A CONTAINER, realized through the preposition ‘in’ (*u*) and the locative case of the noun in question.

(17) ...obiteljima čiji su najmiliji izgubili živote *u poplavi*...

[...the families that have lost their loved ones *in the flood*...]

2.6 Floods as an apocalyptic event or hell

Finally, the floods were conceptualized as THE BIBLICAL/APOCALYPTIC FLOOD/DELUGE, THE PASSION OF CHRIST, THE APOCALYPSE/AN APOCALYPTIC EVENT and THE HELL. The metaphorical realizations of these source domains included ‘the Flood’ (*potop*), ‘of Biblical proportions’ (*biblijskih razmera*), ‘the Passion of Christ/calvary’

(*kalvarija*), ‘the apocalypse’ (*apokalipsa*), ‘apocalyptic’ (*apokaliptičan*), ‘cataclysmic’ (*kataklizmičan*), ‘hell’ (*pakao*, etc.).

- (18) Bosna i Hercegovina je...prošla još jednu *kalvariju*...
[Bosnia and Herzegovina has...gone through another *calvary*...]
- (19) *Apokalipsa* u Rajevom Selu
[*Apocalypse* in Rajevo Selo]
- (20) Novinarka “Blica” u *paklu* Obrenovca
[*Blic* journalist in the *hell* of Obrenovac]

3 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

When the most common conceptual metaphors and their linguistic realizations encountered in our corpus are all taken into consideration, a multi-faceted concept of the 2014 May floods in the Balkans emerges. Rather than being an event occurring without a purpose, the floods were conceptualized as a sentient entity with physical and cognitive abilities, capable of purposeful movement, of influencing the world around them, and characterized by significant physical strength. When these qualities were paired with rage that needed to be vented and mercilessness, widespread destruction and chaos ensued. The floods became frenzied and unpredictable and therefore impossible to control until they themselves decided to calm down and show mercy. Sometimes, they took on the form of an evil monster devouring everything in its path. The only positive (side-)effect they had was bringing people together, but mainly for the purpose of putting up unified resistance. They often took on the role of an invader or attacker in a proper, albeit somewhat one-sided war. Some areas and people were simply hit by the floods, suddenly and unexpectedly. Finally, even when the floods were conceptualized as an event it was an end-of-the-world event or simply hell.

Although the numerous flood-related metaphorical expressions were not evenly distributed across the corpus – not all of the linguistic manifestations were used in each country and some of them occurred only once or twice in the entire corpus – the overarching conceptual metaphors were the same in all three countries, the most frequent in the corpus and therefore the most pervasive in the discourse on floods. Some of these metaphors, such as the ontological metaphor of personification, are, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) maintain, “necessary for even attempting to deal rationally with our experiences” (p. 26) since they help us understand unfamiliar experiences in terms of more familiar ones. However, as Semino (2008) argues, metaphors in discourse, especially non-conventional ones, are rarely neutral and are often deliberately chosen among many alternatives for a variety of communicative, social, political, historical and other reasons. The “main set of functions of metaphors in discourse relates to the representation of (particular aspects of) reality” (Semino, 2008, p. 31) where the choice of the source domain through which a concept is to be understood directly affects that understanding. One of the reasons for this is that conceptual metaphors highlight some aspects of the target domain while hiding others depending on the choice of the source domain (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, pp. 10–13).

While it is not possible give definite reasons why the conceptual metaphors presented in this paper were the most common in the discourse on the 2014 Balkan

floods, we can speculate about the possible effects of these metaphors on public consciousness. Given their pervasiveness, the concept of floods that was structured by them is likely to have had an impact on how the public understood the floods and their consequences. As evidenced throughout this paper, this concept was often one of a juggernaut too powerful for any mere mortal to resist. The way the floods were conceptualized highlighted almost exclusively the qualities of the floods, possibly shifting the focus, and therefore perhaps also the responsibility and the blame, from the people and their ability to resist the floods and mitigate their consequences or even prevent them to the unstoppable floods themselves.

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