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**Mixing Metaphors: An Analysis of Conflicting Figurative Representations of the Debt Ceiling**

**Abstract**

This paper compares approaches to metaphor used by authors on different sides of the debt ceiling debate currently taking place in the United States, similar to Santa Ana's (2002) analysis of metaphors used by the media to describe immigration. It analyzes two articles by politically liberal or moderate writers, Thompson (2011) and Posner and Vermeule (2011), and two by politically conservative writers with libertarian views, Paul (2004) and Meyer (2011). It suggests that authors on the left seem more likely to characterize the debate as frivolous, using metaphors such as *POLITICS AS THEATER* and *POLITICS AS GAME*, whether or not they believe actually raising the debt ceiling is important. Their use of language reinforces their overt point that the debate should be ignored as a political exercise. Authors on the right, by contrast, attempt to make the debate seem more grave, using metaphors such as *DEBT AS GREAT HEIGHTS*, *DEBT AS FOOD AND DRINK*, and *THE DEBT LIMIT DEBATE AS HOSTAGE CRISIS*. These metaphors also imply that everyday common sense is the most useful guide to the correct course in the debate. The paper also suggests a difference in metonymy between the two sides, where authors on the right seem more likely to use pronouns and proper names in a way that defines groups and institutions as the actors. Authors on the left use singular pronouns and personal names to define individuals as the actors, sometimes allowing an individual to represent an institution.

**Introduction**

An episode of the PBS series *Frontline* features an interview with political adviser Frank Luntz in which he discusses how he used language to turn voters against the Estate Tax by terming it the "Death Tax" (2004). Luntz worked for George W. Bush's reelection campaign in 2004 and doesn't seem

to be the only Republican adviser who has used emotionally charged language to influence voters; indeed, as I intend to demonstrate, the political right in recent years has made a habit of using bombastic, alarmist metaphors to engage the general public with political issues. They frame issues as grave and dire, and the forces at work as having only two sides: one which is morally correct and another which is morally abominable. The left, by contrast, seems to have become scornful of the political process and uses language that suggests distance from it. They speak of politics as frippery, frivolity, and amusement.

The two sides' differing use of language can be clearly seen in the recent contentious debate on the debt ceiling. The grave metaphors and use of plural pronouns and names of institutions such as *Congress* on the right splits the debate into two collections: those included with the author, who are assumed to be decent, hardworking, and possessed of common sense, and those excluded, who are assumed to be lazy, greedy, and dishonest. The left recognizes many individual viewpoints; they use singular pronouns and names of individuals, such as *Senator Mitch McConnell*, to distinguish the many worldviews and personalities that comprise the debate.

### **Origin of the Study**

Santa Ana (2002) talks about California on the eve of passing Proposition 187, a bill aimed at discouraging illegal immigration. He noticed that during the debate, a certain metaphor, IMMIGRATION AS DANGEROUS WATERS, underlay much of the language the media used to discuss the issue. Santa Ana cites examples from the *Los Angeles Times* that call immigrants "a brown tide" and "human flows" that are "literally remaking the face of America". Under this metaphor, immigrants are treated not as individuals but as a nameless, faceless mass quantity that threatens to flood the US, viewed as a single house. While the chief rational argument for Proposition 187 was that immigrants take jobs from Americans, Santa Ana found that IMMIGRATION AS DANGEROUS WATERS and its counterpart NATION AS HOUSE actually warn of racial and cultural dangers, not economic ones; they play to the fear that the perceived

Hispanic culture of cockfighting, tequila, and Catholicism would sweep away American apple pie, baseball, and Protestantism.

Like Santa Ana, I fear the power of political language to shape and direct people's most irrational and uncharitable feelings. I believe that fairness and compassion quash these feelings when they remain shapeless, but that metaphorical frameworks can give them shape and structure, and thus the power to influence people's minds. IMMIGRATION AS DANGEROUS WATERS succeeded at this, and Proposition 187 was passed, though the courts stopped its progress. I hope that deep linguistic analysis of a writer's metaphors can show what impression the writer wishes to leave on the reader's mind, and possibly let readers determine his or her true motives. If we recognize these tactics, we may stop giving in to the sensationalist arguments implied by metaphors such as IMMIGRATION AS DANGEROUS WATERS, and politicians may lose some of their power to manipulate and cajole us.

To demonstrate the sort of analysis that could help realize this dream, I chose four published articles about the recent debt ceiling debate. Since the major clash in this debate is between traditional liberals, who believe that spending cuts which are too large will harm recipients of Medicare and Medicaid and are willing to impose new taxes to avoid this, and followers of the libertarian ideology of Ayn Rand, who object to both new taxes and government services, I searched for two articles from each of those sides. In this way we can compare the sides, and also compare individuals on the same side, to establish a pattern. I chose mainly opinion and editorial pieces. Their purpose is persuading readers to accept the author's views, sometimes on very complex issues; since metaphors are powerful tools of both explanation and persuasion, such writing is a breeding ground for them. All four articles came from the Internet, but two were posted on websites affiliated with prominent national periodicals, *Forbes* magazine and *The New York Times*, which can levy the power of their large organizations to increase readership. I read twenty or so articles before choosing the final four, looking for those which made the best use of controlling metaphor, but also trying to superficially observe patterns among

articles on the same side. All of the articles except one (Paul 2004) are current, but that article falls within the same time period as Frank Luntz's interview for *Frontline*, indicating that at that time the political right already had a pervasive style of language use. It makes many of the same points as more recent articles on the debt ceiling, but more cogently, making it an excellent subject for this analysis.

### Findings

The four articles in the data sample are Thompson (2011), Posner and Vermeule (2011), Paul (2004), and Meyer (2011). Thompson seems to be left-wing while Posner and Vermeule is closer to the center. Paul and Meyer are both libertarians.

Thompson's (2011) article, "The Ingenious, Patriotic Cynicism of Mitch McConnell", focuses on the plan proposed by Senator Mitch McConnell to allow President Obama to raise the debt ceiling while allowing Congress to vote against raising the debt ceiling. Thompson's central metaphors are POLITICS IS THEATER and POLITICS IS A GAME. In his opening, Thompson explains that it is common for a minority party to use a debt ceiling vote to chide the majority party in the media, then vote in large numbers in favor of increase (2011). Under POLITICS AS THEATER, Thompson describes the current debate as "dutifully re-staging this annual farce" (2011). Later in the article, he writes that negotiations over cutting the deficit "failed when Republicans walked away from a deal that would cut more than \$3 trillion in spending in the next decade. [...] Exeunt compromise. Enter McConnell." (Thompson, 2011). Thompson makes his intention clear by using the archaic *exeunt*, which is now mainly associated with the stage directions of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Further on, he calls the debt ceiling "a political theater prop" (2011).

Soon after his "farce" line, Thompson invokes POLITICS IS A GAME and writes "Better to think of this, not as a negotiation, but as a game with two simple rules." (2011). Just before this, he refers to the parties involved in the negotiation as "major players", which he names as "the White House, John Boehner, Harry Reid", referring to the two legislators by name instead of using the names of their

institutions (Thompson 2011). Although he uses "the White House" instead of the president's name and uses "Republican leadership" at one point, he elsewhere uses personal names or titles, writing "the president" or "McConnell". He also talks about his own feelings in the first-person singular, writing "When I read the news, my gut reaction [...]" (Thompson 2011).

Posner and Vermeule's article, "Obama Should Raise the Debt Ceiling on His Own", also employs *POLITICS IS A GAME*, saying that "the president and House Republicans are locked in a classic bargaining game." (2011). They also use language suggesting the metaphor *THE PRESIDENT IS AN ANCIENT LORD*, writing that the authority for their suggested course comes from the president's "role as the ultimate guardian of the constitutional order, charged with taking care that the laws be faithfully executed", and that "the president would derive authority from his paramount duty to ward off serious threats to the constitutional and economic system." (Posner and Vermeule, 2011). By using vocabulary like *guardian*, *paramount duty*, and *ward off*, they create the image of the president as an Anglo Saxon warlord, charged with protecting his people from outside threats. Posner and Vermeule use "the president", "President Obama", or "Mr. Obama", but never "the White House".

In "Raising the Debt Limit: A Disgrace", Ron Paul writes, "Congress has become like the drunk who promises to sober up tomorrow, if only he can keep drinking today. Does anyone really believe [...] that Congress will tighten its belt [...]"?, drawing on the metaphor *DEBT AS FOOD AND DRINK* (2004). This metaphor suggests that too much debt clouds judgment and slows the wits, like eating too much or drinking alcohol to excess. He later invokes the common metaphor *MONEY AS HEIGHT*, which connects greater amounts of money with greater physical heights, by comparing the debt with things whose heights change quickly: "Federal spending always goes up", "an unprecedented explosion in federal spending", "without skyrocketing interest rates", "prop up our debt-ridden economy" (Paul, 2004). The term "debt ceiling" also uses this metaphor by comparing the limit in debt to a physical bar to further increase in height.

Meyer's "The Debt Limit: America's Hostage Crisis" shows its central metaphor in the title. The American people (which Meyer calls "We Americans") are hostages to the government, which is threatening to "shut down [...] retirement payments [and] mortgage lending" unless we pay "[t]rillions of dollars in new taxes" (Meyer, 2011). Meyer continues by comparing the government to terrorists (2011). After this he gets sidetracked into explaining his libertarian worldview, which revolves around the metaphor THE FREE MARKET IS AN ECOSYSTEM, shown by his statements that the market has "natural correction mechanisms", like the competition and resource shortages that limit population growth in nature, and that "the ultimate check on the indifferent exercise of market power is extinction." (Meyer, 2011). Under this metaphor, corporations are flora and fauna that can "get fat, slow, arrogant, and senescent" (Meyer, 2011) and die off, even going extinct.

Meyer, in contrast to Thompson and Posner and Vermeule, talks about the American people using the first-person plural pronoun *we*, while referring to the federal government and its institutions as *they*. He and Paul do not name individuals, instead using names such as *Congress*, *the Fed*, and *the government* to suggest what Meyer explicitly states:

Congress has really abdicated much of its power [...], delegating its legislative power to nameless, un-elected bureaucrats [...]. This vast, unaccountable organization seldom changes no matter who we elect to office, putting their own [...] power ahead of ideology. (2011).

### Analysis

| Table 1  |             |              |                 |                            |
|--|-------------|--------------|-----------------|----------------------------|
| <i>Pronoun and Proper Name Use Among the Four Articles</i> |             |              |                 |                            |
|  | Right-wing  |              | Left-wing       |                            |
|  | Paul (2004) | Meyer (2011) | Thompson (2011) | Posner and Vermeule (2011) |
| 1p Singular  | 1           | 30           | 9               | 0                          |
| 1p or 2p Plural <sup>a</sup>                               | 2           | 24           | 6               | 0 <sup>b</sup>             |
| Individual name  | 1           | 3            | 18              | 40                         |

|                    |        |        |        |        |
|--------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| or title           |        |        |        |        |
| Institution name   | 26     | 18     | 28     | 23     |
| Percent Group      | 93.00% | 87.50% | 55.73% | 36.50% |
| Percent Individual | 7.00%  | 12.50% | 44.26% | 63.49% |
| Total              | 30     | 48     | 61     | 63     |

*Note.* Individual and institutional names include third-person pronouns which refer to one of those names.

The total is the sum of all counted occurrences. The percent group is the percent of the total which is either an institutional name or a collective pronoun. The percent individual is the percent of the total which is an individual name or pronoun.

*a.* Second-person plural is used rarely, but to similar effect as first-person plural: to include the reader in a group, usually alongside the author. (See use of "your money" in Paul (2004).)

*b.* Since Posner and Vermeule co-authored their article, their uses of *we* and *our* seem to refer to themselves as the authors, not to themselves and their readers. The context seems clear, but to be safe, I have left them out of the sample.

Both of the left-wing writers use metaphors which trivialize the debate, Thompson explicitly and Posner and Vermeule more subtly. Thompson's use of POLITICS AS THEATER and POLITICS AS GAME liken the debate to things which are diverting but unimportant. Under POLITICS AS THEATER, the politicians are merely jesters competing in a mock battle in which they pretend that ridiculously foregone conclusions can somehow be argued over, like a group of clowns fighting over whether the sun will rise tomorrow. He evokes the spirit of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, portraying the debate as full of colorful banners and pageantry and merriment, without meaning and sure to end happily. Thompson's use of personal names also fits into this structure: in a play, a battle typically consists of several named characters and a horde of extras. Thompson's named characters are Barack Obama, Harry Reid, and Mitch McConnell; the House Republicans that drove Mitch McConnell into a battle he never wanted lurk in the background as McConnell plays out his scheme.

Posner and Vermeule also trivialize the debate with *POLITICS AS GAME*, but do not see the end as meaningless; they imply that, silly as the game is, the president must win, or else a horde of "Tea party-inspired Republican back-benchers" might get the "purifying *Götterdämmerung*" they want and destroy the economy (Posner and Vermeule, 2011). Their metaphor *PRESIDENT AS LORD* casts the president as the noble defender of his people, going through a silly game with deadly serious consequences, similar to life-or-death riddle contests in Anglo Saxon stories. The president, as the hero of this saga, is named; the horde of monsters is mainly nameless, but a few, such as the Fenris-wolf John Boehner, are named.

Both writers' metaphors present the debate as something remote from normal life, something which will either have no consequence, but is merely the necessary end of a silly play, or which could have earth-shattering consequences, but will not, since the hero will triumph and prevent the disaster. This implies that we have no control over the outcome, and can only sit and watch, like a story whose ending is already written.

The two libertarian authors, by contrast, portray not only the outcome but the debate itself as deadly serious. According to Ron Paul's duo of *DEBT AS FOOD AND DRINK* and *MONEY AS HEIGHT*, Congress is a gang of weak-willed gluttons which will drink itself off a cliff of debt if care isn't taken. His use of *MONEY AS HEIGHT* evokes the stories of Icarus and the Tower of Babel, when humans, in their arrogance, tried to rise too high, and were brought crashing to the ground. His use of *DEBT AS FOOD AND DRINK* evokes any number of stories, both fictional and real, about people destroyed by overindulgence. By extension, these metaphors also suggest that the remedy to the problem is everyday common sense; a child may overeat and totter towards high places, but an adult knows better. Similarly, any adult can see why the government must stop running deficits, not only those advanced degrees in business and economics.

Paul's metaphors also split people into two groups: adults, those who can see reason, and children, those who gorge themselves until they become ill and stumble drunkenly off the bridge of



debt. Meyer's metaphors do not show this as forcefully, but he makes it explicit by using the pronoun *we* to separate the reader and himself from the faceless government bureaucracy. His metaphor **DEBT CEILING DEBATE AS HOSTAGE SITUATION** depicts the debate as a situation from which we cannot escape with our lives without paying the "ransom demand" (Meyer, 2011). He then shifts metaphors, using **FREE MARKET AS ECOSYSTEM** to explain how providing services through government instead of the private sector created a "global warming" situation where the balance of nature was thrown off by human intervention, with disastrous consequences (Meyer, 2011). If Meyer had stuck to one metaphor, his hostage situation might be the extinction of the polar bear due to melting ice sheets, or the explosion at Chernobyl irradiating the soil. Both hostage situations and ecological catastrophes provoke visceral reactions from the public and are much more likely to elicit outrage than a dry discussion of the economic theory of deficits. Similarly, Paul's **MONEY AS HEIGHT** summons the panic that many people feel when looking down from great heights, then provides a stepladder down: simply don't let them raise the debt ceiling.

### **Conclusion**

The political right, in particular libertarians, are inclined towards using language to group themselves and their readers into a category of sensible, down-to-earth people, while categorizing those who disagree as despots and thieves. They also use metaphorical structures designed to provoke intense reactions of anger and fear, such as **MONEY AS HEIGHT** and **DEBT CEILING DEBATE AS HOSTAGE SITUATION**. The left, in contrast, downplays the effects of an issue and treats it as distant and unimportant, using such metaphors as **POLITICS AS THEATER** and **POLITICS AS GAME**.

Of course, this study examines only modern examples. In the heyday of the left, the 1960s and 1970s, the use of language by liberal authors was likely much more like that of modern right-wing authors. It also ignores other factions within the Republican party, such as the traditional supporters of big business and the religious right. These factions may have their own ways of using language which

differ from the libertarians, just as their values and beliefs differ. This study also does not examine how language is used for political purposes on other issues, perhaps ones more visceral for liberals, such as health care, nor does it include samples from outside the United States. It is important that we understand these differences of language use among faction, time, and place if we are to take the power to influence our decisions away from political writers and advisers.

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