

# METAPHORS IN PRIME MINISTERS' ADDRESS TO THE NATION ON CORONAVIRUS

## The case of 'country lockdown' televised statements in Italy and in the UK

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**Abstract** – In the first months of 2020, when the Coronavirus pandemic globally broke out, many countries' governments became aware of the unprecedented risks for their populations' health and of the toll on their countries' health care systems. As a consequence, emergency measures were passed that would limit people's contacts and circulation in closed environments. Some of these drastic and dramatic measures were lockdowns that would severely limit or prohibit the movement of people outside their homes. These measures were communicated to the corresponding populations by the countries' Prime Ministers (PMs) in person via televised press conferences. The study considers the public announcements with which the PMs imposed the first country lockdowns placed in Italy and in the United Kingdom in March 2020. Framed within Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), the study conducts a qualitative analysis of the two statements by the then Italian PM, Giuseppe Conte, and the then British PM, Boris Johnson, focusing on the use of metaphors to refer to the COVID-19 outbreak and the first emergency measures that had to be taken to tackle the tragic situation. Results show that both PMs define the virus with the conceptual metaphor CORONAVIRUS IS CHALLENGE/THREAT, while the solution to the emergency is conceptualised in terms of war effort. Results also show that, while Johnson's speech emphasises the importance of the measures to protect the NHS and people's lives, Conte's statement emphasises the population's emotional commitment and personal sacrifice for the greater good.

**Keywords:** Conceptual Metaphor Theory; Coronavirus; PM statements; United Kingdom; Italy.

## 1. Introduction

According to the definition provided by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on their website, "Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered Coronavirus" (WHO, 2023, Covid-19 Dashboard section). The outbreak of the COVID-19 disease dates back to late December 2019 when it hit the Chinese province of Hubei and soon spread to other areas in China. This led the Chinese government to the decision of establishing a two-month lockdown in the province. The population had to stay at home with strict regulations on working conditions outside their home, schools and universities were closed, flights and trains were cancelled, no one was allowed to enter or exit the province (WHO, 2023, Covid-19 Dashboard section).

People affected by the virus endured severe respiratory symptoms, such as particularly aggressive forms of pneumonia. After a world-wide vaccination campaign, on 5<sup>th</sup> March 2023, the Director-General of WHO announced that the COVID-19 emergency had ended (WHO, 2023, News section). The WHO officially estimates that "there have been 767.750.853 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 6.941.095 deaths" (WHO, 2023, Covid-19 section).

The present study considers the period at the beginning of the pandemic, namely, February-March 2020, when the global movement of travellers to and from China and the

rest of the world before the lockdown caused the immediate and dramatic outbreak of the disease outside China. One of the first European countries to be severely affected by COVID-19 was Italy, where – since the end of January 2020 and as of 24<sup>th</sup> March 2020 – the number of cases reached nearly 64,000 cases with more than 6,000 deaths (WHO, 2023, Covid-19 section). At the time, Italy ranked first in the WHO list of affected European countries. The United Kingdom was also affected, even though with a certain delay with respect to Italy and was listed by the WHO in sixth position among the European countries most affected by the virus, with nearly 7,000 cases and nearly 400 deaths (WHO, 2023, Covid-19 section).

The rapidity in the spread of the disease and its impact on hospitals and on the national health systems led the leaders of the most affected countries to take almost immediate action. In consideration of alarms issued by international and national health authorities, the Italian government decided to implement restrictions to some areas in Northern Italy, and then, as the situation worsened, more severe restrictions were extended to the rest of the country. The full national lockdown, with the strictest measures, was declared by Italy's Prime Minister (PM) Giuseppe Conte on Saturday, 21<sup>st</sup> March 2020 (Italian Ministry of Health, 2023, Covid-19 section).

In the United Kingdom, after a few “milder” decisions, and with the country facing the same tragic situation as Italy, British PM Boris Johnson declared the country's lockdown on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020 (UK Institute for Government, 2023, Timeline Coronavirus section). In both cases, the PMs communicated the news with a televised direct address to their citizens and subjects, respectively.

The present study analyses the two PM statements with particular attention to the use of metaphorical language employed to refer to the Coronavirus, to the sanitary emergency, and to its impact on the population. The analysis is conducted with a qualitative approach and is framed within Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). The two statements of the two PMs are examined, contrastively, to identify similarities and differences in the metaphors employed, including possible patterns in the semantic domains and their linguistic realisations that might indicate differences in the languages, Italian and English, respectively.

The article is structured as follows: first, Section 2 presents the theoretical-methodological background used in the study, Section 3 provides a brief biographical overview of the two PMs to better frame their communicative style, which might help understand their respective choices in terms of metaphors used in their statements, while Section 4 provides an overview of the situation in Italy and in the UK as regards the spread of the Coronavirus and how it was being handled by the respective governments, as well as administrative and sanitary authorities. Both Sections are provided to contextualise the results of the analysis in terms of the specific socio-cultural backgrounds and communicative situation in which the statements were issued. Section 5 contains the actual analysis of the cognitive metaphors, domains, and linguistic realisations, with a contrastive commentary on the differences and similarities that can be identified in the two statements. Finally, Sections 6 and 7 conclude the article with some remarks, attempting to draw some conclusions, respectively, on the generalisations that can be made from the study as well as on the limitations of the study itself, and on the implications for future research.

## 2. Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory grounds the use and understanding of metaphors on the cognitive ability of the human brain. As argued by

Conceptual Metaphor Theory, metaphors are deeply embedded in language and thought, and they are pervasive to human life and communication, not just limited to the figures of speech. The latter are believed to be just the linguistic realisations of a deeper cognitive process that allows people to process, understand and communicate reality by way of comparing new data to what is already known. In other words, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) suggest that metaphors make people's thoughts more vivid and interesting and, most importantly, they believe that metaphors actually structure our perceptions and understanding. The two authors consider metaphors an ordinary, not an extraordinary, part of language, since "human thought processes are largely metaphorical [...]" and "metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system [...] is fundamentally metaphorical in nature" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, pp. 4-6). According to this viewpoint, metaphors cannot be considered mere decorative devices but "could be seen as a way of describing the connection that exists between two groups of ideas in people's minds" (Deignan 2005, p. 14).

Moreover, as cross-linguistic studies reveal (Bratož 2004; Capra 2005; Kermas 2006; Tribe 1988, 2007, to name only a few), there are differences in the way languages use different metaphorical conceptualisations to refer to the same phenomenon. These different choices are grounded in physical experience, but they are also likely to be "ideological", in the sense that "metaphors have been used in order to present a particular interpretation of situations and events" (Deignan 2005, p. 23). Thus, the selection of metaphors is subordinated to a number of factors, such as the cultural background of those who use the metaphor and of those the metaphor is addressed to. More specifically, metaphor use varies according to a range of variables, including genre, register and membership of different 'discourse communities' – groups of people who "have texts and practices in common" (Barton 2007, p. 75; see also Caballero 2006; Deignan et al. 2013; Demmen et al. 2015, p. 208; Goatly 2011; Steen et al. 2010). This concept becomes particularly relevant in a cross-linguistic study of metaphor, which must consider "the extent to which we draw on human universals in order to create shared metaphors" (Deignan, Potter 2004, p. 1234).

Metaphors, then, pervade everyday language, but they are also widely used in specialised discourse to convey abstract concepts, since they exploit the human brain's ability to grasp the most complex concepts by grounding them on the information that is already known about the physical world (Deignan 2005, pp. 17-18). This connection is generally made by way of mechanisms of comparison between what is abstract and new and what is concrete and known. In this regard, metaphorical expressions are often used in specialised texts, especially when they "may help decode the conceptual system that underlies the author's theoretical stance" (Gotti 2003, p. 61). In specialised discourse, indeed, metaphors are used for both the purpose of catachresis, namely, to fill a gap in the vocabulary, and to emphasise the expressive connotations of a concept or to add semantic features to a term (Gotti 2003, pp. 56-64). These two functions allow the speaker or the writer to substantially increase the effectiveness of their communication.

In addition, popularising forms of specialised discourses make an extensive use of figurative language, which is highly productive since it helps the sender of the message to convey – to a lay audience – complex, specialised contents in a simplified way. In this case, metaphors are usually drawn from general experience that is supposedly shared between the sender and the receiver(s) of the message, so specialised content is compared to, and contrasted against, situations that are already familiar to the lay audience, who thus immediately grasps abstract concepts easily and effectively (Gotti 2003).

Among the areas in specialised discourse which make a consistent use of metaphorical expressions we can name the field of medicine in its popularising form, in which metaphors are highly functional devices used to convey to laypeople the abstract and

highly specialised concepts that refer to medical conditions and their treatment (Gotti 2003; Salager-Meyer 1990; Sherer et al. 2015) and, in addition, they often help to better handle, at the cognitive level, extremely difficult or tragic situations as several studies have ascertained (see, for example, Camus 2009; Demmen et al. 2015; Demjén, Semino 2016; Semino et al. 2017; Sontag 1979). These studies focus their attention on the ways in which an illness is conceptualised through metaphorical language in popularising medical discourse. Some of the most common conceptualisations are ILLNESS/DISEASE IS WAR or DISEASE IS A (NATURAL) DISASTER: they help to clearly visualise the common perception of a disease, be it a condition that infects masses of populations as in the case of the SARS pandemic of the early 2000s (Chiang, Duann 2007) or a condition that affects the individual, as in the case of cancer-related discourse (Camus 2009; Demmen et al. 2015; Semino et al. 2017). It is also worth mentioning that, according to Scherer et al. (2015), the use of specific metaphors might influence common people's medical decisions, such as their willingness to get vaccinated against the flu, based on the perception of risk transmitted by the metaphors.

As mentioned in Section 1, the present study examines two statements by the Italian PM Giuseppe Conte and the British PM Boris Johnson, in which they announce their countries' lockdown as a measure to limit contagion of the COVID-19 disease. More specifically, a qualitative analysis of metaphor use is conducted to identify the conceptual metaphors and their linguistic realisations used by the two leaders to define the disease, its outbreak, and its consequences on the population's life. The analysis compares and contrasts the metaphors used in the two statements to identify common or different patterns in metaphor selection. Once the conceptual metaphors are identified, and their linguistic realisations exemplified, the results are contrasted against the existing literature and a critical interpretation of the differences is proposed to frame the choices in terms of either cultural differences between the two languages and corresponding cultures or other factors that might intervene to determine these choices.

### 3. Italy's and the UK's Prime Ministers

The two Prime Ministers considered in this study are the Italian Giuseppe Conte and the British Boris Johnson. Before being appointed Prime Minister, Giuseppe Conte was a lawyer and a Full Professor in Private Law at the University of Florence (Italian Government, 2020, Profile section). This is probably the reason why Conte's communicative style has been described as characterised by "seriousness, discipline, strong nerves and solidity" (Ceccobelli, Vaccari 2021, p. 10), typical of an experienced academic or a lawyer speaking in public; it also reflects the definition he gave of himself when he was first appointed Prime Minister, namely, 'the people's lawyer' ("*avvocato del popolo*"; "Governo, Conte: 'Sarò l'avvocato difensore del popolo italiano' 2018, *Corriere della Sera*). His televised speeches also corresponded to "sensitive policies enacted and disseminated by Conte via social media" which, in turn, also "led to higher engagement levels and a growth of his fanbase, thus creating a symbiotic relationship with citizens and achieving great legitimation" (Rullo, Nunziata 2021, p. 309).

As regards Boris Johnson, he became Prime Minister in July 2019. Before his appointment to Prime Minister, he was previously given a series of institutional roles, and for his two terms as Mayor of London (British Government, 2020, People section). Alongside his long-term political career, he is also known as author of essays, novels, a historical survey of the Roman Empire and a Winston Churchill biography (Britannica, 2020, Boris Johnson Biography section). According to The New York Times, his

communicative style has been defined as unorthodox with outbursts and remarks, riddled with metaphors, uttered on various public occasions, that have generated criticism and have led some analysts to compare him to US President Donald Trump (Muddle 2019; Castle 2019).

#### **4. The COVID-19 emergency in Italy and in UK: some contextual information**

During the period taken into consideration, the daily death toll in Italy counted by news media worldwide was tragic, in the order of hundreds of dead patients per day (Ceccobelli, Vaccari 2021). National and international media published daily updates with videos and images from one of the most affected regions in Italy, Lombardy, where rows of military trucks carried the hearses of the victims to crematories in neighbouring regions because the local facilities could not proceed with the expected speed set by the law in cases of death for a contagious disease (Ceccobelli, Vaccari 2021). Hospitals, and the national health system, were on the verge of collapse because intensive care units were not enough, nor were they sufficiently equipped to face such an unprecedented high number of patients. Doctors and nurses from foreign countries and from other less affected regions were volunteering to help out those in the most affected regions (Ceccobelli, Vaccari 2021).

The decision to put the whole country in full lockdown came in the second week of March, when the government realised that only the strictest measures, following the example of China's lockdown measures for the affected regions (see Section 1), could lead to a decrease in the number of deaths (Wodak 2021).

Communication to the population about the several government's decisions proceeded directly from the PM to the nation with live broadcasts through the institutional website of the Italian government or through social media. Press conferences usually followed the official statements addressed to the population. After the live broadcast of the addresses to the nation, the videos were made available on the website of the Italian government together with the full transcript of the speech below the video itself (Wodak 2021).

Unlike Italy, COVID-19 spread in the UK more slowly. According to news media in 2020, specialists believed that they were witnessing a temporal delay of around one month with the spread witnessed in continental Europe (Olza et al. 2021; Wodak 2021). However, soon the contagions and deaths increased. For this reason, in a desperate attempt, the government decided to put the country in lockdown, even though the limitation to people's movements were at first not yet as strict as they were in Italy (Olza et al. 2021; Wodak 2021).

In the case of PM Boris Johnson, communication to the nation happened through press conferences broadcast in live television and on social media. The government's website provided the full transcript of the main speech, before the questions from the press or the speeches from other members of the government or local authorities (Olza et al. 2021; Wodak 2021).

## 5. Analysis of Giuseppe Conte's and Boris Johnson's address to the nation<sup>1</sup>

Only one statement *per* PM was here purposely taken into consideration for the specific reason that the study wants to focus on how the PMs directly addressed the corresponding nations when they first announced the imposition of the first country lockdowns. The public announcements had indeed been preceded by press releases, but the televised announcements were the first occasions through which the PMs spoke to the public, thus seeking to establish a direct contact with the populations. Thus, these announcements can be considered a political 'move' of the PMs. For this reason, the study aims at investigating the communicative strategies that the PMs employed to establish this direct contact through the use of specific metaphors.

### 5.1. General Analysis

Starting with the Italian PM's statement, the transcription of the statement itself is shorter than 800 words and reflects the content of previous communications. It also refers to the tragic number of deaths and the pressure on the national health system to justify the new, stricter measures. Along with practical information on the new measures just issued, the statement contains a strong emotive commitment indicated by the use of the first-person plural pronoun, which communicates a sense of in-group identity and highlights the position of the PM as a common citizen. In addition, some slogan-like statements – such as '*Lo Stato c'è. Lo Stato è qui*' (lit. 'The State is present. The State is here') and '*Uniti ce la faremo*' (lit. 'United we'll make it') – are used to reassure the Italian population that they will receive the necessary State support, both financial and administrative, to survive to the sanitary emergency that will most likely create economic recession in the country. The third slogan, thus, aims at reinforcing the sense of reassurance of the first two slogans, motivating the population to endure the lockdown and to continue following the government's instructions in order to stop the disease from spreading. The motivational rhetoric of the statement is emphasised by this emotional part of the speech. More than focusing on providing practical information on the full lockdown, which are somewhat left to a secondary role, the statement rather focuses on reassuring the population that the Government and the central welfare system would provide not only assistance during the Coronavirus outbreak but also after the danger of the disease would pass and the population would struggle financially.

Boris Johnson's statement, on the other hand, is the first direct address to the nation about the Coronavirus. The full transcript contains slightly less than 900 words. In the weeks before the statement, communications had proceeded through press conferences during which the PM announced to the press, and only indirectly to the population, the measures that the Government were taking, or were about to take, while the situation in Europe was clearly deteriorating. For this reason, the statement has an overall tone of calm urgency, emphasising the seriousness of the situation that had ultimately hit the UK as the rest of Europe. The speech starts with some reference to what is happening in other countries, to stress the fact that, in order to avoid a similar tragic situation, the Government had been forced to put the country in lockdown, thus justifying their decision. Clear reference is made to the struggle that the national health system was facing and that was going to face should the number of cases increase dramatically, thus emphasising the fact that the measures were

<sup>1</sup> The two statements here analysed are both available in full verbatim transcription on the institutional websites of the Italian government (<http://www.governo.it>) and of the British government (<https://www.gov.uk>), respectively.

not issued for political reasons but for the greater good of the British population. The speech, then, provides clear and factual instructions on the behaviour expected from the British subjects during the country's lockdown. There is no space dedicated to some sort of emotive language except for the reference to the difficult moments that the British population had endured in the past and that had successfully overcome, thus appealing to the strength that they showed during the two World Wars and how they managed to survive them (Musolff 2021). In this case, the use of the first-person plural pronoun is used with the same purpose as in the speech by the Italian PM, namely, to create a sense of community and in-group identity with the reassurance that the leader who is speaking is one of them, thus the population knows that his actions and the decisions of the British Government were all made selflessly and for the common good.

### 5.3. Metaphors

As regards the specific metaphors used in their speeches, in those used to refer to the response to the virus, we notice a few relevant differences. Both Conte and Johnson conceptualise the disease as CORONAVIRUS IS CHALLENGE, and they are realised as in Examples (1) and (2) below. The words or expressions highlighted in bold type are the linguistic realisations of the conceptual metaphor.

- (1) *Ho scelto di rendere tutti voi partecipi della **sfida** che siamo chiamati ad affrontare* (I have chosen to make all of you aware of the **challenge** that we are all called to face) [PM\_GC]<sup>2</sup>,
- (2) The people of this country will rise to that **challenge** [PM\_BJ].

However, while Giuseppe Conte does not characterise the virus further, Boris Johnson develops its characterisation of COVID-9 through other two conceptualisations, namely CORONAVIRUS IS THREAT (Example 3) and CORONAVIRUS IS A KILLER (Example 4):

- (3) The Coronavirus is the biggest **threat** this country has faced for decades [PM\_BJ],
- (4) All over the world we are seeing the devastating impact of this **invisible killer** [PM\_BJ].

Both PMs, then, focus their attention on the depiction of the solutions to overcome the disease. In this case, conceptualisations are diversified in the two PMs with only some shared conceptual metaphors to refer to the same idea. For instance, both PMs conceptualise the measures taken to solve the sanitary emergency as SOLUTION TO DISEASE IS MOVEMENT, as illustrated in Examples (5) and (6):

- (5) *Quelle rinunce che oggi vi sembrano un **passo indietro**, domani ci consentiranno di **prendere la rincorsa** e ritornare presto nelle nostre fabbriche, nei uffici, nelle nostre piazze, fra le braccia di parenti, di amici* (Those renunciations that today might seem to you **a step back**, tomorrow they will allow us **to take a running start** and soon come back into our factories, our offices, our squares, in the arms of our relatives, of our friends) [PM\_GC],
- (6) The **way ahead** is hard ... And yet it is also true that there is **a clear way through** [PM\_BJ].

The British PM continues his characterisation of the efforts made to solve the situation with an extensive use of this conceptual metaphor, as clearly realised in Examples (7) to (9):

- (7) We are **accelerating** our search for treatments [PM\_BJ],
- (8) So it's vital **to slow the spread** of the disease [PM\_BJ],
- (9) Without a huge national effort **to halt the growth** of this virus [PM\_BJ].

<sup>2</sup> For examples in Italian a translation in English is provided after the quotation Italian, while the attribution of the quote is indicated – in both cases – with the initial of the PMs' names in square brackets.

On the other hand, an interesting conceptualisation is present in the Italian PM's statement in which he associates the metaphor of SOLUTION TO DISEASE IS MOVEMENT to the presentation of the country with the conceptual metaphor COUNTRY IS A VEHICLE, as illustrated in the two Examples below.

- (10) *Rallentiamo il motore produttivo del Paese, ma non lo fermiamo* (We'll slow the productive engine of the Country, but we won't stop it) [PM\_GC],  
 (11) *Il Governo interverrà con misure straordinarie che ci consentiranno di rialzare la testa e ripartire quanto prima* (The Government will adopt exceptional measures that will allow us to lift up our head and **restart** as soon as possible) [PM\_GC].

The rhetoric of war and of the need for the population to contribute to the war effort is present in both statements even though the common conceptual metaphor of SOLUTION TO DISEASE IS WAR is realised linguistically in different ways, as we can see Examples (12) to (13).

- (12) *Il nostro sacrificio di rimanere a casa è per altro minimo, se paragonato al sacrificio che stanno compiendo altri concittadini* (Our sacrifice in staying at home is, moreover, minimal, if compared to the sacrifice that other fellow citizens are making) [PM\_GC],  
 (13) But in this **fight** we can be in no doubt that each and every one of us is directly **enlisted** [PM\_BJ],  
 (14) We will **beat** the Coronavirus and we will **beat** it together [PM\_BJ].

Giuseppe Conte sentimentally refers to the “sacrifices” that the population has to make and that those in the frontline are already making (Example 14), while Boris Johnson more practically refers to a direct call: to the “enlistment” of the British subjects in the “fight” against the disease, and talks about the overcome of the disease in terms of an enemy that has to be defeated (Examples 13 and 14). Examples (11) to (13) are a case in point as to how both PMs conceptualise the pandemic using a well-established war frame, according to the literature on the use of this metaphor to refer to a disease (see, for example, Craig 2020; Isaacs, Priesz 2020; Castro Seixas 2021; Charteris-Black 2021; Garzone 2021; Semino 2021; Schnepf, Chirstmann 2022).

One final metaphor in Boris Johnson's statements is used in further reference to overcome the sanitary emergency in terms of SOLUTION TO DISEASE IS SALVAGE. The linguistic realisation reflects the reason why the PM is communicating the country's lockdown, namely, to save lives and to ease the pressure on the national health system (see Example 16).

- (16) Because that is the way we reduce the number of people needing hospital treatment at any one time, so we can **protect** the NHS's ability to cope – and **save** more lives [PM\_BJ].

Finally, the emotional charge in Giuseppe Conte's speech is particularly evident in the metaphors illustrated in Examples (17) to (19), which realise the conceptual domains of SOLUTION TO DISEASE IS LOVE (Example 17), of COMMUNITY IS CHAIN (Example 18), and of EFFECTS OF DISEASE ARE VIOLENCE/DISEASE IS VIOLENCE (Example 19), respectively.

- (17) *Compiono un atto di amore verso l'Italia intera* (They [those in the frontline] are performing an act of love towards the whole of Italy) [PM\_GC],  
 (18) *Mai come ora la nostra comunità deve stringersi forte, come una catena a protezione del bene più importante: la vita. Se dovesse cedere anche solo un anello, questa barriera di protezione verrebbe meno, esponendoci a pericoli più grandi, per tutti* (Like never before, must our community stick together, like a chain in protection of the most important valuable asset: life. Should just one ring [in



- the chain] flip, this protection barrier would fail, and we'd all be exposed to greater dangers, [greater] for us all) [PM\_GC],
- (19) *Siamo chiamati a misurarci con immagini, con notizie che ci **feriscono**, ci lasciano un segno che rimarrà sempre **impresso** nella nostra memoria* (we are called to measure up to images, news that hurt us, that leave a mark that will always remain engraved into our memory) [PM\_GC].

## 6. Discussion

As seen in the two PMs' statements, some metaphors occur in both speeches, while others have a different occurrence that – we might suppose – depends on the cultural differences between Italian and English as was revealed by Giuseppe Conte's more frequent reference to emotions (Examples 5, 17, 18, and 19), while Boris Johnson resorted to a more British pragmatist approach (Example 16).

Differences lie also in the communicative situation in which the two speeches were uttered. While Giuseppe Conte's speech was preceded by a series of previous similar announcements, Boris Johnson's was the first of its kind, in that it announced a country lockdown that, until a few days before, was not considered necessary both by the authorities and the population. For this reason, the metaphorical use reflects the urgency of the decision: reference is made to a situation of war that reminds the British subjects of the two World Wars, two events still vivid in the country's collective psyche. In this regard, the use of metaphors that see the action of medical staff and the people's confinement to their homes in terms of active contribution to the "war effort" and, thus, the recourse to the domain of the chosen metaphors, pertains to the ideas of a fight against an enemy that will be defeated just like both enemies in the two World Wars were defeated. This choice is in line with more recent literature on metaphors used to refer to the specific disease of Coronavirus (See Section 5 and Heaney, Riboni 2023). However, the language of violence is balanced by reference to the unified effort that will make it possible for the UK to soon overcome the tragic situation and, hopefully, with as little harm as possible.

In the case of Giuseppe Conte's statement, on the contrary, more emphasis is given to metaphors that reassure the population of the measures that the Government was taking to handle the situation. The country's lockdown had already been activated a few weeks before, so the new, stricter measures could create more panic, thus the purpose of the speech is to explain the increased gravity of the situation across the country and the consequent decision by the Government. For these reasons, after a first reference to the virus outbreak in terms of violent attack, more emphasis is given to the actions to be taken at the commercial and industrial level and to the emotional impact on the population of a prospected economic recession in a country that was still struggling with the consequences of the 2008 global financial crisis (Wodak 2021). In this context, metaphors are conceptualised through domains that refer to the sentiment of love, and to the sense of in-group identity and community, picturing Italian citizens as rings in a chain that protect each other against the disease. The patriotic sentiment is also emphasised through metaphors that refer to the "sacrifice" that citizens are called to make also to honour the example set by those working in the frontline.

Despite the differences noticed in the metaphor use to indicate the solution to the sanitary emergency, similarities occur in the way both PMs define the virus. The literature on the use of metaphors in similar contexts indicates that the preferred way to conceptualise a disease, or any kind of illness, is in terms of war (e.g., 'CANCER IS WAR', Camus 2009; Chiang, Duann 2007). This domain has also been found to be particularly common in the conceptualisation of COVID-19 (to the already mentioned Craig 2020, Isaacs, Priesz 2020,

Castro Seixas 2021, Charteris-Black 2021, Garzone 2021, and Semino 2021 one might also add Combei et al. 2022, Musolff 2022, and Schnepf, Christmann 2022).

Other domains selected by the two PMs to conceptualise the COVID-19's outbreak pertain to a general discourse of violence in the definition of the disease's action. Reference to a war-like attack is indeed to be found in the treatment and in the solutions to be applied to overcome the situation. It is possible that the two PMs decided not to use the expected reference to the outbreak as a war declared by an enemy state to lessen the force of their statements and to avoid a panicked reaction in their respective populations. The attack is obviously implied, but a situation of war is mentioned only in reference to the active reaction of the Governments and the support expected in the population. This might be considered a communicative strategy to actively involve the citizens/subjects in the general effort and to motivate them to contribute by "just" staying at home to avoid the further spread of the disease, thus exerting an effective political control over the population (Milizia 2023).

Both in Conte's and in Johnson's statements, the selection of specific metaphors cannot however be wholly explained as a product of the cultural differences lying behind the respective languages, cultures, and national history in terms of war and war effort. It might rather be interpreted using Bell's (1984) audience design theory, whereby the communicative style of a speaker/writer is believed to change in response to their audience to express, in this particular case, solidarity and intimacy.

In both cases, in fact, the audience is composed of the "auditor" type (Bell 1984, p. 154), whereby listeners are not directly addressed but are known and ratified, since the speaker can only presume that those who are listening to the statement are citizens or subjects who are not yet infected by the virus and are willing to follow the Government's instructions. However, in both statements, the strategies and the metaphors used by the speakers are selected as if the audience is of the "addressee" type (Bell 1984, p. 159), namely, listeners who are known, ratified, and addressed. In fact, by using the first-person plural pronoun, both PMs are explicitly signalling their allegiance to their listeners: by including themselves in the people involved in the lockdown, and consequent measures, they increase the sense of intimacy and proximity with their audience. They also create a sense of belonging to the same community that must stand united to face the enemy represented by the disease.

What actually changes is the emotional charge in the two statements: the more matter-of-fact style of Johnson is justified by the urgency of the measures, while Conte's reference to the gloomy present of mourning the dead and social distancing is balanced by the more positive, motivational reference to the reward that will come if the community stands united and follows the Government's instructions, namely a reunion with the beloved ones and a renewed enjoyment of social proximity (Wodak 2021), as remarked by Conte himself in his famous 2020 statement "Let's keep our distance today so that we can hug each other tomorrow" (Graziani et al. 2022; Scaccia 2022).

## 7. Conclusions

The present study has investigated metaphor use in the two televised statements with which the Italian PM Giuseppe Conte and the British PM Boris Johnson imposed the first full country lockdowns. In more general terms, the two PMs show a consistent communicative style already observed in previous contributions that were mentioned in the Discussion Section, and which is also reflected in the abundant recurrence of the use of metaphorical language in the case of Boris Johnson (e.g., Heaney, Riboni 2022) and in a calming and authoritative tone in the case of Giuseppe Conte (e.g., Scaccia 2022).

As far as the use of metaphors in the two speeches under analysis is concerned, the present study has also shown that similarities in the two PMs are apparent when they refer to the disease in terms of violent attack that has to be faced with determination, using semantic domains that apply to a war-like situation. These, again, reproduce the typical rhetoric of war already observed in the literature to refer to how a disease is faced.

However, differences emerged in the conceptualisation of metaphors to indicate the way in which the Italian and the British populations should help to solve the situation and the corresponding emotional involvement. These differences could not be attributed only to differences in the cultural and linguistic background of the two speakers and their audiences, but they were hypothesised to be ascribed to specific political strategies in the two speakers who sought to establish a sense of proximity and intimacy with their audience.

In conclusion, the present analysis has shown that the two statements, beyond their use of metaphors, might still be worth investigating from a wider perspective that takes into account the discursive choices of the two PMs as well as the pragmatic implications that are determined by specific strategies of audience engagement and audience design, which could provide more thorough insights into the already available literature on the two PMs' communicative rhetoric.

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