

All this metonymy stuff or conceptual indeterminacy as emotional response to crisis

Tanja Gradečak¹, Mario Brdar² & Rita Brdar-Szabo³

¹University of Osijek, tgradeaca@ffos.hr, ²University of Osijek ³Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest

Keywords: metonymy, indeterminacy, emotion

The sense of uncertainty and the lack of control is a very powerful emotion overshadowing many rational judgments. In the past several years the world has experienced some very impactful events that reverberated quite emotionally in the population and the language used to describe them reflected this emotional import. Among many phenomena surrounding discourse on global crises we have noticed the case of indeterminacy or opacity of meaning found in the example of the construction “this X stuff/thing/mess/(bull)s***”, where X stands for the political or some other conflicting situation or event. Observed initially in the discourse on Brexit where it figured prominently as an emotional response to the prolonged period of negotiating the UK’s exit from the EU, the construction was later used as a popular expression of concern over the COVID-19 pandemic, especially at its initial and more advanced stages, and could be observed more recently in the comments on the war in Ukraine.

The datasets consisting of British newspaper texts on Brexit with over 2 million words spanning the period from May 2019 to March 2020 (Gradečak and Tanasić, in press) and the data set of Croatian newspaper texts on COVID-19 pandemic spanning the period from March 2020 to March 2021 (Benčina and Kostanjevac, 2023) were analysed in the program Sketchengine following the Word sketch command ‘Det+Brexit/COVID/corona+ Noun’. KWIC lines were analysed as well as the accompanying texts to detect the reference point (target domain) of the metonymically used lemmas.

We argue that the referential force of the nominal head ‘stuff/thing/mess/(bull)s***’ is triggered by the lack of relevant information and consequentially emotions. It gets intentionally blurred by a metonymic expansion to several potential target domains creating a sense of insecurity and general emotional instability, ranging from fatalistic indifference to exasperation and raging anger, as observable in examples with profanities. As shown in Brdar and Brdar-Szabo (2021), an approach to metonymy is needed that is based not on the notion of mapping but on the activation of the source conceptual cluster that opens up a related mental space. This space is dynamically expanded or reduced so as to come as close as possible to fitting the conceptual frame provided by the co(n)text of use. In the case of Brexit examples, the mental space shifted from the actual deal to Johnson’s exploitation of voter irritation to “get Brexit done” and win the PM seat, true to what Moss et al. (2020) describe as ‘politics of emotion’ in what seems to be the ‘age of emotion’. In line with this label, the fear triggered by the corona pandemic provided further examples of metonymic indeterminacy, especially at its beginning when the lack of information surrounding its source and mechanisms of spreading was depicted by a vague referent such as ‘thing’, or almost equally opaque ‘crisis’, ‘disaster’ etc. The analysis follows the argument that the operative WHOLE FOR PART metonymy is typical for these emotional responses to crises in the sense that the linguistic vehicle for the source domain (following the tripartite division in Panther (2005: 358), and the modified model found in Brdar and Brdar-Szabo (2021)) refers to an amorphous, unspecified whole as a source concept, with more specific target concepts or the whole cluster activated by a shifting focus, sometimes simultaneously, and sometimes discretely, comparable to rather chaotic emotional responses as opposed to sharply delineated shapes of rational arguments.

References

- Brdar-Szabó, Rita & Brdar, Mario. 2021. Metonymic indeterminacy and methalepsis: Getting two (or more) targets for the price of one vehicle. In Soares da Silva, Augusto. (ed.), *Figures: Intersubjectivity and usage*, 211–247. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
<https://doi.org/10.1075/ftl.11.06brd>
- Gradečak, Tanja & Nevena Čosić. In press. Opacity and transparency of metonymic meaning on the example of Brexit. *CALS Proceedings 2020*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Moss, Jonathan, Emily Robinson & Jack Watts. 2020. Brexit and the Everyday Politics of Emotion: Methodological Lessons from History. *Political Studies* 68(4). 837–856.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321720911915>
- Panther, Klaus-Uwe. 2005. The role of conceptual metonymy in meaning construction. In Francisco J. Ruiz de Mendoza & Sandra Peña Cervel (eds.). *Cognitive linguistics: Internal dynamics and interdisciplinary interaction*, 353–386. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.