Metaphorical Spatialization of Economic Issues as a persuasive Strategy in the 2008 American presidential electoral campaign

Tlili Saad
Higher Institute of Applied Studies in Humanities of Gafsa, Tunisia
University of Gafsa, Tunisia
saad_tlili@yahoo.fr

Abstract

In the context of the classical political conflict between the American democratic and republican parties embodied in the electoral campaigns, this article discursively investigates Obama’s and McCain’s maneuvering of metaphors of space in the 2008 electoral campaign’s economic issues leaning on Critical Metaphor Analysis. The candidates spatially invite what serves in the play of framing and instantiation of vital economic issues to highlight the potential journey from negative to positive spaces (e.g. from back to front and vice versa, from low to high and vice versa, out of threat to peace and vice versa ... etc) in order to either metaphorically aggravate the economic status quo and hence accentuate the need for the “proper” president savior (the present candidate), or to open up horizons of potential positive economic change if elected president.

Keywords: American electoral campaign, Metaphors, economics.
1. Introduction

If we study the speeches of the two American candidates we touch particular conceptual structuring of sets of target abstract issues. The instantiation of given abstract target domains by concrete spatial frames generates a set of metaphors with a power of making those abstract concepts marked and coherent in the addressee’s conceptual system. The speakers know well the function of spatial imagery that nears the picture of abstract concepts to the mind of their audiences. Obama and McCain tend to inculcate the delicacy and graveness of the status quo and the urgency of interventions to ‘improve’ the situation in the minds of the American people.

The corpus of this research is composed of two speeches retrieved as electronic texts from the Internet. The speech of McCain is retrieved from an Internet site at the URL: http://mcy2004.blogspot.com/2008/06/remarks-by-john-mccain-at-nfib-and-ebay.html. The speech of Obama is obtained from an electronic site at the URL: http://www.speechwars.com.

Lakoff and Johnsonn (1980, p. 19) called a particular type of metaphor “coherence metaphor,” because they are more in line with the cognitive function they perform. By coherence they mean that certain target concepts tend to be metaphorically represented in a uniform manner. For example, in Obama’s chosen speech of study, various social and economic concepts are characterized by journey features (path, track, facing obstacles, meeting, relief…etc). This article argues that Obama’s speech is metaphorically structured within a generic journey frame. The place of departure is a fence which must be overcome by the promised hard work of the future president of the U.S.A - Barack Obama. If Obama is elected president, he will lead his people beyond this wall of problems to the beach of salvation. The African American candidate invites his audience to a common shared space full of thorns and he positions himself in the center as the person who will flatten this ground in front of his people to lead them to the dreamland. On the other hand, he tries to represent his opponent McCain as the man who will lead the American economy to the ditch.

Senator McCain was not far from his contender in his instantiation of the urgent economic and social issues. In order to create tangible, containable and movable meanings in the minds of voters, McCain resorts to spatial metaphorization of critical social and economic issues. In his speech, delivered in Arlington, VA—U.S on June 10, 2008, John McCain situates the spatial metaphors in the context of electoral contest to win voters voice. He showed an attentive selection of the issues which are of major interests to the American people of different identities and shaped them within witty spatial metaphors.

This article focuses on the spatial language as a strategy of self promotion in the electoral speeches of the American 2008 general electoral campaign. The use of spatial metaphors by the two candidates translates their conceptualization of the economic states of affairs of the American people to strategically represent the Self in relation to the Other. The first considered speech was delivered by John McCain at the NFIB (National Federation of Independent Business) and eBay 2008 National Small Business Summit on the tenth of June, 2008, and the second delivered by Barack Obama in Lansing (capital of Michigan), MI in August 04, 2008.

2. Theoretical Background

Metaphor has become a popular interdisciplinary topic of study and research in almost all disciplines comprising the “cognitive science” paradigm, namely linguistics, philosophy,
psychology and literary theory. This new interest in metaphoricality as a central cognitive mechanism and not a classical figure of speech has resulted in a striking rise in the number of publications on metaphor during the past twenty five years (Ortony 1993; sacks 1979; Honeck and Hoffman 1980; Lakoff and Johnson 1980 and 2003; Kovecses 2000 and 2008…etc).

On the basis of linguistic evidence, Lakoff and Johnson (2003) insists that most of our conceptual system is metaphorical in nature. Metaphor was typically viewed as a characteristic of language alone, a matter of words rather than thought or action. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have found that metaphor is pervasive in everyday language not as a mere superficial decorative device or a matter of rhetorical flourish but as a comprehensive system of conceptualization. Lakoff and Johnson (2003) argues that “our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” (p. 4). The concepts governing our thought are not exclusively mental, they also structure our perception of the world and frame our experience of life. But as our conceptual system is by no means perceptible, one way to find out is by looking at language. Language remains the most important source of evidence of our thinking and acting since human communication shares the same conceptual system used in thought and action.

Metaphor can be characterized with the formula A is B, where the target domain (A) is comprehended through a source domain (B). This comprehension is based on a set of mappings that exist between elements of A and elements of B. In the cognitive linguistic view, metaphor means primarily conceptual metaphor, as opposed to linguistic metaphor; “metaphor is pervasive in everyday language and thought -evidence that did not fit any contemporary Anglo-American theory of meaning within either linguistics or philosophy” (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003, p. ix). That is, with the form A is B, we distinguish between a conceptual metaphor and its metaphoric linguistic expressions. But there are different types of conceptual metaphors (Kovecses 2008). These include classifications according to the conventionality, function, nature, and level of generality of metaphor. My focus in this study is on the spatial dimension of the ontological and structural metaphors. For example, in the ontological conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY, the task will be on the metaphorical spatialization of abstract target concepts, such as economic hardships, unemployment, healthcare, energy, taxes…etc. In their 2008 electoral campaign, Barack Obama and John McCain represented the problems of the American economy and their promised change agenda in different linguistic, rhetorical and cognitive shapes.

3. McCain and Metaphorical Spatialization

Social and economic concepts are well-woven into spatial representations in McCain’s speech. McCain’s promises to overcome the American society’s hardships are circumscribed with placeness, boundaries and borders and measured in terms of the distance from the “centre” and “periphery”. For these reasons, the spatial construction of delicate socioeconomic issues is frequently interwoven with witty self situational adaptation.

3.1. Spatial Metaphor and the American Enterprise

John McCain has started his speech by constructing a space of self-inclusiveness. He created a Self strategic belonging space to connect himself with his audiences. He said he was “honored to be in the company of so many men and women who represent the best of American enterprise.” McCain is trying to subtly perform a cognitive operation on his audience in order to produce an instantiated inclusion through the preposition “in”. His created spatial container is the representatives of the best of American enterprise. The
cognitive construal of his relation to his direct audience could be compacted in a conceptual spatial metaphor REPRESENTATIVES OF THE BEST AMERICAN ENTERPRISE ARE A CONTAINER.

3.2. Spatial Metaphor and Small Businesses

On the other side, McCain has settled for another shape of spatial metaphor to situate another important cell of his voters’ hive - small businesses. Small businesses for McCain are “what make the American economy run”. Hereby, economy is metaphorically on a racetrack; ECONOMY IS A RACER. He describes small businesses as the ones who always take the risks “often with little start-up money and nothing to fall back on”. Small businesses’ space is a boxing ring in which they show dare and courage though they have no support to back them up. It would be safe to say that McCain has chosen to hold small businesses within a space of fighting. THE ECONOMY OF SMALL BUSINESSES IS A BOXING RING would be the suitable metaphor to interpret McCain's cognitive construal of this segment of his aspired voters.

3.3. Minorities and Small Business

As far as minorities are concerned, spatial metaphors transfer schema from economy area to journey area. These metaphors filter and define social and economic issues submitting them to a projection from simple fashion source domain schemata. McCain tries to describe the most important features of complex variables in a simple form embodied in an experiential spatial world. McCain shows that he possesses linguistic faculties with deeply embedded spatial metaphorical structures that are influential in the construction of the reality of minorities. “For women,” says he “for immigrants and for people of every background, small businesses are the path to success and to the American dream”: THE AMERICAN DREAM IS A JOURNEY and THE ARRIVAL POINT OF THE DREAM JOURNEY IS SUCCESS and the road of this journey is small businesses. The metaphor SMALL BUSINESSES ARE THE PATH OF THE JOURNEY TO SUCCESS is directed first to minorities, and McCain is their guide in the journey to success.

3.4. McCain: Economy and Minorities

McCain continues saying that “The African-American and the Hispanic-American small business communities are one of the fastest growing segments of our economy.” The convenient spatial metaphor will be here: ECONOMY IS A GEOMETRICAL FIGURE. Economy is instantiated by a spatial metaphor represented by an image of a geometrical figure and one of its fastest growing segments are the African American and the Hispanic-American small business communities. In the journey to success, McCain has created himself a position of a guide: McCAIN IS A JOURNEY GUIDE of the minorities and the destination is economic success. And he created himself a metaphorical position of a coach in the overall economy racetrack “As president, my goal will be to get our economy running at full strength again” said he.

Hereby, THE AMERICAN ECONOMY IS A RUNNER and McCAIN IS A COACH who will get the economy run at full strength. These spatial metaphors are an instance of a sport spatial schema projected on an economy schema image. McCain uses spatial metaphors depicting economy in an image of a runner who lost vigor. These metaphors are employed as a catalyst for change and a signal for an urgent need for a changer. The other participants in the economy race are the wage-earners and job creators whose function will be on the right
and left sides of the racetrack “And I will pursue tax reform that supports the wage-earners and job creators who make this economy run.” These wage-earners and job creators are on the racetrack sides providing “logistic requirements” to racers or runners, and help them to win in the global economy race. This mass is shown to be guided to a much larger business space which is the global market.

3.5. McCain: Foreign Trade, and workers

In the speech at hand, spatial metaphors are systematically deployed and structured in parallel with thematic scheming. Their shapes change in parallel with the theme treated by the speaker. Foreign trade, for instance, is differently represented; “I want to break down foreign trade barriers” McCain said, Having placed himself on the ground of power, McCain alludes to the fact that he is the right person to break down the barriers and open up new territories (out-of-placeness: a switch from one space (bad) to another (good) for small businesses to compete abroad. He, then, opts for the spatial metaphor FOREIGN TRADE IS A SIEGED TERRITORY and it is only him who will break down the barriers. He has placed himself on the frontiers of the foreign trade as the appropriate man who will break down the barriers and liberate small businesses. McCain, on the other side, promised to help “workers at every turn on a tough road, so that they are not just spectators on the opportunities of others.”

McCain promises to find a better place for displaced workers “at every turn on a tough road, so that they are not just spectators on the opportunities of others.” He promised “to help millions of workers who have lost a job, that won’t come back, to find a new one that won’t go away”. The function of American workers will no longer be restricted to logistic support on the sides of the tough road but to a promised place in the middle of the racetrack. The space of Workers is a crammed market in which they lost their jobs which will never come back again but thanks to McCain, who will have a solid control on the market, these millions of workers will find new jobs that won’t go away. McCain will help them get a new one in the crowded market of service but this time from good sellers. They are now promised sound trade mark jobs not counterfeited ones. The Government should be on your side, not in your way (one of the last sentences of McCain). McCain draws on the metaphor of a covered building to refer to his opponent’s (Obama’s) tax plan: OBAMA’S TAX PLAN IS A BUILDING. Americans of every background (seniors, parents, small business owners, and everyone having even a modest investment in the market) would see their taxes rise.

Obama, in his turn, has worked with spatial metaphors in presenting the American society’s issues, himself and his audience. In his speech delivered in Lansing, MI/ August 04, 2008 entitled New Energy for America, Obama draws on metaphorical spatialization of high priority issues. This helped him establish links to the audience.

4. Obama and Metaphorical Spatialization

The spatial structure of his speech is confined between facing difficult realities and meeting rosy prospects. The text is framed between two verbs: to face (problems) and to meet (the American dream). The American nation is in front of walls of hardships and they have to overcome it to meet an open area of welfare and comfort. The spatial metaphor structuring the speech is overcoming high economic hurdles and meeting a promising 21st century flat economy. The speech is framed within a spatial metaphorical system of facing hardships and aspiring to meet a bright future. Obama is represented to be the person who will make the ends meet.
4.1. The American Country

Obama opened his speech delivered in Lansing, MI, in August 4, 2008 and entitled “Remarks of Senator Barak Obama: New Energy for America” with a sentence containing the verbs to “meet” and to “face” which are two pervasive verbs throughout the text. If we consider Obama’s utterance “We meet at a moment when this country is facing a set of challenges greater than any we’ve seen in generations,” we touch a drawing on the conceptual metaphor CHALLENGES ARE CONCRETE OBSTACLES. From the very start, Obama introduced the critical space of the American country. This country is before an unprecedented set of hurdles and the primal one is terrorism “This is the central front in the war on terrorism.” The second hurdle is the danger of the changing climate “Our changing climate is placing our planet in peril”. Obama spatially instantiated the second danger in the linguistic metaphor: “Our changing climate is placing our planet in peril,” and in the conceptual metaphor: DANGER IS THE CONTAINER OF THE CHANGING CLIMATE. Our planet is, herein, metaphorically placed in the middle of peril. PERIL IS THE CONTAINER OF OUR PLANET.

4.2. The American Families

Highly effective communication practices enable him to put the American families, who lost faith in the American Dream in a spatial image of striving. “Our families are struggling with rising costs and falling incomes” said Obama. In this speech, Obama roots himself firmly as a part of the “We” through the use of the adjective pronoun “our”. Here, his family is included in the battlefield facing rising costs and falling incomes together with the other American families. The warriors whom the American families are struggling against are rising costs and falling incomes: RISING COSTS AND FALLING INCOMES ARE WARRIORS; THE AMERICAN FAMILIES ARE STRUGGLERS AGAINST RISING COSTS AND FALLING INCOMES, and Obama will be the savior who will take them out to victory.

4.3 Energy

Addiction to foreign oil is depicted by Obama as a threat which may dwell in the heart of the American identity: “And central to all of these major challenges is the question of what we will do about our addiction to foreign oil,” “It's also a threat that goes to the very heart of who we are as a nation, and who we will be” said Obama. The American identity, then, is mapped on a human’s body whose heart will be the harbour of the addiction to foreign oil: THE AMERICAN IDENTITY IS A BODY whose heart will be the harbour of the addiction to foreign oil. The importance of the issue of energy led Obama to build up a structure of spatial metaphors which defined possibilities for action and movement within those metaphorical spaces.

The public frustration caused by rising gas prices is spatially metaphorised as a facing barrier which must be overcome and this barrier cannot be dented by McCain’s offshore program. Within the major spatial metaphor ECONOMY IS A JOURNEY there exist other descendant spatial metaphors characterising the difficulties and challenges confronting the travelers. For instance the conceptual metaphor HIGH GAS PRICES ARE A FENCE BEFORE THE AMERICANS cognitively represent current gas prices as a wall, but McCain cannot be the man who can lead his people beyond that obstacle by his plan of offshore drilling: “and in the face of public frustration over rising gas prices, the only energy proposal he’s really promoting is more offshore drilling…that will not make a real dent in current gas
prices. Obama conceives of gas prices as a fence and McCain’s program cannot make a dent through it to lead his people out to the area of cheap pumps.

Obama has created a spatial image in which he personified the aspired challenge of energy independence and spatialised the procedure to realise independence. As you see here the challenge of energy independence is waiting somewhere in a place of appointment and the best guide is the president who will lead his people to the land of meeting. The American people are promised a date of meeting energy independence. But the awaited question here is who is the reliable guide who knows more about the natural features of the journey to the land of appointment. Each candidate tries to expose his topographic plan to meet energy independence and voters will judge the reliability of each plan.

On the Other side, McCain’s energy program, based on more offshore drilling, is bitterly criticised by Obama through another spatial conceptual metaphor which is JEOPERDY IS A CONTAINER. Obama said that the oil companies have placed their bet on Senator McCain and added that “if he wins, they will continue to cash and our economy suffers and our future is put in jeopardy.” Obama has metaphorically represented the track leading to the aimed destination of energy independence. To ascribe the notion of a collective journey to the planned procedure of energy independence, he urged his people to think about the next four years, and even the next ten years and he added saying “We can continue down the path we’ve been traveling…investments in renewable energy…” Obama refers back again to the verb “face” by saying “We can decide that we will face the realities of the 21st century economy. We observe again that Obama’s spatial play is between the two verbs “face” and “meet”: “This is the choice that we face in the months ahead. This is the challenge we must meet. This is the opportunity we must seize - and this may be our last chance to seize it.”

Obama has made recourse to conceptual metaphors to represent the track leading to the aimed destination of energy independence. To ascribe the notion of a collective journey to the planned procedure of energy independence, he urged his people to think about the next four years, and even the next ten years and he added saying “We can continue down the path we’ve been traveling…investments in renewable energy…” Accordingly, Obama has suggested the American people following one well conducive path to enjoy a good economic journey; this path is investment in renewable energy: INVESTMENTS IN RENEWABLE ENERGY ARE A PATH IN THE JOURNEY OF ECONOMY.

Once again, Obama refers to the verb to “face” by saying “We can decide that we will face the realities of the 21st century economy. We observe once and again that Obama’s metaphorical spatial play is between the two verbs “face” and “meet”: “This is the choice that we face in the months ahead. This is the challenge we must meet. This is the opportunity we must seize - and this may be our last chance to seize it.” Obama has confined his audience in a space limited with the verb “to face” on the one side and the verb “to meet” on the other side. He wants to conceptually inform his audience that they are faced by dangerous obstacles and they have to overcome them and meet their ends on the dreamland, and this will come true if they elect him president: CURRENT ECONOMIC SITUATIONS ARE BARRIERS and BETTER ECONOMIC SITUATIONS ARE THE LAND OF MEETING.

4.4. Metaphorical Spatial Orientation of Economy

For Obama the orientation of challenge is bottom-up; it is either following steps or climbing out of a metaphorical ditch. To incite his people, Obama has referred his audience back to history playing again on the spatialisation of hardships; he addresses them saying: “think about how World War II forced us to transform a peacetime economy still climbing out
of depression into an Arsenal of Democracy that could wage war across three continents.” He metaphorically conceives of the American economy as a climber out of depression: DEPRESSION IS A DEEP DITCH and THE AMERICAN ECONOMY IS A CLIMBER. Obama has, then, banked on the verb to meet to construct a metaphorical space of a promised land of meeting in the mind of his audience relying, interalia, on historical references such as president Roosevelt when his advisors informed him that his goals for wartime production were impossible to meet, he waved them off and said “believe me, the production people can do it if they really try. And they did.” Obama concluded saying: “I ask you to draw hope from the improbable progress this nation has made and look to the future with confidence that we too can meet the great test of our time.”

5. Conclusion
This research has described how metaphorical spatial thoughts are pervasive in the political discourse and how they go without being noticed. The work has demonstrated how conventional conceptual metaphors can concretely structure profound economic concepts needed to be introduced to a vital audience in a concise and comprehensive way with an efficient economical language. The wonderful capacity of compacting huge amount of abstract economic conceptions within concretized spatial containers is what exclusively characterizes metaphors. Spatial metaphors, as an instance, could be reliable to compactly contain broad mental and abstract concepts and instantiate them in a form of common and experienced spatial frames. Spatial metaphorical language needs much more careful attention, especially after the great work of the cognitive linguists on conceptual metaphors in general and the ideological associations of space metaphors as a descendant.
References