COGNITIVE METAPHOR AND MANIPULATION IN THE ENGLISH-LANGUAGE ECONOMIC ARTICLES ONLINE

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Abstract:The last decades have witnessed the wide proliferation of cognitive metaphors to account for various economic issues such as free trade, economic policies, changes in fiscal regulations, the state and prospects of the markets, imports and exports, etc.
Not only is metaphor used to enable and facilitate the understanding of the continuously changing economic landscape, but it also plays a significant role in shaping the public's perceptions and attitudes regarding the economy-related issues under scrutiny.
In this context, our paper aims at exploring the manipulative use of cognitive metaphors in the Economic News section of several English-language newspapers such as The Economist, City A.M., The Wall Street Journal, The Telegraph or The Guardian (the online versions). More precisely, our focus is on the metaphorical patterns associated with the bitcoin currency.

Keywords: cognitive metaphor, manipulation, English-language economic articles online, bitcoin

Introduction

Based on the theoretical framework of Cognitive Linguistics (Lakoff and Johnson, Kövecses, Fauconnier), our paper aims at exploring the manipulative nature of cognitive metaphors that pervade the English-language articles discussing economic issues.

Since the emergence of the cognitivist approach, metaphors have been regarded no longer as merely ornamental figures of speech but as valuable conceptual tools facilitating the partial understanding and experience of one thing or experience in terms of another.

More specifically, metaphors rely on conceptual mappings or sets of conventional associations between the less familiar and the more familiar, between the incorporeal and the corporeal, between the unknown and the known. Subsequently, they allow the conceptualization, categorization and denomination of entities and experiences pertaining to essentially abstract domains of experience by means of concrete entities and experiences, grounded in our ongoing interactions with various physical and socio-cultural environments.

Metaphor and Image schemata

In line with this "experiential" worldview, cognitivists maintain that:

> In order for us to have meaningful, connected experiences that we can comprehend and reason about, there must be pattern and order to our actions, perceptions, and conceptions. A schema is a recurrent pattern, shape, and regularity in, or of, these ongoing ordering activities. These patterns emerge as meaningful structures for us chiefly at the level of our bodily movement through space, our manipulation of objects, and our perceptual interactions. […] A schema consists of a small number of parts and relations, by virtue of which it can structure indefinitely many perceptions, images, and events. Image schemata

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> operate at a level of mental organization that falls between abstract propositional structures, on the one side, and particular concrete images on the other. (Johnson, M., 1987: 29)

People use experientially grounded *image schemata* such as the "path schema" or "the container schema" to generate numerous cognitive metaphors. For instance, the "path schema" underlies cognitive metaphors such as A PURPOSEFUL LIFE IS A JOURNEY (He got *a head start* in life. He's *without direction* in his life. I'm *at a crossroads* in my life. He's never let anyone *get in his way*. He's *gone through* a lot in life.[1]), LOVE IS A JOURNEY (We're *at a crossroads*. The relationship *isn't going anywhere*. Our relationship is *off the track*. The marriage is *on the rocks*[2]), LINEAR SCALES ARE PATHS (John is *far* more intelligent than Bill. John's intelligence goes *way beyond* Bill's. John is *way ahead* of Bill in intelligence.[3], MEANS ARE PATHS TO DESTINATIONS (Do it *this way*. However you want *to go* about it is fine with me.[4])

The "container schema" serves as a basis for cognitive metaphors such as ANGER IS A HOT FLUID IN A CONTAINER (You make my blood *boil*, *Simmer* down![5]), LINGUISTIC EXPRESSIONS ARE CONTAINERS (It's difficult to *put* my ideas *into* words. The meaning is right there *in* the words. The introduction *has* a great deal of thought *content.* Your words seem *hollow*.[6]) or VISUAL FIELDS ARE CONTAINERS (The ship is *coming into* view. I *have* him *in* sight. He'*sout of* sight[7]).

The examples provided above illustrate another widespread assumption of Cognitive Linguistics, namely that according to which linguistic patterns are motivated by the cognitive metaphors that underlie them. Thus, at the level of language, one and the same cognitive metaphor is likely to trigger a wide range of metaphorical expressions.

Types of cognitive metaphors

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) distinguish three types of cognitive metaphors: structural, orientational, and ontological.

Orientational metaphors function by organizing a whole system of concepts in terms of physical orientation, usual through polar oppositions: up-down, in-out, front-back, on-off, deep-shallow, central-peripheral. For example, *up-down* spatialization metaphors encoded into motion verbs of the type *go up/down* are used for the metaphorical representation of emotional states such as happiness or sadness: HAPPY IS UP (I'm feeling *up*, That *boosted* my spirits, You are *in high spirits*, My spirits *rose*[8]) and SAD IS DOWN (I'm feeling *down*. I'm *depressed*. He's really *low* these days. My spirits *sank*.[9])

Similarly, health, consciousness, good, virtue, more, having control, and rational are all up, while sickness, unconsciousness, bad, depravity, less, being controlled, and emotional thinking are all generally down.

Ontological metaphors provide incorporeal things or experiences with a sense of boundary and substance, allowing us to envisage them as discrete entities or bounded spaces

[1] Source: Lakoff, G. 1992, p. 220
[2] Source: Lakoff, G. 1992, p. 205
[3]Source: Lakoff, G. 1992, p. 210
[4]Source: Lakoff, G. 1992, p. 216
[5] Source: Kövecses, Z. 2002, p. 166
[6] Source: Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. 1980, p. 10
[7] Source: Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. 1980, p. 30
[8] Source: Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. 1980, p. 15
[9] Source: Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. 1980, p. 15

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(containers). Thus, for instance, the mind can be conceptualized as a brittle object: Her ego is very *fragile*, His mind *snapped*, He *broke* under cross examination, I'*m going to pieces*[10]. Ontological metaphors allow us to refer to abstract things or experiences, to categorize them, group them and quantify them. We also commonly conceptualize events, emotions, actions, activities and ideas as containers (get *into* or *out of* trouble, be *in* a race, get satisfaction *out of* doing something, etc.).

Structural metaphors enable us to do "much more than just orient concepts, refer to them, quantify them, etc., as we do with simple orientational and ontological metaphors; they allow us, in addition, to use one highly structured and clearly delineated concept to structure another." (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 62)

Typical examples of structural metaphors include LOVE IS A JOURNEY, RATIONAL ARGUMENT IS WAR, THE MIND IS A MACHINE, IDEAS ARE FOOD, AN ARGUMENT IS A BUILDING. By means of structural metaphors we can elaborate orientational and ontological metaphors in much more specific terms. For instance, reasoning about arguments in terms of a physical combat accounts for the following entailments: there is a position or territory to be established and defended, one can win or lose, there are opponents whose position one can attack and try to destroy, one can fortify or abandon weak positions, or can counterattack by using verbal weapons and war tactics (presented as "reasons") such as intimidation, threat, invoking authority, insult, challenging authority, evading issues, bargaining, retreat, surrender, etc.

Also, as pointed by Lakoff and Johnson, structural metaphors enable us to establish partial correspondences between different conceptual domains of experience and hence, to highlight some aspects and hide other aspects of specific concepts. Thus, in the case of the RATIONAL ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor the focus is on the potentially aggressive and destructive nature of verbal disputes, whereas the cooperative aspects of conversation, such as taking turns in speech, working together towards a common resolution or towards a better understanding or clarification of controversial issues (particularly in the academic or legal discourses) are downplayed.

Cognitive metaphor and manipulation

For the purpose of our paper, it is important to bear in mind the partial mapping between the source and the target domain, as well as the experiential grounding of cognitive metaphors. Undoubtedly, our experiences differ not only from culture to culture, but also from individual to individual. In our opinion, it is precisely this distinguishing factor that triggers substantial differences in the metaphorical representation and, subsequently, in the interpretation of the same concept or experience by various individuals. The differences of perspective endow metaphor with a genuine power to shape our perceptions, attitudes and beliefs, and even to create new realities:

> "A metaphor may thus be a guide for future action. […]. In this sense metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies. […] New metaphors, like conventional metaphors, can have the power to define reality. They do this through a coherent network of entailments that highlight some features of reality and hide others. The acceptance of the metaphor, which forces us to focus *only* on those aspects of our experience that it highlights, leads us to view the entailments of the metaphor as being *true*." (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 156-157)

[10] Source: Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. 1980, p. 28

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The use of specific cognitive metaphors has an implicit manipulative potential, in that it influences the way people interact with the world. More specifically, people draw inferences, shape perceptions, set goals, make commitments, execute plans, etc., depending on the way in which they structure their experience by means of metaphors. Ordinary people, as well as scientists, politicians, specialists in various fields of activity, the mass-media, etc. use metaphors, consciously or unconsciously, to manipulative purposes.

Political speeches, in particular, abound in the subversive use of metaphors. To give an example, we shall make a brief account of President Carter's stance toward the 1979 energy crisis. In his Address to the Nation delivered on 15 July 1979, the president referred to the crisis as "the moral equivalent of war.": "The real issue is freedom. We must deal with the energy problem on a war footing.[11]" His speech was sprinkled with *war* metaphors, such as "energy war", "fight", "targets", "win", "attack", etc., which generated a network of entailments and provided grounds for specific inferences: the existence of an external, hostile enemy, the necessity to set targets, to establish a chain of command, to plot new strategies, to marshal forces in order to overcome and defeat this threat to national security. The *war* metaphor translated into future course of action, constituting a license for policy change and political and economic undertaking.

Similarly, the economic discourse, and particularly economic reports, make consistent use of a complex web of cognitive metaphors, among which the *war* metaphor is worthy of special attention. In the context of increasingly fierce competition between economic agents, the war metaphor serves primarily to raise awareness on the potentially destructive effects of aggressive or inadequate economic policies. Although the structural metaphor of economy-as-war seems to prevail, the economic discourse also features other instances of structural metaphors, among which the metaphor that assimilates the functioning of the economy to the functioning of a machine, or the one that relies on the analogy between the structure of the economic system and the structure of a building. What is worthy of note is that the choice of a specific metaphor highlights different aspects of economic realities and events; hence is likely to manipulate in a particular manner the public's perceptions and reactions to economic events, trends and developments.

Most often than not, structural metaphors co-occur with ontological metaphors that allow people to envisage the economy in terms of a human being, or even a plant. Moreover, it is widely acknowledged that economic variables and indicators such as prices, interest rates, revenues, inflation, currency trading or exchange rates are commonly conceptualized in terms of either concrete objects or personified as humans. The ontological metaphor usually combines with the orientational metaphor in order to describe the fluctuations in the levels of the above mentioned variables[12].

Thus, for instance, prices are typically viewed as discrete entities (or objects) moving on a vertical or horizontal axis. This activates the "path schema", involving physical or metaphorical movement from one point to another, with a starting point, a goal/destination, an object that is moved from one location to another, a vehicle by means of which movement takes place and a series of intermediate points or obstacles.

[11] Source: http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/jimmycartercrisisofconfidence.htm

[12] Lakoff and Johnson (1980) explain how seemingly disjointed metaphors for the same concept can coherently overlap. The complexity of experience and the partial structuring of metaphors account for the use of multiple metaphors in order to structure a single concept.

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Orientational metaphors such as *rise, fall, go up/down* applied to financial variables have become conventionalized to such a degree that they their metaphorical nature is no longer perceived. Moreover, since the economic reports on financial news are based on presenting figures and percentages drawn from statistics, they are generally viewed as being inherently objective and as serving informative purposes.

However, in our opinion, despite their highly conventional and unbiased nature, financial orientational metaphors do not only provide the public with information and with convenient cognitive tools to approach highly specialized economic concepts, but also carry a (more or less) latent manipulative potential. In order to identify the specific elements that activate this potential, as well as the extent to which orientational metaphors can be used to shape people's perceptions and courses of actions, we focused on a corpus of articles and economic reports published in the online editions of six English-language newspapers: *The Economist, The City AM, The Wall Street Journal, The Telegraph, The Guardian* and *The Capital Gold Group*.

In order to refine our analysis, we limited the scope of our research to recent articles dealing with *bitcoin-related issues*. Our choice was motivated by the fact that, ever since its creation in 2009, bitcoin has given rise to lively debates among economic analysts and ordinary people alike.

What is bitcoin? Created in 2009, it is a digital currency that is completely decentralized. According to https://www.theguardian.com/business/2017, bitcoin is a digital currency that emerged after the financial crisis and is completely decentralized. It facilitates payments by using peer-to-peer technology and can be used on the internet or in brick and mortar stores. It is considered a type of crypto-currency because it uses cryptography for security, making it extremely difficult to counterfeit. Allowing people to bypass banks and traditional payment methods for goods and services, bitcoin has evidently caught the imagination of some investors, because its price has surged by more than 900% in 2017. *Should investors buy? Can we value bitcoin? How high could the price go in the long run?Will bitcoin become a legitimate form of currency and financial vehicle for investments? Does it have the potential to rival the U.S. dollar and even gold?* are but few of the questions that remain to be resolved. Our assumption is that the use of carefully selected metaphors to refer to this controversial cryptocurrency can provide a basis for shaping the public's opinions and course of action in bitcoin-related issues.

The manipulative nature of Bitcoin metaphors

The economic articles reporting about bitcoin display numerous instances of metaphors, particularly spatialization metaphors:

> (1) But it is worth remembering that the cost of using bitcoin *is going up*. Each transaction has to be verified by "miners" who need a lot of computing power to do so, and a lot of energy: 275kWh for every transaction, according to Digiconomist, a website. […] The miners are rewarded for their efforts by being paid in bitcoin; they are delighted by *the rise* in the currency's price.
> (Source: https://www.economist.com/news/finance-and-economics/21731827-getting-out-such-illiquid-asset-can-be-harder-getting-bitcoins)

> (2) The price of bitcoin has *smashed* through $5,000 to *an all-time high.*
> The cryptocurrency *rose* by more than 8% to $5,243 having started the year at $966. Bitcoin has *soared* by more than 750% in the past year and is worth four times as much as an ounce of gold.

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But the price has been volatile. The digital currency *plunged below* $3,000 in mid-September […].
(Source: https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/oct/12/bitcoin-price-5000-cryptocurrency-gold-bubble)

(3) Bitcoin finally *rose* back above $11,000 for the first time since Wednesday, the day the cryptocurrency first broke the mark.
Following bitcoin's stunning mid-week streak, in which it *broke through* both $10,000 and $11,000 in quick succession, the volatile asset just as quickly *plummeted back down* to around $9,500. […] Bitcoin *reached as high as* $11,156 this morning, but at the time of writing, it had *slipped* back *down*. The cryptocurrency was *down* 0.72 per cent at $10,781.26, according to Coindesk's index.
The recent *rocketing*of bitcoin's price had led some analysts to call it a speculative bubble.
(Source: http://www.cityam.com/276786/bitcoin-back-above-11000-after-us-regulators-approved)

(4) As Bitcoin *climbed* above $1000 per unit on Dec. 4th, former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan said, *It's a bubble.* […].
Mr. Greenspan's quite familiar with bubbles as he resided over the dot.com bubble implosion of the early 2000's. Sure enough, a few short weeks after his bitcoin bubble premonition, the virtual currency lost over half its value, *plunging to a low* of $455. The *downfall* began as reports on Monday surfaced stating officials at the People's Bank of China met with over 10 major third-party payment processors and ordered them to stop working with bitcoin exchanges.
(Source: https://www.capitalgoldgroup.com/blog/the-bitcoins-lack-of-intrinsic-value-will-lead-to-its-downfall/)

(5) MOST money these days is electronic—a series of ones and zeros on a computer. So it is rather neat that bitcoin, a privately created electronic currency, *has lurched* from $1,000 to above $10,000 this year (see chart), *an epic journey* to add an extra zero. […] Bitcoin can be used to buy a few things. But a currency has three main functions: store of value; means of exchange; and unit of account. Bitcoin's volatility, seen when it *fell* 20% within minutes on November 29th before *rebounding*, makes it both a nerve-racking store of value and a poor means of exchange. Imagine buying an iPhone X with bitcoin in January. You would by now be cursing as the same coin could buy ten phones—Christmas gifts for the whole family. […]
(Source:https://www.economist.com/news/finance-and-economics/21731827-getting-out-such-illiquid-asset-can-be-harder-getting-bitcoins)

(6) Oliver White at Fathom Financial Consulting wrote that bitcoin "certainly fits the criterion" for a bubble asset. Using data stretching back to 2013, Fathom's economists […] found the current value of bitcoin running at six times its average price since 2013. The cryptocurrency *has yo-yoed* with extreme volatility over the period – over the past week, the price *has leapt to as high as* $11,379 and *plunged* to $9,146 before *rebounding* to $10,700.
(Source:https://www.theguardian.com/business/2017/dec/02/bitcoin-is-it-a-bubble-waiting-to-burst-or-a-good-investment)

(7) *The gravity-defying rise* of bitcoin has been drawing in new money from people who appear to know nothing about the cryptocurrency other than the fact that its price *has gone up* a lot in a hurry.
(Source:https://blogs.wsj.com/moneybeat/2017/12/01/bitcoin-ignorance-and-you/)

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> (8) But as bitcoin *hits the stratosphere*, there are fears an economic bubble is forming as it becomes treated less like a currency and more like a store of value, open for speculators making ever increasing bets on how far it can rise. […]
> Economists have compared bitcoin's*meteoric rise* with past bubbles, such as the tulip mania of the 17th century and the dotcom bubble that began in the late 90s with the Nasdaq index in New York and burst in 2000.
> (Source:https://www.theguardian.com/business/2017/dec/02/bitcoin-is-it-a-bubble-waiting-to-burst-or-a-good-investment)

The excerpts above present a sense of consensus, in that they show evidence that spatialization metaphors are the favourite means to convey the ever-fluctuating nature of bitcoin's price. Our corpus features a wide range of verbal metaphors implying various types of trajectories and/or movements: linear movements along a typically vertical axis: upward movement - *go up* (ex. (1) (7)), *rise* (ex. (1), (3), (7),) *soar* (ex. (2)), *climb* (ex. (4)), *reach as high as* (ex (3)) or downward movement - *fall* (ex. (5)), *slip down* (ex. (3), *downfall* (ex. (4)) and sudden, uncontrolled, irregular movements – upward: *lurch, rebound* (ex. (4), (6)), *smash to an all-time high* (ex. (2)), *break through* (ex. (3)), *rocket* (ex. (3)), *leap high* (ex. (6)) or downward: *plunge below* (ex. (2), (4), (6)), *plummet down* (ex. (3)).

To the difference of the linear, smooth movement verbs, the metaphorical patterns centered on verbs that express irregular, sudden movement are an obvious indicator of bitcoin's instability and volatility. In our opinion, such metaphors may well have a signal function in that they indirectly question the reliability of the cryptocurrency and further on, contribute to forging the image of a speculative bubble.

In example (5), the metaphor of the "epic journey", placed in the very opening sentence of the article accounts for the idea of a large-scale financial phenomenon. Its association with the verb "lurch", however, functions as a downplayer, reorienting the receivers' attention on bitcoin's lack of stability. Furthermore, the distrust toward the alluring aura of bitcoin as a trading vehicle is enhanced by the clever description of the cryptocurrency in terms of a *nerve-racking* store of value and of a *poor* means of exchange. The use of the metaphorical constructions "*nerve-racking"* and "*poor"* represents an effective manipulation strategy, carrying additional information about bitcoin's lack of intrinsic value and inherent instability. The negative entailments of the two metaphors are likely to prompt the public into being extremely cautious about investing in bitcoin currency.

Moreover, in example (6), the highly original verbal metaphor "*yo-yo*" is evocative of the repeated fall and rise fluctuations in bitcoin's price and value, which implicitly suggest the extreme unpredictability and volatility of the crypto-currency. Thus, in our opinion, the metaphor represents an indicator that investing in bitcoin in hopes it will appreciate in value is not advisable.

In examples (7) and (8), the references to "*gravity-defying rise*" and to "*hitting the stratosphere*" are suggestive of the spectacular increase in bitcoin's price and may potentially mislead people into thinking that investing in bitcoin with the expectation of high return is worth it. Nevertheless, the text contains an important linguistic clue for deciphering the true nature of bitcoin's ascension – the metaphorical construction "*meteoric rise*" (ex. (8)). The associative field of the metaphor includes concepts such as "spectacular", "sudden", "incandescent", but also the ideas of "transitory", "fugacious". Thus, at a closer look, the metaphor contributes to raising people's awareness concerning the ephemerality of the digital currency.

Concluding remarks

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The analysis of the corpus has led us to the conclusion that spatialization metaphors used in reference to bitcoin currency allow people to have a glimpse into the upcoming economic developments. Not only do metaphors encapsulate important information, signaling the fluctuations in bitcoin's price and value, but they also foreshadow the inevitable collapse for a currency that has no intrinsic value. In light of the above, we can confidently state that cognitive metaphors can be successfully used for manipulative purposes in the economic discourse, being able to shape people's perceptions and attitudes, to justify their behavior, and to orient them towards responsible courses of action.

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Corpus

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