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# TWITTER-BASED MULTIMODAL METAPHORICAL MEMES PORTRAYING DONALD TRUMP

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**Abstract:** The present study focuses on multimodal conceptual metaphors with the TRUMP-PRESIDENT target domain in Twitter-based political memes. The source and target domains of such metaphorical memes are cued (exclusively or partially) in visual and verbal semiotic modes where verbal texts anchor the images guiding their interpretation. Expressing a strong critical stance, the analysed memes are designed to elicit negative inferences and emotional attitudes.

**Keywords:** conceptual metaphor, emotional attitude, inference, multimodality, political Internet meme, Trump.

## 1. Introduction

Donald Trump has probably been the most controversial personality on the US political scene. A businessman and reality TV star of no previous political experience in the past, Trump was able to win the 2016 presidential election and become the 45<sup>th</sup> president of the United States. Although it is hard to assess the true role of social media in his unexpected victory, many scholars note that his personal Twitter account had a significant effect on the outcome of the elections (Ahmadian et al. 2017: 52; Belt 2018: 112; Cornfield 2017; Enli 2017; Galdieri et al. 2018: 2; Johnson 2016; Williams 2017). They state Trump's Twitter has had an agenda-setting impact on the US politics (EB, *s.a.*), constituting a powerful arena for construing and maintaining his image (Enli

2017: 59). Further, despite his eccentric and unconventional rhetoric being subject to constant debate, the 45<sup>th</sup> American president stays among the most popular personalities on Twitter, with more than 60 million followers from all over the world (DJT, *s.a.*). Numerous Internet users from different countries, of various cultural and social backgrounds are attracted to Trump's Twitter account, where they enter into communication with the president by responding to his tweets.

The majority of studies focusing on Trump's discourse on Twitter investigated how his communication style contributed to the victory in the presidential election and influenced people's views in general. In this line of thought, Cornfield (2017) analyses Trump's Twitter-savvy techniques and populist stance, by which the Trump campaign solicited support. Enli (2017) investigates Trump's tweets during the 2016 campaign claiming that his tweeting style is marked by amateurism that strengthens the image of an authentic candidate. Schneiker (2018) studies the image Trump created on Twitter during his campaign and the first 100 days of his presidency, which she dubs a "superhero anti-politician celebrity" (*ibid.*, 210). Ott (2017) concentrates on Trump's tweeting style, characterising it as simple, impulsive, and uncivil. Pérez-Curiel and Limón Naharro (2019) focus on the study of Trump's propaganda mechanisms on Twitter during the first 100 days of his presidency. Painter and Rizzo (2018) use a computer-assisted quantitative content analysis to investigate the tone of the 2016 US presidential primary candidates' rhetoric on Twitter. They maintain that Trump's rhetoric was vague in terms of policy details, extensively hyperbolic, and less realistic in tone compared to his Democratic opponents. Fromm et al. (2018) study the topics of Trump's tweets during primaries and find that most of his tweets were about parties, other politicians, and the media. Lovett et al. (2019) analyse President Trump's tweeting behaviour and reveal the following strategies: denying, delegitimising, advertising, interpreting, misleading, using emotional language, insulting/belittling, ideologically extremising, mockery/sarcasm, personalising, and threatening. Gershberg (2018) argues that Trump employs a paranoid style on Twitter by promoting conspiratorial fantasies. Goroshko and Poliakova (2018) conclude that persuasiveness in Trump's

Twitter discourse is achieved through such linguistic means as imperative constructions, short sentences and slogans, future tense forms, elliptical sentences, and metaphor.

Another line of research concerning Trump embraces the studies of the Internet memes featuring the president. These studies predominantly deal with multimodal or visual instantiations found on social media including Twitter. Denisova (2019), investigating memes that circulated on Twitter on the eve of the election day mocking and criticizing Trump and Clinton, singles out three features of memetic communication in the US, which include persistent curation of memes, reliance on media agenda, and carnivalization of political discussion.

Among the studies dealing with the Internet memes featuring Trump, which are not based on Twitter, Ross and Rivers (2018) apply critical discourse analysis, thus revealing how humour, delegitimation strategies, and intertextuality are intertwined in Internet memes, transmitting a negative image of the president. Heiskanen (2017) focuses on memes that called attention to Trump's contradictory or incongruous statements commenting on his policy positions. Lamerichs et al. (2018) pay special attention to alt-right memes framing Trump and contend that during the 2016 American presidential elections memes were powerful and persuasive media, adopted by the alt-right to defame and ridicule the political opponents and glorify Trump as the ultimate saviour.

However, despite such close attention to Trump's discourse and Trump's image on social media from scholars of various fields of research, there has been no detailed investigation of the Internet memes employed by Trump's Twitter users in response to Trump's tweets and representing his metaphorical image.

The aim of this research is to reconstruct the cognitive models underpinning typical Twitter-based multimodal metaphorical memes portraying Trump in order to reveal

their socio-pragmatic implications. A closer look is taken at the following three aspects:

1. The source domains that are recruited to metaphorically depict Trump.
2. The interface of the verbal and visual modes in structuring the source and target domains of the memes.
3. The critical political stance of the memes; inferences and emotional attitudes that can be triggered by particular source domains.

The innovative aspect of this study stems from bringing together the methodological tools of the conceptual metaphor theory (CMT), multimodal studies, and political discourse analysis to investigate a metaphorical Internet meme portraying Trump on his own Twitter account. It is enhanced by the view of the meme as a unit of monomodal/multimodal Internet communication that embodies a communicative action of its creator who is motivated by the need to respond to a tweet from Trump, express a particular political stance, and get a response from other Internet users. This view not only highlights the creative nature of a multimodal conceptual metaphor that exploits affordances of different semiotic modes, combining them in unexpected ways (El Rafaie 2015: 13), but also puts a multimodal conceptual metaphor into a socially and culturally specific communicative context, where it entails evaluative inferences and acquires emotional value, thus affecting its recipients. Therefore, it allows us to look at the socio-pragmatic "effects" of conceptual metaphors, ignoring what is seen as "a major debt of CMT" (Kövecses 2017: 345).

This article is organised as follows. The Introduction gives an overview of related papers, sets the aim of this paper, sheds light on its innovative nature and describes its structure. Section 2 discusses the notion of meme and reveals the fundamental features of political Internet memes as well as their role in political Internet discourse. Besides, it focuses on the conceptual and multimodal metaphor research as well as on the application of its tools in investigating multimodal metaphorical memes portraying Trump. This section also features the criteria applied to select the sample and explains

the methodological procedure of the research. Section 3 discusses the results of the analysis of eight multimodal metaphorical memes each of which instantiates a specific category of memes represented by the sample. Finally, the conclusion sums up the results and outlines some prospects for further research.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1 Political Internet memes from a linguistic perspective

According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary (MWD, *s.a.*), a **meme** is "an idea, behavior, style, or usage that spreads from person to person within a culture". The term "meme" was coined in 1976 by the biologist Richard Dawkins in his book "The selfish gene" to introduce the concept of a replicating entity in culture. To name the new concept, Dawkins made use of the Greek word *mimēma* ("that which is imitated" (Lexico, *s.a.*)) and abbreviated it to "meme" in order to make it sound like "gene" (2006: 192). In Dawkins' interpretation, a meme is a unit of cultural transmission, which propagates itself "by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation" (*ibid.*, 192). Among the examples of memes, the scientist lists material things like catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots, building arches, as well as such abstract notions as the idea of God (*ibid.*, 192). Dawkins claims that memes are subject to a heavy competition for human attention, in which some of them spread exponentially ousting the "weaker" ones. Those memes of high survival value are characterised by stability that encompasses the following three qualities (*ibid.*, 17; 194-195):

- longevity – memes of high longevity tend to become more numerous because they have longer time available for making copies of themselves;
- fecundity – the higher the speed of replication is, the more copies are produced;
- copying-fidelity – accuracy of replication contributes to breeding more copies.

Dawkins' approach has met with some criticism for applying a biological metaphor to cultural phenomena, since, as Shifman (2014: 11-12) puts it, reducing culture to

biology narrows and simplifies complex human behaviours. Despite that, the meme concept "has been enthusiastically picked up by Internet users" (ibid., 13). Back in the 1960s, McLuhan (1994: 7) famously claimed, "the media is the message", meaning that the new forms of electronic means of communication affect the structure and meaning of the message. Nowadays this statement has become even more relevant since Internet platforms like Twitter enable users to communicate by means of texts, which combine resources of various semiotic modes (Мелещенко 2018: 48). Consequently, one of the most popular trends of Twitter communication is creating and using Internet memes to express messages. As Shifman (2014: 15) argues, "Internet memes can be treated as (post)modern folklore, in which shared norms and values are constructed through cultural artifacts such as Photoshopped images or urban legends".

The properties of successful replicators mentioned by Dawkins have been boosted by the Internet (ibid., 17). Therefore, the following features are particularly characteristic of an **Internet meme** (ibid., 18-22):

- gradual propagation from individuals to society – Internet memes pass along from person to person, but gradually scale into a shared social phenomenon, as the content spread by individuals can achieve mass levels within hours;
- reproduction via copying and imitating – Internet memes reproduce by imitation, in the process of which they are often altered by users who prefer to create their own versions of them;
- diffusion through competition and selection – adaptability of Internet memes to the sociocultural environment determines their competition and selection patterns.

In contemporary scholarship, the term "Internet meme" does not have an accepted definition and is interpreted as:

- "any artifact (a film, spoof, rumor, picture, song, etc.) that appears on the Internet and produces countless derivatives by being imitated, remixed, and rapidly diffused

by countless participants in technologically mediated communication" (Dyner 2016: 662);

- "(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users" (Shifman 2014: 41);
- "multimodal artifacts remixed by countless participants, employing popular culture for public commentary" (Milner 2013: 2357);
- "a relatively complex, multi-layered, and intertextual combination of (moving) image and text that is disseminated by the active agency of internet users, becoming popular among them" (Laineste & Voolaid 2016: 27).

These definitions highlight different characteristics of the Internet meme from similarity in form and content (as favoured by Shifman (2014)), active participation of users in their creation and modification (as accentuated by Dyner (2016), Shifman (2014), and Milner (2013)) to multimodal semiotic structure (as emphasised by Milner (2013) as well as Laineste and Voolaid (2016)).

Bearing in mind the characteristics of virality and of the Internet environment stated above, we adopt Castaño's (2013: 97) definition of the Internet meme, as "a *unit of information* (idea, concept or belief), which *replicates* by passing on via *Internet* (e-mail, chat, forum, social networks, etc.) in the *shape* of a hyper-link, video, image, or phrase". This working definition seems to be suitable since it captures the asymmetry between an idea (a meaning) and the multiple/multimodal forms it takes in the process of dissemination, which is crucial for cognitive and multimodal linguistics. Besides, this definition avoids narrowing the term and is, consequently, universal, including both monomodal and multimodal units of information on the Internet, altered and non-altered, representing a group or single. However, it is important to note that we do not draw a distinction, as, for example, Shifman (2014: 56) does, between memes and

virals, with the former representing a collection of texts that always undergo some modification and the latter being single cultural units that propagate by imitation as exact copies. For now, we side with Castaño (2013) who considers these two phenomena to be memes, and regard the differentiation between memes and virals as a prospect for further research.

Internet memes function in various spheres of communication including politics. A **political Internet meme** is one of the most complex and powerful tools of communication, as it, on the one hand, can inform, entertain or educate, and, on the other hand, is an effective means of persuasion and propaganda (Axelrod 2016; Denisova 2019; Haddow 2016; Lamerichs et al. 2018). Agreeing with Ross and Rivers (2018: 287) that "the discursive intention of many memes is to express a particular viewpoint or idea", we point out that a political Internet meme translates a highly emotional evaluative view on a certain political entity – idea, event, or personality – which already happens to be in the focus of attention of the Internet community. Moreover, it seeks to shape people's attitudes towards this political entity, triggering shared and unshared emotional and rational motivation experience.

Metaphorical memes, portraying Trump on his Twitter, fully meet the qualifications of a unit of political communication. Firstly, their content belongs to the sphere of politics since they construe an image of a political leader, the president of the US. Secondly, being replies to Trump's tweets, these memes are involved in the interaction between any American as a "person on the street" (though Twitter makes it possible for English speakers of any sociocultural background to get involved in communication) and the president as a representative of the highest US political institution.

A critical analysis of the current literature on the issue (Castaño 2013; Dynel 2016; Laineste & Voolaid 2016; Lamerichs et al. 2018; Miltner 2014; Ross & Rivers 2018; Shifman 2007; 2014; Zenner & Geeraerts 2018; Yus 2019) allows us to reveal the

following fundamental features of political Internet memes, which we present in order of importance:

1. **Multimodality.** Although political Internet memes can be purely verbal, in most instances they are viewed as artifacts existing in the forms of photographs or videos, or combinations of verbal and visual semiotic signs (Laineste & Voolaid 2016; Milner 2013; Yus 2019; Zenner & Geeraerts 2018). Thus, Internet memes can be treated as multimodal texts within the interdisciplinary approach of multimodal studies where a "mode" is understood as a "socially shaped and culturally given semiotic resource for making meaning" (Kress 2010: 79). In communication, the image, writing, music, gesture, and oral speech are regarded as modes (ibid.). Twitter-based multimodal political memes, as a rule, consist of images and written speech, probably one of the most widespread combinations of modes (see Bateman 2014).

2. **Intertextuality.** As a rule, memes are based on phenomena (represented by verbal, visual, or musical texts), which are clearly recognisable by members of the same cultural group. This characteristic makes them intertextual. Intertextuality refers to the absorption and transformation of other texts (Kristeva 1980: 66) by a political Internet meme through such intertextual devices as quotation, reference, plagiarism, allusion, parody, and pastiche (Пъере-Гро 2008). Intertextuality of Internet memes is enhanced by modern software that offers easy and quick ways of copying texts, images, or their fragments.

3. **Dependence on the current context.** Since political Internet memes mostly emerge as a reaction to some current political issue, personality, or important event, their understanding depends on the addressee's background knowledge of the political situation (see Castaño 2013: 97; Yus 2019: 109). A meme is understood and appreciated if it is based on a phenomenon, which is still within the memory of the recipients. Absence or lack of background knowledge leads to the recipients' failure to understand all the implications drawn by an Internet meme.

4. Emotional colouring. Extensive use of such stylistic devices as hyperbole, contrast, litotes, metaphor, and metonymy fills political Internet memes with images triggering emotions. Memes also exploit the power of image to convey and evoke emotions by depicting people who experience certain emotional states (Мартынюк 2015: 69). Furthermore, memes containing vivid metaphoric images are powerful means of persuasion, because they affect the emotional sphere of a recipient indirectly (Popa 2015: 84), bypassing their rationality capable of critical evaluation of the situation.

5. Humour. Some political Internet memes are humoristic in nature (Ross & Rivers 2018; Shifman 2014). It is universally acknowledged that humour is based on the awareness of incongruity, which arises when two incompatible ideas are brought together (see Koestler's (1964) bisociation theory, Suls's (1972) two-stage incongruity-resolution model and their application in handling humoristic political insults (Martynyuk 2017) or modern Anglophone jokes (Samokhina & Pasynok 2017)). Incongruity in political Internet memes often aims at mocking politicians, which makes memes very close to political cartoons.

6. Simplicity of the structure: the simpler the structure, the easier it is for a user to modify the meme and share it. This characteristic is mostly typical of videomemes. As Shifman (2014: 81-82) suggests, simple visual construction of topics contributes to spreading content, because when people understand something quickly they are prone to share it. Thus, simple framing in a political Internet meme facilitates its understanding for the average Internet user. Further, political memes also tend to be simple in form, since such simplicity makes the imitation easier (ibid.).

7. Anonymity surrounding their creation and distribution. As Ross and Rivers (2018: 293) point out, "creators of Internet memes can liberally share their political views regardless of how offensive, inaccurate, or unpopular they are as a direct result of not being linked to authorship and thus accountability." Therefore, Internet users are free

in their choice of the language and images that can express bitter criticism of a politician, bypassing the censorship characteristic of the traditional media.

Taken together, the features listed above make a political Internet meme a perfect weapon in expressing and shaping public opinions to promote a particular viewpoint (for an overview of viewpoint studies see Alexiyevets 2017). This becomes even more relevant to metaphorical political memes since one of the most important properties of conceptual metaphors is that they can create virtual realities (Kövecses 2018: 137). This feature reinforces the ability of political Internet memes to influence public opinions.

## *2.2 Multimodal metaphorical foundations of political Internet memes*

Quite a number of political Internet memes rest on metaphors, which, being easily recognised transnationally (Forceville 2008: 463), are extensively used "to represent the unknown, unresolved or problematic in terms of something more familiar and more easily imaginable" (El Rafeie 2003: 84). Thus, it comes as no surprise that metaphors are extensively used to portray such a controversial politician as Trump. Whereas, on the surface, metaphors can be perceived as embellishing entities, they are rooted in the conceptual level of cognition. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), our conceptual system is in many ways metaphorically structured. This assumption laid the groundwork for the CMT, launched by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and developed in a number of successive works (Gibbs 2011; Johnson 1987; Kövecses 2002; Lakoff 1987; 1993). This theory challenged the traditional views of metaphor as a trope, shaping the idea of metaphor as a conceptual phenomenon (for recent research into conceptual metaphor see Davydyuk & Panasenko 2016; Kövecses 2017; 2018; Morozova 2017).

As Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 5) claim, "the essence of **metaphor** is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another." This understanding is based on the cognitive operation of conceptual mapping, where the target conceptual structure (target domain/concept) is identified in terms of the source conceptual

structure (source domain/concept), which is, as a rule, a more concrete mental entity (Kövecses 2002: 6; Lakoff 1993: 210). Metaphorical mappings are sets of systematic correspondences between the source and the target conceptual structures (Kövecses 2002: 6), which are partial and unidirectional (ibid., 6; 91). That is, only a part of the source domain is utilised in every conceptual metaphor, resulting in highlighting some of the aspects, whereas the other aspects are hidden (ibid., 79-80). At the same time only the source domain can be mapped onto the target domain and not the other way round (ibid., 6).

Since a metaphor is "primarily a matter of thought and action and only derivatively a matter of language" (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 153), it can be translated in any semiotic mode. Metaphors can be cued in written or spoken language, images, music, gesture, or gaze, or their combination, which makes these metaphors multimodal. Though multimodal conceptual metaphor research encompasses such fields of study as gesture (McNeill 1992; 2005; Mittelberg & Waugh 2009; Muller & Cienki 2009) and music (Forceville 2009a; Zbikowski 2009), the majority of works in this field deal with images and their combination with language in such multimodal genres as advertising (Forceville 1996; 2008; Pérez-Sobrino 2017) and political cartoon, both static (Bounegru & Forceville 2011; El Rifaie 2009; Forceville & van de Laar 2019; Teng 2009) and animated (Popa 2015).

**Multimodal metaphors** are "metaphors whose target and source are each represented exclusively or predominantly in different modes" (Forceville 2009: 24). According to Forceville (2008: 469), a multimodal metaphor should meet the three primary criteria:

- given the context in which they occur, the two phenomena engaged in a metaphor belong to different categories;
- the two phenomena can be slotted as target and source respectively, and captured in an "A is B" format that forces or invites an addressee to map one or more features or connotations from source to target;

- the two phenomena are cued in more than one sign system, sensory mode, or both.

In this study, the concept of a multimodal metaphor is understood in El Rafeie's (2009: 181) sense of the term, where she extends Forceville's definition, given above, to include the cases where "target and source are partially represented in different modes", since most of the analysed memes fit this definition.

Compared to monomodal metaphors, multimodal instantiations are considered to be more emotionally coloured (Morozova 2017: 272) and more powerful in their impact on the addressee since the signs of different semiotic modes used together can modify meanings occurring in each semiotic mode in such a way that the set of possible meanings is multiplied (Lemke 1998: 92).

### *2.3 Data and methodology*

Our sample consists of 150 multimodal metaphorical Internet memes featuring Trump, which were manually collected from the memes used as replies to Trump's tweets on his Twitter account @realDonaldTrump. Each of the eight Internet memes analysed in Section 3 instantiates a specific category of memes represented by this sample.

The chosen memes appeared on Trump's Twitter in the period between September 1, 2018 and July 1, 2019. This particular period of time was selected because it covers the midpoint of Trump's presidency and includes such important events affecting Trump's reputation as the Midterm elections to the US Senate and Congress (November 6, 2018), Trump's State of the Union Address (February 6, 2019), and his announcement to run a re-election campaign (June 18, 2019). Thus, tackling the multimodal memes-responses to Trump's statements allows registering the reaction (positive or negative) of the international Internet community to the activity of the US president as well as reconstructing his metaphorical image as perceived by Twitter users.

The following criteria were applied to the sample selection:

1. The memes pertain to the category of multimodal Internet memes – those incorporating both image and written text.
2. In all the memes, the metaphor is applied to the TRUMP-PRESIDENT target domain (in this study we follow the convention in research literature of using SMALL CAPITALS to indicate names of domains/concepts (e.g., see Forceville 2009: 30).
3. The target and source of the metaphorical memes are exclusively or partially represented in different modes (in El Rafeie's (2009) understanding of the term "multimodal metaphor").

Relying on the methodological tools of CMT, enriched by the multimodality studies, we use the following methodological procedure to handle our sample:

1. Describing the semiotic structure of an Internet meme.
2. Construing and labelling a multimodal metaphor, embodied by a meme, based on the "A is B" model.
3. Revealing semiotic resources (modes) recruiting the target and source domains. Most of our examples represent metaphors of a hybrid type (the term first introduced by Forceville (2002: 217)), where the target and the source have been physically integrated. One can recognise both, but cannot "disentangle" them; they form a single gestalt (2016: 247).
4. Disclosing how the verbal text and image interact in a multimodal metaphor to produce meaning. To reveal the interface of the image and language we employ Barthes' notion of anchorage opposed to relay (1977: 38). In his interpretation, anchorage occurs when the text is used to direct the recipients through the maze of possible meanings, to "remote-control" them to a pre-determined meaning. In the case of relay, the text advances the image by supplying meanings not found in the image itself (ibid., 40-41).
5. Interpreting a multimodal metaphor, which boils down to discovering which features (connotations, values, attitudes, or emotions) associated with the source are projected

onto the target (Forceville 2016: 244). In our case, interpretation involves disclosing the features mapped from a source domain onto the TRUMP-PRESIDENT target domain.

6. Clarifying if the meme involves any other multimodal tropes besides the metaphor, how these tropes are cued, and how they interact with the metaphor.

7. Revealing the critical stance that a meme entails through juxtaposing the features projected on the TRUMP-PRESIDENT target domain and the features expected from an efficient political leader. Predicting inferences and emotional attitudes, a multimodal metaphorical meme can possibly evoke.

### 3. Results and discussion: Trump's metaphorical images and their implications

The results of our study show that the TRUMP-PRESIDENT target domain is mapped in terms of such elaborations (non-conventional specifications (Lakoff & Turner 1989: 67-69) of the PERSON source domain as CONMAN, BRIDE, CLOWN, and CHILD; the OBJECT source domain – MACHINE (SHIP), PUPPET, FOOD (SPAM), and the INSECT source domain – PARASITE.

The first example instantiates multimodal metaphorical memes with the PERSON source domain. This particular meme is a reply to the president's tweet *Drug makers and companies are not living up to their commitments on pricing. Not being fair to the consumer, or to our Country!*

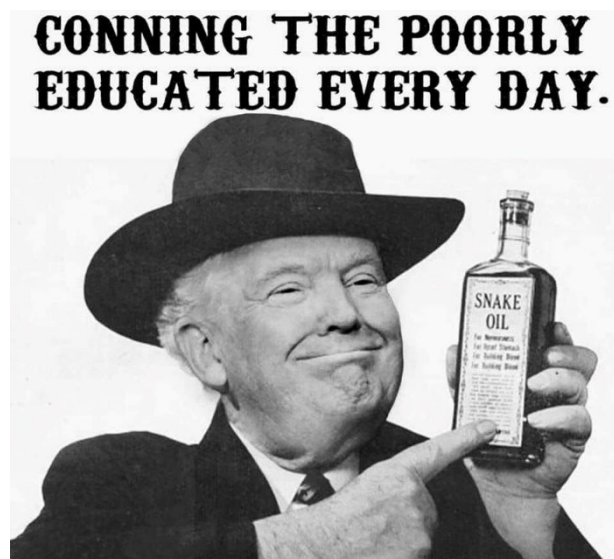


Figure 1. Metaphorical portrayal of Trump as a SNAKE OIL SALESMAN (Silvers 2019)

The meme consists of a black-and-white photo representing Trump wearing a dark suit with a black tie and a cowboy hat. He is holding a bottle in his left hand and pointing to this bottle with the index finger of the other hand. His facial expression conveys satisfaction. The bottle has the inscription *SNAKE OIL*. Another caption is placed at the top of the picture: *CONNING THE POORLY EDUCATED EVERY DAY*.

Such semiotic structure of the meme allows us to construe the TRUMP-PRESIDENT IS A SNAKE OIL SALESMAN multimodal metaphor. Though it is a case of hybrid metaphor where target and source create a gestalt (the images of Trump and the snake oil salesman are physically inseparable), we can still "disentangle" them for the purposes of analysis. The target domain is cued visually – by the photo-image of a person looking like Trump. The source structure is recruited partially visually (by the black-and-white photo-image styling Trump as a travelling salesman skilled in deception (consider the facial expression) in the Western United States) and partially verbally. As for the interface of the image and the language, the inscriptions *SNAKE OIL* and *CONNING THE POORLY EDUCATED EVERY DAY* serve as verbal anchors, narrowing possible interpretations of the image and specifying the source domain as A SNAKE OIL SALESMAN.

However, these inscriptions may be dispensable for those recipients who are not familiar with American culture, since this multimodal metaphor is based on the allusion to the 1940s advertisement of snake oil featuring a man with a bottle similar to the photo in the meme. In the US culture, snake oil has come to symbolize fraud (Gandhi 2013) and a snake oil salesman is associated with "someone who deceives people in order to get money from them" (Cambridge dictionary, *s.a.*).

The definition of a snake oil salesman allows us to attribute to Trump such a quality as being DECEPTIVE, reinforced by such traits of a typical salesman as GREEDY, SLICK, CROOKED, FICTITIOUS (WAN, *s.a.*). Obviously, these attributes are incompatible with the features expected from a worthy political leader. Consequently, the recipients can

draw inferences that Trump does not qualify for the president since he is giving empty promises and taking advantage of his presidency in order to make money and strengthen his power at the expense of ordinary Americans. In addition, the vivid negative image of the trickery SNAKE OIL SALESMAN, well satisfied with taking advantage of people who take his promises at face value, aims to evoke a strong negative emotional attitude towards Trump.

Another example of multimodal metaphors elaborating the PERSON source domain is a reply to Trump's tweet *The Russian Witch Hunt Hoax, started as the "insurance policy" long before I even got elected, is very bad for our Country. They are entrapping people for misstatements, lies or unrelated things that took place many years ago. Nothing to do with Collusion. A Democrat Scam!*



Figure 2. Metaphorical portrayal of Trump as PUTIN'S BRIDE  
(Lade Sade 2018)

This meme consists of the image of Trump in a bridal gown sitting in an armchair against the dark background and the verbal inclusions *TIME*, *Russian Bride of the Year*,

*DONALD TRUMP*, and *VLADIMIR PUTIN'S BLUSHING BRIDE*. It is well known that the "Time" magazine publishes issues announcing "Person of the Year" – the world's most influential individual of the year in a particular sphere. The words *Russian Bride of the Year* suggest a parodic allusion to Trump's 2016 "Time" magazine cover, representing him as Person of the Year.

The meme actualises the TRUMP-PRESIDENT IS PUTIN'S BRIDE metaphor that refers to the alleged support of Trump by Russia in the 2016 presidential election. The target domain of this multimodal metaphor is cued partially in the visual mode and partially verbally – by the photo of Trump and the verbal inclusion *DONALD TRUMP* that labels the image. The source domain is also represented visually (consider the bridal gown and veil) as well as verbally – by nominations *Bride* and *BLUSHING BRIDE*, which actually repeat the information found in the image, and also *Russian* and *VLADIMIR PUTIN'S*, which reinforce the image, directing the recipients towards the meaning chosen by the creator of the meme.

The relations between Trump and Putin are metaphorised as those of BRIDE and GROOM. The meme exploits a recurrent metaphorical scenario of the political discourse – POLITICAL PARTNERSHIP IS A MARRIAGE (Forceville & van de Laar 2019: 302). It is noteworthy that in the memes of this type Trump is always depicted as a woman. This metaphorical mapping highlights such features of the BRIDE source domain as MAIDEN, TIMID, ROMANTIC (WAN, *s.a.*) and projects them onto the TRUMP-PRESIDENT target domain. It is obvious that in the US that is recognized to be a masculine culture (Hofstede et al. 2010), where "men should be assertive, ambitious, and tough, whereas women are supposed to be tender and to take care of relationships" (*ibid.*, 155), the features highlighted in this metaphorical mapping are incongruent with the vision of a political leader. This incongruity becomes even more striking in the context of the Republicans' moral code that promotes the Strict Father Morality (Lakoff 2002). Thus, the recipients have all the cues necessary to infer the message of the Twitter user who criticises Trump for being weak in the US – Russia relations and, employing the image

of a BRIDE, provokes a negative emotional attitude towards him as a weak and dependent political leader.

The next example is a reply to Trump's tweet *The mainstream media has refused to cover the fact that the head of the VERY important Senate Intelligence Committee, after two years of intensive study and access to Intelligence that only they could get, just stated that they have found NO COLLUSION between "Trump" & Russia:*



Figure 3. Metaphorical portrayal of Trump as a CHILD THROWING A TANTRUM (Pissed off Parker 2019)

In this meme the text written in white letters with a black contour (using the font "Impact") is superimposed on the image at the top and bottom of the picture (Zenner & Geeraerts 2018: 175-176). It comprises a caricature image of Trump sitting on the floor with a cell phone, from which twitter birds and exclamation marks are flying out. The text, superimposed on the image, reads, "*ATTENTION EVERYONE! TWITTER TANTRUM IS NOW IN PROGRESS!*"

We label this multimodal metaphor TRUMP-PRESIDENT IS A CHILD THROWING A TANTRUM. The target domain is represented visually as the caricature depicts a man

with Trump's facial features and the well-known gimmick – specifically styled blonde hair. The source domain is cued by the same image, since Trump is depicted in a pose characteristic of small children – shouting, with a furious face and flaming hair accentuating the heat of emotion. The inscription *TANTRUM* contributes to the source domain as it has the meaning of "an uncontrolled outburst of anger and frustration, typically in a young child" (Lexico, *s.a.*). Labelling the situation represented by the caricature, the verbal element prompts its right interpretation, functioning as an anchor and directing the recipients towards the intended reading.

The features projected from the source domain onto the target – NAUGHTY, CRYING, CHILDISH, MISCHIEVOUS (WAN, *s.a.*) – are incompatible with those expected from a leader, who is to be CHARISMATIC, RESPECTED, INFLUENTIAL (WAN, *s.a.*). The critical stance of this meme is that Trump behaves on Twitter in a childish way. The meme is designed to elicit an inference that Trump does not meet the expectations for the president, accompanied by a negative emotional attitude triggered by the colourful pictorial image of a naughty child.

The next metaphorical meme employs the CLOWN source concept, elaborating the PERSON domain. From an interactional aspect, this meme is an answer to Trump's tweet *I hope the people over at the Fed will read today's Wall Street Journal Editorial before they make yet another mistake. Also, don't let the market become any more illiquid than it already is. Stop with the 50 B's. Feel the market, don't just go by meaningless numbers. Good luck!*



Figure 4. Metaphorical portrayal of Trump as a KU KLUX CLOWN  
(Live on Stage 2018)

The meme consists of Trump's Photoshopped image in a clown's makeup, the words *Ku Klux Klown* at the top of the picture and abbreviation *GOP* on the badge in the lower right corner, which stands for the Republican Party also referred to as the Grand Old Party. Taken together, these perceptual stimuli translate the TRUMP-PRESIDENT IS A KU KLUX CLOWN multimodal metaphor.

The target conceptual structure is recruited partially visually – by the Trump's Photoshopped image – and partially verbally – by the abbreviation *GOP*. As for the source structures, this metaphor has two source domains – CLOWN and KU KLUX KLAN, which are activated by the pun word *KLOWN*. The word *klown* is a blend of *Klan* and *clown*. *Klan*, in the verbal context of *KU KLUX KLOWN*, is associated with the Ku Klux Klan – an American right-wing organisation advocating white nationalism and anti-immigration, which historically used physical assault and murder against those it opposed (EB, *s.a.*). The other association, resulting from the homophone features of *klown* and *clown* and supported by the Trump's pictorial image (makeup, clown nose, and dishevelled ginger hair) activates the CLOWN source domain. Thus, the KU KLUX KLAN domain is cued verbally, while the CLOWN domain – partially visually and partially verbally with the text guiding the interpretation of the image.

This metaphorical mapping entails the projection of the attributes from both the source domains onto the TRUMP-PRESIDENT target domain. Obviously, the KU KLUX KLAN source domain supplies such attributes that are highly negative from the ethical point of view as RACIST, NAZI, NOTORIOUS, VIOLENT (WAN, *s.a.*). It is a bit more difficult to predict, which attributes will be highlighted in the CLOWN source domain for people of different backgrounds. Firstly, the word *clown* can hint at Trump's past as a reality TV star, performer, and entertainer, since one of its meanings is "a comic entertainer" (Lexico, *s.a.*). Secondly, in the current political discourse of the US, the word *clown* is often used to accentuate Trump's eccentric behaviour in line with another definition of the word – "to behave in a silly or funny way" (LDCE, *s.a.*). Thirdly, in the context of American mass culture, the image of a CLOWN is associated with creepy, scary clowns from horror movies, who are cruel and ruthless creatures. Anyway, the attributes mapped onto the TRUMP-PRESIDENT target domain from the KU KLUX KLAN source domain (RACIST, NAZI, NOTORIOUS, VIOLENT (WAN, *s.a.*)) and from the CLOWN source domain (INSANE, PSYCHO, COMICAL, MURDEROUS, GROTESQUE, DEMONIC, CLUMSY, SINISTER, SILLY, SCARY, RIDICULOUS, ECCENTRIC (WAN, *s.a.*)) are incompatible with the attributes expected from a political leader. Thus, this meme conveys a strong critical stance and can initiate all kinds of negative inferences as for Trump's adequacy as the president and negative emotional attitudes towards him, ranging from disapproval to contempt and even hate.

In the following example, the metaphorical meme rests on the OBJECT source domain. It is a reply to Trump's tweet *Fake News has it purposely wrong. Many, over ten, are vying for and wanting the White House Chief of Staff position. Why wouldn't someone want one of the truly great and meaningful jobs in Washington. Please report news correctly. Thank you!*



Figure 5. Metaphorical portrayal of Trump as a SINKING SHIP (Yvette with a Y 2018)

This meme depicts a sinking ship named *TRUMP* with a Russian flag. There are red hats with Trump's catchphrase *Make America Great Again* floating around the ship. There is the abbreviation *U.S.S.* standing for United States Ship (MWD, *s.a.*) on the side of the ship and also the abbreviation of Trump's catchphrase *MAGA* on the cockpit. Taken together, these pictorial and verbal perceptual stimuli bring about the TRUMP-PRESIDENT IS A SINKING SHIP multimodal metaphor. The target domain is exclusively represented in the verbal mode (*TRUMP*, *Make America Great Again*, *MAGA*), whereas the source is cued visually and verbally (*U.S.S.*). As in the previous examples, the verbal text directs the recipients to the pre-determined meaning of the image.

The ship image can be seen as a variety of the JOURNEY metaphor, in which political leaders are supposed to lead the country in the "right direction" (Forceville & van de Laar 2019: 302). Since the ship is sinking, the political leader cannot lead the country. Thus, such an attribute as FAILING is mapped onto the TRUMP-PRESIDENT target domain. As FAILING is opposed to PROMINENT (WAN, *s.a.*), an attribute expected from an efficient leader, the meme has a strong critical stance, suggesting an inference that Trump's policies as well as his presidency will fail. In addition, it evokes a negative emotional attitude toward Trump as a leader associated with failure.

Another widespread portrayal of Trump is based on the PUPPET domain. The analysed meme is a reply to Trump's tweet *While my (our) poll numbers are good, with the Economy being the best ever, if it weren't for the Rigged Russian Witch Hunt, they would be 25 points higher! Highly conflicted Bob Mueller & the 17 Angry Democrats are using this Phony issue to hurt us in the Midterms. No Collusion!*



Figure 6. Metaphorical portrayal of Trump as PUTIN'S PUPPET (Chefjoeygibsonrivas 2019)

This meme shows Putin pulling the strings of a puppet with Trump's facial features (the meme is animated as it is a GIF – Graphics Interchange Format). The verbal label *TRUMP THE PUPPET* is placed at the top of the image. Such semiotic structure of the meme construes the TRUMP-PRESIDENT IS PUTIN'S PUPPET multimodal metaphor. The target and source are cued in two modes – verbal and visual. The verbal mode actually repeats the information given by the image fixing its meaning. Such features of a PUPPET as SURRENDERED, CONQUERED, NOMINAL, ACCEPTING, SCRIPTED (WAN, *s.a.*) are mapped onto the TRUMP-PRESIDENT target domain. Similar to the image of PUTIN'S BRIDE, the image of PUTIN'S PUPPET conveys a strong negative stance, since it highlights the features that are incompatible with those of a top political leader of the American nation. The metaphorical meme suggests inferences and evokes emotions that can shape negative attitudes towards Trump and his political party.

One more source domain engaged in metaphorical memes portraying Trump on his Twitter is that of FOOD. The instantiation given below is a reply to the president's tweet *Two Fantastic People! My friends from the very beginning. Thank you D&S.*



Figure 7. Metaphorical portrayal of Trump as SPAM (BRing 2019)

The meme shows tinned meat shaped as Trump's face profile and a can of Spam with the inscription *SPAM with Real Hormel BACON*. The meme represents the multimodal metaphor that is labelled TRUMP-PRESIDENT IS SPAM. The target domain is exclusively cued in the visual mode. The source domain is cued partially visually (by the image of chopped meat and its tin) and partially verbally (by the text on the tin *SPAM with Real Hormel BACON*). As in the previous examples, the text labels the image directing its interpretation by the recipients.

The concept of SPAM is deeply ingrained in the Western culture and is viewed as the symbol of everything that is wrong with American processed food. A block of fatty and salty pork, Spam became a subject of derision during World War II, when it was one of the most affordable meals (OEFDA 2012: 342). Consequently, SPAM (canned meat) is associated with such features as FAKE, UBIQUITOUS, FALSE, POORLY (WAN,

*s.a.*) and all these features, highlighted by the metaphorical mapping, are projected onto the TRUMP-PRESIDENT target domain.

Since *spam* is a polysemantic word, for some recipients it can activate another source domain, that of COMPUTER TECHNOLOGIES, against which *spam* is interpreted as "irrelevant or unsolicited messages sent over the Internet, typically to a large number of users, for the purposes of advertising, phishing, spreading malware, etc." (Lexico, *s.a.*). This source domain gives rise to a metonymy based on the EFFECT FOR CAUSE relationship (Kövecses & Radden 1998: 56). It characterises Trump as A SENDER OF IRRELEVANT MESSAGES, implying criticism for his extensive usage of Twitter.

Both the metaphor and the metonymy contribute to devaluation of Trump as a political leader, entailing negative inferences and evoking negative emotional attitudes.

The next meme rests on the INSECT source domain and is a reply to Trump's tweet *One thing has now been proven. The Democrats do not care about Open Borders and all of the crime and drugs that Open Borders bring!*

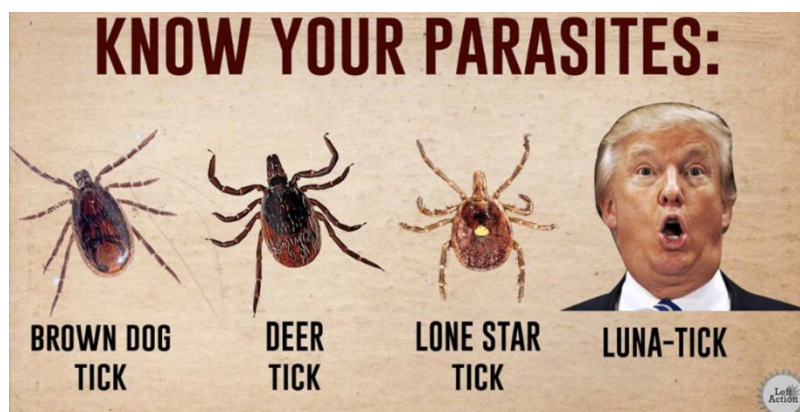


Figure 8. Metaphorical portrayal of Trump as a LUNATIC TICK (Burgess 2019)

The meme contains images of three kinds of ticks, i.e. parasitic insects, and a photo of Trump, placed in one line with the insects. There is the text *KNOW YOUR PARASITES*, located above the images, and also captions *BROWN DOG TICK*, *DEER*

*TICK*, and *LONE STAR TICK* put under the images of ticks and *LUNA-TICK* – under Trump's photo, respectively.

We can assume that this meme gives rise to the TRUMP-PRESIDENT IS A LUNATIC TICK multimodal metaphor. The target is exclusively represented in the visual mode – by the photo of Trump. The source domain is cued partially in the visual mode – by the images of ticks – and partially in the verbal mode – by the nominations (*PARASITES*, *BROWN DOG TICK*, *DEER TICK*, *LONE STAR TICK*, and *-TICK*). The images of the ticks and of Trump are of the same size and aligned with one another. This alignment contrasts the images making the metaphor more powerful. Similar to the above memes, the words guide the interpretation of the images.

In the process of mapping, such features of ticks as PARASITIC, BITING, SUCKING, INFECTIOUS, CRAWLING, RESISTANT, POISONOUS, HUNGRY (WAN, *s.a.*) are projected onto the TRUMP-PRESIDENT target domain. They obviously oppose the features of the prototypical president.

The pun word *luna-tick*, which is a homophone of *lunatic* meaning "an extremely foolish or eccentric person" (Lexico, *s.a.*), evokes another source domain, that of PERSON (LUNATIC), and highlights qualities like INSANE, MAD, DANGEROUS, CRAZY, INCOMPETENT, DISGUSTING, DUMB, DISTORTED, RIDICULOUS, ILL (WAN, *s.a.*), which are incompatible with the image of the president. Using this meme, the Twitter user criticises Trump for making money on the US citizens, and expresses doubt about Trump's sanity. Consequently, the meme entails inferences of Trump's inadequacy as the president accompanied by negative emotional attitudes, evoked by the images of LUNATIC and PARASITE INSECT.

#### **4. Conclusions**

In this paper, we have investigated multimodal metaphors portraying Donald Trump in recurrent political memes employed as replies to Trump's tweets on his Twitter

account. The examples discussed constitute multimodal metaphors, in which the highlighted features of such source domains as PERSON (CONMAN, BRIDE, CLOWN, and CHILD), OBJECT (MACHINE, PUPPET, and FOOD), and INSECT (PARASITE) are mapped onto the TRUMP-PRESIDENT target domain. Several multimodal metaphors recruit two source domains (CLOWN and KU KLUX KLAN, PARASITE INSECT, and LUNATIC PERSON). Within the semiotic structure of some multimodal memes, metaphor interacts with metonymy: TRUMP-PRESIDENT is metaphorically mapped as SPAM FOOD and metonymically – as A SENDER OF A SPAM ELECTRONIC MESSAGE.

All the analysed memes share such fundamental features of a means of political Internet communication as dependence on the current context, emotional colouring, simplicity, and anonymity. Most memes demonstrate intertextual nature instantiating allusions, including parodic ones. As for the humour, though all the analysed metaphors are based on incongruities, highlighting the features incompatible with those expected from an efficient politician, these incongruities might elicit emotions other than enjoyment: puzzlement, disapproval, contempt, or disgust.

The target and source domains of the multimodal metaphorical memes are cued exclusively or partially in the verbal and visual modes. While the visual mode prevails, the images alone are too vague to interpret. The verbal text anchors the images, labelling them and in this way guiding their identification and interpretation, specifying the source structures, and highlighting their particular features. Thus, the image and verbal text of multimodal metaphorical memes interact through the anchorage in which the text pre-determines the meaning of the image.

In all of the instances, the multimodal metaphors map negative features. These negative mappings involve such attributes as DECEPTIVE, SKILFUL, GREEDY, SLICK, CROOKED, FICTITIOUS (the SNAKE OIL SALESMAN source domain), MAIDEN, TIMID, ROMANTIC (PUTIN'S BRIDE), NAUGHTY, CRYING, CHILDISH, MISCHIEVOUS (CHILD), RACIST, NAZI, NOTORIOUS, VIOLENT (KU KLUX KLAN), INSANE, PSYCHO, COMICAL, MURDEROUS,

GROTESQUE, DEMONIC, CLUMSY, SINISTER, SILLY, SCARY, RIDICULOUS, ECCENTRIC (CLOWN), FAILING (SINKING SHIP), SURRENDERED, CONQUERED, NOMINAL, ACCEPTING, SCRIPTED (PUPPET), FAKE, UBIQUITOUS, FALSE, POORLY (SPAM), PARASITIC, BITING, SUCKING, INFECTIOUS, CRAWLING, RESISTANT, POISONOUS, HUNGRY (PARASITE INSECT), INSANE, MAD, DANGEROUS, CRAZY, INCOMPETENT, DISGUSTING, DUMB, DISTORTED, RIDICULOUS, ILL (LUNATIC). Some of these attributes directly depreciate the president's competence (the CLOWN, LUNATIC, and SPAM source domains).

These negative mappings entail further inferences of Trump's inadequacy as a US president. In addition, negative metaphorical images fusing affordances of the visual and verbal modes are apt to evoke strong negative emotional attitudes towards Trump, which multiplies the potential of the Internet memes to influence other Twitter users.

Further investigation should take a closer look at other tropes in multimodal political memes. Another fruitful aspect of research involves revealing the interaction between Trump's communicative strategies instantiated in his multimodal tweets and Twitter users' responsive strategies.

### **List of abbreviations**

CMT – Conceptual metaphor theory

DJT – Donald John Trump, [twitter.com/realDonaldTrump](https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump)

EB – Encyclopaedia Britannica

LDCE – Longman dictionary of contemporary English

MWD – Merriam-Webster dictionary

OEFDA – The Oxford encyclopaedia of food and drink in America

WAN – Word Associations Network

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## Résumé

This article analyses multimodal conceptual metaphors in Twitter-based political memes with the TRUMP-PRESIDENT target domain. The sample, selected from Trump's personal Twitter account, comprises 150 multimodal metaphorical Internet memes that are Twitter-users' replies to Trump's tweets. The research has adopted Forceville's and El Rafeie's understanding of a multimodal metaphor as well as Barthes' notion of anchorage opposed to relay in order to reveal the interface between the text and image, which is a typical combination of modes in the analysed memes. The source and target domains of the memes are cued (exclusively or partially) by means of the visual and verbal semiotic modes, with the texts anchoring the images and in such a way directing the recipients towards their intended interpretation. The mappings of Trump's metaphorical image recruit the PERSON (SNAKE OIL SALESMAN, BRIDE, CLOWN, and CHILD), OBJECT (MACHINE (SINKING SHIP), PUPPET, and FOOD (SPAM)), and INSECT (PARASITE) source domains. In the semiotic structure of some multimodal memes, metaphor relies on two source domains or interacts with metonymy creating images

that trigger several possibilities of interpretation. Some metaphorical memes represent an allusion, including a parodic one, to a politically relevant situation. The metaphorical and metonymical mappings highlight the exclusively negative features, which are incongruent with those expected from an efficient political leader. These negative mappings entail inferences of Trump being unable/unsuitable/not deserving to hold the position of the US president because of his poor moral or professional qualities. In addition, negative metaphorical images aim at evoking intense negative emotional attitudes towards Trump.

**Keywords:** conceptual metaphor, emotional attitude, inference, multimodality, political Internet meme, Trump.

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