Utilizing the USAS semantic tagger to analyze metaphor: A case study of the US legalization of same-sex marriage discourse

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Since the 1980s, the debate over marriages for people of the same sex has emerged. However, it was until June 26, 2015 that the US Supreme Court pronounced same-sex marriage to be legal nationwide. Although this landmark ruling is one of the most important social movements of our generation, it should be widely accepted that this legalization is controversial in terms of culture, politics, and religion. Since this matter is controversial, it should be examined through the lens of metaphor as metaphor is not merely a phenomenon whereby we talk and think about one thing in terms another, but it is also a means to create the "viewpointed" reality of the target concept. In this regard, I aim to investigate metaphorical patterns in the US legalization of same-sex marriage discourse to shed light on how metaphor is employed to conceptualize same-sex marriage controversies.

To this end, I first compiled a specialized corpus based on the more general News on the Web (NOW) corpus which gathers online news articles from 20 English-speaking countries from 2010 to the present time (Davies 2013). My purpose-built corpus contains 254 news articles (approximately 200,000 words) which were published in 2015 – the year of the legalization. This corpus was uploaded to Wmatrix (Rayson 2008), so that it could be annotated at the semantic level with the USAS tagger. Subsequently, I compared my corpus to the BNC sampler written informative corpus with the log-likelihood cut-off of 15.13 (99.99%, $p<0.0001$; 1 d.f.) to find the statistically significant domains belonging to the observed corpus.

Having gained the significant domains, I went through the wordlist of each domain and exported the concordance lines of the words and expressions referred to as "potential metaphorical pointers". Potential metaphorical pointers are either (a) words and expressions which have tendencies to express metaphorical senses in a particular context, or (b) words and expressions which should not but somehow occur in the corpus. In search of metaphorical expressions, I analyzed all of the potential metaphorical pointers based on the Pragglejaz (2007)'s MIP. Crucially, a cursory glance at the identified metaphorical expressions revealed to me that same-sex marriage controversies can be conceptualized by means of both conventional and novel metaphors. In light of this, I employed a mixed, adaptive method of analysis which combines "Conceptual Metaphor Theory" (CMT) with "Conceptual Blending Theory" (CBT) to cover not simply the pedestrian uses of metaphor, but also the wild and creative expressions. Specifically, while conventional metaphors were analyzed following the CMT traditions, novel metaphors were analyzed through the lens of blending.

The results of this study show that the same-sex marriage controversy is construed primarily by 10 types of metaphor, namely War/Combat, Building/Construction, Force, Object/Person/Living Organism/Location/Container, Religion and the Supernatural, Journey and Obstacles, Sports and Games, Crime, Light and Darkness, and Disease/Illness metaphors. Interestingly, the War/Combat metaphor is the most prevalent one and seems to reflect some conceptual links to other types of metaphor. Also, the metaphors in this specific type of discourse are normally used to either construct or reinforce the same-sex marriage controversy. Their function in attenuating the issue however can hardly be observed.

References

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