

Who is America and Where Does She Go? Cognitive Mechanisms in Inaugural Addresses of American Presidents

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ABSTRACT

Language makes it possible to use and understand complex language structures and cognitive mechanisms describing our reality. Scientists have made a number of attempts at understanding and using these conceptual mechanisms for various purposes. Phenomena which have fairly recently started attracting increasing attention in cognitive science are conceptual metaphor and metonymy. These linguistic mechanisms had for long been perceived as figures of speech in which one notion is understood through another.

However, scientific disciplines exploded during the last century and linguists discovered interesting things which largely clarified conceptual processing of language as well as various language phenomena. What we know about metaphor and metonymy today tells us that they are not just figures of speech comparing and replacing one notion by another but rather specific phenomena in which one notion is used to present another in a different way or, in case of metaphor, to map some of the source domain features to a target domain creating completely new concept which is a mixture of both source and target domains.

Politics is the area which abounds in metaphors and metonymies and from a linguistic perspective it is impossible even to imagine how a serious political speech would look like without these linguistic means.

The paper analyses this aspect of the American society and, as the prototype of the American political discourse, we analyse presidential inaugural addresses. Understanding the importance of this event, it is impossible not to think about the messages and linguistic means inaugural addresses contain. Inspired by these questions, we decided to analyse several inaugural addresses and determine how metaphors and metonymies are used in American political discourse over the last three decades. The analysis focuses on inaugural addresses of Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Hussein Obama.