Obama’s Jokes and Metaphorical Expressions in the White House Correspondents’ Dinner (2009–2016)

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to analyze Barack Obama’s jokes and metaphorical expressions in the White House Correspondents’ Dinner (WHCD) to show how his audience’s reaction to his humor is linked to the use of metaphors. The study contains not just verbal metaphorical analysis but also effective visual metaphors in an attempt to understand Obama’s hidden intentions behind them, and shows that background knowledge concerning the rhetorical devices is essential (Charteris-Black 2011, 2014, 2018; Fillmore 1982, Lakoff 1980, 1987, 2014; Waisanen 2015).

(1) The WHCD speeches demonstrate how the rhetorical capacities of presidents have been extended through jokes’ enthymematic smoke, attempting to turn perceived losses into gains by creeping up to the edge of the fire—a precipice that holds the possibility for tragedy to become comedy, and vice versa, given the risk involved (Waisanen 2015).

1. The aim of the research

• To supplement the scarcity of the previous study (Waisanen 2015).
→ He didn’t analyze metaphorical expressions and visual metaphors.

2. Method

Framework


Source


The procedure of the analysis

1. Extracting verbal similes and metaphors
2. Extracting visual metaphors (Forceville 2008)
3. Classifying types of metaphors

▶ Visual metaphor (Forceville 2008)

(2) a. contextual metaphor

An object is metaphorized because of the visual context in which it is placed.

b. Hybrid metaphor

Two objects that are normally distinct entities are physically merged into a single “gestalt”.

3. Data

Table 1 Verbal metaphor and simile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>year</th>
<th>topic of simile</th>
<th>metaphor (source domain)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>youth, fire</td>
<td>bridge, whirlwind, friend, enemy, iron, fire, color</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>war</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>trap</td>
<td>energy, food, journey, light</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>color</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>magic, the Ptolemaic theory</td>
<td>×</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>marriage, Hillary</td>
<td>fire</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*× refers to (0)

Table 2 Types of Visual Metaphors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>year</th>
<th>type (Forceville 2008)</th>
<th>metaphor/metonymy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Hybrid metaphor</td>
<td>THE WHITE HOUSE IS THE TRUMP TOWER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Contextual metaphor</td>
<td>DONALD TRUMP IS OSAMA BIN LADEN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Hybrid metaphor</td>
<td>OBAMA IS THE SATAN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Hybrid metaphor</td>
<td>THE CONGRESS IS THE FROZEN HELL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>OBAMA IS EDDARD STARK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>PUTIN IS A TEENAGE STAR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Hybrid metaphor</td>
<td>JOE BIDEN IS THE NEW SECURITY SYSTEM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Hybrid metaphor</td>
<td>OBAMA IS A SKELETON</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>others types</td>
<td>metaphor/metonymy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2012 Metaphor from metonymy (Goosense 1990) EXPRESSIONS ARE EMOTIONS

2013 Metonymy A CAT STANDS FOR OBAMA

2016 Metaphor from metonymy (Goosense 1990) EXPRESSIONS ARE EMOTIONS

In this presentation….

▶ Fire, marriage and color metaphor (Verbal metaphor)

▶ Hybrid metaphor (THE WHITE HOUSE IS THE TRUMP TOWER)

▶ Contextual metaphor (DONALD TRUMP IS OSAMA BIN LADEN)

● Fire metaphor and simile

(3) a. In the next hundred days, we will housetrain our dog, Bo, because the last thing Tim Geithner needs is someone else treating him like a fire hydrant. In the next hundred days, I will strongly consider losing my cool. (2009)

b. Bernie’s slogan has helped his campaign catch fire among young people. ‘Feel the Bern.’ ‘Feel the Bern.’ (2016).

• simile → “treat him like a fire hydrant” (2a)

→ someone should treat him as a key person to adjust a function of the government.

• idiom → ”lose one’s cool” (2a)

→ “Not stay in cool and in control” (Urban Dictionary) (UD)

• idiom → “catch fire” (2b)

→ Begin to burn. ‘(figurative) become interesting or exciting (Oxford Dictionary of ENGLISH)’

—99—
"Feel the Bern" → "Feel the burn"
An expression one uses when he/she supports Senator Bernie Sanders for President of the United States. (UD)

Table 3 Meanings of the metaphorical expressions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expression</th>
<th>Politician</th>
<th>meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>like a fire hydrant</td>
<td>Tim Geithner (Secretary of the Treasury)</td>
<td>To extinguish fire = Using Tim Geithner to control Obama. =To handle emergency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lose one’s cool</td>
<td>Obama</td>
<td>Not stay in cool and in control = Obama would be able to anything by using his power. =To set fire</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

three types of fire: natural fire, functional fire and organic fire (Charteris-black 2018).
→natural properties of fire, and the attribute is linked to its appearance and its intensity, which means that humans have limited control over fire. This type is classified into NATURAL FIRE.
→its effects such as providing light or providing heat indicates the aspect of the function of fire: FUNCTIONAL FIRE.
→ORGANIC FIRE: "a sequence of events from its start, and its growth through to its end" (Charteris-Black 2018: 30).

FrameNet (https://framenet.icsi.berkeley.edu/fndrupal/FrameGrapher)
- Fire_burning frame ORGANIC FIRE
- Fire_emergency_scenario

"Feel the Bern" → "Feel the burn"
Idiom →"Feel the burn” “feel someone”

Table 4 Meanings of honeymoon (OED)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>honeymoon</th>
<th>The period immediately following marriage, as characterized by love and happiness. Later also: a period of love and happiness at the beginning of a similar relationship.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>love and happiness</td>
<td>goodwill, enthusiasm. Friendly relations. Frequently in political contexts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5 A mapping of the marriage metaphor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Honeymoon</th>
<th>Presidency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The beginning of a marriage</td>
<td>The beginning of the presidency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love and happiness</td>
<td>goodwill, enthusiasm. Friendly relations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<A honeymoon is over> <The beginning of the presidency is over>
- A real start of a marriage
- To face a reality (both pros and cons)
- A real start of the presidency
- To face a reality (both pros and cons)

red wedding
A total disaster; a sudden event resulting in a complete change of fortune among rivals, involving immense loss on one side and the total triumph of the other, often involving a carefully planned betrayal and brutal bloodletting. Based upon the "Red Wedding" event in "Game of Thrones". (UD)

*red wedding
Game of Thrones
Game of Thrones as the background knowledge
OBAMA IS EDDARD STARK

Anyway, this year, I’ve promised to use more executive actions to get things done without Congress. My critics call this the “imperial presidency.” The truth is, I just show up every day in my office and do my job. I’ve got a picture of this I think. (2014)

Games of Thrones is the continuous theme (background knowledge) of metaphors in 2014 and 2016.

Color metaphor (idiom)

In the next hundred days, our bipartisan outreach will be so successful that even John Boehner will consider becoming a Democrat. After all, we have a lot in common. He is a person of color. Although not a color that appears in the natural world. What’s up, John? (2009)
Table 6 The meaning of “person of color”, “the natural world” and “world”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dictionary</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Person of color (UD)</td>
<td>White liberals invented the expression so colored guys would not be offended when people called them colored guys. If you said, “Hey colored guy, get your lazy black ass off of my car,” the colored guy would be offended and have his feelings hurt. So now, all good white liberals say, “Hey, person of color, get your employmentally challenged black backside off my car,” the colored guy is not offended, and his feelings don’t get hurt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The natural world (Merriam-Webster)</td>
<td>All of the animals, plants, and other things existing in nature and not made or caused by people.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| World (OED)                 | · A group or system of (usually similar) things or beings associated by common characteristics (denoted by a distinguishing word or phrase), or considered as constituting a unity.  
                              · The human race; mankind as a whole; human society. |

▶ Obama’s biracial background

(7) As the child of a black man and a white woman, someone who was born in the racial melting pot of Hawaii, with a sister who’s half Indonesian but who’s usually mistaken for Mexican or Puerto Rican, and a brother-in-law and niece of Chinese descent, with some blood relatives who resemble Margaret Thatcher and others who could pass for Bernie Mac, so that family get-togethers over Christmas take on the appearance of a UN General Assembly meeting. (Obama 2006: 274)

▶ Visual metaphor

► THE WHITE HOUSE IS THE TRUMP TOWER

(8) Donald Trump is here tonight! Now, I know that he’s taken some flak lately, but no one is happier, no one is prouder to put this birth certificate matter to rest than the Donald. And that’s because he can finally get back to focusing on the issues that matter -- like, did we fake the moon landing? What really happened in Roswell? And where are Biggie and Tupac? But all kidding aside, obviously, we all know about your credentials and breadth of experience. For example -- no, seriously, just recently, in an episode of Celebrity Apprentice - - at the steakhouse, the men’s cooking team cooking did not impress the judges from Omaha Steaks. And there was a lot of blame to go around. But you, Mr. Trump, recognized that the real problem was a lack of leadership. And so ultimately, you didn’t blame Lil’ Jon or Meatloaf. You fired Gary Busey. And these are the kind of decisions that would keep me up at night. Well handled, sir. Well handled. Say what you will about Mr. Trump, he certainly would bring some change to the White House. Let’s see what we’ve got up there. (2011)

<picture 2> (hybrid metaphor)

* Captions as the characteristics of Trump

“TRUMP the WHITE HOUSE”, “HOTEL”, “CASINO”, “GOLF COURSE”, and “PRESIDENTIAL SUITE”

(9) He had no ability to plan and organize and pay attention and switch focus; he had never been able to tailor his behavior to what the goals at hand reasonably required. On the most basic level, he simply could not link cause and effect. (Wolf 2018)

* An interpretation of the visual metaphor

The former leader intends to imply that Donald Trump is reckless, impetuous, and irrational, and his implication hits the nail on the head in that Obama brings to the audience’s attention to an awareness of public opinion at that time.

► DONALD TRUMP IS OSAMA BIN LADEN

(10) My fellow Americans, we gather during a historic anniversary. Last year at this time -- in fact, on this very weekend -- we finally delivered justice to one of the world’s most notorious individuals. (2012)

<picture 3> (contextual metaphor)

* Obama’s remark on the death of Osama Bin Laden

(11) Tonight, I can report to the American People and to the world that the United States has conducted an operation that killed Osama bin Laden, the leader of Al-Qaeda, and a terrorist who’s responsible for the murder of thousands of innocent men, women and children. (2011)
A mapping of the contextual metaphor

Table 7  A mapping within the same category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Notoriusness</th>
<th>Osama Bin Laden</th>
<th>Donald Trump</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>murderer</td>
<td>No scruples</td>
<td>Rebel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cruel</td>
<td></td>
<td>Disruptor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inhuman</td>
<td></td>
<td>Living outside the rules</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- hyperbole as a joke

\[\rightarrow \text{Obama emphasizes Trump’s notoriousness by comparing with the terrorist, Osama Bin Laden.}\]

4. Summary

Table 8 Effects of using the metaphorical devices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of metaphor</th>
<th>Effects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Fire (simile)     | · To evoke the fire frame (FrameNet)  
|                   | · To map the sequence of events onto the degree of the intensity of the emotion.  
|                   | · The image of Tim Geithner as the fire hydrant.  |
| Fire (slogan)     | · pun (various meanings are attached to the slogan) |
| Marriage          | · To indicate the beginning of a happy moment is over.  
|                   | · To face a reality |
| Color             | · self-deprecating  
|                   | · irony  
|                   | · racial awareness |
| Hybrid metaphor (Trump) | · To show everyone’s thoughts or images of Trump by using the visual metaphor. (sympathy)  
|                   | · a eureka moment |
| Contextual metaphor (Trump) | · To share the same property (notoriousness)  
|                   | · hyperbole |

- In this presentation, I pointed out the analysis of the previous study (Waisanen 2015) was insufficiency.
- Background settings (political figures, celebrities, movies (dramas), idioms, slogans) are significant to understand each joke.
- Metaphorical expressions including visual metaphors play an important role to understand jokes in the WHCD.
- Jokes include irony, self-deprecating, hyperbole, a eureka moment, and sympathy.
- Since the current study has only examined verbal and visual metaphors, more broad-ranging modes (movies, gestures) should be analyzed.

References

(Dictionaries)
Meriam-Webster (https://www.merriam-webster.com)
Urban Dictionary (https://www.urbandictionary.com)