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"World-beating" Pandemic Responses: Ironical, Sarcastic, and Satirical Use of War and Competition Metaphors in the Context of COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic tempted some governments to promise to wage "war" against it and implement "world-beating" control mechanisms. In view of their limited success, such claims soon came in for massive criticism, which turned their hyperbolic implicatures and figurative framing against them. Our paper focuses on such cases of "metaphor reversal" within the context of the British public debate. Drawing on examples from a corpus of media texts, we identify several types of the dissociation, including irony (i.e., putting the figurative claims' implicatures in doubt implicitly), sarcasm (i.e., explicitly decrying their plausibility) and satire (i.e., exhibiting their presumed absurdity), with reference to theory models of irony (echo, pretense, mental space structuring).

In conclusion, we argue that the seesaw of exchanges between exaggerated figurative claims of (imminent) success made by government politicians and their sarcastic-satirical debunking by media and opposition politicians has an ambivalent effect on public discourse. On the one hand, it highlights contrasts in policy and policy assessment and may also have entertainment value, but on the other hand, it conveys experiences of repeated, serial exposure of hyperbolic government rhetoric. This in turn may lead to an erosion of trust in official communication as being unrealistic, which may foster beliefs in conspiracy theories.

Introduction

When the urgency and global dimension of the COVID-19 pandemic became salient in early spring 2020, a number of political leaders in the Western world rushed to declare a "war" on the pandemic, not dissimilar to earlier pronouncements about "wars" against drugs, cancer, SARS, AIDS, and, in the political sphere, *war on crime* and *terror* (Chiang & Duann, 2007; Coleman, 2013; Elwood, 1995; Hodges, 2011; Sontag, 1978, 1991; Steuter & Wills, 2008). Now, threatened by the "invisible enemy" of a hitherto unknown virus, a new *war effort* had to be undertaken, according to several heads of government and state, including the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and the President of the United States[1]

(1) [British Prime Minister] Boris Johnson *declares "war"* on coronavirus with new emergency 'C-19' committee (*Daily Mirror*, 17 March 2020)[2]

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[1]For similar statements by other global leaders, e.g. UN Secretary-General António Guterres, China's President Xi Jinping and the French president, Emmanuel Macron (see Tian, 2020; United Nations, 2020); *The Guardian*, 21 March 2020, respectively.:
[2]Relevant WAR-metaphorical and other figurative passages in this and further examples has been put in italics by author.

(2) The fight to slow the spread of COVID-19 is "*our big war*," [US President] Trump said Thursday. "*It's a medical war. We have to win this war. It's very important.*" (*Time*, 19 March 2020)

However, public voices were soon raised against such *war declarations* e.g. by journalists and academics who claimed that the use of martial rhetoric in a public health crisis was misleading and/ or counterproductive and who invoked its problematic track record in public discourses (Haddad, 2020; Jaworska, 2020; Momtaz, 2020; Serhan, 2020; Tisdall, 2020; Vondermaßen, 2020). After all, WAR-based metaphors have often been used to dramatize and exaggerate the respective target referents as "life-or-death" emergencies. They also tend to advocate drastic countermeasures and to unambiguously evaluate their outcomes as *defeats* or *victories*, as has been pointed out in studies of such metaphors in health-related and other public discourse domains (Atanasova & Koteyko, 2015; Elwood, 1995; George, 2002; Johns & Borrero, 1991; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980/2003, pp. 156–157; Larson, Nerlich, & Wallis, 2005).

It has also been observed, however, that WAR- and generally FIGHTING-related metaphors are so pervasive in discourses that they seem to be unavoidable (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980/2003, pp. 4–5, 61–64; Semino, Demjén, & Demmen, 2018; Semino, Demjén, Hardie, Payne, & Rayson, 2018).[3] Furthermore, it could be argued in their defense that a metaphorical *war-declaration* was indeed apt in the COVID-19 context as a signal of urgency insofar as it alerted a largely uninformed public to the emergence of a new deadly danger to their lives and their socio-economic existences. However, this excuse may not be valid for all uses. In this paper, we explore critical reactions to WAR- and FIGHTING-related metaphors for COVID-19 pandemic management within the British context with regard to the pragmatic strategies employed to reject and/or subvert their framing effect. We distinguish various degrees of im-/explicitness of metaphor rejection, ranging from critical "thematization" and dismissal to implied ironical relativization and satirical subversion. We then discuss the possible "counter-framing" effects of these types of metaphor rejection.

Metaphor pragmatics

In recent years, the pragmatic aspect of metaphor, which once seemed to have been buried by Lakoff's devastating critique of Searle's "indirectness" account (Lakoff, 1993; Searle, 1979) has become a widely discussed topic again, especially in the context of analyses that focus on its "interaction" (*pace* Black, 1962) with other non-literal uses of language that were traditionally summarized as rhetorical "tropes", e.g. irony and hyperbole (Burgers, Renardel de Lavalette, & Steen, 2018; Colston & Gibbs, 2002; Giora, 2003). Relevance Theory (RT), in its early version, arranged them on a continuum of "loose uses" of language that were viewed as the norm rather than the exception in communication (Sperber & Wilson, 1995, pp. 234–235). This contention, i.e. the rejection of a special, "indirect" status for figurative language use (in relation to "literal" use) chimed with the tenets of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), which viewed metaphor as a fundamental principle of human thought and as pervasive in communication (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980/2003). As a result, there have been various attempts at connecting RT and CMT and presenting them as mutually compatible or at least not contradictory (Gibbs & Tendahl, 2011; Sperber & Wilson, 2008; Tendahl, 2009; Tendahl & Gibbs, 2008). However, this discussion has also shown that metaphor, irony, and hyperbole interact in complex ways, so that their "linear" contiguous ordering on a continuum of non-literalness is not possible (Carston & Wearing, 2011, 2015), leaving the question of determining and explaining the semantic/pragmatic "interface" in utterances that combine some or all of these "tropes" still open.

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[3]The use of lexicalized WAR-related background metaphors is also "par for the course" in popular-scientific literature on COVID-19; e.g., one of the first monographs on the pandemic begins with the statement: "The world is *fighting a global war* against a newly discovered strain of coronavirus" (Koley & Dhole, 2021: 1; italics by AM). Further conventional WAR/FIGHTING terms for dealing with the pandemic (such as *ammunition, battle, combat, defense, fight, frontline invasion, protection*) are repeated throughout the book and can be found even in specialized scientific articles (Aschwanden, 2020; O'Grady, 2020).

The real-life consequences of this problem are of particular significance for the analysis of political discourse, which is generally characterized by a proliferation of complex, integrated rather than isolated uses of pragmatic devices or strategies. Political utterances are intended to have maximum communicative effect (Musolff, 2016; Charteris-Black, 2005), so they seldom include just one communicative device. However, CMT proponents have claimed that metaphor has an extraordinarily strong "framing" power that compels recipients to interpret a target concept in terms of ideologically slanted source concepts that "hide" all alternative perspectives and can even turn into "self-fulfilling prophecy mechanisms" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980/2003, p. 156, see also Goatly, 2007; Lakoff, 1996, 2004; Lakoff & Wehling, 2016). Such claims presuppose a view of metaphor understanding as a quasi-automatic acceptance not just of the source-target mapping but also of the ideological connotations and associations of the source concepts. In the case of the PANDEMIC MANAGEMENT AS WAR metaphor used during the COVID-19 outbreak, the stereotypical assumptions that we make about wars in the literal sense (i.e. military conflicts between nation states or within states, with concomitant mass casualties, general devastation, etc.) would be mapped, according to CMT, onto the health policies designed to mitigate and/or overcome the mass infection and its fatal consequences.

Experimental evidence for the "psychological reality of" framing effects of metaphorical statements has been provided but is still debated as regards its methodological rigor and replicability (Brugman & Burgers, 2018; Burgers, Konijn, & Steen, 2016; Thibodeau & Boroditsky, 2011, 2013; Thibodeau, Fleming, & Lannen, 2019). In this paper, we look at a different type of evidence, i.e. we analyze metarepresentational follow-ups of public discourse statements (Sperber, 2000; Weizman & Fetzer, 2015) as evidence of how those statements were interpreted by parts of the public audience. Of course, such interpretations are themselves part of public discourse and therefore need to be analyzed in detail for their "interpretive resemblance" (Wilson, 2000) vis-à-vis the "precedent" speaker-utterances and they have to be situated in their discourse-historical context (Wodak, 2009).

Pandemic management as war: basic concepts and scenarios

Using as data basis a research corpus of 157 articles in which metaphors and similes are employed to cover the COVID-19 pandemic and public health management from across a broad media spectrum that has been collected since February 2020,[4] we have identified 60, i.e. a little more than one third, as including WAR and/or FIGHTING-related terminology and/or allusions to historical wars.[5] The journalists seem to have tapped this semantic field before the politicians did. Thus, the conservative-leaning tabloid newspaper *Daily Mail*, spoke of *battle plans, war*, and *making sacrifices* even before Prime Minister Johnson's *declaration of war* (example 1):

(3) UK's coronavirus *battle plan*: Britons could face European-style ban on public gatherings and fines for entering "infected" areas as Boris Johnson warns of "significant" spread within days (*Daily Mail*, 2 March 2020)

(4) Coronavirus has *declared war* on the world – so we must all stop our selfish whining and remember that *you can't fight – and win – wars without making some sacrifices. This is war*. Make no mistake, for my generation, the COVID-19 coronavirus is the biggest threat to civilian life that we will have experienced since World War 2. (*Daily Mail*, 11 March 2020)

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[4]The corpus has a size of 132,439 word tokens. The following British media (in online versions) are represented in the corpus: *BBC, Channel 4, Daily Express, Daily Mail, Daily Mirror, Financial Times, New Statesman, The Daily Telegraph, The Economist, The Guardian/ Observer, The Independent, The New European, The Sun, The Times*.

[5]Other prominent source domains of metaphors targeting the COVID-19 pandemic and the public health management responding to it include JOURNEY-MOVEMENT (the pandemic's *march* vs. state/society's *progress* in devising and implementing counter-measures, e.g. *circuit breakers*), CONTAINMENT and CONSTRUCTION (national and regional *lockdowns*, allocation of regions to *tiers* of anti-pandemic measures), FLOOD and DEFENSE AGAINST IT (*waves, surge, tsunami* of the pandemic, government *turning the tide* against it), as well as popular (mis-)interpretations of scientific metaphors such as *herd immunity* (Aschwanden, 2020).

Example (4) spells out some of the implied consequences of the PANDEMIC MANAGEMENT AS WAR metaphor. It hyperbolically ascribes agency, and thus, aggressor- (and communicator-role) to the virus and it specifies the need for the addressees (i.e. the readers) to give up "selfish whining" and instead adopt an altruistic stance of solidarity and even willingness to make "sacrifices." It also reminds its readers of the historical experience of World War II (in its popularly memorized form), as an emergency that allegedly made similar demands on the nation.

References to WW II memories were characteristic of the early phase of the pandemic debate in Britain. These references share an experiential source domain with WAR-based metaphors but are in themselves similes or comparisons that suggest parallels with specific aspects of the British WW II experience and sometimes include metonymic references to symbolic and highly emotive aspects of it. These included, for instance, *the blitz spirit* or *bulldog spirit* shown by the UK populace in the early years of WW II and epitomized by Britain's war-time leader Winston Churchill.[6] The *Daily Mail* showed a picture of Churchill with his famous V[ictory] finger-sign and the following caption:[7]

> (5) It's time for the kind of *Bulldog spirit personified by Winston Churchill.* "If you're going through hell, keep going," he urged as the Nazis blitzed allied forces. (*Daily Mail*, 11 March 2020)

Churchill, whom Johnson is known to admire (as evidenced by his hagiographic account of the wartime prime minister; see Johnson, 2014), is held up as a model or ideal leader-figure in crisis, whom Johnson should follow during the pandemic. Subsequently, and especially after the 17 March *war declaration*, most of the British press invoked this WW II scenario as a benchmark for what was needed in the current crisis and to praise or criticize Johnson for emulating Churchill's leadership or failing to do so, depending on their political leanings:

> (6) Can Boris Johnson conjure up *the spirit of the Blitz*? As the coronavirus crisis worsens, the challenge and risks confronting the Prime Minister are *Churchillian* in magnitude. (*Daily Mail*, 16 March 2020)
> (7) Boris Johnson is seizing his chance to *be the new Churchill in his war on coronavirus.* (*The Daily Telegraph*, 27 April 2020)
> (8) *Like Churchill in 1942*, Boris Johnson will prove the moaning minnies wrong (*The Daily Telegraph*, 9 October 2020)
> (9) "Action this day" was one of *Winston Churchill's* famous injunctions. For Boris Johnson, it has been: "An empty pledge to get me through the day." (*The Observer*, 14 June 2020)
> (10) *In language that appeared designed to evoke his hero Winston Churchill's wartime broadcasts*, [Johnson] said: "Never in our history has our collective destiny and our collective health depended so completely on our individual behaviour. Now is the time for us all to summon the discipline, and the resolve, and the spirit of togetherness that will carry us through." His stark warning to the public contrasted with the view of the Labour leader, Keir Starmer, who said in his party conference speech that a second lockdown would be "a sign of government failure, not an act of God". (*The Guardian*, 23 September 2020).

The two latter examples show the ambivalence of the World War II reference. As attractive as the comparisons of Johnson with Churchill and Britain's victorious WW II record and the pandemic crisis

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[6]The references to Winston Churchill as leadership model are likely to include also public memories of his fame as a rhetorician who restored Britain's "fighting spirit" during WWII in speeches that were, inter alia, famous for their use of figurative language (Crespo-Fernández, 2013; Toye, 2014), but these remain largely implicit.

[7]A further occasion for symbolic reminiscences of WW II emerged in a fund-raising campaign for Britain's National Health Service by a 99-year old veteran, Captain Tom Moore who did 100 rounds of his garden on his walking frame before his 100th birthday with the initial aim of raising 1000 Pounds. After his campaign was made public in the media, it raised 32 million Pounds and Moore was hailed as a hero and "national treasure" and was promoted and knighted by the Queen on the behest of Johnson's government (*Daily Express*, 15 April 2020; *The Daily Telegraph*, 30 April 2020 and 20 May 2020; for public "hero" status see Kinsella, Igou, & Ritchie, 2019).

may have seemed to government "spin doctors" and their media allies, they also implied the risk of showing up the present-day crisis management being less efficient than the historic achievement. Soon after Johnson's *war declaration*, the *Guardian* columnist S. Tisdall warned Johnson and other nation leaders to "lay off those war metaphors" because they themselves "could be next casualty":

(11) Politicians, scientific experts and commentators who now routinely resort to *wartime meta-phors, images and language* to describe *the battle against Covid-19* do so at their peril. [. . .]. *The language of war* divides communities. For each volunteer supplying food to the elderly, there are legions of panicked shoppers stripping supermarkets in a particularly stupid bid to preempt "wartime" rationing. [. . .] Historically, war often leads to revolution. Armchair generals Trump and Johnson please note. (*The Guardian*, 21 March 2020)

Tisdall highlights one important implicature of the *war-declarations* against the pandemic-as-*enemy*: whilst they are probably intended by the respective speakers as rousing and solidarity-inspiring speech acts they may have the unintended effect of scaring people and making it easier to imagine all kinds of wartime measures. Evidence for the materialization of fearful fantasies was demonstrated not only by panic-buying of toilet rolls and other household goods, apparently motivated by fear of war-like rationing (BBC, 26 March 2020: "Coronavirus: What's behind the great toilet roll grab?") but also by the proliferation of conspiracy theories about the virus having originated in a military context and/or involving forced vaccination (BBC, 30 March 2020: "Coronavirus: Bill Gates 'microchip' conspiracy theory and other vaccine claims fact-checked"; *The Guardian*, 14 May 2020: "A disgraced scientist and a viral video: how a Covid conspiracy theory started").

The second risk of figurative war announcements derives from their (usually hyperbolic) presup-position of an "all-or-nothing" confrontation, with maximum responsibility for the outcome allocated to leaders, i.e. the "Churchillian" dimension (example 6). In the UK, the benchmark of successful and legitimate war-leadership is Winston Churchill's WWII record; thus, anybody who rhetorically assumes the mantle of a *war leader* can expect to be measured against his achievements. As examples (6)–(10) above show, this is exactly what happened in the aftermath of Johnson's *war declaration* against COVID. But only examples (7) and (8) are affirmative for Johnson in this respect. In (6), the issue is treated as an open question, and in (9) and (10), published by the government-critical *Guardian/Observer* newspaper, his claim is implicitly denounced. Thus, in (9), Churchill's motto, "Action this day", which was used in wartime notes and on stickers to emphasize the urgency of specific policies (*International Churchill Society*, 2021) is contrasted with a fictitious, deliberately designed mock-quotation revealing Boris Johnson's alleged reckless attitude. Example (10) highlights the difference between the opposition leader Keir Starmer's focus on "government failure" and Johnson's pathos-filled rhetoric "*designed to evoke his hero Winston Churchill's wartime broadcasts.*" In both cases, the contrasting effect is employed to expose Johnson's supposed incompetence in crisis management.

The communicative risk of over-optimisti promises of quick achievements in managing the pandemic was not restricted to the initial *war-declaration* but persisted for many months, in the form of further metaphors drawn from the broad domain of FIGHTING and COMPETITION. In April, when Johnson caught the infection himself and was hospitalized for a week, the Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab and then Health Secretary, Matt Hancock, praised his "fighter" qualities (*BBC*, 9 April 2020). After reassuming his official business, Johnson tried to reassure the British public that

(12) "We have growing confidence that we will have a test, track and trace operation that will be *world-beating* and yes, it will be in place by June 1." (BBC, 20 May 2020)

Although introducing his statement in parliament by the hedging formula, "We have growing confidence that . . ..," the reassurance also includes a hyperbolic promise, i.e. to have the *best* test-and tracing system on the world within 12 days. The maximalist claim centers on the term

world-beating as a *victory in a competition*, like a sporting "world championship," in which Britain as a nation *competes* against other nations over who is the best COVID-19 health manager. The adversary in this competition is not the pandemic but other nations, literally the whole world community. But like the *war leadership*-claim foisted upon Johnson by the media, his *world leadership* promise of May 2020 became a hostage to fortune because the technological and administrative delivery of the promised tracing system depended on factors he could not control. The promised delivery date of 1 June came and passed, and shortly after one of the government's own experts from the government's "Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies" (SAGE), Professor John Edmunds cautioned:

(13) "Honestly I couldn't care less *whether it's world beating or not*. I just want it to be *virus beating* – and it's not." (*The Independent*, 5 June 2020)

By bringing the pandemic as the more appropriate target domain object of *beating* back into the discussion, Edmunds implicitly disqualified Johnson's promise. Bolder critics than he also exposed the Prime Minister's claim as both factually wrong and irrelevant:

(14) Test and Trace is getting WORSE: Data shows number of contacts of Covid-19 patients being reached has dropped for a second week to 72.4% – *but Boris Johnson still insists it's "world-beating"* (*Daily Mail*, 6 August 2020)

(15) Since the start of this pandemic, we have had *promises of a world-beating this* or a ground-breaking that – only for them to end in abject failure. (*Daily Mirror*, 22 August 2020)

(16) [Keir Starmer in a guest article:] "*We don't need a world-beating testing system, we just need one that works.*" (*The Daily Telegraph*, 8 October 2020)

The "world-beating" claim was part of a whole series of attempts at over-optimistic figurative reassurances claiming world-"leadership" or "moonshot" quality [meaning "top high-tech quality"] for the UK government's response to the pandemic, which were propagated during the summer of 2020.[8] They all fared little better than the "blitz"-nostalgia of the early phase and were denounced as unrealistic and not reflecting public health experts' advice.[9] The trigger for such criticism was the exaggeration implied in the maximalist claims of being able to stop or rein in the pandemic before long.

Even when Johnson tried to utilize his own recovery experience for a nation-uniting *fighting back* message, he did not escape sarcastic debunking. One day after returning to 10 Downing Street from intensive care and recuperation, he attempted to reassure the British public that the pandemic could be *beaten*, not just personally, as in his own case, but also nationally:

(17) "If this virus were *a physical assailant, an unexpected and invisible mugger*, which I can tell you from personal experience it is, then this is the moment when *we have begun together to wrestle it to the floor*." (*The Sun*, 27 April 2020)

Johnson's personalization of the nation as the resilient *victim of a mugging who fights back successfully* was at first enthusiastically taken up by the Tory-friendly press (e.g. *The Daily Telegraph*, *Daily*

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[8]Cf. e.g. *The Guardian*, 2 September 2020: "[Foreign Secretary] Dominic Raab pledged Britain will *take the global lead* in tackling coronavirus and the growing risk of famine in developing countries by combining diplomatic strength with "world-leading" aid expertise"; *The Guardian*, 9 September 2020: "Boris Johnson believes a mass testing programme is "our only hope for avoiding a second national lockdown before a vaccine", according to [. . .] plans for '*Operation Moonshot*'".

[9]Cf. e.g. *The Times*, 10 September 2020: "Far from boosting the nation's morale, [Johnson's] *talk of a mass-testing 'moonshot'* that would allow life to return to normal, perhaps before the end of the year, raised fresh questions about his grip on the crisis"; BBC 10 September 2020: "Scientists and health professionals have raised *doubts about Prime Minister Boris Johnson's 'Operation Moonshot' plan* for mass coronavirus testing".

Express, Daily Mail),[10] but was also seized upon by critics to ridicule him. The *Guardian* columnist Marina Hyde, for instance, denounced it as being hypocritical by contrasting his pretended tough *anti-mugger* stance with the lack of efficient countermeasures against the pandemic:

> (18) Boris Johnson is tough on crime. Except *when coronavirus wants to mug Britain*. On Monday, he explained that "this is the moment we have *begun together to wrestle it to the floor*". Which is one way of drawing a veil over the fact *he effectively took the mugger to the rugby* [match] at Twickenham on 7 March [which Johnson had attended despite medical warnings]. People say the other parties are soft on crime, but at least [...] they don't watch it *mug Italy and Spain* while [...] the Johnson government watched the virus coming toward us [...]. (*The Guardian*, 28 April 2020)

Hyde recasts Johnson's self-praising *mugging* scenario (*attack* by mugger COVID-19 – then successful self-*defense*) as a story of his reckless failure to provide assistance to the *mugging victim* Britain, despite having witnessed two earlier *muggings* (of other nations) by the same perpetrator. Six months later, she followed up this mock-application of Johnson's own *virus-as-mugger* metaphor with a further satirical spin-off:

> (19) Back in April, Boris Johnson described coronavirus as *"an unexpected mugger" we had to wrestle to the ground*. Hand on heart, the *mugger is a little more expected the second time* around. Yet with this latest set of plans [of imposing a so-called three tier system of COVID-19-related restrictions on British regions], I can't help feeling the prime minister *is not so much wrestling coronavirus, as warning the virus he will wrestle it if it's not careful*. (*The Guardian*, 13 October 2020)

Here, Johnson's performance is ridiculed as offering a wholly inefficient defense against the *mugger-virus* by fighting it only rhetorically but not practically, thus making things worse for the victim. The critical stance toward Johnson's policies and rhetoric is predictable coming from the *Guardian* columnist, but Hyde's strategy of turning Johnson's metaphor against him takes her sarcastic debunking a step further. The Prime Minister's alleged incompetence in managing the pandemic is no longer only exposed by contrasting his hyperbolic figurative rhetoric with disappointing evidence at the literal level but is also expressed at the level of the source-domain narrative, which is turned into a satirical allegory of his failing pandemic-management.

Discussion

In pragmatic terms, the media's denouncements of Johnson's *war declaration* and his claims at *world-beating/-leading* or *moonshot* successes can be analyzed as cases of irony, and the *mugging*-related examples (18)–(19), which we'll discuss later on, are closely related cases but arguably go beyond that categorization. There are two well-established pragmatic theory traditions for irony. One is its analysis as an "echoic" type of utterance, in which "the speaker dissociates herself from the thought she is echoing" (Wilson & Sperber, 1992: 60; see also, 2012). Alternatively, irony is viewed as the speaker's "pretense" of being an "injudicious person speaking to an uninitiated audience", which conveys an implicit distancing comment on the "staged utterance" (Kumon-Nakamura, Glucksberg, & Brown, 1995). Examples (14)–(16), for instance, refer to "echoed" utterances (made by Johnson) which are debunked through contrasting them with supposedly widely accepted knowledge that the promised *world-beating* results have not been achieved, so that readers are invited to join in the speakers' dissociation from the echoed hyperbolic promise. In

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[10]The latter dubbed him "Boris 'the boxer' Johnson" (*Daily Mail*, 27 April 2020), thus extending the wrestling-in-the-street scenario to a boxing context.

(10) a similar effect is achieved through the contrast with a quoted utterance by a politician whom the journalist favors, i.e. the opposition leader, Keir Starmer. For (9), with its invented Johnson-motto "An empty pledge to get me through the day", the pretense theory seems more fitting. However, this particular case of pretense is different from the "pretended utterance" in Clark & Gerrig's example of someone saying, "Trust the Weather Bureau! See what lovely weather it is: rain, rain, rain" (Clark & Gerrig, 1984, p. 122). In their example "the speaker is pretending to be an unseeing person, perhaps a weather forecaster, exclaiming to an unknowing audience how beautiful the weather is" (Clark & Gerrig, 1984, p. 122), i.e. the pretended utterance is ironically debunked by the speaker through contrast with the evidence of continuous rain. In (9), by contrast, both parts of the contrast appear as quotations but are of different status: a) Churchill's directive, "Action this day", is quoted *bona fide* as a well-known model of successful crisis-management; b) the alleged Johnson-motto, "An empty pledge to get me through the day", is a pseudo-quotation made up by the journalist, which in itself has got nothing to do with the Churchillian motto. However, by contrasting a fictitious maxim fit to describe Johnson's policies with Churchill's motto, the journalist reminds the *Guardian* readers of Johnson's own Churchillian pretense (and denounces it as preposterous). Example (9) thus employs "pretense" at various levels, i.e. the journalist "pretending" to cite Johnson's motto; Johnson allegedly "pretending" to be like Churchill (as part of background knowledge shared by author and readers).

This complex case is perhaps best accounted for by Coulson's (2005) framework that builds on the pretense account and on "conceptual integration theory" (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002) and allows for inferences based on a "blend" of opposing "mental spaces." Thus, in a "scenario in which a driver says 'I love people who signal' after being cut off in traffic," she diagnoses a "blend between the scenario in the expected reaction space and the speech act in the counterfactual trigger space" (Coulson, 2005, p. 136), so that the driver "compliments" a behavior she in fact despises. This "[mental] space structuring model" focused on "sarcastic" irony would fit (9) and some other examples of COVID-19 promise debunking that we have presented above. It is partially different from "classic," *implicit irony*, where hearers have to work out uncertain inferences from the contrast between an echoed or pretended thought/utterance and presumed but not explicated shared knowledge about what is the case. By contrast, *sarcastic irony* uses shared knowledge about an *obvious* state of affairs; its function as evidence for denouncing the pretended or echoed thought/utterance is made explicit and/or deemed to be understood quasi-automatically, by default (Giora, Givoni, & Fein, 2015). Like the speaker who sarcastically pretends that rain is "lovely weather" or the driver who sarcastically praises other drives for signaling in a counterfactual context, the journalists and politicians who reference Johnson's promises of heroic *warrior/fighter* qualities and *world-beating/-leading* pandemic management do so only to draw their readers' attention to his supposedly obvious failures. This *obviousness* of the contrast is especially foregrounded, e.g. in examples (13)–(16) by juxtaposing statements of fact and quoted claims ("Test and Trace is getting WORSE . . .. but Boris Johnson still insists it's "*world-beating*"), by dismissive, ridiculing expansion of quoted expressions ("*world-beating this* or a ground-breaking that") or by parallelized comparative syntactic construction, highlighting the discrepancy between the allusion and reality ("I couldn't care less . . . I just want . . ..."; "We don't need . . ., we just need one that works").

The *mugging*-related examples (18) and (19) reference a Johnson-quotation (17) and contrast it with contradictory evidence. In (18), the author Marina Hyde highlights his – under pandemic conditions ill-advised – attendance at a mass event and his inaction while the *mugger*-virus was still attacking other nations; in (19) she alleges that he foolishly gives the *mugger* early warning of his resistance, so he is not likely to be successful. Both passages can be viewed as close to the *sarcasm* end of the irony spectrum on account by setting up a blend of opposing mental spaces (through recontextualizing his talk of mugging in situation contexts which they were never intended for). However, they arguably even go beyond sarcasm, by elaborating the source "scenario" (Musolff, 2016; Coulson, 2005) of "mugging" into a mini-narrative with highly

specific predictive and evaluative implicatures. Due to this elaborate, richly inferential quality such extended scenarios may be viewed as approaching the literary genre of "satire," characterized as "militant irony," which "assumes standards [of normality] against which the grotesque and absurd are measured" (Frye, 1953/2000; see also Abrams, 1971, pp. 167–170). One could imagine a short story, drama, essay, or cartoons (El Refaie, 2013), developed from the *mugging*-scenario, which detail further developments in Johnson's *wrestling match* with the virus.

Conclusions

The overall impact of WAR/FIGHTING/COMPETITION-based metaphors on framing the Corona pandemic for the British public still remains to be determined – the data presented here are limited by the restricted size of the corpus and the fact that the pandemic and its public conceptualization are still ongoing at the time of writing. But from the available data a pattern emerges that shows a kind of communicative contest between the government, and in particular its head, Prime Minister B. Johnson, with some sympathetic media voices on one side, and critical, derogating voices on the other side, repeatedly exchanging arguments that are partly framed in terms of this metaphor complex. Johnson has regularly presented his government's pandemic management as a *war effort*, or a *competitive or fighting strategy* that is fully legitimate (as *self-defense*) and promises to be successful. The critics on their part have denounced these scenarios by declaring them simply to be factually incorrect but also by seemingly accepting them and then turning them against their initial author. This ironic or sarcastic "reversal" effect is achieved by first metarepresenting, i.e. quoting, or alluding to Johnson's optimistic *victory* promises and then contrasting them with supposed counter-evidence. This counter-evidence is articulated in statements about "facts" contradicting the promises (e.g. alleged failures of policy-implementation, as in examples 13–17), in invented or real quotations by others (as in 9, 10), or in retelling the *victory* scenarios as stories of *defeat* (18, 19). The alternation between hyperbolic promises and critics' denunciations is of course predictable in terms of the speakers' well-known party-political interests and their ideological stances. From a pragmatic viewpoint, however, the exploitation and variation of the *same* figurative framing models, i.e. WAR/FIGHTING/COMPETITION scenarios, by all sides seems remarkable. Bearing in mind that, in the absence of an easily accessible scientific consensus, the wider, non-expert public largely depends on a nonscientific, i.e. necessarily figurative, framing of the health threat posed by the coronavirus pandemic, we may ask what the likely persuasive effects of these metaphors are.

As mentioned earlier, WAR/FIGHTING/COMPETITION scenarios are by no means the exclusive source domain for COVID-19 framing, but with an apparent relative weight of about 30% of all metaphorical occurrences in our corpus they make up an important part of the publicly accessible conceptualization and argumentation space in the public debate about the COVID-19 pandemic. One framing effect that they are highly likely to have is a naturalization effect, as the WAR/FIGHTING/COMPETITION domain is pervasive in public communication about any topic that involves contestation or conflict. Thus, the WAR/FIGHTING/COMPETITION domain is already well entrenched in public discourse and the new pandemic conceptualization is made familiar through integration in this domain. In the case of specific scenarios such as Britain's wartime effort against Nazi Germany, with associations and reminiscences of heroism under the *Blitz* and Churchill's leadership (see examples 5, 6), the framing seems to have achieved temporary reassurance and solidarity-building effects.

On the other hand, the repeated *victory* promises run the risk of being perceived as hollow if they are not matched by policy successes and become vulnerable to denunciations by critics who can easily achieve an ironic, sarcastic, or satirical debunking effect by comparing them with publicly perceived policy failures. Use of WAR/FIGHTING/COMPETITION-based metaphors then becomes a liability for the speakers, not just because they undermine their personal standing and may scare and panic audiences (see example 11), but also because they develop an inflationary dynamic of their own. With repetition, the government *victory* claims tend to become ever more hyperbolic (e.g. FIGHTING -> WAR, VIRUS-

BEATING -> WORLD-BEATING, TESTING -> MOONSHOT TECHNOLOGY). As a result of increased hyperbole, their debunking as *utter failures/defeats* also becomes more elaborated and/or polemical. The grotesque mini-satires of the *mugging-victim foolishly taking the mugger to a rugby match* or *informing him of intentions to fight back* is testimony to an initially optimistic metaphor use being turned around and exploited to denounce its initial user.

The long-term effect of continuous exchanges of officials' optimistic figurative scenarios and subsequent sarcastic "deconstruction" by critics is difficult to gauge. It may well partly result in a spread of indifference, confusion, and/or conspiracy theories among the public and foster a growing general mistrust in whatever framings the politicians *and* the mainstream media have to offer. The result could be a reliance on non-mainstream voices offering "alternative" framings in non-mainstream media, e.g. "social media" and messaging or chat-groups that claim to have "privileged" access to special information (Buranyi, 2020; D'Ancona, 2017). Such supposedly factual information is of course also framed, perhaps again in well-known scenarios such as that of the WAR/FIGHTING/COMPETITION source domain. But the pandemic interpretations conveyed by conspiracy-based WAR scenarios such as the "Q-Anon" theory (of a world-wide *battle* of freedom fighters against a cabal of pedophile elites hoarding children's blood), "anti-vaxxers" resisting vaccination and all public health agencies, or the "explanation" of pandemics releases from military laboratories to achieve world domination are of a different caliber than the routine hyperbolic *victory* promises by governments. By projecting frames of absolute, apocalyptic confrontation, they try to immunize against irony, satire, and counter-argumentation by turning the WAR/FIGHTING/COMPETITION scenarios into menacingly literal prophecies.

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