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## **COVID-19 through Bolsonaro's speech: old sources for a new disease**

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**ABSTRACT:** In the context of Brazil's alarming COVID-19 death toll, metaphors in the discourse of former President Jair Bolsonaro seemed to minimize the magnitude of the pandemic scenario. Our goal is to analyse his use of figurative language in response to the widespread transmission of the virus in Brazil. We departed from the hypothesis that war, religion, and health mappings would be plentiful in Bolsonaro's speeches, considering his military past, religious beliefs, and the current pandemic. Our corpus consists of excerpts from Bolsonaro's public speeches, ranging from March 10th, the day the subject started to be addressed on the government website, to mid-August 2020, when Brazil surpassed 100,000 deaths. Bolsonaro's metaphorical utterances regarding COVID-19 were identified using the

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Metaphor Identification Procedure (Pragglejaz Group, 2007). In our results, WAR, a common source domain in politics, was one of the most used ones by Bolsonaro to talk about COVID-19 and its consequences. Linguistic instantiations of health and religious source domains were not frequent. Instead, religious beliefs came up as a frame that often underlies his speech. Moreover, results point to the possibility that Bolsonaro's speeches instantiate the Strict Father Model (Lakoff, 1996; 2004), a framework that describes conservative politics in the US.

**KEYWORDS:** Conceptual Metaphor; Figuration; Political Discourse; Coronavirus.

**RESUMO:** No contexto do alarmante número de mortes por COVID-19 no Brasil, as metáforas presentes no discurso do ex-presidente Jair Bolsonaro pareciam minimizar a gravidade do cenário pandêmico. Nosso objetivo é analisar o uso de linguagem figurada pelo ex-presidente em suas respostas à ampla disseminação do vírus no país. Partimos da hipótese de que haveria uma abundância de mapeamentos relacionados à guerra, religião e saúde nos discursos de Bolsonaro, considerando seu passado militar, crenças religiosas e o contexto da pandemia. Nosso corpus é composto por trechos de discursos públicos de Bolsonaro, abrangendo o período de 10 de março de 2020, data em que o tema começou a ser abordado no site oficial do governo, até meados de agosto de 2020, quando o Brasil ultrapassou a marca de 100 mil mortes. As expressões metafóricas de Bolsonaro relacionadas à COVID-19 foram identificadas utilizando o Metaphor Identification Procedure (Pragglejaz Group, 2007). Em nossos resultados, constatamos que a GUERRA, um domínio-fonte comum na política, foi um dos mais utilizados por Bolsonaro para se referir à COVID-19 e suas consequências. Instanciações linguísticas dos domínios-fonte da saúde e religião foram pouco frequentes. Por outro lado, as crenças religiosas apareceram como uma moldura subjacente recorrente em seus discursos. Além disso, os resultados apontam para a possibilidade de que os discursos de Bolsonaro instanciem o Modelo do Pai Rigoroso (*Strict Father Model*, Lakoff, 1996; 2004), um arcabouço que descreve a política conservadora nos Estados Unidos.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Metáfora Conceitual; Figuratividade; Discurso Político; Coronavírus.

## 1. Introduction

In the period spanning March to May 2020, the President-in-office of Brazil, Jair Messias Bolsonaro, stated the following:

*“It won't be a ‘small flu’ that will knock me down (...)”*<sup>7</sup> 20/03/2020

*“We are at war [against COVID-19]: worse than being defeated is the shame of not fighting.”*<sup>8</sup> 20/05/2020

The aforementioned statements represent instances of metaphor usage in political discourse. Since Lakoff's *Moral Politics* (1996), metaphors in political discourse have been substantially studied under the Cognitive Linguistics approach

<sup>7</sup> Free translation. Original speech: “*Não vai ser uma gripezinha que vai me derrubar*”.

<sup>8</sup> Free translation. Original speech: “*Estamos em Guerra: ‘Pior do que ser derrotado é a vergonha de não ter lutado’*”.

(Brugman, Burgers & Vis, 2019; Cienki, 2005; Renardel de Lavalette, Steen, G., & Burgers, C., 2019; Flusberg, Matlock & Thibodeau, 2018; Musolff, 2019). Accordingly, similar research has been conducted in Brazil, focusing on Brazilian politicians (Sardinha, 2008, 2010). This paper aims to analyse the figurative speech in Bolsonaro's discourse as the new coronavirus gained ground in Brazil. This work is of special interest since Bolsonaro's understanding of the virus could affect not only the way he talked about COVID-19, but – most importantly – the way Brazil dealt with the pandemic. Although most probably unconscious, we suppose Bolsonaro's linguistic choices were not randomly selected<sup>9</sup>. On the contrary, the way he speaks about the virus imposes a specific perspective. For instance, when Bolsonaro conceives the new coronavirus as a “*small flu*” [*gripezinha*], he seeks to minimize the effects of the virus. Later on, when he treats the pandemic in terms of war, he acknowledges the severity of the situation and the need for an appropriate counter-attack. It is worth emphasizing that, as recent studies have shown, the linguistic contexts in which war metaphors are used are abundant (Olza et al., 2021, Wicked & Bolognesi, 2020) and conventional (Siqueira et al., 2023), often involving the notion of antagonism (Vereza, 2020).

Nowadays, political discourse is widely broadcast in different media types and permeates different genres. In this paper, we selected texts from press conferences, official statements, and posts on social media. Our focus relied on what the President himself had to say (i.e. the direct speech) regarding the pandemic from March to August 2020. Given the former president's military and religious background, it was expected that he would use metaphors with source domains related to these two main aspects when addressing COVID-19. In light of the pandemic scenario, it was also expected that HEALTH would be a common source domain in Bolsonaro's speech.

## 2. Theoretical Background

Within Cognitive Linguistics, there is a vast body of studies regarding metaphors in political discourse (Cienki, 2005; Flusberg, Matlock & Thibodeau, 2018; Lakoff, 1996, 2004; Warell, 2020). There has been much progress in the study of various aspects of that specific type of discourse, not only in terms of figurative

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<sup>9</sup> We acknowledge the heated debate around the deliberateness of metaphor (Steen, 2008; Gibbs, 2011), but the classification of the metaphors used by the President as either deliberated or situated (in the sense of Vereza, 2013) goes beyond the scope of our analysis.

language, but also with respect to frames and persuasion discourse strategies (Charteris-Black, 2011; Musolff, 2019). The analysis presented in this paper draws on these studies, with special regard to the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Metaphor, from such a perspective, is understood as a cognitive-linguistic phenomenon that consists of a mapping between two different conceptual domains. Such domains typically consist of our bodily experiences and our subjective perceptions about the world. Our bodily experiences, conceptualization, and linguistic instantiations is a two-folded path: conceptual mappings shape the way we think, speak and act; as much as the way we speak shapes the way we conceptualize the world.

We further considered Grady's *Primary Metaphor Theory* (1997). According to the author, once we simultaneously experience bodily sensations and subjective perceptions of similar scenes on a daily basis, we tend to map such aspects, which then originate the so-called primary conceptual metaphors. Based on our physical interaction with the environment surrounding us, we formulate metaphorical mappings that we later instantiate in discourse. In the political sphere, this could not be different. Sardinha (2008), for example, shows that knowledge about daily bodily experiences abounds in political discourse. When analysing another former Brazilian President, the author brings the example of the word “*avanço [advance]*” which, according to him, instantiates the primary metaphor PROGRESS IS FORWARD MOVEMENT.

We also took into account Lakoff's Strict Father Model (1996, 2004), which merges the theories of Conceptual Metaphors and Frames in the scope of discourse and political actions. In the Strict Father Model, politics is compared to a patriarchal family structure, in which authority is imposed vertically. The leader is equivalent to the authoritarian father and the nation, to the family. In Lakoff's terms, the strict father is understood as the "moral authority and master of the household, dominating the mother and children and imposing needed discipline. Contemporary conservative politics turns these family values into political values: hierarchical authority, individual discipline, military might" (2004, p. 47). His model stems from Fillmore's Frame Semantics Theory (1982). In this context, frames are knowledge schemes structured around daily experiences which guide the way we communicate. When we use a word in a particular context, we depart from a certain perspective and a previously established understanding in our conceptual organization. The word ‘fight’, for example, subsumes a physical dispute involving at least two opponents.

Fundamentally, it is virtually impossible to grasp the meaning of a linguistic expression without accessing the encyclopedic knowledge and the immediate context related to such words. That certainly applies to political discourse as well.

## **2.1 Metaphor and Politics**

Both metaphor and politics can be defined in their linguistic, communicative, and cognitive dimensions (Chilton, 2004; Lakoff, 2004). In this study, we are particularly interested in the linguistic and cognitive dimensions of the use of metaphors in politics. Our language is a powerful tool in the political field and it can be used in several ways to influence or manipulate public opinion (Charteris-Black, 2011; Otieno, Owino & Attyang', 2016). Considering that political discourse is eminently metaphorical and that metaphor is an important persuasion resource (Musolff, 2019), it is therefore interesting to investigate the political discourse of the President of Brazil during the pandemic to describe underlying conceptual mappings.

It is already established within Cognitive Linguistics that politicians resort to well-known conceptual domains to explain complex and/or new concepts (Kövecses, 2002; Musolff, 2004; Sardinha, 2010). That is, we may describe “doing politics” as an attempt to balance conflicting interests, primarily through speech. It is, therefore, natural that different ideological stances would be described metaphorically from the semantic field of *war* since the components of meaning of a political conflict are consistent with those of opponents on a battlefield.

In this regard, Charteris-Black (2011) analyses prominent politicians who conceptualized politics in terms of conflict and described their value systems using the language of war. Likewise, Flusberg, Matlock & Thibodeau (2018) point to the productivity and repercussion of war metaphors in political speech. According to the authors, the conventionality of war metaphors is due to at least two reasons. One refers to the fact that this knowledge is culturally shared worldwide. The other concerns the emotional content that accompanies situations of war, which includes fights between opposing forces, a sense of risk, fear, and urgency. The researchers point to a strengthening of the emotional connection, which is in turn used in the political discourse to guarantee persuasion, constancy, and effectiveness. Furthermore, Mohammadi (2024) points out that the use of war metaphors hazes over any

misguided decision politicians might make in critical situations, thus creating a scenario in which they are not to blame.

When it comes to Brazilian studies, Sardinha (2008) studied the occurrence of war metaphors in political discourse through the speeches of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. During his first term (2003 – 2007), Lula repeatedly used the verb *conquistar* [to conquer] in his speeches as a means to associate political achievements with the positive outcomes of a war. Some of the metaphors used by the president when talking about the struggles in his journey to becoming president related to the BATTLE conceptual domain.

Despite being very common, war metaphors can lead to negative outcomes. They may widen the perception of a problem, extending it to different issues, manipulating the recipients' focus of attention, and even favoring assorted interests (Flusberg, Matlock & Thibodeau, 2018). Generally speaking, the valence – positive or negative – of a conceptual metaphor depends on the context in which it appears. Semino and colleagues (2017, 2018) show that war metaphors referring to cancer may have a negative effect on the perception of patients, caregivers, and health workers, as patients are considered responsible for the development of their disease.

Accordingly, a pandemic scenario, where different political views may result in different strategies and outcomes, seems to create a discursive context that favors the use of war metaphors with a negative valence. It is also expected that the pandemic context could promote the use of health-related mappings along with war metaphors. However, as Mohammadi (2024) stresses, “in times of war, the concept of war is widely represented within the domain of health, while in times of health crisis, the rhetoric becomes militaristic.”

According to Cognitive Linguistics, specific characteristics of the world we live in, our bodies, the physical environment that surrounds us, and the culture to which we belong interact dynamically with the way we think and talk about daily experiences. Consequently, specific situations might stimulate the use of particular conceptual domains which become more evident under such circumstances. Therefore, considering the influence of a unique moment such as a pandemic, it is expected that people would use aspects related to it as source domains, and produce health-related metaphors. Based on this assumption, along with findings from previous research about metaphors in political discourse, and on what is known about Bolsonaro's background, we formulated the hypothesis that WAR, RELIGION, and HEALTH

would be common domains in the former President's speeches as the pandemic progressed in Brazil.

Firstly, WAR as a source domain emphasizes antagonism, an opposition between us and them, whoever us and them might represent (COVID-19 *versus* the people or the President *versus* political opponents). RELIGION, specifically from a Christian perspective, in turn, emphasizes a hierarchical authority relationship, in which one entity holds the power, imposing rules to be followed by others. Lastly, HEALTH, taken as the proper functioning of our bodies, is an obvious embodied source domain candidate, given that bodily experiences are our primary experiential basis. When used in political discourse, this domain typically emphasizes political and economic issues through conceptualizations of a sick body. As WAR, RELIGION, and HEALTH clearly relate to the pandemic scenario, we thought that these would be vastly used as source domains. Moreover, such domains carry common knowledge and generate certain inferences that provide insights into the ideological, political, and communicative dimensions of Bolsonaro's speech. Next, we will describe the method employed to verify this hypothesis.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1 Sample**

Our database consists of 69 entries. Each entry is formed by a text unit, which varies from a single sentence to whole paragraphs with one or more conceptual metaphors, and our unit of analysis ranged from suffixes to phrases. In total, we have (i) 12 tweets from Bolsonaro's official Twitter account; (ii) 51 excerpts from 17 governmental speeches and interviews; (iii) 6 utterances from two countrywide influential news websites (*G1* and *Terra*) and two major online newspapers (*Folha de São Paulo* and *Estadão*). As an inclusion criterion, only excerpts referring to COVID-19 and its consequences were selected. Such sources were not randomly chosen. Instead, they were selected due to their prestige, national coverage, and for containing the former President's direct speech.

### 3.2 Procedures

Data collection was conducted by the authors, ranging from March 10<sup>th</sup> 2020, the day the subject ‘COVID-19 pandemic’ started to be mentioned on the government website, to August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020; when Brazil surpassed 100,000 deaths caused by COVID-19. The Metaphor Identification Procedure (Pragglejaz Group, 2007) was used for finding metaphorical expressions in Bolsonaro’s speech. Subsequently, metaphorical mappings were identified through brainstorming. Many general mappings were found, such as the primary metaphors IMPORTANCE IS SIZE and UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING. As we are concerned with the former President’s conceptualization of the coronavirus pandemic, such mappings were not considered in our analysis unless they were strictly related to the pandemic.

In addition to the process of identifying conceptual mappings underlying linguistic metaphors, we found 12 entries in our corpus that did not convey a religious linguistic metaphor but pointed to the possibility of a religious framing in Bolsonaro’s speeches. We then highlighted and analysed these entries together, in an attempt to establish if they really evoked such a frame.

### 4. Results

In this section, we present some occurrences of linguistic metaphors instantiated by the former President when talking about the pandemic. We listed the most relevant entries found in our corpus in terms of conceptualization. The data below follows a chronological order from March to August 2020<sup>10</sup>. Each table corresponds to a month. In the left column we showed the date in which the speech was conveyed and the number of reported deaths and cases in Brazil below it. In the middle column we presented the sentence with the linguistic metaphor uttered, followed by its corresponding conceptual metaphors in the last column.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> All excerpts from our corpus are available at <<https://osf.io/7bjg4/>>.

<sup>11</sup> Contextual information provided for each month regarding the progression of the pandemic in Brazil comes from <<https://www.sanarmed.com/linha-do-tempo-do-coronavirus-no-brasil>>.



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**March**

|   |   |                                    |
|---|---|------------------------------------|
| 10/03/2020<br>Confirmed cases: 34<br>Deaths: 0 <sup>a</sup> | “Obviously we have at the moment a crisis, a <u>small crisis</u> [ <i>uma pequena crise</i> ], right?”  | IMPORTANCE IS SIZE                 |
|   |   | IMPORTANCE IS SIZE                 |
|   |   | BAD IS DOWN                        |
| 20/03/2020<br>Confirmed cases: 904<br>Deaths: 5             | “After being stabbed, a <u>small flu</u> [ <i>uma gripezinha</i> ] is not going to <u>take me down</u> [ <i>me derrubar</i> ]”  | NORMAL IS UPRIGHT                  |
|   |   | COVID-19 IS GRAVITATIONAL STRENGTH |
| 24/03/2020<br>Confirmed cases: 2.201<br>Deaths: 46          | “The virus has come, <u>it’s being confronted</u> [ <i>está sendo enfrentado</i> ] by us and soon will pass.”   | COVID-19 IS WAR                    |
| 30/03/2020<br>Confirmed cases: 4.589<br>Deaths: 159         | “Together, being courageous, with serenity and patriotism, <u>we will win the battle</u> [ <i>venceremos essa batalha</i> ] against the pandemic and its effects! <u>We will fight</u> [ <i>lutaremos</i> ] with all of our forces (...)” | PANDEMIC IS WAR                    |

Note. <sup>a</sup> Data from the official COVID-19 panel of the Ministry of Health of Brazil: [<https://covid.saude.gov.br/>](https://covid.saude.gov.br/).

**Table 1:** Sample of metaphorical occurrences from March 2020

On March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the World Health Organization declared a state of pandemic. However, at that point, the President's metaphorical speech seemed to be an attempt to diminish the gravity of the situation. The use of the conceptual metaphor IMPORTANCE IS SIZE when he referred to the pandemic as *a small crisis* is a clear linguistic indication of that. Such indifference to the situation went hand in hand with an increase in the number of cases (and deaths) due to COVID-19 in Brazil. Further in that month, the coronavirus infections were already untraceable in the country.

The President's very first public metaphoric statement about COVID-19 diminished the severity of the virus both in his lexical and morphological choices. Of note, in Brazilian Portuguese, the diminutive suffix "*inh*" (as shown in Table 1) may instantiate a negative valence of the conceptual metaphor IMPORTANCE IS SIZE. That makes for a dysphemistic and powerful statement since in other countries the virus had already proven to be very contagious and harmful. As days passed and the

number of cases increased exponentially, Bolsonaro started to change his discourse, calling civilians to fight against the virus along with the government, hence alluding to the understanding of COVID-19 in terms of war. Nonetheless, note that in March the conceptual metaphor COVID-19 IS WAR appeared in discourses where the President approached the enemy as the weakest force.

| <b>April</b>   |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| 16/04/2020<br>Confirmed cases: 30.449<br>Deaths: 1.933 | I have never been consulted about the measures implemented by most governors and mayors (...) <u>It will be a high price to pay</u> [ <i>o preço vai ser alto</i> ] (...) don't put <u>this bill</u> [ <i>essa conta</i> ] on the Federal Government, don't put <u>this bill</u> (...) on the <u>back of our suffering Brazilian people</u> [ <i>nas costas do nosso sofrido povo brasileiro</i> ]. | CONSEQUENCES ARE FINANCIAL COSTS<br><br>QUANTITY IS HEIGHT<br><br>RELEVANCE IS HIGH<br><br>THE GOVERNMENT IS A RECIPIENT<br><br>TAKING RESPONSIBILITY IS CARRYING<br><br>DIFFICULTIES IN ACTIONS ARE BURDENS |
| 17/04/2020<br>Confirmed cases: 33.759<br>Deaths: 2.143 | “The <u>side effect</u> [ <i>efeito colateral</i> ] of <u>fighting the virus</u> [ <i>combate ao vírus</i> ] cannot be, in my point of view, <u>more damaging</u> [ <i>mais danoso</i> ] than the <u>medicine</u> [ <i>remédio</i> ] itself.” <sup>12</sup>   | A PROBLEM IS A DISEASE<br><br>ISOLATION IS MEDICINE<br><br>ECONOMIC CRISIS IS A CONSEQUENCE OF THE MEDICINE<br><br>EFFECTS ARE OBJECTS WHICH EMERGE FROM CAUSES<br><br>COVID-19 IS WAR                       |
| 20/04/2020<br>Confirmed cases: 40.616<br>Deaths: 2.584 | “We can still <u>save</u> Brazil [ <i>recuperar o Brasil</i> ]. I hope this is the last week of quarantine, of this way of <u>fighting the virus</u> [ <i>combater o vírus</i> ].”  | ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IS HEALTH<br>COVID-19 IS WAR  |

**Table 2:** Sample of metaphorical occurrences from April 2020

In April 2020, Bolsonaro’s metaphorical statements regarding COVID-19 seemed to raise concern solely about the country’s economy and address social

<sup>12</sup> Of note, contextual information tells us that “side effects”, in this case, refers to the economic crisis caused by social isolation, which is referred to as the “medicine”. This term is frequently used by the President to talk about the economic crisis. Excerpts 6, 44, and 55 in our corpus illustrate this usage.

isolation as a negative and detrimental way of facing the virus. It is worth pointing out that Brazil, in the previous excerpts, is used metonymically to address the country's economy. In the same month, the virus transmission increased substantially, with lethal cases spreading throughout the country. April was also the month the Ministry of Health began sending COVID-19 tests to health workers.

As the pandemic progressed and there was guidance from the World Health Organization to observe social isolation, Brazilian citizens dealt with antagonistic proposals to control the pandemic within different instances of the government. While a great number of mayors and governors defended the quarantine, the President was openly opposed to social distancing. Bolsonaro's argument was that keeping people from working, thus freezing the economy, would do a greater harm than the virus itself. This antagonism emerges linguistically from the maintenance of war metaphors, already used in March. Additionally, as observed in Table 2, besides the virus, target domains in April tackled mainly the topics of isolation, finances and the government responsibility.

| <b>May</b>  |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| 16/05/2020<br>Confirmed cases:<br>233.142<br>Deaths: 15.633 | "Unemployment, hunger and misery will be the future of the ones who support <u>the tyranny of total isolation</u> [ <i>tiranía do isolamento total</i> ]."  | SELF-ISOLATION IS AN AUTHORITARIAN REGIME |
| 20/05/2020<br>Confirmed cases:<br>291.579<br>Deaths: 18.859 | "There is no scientific proof about it (hydroxychloroquine), but it's being monitored and used in Brazil and around the world. But <u>we are in war</u> [ <i>estamos em guerra</i> ]: " <u>Worse than being defeated is the shame of not fighting</u> " [ <i>Pior do que ser derrotado é a vergonha de não ter lutado</i> ]." | PANDEMIC IS WAR                           |
| 21/05/2020<br>Confirmed cases:<br>310.087<br>Deaths: 20.047 | "(...) We have to work together in the sanction of a project, <u>an aid, some help</u> [ <i>um auxílio, um socorro</i> ] to the governors, of approximately 60 billion reais"   | FINANCING IS SAVING                       |

**Table 3:** Sample of metaphorical occurrences from May 2020

In May, the number of deaths caused by COVID-19 skyrocketed, with figures surpassing 800 deaths daily. Still, Bolsonaro's statements sustained his position against the quarantine measures and pro-chloroquine (a drug widely known to be used

in the treatment of malaria) in the early treatment of those infected by the virus. May was also the month when Brazil had two Health Ministers replaced in less than a month. Reshuffles were caused by disagreements between the Health ministers and the President about what guidelines to follow in the treatment of the virus.

In that month, Bolsonaro metaphorically addressed the virus, isolation, finances, and government responsibility once more. Table 3 shows that the President's speech reflected his concern with fighting two main battles: one against the economic effects of social isolation and the other against the virus itself.

| <b>June</b>   |   |
|---|---|
|   | <p>"I am sure that the media will <u>greatly highlight</u> [<i>grande destaque</i>] this piece of news today."</p> <p style="text-align: right;">IMPORTANCE IS SIZE</p>   |
|   | <p>"We know it <u>from the very beginning</u> [of the pandemic] [<i>desde o começo</i>], and the government has been repeating that <u>life comes first</u> [<i>a vida em primeiro lugar</i>], but we couldn't leave the matter of employability in Brazil <u>much far</u> [<i>muito distante</i>] from it."</p> <p style="text-align: right;">PANDEMIC IS A JOURNEY</p> <p style="text-align: right;">IMPORTANCE IS PRIMACY</p> <p style="text-align: right;">IMPORTANCE IS PROXIMITY</p>                                    |
| <p>09/06/2020<br/>Confirmed cases: 739.503<br/>Deaths: 38.406</p> | <p>"I've said <u>way back</u> that the implemented measures to <u>fight the virus</u> [<i>combater o vírus</i>] could not generate a <u>side effect</u> [<i>efeito colateral</i>] that would cause <u>much greater damage</u> [<i>dano muito maior</i>] than the virus itself".</p> <p style="text-align: right;">PAST IS BACKWARDS</p> <p style="text-align: right;">COVID-19 IS WAR</p> <p style="text-align: right;">EFFECTS ARE OBJECTS WHICH EMERGE FROM CAUSES</p> <p style="text-align: right;">IMPORTANCE IS SIZE</p> |
|   | <p>"(...) what we want the most is to safely return to our economic activity because <u>economy is life</u> [<i>economia é vida</i>]".</p> <p style="text-align: right;">FINANCIAL ACTIVITY IS LIFE</p>   |

**Table 4:** Sample of metaphorical occurrences from June 2020

In June, Brazil surpassed 1 million confirmed COVID-19 cases, more than 50 thousand deaths, and reaching 1 thousand deaths a day. Despite the fact that the field hospitals in São Paulo and other capitals were crowded with COVID-19 patients, metropolises were planning to reopen street commerce. In terms of our analysis of figurative language, what distinguishes June from the previous analysed months is the

presence of a greater amount of primary metaphors. Note that the repetition of IMPORTANCE as a target domain in the examples above reflects the way the President emphasises economical issues which the government was struggling with. As for the rest of the metaphorical instantiations of that month, they kept showing the President's tendency to speak metaphorically about the economy being the greater concern as the pandemic continued to spread around the country. The nation is referred to as a living being, and the economy is what brings it to life, hence the idea that ceasing financial activity equals death. Besides, in June, as Brazil became the second country with the most number of deaths caused by COVID-19, Bolsonaro notoriously threatened to withdraw Brazil from the World Health Organization.

| <b>July</b>   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
|   | “Even with the challenges <u>imposed</u> [ <i>impostos</i> ] by the pandemic (...)”.  | PANDEMIC IS AUTHORITY<br>PANDEMIC IS A PHYSICAL FORCE           |
| 02/07/2020<br>Confirmed cases:<br>1.501.353<br>Deaths: 61.990 | “In this pandemic, the development fund has shown that it combines utility with solidarity by allocating fifteen million dollars <u>to fight the coronavirus</u> [ <i>combate ao coronavírus</i> ]”.  | COVID-19 IS WAR   |
|   | “(...) the upcoming months will be of <u>great challenges</u> [ <i>grandes desafios</i> ] for us all. The <u>biggest one</u> [ <i>maior deles</i> ] which presents itself right away, is to reconcile the protection of people's health with the imperative of recovering the economy”. | IMPORTANCE IS SIZE  |
| 30/07/2020<br>Confirmed cases:<br>2.613.789<br>Deaths: 91.377 | We <u>started facing</u> [ <i>começamos enfrentando</i> ] a pandemic. Nobody expected it, <u>but it came</u> [ <i>mas veio</i> ] (...).   | PANDEMIC IS WAR<br>PANDEMIC IS A MOVING AGENT<br>TIME IS MOTION |

**Table 5:** Sample of metaphorical occurrences from July 2020

As for July 2020, the number of entries in our corpus decreased, reflecting the fact that the President did not often speak about the pandemic in that month. In fact, during the time span of data collection, we found that Bolsonaro hardly ever devoted

entire speeches to talk about the pandemic, dedicating only a few sentences to it within speeches that concerned mainly other topics. He was reportedly known for downplaying the pandemic<sup>13</sup> and being one of the Presidents who least addressed the situation on social media<sup>14</sup>. When the virus was rapidly spreading in Brazil and the number of deaths was approaching 100.000, Bolsonaro had only a few words on the topic and metaphorically addressed the situation in the very same way as the previous months. In July the President once again used metaphorical (including war) statements to emphasize the economic crisis caused by the virus outbreak. The pro-hydroxychloroquine agenda was also sustained.<sup>15</sup>

| August  |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| 06/08/2020<br>Confirmed cases:<br>2.912.212<br>Deaths: 98.493 | "I always say this, it is a military lesson: worse than a bad decision is indecision. <u>You can't just stay put</u> [ <i>você não pode apenas ficar parado ali</i> ]... 'Stay at home'. You can't. I adopted this thought from the get-go". | DECISION IS A MOVING OBJECT<br><br>PROGRESS IS PHYSICAL ADVANCE |
|   | "As far as I know, I may be mistaken, it didn't come to my knowledge at least, that we <u>lost lives</u> [ <i>perdido vidas</i> ] due to the lack of ICU beds or respirators."   | LIFE IS AN OBJECT   |
|   | "Maybe in December, maybe, December, January, there is the possibility of a vaccine, and then <u>we will beat this problem</u> [ <i>nós iremos vencer este problema</i> ]."  | PANDEMIC IS WAR   |

**Table 6:** Sample of metaphorical occurrences from August 2020

In the last month of data collection, when the number of deaths resulting from COVID-19 exceeded 100,000, we could observe that, in addition to the recurring war metaphor, Bolsonaro spoke metaphorically about (the lack of) *progress* to continue to defend the reopening of the market and the maintenance of financial and social activities. In order to defend the idea that deaths were not caused by a lack of

<sup>13</sup> See <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-52080830>> for further details.

<sup>14</sup> See <<https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2020/03/bolsonaro-e-antepenultimo-em-ranking-de-tuites-de-presidentes-sobre-coronavirus.shtml>> for further details.

<sup>15</sup> As a piece of anecdotal information, in July the President announced testing positive for coronavirus and attested the alleged positive effects of using hydroxychloroquine in the treatment. See <<https://www.euronews.com/2020/07/25/brazil-s-president-bolsonaro-says-he-s-recovered-from-coronavirus>> for further details.

governmental policies to suppress the COVID-19 outbreak<sup>16</sup>, the President sometimes used the conceptual metaphor LIFE IS AN OBJECT. At that point, he was known for arguing that deaths would inevitably occur<sup>17</sup>, treating life as a trivial matter. In August, as the pandemic progressed, the government started to show interest in financing vaccines against COVID-19.

In conclusion, from April to August 2020, the president repeatedly conceptualized the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of war, as if the country's economy were a living being that needed to be saved. He also metaphorically alluded to the necessity of an economical maintenance that goes against common isolation measures adopted throughout the world. Besides, several primary metaphors appeared in his speech (e.g. IMPORTANCE IS SIZE, IMPORTANCE IS PROXIMITY, QUANTITY IS HEIGHT, TIME IS MOTION). Since the co-occurrence of primary scenes such as IMPORTANCE and PROXIMITY are recurrent in everybody's experience, it is expected that primary metaphors of this kind will abound in any type of discourse (Grady, 1997). In our corpus, it was not different.

Contrary to our expectations, HEALTH was not a recurrent source domain in Bolsonaro's speeches about the pandemic. As exemplified below, only a few conceptual metaphors (ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IS HEALTH, EMPLOYMENT IS HEALTH, A PROBLEM IS A DISEASE) with source domains related to HEALTH appeared in the corpus.

*“We know that we have a common enemy, the virus. As well as we know and are aware that the side effect, which may be the unemployment, can be defeated.”<sup>18</sup>*  
23/03/2020

*“(...) an unemployed person is more prone to suffer from health problems than a person who is employed. And since the beginning of the pandemic, I have gone to every minister and talked about life and employment. It is like a patient who has two*

<sup>16</sup> On April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020, when asked by a journalist about the latest death toll: “Look man, I am not a gravedigger.”. See <<https://br.reuters.com/article/idUSL1N2EE1GZ>> for further details.

<sup>17</sup> See <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-brazil-idUSKBN21E3IZ>> for further details.

<sup>18</sup> Free translation. Original speech: “Sabemos que temos um inimigo em comum, o vírus. Bem como também sabemos e temos a consciência que o efeito colateral, que pode ser o desemprego, pode ser combatido.”

*diseases, we cannot ignore one and treat exclusively the other, because, in the end, this patient may lose his life.*<sup>19</sup> 16/04/2020

In all occurrences, this domain was used as a means to talk about the economical consequences of the pandemic. It is interesting to note, however, that WAR is such a pervasive source domain in our corpus that it runs through most excerpts, even when addressing HEALTH and other related domains. That generates, in turn, metaphorical chains. While analysing Bolsonaro's announcements, we could observe mappings that characterize the COVID-19 IS WAR conceptual metaphor. Constituent elements of war were systematically mapped to corresponding elements of the pandemic caused by the new coronavirus. The enemy in the battle corresponds to the pandemic or more specifically to the COVID-19 target domain; soldiers were mapped to Brazilian citizens or to the Brazilian government; war strategy corresponds to social isolation or early treatments; war weapons correspond to hydroxychloroquine; negative outcomes correspond to the economical crisis or deaths due to the virus.

It was our expectation that WAR, HEALTH, and RELIGION would be common source domains used by the President. However, religion did not appear metaphorically. We identified only one religious-based conceptual metaphor: TO DIVULGE KNOWLEDGE IS TO PREACH, instantiated linguistically by the utterance *“that panic preached back then, by the mainstream media, regarding the virus (...)”*<sup>20</sup>. This example reflects a conventional usage of the verb *pregar* [to preach] in Brazilian Portuguese, one that could be used even by a non-believer. Still, Bolsonaro did pick specifically one word that evokes religion at that point, which might be part of a larger picture, that of a religious man. In fact, religious expressions abound in his speeches about the pandemic, though rarely appearing in a metaphorical way.

Other examples have led us to conclude that there is something bigger (meaning a strong connection to religion) behind the President's statements. When Bolsonaro stated *“I believe in God, Who will enable scientists and researchers from Brazil and*

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<sup>19</sup> Free translation. Original speech: *“(...) uma pessoa desempregada, ela estará mais propensa a sofrer problemas de saúde do que uma outra empregada. E desde o começo da pandemia eu me dirigi a todos os ministros e falei da vida e do emprego. É como um paciente que tem duas doenças, a gente não pode abandonar uma e tratar exclusivamente outra, porque, no final da linha, esse paciente pode perder a vida.”*

<sup>20</sup> Free translation. Original speech: *“esse pânico que foi pregado lá atrás, por parte da grande mídia no tocante ao vírus (...)”*, in 09/06/2020.



*around the world to find the cure for this disease*"<sup>21</sup>, for example, he is not instantiating a linguistic metaphor, but revealing a religious framing through which he sustains his alleged positive influence. Such religious framing came as a byproduct of our search for metaphorical expressions, which we considered worthy of further investigation. That is to say, we identified another figurative form of creating meaning not necessarily observed through any specific trope: that of a religious metaphorical framing.

This religious metaphorical framing can be examined in the light of the so-called Strict Father Model (Lakoff, 1996). As mentioned, such a model conceptualizes metaphorically a nation as a family, in which the governmental leader, the father of the family, is strict. In our data, Bolsonaro's metaphorical and literal statements seem to evoke Lakoff's model, since it establishes a patriarchal family structure in which authority is imposed vertically. In this model, the leader is equivalent to the father and the nation, to the family. Considering the following statements, released during the pandemic, it is possible to observe that the President declares resistance in two aspects: one is the position of a minister who confronts the President's authority as a supreme leader, and the other is the role of a leader who is facing a horizontal administration in which the power does not gather only in his hands.

*"(...) I cannot accept my authority being confronted by any minister"*<sup>22</sup> 24/04/2020

*"I have the obligation, as head of state, to make decisions. I have my hands tied by the decision of the Supreme Federal Court that delegated these measures to states and municipalities."*<sup>23</sup> 26/05/2020

Alongside these statements, there are others suggesting the same metaphorical framing, as we can see in the following sentences. When justifying his decision to discharge the Minister of Health, whose public policies were in accordance with COVID-19 scientific advances endorsed by WHO, the President showed his

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<sup>21</sup> Free translation. Original speech: "Acredito em Deus, que capacitará cientistas e pesquisadores do Brasil e do mundo na cura dessa doença.", in 24/03/2020.

<sup>22</sup> Free translation. Original speech: "Não posso aceitar minha autoridade confrontada por qualquer ministro."

<sup>23</sup> Free translation. Original speech: "Eu tenho obrigação como chefe de Estado de tomar decisões. Estou de mãos amarradas por decisão do Supremo Tribunal Federal que delegou a Estados e municípios essas medidas."

dissatisfaction with views different from his own. One must bear in mind that the President's metaphorical utterances revealed a major concern on economic issues and that he dismissed lockdown measures<sup>24</sup> (as shown on Table 5).

*“Mandetta’s vision [previous Minister of Health], a very good vision, was that of health, of life. Mine, besides health and life, includes Paulo Guedes [Minister of Economy], includes economy, and includes employment. Since the beginning, I had this vision, and still have, that we should open workplaces, because the side effect of fighting the virus cannot be, from my point of view, more damaging than the medicine itself.” 17/04/2020*

What is expected from a democratic regime is that technical ministers will have a certain autonomy to deal with their agendas and that their decisions will be supported by the president. However, what we can draw from Bolsonaro's statements is that he did not accept such decision-making power on the part of the health minister – who was more supported by the population than the president<sup>25</sup>. Just like a strict father who will not admit being questioned, Bolsonaro chose to silence ministers, laying off those who disagreed with his positioning. The excerpt above is one out of the many examples that illustrate how Bolsonaro used his political power to silence those authorities who went against his wills.

On another occasion, when advocating for certain stances of his government and of the third minister that took over the Health Ministry, Bolsonaro quotes the following biblical passage: "John 8:32: *Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*" Through this passage, we can see the verticality of the religious and political model deployed, in which there is a universal truth to be acknowledged and followed. The definite noun phrase ‘the truth’ presupposes the existence of only one truth and implicates the existence of a single God who is above everyone.

Although the Strict Father Model does not anticipate religious metaphorical mappings, it seems like Bolsonaro's speeches create a link between the Strict Father Model and a (monotheistic) religion. Among similar aspects between Lakoff's Model and Bolsonaro's utterances, two of them are relevant to our discussion: a supreme

<sup>24</sup> See <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-52351636>> for further details.

<sup>25</sup> See <<https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-health-coronavirus-brazil-poll-idUKKBN21L2R7>> and <<https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/internacional/en/brazil/2020/04/brazils-health-ministry-has-76-approval-rating-bolsonaro-33.shtml>> for further details.

authority (a father or a God) and strict moral values. Bolsonaro refers to God as a strict father who is above everything and paints himself as a leader who weighs his own actions based on religious principles. He manifests this connection in his discourse:

*“Because I’ve always said, given my military background: worse than a bad decision is indecision. I will never commit the sin of omission.”<sup>26</sup> 16/04/2020*

*“I believe in God, who will enable scientists and researchers from Brazil and around the world to find the cure for this disease.”<sup>27</sup> 24/03/2020*

*“There isn’t a more serious accusation [that of a liar] for a man like me, a soldier, a Christian and the President, to be accused of this.”<sup>28</sup> 24/04/2020*

*“So what? I am sorry! What am I supposed to do? I am Messiah, but I do no miracles.”<sup>29</sup> 28/04/2020*

The vertical model of the religion professed by the former President fits his military past and religious beliefs. Christians believe in a god who is above everyone, which reflects a vertical system. If we take Bolsonaro's campaign slogan ('Brazil above everything, God above everyone') into account, it is possible to identify the same taxonomy. That is also the case in several of his speeches, as can be seen below:

*“I am President because the majority of the population trusted me, and also I am alive because God allowed it.”<sup>30</sup> 26/05/2020*

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<sup>26</sup> Free translation. Original speech: *“Porque sempre tenho dito, dada a minha formação militar: pior que uma decisão mal tomada é uma indecisão. Jamais pecarei por omissão.”*

<sup>27</sup> Free translation. Original speech: *“Acredito em Deus, que capacitará cientistas e pesquisadores do Brasil e do mundo na cura dessa doença.”*

<sup>28</sup> Free translation. Original speech: *“Não existe uma acusação mais grave [a de mentiroso] para um homem como eu, militar, cristão e presidente da República, ser acusado disso.”*

<sup>29</sup> Free translation. Original speech: *“E daí? Lamento. Quer que eu faça o quê? Eu sou Messias, mas não faço milagre.”* Of note, Messias (*Messiah*) is his middle name.

<sup>30</sup> Free translation. Original speech: *“Sou presidente porque a maioria do povo confiou em mim, assim como estou vivo porque Deus assim o permitiu.”*

*“So we hope that this issue with the virus, by God’s will, will soon fade away, so that business can reopen and the side effect of fighting the pandemic is not more damaging than the virus itself.”<sup>31</sup> 05/06/2020*

All in all, Bolsonaro’s actions and discourse suggest a position which is in consonance with Lakoff’s (1996) Strict Father governmental model. This becomes evident in excerpts where his religious framing evokes values associated with moral and divine authority along with attempts of social cohesion in times of crisis, traditional values in both religion and the Strict Father rationale. It was not our initial aim to analyse Bolsonaro’s political stance *per se*, its impacts on society, or to identify metaphorical framings in his discourse. Nonetheless, we found it pertinent to put such frames under debate, as these clearly relate to our main focus: metaphorical instantiation and conceptual mappings which emerged from the President’s statements about the pandemic.

Having completed our analysis of Bolsonaro’s metaphorical utterances and further identified a religious framing in his speech throughout the progression of COVID-19 in Brazil, we now return to a concept brought by Lakoff (2004). The author indicates that a leader’s metaphorical speech, as well as his non-metaphorical speech and behavior, provide evidence of his ideology and political stance. Bolsonaro’s way of addressing the COVID-19 pandemic in his public speech clearly had repercussions way beyond the domain of language.

## **5. General discussion and conclusions**

Since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, we have seen leaders throughout the world resort to figurative language (cf. Bates, 2020; Semino, 2021) to describe this unprecedented event. This new topic of discussion allowed new linguistic investigations concerning the use and understanding of conceptual metaphors in the political realm. In this study, we have analysed metaphorical occurrences that emerged from the speeches of Jair Bolsonaro, the President of Brazil when the COVID-19 pandemic broke out. All things considered, we expected that WAR, HEALTH, and

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<sup>31</sup> Free translation. Original speech: *“Então a gente espera que essa questão do vírus, se Deus quiser, se atenuie rapidamente de modo que o comércio volte a funcionar e o efeito colateral do combate à pandemia não seja mais danoso do que o próprio vírus.”*

RELIGION would appear as common source domains in his linguistic instantiations about the coronavirus pandemic. Alongside the investigation of conceptual mappings, data led us to a religious framing that embeds the President's religious beliefs, thus creating a scenario that resembles Lakoff's Strict Father Model.

Tracking Bolsonaro's metaphorical speeches back to March 2020, when COVID-19 was officially recognised as a pandemic by the World Health Organization, we observed that Bolsonaro started by dismissing the coronavirus threat. This could be verified in his use of figurative language in many levels, from morphemes (such as the IMPORTANCE IS SIZE conceptual metaphor instantiated by the morpheme *-inh* in *gripezinha* [small flu]) to whole figurative expressions (such as PROGRESS IS MOVING FORWARD in the expression *não pode apenas ficar parado ali... 'Fique em casa!' Não dá.* [You can't just stay put... 'Stay at home'. You can't.])

Results fully support our hypothesis about Bolsonaro's recurrent use of the war metaphor. Since his first announcements about the virus outbreak, he consistently used the source domain WAR to talk metaphorically about the pandemic. Furthermore, the realization of the pandemic in terms of war alluded to a common enemy (i.e. COVID-19) that should be faced on the battlefield (i.e. public spaces). As said before, by using linguistic metaphors related to the domain of WAR, Bolsonaro was (potentially) able not only to make the matter understandable to his audience but also to evoke an emotive resource already proven to be very powerful in political discourse (Charteris-Black, 2011, 2021) and even to shift the responsibility from the government to the virus itself (Mohammadi, 2024). Hence, by alluding to a war scenario, Bolsonaro managed to spread the idea that the country's economy was suffering from the negative outcome of this battle. It is also worth noting that the notion of war implies finitude. That is, a declaration of war establishes an expectation that the fighting period will not last forever. An imminent end is in line with the claims of the President, who seeks to minimize the impacts of the pandemic.

While WAR was the most frequent source domain throughout the data, linguistic instantiations with HEALTH and RELIGION as source domains, differently from what was expected, were sporadic. We credit the lack of health-related mappings to Bolsonaro's apparent avoidance to address topics not related to the economic crisis caused by the pandemic. In fact, HEALTH appeared as a source domain in Bolsonaro's pronouncements solely when he talked about the negative outcomes of social isolation. As said, Bolsonaro repeatedly rejected self-isolation measures (one of the strategies

recognized worldwide as an effective way to fight the virus) and lessened the gravity of the virus. This was observed through linguistic instantiations of conceptual metaphors such as SELF-ISOLATION IS AN AUTHORITARIAN REGIME and IMPORTANCE IS SIZE.

Similarly to HEALTH, RELIGION was not a source domain frequently used by Bolsonaro to talk metaphorically about COVID-19. This does not mean, however, that religion is not pervasive in his speeches. On the contrary, the subject of religion appears frequently in his discourse, although not through linguistic metaphors. What our data revealed was the domain of religion appearing as a metaphorical framing that underlies his political view. We argue that the religious references in his discourse do not occur randomly; rather, they are part of his persona. Bolsonaro even quotes whole passages of the Bible in his pronouncements and portrays himself as a religious moralist; a good citizen whose job is to follow God's will while leading the nation.

The religious framing in Bolsonaro's statements presented itself regardless of it not being our initial research subject. Religion, as used in his discourse, connects some dots, as it reveals his attempts (i) to attribute to a divine intervention the resolution of what is outside his scope; (ii) to discredit technical orientations based on scientific methods favoring quicker and cheaper solutions; (iii) to gain public support from the electorate through linguistic identification found in his speech. Such a frame would meet the expectations of the nation, bringing to citizens some sense of protection. Bolsonaro is a ruler who, in the eyes of his followers, is resigned to divine strength, to a greater good. This is a rhetorical strategy through which Bolsonaro defined his interests, based on the characteristics of the social group (conservative and religious people) that he intended to impact. This religious framing grounds the victorious persona that the President portrays, which meets the frequency of war mappings in his speech. Moreover, Bolsonaro's discourse as a whole illustrates the idea that "frames, even if not explicitly present as metaphors *per se* in discourse, can be used to metaphorically structure viewpoints which in turn traverse political discourse" (S. Kefalidou, personal communication, 2021). In the President's discourse, the religious framing, alongside the war conceptual metaphor, support the idea of an autocratic, vertical, conservative, and religious political stance.

As far as limitations are concerned, we firstly list two main restrictions: time and space. The first one is related to the time gap (March to August 2020) concerning our data collection. As time went by and the pandemic remained, new mappings may

have emerged from Bolsonaro's thoughts, speeches, and, eventually, from his actions. The second one is related to the mediatic spaces where the President's direct speech is shared since we were not able to analyse all of the possible sources.

We also acknowledge some theoretical limitations. Under the Cognitive Linguistic umbrella, multiple theoretical tools could help expand our analysis. Regarding discourse interpretation and persuasion, for one, Musolff's (2006) scenario scheme could help explore further inferences and possible outcomes of what Bolsonaro said. Regarding discourse production and persuasion, the discussion around deliberated metaphors (Steen, 2008, 2015; Gibbs, 2011, 2015) could help explore possible underlying motivations. All things considered, we recognize that different approaches could have guided us to different conclusions.

Beyond contributions to the studies of figurative language, we understand that it is relevant to analyse the speech of the supreme leader of the country since his statements about the pandemic have a strong socio-political impact. The fact that the President went against certain scientific advances, for example, had a direct impact on public health policies, consequently influencing the lives of Brazilians. George Lakoff, in an interview to Pires de Oliveira (2001), already stated that "moral systems are very complex". We can add politics to this statement and say that politics and moral systems are both very complex. Considering we are not political scientists, many of our comments on political matters in this chapter are speculative to a great extent. Still, with a study based on real language use to ensure ecological validity, we wish to contribute to the ongoing (and never-ending) discussion about the power of metaphor in political discourse and to reassure the Cognitive Linguistics' empiricist vocation.

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## Data Availability Statement

Publicly available datasets were analysed in this study. All data are housed at either Twitter (<https://twitter.com/jairbolsonaro>), the government website (<https://www.gov.br/planalto/pt-br/acompanhe-oplanalto/pronunciamentos/pronunciamentos-do-presidente-da-republica>), or news sites (<https://www.folha.uol.com.br/>; <https://www.estadao.com.br/>; <https://g1.globo.com/>; <https://www.terra.com.br/>).  
Analysed excerpts are available at: <https://osf.io/7bjg4/>

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