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The Persuasive Use of Rhetorical Devices in the Reporting of 'Avian Flu'

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Abstract

This article examines the emerging cultural patterns in reporting a pandemic in waiting (avian influenza) as instantiated in the news discourse of the British press, more particularly the crisis that followed the 2005 outbreak. Emphasis is given to the use of rhetorical devices such as metaphors and pragmatic markers. Drawing on the work by Schön and by Lakoff, and following the line of research by some other scholars such as Nerlich, it is claimed that exposure to those linguistic resources can affect readers' perceptions, actions and value judgements in accordance with the logic displayed by those devices.

Key words: avian influenza, generative and conceptual metaphors, problem setting, argumentative function of metaphors, pragmatics

Resumen

Este artículo examina los patrones culturales emergentes en la cobertura de una pandemia esperada (la gripe aviar) tal y como aparece reflejada en el discurso periodístico de la prensa británica, en concreto la crisis que resultó del brote de 2005. Se presta especial atención al uso de recursos retóricos como las metáforas y los marcadores pragmáticos. Con base en el trabajo de Schön y Lakoff, y siguiendo la línea de investigación de estudiosos como Nerlich, se afirma que la exposición a estos recursos lingüísticos puede afectar las percepciones, acciones y juicios de valor de los lectores de acuerdo con la lógica resultante de los recursos utilizados.

Palabras clave: gripe aviar, metáforas generativas y conceptuales, planteamiento de problemas, función persuasiva de las metáforas, pragmática.

1. Introduction

Avian influenza (“bird flu” or H5N1), an infectious disease of birds caused by strains of the influenza virus, was first identified back in 1996 in Guangdong, China. Then, the following year the first cases of humans with the strain were reported in Hong Kong. From then on, the disease has resurfaced once and again mainly in Asia but also in parts of Europe, the Near East and Africa. It is likely that this infection among birds has become endemic in certain areas and that human infections resulting from direct contact with infected poultry and/or wild birds will continue to occur. Thus, the farming industry will still have to conquer new health threats as they come up. Let us remember that when bird flu struck the food industry it was already reeling under the recent impact of BSE, first, and foot and mouth disease, afterwards.

In this paper I examine, firstly, the cultural framing of reports on the Avian Flu disease through the use of metaphors as cultural and linguistic tools for conceptualizing disease and, secondly, I analyze the use of pragmatic markers such as historical references to previous diseases and scare statistics. The reports and articles published in the British press contributed to the creation of negative expectations on the part of the readers, which somehow called for appropriate action. Thus, studying the interconnection between metaphors and pragmatic markers will prove to be important because readers’ actions and demands will depend on the discourse they have been exposed to.

As for the period of research, it covered one of the peaks of the disease from October in 2005 to March in 2006. The reason why this period was chosen was because it was precisely in October, 2005, when the disease had reached Europe (countries such as Romania, Croatia, Greece, Italy, and Austria), which tremendously increased the newsworthiness of the story. A rare and distant illness, thus, was moving much nearer to Britain, implying that more awareness and more preparedness were needed.

2. Conceptual Framework

For this study, as it has become evident that metaphor can frame our understanding of disease (Rosenberg and Golden, 1992), I will draw mainly on the work of the political analyst Donald Schön (1993) on policy framing, on the study of conceptual metaphors in cognitive linguistics (Lakoff and his associates) and, finally, on

the application of conceptual metaphors to the analysis of some scientific debates using a more cultural and social approach than that proposed by Lakoff, namely Nerlich, Hamilton and Rowe 2002; and Nerlich, 2004; 2005. This metaphor-based analysis will be combined with pragmatics (Nerlich and Halliday, 2007) as the combination of these two approaches has proven to be very fruitful.

In a paper on the use of generative metaphors on social policy issues, Schön (1993:138) claimed that the “framing of problems often depends upon metaphors underlying the stories which generate problem setting and set the directions of problem solving”. In other words, once the metaphor has been created, the train of thought follows the line imposed and constrained by the metaphor, in such a way that we can hardly escape from it. This line of thought has been pursued by many other scholars such as Boers (1997) when he says that the problem solving strategies to a given problem will be determined by the logic of the metaphors readers have been exposed to.

As a result, what is claimed here is not that metaphors should be avoided, as they are one of our most productive cognitive processes in terms of comprehension, but rather that “we ought to become critically aware of these generative metaphors” (Schön 1993:139) as they generate our framing of different issues. Or, taking this idea a step further, Gibbs (1994: 207) claims that metaphor is not only constitutive of “all aspects of human thought and language understanding” but that “a great deal of human cognition is determined by the natural reflex to think metaphorically” and for that reason we must keep our eyes open to see how “everyday thought is determined by metaphor”.

On the other hand, an overlapping view of metaphors, such as the one illustrated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), is used in my characterization of the media reporting of this crisis. This cognitive view of metaphors helps us understand and structure highly abstract concepts in terms of more concrete ones. Metaphors are not only linguistic, but also cultural and cognitive phenomena; that is to say, they are materialized in actual utterances by speakers of a given community but in fact they are conceptual in nature. Conceptual metaphors, which will be written in capitals, such as FIGHTING AN ILLNESS IS A WAR are seen as mappings across two conceptual domains: the conceptual source domain (war), and the conceptual target domain (fighting an illness). Thus, metaphors are a necessary tool in our daily life to think, talk and reason when it comes to dealing with abstract concepts.

Nerlich, as said above, has applied this cognitive view of metaphor to the analysis of some scientific debates, such as the one on genetically modified food, or the one on foot and mouth disease; one of the metaphors most widely discussed in her papers on foot and mouth disease is precisely that of FIGHTING A DISEASE IS WAR (2004). As in this article I analyse a similar type of reporting, reference to Nerlich's papers, published in journals on social and health sciences, is inevitable.

On the other hand, pragmatics deals with the study of language in situation. From a pragmatic point of view (Austin 1962), three components can be distinguished in utterances: locution (what utterances say), illocution (what utterances perform), and perlocution (what utterances achieve). In this study I shall pay special attention to this third component, or the potential of utterances to bring about an effect on the readers.

The hypothesis guiding this paper is that metaphors contributed to the political and cultural understanding of the crisis that followed the 2005 outbreak of avian influenza in the UK, through the use of images such as those of a war or a journey; but, mainly, they guided and influenced readers' minds according to the political needs of the moment. In other words, as Cubo de Severino et al. (1988) claimed, metaphors have two very important functions: a) to give a more concrete representation of the situation at hand, making it clearer; and b) to manipulate readers' minds through the inference patterns and value judgements generated by the metaphors being used. On the other hand, it is also claimed that the use of pragmatic markers (historical references and scare statistics) was an explicit manner exploited by scientists and echoed by the media to tell readers that the time for action had come.

The practical part of this study contains an analysis of the rhetoric used to report on this socio-economic issue in a major British newspaper, *The Times* (a centre-right broadsheet), more particularly its online version *The Times online* (T). The reason why this paper was selected against other national newspapers was because it published the greatest number of articles on Avian Flu. The articles analysed, those which referred to Avian Flu in one way or another, appeared in the leader pages of the home news sections and editorials, which shows the importance of the story once the illness was knocking on British people's doors. The article length varied, but on average articles of over 350 words were found. As for the sources being used, most articles relied heavily on World Health Organization (WHO), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and government sources.

The analysis was divided into two different stages. In the first stage, which covered the whole period of study (October, 2005, through March, 2006), the metaphor of war was used with a frequency which ranged on a gradient from ‘very often’ at the beginning of the period up to a point where it was almost completely absent by March; the JOURNEY metaphor, on the other hand, was used all through the period; pragmatic markers were also attested in a great number of examples, equally all through the period. In the second stage, January through March, 2006, four new metaphors emerged with strength: the CONTROL metaphor, A VIRUS IS A SUPERNATURAL FORCE, A VIRUS IS A NATURAL FORCE and the GLOBAL NETWORK metaphor, very much in line with the idea that we live in a global village.

3. Rhetorical frames used in reporting on Avian Influenza

First of all, let us define the concept of *frame*. Van Dijk (1997:21) states:

We propose that frames define units or chunks of concepts which are not essentially, but *typically* related. [...]. Conceptually, there is no immediate or essential relation between the concept of ‘table’ and the concept of ‘cereal’, nor between ‘soap’ and ‘water’, or between ‘waitress’ and ‘menu’. They are distinct and do not presuppose each other. Yet, they are organized by the frame of ‘breakfast’, ‘washing’ and ‘restaurant’, respectively.

In other words, frames are causal chains that represent frequently repeated actions in such a way that mentioning one of the actions in the chain, for example, buying a plane ticket, activates the whole frame of travelling by plane. Other individual proposals to grasp this concept have been made through the use of the label *script* (Schank and Abelson 1977:41), which they describe as “a stereotyped sequence of actions that defines a well-known situation.” Other similar proposals have been made under different labels such as that of *scenario*, which basically touches on the same issue: structured knowledge dominates our comprehension (Schank and Abelson 1977).

Apart from the above mentioned framing devices, in this paper I focus on the use of another framing device which has produced much literature in the last thirty years: metaphors. In the first stage of my analysis, stories of war, journeys, and destruction brought about by natural and supernatural forces, to mention some of them, permeate the narrative on Avian Flu. In the second stage, the WAR metaphor is less visible and is replaced by the CONTROL metaphor.

3.1. *First stage*

The two metaphors most heavily relied on and which will provide discourse with a highly structured skeleton are the WAR and JOURNEY metaphors. These two metaphors can be characterised because they have a lot of detail to be filled in, as will be seen in the analysis; that is to say, the degree of structural elaboration in both metaphors is high as there is a long list of structural connections between the source and target domains (see Lakoff and Turner, 1989: 85). On the other hand, more generic frames will be found, such as THE GLOBAL NETWORK, with a skeletal structure since they offer very little specific detail.

3.1.1. The WAR metaphor

One of the most powerful narratives in our culture to explain complex political realities revolve around frames (Van Dijk, 1977, Schön, 1993) of war and confrontation. This is also clearly stated in the following statement by Lakoff (1992: 1):

There is an extensive, and mostly unconscious, system of metaphor that we use automatically and unreflectively to understand complexities and abstractions. Part of this system is devoted to understanding international relations and war.

In his article about the metaphors used in the Gulf War, Lakoff (1992) provided us with a prototypical war scenario where one of the metaphorical systems that played a major role was FAIRY TALE AS A JUST WAR. In the narrative that emerged around the Avian Flu we can see how the war scenario anticipated by Lakoff –or ‘prototype scenario’, which is the term used by Kövecses when talking about ‘anger, pride and love’ (1986)– fits this new situation quite well. Thus, we find the prototypical actors represented by the following entities: in the first stage, there is a villain to be fought (the virus or the animal carrying it, which brought about death on the innocent victim), and a victim (the farming community, and the industry of tourism, also badly affected by the crisis); in the second stage, the hero (the governmental institutions handling the crisis) in charge of restoring moral balance by winning over the enemy.

In the following, some of the correspondences between the source and target domains will be analysed. The italicized linguistic expressions are the particular linguistic examples of the conceptual metaphor.

Typical activities in a war: fighting (an illness) and defending (from its attack)

The two opponents are governments and the virus. Governments are presented as attacking the enemy, the disease, and defending themselves from the attacks by the enemy.

(1) A plan drawn up by the Bush Administration to *combat a pandemic bird flu* outbreak reveals that America is grossly unprepared to deal with what would likely be the worst disaster in US history. (T 10/Nov/05)

(2) Britain *on the defensive* over bird flu plan. (T 20/Feb/06)

There is an enemy (virus) to be destroyed

The virus which kills people is the entity to be fought. Thus, the adversary, unless destroyed, brings about death.

(3) Some controls are already in place. Airline companies have been called in by the Department of Transport and told not to carry passengers, particularly from South-East Asia, where *the H5N1 virus* has killed 68 human beings and 125 million bird. (T 5/Nov/05)

Strategies conducted in the course of a war

A strategy devised to try to control the course of the war.

(4) If bird flu does arrive in Britain, the *government’s strategy* is simple: isolate the outbreak site and slaughter all poultry in the immediate vicinity to stop the disease spreading. (T 22/Oct/05)

Armed forces (veterinaries)

An army of veterinaries was drafted in.

(5) Dr. Juan Lobroth, senior animal health officer for the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation, said he would like to have at least 20 more Veterinarians to send to Indonesia and Turkey simply to train “*brigades of cullers*”. (T 29/Jan/06)

Use of weapons (vaccination and closure of countryside)

The use of weapons in this war was both offensive and defensive. Offensive measures such as the use of vaccines, and defensive ones such as the closure of the countryside through the establishment of exclusion zones, hoping to stop the advance of the disease.

(6) *Key weapon* in battle to stop the H5N1 virus [vaccines]. (T 23/Feb/06)

(7) *Exclusion zones* will be thrown around farms affected by the disease. Under old rules, only poultry for immediate slaughter could be moved out of these areas. (T 21/Feb/05)

Shield (species barrier)

The species barrier makes it difficult for infectious diseases to be transmitted from one species to another. Thus, a type of protection is to try to prevent the disease from jumping from birds to domestic fowl. The failure in the species barrier between animals and humans would provoke a pandemic. Defense is therefore vital, as reflected in the media.

(8) *Defending the species barrier* will mean active and unstinting solidarity and support for societies in Asia and Africa. (T 22/Oct/06)

Military activities

The danger of this enemy makes the army (members of the government or involved with the government in one way or another) give all their attention to what is happening around them.

(9) He [the Chinese Health Minister] announced that President Hu wanted an all-out effort to prevent the spread of the virus. "We cannot *let down our guard*, we cannot under-estimate the risks of the outbreaks," he added. (T 22/Oct/05)

This war scenario is justified on the grounds that we are dealing with a very dangerous and violent enemy: AVIAN FLU IS A KILLER (Nerlich 2005). This other metaphor was highly frequent in discussions of the disease where Avian Flu was continuously labelled as a "deadly virus" which "claims victims" and "kills people"

(10) "*The deadly H5N1 virus* is heading our way. Will we all die? It 's coming closer and it strikes without warning." (T 16/Oct/05)

As waging a war implies some type of movement, the JOURNEY metaphor fits very well into the WAR frame. The JOURNEY metaphor was frequently used in reporting in The Times, and will be analysed below.

3.1.2. The JOURNEY metaphor

This metaphor is one of the most pervasive metaphors we use when dealing with abstract concepts such as those of a life or fighting a disease, which is not at all surprising since this metaphor is grounded in everyday physical experience. Moving our body from one place to another is a typical and recurring activity; thus, being a prime example in the domain of physical activity it is also a good candidate for metaphorical mappings in abstract domains. In the case at hand, the disease, as will be seen in the examples, is conceptualized as a physical entity moving over a path towards a goal: infecting Britain. This is so because the data were extracted from a British newspaper, and the whole situation was being watched through and reported from British eyes, so to speak.

I will once again provide some examples within the given correspondences (source and target):

The disease is a traveller

We find the disease going from one place to another, especially in foreign countries.

(11) The deadly H5N1 strain of the virus, which has jumped the species barrier from birds to humans in Asia, *has arrived in European countries* including France, Germany and Greece. (T 2/March/06)

Difficulties are impediments to travel

The species barrier is an obstacle along the way to be avoided by the disease. In the case at hand, the way the disease gets over the obstacle is by jumping it.

(12) The disease *has already jumped species*, leading to three human outbreaks, the most serious of which killed 23 out of 34 people infected in Asia last year. (T 2/Oct/05)

Progress is the distance travelled

Whilst travelling, the disease is reaching countries such as Britain, from where the whole issue is being reported, though other examples mention the Middle East or Africa. Be this as it may, the disease seems to be moving freely and globally.

(13) All the strains identified have a common origin, a 1996 virus in Guangdong, China. The research suggests that random infections by migrating

birds are unavoidable, and that the virus will almost certainly *reach Britain* in this way. (T 14/Feb/06)

- (14) “As the virus *continues its geographic expansion*, it is also undergoing genetic diversity expansion”, said Rebecca Garten, of the US Centres for Disease Control and Surveillance (CDC) in Atlanta, Georgia, who led the study. (T 21/March/06)

Direction of the motion

We see the disease travelling towards the west.

- (15) But European governments are scrambling to *halt the westward spread of* the virus and are taking their own measures to prevent it crossing the borders from Turkey. (T 11/Jan/06)

Ways of moving

The disease can move along the way differently, depending on the purpose. If it wants to move without attracting attention, it will creep; if, on the other hand, something on the way has to be avoided, it will jump. This means that the disease is attributed agency, and thus given the capacity to think and act accordingly.

- (16) We must work with her [Mother Nature], not against her, tilling the soil without chemicals and allowing out chickens to roam free, even as bird flu *creeps* closer to our door. (T 1/march/06)

A very interesting comment to make in line with this last example is that there is an implicit metaphor fleshing out the discourse of agriculture in Western European thinking: SURVIVING IS SUBDUING NATURE (Martín, 2006). This example is precisely claiming that we should move in the opposite direction: working *with* nature instead of *against* nature; as, otherwise, what may happen is that nature will rebel against humans.

Means of transport

The vehicle used for the motion can be a train, as the example shows.

- (17) “Vaccination does not necessarily stop the disease *in its tracks*”, said the Environmental Secretary. (T 20/Feb/06)

3.1.3. Pragmatic markers

The rhetorical devices analysed in this section (historical references and scare statistics) work as pragmatic markers (Aijmer, 2002, Aijmer and Simon-Vandenberg, 2006), as they anchor meaning to the context of situation in such a way that each instantiation echoes the sound of the previous occurrence; but they also work as symbolic ‘risk signals’ (Nerlich and Halliday, 2007:50) —typically used when the media deal with risk issues that attract public attention— since their function is to make the audience aware of a possible pandemic in waiting and create a feeling of anxiety and expectation about it calling for prompt action. At any rate, as pragmatic markers they are to be understood not within the boundaries of a single sentence, as Austin did in speech act theory (Aijmer, 2002:8), but in a much broader context. In other words, we can talk about the emergence of an avian flu narrative (Nerlich, Hamilton and Rowe, 2002) where metaphors and other rhetorical devices evolve in contextual use.

3.1.3.1. Historical references

Newspapers try to give current events more newsworthiness by linking them to other well-known episodes of the same event. Thus, in the corpus collected, there is a clear pattern of reference to previous flu pandemics, which is a way to give salience and continuity to a present event. It should not be forgotten that Avian Flu is one of those emergent diseases which has surfaced three times in the last century.

Just to mention two examples:

(18) The global death toll could make the pandemic more serious than *the 1918 Spanish flu* outbreak, the worst infection since mass statistics have been gathered. (T 16/Oct/05)

(19) If this [the virus may mutate] happens, it is difficult to predict which age groups might be more at risk. Deaths occurred predominantly in infants and the elderly during *the 1889 and 1947 pandemics*, while young adults were most severely affected in 1918. (T 14/Jan/06)

3.1.3.2. Scare statistics

This is another rhetorical device used to emphasise the salience of the event being discussed by presenting how it can affect human beings, as shown in the following examples:

- (20) In Britain *the virus* [Spanish flu] *killed 228,000 people* worldwide, about 50 m died, more than in the first world war. (T 6/Oct/05)
- (21) The keynote speaker, David Salisbury, head of immunisation at the Department of Health, said businesses should be planning for the ‘worst case scenario’ in which *25% of the population*, or 14.6m people, *would come down with the flu*. (T 22/Jan/06)

3.2. Second stage

As a war scenario leads to victory or defeat and no progress in the fight against the disease was being made—in fact the geographical expansion of the virus continued from country to country—the uncertainty grew about what to do in the case of a possible pandemic. As a consequence, this situation generated a new set of metaphors where war, though still being used, became less visible. Thus, the more energetic discourse of war was replaced by a more uncertain approach where the new metaphors we come across are: THE CONTROL metaphor, A VIRUS IS A SUPERNATURAL FORCE, A VIRUS IS A NATURAL FORCE within THE GLOBAL NETWORK frame.

3.2.1. The CONTROL metaphor

When coming to terms with the disease, this metaphor calls for a more moderate approach, politically and economically, than the war metaphor. Thus, the Avian Flu was now reported in the following terms:

- (22) The FAO warned Turkey’s neighbours, including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Iraq, Iran and Syria, to put *control and surveillance measures in place* immediately. (T 11/Jan/06)
- (23) The research published in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences Indicates that the virus has been spreading *in an uncontrolled fashion* in China, for the past decade. (T 14/Feb/06)

This control effort by government and institutions such as WHO and FAO was typically framed through the container schema (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), where the image of a physical body with its boundaries is imposed on the disease. In the case at hand, the boundaries of the disease were those of a farm, a town, a region, a country, a continent, etc. Let us see some examples:

- (24) Far more human and animal exposure to the virus will occur if strict containment does not isolate *all known and unknown locations* where the bird flu virus is currently present. (T 11/Jan/06)
- (25) The measures were taken to stop the deadly H5N1 virus spreading from wild birds to domesticated birds after it was confirmed that the virus had arrived *at the fringes of Europe*, with cases in Turkey and a suspected case in Romania. (T 15/Oct/05)

3.2.2. Supernatural and natural force metaphors

The use of these two new metaphors (Nerlich, 2004, Nerlich and Halliday, 2007) seems to **indicate** that the disease is getting out of control, after having been running non-stop since the H5N1 was identified in Guangdong (China, 1996), and the government needs to resort to the use of metaphors which present the issue as something uncontrollable. However, the choice of these metaphors makes it clear, through the use of images such as those of a doomsday scenario or tidal waves and fires, that the reason for the lack of control is the fact that it was totally unpredictable and beyond human control. Thus, if we were to hear of a tsunami coming our way nothing could be done to stop it but just get ready to deal with it. Thus, the logic behind these images pushes the public to believe that we just have to take it as it comes.

a) A VIRUS IS A SUPERNATURAL FORCE

The discourse of the supernatural has always proved to be a very powerful narrative to catch people’s attention (important as the journalist wants readers to read the articles s/he has written) and has provided the government with the right framework to ask people to join in as the evil forces will hit each and everyone of us. More particularly, one of the examples strikes a religious note “on a wing and a prayer” trying to show how governments and people behind them are on the good side (from a moral point of view). Therefore readers, unless they want to question the validity of this discourse, have no other option but to embrace the government’s rhetoric and the logic resulting from it.

As can be seen, all the examples appeared in February and March 2006, that is to say, towards the end of this outbreak, when the disease had already been circulating silently and freely all over the world for a long time, particularly from the end of 1996.

The flavour of this metaphor is clearly apparent in the following examples:

(26) Residents have every reason to believe in *a curse*. When it was placed under bird flu quarantine last week, the town renowned for its hedonistic nightlife was only just recovering from a bombing by Islamic extremists last July in which five people were killed. (T 18/Feb/06)

(27) If the new variant of bird flu becomes as infectious as speech habits then we are all *doomed*. (T 14/Mar/06)

(28) Bird flu: a Dooms Day Scenario? (T 2 Mar/06)

(29) *On a wing and a prayer*. (T 21/Jan/06)

b) A VIRUS IS A NATURAL FORCE

The disease is conceptualised as something beyond human control, such as a wave or a tsunami, which means that nothing could have been done in the first place to prevent it; though, as one of the examples implies, something could be done to minimise the impact once it has happened.

Through the different metaphors discussed, we can see how the handling of the disease by the government is presented first as an issue that the government is controlling and then as an issue which is unpredictable and difficult to control. That is to say, talking about waging a war against the disease, somehow, presents the government as engaging in a struggle to fight and reduce the enemy devising the most effective strategies and using the right weapons. On the other hand, when the disease is later portrayed as a natural force, the only option for the government is to react to the unpredictable whenever it happens; the grip is on the part of the natural force, at least in the first stages. The logic of this metaphor, once again, is that people should pull together to save the nation.

Tidal wave

(30) What we do not want is either *a New Orleans situation or a tsunami situation*—that is you could predict something was going to happen but you don't do anything about it to prepare—. (T 20/Feb/06)

(31) *A new wave of infection* begins [December 2004]. Vietnam, Cambodia and Indonesia report cases of the virus in humans. (T 18/Feb/06)

Fire

(32) He was one of an army of men in masks and white boiler suits deployed to disinfect cars and round up birds for destruction as the virus *flared* across the country. (T 15/January/2006)

(33) Bird flu *sweep* Orkney isle as 100 chickens die on remote farm. (T 17/Mar/06)

Wild beast

(34) The results have lifted immediate threat of the virus having already crossed the Channel but experts warned that it would be foolish to ignore the growing risk as the disease *creeps closer*. (T 20/Feb/06)

(35) *The monster* at our door. (T 17/Mar/06)

3.2.3. The Global Network frame

In the report prepared by Scudamore and Harris (2002), of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), on the lessons learnt from the experience of the outbreak of foot and mouth disease in Great Britain in 2001, the emphasis is placed upon a number of topics, one of them being the engagement with other countries. This is precisely one of the lessons put into practice in this new food scare at the beginning of 2006. Another measure, though it had already been implemented in the outbreak of foot and mouth disease in 2001, was the establishment of contingency plans: surveillance zones were introduced, imposing movement restrictions.

As a consequence, the main difference between how other diseases have been tackled in the past—with the exception of the 2003 SARS epidemic (Nerlich 2005)—and how this new epidemic was dealt with was the search for a global mechanism to stop the spread of the disease, involving as many countries as possible in the process. There are some remains of a militaristic language in the use of this new metaphor. Let us mention some examples:

(36) The risk is *global*. We need to exercise solidarity. (T 11/Jan/06)

(37) Africa is *weak link in bird flu defences*. (T 22/Jan/06)

(38) GEIS [*Global Emerging Infections Surveillance and Response System*] centres

In Egypt, Indonesia, Kenya and Peru have played an important part in monitoring the spread of the H5N1 flu in Asia, but laboratories in seven other countries have been closed because of budget cuts and changing strategic priorities. (T 2/Mar/06)

(39) *Global network* is needed to combat bird flu pandemic. (T 2/Mar/06)

(40) The news came as a group of American military scientists called for the setting-up of a *global network of laboratories* [...]. (T 2/Mar/06)

(41) The absence of adequate surveillance in much of Africa, South America and Asia leaves a *gap in the world's defences* against an influenza pandemic that wealthier countries need to address. (T 2/Mar/06)

(42) We need *global solidarity* against *global disease*. (T 6/Mar/06)

This frame of a global network is deeply embedded in a modern cultural and social narrative of a globalised society, where we all belong to the same global village and are all involved in countering the challenges we face, such as Avian Influenza in this case, or war on terrorism, in others. Familiarity with the semantics of a metaphor is, then, an ingredient that can help enhance the potentiality of a new metaphor as it taps into the common sense and inference patterns of a given community.

4. Conclusion

In our global village, not only do people and communication travel faster with no frontiers to cross, but also diseases such as avian influenza. Because of this new and enlarged scenario, new ways to deal with diseases and, even more important from our point of view, new linguistic structures that provide us with new ways of conceptualizing disease are needed.

In this paper I have tried to analyse the different rhetorical devices (be they metaphors or pragmatic markers) used by the online version of *The Times* to frame the coverage of avian flu, particularly the period running from October (2005) to March (2006).

As far as metaphors are concerned, a number of conceptual metaphors were used consistently, firstly, to give a more concrete picture of this abstract and complicated issue of avian flu and, in consequence, provide readers with linguistic

structures to talk about it; and, secondly, to push readers into a particular frame, with its resulting logic, in such a way that challenging what is presented as fixed and common sense becomes more difficult. Going back to Boers (1997), the strategies used to deal with a situation will, then, be determined by the type of metaphors which have been chosen to report the issue. For this reason, I have discussed the persuasive use of metaphor in political discourse, where metaphorical expressions are adapted to the circumstances over and over again thus creating and then recreating new scenarios. In this case, we have seen how a war scenario, where the government would be seen in charge of making decisions, proved unfruitful as the virus continued crossing countries and affecting animals and humans, and, then, was replaced by a scenario more suited to the situation where the government was presented not so much in control as struggling against uncontrollable (supernatural and natural) forces. This confirms the claim by Edelman (1977) when he contended that at the core of political communication is the ability of the politician to use metaphor persuasively, depending on what is needed at a given moment.

As for pragmatic markers, through the evocation of other previous diseases, such as the 1918 ‘Spanish flu’ pandemic, and the mention of scare statistics, explanations as to how many people can get infected, and audiences (including the government as well, since statements were issued by experts trying to make governments aware that they needed to prepare for action) are mobilized to explore ways to escape the risk of infection. The problem that arises is the uncertainty “as to the nature of these actions, when to execute them and how many governmental resources should be allocated” (Nerlich and Halliday, 2007: 51).

Another interesting point discussed in this paper is the framing of this disease as a global issue, which highlights the role of some international organizations in setting news agendas and leading the way. Moreover, although joint and coordinated effort was seen across some agencies such as WHO and FAO (although the WHO was clearly the most conspicuous organization), they all worked as advisory and coordinating bodies willing to help countries in countering the disease but never claiming any authority over steps to be taken, as can be seen in the following example: “The WHO advised nations last year they should stockpile enough drugs to treat at least a quarter of their [EU] population”. Thus, there is a clear absence of an international regulatory body to show the way ahead, which is maybe an issue the United Nations could look into.

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