


Language of War


Metaphors and Frames that Rule Our Thinking

Presenter: Victoria Fé

◆ AI Overview


The language of war metaphor frames non-military issues like diseases (COVID-19), social problems (poverty/drugs), or personal struggles as battles to create urgency, unity, and emotional impact. While effective for mobilization, this rhetoric can oversimplify complex issues, reduce ethical nuance, and create a "good vs. bad" binary.  Taylor & Francis Online +4

Common Examples and Contexts

- **Public Health & Policy:** Referring to the "war on cancer" or "war on COVID-19" (e.g., "fighting the virus," "frontline workers," "attacking the disease").
- **Interpersonal Relationships:** Describing romance through conflict, such as "conquering" a heart, "fending off" suitors, or "winning" someone over.
- **Daily Life & Work:** Framing arguments as combat (e.g., "he *attacked* every weak point," "I *defended* my position").
- **Internal Struggles:** Describing personal, emotional, or psychological battles (e.g., "fighting inner demons").  TikTok +4



Functions of War Metaphors

- **Urgency:** Communicates that a situation is critical and requires immediate, collective action.
- **Structure:** Simplifies complex, abstract, or unknown problems into a familiar, concrete scenario.
- **Emotional Impact:** Evokes fear, patriotism, or determination.  The Economist +4

Critiques and Risks

- **Obscures Reality:** It can distract from the specific, non-military, or scientific actions needed, such as in public health crises where "fighting" is less effective than "treating" or "preventing".
- **False Dichotomy:** It forces a "winner vs. loser" mentality on issues that may require nuance, cooperation, or long-term management.
- **Moral Hazard:** The language can desensitize people to the actual, physical destruction of real war. [Wikipedia +4](#)



◆ AI Overview

Lakoff and Johnson's theory (1980) posits that **metaphor is not just poetic, but a fundamental cognitive mechanism that shapes how we think, act, and perceive the world**. They argue that we understand abstract concepts (e.g., time, love, arguments) through concrete physical experiences (e.g., journey, container, war). [YouTube +4](#)

Key Aspects of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT):

- **Metaphors Structure Thought:** Metaphors are not just in language, but in the mental, conceptual system, meaning they influence our actions and perceptions.
- **Source-Target Mapping:** We understand a "target" domain (usually abstract) in terms of a "source" domain (usually concrete/physical). Examples include:
 - **ARGUMENT IS WAR:** "Your claims are *indefensible*," "He *attacked* every weak point".
 - **TIME IS MONEY:** "Spending time," "running out of time," "investing time".
 - **LOVE IS A JOURNEY:** "It's been a *long, bumpy road*," "We're *at a crossroads*".

Metaphors We Live By

Examples of abstract notions described in everyday metaphors:

on the simplest level we encounter the *metaphorical* use of, say, the UP-AND-DOWN schema.

We come across this latter everyday – when we watch the level of water go *up* in the glass,

when we get *up* and stay *up* all day (functioning, healthy), whereas if we fell sick we would be

lying *down*, etc. As a result, the UP-AND-DOWN schema has multiple applications in our

abstract thinking: we perceive GOOD as UP, HAPPY as UP, HEALTH as UP, ALIVE as UP,

CONTROL as UP, STATUS as UP (and, correspondingly, the opposites of the

above-mentioned notions employing “DOWN”).*

***WARM - COLD

**See Lakoff & Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) for a detailed analysis of the usage of this and other image schemas.*

Understanding Time

The Time Orientation Metaphor

The Location of the Observer	→	The Present
The Space In Front Of The Observer	→	The Future
The Space Behind The Observer	→	The Past

Linguistic expressions of this metaphorical mapping include: **“That’s all *behind* us now. Let’s put that *in back of* us. We’re looking *ahead* to the future. He has a great future *in front of* him”**.*

Other spatial metaphors we use to talk about time include the *Moving Time* metaphor and the *Moving Observer (or Time’s Landscape)* metaphor. In the first case events are moving past us as we observe them, in the second, we move along the time’s landscape.

*Lakoff G., *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1998), p. 140.

The Moving Observer Metaphor

Locations On The Observer's Path of Motion → Times

The Motion of the Observer → The "Passage" of Time

The Distance Moved By The Observer → The Amount of Time "Passed"

Combine this with the above-mentioned Time Orientation metaphor and you'll get the whole scenario of what is happening.

Examples:

There's going to be trouble *down the road*.

Will you be staying a *long time* or a *short time*?

Let's spread the conference *over two weeks*. We're coming *up on* Christmas.

We *passed* the deadline.*

*Ibid., p. 146.

Time is a Resource

Waste time

Spend time

Value time

We are running out of time.

etc.

Time as a flow*

Time flows.



Deep Frames

In his *Thinking Points* (2006) (and elsewhere) Lakoff claims that we think in ‘frames’:

Frames are the mental structures that allow human beings to understand reality—and sometimes to create what we take to be reality... Frames facilitate our most basic interactions with the world—they structure our ideas and concepts, they shape the way we reason, and they even impact how we perceive and how we act. For the most part, our use of frames is unconscious and automatic—we use them without realizing it. *

To explain this idea he refers to E. Goffman’s study of institutions and conventionalized social behavior. Thus, e.g., in a hospital frame you would have people playing certain fixed roles (surgeons, nurses, orderlies, patients). Besides,

the hospital frame rules out certain behavior, because it determines what is appropriate and what isn’t: orderlies or visitors do not perform operations; surgeons don’t empty bedpans; operations are not performed in the waiting area; visitors bring flowers to the patients, but surgeons don’t bring flowers to orderlies.

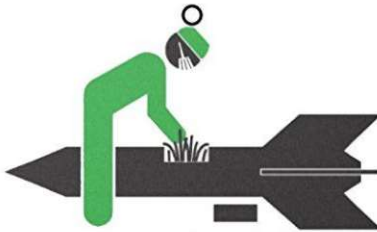
The scenarios also have a logic and a linear order: First you check in at the registration desk, then you’re prepped for an operation before you are operated on; visitors are allowed after the operation. Checking in after your operation is ruled out by the logic of the frame. **

*G. Lakoff, *Thinking Points*, Chapter 3, p. 1.

** *Ibid.*, p. 2.

The hospital 'framework' is extended when we talk about military operations:

...the enemy is seen as a cancer that can spread. In this metaphor, military "operations" are seen as hygienic, to "clean out" enemy fortifications. Bombing raids are portrayed as "surgical strikes" to "take out" anything that can serve a military purpose. The metaphor is supported by imagery of shiny metallic instruments of war, especially jets.*



*G. Lakoff, "Metaphor and War: The Metaphor System Used to Justify the War in the Gulf", Part 1, p. 11.

** See p. 2 of Lakoff's Thinking Points for details.

Here is another example of a social frame used to discuss politics:

[T]ake this sentence: "The Democrats accused Bush of illegal spying on U.S. citizens." The accusers are the Democrats, the accused is the president, the offense is illegal spying on U.S. citizens, and the accusation is the act of declaring. The verb "accuse" is decomposed into two statements, one declared and one presupposed. The badness (illegality or immorality) of the offense is presupposed by the accuser, who is declaring that the accused did perform the offense.**

Metaphor and War

The Metaphor System Used to Justify War in the Gulf

George Lakoff
Linguistics Department
University of California at Berkeley
(lakoff@cogsci.berkeley.edu)

Metaphors can kill. The discourse over whether we should go to war in the gulf is a panorama of metaphor. Secretary of State Baker sees Saddam as “sitting on our economic lifeline.” President Bush sees him as having a “stranglehold” on our economy. General Schwarzkopf characterizes the occupation of Kuwait as a “rape” that is ongoing. The President says that the US is in the gulf to “protect freedom, protect our future, and protect the innocent”, and that we must “push Saddam Hussein back.” Saddam is seen as Hitler. It is vital, literally vital, to understand just what role metaphorical thought is playing in bringing us to the brink of war.

Deep frames used to talk about war (by the media/politicians)

- War is Politics
 - Politics as Business (costs and gains, calculating the amount of sacrifice going to war would be “worth”)
- War is a Competitive Game
- War as Medicine
- The Just War Fairy Tale
- War as a Violent Crime

War as a Competitive Game

It has long been noted that we understand war as a competitive game like chess, or as a sport, like football or boxing. It is a metaphor in which there is a clear winner and loser, and a clear end to the game. The metaphor highlights strategic thinking, team work, preparedness, the spectators in the world arena, the glory of winning and the shame of defeat.*

Military maneuvers are often described as "positioning" or "trapping" in a "maze" of combat.

Politicians often frame strategic decisions as a "poker game," where they avoid showing their cards, take risks to win, or bluff.

War is likened to team sports like American football, focusing on field position, gaining ground, and trying to "hurt the other guy".

*G. Lakoff, "Metaphor and War: The Metaphor System Used to Justify the War in the Gulf", p. 8.

War as Medicine

[T]here is a common metaphor in which military control by the enemy is seen as a cancer that can spread. In this metaphor, military "operations" are seen as hygienic, to "clean out" enemy fortifications. Bombing raids are portrayed as "surgical strikes" to "take out" anything that can serve a military purpose. The metaphor is supported by imagery of shiny metallic instruments of war, especially jets.*

*G. Lakoff, "Metaphor and War: The Metaphor System Used to Justify the War in the Gulf", p. 11.

International Politics is Business*

Here the state is a Rational Actor, whose actions are transactions and who is engaged in maximizing gains and minimizing costs. This metaphor brings with it the mathematics of cost-benefit calculation and game theory, which is commonly taught in graduate programs in international relations.

Clausewitz's metaphor, the major metaphor preferred by international relations strategists, presupposes this system.

**Clausewitz's Metaphor:
War is Politics, pursued by other means.**

**G. Lakoff, "Metaphor and War: The Metaphor System Used to Justify the War in the Gulf", p. 7.*



◆ AI Overview

Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831) was a prominent Prussian general, military theorist, and intellectual whose work *Vom Kriege* (On War) remains a foundational text on strategy and military science. He famously defined war as a "continuation of politics by other means," focusing on the psychological and political aspects of conflict. [Wikipedia +2](#)

Key Aspects of Clausewitz:

- **Military Career:** He joined the Prussian army at age 12, fought in the Napoleonic Wars, served briefly in the Russian army, and later became director of the Prussian Military Academy.
- **Major Work - *On War*:** Published posthumously by his wife, Marie von Brühl, this work emphasizes that war is not merely a technical exercise, but a "paradoxical trinity" involving the government, the army, and the people.

- Mathematization of Metaphor
- Rational Action
- Rationality is Profit Maximization

The Causal Commerce System*

The Causal Commerce system is a way to comprehend actions intended to achieve positive effects, but which may also have negative effects. The system is composed of three metaphors:

Causal Transfer: An effect is an object transferred from a cause to an affected party.

For example, sanctions are seen as “giving” Iraq economic difficulties. Correspondingly, economic difficulties for Iraq are seen as “coming from” the sanctions. This metaphor turns purposeful actions into transfers of objects.

The Exchange Metaphor for Value: The value of something is what you are willing to exchange for it.

*G. Lakoff, “Metaphor and War: The Metaphor System Used to Justify the War in the Gulf”, pp. 5-7.

Whenever we ask whether it is “worth” going to war to get Iraq out of Kuwait, we are using the Exchange Metaphor for Value plus the Causal Transfer metaphor.

Well-being is Wealth: Things of value constitute wealth. Increases in well-being are “gains”; decreases in well-being are “costs.”

The metaphor of Well-being-as-Wealth has the effect of making qualitative effects quantitative. It not only makes qualitatively different things comparable, it even provides a kind of arithmetic calculus for adding up costs and gains.

Taken together, these three metaphors portray actions as commercial transactions with costs and gains. Seeing actions as transactions is crucial to applying ideas from economics to actions in general.

Risks

A risk is an action taken to achieve a positive effect, where the outcome is uncertain and where there is also a significant probability of a negative effect. Since Causal Commerce allows one to see positive effects of actions as “gains” and negative effects as “costs”, it becomes natural to see a risky action metaphorically as a financial risk of a certain type, namely, a gamble.

Risks are Gambles

In gambling to achieve certain “gains”, there are “stakes” that one can “lose”. When one asks what is “at stake” in going to war, one is using the metaphors of Causal Commerce and Risks-as-Gambles. These are also the metaphors that President Bush uses when he refers to strategic moves in the gulf as a “poker game” where it would be foolish for him to “show his cards”, that is, to make strategic knowledge public.

The Fairy Tale of the Just War*

Cast of characters: A villain, a victim, and a hero. The victim and the hero may be the same person.

The scenario: A crime is committed by the villain against an innocent victim (typically an assault, theft, or kidnapping). The offense occurs due to an imbalance of power and creates a moral imbalance. The hero either gathers helpers or decides to go it alone. The hero makes sacrifices; he undergoes difficulties, typically making an arduous heroic journey, sometimes across the sea to a treacherous terrain. The villain is inherently evil, perhaps even a monster, and thus reasoning with him is out of the question. The hero is left with no choice but to engage the villain in battle. The hero defeats the villain and rescues the victim. The moral balance is restored. Victory is achieved. The hero, who always acts honorably, has proved his manhood and achieved glory. The sacrifice was worthwhile. The hero receives acclaim, along with the gratitude of the victim and the community.

As the gulf crisis developed, President Bush tried to justify going to war by the use of such a scenario. At first, he couldn't get his story straight. What happened was that he was using two different sets of metaphorical definitions, which resulted in two different scenarios:

*G. Lakoff, "Metaphor and War: The Metaphor System Used to Justify the War in the Gulf", p. 4
The Rescue Scenario: Iraq is villain, the US is hero, Kuwait is victim, the crime is kidnap and rape.

The Self-Defense Scenario: Iraq is villain, the US is hero, the US and other industrialized nations are victims, the crime is a death threat, that is, a threat to economic health.

The American people could not accept the second scenario, since it amounted to trading lives for oil. The administration has settled on the first, and that seems to have been accepted by the public, the media, and Congress as providing moral justification for going to war.

*G. Lakoff, "Metaphor and War: The Metaphor System Used to Justify the War in the Gulf", pp. 4-5.

*G. Lakoff, "Metaphor and War: The Metaphor System Used to Justify the War in the Gulf", p. 8.

War as Violent Crime*

To bear in mind what is hidden by Clausewitz's metaphor, we should consider an alternative metaphor that is *not* used by professional strategists nor by the general public to understand war as we engage in it.

WAR IS VIOLENT CRIME: MURDER, ASSAULT, KIDNAPPING, ARSON, RAPE, AND THEFT.

Here, war is understood only in terms of its moral dimension, and not, say, its political or economic dimension. The metaphor highlights those aspects of war that would otherwise be seen as major crimes.

There is an Us-Them asymmetry between the public use of Clausewitz's metaphor and the War-as-Crime metaphor. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait is reported on in terms of murder, theft and rape. The planned American invasion is never discussed in terms of murder, assault, and arson. Moreover, the US plans for war are seen, in Clausewitzian terms, as rational calculation. But the Iraqi invasion is discussed not as a rational move by Saddam, but as the work of a madman. We see US as rational, moral, and courageous and Them as criminal and insane.

The State-as-Person System*

A state is conceptualized as a person, engaging in social relations within a world community. Its land-mass is its home. It lives in a neighborhood, and has neighbors, friends and enemies. States are seen as having inherent dispositions: they can be peaceful or aggressive, responsible or irresponsible, industrious or lazy.

Well-being is wealth. The general well-being of a state is understood in economic terms: its economic health. A serious threat to economic health can thus be seen as a death threat. To the extent that a nation's economy depends on foreign oil, that oil supply becomes a 'lifeline' (reinforced by the image of an oil pipeline).

Strength for a state is military strength.

Maturity for the person-state is industrialization.

*G. Lakoff, "Metaphor and War: The Metaphor System Used to Justify the War in the Gulf", p. 3.

What is not seen in the State-As-a-Person metaphor?

- National interest is a metaphorical concept that oversimplifies the reality

When President Bush argues that going to war would “serve our vital national interests”, he is using a metaphor that hides exactly whose interests would be served and whose would not. For example, poor people, especially blacks and Hispanics, are represented in the military in disproportionately large numbers, and in a war the lower classes and those ethnic groups will suffer proportionally more casualties. Thus war is less in the interest of ethnic minorities and the lower classes than the white upper classes.*

- The military’s interest

*G. Lakoff, “Metaphor and War: The Metaphor System Used to Justify the War in the Gulf”, p. 13.

- Energy policies

The State-as-Person metaphor defines health for the state in economic terms, with our current understanding of economic health taken as a given, including our dependence on foreign oil. Many commentators have argued that a change in energy policy to make us less dependent on foreign oil would be more rational than going to war to preserve our supply of cheap oil from the gulf. This argument may have a real force, but it has no metaphorical force when the definition of economic health is taken as fixed. After all, you don't deal with an attack on your health by changing the definition of health. Metaphorical logic pushes a change in energy policy out of the spotlight in the current crisis.*

*G. Lakoff, "Metaphor and War: The Metaphor System Used to Justify the War in the Gulf", p. 14.

- the “costs” of war:
 - social costs like PTSD for the survivors and their families, long-term health problems, both physical and mental)
 - Political costs (increased terrorism, bias towards all Arabs, etc.)
 - Moral costs (justifying killing and maiming human beings as a proper way to resolve a conflict)

But those are costs to us. What is most ghoulish about the cost-benefit calculation is that “costs” to the other side count as “gains” for us. In Vietnam, the body counts of killed Viet Cong were taken as evidence of what was being “gained” in the war. Dead human beings went on the profit side of our ledger.

There is a lot of talk of American deaths as “costs”, but Iraqi deaths aren’t mentioned. The metaphors of cost-benefit accounting and the fairy tale villain lead us to devalue of the lives of Iraqis, even when most of those actually killed will not be villains at all, but simply innocent draftees or reservists or civilians. (Ibid, p.15)

In a just war scenario the hero saves the victim. America might be seen as the hero to some of the Arabs but definitely not all. To some, the USA is nothing but an aggressive colonizer. Thus “the hero” may be seen as “the villain”.

Person metaphor hides the internal structure of states and allows us to think of Kuwait as a unitary entity, the defenseless maiden to be rescued in the fairy tale. The metaphor hides the monarchical character of Kuwait, and the way Kuwaitis treat women and the vast majority of the people who live in their country. The State-as-Person metaphor also hides the internal structure of Iraq, and thus hides the actual people who will mostly be killed, maimed, or otherwise harmed in a war. The same metaphor also hides the internal structure of the US, and therefore hides the fact that it is the poor and minorities who will make the most sacrifices while not getting any significant benefit. And it hides the main ideas that drive Middle Eastern politics. (Ibid, p. 16)

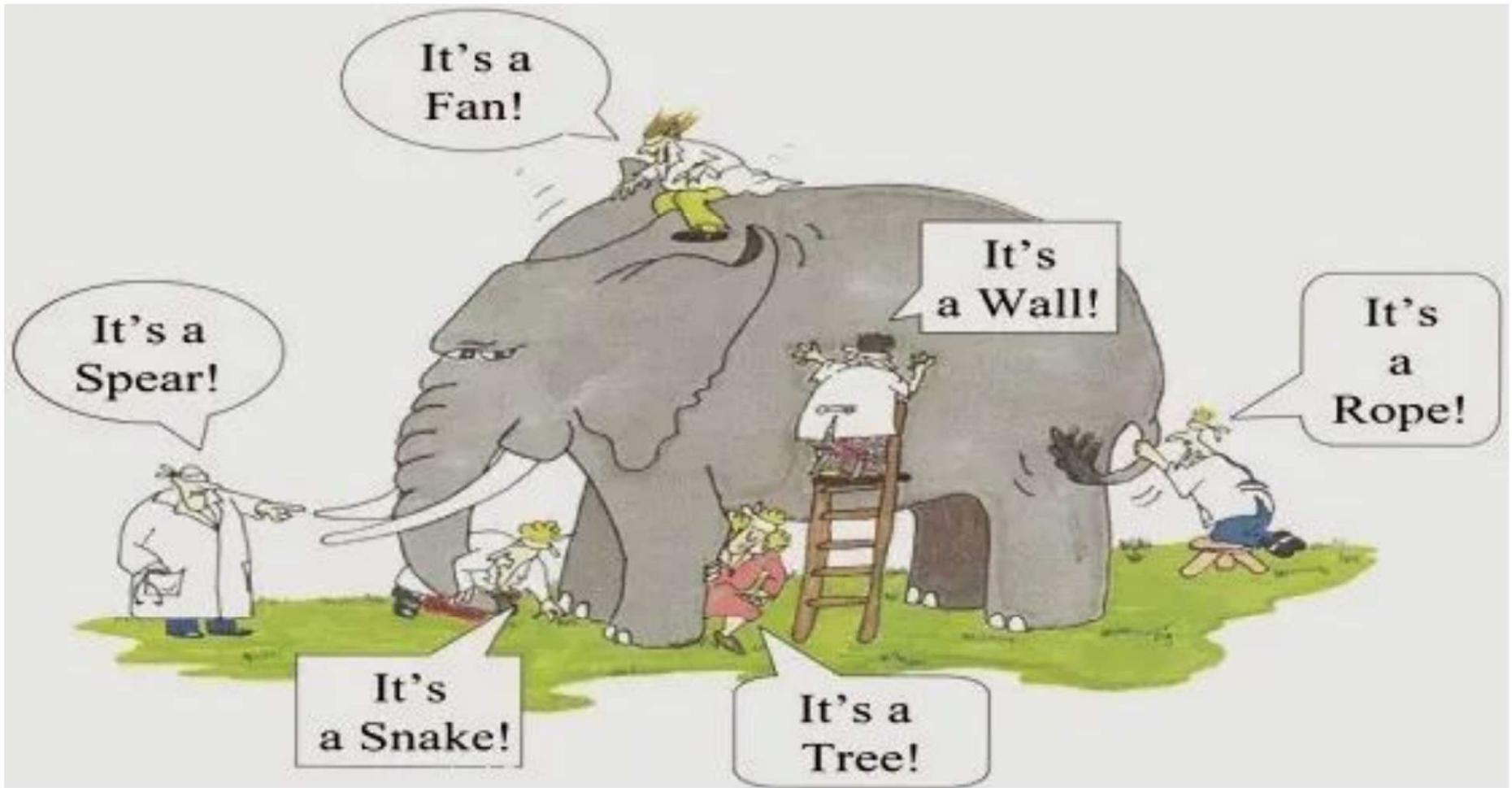
The Ruler-for-State Metonymy

There is a metonymy that goes hand-in-hand with the State-as-Person metaphor:

THE RULER STANDS FOR THE STATE

Thus, we can refer to Iraq by referring to Saddam Hussein, and so have a single person, not just an amorphous state, to play the villain in the just war scenario. It is this metonymy that is invoked when the President says “We have to get Saddam out of Kuwait.”

Incidentally, the metonymy only applies to those leaders perceived as rulers. Thus, it would be strange for us, but not for the Iraqis, to describe an American invasion of Kuwait by saying, “George Bush marched into Kuwait.” (Ibid., p. 5)



References and further reading

<https://george-lakoff.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/metaphor-and-war-the-metaphor-system-used-to-justify-war-in-the-gulf-lakoff-1991.pdf>

<https://george-lakoff.com/books/thinking-points/>

<https://press.uchicago.edu/sites/daysafter/911lakoff.html>

https://www.huffpost.com/entry/obama-reframes-syria-meta_b_3879335

<https://legionmagazine.com/euphemisms-acronyms-and-outright-lies-the-language-of-war/>

<https://www.bartleby.com/essay/What-Is-A-War-Metaphor-FJYSP55JXKM>

<https://peacemagazine.org/archive/v13n4p14.htm#:~:text=Today%2C%20we%20may%20ask%20someone,concern%20at%20a%20deeper%20level>