

Ontological Metaphors and Interdiscursivity/ Recontextualization in Iranians' Political Comments on Instagram

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Abstract

With the significance that linguistic or discursive creativity has achieved in the last decade, it becomes incumbent on researchers to examine this phenomenon in political discourse in varying contexts. Therefore, in this study, the researchers sought to examine five ontological metaphors (at a linguistic/pragmatic level) as well as interdiscursivity and recontextualization (at a discourse analytical level) in Instagram comments in the Iranian context. Accordingly, the researchers employed Al-Hindawi and Al-Saate's (2016) model of ontological metaphors as well as Jones' (2010) interdiscursivity and recontextualization as discursive strategies. The analysis of Instagram comments indicated that overall Iranian social media users drew on various types of ontological metaphor in their Instagram comments. More specifically, among the ontological metaphors, metonymy and idiomatic expressions were the most commonly used metaphorical strategies followed by simile, with hyperbole and personification being the least frequently utilized metaphors. Additionally, results indicated the Iranians users' resort to interdiscursivity and recontextualization as discursive strategies in their attempt to bring about political and social change. More specifically, the users employed ideas from various discourses such as sports, religion and literature to emphasize the need for political and social change. The findings may have implications for linguists, discourse analysts, politicians, and pragmaticians.

Keywords

Discursive Creativity, Interdiscursivity, Linguistic Creativity, Ontological Metaphors, Recontextualization, Political Discourse, Social Media.

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Introduction:

Creativity, which appears to be an essential means of achieving objectives in communication, is typically actualized at the linguistic/pragmatic and discursive levels. At the linguistic or pragmatic level, one might refer to metaphors, among many other devices, as powerful tools that can play a significant role in establishing creativity in different discourses (Efeoğlu Özcan, 2022). As Colak (2023) states, through the investigation of metaphors, researchers can better understand the personal perceptions of individuals about various phenomena. Metaphors become even more vital when we learn that they are capable of shaping, redefining as well as negotiating new meanings and ideologies (Chiang & Su, 2022; Kimmel, 2004). As Chiang and Su (2022) contend, metaphors are capable of strengthening conventional views or even introducing novel values within a recognized social frame. This function is particularly true about political and scientific ideologies (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Along the same lines, Tameryan et al. (2018) consider the use of metaphors as thinking and reasoning devices in communication with nature, and point out that metaphors can portrait a political image of the world.

At the discursive level, however, some researchers go beyond linguistic and literary devices like metaphor, highlighting the significance of discursive strategies in understanding humans' ideologies (e.g. Jones, 2010, 2012, 2016), as well. These researchers are concerned with strategies at the discourse level. In this approach, a researcher's focus shifts away from just literature and moves toward other domains like applied linguistics and sociolinguistics and focuses on everyday language (advertisements, presidents' speeches, etc.) instead of literary texts. For instance, Jones (2010) aptly refers to interdiscursivity and recontextualization as strategies that are capable of impacting on individuals' ideologies and bringing about the desired social or political change in their everyday conversations. Such strategies are in fact viewed as practical measures that are taken by interactants to exert their own ideologies.

Many valuable studies have sought to investigate metaphor and its different types (e.g. Al-Hindawi & Al-Saate, 2016; Berber Sardinha, 2011; Caballero, 2014; Drogsoz, 2008; Hidalgo Downing & Kraljevic Mujic, 2011; Kimmel, 2004; Veremchuk, 2022). However, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, very few studies have tried investigating metaphor in Iranian context, especially ontological metaphor in political discourse. Besides, the study of metaphor in social media context by online interactants has been taken up only recently, indicating a huge gap, especially in the Iranian context (Colak, 2023; Fang and Wu, 2022; Palfreyman & Amin, 2022; Wang, 2022; Wheatley & Vatnoey, 2022; Younes & Altakhaineh, 2022). In a similar manner, despite certain significant studies probing into discursive creativity and

interdiscursivity or recontextualization strategies in certain foreign contexts (e.g. Forceville, 2012; Hidalgo Downing, Kraljevic Mujic, & Núñez Perucha, 2013; Jones, 2010, 2012, 2016), such an attempt has been missing so far in an Iranian context.

Unlike a majority of previous studies, this study simultaneously focuses on both ‘linguistic creativity’, and ‘discourse creativity’ which has to do with the things performed through language by individuals as ‘social agents’ in social media context. Besides, taking into account the various occasions of political unrest, the wide public dissatisfaction with the government, and the limited national social media platforms with an international audience in Iran, it appears essential to learn how Iranians might draw on linguistic or discursive creativity on Instagram to exert their political or social ideologies with the world.

Understanding both linguistic creativity (through the study of ontological metaphors) and discursive creativity (by studying interdiscursivity and recontextualization) in political discourse can inform and benefit many including linguists, discourse analysts, politicians, and pragmatians. By unearthing the linguistic and discursive strategies employed in social media to influence ideology or bring about social or political change, the related stakeholders can have the opportunity to add to their knowledge of the world and social media communication in different cultures.

Generally, this study aims to shed more light on how creativity is manifested as a linguistic/pragmatic and discursive practice which can bring about social or political change, and influence ideologies. To this end, among different discourse types, political discourse in Iranian social media context is selected. More specifically, in this corpus-based study, the researchers seek to find out how ontological metaphor, among other metaphor types, and its subcategories (personification, metonymy, hyperbole, simile, and idiomatic expressions) are utilized by Iranian Internet users in their Instagram comments. Further, the study aims to find out how discursive strategies are employed to bring about change and convey the desired ideology together with metaphors. Accordingly, for this study the following research questions were formulated:

1. How are different types of ontological metaphors realized in Iranian Internet users’ Instagram comments?
2. How is interdiscursivity or recontextualization utilized by Iranian Internet users in their Instagram comments to bring about social change and influence ideologies? What discourses do Iranians resort to as a part of interdiscursivity or recontextualization?

Theoretical background:

The objective of this paper is two-fold; that is, the researchers follow two purposes, and interestingly two different frameworks are utilized for this paper. Overall, the paper is a new contribution to the literature concerning creativity, particularly in the Iranian context. At one end of the creativity continuum we can find linguistic creativity, which is mainly manifested by literary devices, and in this study specifically through ontological metaphor. Generally, in this research, metaphor is viewed as a rhetorical figure of speech where one entity is referred to through the use of another. In the literature dealing with metaphor, varying theoretical frameworks can be found. The most important of these frameworks might be Lakoff and

Johnson's (1980) conceptual theory of metaphor (Al-Hindawi & Al-Saate, 2016). The basic assumption made in Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) theory is that individuals' cognition and language operate together since our thoughts have a metaphorical nature. Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) conceptual theory of metaphor involves the three subcategories of structural, orientational and ontological metaphors. In the present analysis, however, the researchers make use of ontological metaphors, a rather under-researched type of metaphor. According to Al-Hindawi and Al-Saate (2016), ontological metaphor is divided into the five categories of personification, metonymy, hyperbole, simile, and idiomatic expressions. In the current study, similar to Al-Hindawi and Al-Saate (2016), the researchers adopt a linguistic/pragmatic approach to the analysis of ontological metaphors; that is, the use and interpretation of ontological metaphors in this analysis is based on the writers' intentions to influence their addressees' ideologies.

Concerning the individual ontological metaphors, personification, which is considered a major ontological metaphor type (Kövecses, 2002; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), is defined by Charteris-Black (2011) as a linguistic device whereby an abstract or inanimate thing is given the qualities that belong to a person. Metonymy is defined as an entity that represents another related entity (Al-Hindawi & Al-Saate, 2016; Littlemore, 2015). Hyperbole, often ignored in research (Mora, 2009), is defined by Christodoulidou (2011) as overstatements violating the actual number and quantity, as well as descriptions that do not appear plausible. As for a simile, it is viewed by Tirrell (1991) as an ontological metaphor which is hedged and is treated like metaphors. Al-Hindawi and Al-Saate (2016) point out that similes are usually accompanied by the use of the words 'like' and 'as', which indicate similarity. Finally, Al-Hindawi and Al-Saate (2016) consider idiomatic expressions as metaphors that are 'conceptually motivated'. In the general sense of the word, an idiom is an expression the meaning of which cannot be derived from the individual words constituting it.

At the other and probably more important end of the creativity continuum is discursive creativity. This type of creativity is mainly manifested by interdiscursivity and recontextualization (Jones, 2010). In addition to the linguistic and also pragmatic approach to creativity, the researchers will adopt a discourse analytical approach to creativity in the same way as Jones (2010). Whereas in the first research question, the researchers deal with linguistic creativity and reproduction of language, for the second objective of the study, they follow Swann and Maybin (2007) by examining creativity as the recreation, reshaping, and recontextualization of language resources in the process of communication. Thus, by creativity at the discourse level, the researchers refer to those social acts which are done through words and texts (Iranian Internet users' Instagram comments in the case of the present research). In particular, it is important for the researchers to learn how different discourses are mixed (interdiscursivity) or reshaped (recontextualization) as strategies to bring about social or political change and even influence the addressee's ideology in addition to the interactants' use of linguistic/pragmatic strategies (i.e. ontological metaphors).

Methodology:

In the present analysis, qualitative methodology was used. The researchers generally sought to examine linguistic and discourse creativity in political discourse in social media context. More specifically, they aimed to find out how ontological metaphors (personification, metonymy,

hyperbole, simile, and idiomatic expressions) and discursive strategies (i.e. interdiscursivity and recontextualization) were utilized by Iranian Internet users in their Instagram comments to influence the reader and convey the desired ideologies.

Corpus:

In the present analysis, the researchers made use of nine news posts on Instagram in 2020. The Instagram posts were selected based on topic similarity. That is, all the nine posts were about Iranian General Qasem Soleimani's death by the United States. General Soleimani's death has been one of the main political issues in Iran and the world since the start of 2020. As for the selection of Instagram, it should be noted that it has been one of the most popular social media applications in Iran, with many Internet users utilizing its comments option for the expression of their political or social ideas. The news posts utilized in the study were chosen from international Persian news agencies on Instagram rather than national news agencies. The researchers' rationale for the selection of these three news agencies on Instagram included their higher readership among Iranians and even those Iranians living abroad and international readers, as well as their rather higher popularity in Iran in comparison to many other news agencies on Instagram.

Data collection and analysis:

In order to garner the data for the analysis, first the topic of the Instagram posts and comments was decided by the researchers. The key words '*Iranian General Qasem Soleiman*',' *death*',' *assassination*',' *martyrdom*',' *the United States*' were chosen by the researchers. This topic was a very recent one at the time of the study and most online news posts on Instagram covered it, which facilitated finding the relevant Instagram posts. A host of Instagram news posts were found on the topic; however, the researchers selected only those Instagram news posts that were from famous and popular Instagram news agencies, and included sufficient Internet user comments for analysis. Next, the Instagram posts were copied and pasted from the related websites onto Word Microsoft for analysis.

In order to examine the data and find out ontological metaphors, the researchers followed Al-Hindawi and Al-Saate's (2016) classification of ontological metaphors. This model involves five categories of ontological metaphors including personification, metonymy, hyperbole, simile, and idiomatic expressions. Next, for the analysis of the metaphors, the researchers utilized the comments in the Instagram posts. The results were then explained through frequencies and percentages and examples from the comments. For the analysis of the data concerning the second research question, the researchers followed Jones (2010). By adopting a discourse analytical approach, they looked for traces of discursive strategies and signs of interdiscursivity or recontextualization observed in the data, and explained the data through relevant examples from the different discourses.

Results:

Ontological Metaphors in Instagram Comments:

In the present analysis, the researchers tried to find answers to two research questions. Initially, at a linguistic/pragmatic level, they sought to see how the five ontological metaphors were employed by Iranian Internet users in their Instagram comments. Overall, results

indicated the use of all five types of ontological metaphors, i.e. personification, metonymy, hyperbole, simile, and idiomatic expressions by Iranian users. Based on the results, 489 ontological metaphors were employed by the users in the data.

Among the ontological metaphor types utilized by Iranian Internet users in their Instagram comments, metonymy was the most frequent, followed by idiomatic expressions; simile and hyperbole had a rather similar frequency, with personification observed as the least frequent metaphor type. Table 1 clearly indicates the frequency of ontological metaphors in the internet users' comments on Instagram. In the table, 'f' stands for frequency, with 'p' representing percentage.

Table 1: Distribution of the five types of ontological metaphors in the Iranian Internet users' Instagram comments

Data	Personification		Metonymy		Simile		Hyperbole		Idiomatic expressions		Total frequency		Percentage
	F	P	F	P	F	P	F	P	F	P	F	P	
Instagram Comments	39	8	181	37	62	13	47	9	160	33	489	100	

Further, according to Table 1, outstanding variations can be observed among the metaphor types in terms of the frequency. As we can see, metonymy and idiomatic expressions appear to be more outstanding in Instagram comments than the other metaphor types. Below, the five ontological metaphor types are explained briefly through examples from the data. The most common ontological metaphor in the comments was metonymy (% 37) where one entity was referred to by another. An example of metonymy from the data is given here:

- Iran be vakhtesh javabe Amrika ro mide (Iran will respond to the US in the right time).

In the example above, the Internet user utilizes the term 'Iran', a place entity, to refer to the government of Iran. Similarly, by writing 'the US', the writer is referring to another entity, i.e. the US government. The second most frequent ontological metaphor in the data was idiomatic expressions (% 33). An example of idiomatic expressions is given below:

- Goureto gom kon baba (Lose your grave, dude=Get lost, dude).

In this example, the writer draws on an idiomatic expression probably to influence his/her reader's mindset. 'To lose one's grave' has nothing to do with the literal and verbatim meaning of the single words yet when combined, they make a completely different sense. The third most frequent ontological metaphor was simile (%13). An example of this metaphor is:

- Afghanhaye shie mesle emam Ali kheili jasuran (The Shiite Afghans are very brave like Imam Ali).

In this example, the user resorts to a simile by comparing the Shiite Afghans to Imam Ali (A Muslim character believed to be a paragon of virtue by Shiite Muslims). This comparison is made to strengthen the impact of the utterance. Finally, the least frequent metaphors in the data were hyperbole (9%) and personification (8%). Examples of these metaphors are:

- Az haminja khafat mikonama (I'm gonna strangle you right from here!)
- Namak khordi, namakdan ra mayazar (Once you eat the salt, don't hurt the salt container).

In the first example, we can clearly see a case of hyperbole. Being a little down to earth and realistic, we would simply know that it is impossible for one person to throttle another person online. In the second example, the user asks the reader not to hurt a salt container. Here a salt container is given the qualities of an animate creature with feelings which can be hurt. This metaphor appears to be utilized to increase the impact of the word. This example can also be considered an idiomatic expression.

Interdiscursivity or Recontextualization in Instagram Comments:

With the second research question the researchers aimed to see, at a discourse analytical level, how Iranian Instagram users made use of discursive strategies (interdiscursivity or recontextualization) to cause social or political change, and impact on their addressees' ideologies. A scrutiny of the data revealed that the Instagram comments had interesting examples of interdiscursivity. Based on the results, the users mainly drew on religious and literary, and even sports, statements to emphasize their political points. In what follows, several examples are offered for a better clarification of such strategies, and how they were intended to bring about change or impact on ideologies. Similar to the above examples, the comments given below were originally written in Persian by the Iranian users, and are presented with their English equivalents.

1. Eltemase tafakkor (We beg you to meditate/think).
2. Mayazar Irani ke danekesh ast o amouyash chagookesh ast (Do not harass Iran which is carrying seeds and whose uncle can stab you with a knife)
3. Durud bar President Trump, monjie Alam (Long live President Trump, the Savior of the World).
4. Az in lahze bazi ba soote davar shuru mishe. Jange jahani nashe salavat (At this moment, the match starts with the referee's whistle. I hope it won't be a world war).

In these examples which are all about General Soleimani's death by the United States, tangible cases of interdiscursivity and recontextualization can be seen. These utterances are part of a verbal conflict between some Instagram users, with opposing ideas about General Soleimani and the United States. Some of them appear to be joyous about General Soleimani's death, with others viewing it as a terrorist act by President Donald Trump.

In the first example, the user intentionally changes the discourse. Usually, Iranian people, when in need of prayer and help, say 'Eltemase doa {We beg you to pray for us}' to a friend, asking

for their prayer and good wishes. It is a religious practice in nature. However, the Instagram user intentionally recontextualizes this religious statement in a political discourse, while using some verbal irony, by asking his/her addressee to be wise and think before commenting. The second example is a distorted version of a poem in Persian by the famous Iranian poet, Sa'adi. In the original poem, the poet invites his readers not to hurt a harmless 'ant which carries seeds'. Nevertheless, the user, who is most probably supporting General Soleimani and the Iranian government or even people, resorts to the discourse of literature, and uses it as a discursive strategy in his/her political argument. To emphasize his/her point, the user tries to persuade the reader by referring to the famous poem. As we can see, such a literary statement has been employed in a political discourse and with political reasons.

The third example appears to be a humorous attempt at adopting a discursive strategy. In Islamic and mainly Shiite culture, Muslims believe there is a savior of the world called Imam Zaman who will appear at the end of the world and free it from evil. The expression 'Monjje Alam' or 'Savior of the World' is one always used to call Imam Zaman by Shiite Muslims. However, the Instagram user has skillfully recontextualized the religious discourse and its language in a political discourse to influence his/her addressees in order to change their attitude about General Soleimani and express his/her complaint at the unpleasant political situation. The user is, in fact, trying to express his/her passion for President Donald Trump's government by using the religious discourse is completely affiliated with the Iranian government. The fourth instance can be another humorous attempt at interdiscursivity. The user creates a resemblance between a football match report and politics. In Iran, football match reports typically start with the sentence 'At this moment, the match starts with the referee's whistle'. However, borrowing from the sports discourse, the user is trying to create the desired change in the reader's mindset and beliefs. Thus, through interdiscursivity and recontextualization s/he tries to predict a potential world war because of General Soleimani's death.

Discussion:

The current research sought to examine creativity at the two linguistics and discourse levels. For this purpose, the researchers scrutinized the utilization of ontological metaphor (and its subcategories) and interdiscursivity or recontextualization.

Findings indicated that the Iranian Internet users employed various types of ontological metaphors in Instagram comments to highlight their points. This finding appears to be expected in some sense. First, as Efeoğlu Özcan (2022) maintains, individuals typically resort to the use of discursive strategies in political discourse in order to achieve, exercise and hold power. In particular, metaphors are among the most common linguistic resources that can give an interactant the power to persuade their addressee and convey the desired ideologies through them. Second, it should be noted that Instagram as an international online platform enjoys a high degree of freedom of speech. It provides its users with an unlimited freedom to utilize whatever linguistic devices they may wish to draw on, in order to get across their point or impact on their readers' ideology. Examples of this freedom of speech can be seen in most of the impolite comments posted by the Iranian users targeting either the Iranian government or the Trump administration. Such an online platform is especially important for Iranian Internet users since those who oppose the government might not be able to express their anti-

government ideas on Iranian online platforms. Another reason may have to do with the Iranian users' culture, which endorses the use of literary devices even in the daily conversations. For instance, Persian is a rich language in terms of simile and idiomatic expressions. Still, a third reason may have to do with the high number of Iranian Internet users leaving comments on Instagram. That is, in the present study, the Instagram comments were from many different users with different degrees of linguistic talent.

The data analysis also revealed that metonymy was the most frequent ontological metaphor. The higher frequency of metonymy as linguistic device has been also supported by Al-Hindawi and Al-Saate (2016) who found such devices to be highly common in economic discourse since it is economic to use an entity to refer to the whole entity. In fact, since most users were involved in an online conflict over General Soleimani's death, it might be less time-consuming and easier to draw on metonymy. For instance, it appears linguistically economic to use the term 'the U.S.' instead of 'the U.S. government'.

The lower percentage of personification in Instagram comments might have to do with the nature of the data source and the topic used in this study. Whereas a topic like 'nature' may include more personification, one like 'General Soleimani's death by President Donald Trump' may leave less space for this linguistic device. Similarly, the higher percentage of idiomatic expressions in Instagram comments may relate to the 'everyday' nature of the posts and comments, and even the idiosyncratic features of the Persian language as one abounding with idiomatic expressions.

Interestingly, the discursive analysis of the data demonstrated interesting cases of discursive strategies utilized by Iranian Instagram users in their comments. The discursive strategies were manifested in the form of interdiscursivity and recontextualization. The results further indicate that Iranian online users simultaneously employ different discourses while engaging in politics in order to bring about social or political change. The most salient among these discourses might be the religious discourse followed by literary and sports discourses. The Iranian users' (especially the anti-government users') reliance on religious discourse might be an intentional strategy employed by them so as to drive their own anti-government ideologies home, and convince the religious supporters of the Iranian government by using their own religious discourse to which they are accustomed.

As for the users' resort to literary discourse, Iranians have the advantage of reading famous poems and literary works from an early age at school and even home. Such familiarity with literature as well as the high value of poetry to a majority of Iranians might be a good reason for the users to rely on the literary discourse to communicate their ideologies. Finally, the reliance on sports discourse might be because most social media users in Iran are typically the younger generations who often watch football and are well-versed in football terminology. Of course, in interpreting the results, other factors such as the number of participants in the corpus should be considered, which might lower the generalizability of the findings. Overall, as many researchers (e.g. Hidalgo Downing, Kraljevic Mujic, & Núñez Perucha, 2013; Jones, 2010, 2012, 2016) emphasize, it is not only the linguistic creativity that matters; but it is also the discursive creativity that can be employed by individuals, through mixing different discourses or reshaping and replacing them, to influence ideologies and bring about social

change, as was the case with the Iranian users in this study. In fact, the discursive strategies are dynamic actions that are taken by participants to change the world around them.

Conclusion:

This study was an attempt to shed light on the manifestation of linguistic and discursive creativity in social media users' political talk. Findings indicate that online users' everyday speech in social media context can be embellished with different types of ontological metaphors. Such metaphors are among the users' basic strategies for exerting their ideologies, and persuading their addressees. Moreover, users may also go beyond linguistic strategies like metaphor, and draw on discursive strategies like recontextualization as an even more effective strategy to not only persuade their addressees but also attack their established ideologies and replace them with their own. This was particularly evident in the Instagram users' use of different discourses in the current study. Even though this study was a novel attempt at discovering both linguistic and discursive creativity in Iranian social media context, due to issues such as a rather small corpus and a lack of gender differentiation, the findings should be used cautiously. Future researchers may want to explore these linguistic and discursive strategies in different contexts or with a larger dataset.

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