

Metaphor for social change and hope

Abstract

Collective actions such as rallies, strikes, or occupations cannot be conceived without discourse, whether expressed verbally or through non-verbal forms. Yet, despite the extensive attention that social protest movements have received from historians, sociologists, economists, political scientists, psychologists, and culture and media scholars (Snow et al. 2004; Goodnow 2006; Stewart et. al 2007; Jasper 2014; Della Porta & Diani 2015/2020; Earl & Rohlinger 2018; Wagoner 2018), they have only comparatively recently become a focus of interest for discourse analysts (Romano 2013, 2021, 2022, 2026; Porto & Romano 2019; Lalic-Krstin & Silaški 2025). So, even though still today we cannot predict when a protest will emerge, we are now far closer to understanding how activists mobilize others, how they express their demands, and how they create group coherence, solidarity and identity; processes that are achieved fundamentally through discourse.

Protesting exemplifies what Van Dijk (2024) has called “doing something social” through discourse. Demonstrators must fulfil a wide variety of social functions simultaneously: making political claims, encouraging participation, challenging social inequalities, constructing group identity, while also expressing emotions and grievances. An interdisciplinary approach integrating Cognitive Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis (Hart & Lukes 2007; Charteris-Black 2011; Soares da Silva et al. 2017; Hart 2018; Musolff 2023; Romano 2024), provides particularly suitable analytical tools for examining these complex discursive strategies.

Protest slogans, the focus of this talk, circulate, both online and offline, across a wide variety of media —banners, posters, street art, social networks, T-shirts, hashtags— and modes —words, images, chants, street performances. And, because they are inherently ‘mobile language objects’ (Jaworski 2015), as well as temporally and spatially bound texts that will probably be read only once (Romano 2013), creators need to compact their messages within in a single word, image, object or melody. It is in this context that metaphor emerges as a protest strategy par excellence.

Metaphor, together with closely related analytical concepts such as *creativity*, *multimodality*, *scenario*, *framing*, *recontextualization*, *(re)appropriation* and *resemiotisation*, proves crucial for explaining how protestors compress such vast amounts of sociocultural, historical, and emotional meaning. Within protest discourse, metaphors function as powerful ideological and disruptive resources that undo well established linguistic and cultural categories, along with the ontologies and ideologies those categories embody (Goatly 2008; Koller 2014), and that shape people's opinions by shocking and calling attention (de Lavalette et al. 2019).

By analyzing metaphors as key protest symbols in recent global social protests, this talk demonstrates how activists repurpose everyday concepts and objects—such as statues, umbrellas, fruit or animals—not only to challenge dominant ideologies and mobilize people, but, above all, to construct a new discourse of solidarity and foster conditions for hope (Silva & Lee, 2024) in contemporary contexts shaped by social despair and hate speech.

Keywords: protest slogans, metaphor, social transformation, hope

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