



International Journal of  
**MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION**

**ISSN: (Print)** ISSN 1987-9601

**(Online)** E ISSN 1512-3146

**Journal homepage:** <https://multilinguaeducation.openjournals.ge/>

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## **Metaphorical Representations of Russia in Georgian Political Discourse**

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To cite this article: Guchua Tamar (2024), Metaphorical  
Representations of Russia in Georgian Political Discourse:  
International Journal of Multilingual Education, #25-2; pp. 53-61.

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.22333/ijme.2024.9021>

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## Metaphorical Representations of Russia in Georgian Political Discourse<sup>2</sup>

### ABSTRACT

A case of a cognitive process involving the transfer of knowledge from one conceptual domain to another is known as a metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Quinn, 1991; Kövecses, 2002; Kövecses, 2005). The study of metaphor is not limited to cognitive linguistics. Our cognition of the external world always occurs within the context of a specific culture and language. Considering these aspects, metaphor is also an ethnocultural phenomenon.

The concept of culture brings together many institutional components of human society, among which politics plays a significant role. Political metaphors in language are often based on political events as the source domain, and the meaning is transferred to the target domain through comparison, association, or analogy.

In the 20th century, during the Soviet occupation of Georgia, a number of expressions emerged in the Georgian language, rooted in political context and based on metaphorical generalizations of historical events. Considering the ongoing Russian occupation of Georgian territories, the use of these expressions remains as relevant as ever.

The study aims to analyze Russia-related metaphors in contemporary Georgian political discourse. It is structured in the following way: 1. Observation of the discourse and identification of metaphors; 2. Conceptual analysis of the metaphors; 3. Identification of historical-political factors and the determination of the etymology of specific metaphorical instances.

The study's findings indicate that the metaphors found in Georgian political discourse have two dimensions: semantic and pragmatic. One dimension is that these metaphors reflect political events, while the other is that they serve as important tools in the construction of cultural identity.

**Keywords:** *metaphor, Russia, Georgian language, political discourse.*

### Introduction

A case of a cognitive process involving the transfer of knowledge from one conceptual domain to another is known as a metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Quinn, 1991; Kövecses, 2002; Kövecses, 2005). The study of metaphor is not limited to cognitive linguistics. Our cognition of the external world always occurs within the context of a specific culture and language. Considering

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<sup>2</sup> This research [YS-24-546] has been supported by Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation of Georgia.

these aspects, metaphor is also an ethnocultural phenomenon.

In addressing the notion of culture, American anthropologist Clifford Geertz cites German sociologist Max Weber, stating: “Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun. I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning” (Geertz, 1973, p. 5). The seminal work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), published shortly thereafter, introduced a new perspective on the study of metaphor: meanings originate from our cognitive experiences. Therefore, when discussing metaphors, we should focus on the connections between concepts rather than on lexical units.

The idea that words and expressions have meaning not in isolation, but within context, is grounded in the concept of semantic frames. Semantic frames are cognitive structures that shape our worldview, influence our decisions, guide our actions, and inform our sense of right and wrong. These frames also play a significant role in shaping social policies. According to Lakoff, such mental structures are part of the so-called cognitive subconscious, which can be observed through language. Words are defined in relation to conceptual frames, and when we hear a word, its frame(s) are activated in our brain (Lakoff, 2004, p. xv).

It is impossible to observe the process of metaphorical meaning formation without studying figurative language in relation to culture. Moreover, expressions of this type are so conventional and context-dependent that a certain level of metaphorical competence is required to understand them. According to Stern, metaphorical competence gives us the ability to interpret metaphors, which would be impossible without considering extralinguistic parameters and contexts (Stern, 2000, pp. 301-302).

The concept of culture brings together many institutional components of human society, among which politics plays a significant role. Political metaphors in language are often based on political events as the source domain, and the meaning is transferred to the target domain through comparison, association, or analogy.

Contemporary Georgian political discourse contains numerous metaphors related to Russia, which are rooted in historical events. The 70-year period of Soviet occupation in the 20th century left a lasting impact on the Georgian language. As a result, various metaphorical expressions related to the Soviet empire and its propagandists emerged. The names and surnames of numerous Soviet-era party officials and revolutionaries have also become sources of metaphorical expressions in the

language (Guchua, 2018). Given the current situation, in which Russia continues to occupy Georgian territories, the use of these expressions remains as relevant as ever.

## Methodology

The methodology of political discourse research is multifaceted and complex, requiring various theoretical and practical approaches to study specific speech events or texts. The aim of this study is to conceptually analyze metaphors related to Russia in contemporary Georgian political discourse and to demonstrate how specific linguistic elements (words, phrases) acquire social meaning, as well as how metaphors are formed and used to convey cultural values and political ideologies. The illustrative material is sourced from Georgian online publications, and the research is presented procedurally as follows: 1. Observation of the discourse and identification of metaphors; 2. Conceptual analysis of metaphors; 3. Identification of historical-political factors and determination of the etymology of specific metaphorical instances.

This study does not claim to have exhausted all metaphors related to Russia, but it will attempt to discuss a few of them below to illustrate the issue.

### "Russian Bear"

*"Moscow may believe that the West has abandoned Georgia, and the Russian rabid bear is likely to launch a decisive attack."* (Kviris palitra, 2024).

*"Until this country [Russia] breaks up, you will not be able to defeat it. You will always have a wounded bear on the border, which will immediately charge at you as soon as it regains its strength."* (Radio Liberty, 2023).

*"The world should lock the Russian bear in a cage so that we can all take a break from Russian aggression."* (Facebook, 2022).

Although the bear has never been an official symbol of Russia (the coat of arms depicts a double-headed eagle), it remains one of the most widely used metaphors associated with the country. Interestingly, during World War I, separate battles were fought on the pages of newspapers. Following national stereotypes, propaganda actively used animal metaphors. For example, in the German satirical press of this period, Russians were depicted as bears, the French as cats and roosters, the English as bulldogs, the Belgians as rabbits, the Moroccans as camels, and the Japanese as monkeys (Lazari et al., 2013, p. 56).

The political metaphor of the 'Russian bear' was used in 1915 by Hitler's predecessor, Field Marshal General Paul von Hindenburg, in his memoirs: "There was something unsatisfactory about

the final result of the operations and encounters of this year. The Russian bear had escaped our clutches, no doubt bleeding from more than one wound, but still not struck to death." (Hindenburg, 1920, p. 149). Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, in the early 2000s, the bear was depicted on the flag of the ruling political party, "United Russia". The bear metaphor is also present in Russian political discourse itself. For example, in 2014, at a conference, President Putin described Russia's military actions as defensive and compared them to a bear protecting its forest, the taiga, from foreign interference.

The metaphorical interpretation of the bear varies across cultures. For example, a contextual analysis based on the Russian National Corpus shows that the zoonym 'bear' appears in Russian phraseologisms as a metaphor for large size and strength, while a similar analysis based on the British National Corpus indicates that in English speech units, the bear is portrayed as a hungry, dangerous, and aggressive animal, which is negatively marked in the language (Dybo & Nikulenko, 2019, pp. 89-90). The bear metaphor is ambivalent and combines both positive and negative meanings. In anti-Russian political discourse, the 'bear' is a metaphor loaded with negative connotations (stubbornness, aggressiveness, inability to progress, backwardness), whereas in pro-Russian political discourse, it is presented with positive connotations (strength, calmness, independence, courage).

In Georgian culture, the bear carries a negative connotation. According to Sakhokia, a 'bear' symbolizes a person with rude and unappealing manners, while a 'bear's forehead' refers to a dangerous, terrifying, and ferocious expression on someone's face (Sakhokia, 1979, pp. 128-129).

In Georgian political discourse regarding Russia, the saying 'If a bear attacks you, you should call it "dad"' is quite common. This metaphorically refers to a difficult and insurmountable situation in which the opponent is stronger than you, and confronting them exceeds your own capabilities. It is interesting that the mentioned metaphorical phrase is confirmed in the 'Materials of Folk Language' published by the Academy of Sciences of the Georgian SSR in 1957 (Songhulashvili, 1957, p. 23), while it is not confirmed in such fundamental works as Sakhokia's 'Georgian Idiomatic Words and Sayings' (Sakhokia, 1979) and Oniani's 'Georgian Idioms' (Oniani, 1966). It is also interesting that we have not found an exact equivalent of this expression in European languages.

As a metaphor for caution and restraint in English-language political discourse, the saying 'Don't Poke the Bear' is attested. 'Poke the Bear' means to intentionally anger someone more

powerful than you (see Cambridge Dictionary). Taegan Goddard's 'Political Dictionary' explicitly states that this expression spread after the Cold War as a warning not to anger the nuclear-armed Soviet Union (see 'Political Dictionary'). In the context of Russia's actions, this phrase is still frequently echoed in Western political discourse today.

The Georgian metaphorical saying 'If a bear attacks you, you should call it "dad"' was criticized by Akaki Bakradze, who noted that the phrase should not be old, 'at least from the time when cowardice was not respected among us' (Bakradze, 1995, p. 379).

### "Russian Boot"

*"The Georgian people firmly defend and will continue to defend their European future and will never accept living under the Russian boot."* (Radio Liberty, 2024).

*"How can you find common ground with an invader?! You either have to live under his boot or escape from him."* (Kviris palitra, 2024).

*"The Russian boot will leave Abkhazia, and a common state will be formed."* (Facebook, 2024).

The "Russian boot" is a political metaphor that refers to Russia's aggressive policies, particularly in the context of military interventions. The metaphor is linked to acts of violence, occupation, and control.

"Russian boot" is defined by Merriam-Webster dictionary as a knee-length leather shoe that was first used in 1781 (see Merriam-Webster dictionary). It is difficult to determine when the term began to acquire a metaphorical meaning. The *Ethnographic Dictionary of Georgian Material Culture* states that there are many different types of boots, such as the "Russian boot," which came to symbolize the imperial power of the Russian army (Nadiradze, 2013). Russian military pressure is referred to as the "Russian boot" in Georgian political discourse, both historically and in light of recent political events.

"Boot" is also used as a metaphor in military contexts among non-Georgian speech communities. For example, during a visit to Egypt in 2019, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated, "The U.S. will expel every last Iranian boot from Syria. In addition, the English language includes an idiom called "boots on the ground," which, according to the Cambridge Dictionary, refers to the deployment of ground troops in a foreign country and their involvement in a military operation (Cambridge Dictionary). "Boots on the ground" is a common metaphor in English-language political discourse and is often used by American presidents in their public speeches. For instance, since 2001, George W. Bush has used this metaphor in the context of the fight against

terrorism and national security. In 2014, while commenting on the political crises in Syria, Iraq, and the Islamic State, Barack Obama stated, "There will be no boots on the ground," to which Vice President Joe Biden later responded, "Local forces could destroy the Islamic State without U.S. boots on the ground."

Thus, "boots on the ground" is a figurative expression and a type of synecdoche, where a part ("boot") represents the whole ("soldier"). Unlike Western political discourse, Georgian political texts use the word "boot" as a symbol of brute military force, imperialist ambitions, and authoritarian power. The addition of the word "Russian" specifically associates it with Russia's geopolitical actions.

According to the conceptual theory of metaphors, the phrase "Russian boot" belongs to the general framework of metaphors: "POWER IS A PHYSICAL PRESENCE." The image of the "boot" symbolizes power and provides its visualization. It is interesting to observe how this metaphor shapes ideological constructs across different languages and cultures. While in international political discourse, the "Russian boot" emphasizes Russia's narrative of conquest, in the Russian domestic context, it is associated with strength and resilience. For example, the phrase "a Russian soldier will wash his boots in the Indian Ocean" is a well-known expression in Russian political discourse, popularized by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy in the early 1990s. The ultranationalist political leader used this metaphor in one of his public speeches to emphasize Russia's potential global influence in the strategic region.

### "Iron Curtain"

*"Moscow is returning to a new type of Soviet Union, and the Iron Curtain is gradually falling again." (Tabula, 2022).*

*"The European Union will either accept new member states from Eastern Europe and the Balkans, or a new Iron Curtain will be erected across the continent." (Euronews Georgia, 2024).*

*"On one side of the scale lies the choice of following behind the Iron Curtain and remaining with Russia, while on the other side lies the choice of defending our civilizational values." (Facebook, 2024).*

The term "Iron Curtain" was first used by Winston Churchill in a speech at Westminster College in Fulton, England, in 1946, as a metaphor for a political and ideological barrier. Churchill used this phrase to describe a divided Europe and the political reality in which the East (the Soviet Union and its satellite states) was isolated from Western Europe and Western democracy.

In the second half of the 20th century, the "Iron Curtain" on one hand symbolized ideological differences, marking the division between the communist Soviet Union and the capitalist West; on the other hand, it served as a propaganda tool. In the former Soviet republics and Eastern Bloc countries, the metaphor was used to justify isolation from Western influences, as if these influences could pose a threat to socialist values.

In modern political discourse, the "Iron Curtain" remains a relevant metaphor, but now it is used to describe forms of isolation, such as economic sanctions and barriers.

Although the term "Iron Curtain" became popular after Winston Churchill's famous words (*"From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent."*), the collocation of the two words, "iron" and "curtain," was used much earlier. For instance, in the 18th century, the Lyon theater created an iron curtain to prevent the spread of fire; in 1794, the London theater followed suit. Starting in 1864, Parisian theaters were legally required to have such curtains, and from 1889, German theaters were also required to install them. After the great fire at the Vienna Theater in 1881, many theaters across Europe began to lower fireproof curtains. The metaphorical use of the "Iron Curtain" is first attested in 1819, as evidenced by fiction from that period (Feuerlicht, 1955). The first use of the term in a political context is attributed to Alexander Campbell. In 1945, in his book *It's Your Empire*, he referred to the Iron Curtain of silence and censorship (ibid.).

"Iron" symbolizes strength, while "curtain" represents a temporary barrier. Together, the two words form a metaphor for isolation and darkness, from which escape is both difficult and painful. In modern political discourse, it is associated with dichotomies such as freedom versus authoritarianism and democracy versus communism.

## Conclusion

As a result of political metaphorization, neutral and non-ideologized lexical units acquire new political meanings and establish emotional and connotative connections. Consequently, lexical units that previously existed on the periphery of a language's lexical inventory are often updated. It is worth noting the dynamics of the semantic structure of such units and examining the historical-political events from which they originate, as well as their metaphorical interpretations. This approach offers a valuable opportunity to trace society's attitudes toward historical and political events of a given period.

The lexical and phraseological inventory of a language is directly influenced by extralinguistic events and the social processes within which the language operates. Metaphorical expressions formed in response to political events of the Soviet period have become so entrenched in the Georgian language that they are now regarded as phraseological units. Interestingly, these expressions are actively used by the post-Soviet generation—individuals born in independent Georgia, for whom Soviet political events are largely unfamiliar.

The study of metaphors in political discourse encompasses two dimensions: semantic and pragmatic. On the one hand, such metaphors reflect political events; on the other, they serve as important tools in the construction of cultural identity. For example, the metaphors examined in this study share two common features: a connection with Soviet/post-Soviet Russia and a distinctly negative context. In political discourse, such expressions are often employed to criticize the subject of discussion.

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Political Dictionary. <https://politicaldictionary.com/>

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