



# A Critical Cultural Linguistic Analysis of Metaphor and Ideology in Media Discourse on Immigration

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## ABSTRACT

Metaphorical language in news discourse on immigration significantly influences public perception and discussion, frequently perpetuating dehumanization and polarization through emotionally charged framings. This study investigated the interrelationships among metaphors, political ideology, and online engagement within U.S. social media discussions. Our objective was to elucidate how ideological extremity mediates the deployment and dissemination of dehumanizing metaphorical language. We employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating computational metaphor detection with qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). A corpus of 500,000 U.S. tweets from 2023–2024 was processed using large language models and SBERT embeddings to identify metaphors across seven source domains (e.g., WATER, VERMIN, WAR). Political ideology was inferred via BERT-based classification, and user engagement was measured through retweets and likes. Findings indicate that conservative users employed dehumanizing metaphors more frequently than liberal users, with this tendency notably amplified among far-right users. Conversely, extreme liberal users paradoxically utilized creature-related metaphors as a strategy to critique immigration policies. Metaphorical language, particularly from the ANIMAL and VERMIN domains, demonstrably increased user engagement, with liberal tweets receiving a higher volume of retweets. Qualitative CDA revealed prevalent 'us' versus 'them' dichotomies, with conservatives framing migrants as a threat, juxtaposed against liberal critiques of systemic failures. These findings underscore the profound impact of metaphors in constructing and digitally propagating ideological narratives surrounding immigration, thereby shaping responses to divisive discourse.

## 1. Introduction

Language, particularly through metaphors, powerfully shapes public discourse and perception by conceptualizing abstract ideas in tangible terms (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In immigration discussions, metaphors often

originate from source domains like WATER, VERMIN, or ANIMALS, mapped onto immigrants or the migration process (Santa Ana, 1999; Charteris-Black, 2006). These framings are non-neutral, deeply intertwined with ideology—a system of beliefs legitimizing power through discursive practices and binary oppositions like

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“us” and “them” to delegitimize migrants (van Dijk, 1998; Arcimaviciene & Baglama, 2018). User engagement (e.g., retweets) with metaphorical content on social media can amplify ideological polarization (Mendelsohn & Budak, 2025). Political ideology, from conservative-liberal to extreme, further moderates these processes; historically, conservatives use dehumanizing language to frame immigration as a security threat (Card et al., 2022; Mendelsohn et al., 2021). These interconnected variables—metaphors, ideology, media discourse, and user engagement—collectively shape social realities, influencing policy and public sentiment (Burgers et al., 2016; Boeynaems et al., 2017).

A broader concern is the pervasive use of dehumanizing metaphors in migrant media discourses, which unconsciously reinforces discrimination, exacerbates social divisions, and mobilizes political action (Utych, 2018; Musolff, 2015). Metaphors like WATER or PHYSICAL PRESSURE evoke uncontrollable forces, legitimizing defensive measures while obscuring human realities (Charteris-Black, 2005; Jimenez et al., 2021). This discursive mode, especially during public panics like the 2015 European refugee crisis, can foster anti-immigration populism and xenophobia, shifting public opinion (Georgiou, 2017; Hemmelmann & Wegner, 2017). Despite these impacts, a notable gap exists. While qualitative studies illuminate metaphor use in specific contexts (e.g., U.S. political speeches [Card et al., 2022], EU media narratives [Arcimaviciene & Baglama, 2018], German newspaper coverage [Fischer, 2020]), few integrate computational methods with critical cultural linguistic analysis of large-scale social media data across the full ideological spectrum (Mendelsohn & Budak, 2025; Zwitter Vitez et al., 2022). Prior research has not consistently accounted for the subtle influences of ideological extremity and user engagement on metaphor amplification, including unexpected liberal use of creature-type metaphors (Mendelsohn & Budak, 2025). There is an evident knowledge gap in understanding metaphors' nuanced role in digital ecologies and their differential impact on audiences, highlighting the utility of a hybrid theoretical approach merging conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) with empirical computational techniques to discern contemporary implicit ideologies. To

address this, the current study investigates the following research questions:

RQ1: How does political ideology influence the selection of dehumanizing metaphors used to frame media discussions about immigrants, and does ideological extremity moderate this relationship?

RQ2: What is the relationship between metaphorical language in immigration discourse and user engagement, and how is this relationship moderated by political ideology?

## 2. Literature Review

A thorough examination of metaphor and ideology in migration-related media discourse necessitates established theoretical foundations and contributions to evolving literature. CMT (Kövecses, 2010) posits metaphor as a fundamental cognitive structure shaping understanding of complex phenomena like immigration. It maps concepts from familiar source domains (e.g., natural disasters, military invasions) onto target domains (e.g., migrants as enemies), inherently carrying ideological weight by highlighting certain aspects (danger, burden) while obscuring others (human agency, contributions) (Burgers et al., 2016). CMT is complemented by CDA (van Dijk, 1998), which scrutinizes how power and ideologies are reproduced through language, constructing binary oppositions (e.g., “us” vs. “them”) to legitimize exclusion. In immigration, CDA reveals how metaphors, driven by ideology, portray migrants as non-human or undesirable (Charteris-Black, 2006; Musolff, 2015). Framing theory integrates these perspectives, viewing metaphors as powerful tools that define problems, attribute responsibility, and suggest solutions (Entman, 1993; Boeynaems et al., 2017). Contemporary applications focus on how digital media amplify ideological framings, where engagement (e.g., retweets) boosts metaphorical content, exacerbating polarization (Prabhakaran et al., 2021).

Empirically, 2020-2025 has seen an increase in hybrid qualitative-computational approaches. Mendelsohn et al. (2025) used LLMs and embedding techniques to identify dehumanizing metaphors (e.g., WATER, VERMIN) in 400,000 U.S.

immigration tweets. They found conservative users employ such metaphors more frequently, with ideological extremity escalating usage, particularly for far-right positions. Creature-related metaphors increased engagement, especially for liberal authors, suggesting complex rhetorical dynamics and a link between metaphors and increased prejudice, consistent with Utych (2018) and Jimenez et al. (2021). Arcimaviciene and Baglama (2018) applied CMT and CDA to U.S. and E.U. media coverage of the 2015-2016 migration 'crisis,' identifying pervasive dehumanization myths (objects, commodities, natural phenomena, crime, terrorism metaphors) that reinforced stereotypes and deepened ideological polarization, delegitimizing migrants and bolstering host societies' moral authority.

In European contexts, Fischer (2020) qualitatively analyzed German newspapers (2015-2016), identifying discriminatory metaphorical themes (e.g., water, military, animals) depicting refugees as threats and dehumanizing them, influencing public opinion and political shifts towards anti-immigrant populism (Esses et al., 2013; Bos et al., 2016). Zwitter Vitez et al. (2022) developed a neuro-symbolic system for cross-lingual metaphor detection in Slovenian migration news, finding WATER as a primary source domain and incorporating linguistic, conceptual, and stance levels to reveal embedded ideologies. Broader recent syntheses consistently reveal patterns of othering, threat perception, and debates on "deservedness" in migration coverage, often linked to securitization frames post-2015 (Georgiou, 2017). For example, Greek editorials (2015-2022) documented ideologically informed shifts from humanitarian to security framings during crises. Analyses of political discourse, like Trump's rhetoric, exemplify metaphors implicitly casting migrants as invaders, integrating CMT and prompt engineering to uncover pervasive ideologies of exclusion. While these findings emphasize persistent dehumanizing representations, a disconnect remains between real-time digital engagement data and comprehensive cross-cultural comparisons, a gap this study aims to address.

### 3. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to investigate the relationship between metaphors, ideology, and user engagement in immigration rhetoric on social media. It combined qualitative CDA (van Dijk, 1998) with quantitative computational methods, drawing upon Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The primary objectives were to examine how political ideology and its extremity influence dehumanizing metaphor use, and how metaphors within distinct ideological contexts correlate with user engagement, with ideology as a moderator. This approach aligns with recent research synthesizing qualitative and computational methods for analyzing metaphorical language (Mendelsohn & Budak, 2025; Zwitter Vitez et al., 2022). The dataset consisted of 500,000 U.S.-based tweets related to immigration from January 2023 to December 2024, collected via the X (formerly Twitter) API. Posts were sampled for geographical diversity and inferred attitudinal stances (Mendelsohn et al., 2021). A subset of 2,000 posts was manually annotated as a gold standard for metaphor identification (Steen et al., 2010; Zwitter Vitez et al., 2022). Metaphor detection utilized a hybrid method adapted from Mendelsohn and Budak (2025). This involved:

1. **Word-Level Processing:** GPT-4 identified metaphorical phrases categorized into seven source domains (ANIMAL, VERMIN, PARASITE, PHYSICAL PRESSURE, WATER, COMMODITY, WAR) (Charteris-Black, 2006; Santa Ana et al., 2002). Scores were normalized for tweet length.
2. **Discourse-Level Processing:** Sentence-BERT (SBERT, all-MiniLM-L6-v2) computed cosine similarity between tweet embeddings and concept embeddings from carrier sentences (Mendelsohn & Budak, 2025; Reimers & Gurevych, 2019).

A composite metaphor score combined these levels. The methodology was validated against human annotations following the MIPVU protocol (Steen et al., 2010), confirming its robustness. Political ideology was estimated using user self-reported affiliations and a fine-tuned BERT model for classifying users as liberal, conservative, or moderate. Extremity scores were assigned based on polarization markers (Alizadeh et al., 2019).

User engagement was quantified by normalized retweets and likes (Prabhakaran et al., 2021). Regression models (logistic and linear) analyzed the relationship between ideology and metaphor usage for RQ1, including interaction terms for ideological extremity. Negative binomial models addressed RQ2, predicting engagement based on metaphor scores, moderated by ideology, and controlling for post length, sentiment, and time (Mendelsohn & Budak, 2025). A qualitative CDA complemented the computational analysis, examining a purposive sample of 200 high-metaphor tweets representing various ideologies and domains. Van Dijk’s (1998) model was applied to explore how metaphors construct “us” vs. “them” dichotomies and perpetuate narratives (Arcimaviciene & Baglama, 2018), identifying thematic patterns and their link to ideology. Ethical considerations included user data de-identification and compliance with X’s API terms.

Manual annotation ensured high inter-rater reliability ( $\kappa > 0.8$ ). This comprehensive methodology links qualitative depth with computational scale for a nuanced analysis of metaphors in immigration discourse.

#### 4. Results

##### *Results for RQ1: Influence of Political Ideology and Extremity on Dehumanizing Metaphor Use*

The computational analysis revealed significant differences in metaphor use across political ideologies. Logistic regression models indicated that conservative users were more likely to employ dehumanizing metaphors (e.g., WATER, VERMIN, WAR) compared to liberal users ( $\beta = 0.42, p < 0.001$ ). Linear regression further showed that ideological extremity amplified metaphor use among conservatives ( $\beta = 0.31, p < 0.01$ ).

**Table 1**

*Metaphor Use Across Political Ideologies (Percentage of Tweets)*

Metaphor Type	Conservative (%)	Liberal (%)	Far-Right (%)	Moderate Conservative (%)	Extreme Liberal (%)	Moderate Liberal (%)
WATER	28	18	35	25	20	15
VERMIN	15	8	22	10	12	5
WAR	12	6	18	9	7	4
ANIMAL	10	15	14	8	20	10
COMMODITY	5	20	3	7	10	25

Conservative users demonstrated a higher propensity for WATER (28% vs. 18%), VERMIN (15% vs. 8%), and WAR (12% vs. 6%) metaphors compared to liberals. This pattern was particularly pronounced among far-right conservatives, who used WATER metaphors in 35% of their tweets and VERMIN metaphors in

22%. Conversely, moderate liberals showed a preference for COMMODITY metaphors (25%). Extreme liberals, while generally lower in dehumanizing metaphors, showed an elevated use of ANIMAL metaphors (20%), often in a critical context.

**Table 2**

*Influence of Ideological Extremity on Dehumanizing Metaphor Use (Mean SUM Score)*

Ideological Group	VERMIN Metaphors (Mean SUM Score)	ANIMAL/VERMIN Metaphors (Mean SUM Score)
Far-Right	0.82	0.75
Moderate Conservative	0.45	0.38
Extreme Liberal	0.30	0.55
Moderate Liberal	0.15	0.20

Ideological extremity significantly influenced metaphor use. Far-right users exhibited the highest frequency of dehumanizing VERMIN metaphors (mean SUM score = 0.82), nearly double that of moderate conservatives (0.45). Notably, extreme liberals also showed elevated use of creature-related metaphors (ANIMAL and VERMIN) with a mean SUM score of 0.55, particularly in contexts emphasizing empathy or critique of policy failures (e.g., “migrants treated like animals”). Qualitative CDA of 200 high-metaphor-score tweets provided deeper insights. Conservative tweets frequently framed immigrants as existential threats, using WATER and WAR metaphors to justify border security (e.g., “We must stop the flood of illegals invading our nation”). These narratives constructed a stark “us” vs. “them” dichotomy, delegitimizing migrants as outsiders. In contrast, liberal tweets often employed ANIMAL metaphors to critique

dehumanizing policies (e.g., “Caging refugees like animals is inhumane”). Far-right tweets intensified threat-based framings, while extreme liberal tweets occasionally mirrored conservative rhetoric to highlight systemic failures, complicating the ideological binary.

**Result for RQ2: Association Between Metaphorical Language and User Engagement, Moderated by Ideology**

Negative binomial regression models demonstrated a significant positive association between metaphor use and user engagement (retweets and likes) ( $\beta = 0.38, p < 0.001$ ), supporting H2. Tweets with high metaphor scores (SUM > 0.7) received 2.5 times more retweets on average than non-metaphorical tweets ( $p < 0.001$ ).

**Table 3: Impact of Metaphor Type on User Engagement (Retweets Multiplier)**

Metaphor Type	Overall Multiplier	Liberal-Authored Tweets Multiplier	Conservative-Authored Tweets Multiplier
All Metaphors (SUM > 0.7)	2.5x	2.8x	2.2x
Creature-Related (ANIMAL, VERMIN)	2.8x	3.2x	1.8x
WATER	1.5x	1.6x	1.4x
WAR	1.8x	1.2x	2.0x
COMMODITY	1.3x	1.5x	1.0x

Metaphorical language generally boosted user engagement, with tweets using metaphors showing a 2.5 times higher retweet rate. Creature-related metaphors (ANIMAL, VERMIN) were particularly potent, increasing engagement by 3.2 times for liberal-authored tweets and 1.8 times for

conservative-authored tweets. WAR metaphors were more effective for conservative tweets (2.0x multiplier), while WATER metaphors had a more modest impact with no significant ideological moderation.

**Table 4:** Mean Retweets for High-Metaphor-Score Tweets by Ideology

Metaphor Type (High Score)	Liberal Tweets (Mean Retweets)	Conservative Tweets (Mean Retweets)	Far-Right Tweets (Mean Retweets)	Moderate Tweets (Mean Retweets)
ANIMAL	150	80	90	120
VERMIN	130	100	160	70
WAR	90	120	140	80

Liberal tweets using ANIMAL metaphors, such as those decrying “inhumane treatment of migrants like cattle,” resonated strongly with audiences, reflected in high retweet counts (mean = 150 retweets for high-score tweets). These posts often evoked emotional appeals, aligning with framing theory’s emphasis on emotional resonance (Entman, 1993). Conservative tweets using WAR metaphors (e.g., “migrant invasion threatens our sovereignty”) similarly garnered high engagement (mean = 120 retweets), reinforcing threat perceptions among like-minded audiences (Utych, 2018). However, overtly inflammatory VERMIN metaphors showed mixed effects: while they amplified engagement among far-right users (160 retweets), they occasionally reduced retweets

among moderates (70 retweets), possibly due to conscious resistance to extreme rhetoric (Hart, 2021).

### **Evaluation of Metaphor Detection**

The metaphor detection model achieved a precision of 0.78 and recall of 0.72 on the annotated subset of 2,000 tweets, comparable to benchmarks in Zwitter Vitez et al. (2022). Word-level detection (via GPT-4o) accurately identified explicit metaphors (e.g., “pouring” for WATER), while discourse-level SBERT embeddings captured implicit framings, such as crisis narratives without explicit metaphorical words. Inter-rater reliability for manual annotations was high (kappa = 0.85), ensuring robustness.

**Table 5:** Metaphor Detection Model Performance

Metric	Value
Precision	0.78
Recall	0.72
F1-Score	0.75
Inter-rater Reliability (Kappa)	0.85
Annotation Sample Size	2,000 tweets

The model’s performance, with a precision of 0.78 and recall of 0.72, indicates its effectiveness in identifying metaphors within the dataset. The high inter-rater reliability (kappa = 0.85) for manual annotations further validates the robustness of the ground truth used for model training and evaluation. These results confirm the hybrid approach’s ability to detect both overt and subtle metaphors in large-scale data with acceptable accuracy.

## **5. Discussion and Conclusion**

This study enriches our understanding of metaphors’ role in shaping ideological narratives and user engagement in U.S. social media discourse on immigration, extending conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and critical discourse analyses (van Dijk, 1998) into digital environments. The findings reinforce that metaphors are cognitive mappings, framing abstract issues in concrete, often threat-based, terms (Burgers et al., 2016), influencing policy

attitudes (Entman, 1993; Boeynaems et al., 2017). Notably, extreme liberal use of creature metaphors highlights their malleability as framing tools for challenging injustice (Hart, 2021). This challenges a binary view of metaphor use, showing that extreme ideological positions can yield affective language across party lines (Alizadeh et al., 2019). The link between metaphors and engagement aligns with communication theories suggesting metaphorical vividness enhances persuasiveness by evoking emotion (Ortony, 1975; Prabhakaran et al., 2021).

Empirically, findings corroborate existing research: conservative ideology correlates with more frequent dehumanizing metaphors (Mendelsohn and Budak, 2025; Card et al., 2022). Liberal use of creature metaphors mirrors observations in U.S. and EU media (Arcimaviciene and Baglama, 2018), adding complexity to ideological divides. Fischer's (2020) work confirms racist and distance themes in crisis coverage. Increased use of creature metaphors and heightened engagement, particularly on the liberal side, aligns with Prabhakaran et al.'s (2021) and Sengupta et al.'s (2024) findings. However, mixed effects of overt VERMIN metaphors among moderates contradict Utych's (2018) experiments, suggesting resistance to polarizing rhetoric (Hart, 2021). Zwitter Vitez et al.'s (2022) computational exploration supports our hybrid approach. Collectively, these empirical alignments bridge qualitative CDA and computational scalability, addressing real-time digital analysis lacunas (Mendelsohn et al., 2021) and illustrating how metaphors mediate discrimination (Musolff, 2015).

In summary, this study reveals that political ideology drives the metaphorical dehumanization of immigration in U.S. social media. Conservatives and ideological extremists employ threat-based metaphors, while liberals use creature-related metaphors for critical commentary. Metaphors enhance user engagement through emotional connections, moderated by ideology, underscoring their power in shaping ideological oppositions and polarization. Theoretically, findings contribute to CMT and CDA by exposing metaphors' dual capacity for reinforcement and resistance (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; van Dijk, 1998). Practically, implications exist for media literacy and policy.

Algorithmic changes could promote inclusive immigration debates, and identifying metaphoric devices can aid in constructing counter-narratives.

Limitations include focus on U.S. English-language tweets, potential biases from LLM training data, and self-reported ideology inferences. The 2023-2024 dataset precludes long-term trend examination. Future research could conduct longitudinal and cross-cultural comparisons. Experimental designs could investigate causal effects of metaphor exposure on attitudes (Utych, 2018). NLP advancements (Zwitter Vitez et al., 2022) could apply methods to multimodal discourse. Finally, AI-supported interventions for detecting and reframing dehumanizing language warrant exploration in media ethics.

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