

---

## Multimodal Metaphor Approach to the Meaning-Making of the United Nations' Posters

Putu Dea Indah Kartini <sup>1</sup>, Gede Primahadi Wijaya Rajeg<sup>2</sup>, I Made Netra<sup>3</sup>

Bachelor of English Literature Program & Centre for Interdisciplinary Research on the Humanities and Social Sciences (CIRHSS), Udayana University

E-mail: [deaindahk21@gmail.com](mailto:deaindahk21@gmail.com)

---

### Article History:

Received: 25 Juni 2024

Revised: 07 Juli 2024

Accepted: 09 Juli 2024

### Keywords:

*multimodal metaphor, verbal and visual sign, poster, global communication.*

***Abstract:** This study aims to identify the metaphors used in the images and textual elements of selected United Nations (UN) posters, analyze how these metaphors convey meaning, and understand the functions of the messages delivered. The data was sourced from the official Instagram account of the UN, @unitednations. The data were analyzed using a descriptive-qualitative approach with the application of multimodal metaphor theory by Forceville (2009) and visual grammar theory by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020). The results indicate that the visual and verbal processes in these posters are complementary and work together to provide a cohesive message to the audience. The analysis reveals that the metaphors used in the posters serve to enhance the communication of complex global issues by making abstract concepts more relatable and understandable. This study contributes to the understanding of how multimodal metaphors in posters can be effectively used for global communication.*

---

## INTRODUCTION

With the development of science and technology, communication now includes both verbal and non-verbal signs. Verbal signs use words, spoken or written, to convey messages, while non-verbal or visual signs rely on images, graphics, colors, and layout. Posters are a common medium that integrates both verbal and visual elements, allowing advertisers, designers, and communicators to use multimodal metaphors to engage and persuade audiences.

The United Nations (UN) addresses complex global issues like human rights, poverty, environmental sustainability, and peace, representing diverse cultures, languages, and perspectives. Their posters use symbols and semiotic elements to convey messages that go beyond language barriers. This study aims to explore how these multimodal elements in UN posters reflect metaphorical concepts and communicate universal values. This study aims to demonstrate how the metaphor uncovers the various ways in which UN posters contribute to shaping global narratives, fostering understanding, and mobilizing collective action for positive change. This study uses the Multimodal Metaphor theory by Forceville (2009), based on the

---

Conceptual Metaphor Theory by Lakoff and Johnson (2003) and Kövecses (2010), as well as the visual grammar theory by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020).

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Multimodal Metaphor**

Metaphor is a linguistic and cognitive tool that uses comparisons or analogies to convey concepts or ideas indirectly. Traditional metaphors work on the principle of “A is B,” where A (the target domain) is described through B (the source domain) based on shared similarities. For instance, the metaphor “life is a stage” compares life (A) to a stage (B), suggesting that life involves performances and roles similar to those in a theater. This traditional approach to metaphor relies on the direct comparison between two seemingly different things to highlight their shared characteristics. However, Lakoff and Johnson (2003) argue that metaphors are more than just linguistic constructs; they are fundamental to human cognition. Rather than just using language to express ideas, metaphors help us conceptualize one idea through another. For example, saying “attacking a weak point in an argument” metaphorically likens arguments to battles, illustrating how we understand abstract ideas through more concrete experiences.

Lakoff and Johnson (2003) identify several types of metaphors that help explain how concepts are structured and understood. One type is the structural metaphor, which involves understanding one concept through the structure of another. A common example is “time is money,” where time is treated as a valuable and limited resource akin to money, which can be saved, wasted, or invested. Another type is the orientational metaphor, which organizes experiences spatially based on physical sensations and emotions. For instance, phrases like “feeling high” or “mood sank” use up and down to describe emotional states.

Metaphors also reflect cultural coherence, where the values of a culture shape metaphorical understanding. Different societies or groups might emphasize various values, such as the idea that “more is better,” which reflects a cultural belief that abundance is positive. Finally, the ontological metaphor allows abstract concepts to be described as physical entities. For example, saying “combatting a problem” represents abstract challenges as physical battles, helping us to understand complex ideas through tangible metaphors. These diverse types of metaphors demonstrate how abstract concepts are communicated and understood through both language and cognitive processes.

Unlike metaphor, metonymy serves a referential function by emphasizing specific aspects of an entity. According to Lakoff and Johnson (2003), conceptual metonymy refers to using one entity to represent another related entity, which differs from personification, where human traits are assigned to non-human objects. For example, “Inflation robbed me of my savings” personifies inflation, while “The ham sandwich is waiting for his check” uses the sandwich to refer to the person who ordered it, demonstrating metonymy through direct associations. Furthermore, metonymy structures our thoughts and actions. This concept also extends to religious and cultural contexts, providing a means to understand abstract ideas through everyday experiences and metaphorical systems, thus revealing its fundamental role in shaping our worldview (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p.40).

Multimodal metaphors involve the target and source being primarily represented in different modes. In diverse scenarios, it can denote the integration of various media types, channels of communication, or sensory modes to enrich the overall experience or communicate information with greater efficacy. Forceville (2009) therefore proposes the subsequent classifications for exploring multimodal metaphor, including pictorial signs, written signs, oral

signs, gesture, sound, music, smell, taste, and touch. Forceville (2009) himself integrates conceptual metaphor theory with multimodality to obtain better understanding and is accepted by diverse audiences due to the universality of images.

### **Reading Image**

Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) propose a comprehensive framework for analyzing visual images through three main types of meaning: representational, interactive, and compositional. Representational meaning examines how images depict processes, participants, and circumstances, categorized into two structural types: narrative and conceptual. Narrative structures illustrate actions, events, and changes, while conceptual structures focus on the stable and generalized nature of participants. These structures help in understanding how images convey stories or ideas and organize visual information into temporal versus timeless contexts.

Interactive meaning explores how images establish contact, depict social distance, and represent power relations between viewers and participants. Contact is created through visual cues like gaze or gestures, while social distance is shown through the size of the frame, such as close-ups or wide shots. Power relations are influenced by the vertical camera angle, which can signify dominance or submission, and involvement is determined by the horizontal angle, which can be frontal or oblique. These elements reveal how images engage viewers and convey different levels of interaction and authority.

Compositional meaning is analyzed through three interconnected systems: information value, framing, and salience. Information value involves how elements are positioned to convey messages, such as oppositional structures where left/right or top/bottom positions denote given/new or ideal/real concepts. Framing refers to how visual elements are separated or integrated through techniques like segregation, separation, or visual contrast, which helps in distinguishing or connecting components of the image. Salience focuses on how elements capture attention through factors like positioning, size, color, and sharpness, establishing a hierarchy of importance in the visual composition. Together, these systems illustrate how images organize information, highlight key elements, and guide viewer perception.

Previous studies have been conducted to explore the use of multimodal metaphors in various forms of media and their impact on communication such as in public service advertisements (Feng and Wu, 2022), commercial advertisements (Alousque, 2014; Jahameh and Zibin, 2023; Rahmadani and Kurniawan, 2021; Silalahi and Rerung, 2022; Zhu, 2023), magazine covers (Cao, 2022), and cartoons or images (Alousque, 2020; Godioli and Pedrazzini, 2019). Based on previous studies, those studies highlight the continued relevance of multimodal metaphors in understanding cultural and social phenomena. Although it examines the same research topic, this study focuses on metaphors in public service posters aimed at a global audience with diverse backgrounds and understandings. This study contributes to the understanding of multimodal metaphors, particularly in posters, enhancing the effectiveness of communication by combining visual and textual elements.

### **RESEARCH METHOD**

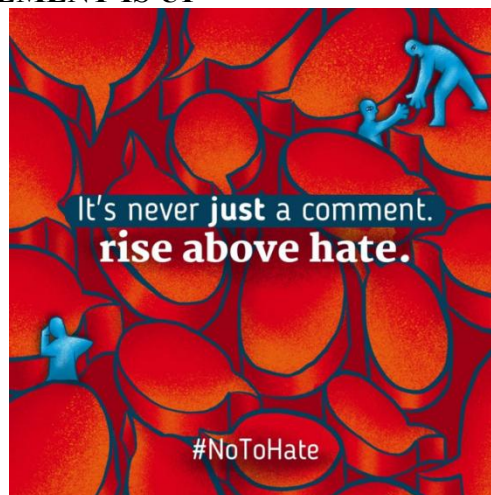
This study analyzed five UN posters uploaded on its official Instagram account, @unitednations, in 2023. These posters were chosen for their diverse topics and potential to evoke a range of metaphorical concepts. The study used a descriptive qualitative approach to identify and describe the metaphorical content in the posters, focusing on the visual and textual elements.

The analysis applied Multimodal Metaphor Theory by Forceville (2009) to identify metaphors in both images and text. Additionally, visual grammar theory by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020) was used to interpret the images. After collecting the data, the researchers analyzed the metaphorical hypotheses present in the posters, aiming to understand how metaphors were used to convey complex concepts.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The United Nations' Instagram posters are considered multimodal because they combine images and text. These posters address global issues and are accessible worldwide via the internet. Images play a significant role in conveying cultural messages, which can be interpreted differently by people from various backgrounds. To understand the intended meanings and messages, each mode (image and text) in the posters is analyzed. The analysis is organized into sub-sections titled after the conceptual metaphors evoked by the posters.

### HATE/ANGER IS RED, DIFFICULTY IS MOTION IMPEDIMENT/CONFINEMENT, BAD IS DOWN, IMPROVEMENT IS UP



Picture 1. Datum 1

(Source: United Nations Instagram, April 10<sup>th</sup> 2023)

#### Datum 1

The poster incorporates various metaphors in the connection between the visual and textual components to convey its message about the impact of online hate speech. The red speech bubbles symbolize chaos and anger, representing harmful comments, motivated by the HATE/ANGER IS RED (conceptual) metaphor. We could find this metaphor manifests in conventional English expressions such as “She was *scarlet with rage*” and “He got *red with anger*” (Lakoff 1987: 382). The human figure trapped among these “anger” bubbles illustrates the DIFFICULTY IS MOTION IMPEDIMENT/CONFINEMENT metaphor, suggesting that hate speech restricts and burdens individuals. The next metaphor is what Lakoff and Johnson (2003) calls an orientational metaphor whereby the spatial position is used to conceptualize quality. The figure's lower position in the poster signifies the BAD IS DOWN metaphor, while another figure's attempt to help represents the IMPROVEMENT IS UP/MOVING UPWARDS metaphor, indicating efforts to support each other against negativity.

The text "It's never just a comment" and "rise above hate" emphasizes the significance of online comments and the need to combat hate speech. The differing typography of these phrases enhances their impact, with "just" in bold stressing the weight of comments, and "rise above hate" standing out to promote positive online behavior. The hashtag #NoToHate reinforces the call to reject hate speech. Overall, the poster's central text and contrasting elements effectively highlight the damaging effects of online hate speech and encourage a respectful digital environment.

#### DIFFICULTY IS MOTION IMPEDIMENT/CONFINEMENT, QUANTITY IS SIZE



Picture 2. Datum 2

(Source: United Nations Instagram, April 26<sup>th</sup> 2023)

#### Datum 2

Another metaphor introduced here is regarding conceptualizing the amount in terms of physical size (Lakoff 1987: 386), that is the QUANTITY IS SIZE metaphor. These metaphors pictorially reinforce the meaning expressed literally by the caption ("2 billion people still lack safe drinking water"). The poster focuses on the metaphor of a tied pipe, which, though unrealistic, effectively conveys the concept of DIFFICULTY IS MOTION IMPEDIMENT/CONFINEMENT. This image symbolizes obstacles blocking water flow, representing infrastructure problems or lack of access hindering safe drinking water availability. The faucet on the left signifies known issues with clean water, while the single drop emphasizes scarcity, reflecting the QUANTITY IS SIZE metaphor. According to Kress and van Leeuwen's theory, the left side (the Given) highlights familiar issues, while the right (the New) and bottom (the Real) provide new factual information, such as "2 billion people still lack safe drinking water."

The text "2 billion people still lack safe drinking water" is placed at the bottom right to introduce new and crucial information. The black background of this phrase creates visual contrast, drawing attention to the ongoing issue. The word "still" highlights the persistent problem despite technological and developmental advancements. The poster's powerful message aims to raise awareness about global water scarcity and the urgent need for solutions to ensure equitable access to safe drinking water, advocating for water sustainability and resource equity.

## WORDS ARE WEAPONS



Picture 3. Datum 3

(Source: United Nations Instagram, June 18<sup>th</sup> 2023)

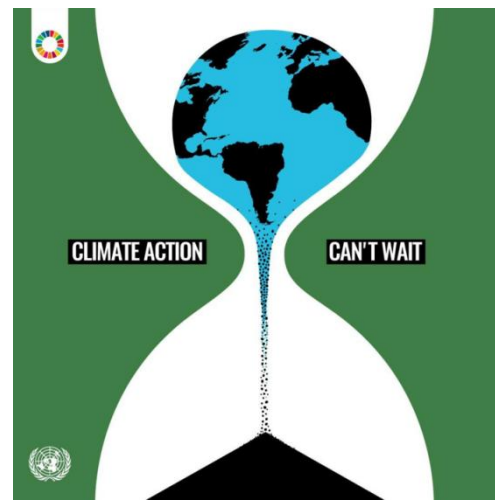
### Datum 3

The poster metaphorically equates words with weapons, aligning with the broader metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR (Lakoff & Johnson 2003). This suggests that verbal exchanges can be as confrontational and harmful as physical warfare, with words acting as weapons that can cause harm or incite violence. The metaphor "Words *kill*" is an ontological metaphor, portraying the abstract concept of harmful language not just as a physical object, but more specifically as a lethal weapon, making it easier to understand the potential danger of inappropriate words.

The visual element of the poster features a grenade made up of a keyboard, symbolizing that words typed on a keyboard can be as deadly as a grenade if misused. This central image draws the viewer's attention, emphasizing the core message. The accompanying text, "words can be weapons," reinforces this idea. The word "weapons" is highlighted with bold typography and a dark background, further emphasizing the notion that verbal communication can have serious, weapon-like consequences.

By likening words to weapons, the poster stresses the importance of rejecting hate speech and promoting responsible communication. It highlights the potential harm words can cause, urging people to use language to foster understanding, empathy, and respect rather than division and hostility. The analysis underscores the message against hate speech, as seen in the hashtag #NoToHate, and advocates for the responsible use of language to prevent incitement of violence and harm. The poster ultimately calls for thoughtful and mindful communication, warning of the dangers of misusing language.

**GOOD IS UP; BEING IN A BAD STATE IS DOWNWARD MOTION; EARTH CONDITION IS THE SAND IN HOURGLASS**



Picture 4. Datum 4

(Source: United Nations Instagram, September 4<sup>th</sup> 2023)

#### Datum 4

The poster uses the image metaphor of the Earth as sand in an hourglass to convey the urgency of climate change. The hourglass, a traditional time-measuring device, has its sand replaced by the Earth, which is shown melting and falling from the upper to the lower chamber. The Earth in the upper chamber represents an ideal state (GOOD IS UP), while the melted Earth with no clear shape and structure in the lower chamber represents the current degraded state due to climate change (BAD IS DOWN). This dynamic motion from top to bottom also reflects the BEING IN A BAD STATE IS DOWNWARD MOTION metaphor, emphasizing environmental degradation and the urgent need for intervention.

The melting Earth in the hourglass symbolizes the gradual but accelerating impacts of climate change, such as melting polar ice, prolonged droughts, and increased wildfires. The accumulated debris at the bottom signifies the consequences of inaction. The text "Climate action can't wait" reinforces the urgency conveyed by the hourglass, highlighting the need for immediate measures to mitigate climate change effects and protect the environment. The phrase underscores the importance of proactive steps, stressing that delaying action will exacerbate the problem.

Overall, the poster aligns the metaphorical image with the text's message, symbolizing the passage of time and the pressing need to address climate change. It calls for collective action and emphasizes the responsibility of individuals, communities, and governments to prioritize climate action to safeguard the planet for future generations.

---

## HATE SPEECH IS AN ENEMY; KINDNESS IS A WEAPON



Picture 5. Datum 5

(Source: United Nations Instagram, November 13<sup>th</sup> 2023)

### Datum 5

The text "Fight hate speech with kindness online and offline" serves as an ontological metaphor that concretizes abstract concepts like "hate speech" and "kindness." The verb "fight" invokes the FIGHTING/WAR domain, suggesting the metaphor HATE SPEECH IS AN ENEMY, as enemies are typically fought rather than abstract ideas. The phrase "fight hate speech with kindness" further implies that kindness is a weapon, introducing the metaphor KINDNESS IS A WEAPON. This metaphor emphasizes using kindness as a response to hate speech, promoting empathy and understanding both online and offline. The main message, placed at the top of the poster, is reinforced by the hashtag #NoToHate, which advocates rejecting hate speech and fostering positivity.

The poster features a megaphone emitting heart shapes instead of sound waves, symbolizing the impact of spreading love and kindness to a wide audience. This imagery suggests that love and kindness can be as effective in communication as spoken words. The heart symbol represents compassion, empathy, and understanding, reinforcing the message that positivity can counteract the negativity of hate speech. Both the visual and textual elements work together to convey a powerful message: combating hate speech with kindness and empathy. The poster encourages individuals to use their voices to spread love and compassion, advocating for a world free from hate and discrimination.

## CONCLUSION

The study concludes that metaphors in the visual and textual elements of selected UN posters effectively convey complex and abstract concepts. By using metaphors, the posters make these messages more accessible and relatable through familiar imagery and language. The synergy between visual and verbal elements creates a cohesive and compelling message, enhancing audience engagement and comprehension. This approach highlights the importance and urgency of global issues like gender equality, environmental conservation, and social justice. The research demonstrates that multimodal metaphors are powerful tools in public communication, improving message understanding and retention, and underscores their significance in communication strategies.

## REFERENCES

- Alousque, I.N. (2020). The Metaphorical Representation of Brexit in Digital Political Cartoons. *Vis. Commun. Q.* 27, 3–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15551393.2019.1707084>
- Alousque, I.N. (2014). Verbo-pictorial metaphor in French advertising. *J. Fr. Lang. Stud.* 24, 155–180. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0959269513000045>
- Ananda, R., Fitriani, S.S., Samad, I.A., Patak, A.A. (2019). Cigarette advertisements: A systemic functional grammar and multimodal analysis. *Indones. J. Appl. Linguist.* 8, 616. <https://doi.org/10.17509/ijal.v8i3.15261>
- Cao, X. (2022). Analysis of Multimodal Metaphor and Metonymy in China-related Front Covers of The Economist. *Asian J. Soc. Sci. Stud.* 7, 22. <https://doi.org/10.20849/ajsss.v7i8.1264>
- Erge, A., Guohong, L. (2023). A Multimodal Cognitive Approach to the Conceptualization of Coffee. *Int. J. Linguist. Lit. Transl.* 6, 59–71. <https://doi.org/10.32996/ijllt.2023.6.5.7>
- Feng, D., Wu, X. (2022). Coronavirus, Demons, and War: Visual and Multimodal Metaphor in Chinese Public Service Advertisements. *SAGE Open* 12, 215824402210788. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440221078855>
- Forceville, C., Urios-Aparisi, E. (Eds.). (2009). *Multimodal metaphor, Applications of cognitive linguistics*. Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin ; New York.
- Godioli, A., Pedrazzini, A. (2019). Falling stars and sinking ships: Framing and metaphor in cartoons about Brexit. *J. Eur. Stud.* 49, 302–323. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047244119859167>
- Jahameh, H., Zibin, A. (2023). The use of monomodal and multimodal metaphors in advertising Jordanian and American food products on Facebook: A comparative study. *Heliyon* 9, e15178. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e15178>
- Knowles, M., Moon, R. (2007). *Introducing metaphor*, Repr. ed. Routledge, London.
- Kövecses, Z. (2020). *Ten Lectures on Figurative Meaning-Making: The Role of Body and Context*. BRILL. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004364905>
- Kövecses, Zoltán. (2010). *Metaphor: A practical introduction*. 2nd edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kress, G.R., Van Leeuwen, T. (2020). *Reading images: the grammar of visual design*, Third edition. ed. Routledge, London ; New York.
- Lakoff, G., Johnson, M. (2003). *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (1999). *Philosophy in the flesh: The embodied mind and its challenge to Western thought*. New York: Basic Books.
- Lakoff, G. (1987). *Woman, fire, and dangerous things: What categories reveal about the mind*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Lakoff, G. & Kövecses, Z. (1987). The cognitive model of Anger inherent in American English. In Dorothy C. Holland & Naomi Quinn (eds.), *Cultural models in language and thought*, 195–221. Cambridge [Cambridgeshire] ; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- O'Halloran, K.L. (2008). Systemic functional-multimodal discourse analysis (SF-MDA): constructing ideational meaning using language and visual imagery. *Vis. Commun.* 7, 443–475. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470357208096210>
- Rahmadani, D.E., Kurniawan, M.H. (2021). Visual And Metaphorical Representation In McDonald's Singapore Advertisement. *Metathesis J. Engl. Lang. Lit. Teach.* 5, 103. <https://doi.org/10.31002/metathesis.v5i1.3434>
- Silalahi, R.M.P., Rerung, M.K.T. (2022). Metaphor Analysis of Two International Burger Franchises. *J. Engl. Lang. Cult.* 12. <https://doi.org/10.30813/jelc.v12i2.3341>

---

Zhu, S. (2023). Case Study of Multimodal Metaphor—Taking Thai Hom Mali Rice Advertisement as Example. Acad. J. Humanit. Soc. Sci. 6.  
<https://doi.org/10.25236/AJHSS.2023.061305>