

A cognitive-based approach to President Obama's educational discourse through the lens of his State of the Union Addresses (2009-2016)

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Abstract

In order to gain a cultural understanding of the discourse on education used by President Obama, this article examines the source domains commonly used to refer to education in his State of the Union Addresses, from the time he took office in 2009 to 2016 when he will leave office. The study will proceed by applying insights from Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), within the field of cognitive linguistics, supplemented by the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) developed by the Pragglejazz Group. The source domains identified and discussed are: COMPETITION and ECONOMICS. In fact, the strong coherence in Obama's speeches relies on the use of the story of competition as the concept that is repeated in and across speeches and that works as a persuasive device by framing reality and directing the audience's thinking, perception and even action.

Keywords: educational discourse, conceptual metaphor, cognitive analysis, President Obama's State of the Union Addresses.

Resumen

Un estudio cognitivo del discurso educativo del Presidente Obama a través de sus Discursos del Estado de la Unión (2009-2016)

Con el objetivo de presentar una aproximación cultural al discurso sobre educación utilizado por el presidente Obama, este artículo examina los “campos

origen” que habitualmente emplea para referirse a la educación en sus Discursos del Estado de la Unión, desde que asumió el cargo de presidente en 2009 hasta este último año de su mandato, 2016. El estudio se plantea y desarrolla desde la aplicación de la Teoría de la Metáfora Conceptual, en el campo de la lingüística cognitiva, complementado con el Procedimiento de Identificación de Metáforas (MIP) que ha desarrollado el Grupo Pragglez. Los “campos origen” identificados y analizados son: la COMPETICIÓN y la ECONOMÍA. En realidad, la fuerte coherencia que se observa en los discursos de Obama al abordar la educación se apoya en el uso de la competición como el concepto que se repite con regularidad en sus intervenciones y que funciona como un mecanismo de persuasión que determina y condiciona el pensamiento, la percepción e incluso la acción de sus audiencias.

Palabras clave: discurso educativo, metáfora conceptual, análisis cognitivo, Discursos de la Unión del Presidente Obama.

1. Introduction

Education policy is nowadays a high-priority topic on the agenda of many politicians in OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) member countries. Such is the case in the United States, where in one way or another it has been present in the legislative debate, committee reports, and presidential meetings and speeches in the last half-century. Indeed, it has always been a very controversial issue because as Goldstein (2014: 4) claims “every new era of education reform has been characterized by a political and media war”.

Over the last few decades there has been a call to improve students’ performance by, in large part, raising standards. This increased interest on the part of politicians is in line with that of the audience, who have begun to pay more attention to issues such as how well schools work or students perform (DiPerna, 2014). In accordance with this perception and understanding, several reform initiatives have been implemented.

One of the most important ones has been the effort to create a national system of standards. This move was initiated in the law *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*, which was announced by President Clinton in his 1997 State of the Union Address. He claimed to be pursuing a path of education standards, which represented what all students must know to succeed in the knowledge economy of the 21st century. The culmination of this line of thought was the Test-Based Accountability with the enactment of the Act

No Child Left Behind of 2001, put forward by President Bush and passed by Congress with the support of both Republicans and Democrats. An Act which to Lipman (2007: 35) “crystallizes key neoliberal and neoconservative business-oriented education policies”. In 2009, President Obama launched his *Race to the Top Program*, which, not by accident, was a central part of the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act* (ARRA), a program designed to boost the economy and overcome recession. These reform initiatives in the federal education policy have been the response to a sustained concern among families, educators and public opinion because of the low academic results of primary and secondary North-American students when compared with those of other developed countries. All this has led politicians and the media to speak about an education crisis in the US, which has become a highly controversial issue nowadays.

Bearing in mind the most recent academic achievement results, both on a national - National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, IES/NCES, 2014) and Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT, College Board, 2014) - and on an international basis - Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA, OECD, 2011; 2014) - for some progressive scholars, talking about the education crisis in the USA is a spurious interpretation to cement a particular perception generated by social and economic sectors interested in promoting the development of privatization in North-American public schools (Ravitch, 2013; Berliner & Glass, 2014). For other more conservative sectors, it is clear that the American education system is in crisis (Maranto & McShane, 2012).

In the rhetoric used in public school reform by the former Presidents of America over the last thirty years, we find a very powerful device which helps both politicians and their audiences to better cope with the complex universe of politics, more particularly school reform, by giving meaning and order to what might appear as a confusing picture: metaphors. As some scholars have pointed out (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Nelkin, 2001), metaphors have some kind of explanatory power to organize and simplify information and illuminate understanding. However, metaphors are not just linguistic devices but cultural ones, as certain cultural practices - where some community values are selected over others - will be behind the choice of particular metaphors (Kövecses, 2005; Lakoff, 2006). Thus, a cultural understanding of school reform lies in the conceptual metaphors which politicians resort to and which serve to organize, guide and naturalize their discourse.

In this paper we will analyze the direction of President Obama's education policy to overcome some of the problems facing American education and public school. Those education issues have been reflected in Obama's State of the Union Addresses, which have marked his tenure over the past seven and a half years and constitute a significant part of his educational ideology and, by extension, of his own political party. More particularly, the purpose of this study is to uncover the conventional metaphors on schooling and school improvement which pervade the thinking of policy makers, as audiences will use the same points of reference to think, talk, and act on those issues. Therefore, given the relevance of the topic of education for American public opinion - frequently discussed in the media (Cossentino, 2004; DiPerna, 2014) - the main contribution and novelty of this paper lies precisely in analyzing, within the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), this particular topic in key speeches such as Obama's State of the Union Addresses. As will be seen later, the importance of those Addresses stems from the fact that they will be the basis to identify the programmatic priorities on the President's legislative agenda (Campbell & Jamieson, 2008; Shogan, 2015).

We hypothesize that the metaphors used could well reflect a certain ideological position on the part of politicians and, in turn, serve to legitimize a type of discourse by framing political issues in a given way, directing the audience's thinking and perception and eliminating alternative points of view (Thompson, 1996; Semino, 2008; Charteris-Black, 2011). Thus, the guiding question is 'In what way is education represented in Obama's speeches through the choice of the different source domains?'

The paper is organized into four sections. The first section deals with the theoretical framework, which supports the body of the paper; secondly, methodological issues are addressed; next comes the analysis section, where we present the different source domains which President Obama relies on in his use of metaphors to substantiate his discourse on education, as reflected in the State of the Union Addresses (2009-2016) - COMPETITION and ECONOMICS. Finally, the last section presents the conclusions drawn from analyzing the metaphors in the speeches.

2. Theoretical framework

This paper is primarily based on the work done on cognitive linguistics (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Johnson, 1987; Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff & Turner,

1989; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Kövecses, 2002, 2005; Lakoff, 2006). Within this branch, there is a cognitive device that has proved very fruitful in yielding results, namely, metaphor.

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Kövecses (2002), conceptual metaphors allow us to understand an abstract or inherently unstructured concept in terms of a more physical, more highly structured one. In other words, this more concrete concept is based on our experience of space and motion, and on the perception we have of the world as embodied beings. The theory of embodiment, which claims that our concepts and forms of reasoning arise mainly from our bodily structures and interaction with the environment, was developed by Johnson (1987) and Lakoff and Johnson (1999). However, it is important to stress that our concepts can go beyond our personal experience and also be acquired through communication with our peers (Ritchie, 2003).

A good way of representing this view of metaphor is the following: CONCEPTUAL DOMAIN (A) IS OR STANDS FOR CONCEPTUAL DOMAIN (B), which is what we call conceptual metaphor - as in the well-known example LIFE IS A JOURNEY (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). It consists of two conceptual domains (A and B), and the metaphor links one to the other. A conceptual domain is a coherent organization of experience. Thus, we have organized knowledge about journeys that we resort to when understanding life. Understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another implies that there is a tight mapping according to which entities in the domain of life correspond to entities in the domain of journeys. The mappings are not arbitrary but grounded in our experience of the world we live in, both physical and cultural (Kövecses, 2002; Cortés de los Rios, 2010; Herrera-Soler & White, 2012).

At this point, we need to distinguish conceptual metaphors from metaphorical linguistic expressions. When in a relationship we say we aren't going *anywhere*, we are using linguistic expressions that come from the more concrete conceptual domain "journey", to talk about the more abstract conceptual domain "life". The distinction is important because even though metaphors are a conceptual phenomenon - they do not occur in language - we have access to them through the linguistic expressions we use, which are a manifestation of the metaphor that operates in our minds. In the analysis section - in the same fashion as Charteris-Black (2011) - we will focus on the source domains chosen by President Obama (COMPETITION and

ECONOMICS) to convey information about the target domain: EDUCATION.

In the preceding lines, we have worked with a general definition of metaphor, as a process where a number of correspondences are mapped across two conceptual domains, involving some form of comparison; in other words, a process by which speakers/writers “talk about something in terms of something else” foregrounding some aspects of the phenomenon and downplaying others, as claimed by Semino (2008: 86). However, even though our view of metaphor is primarily based on the work by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), who place metaphors in the conceptual domain, in this paper we would like to go further by analyzing metaphors as part of language use or as events of discourse following scholars such as Semino (2008), Steen (2008, 2011) and Charteris-Blacks (2011). Thus, any word can be metaphorical depending on how it is used: when the meaning assigned is not the basic or common meaning of the word (as it appears in a dictionary), then it is being used metaphorically.

But how is metaphor interpreted in language use? The key aspect to be taken into account is whether metaphor has been used deliberately or not, which emphasizes the communicative dimension of metaphor (Steen, 2008). Thus, when conventional metaphors are deliberately used, they are “revitalized” (Steen, 2011), which means that they are recharged with their full metaphorical potential and processed metaphorically again. Therefore, in this new perspective, a metaphor does not only exhibit a linguistic form and a conceptual nature but a communicative purpose. In that case the addressee is invited to adopt a change of perspective - by looking at the target of the metaphor from the standpoint of another conceptual domain - as a discourse strategy implemented for persuasive reasons. Hence, this communicative aspect of metaphor will be key to analyzing metaphors as part of actual language use.

On the other hand, this different approach to metaphor places the device in a new light since the metaphorical meaning which a word or expression will convey is a potential meaning which, depending on language use, will or will not be activated. In other words, meaning is not accessed or retrieved from long-term memory, as claimed by the proponents of CMT, but rather it is created by how language is used (Gibbs, 2011). Along the same lines, Charteris-Black (2011) states that politicians - in trying to maximize their potential as communicators - tend to rely on conventional metaphors as they

contribute to sounding right, which suggest the deliberate nature of metaphors and their persuasive function. The shift in meaning from one sense to the other is what enables metaphors to trigger emotional responses and persuade readers into a way of thinking (and acting).

3. Texts and methodology

In this section we offer an overview of the different steps taken to address the methodological issues in this analysis. Firstly, we provide the criteria adopted to collect the texts which form our corpus, followed by the method used for metaphor identification and analysis.

3.1. Corpus

In order to make this analysis more manageable, taking into account that the topic of school reform has always attracted much media attention (Cossentino, 2004), we decided to focus on the State of the Union Addresses from 2009 to 2016, covering the whole period from the time President Obama took office to date. They are all available on the website provided in Appendix 1. The total corpus size, which will help us identify the source domains used by President Obama in his State of the Union Addresses when talking about education, is 53,947 words and spans a period of almost eight years (see Appendix 3).

Regarding the relevance of the State of the Union Addresses for this paper, they may be considered the most important presidential speeches of each legislative year. They are characterized by the following features: a wide audience, both the nation and members of Congress, and the policy proposals and programmatic priorities for the upcoming year (Shogan, 2015). Another interesting feature discussed by Campbell and Jamieson (2008) is that each State of the Union Address typically has a number of sequential arguments, which can be summarized in the following two ideas: reflection upon the current conditions of the US and identification of the issues which will constitute the President's legislative agenda. Besides, it should be pointed out that modern Presidents, as is the case of President Obama, have paid much attention to domestic policy (Cohen, 2012). Their concern to improve the educational situation in the US is a good illustration of this. Finally, as for the 2009 speech, it is important to highlight that strictly speaking it is not a State of the Union Address as he gave that initial speech

(like the previous five Presidents) when he had just been in office for a short time. However, for purposes of research, it is considered to be so by specialists since its audience, impact and influence are at the same level.

3.2. Methodology

Since one of the most frequent criticisms of CMT is the lack of explicit criteria for identifying what constitutes a metaphor when analyzing language in discourse (Gibbs, 2011), a group of scholars, known as the Pragglejazz Group (2007), developed the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) in order to reliably identify metaphorically used words in discourse in an explicit manner. Hence, our approach to the identification of metaphorical expressions is based on this method. Such procedure follows a number of steps:

1. Read the entire text-discourse to establish a general understanding of the meaning;
2. Determine the lexical units in the text-discourse;
- 3a. For each lexical unit in the text, establish both its contextual meaning and its more basic contemporary meaning;
- 3b. For each lexical meaning, determine if it has a more basic contemporary meaning in other contexts than the one in the given context;
4. If that is the case, mark the lexical unit as metaphorical.

As a result of completing the process set out above in each speech, a number of lexical items (the tokens of metaphor) were marked as metaphorical. So that the reader can know the lexical items which were identified in this manner, these lexical items will appear in italics, both in the examples found throughout the text and in Appendix 2. At this stage, it must be asserted that only those lexical items which were clear examples of a metaphor were included; the less clear examples were discarded.

4. Metaphor analysis: Source domains

After a close reading of the speeches, a total of 44 metaphors were identified in the corpus (53,947 words) - roughly one every 1,200 words. These

metaphors originate mostly from two common source domains: COMPETITION and ECONOMICS. For the sake of clarity, each of them will be treated separately, even though there is a clear intersection between both of them as will become clear.

As regards the source of competition, it is very closely linked to the domain of SPORTS, which is one of the most common source domains identified by scholars such as Semino (2008) and Charteris-Black (2011) when analyzing political discourse. It comes as no surprise that the concept of competition, a deeply-rooted experience in Western culture, is equally applied to the domain of EDUCATION. ECONOMY, on the other hand, arises as a source domain exploiting projections such as EDUCATION AS COMMODITY - which was already identified by Goatly (2007) - but adding new projections such as education as an investment. Further in this line of thought, the very President Obama declared, in a speech given at the University of Texas at Austin on August 9, 2010 that “education is the economic issue of our time”. Both domains have been chosen because the tokens of such metaphors are repeated frequently as will be seen in the analysis section. This means that they play a very important role in framing education. The exact number of times that each source domain was repeated in each speech can be consulted in Appendix 4.

Before analyzing the different source domains identified, it is important that we begin by referring to one ontological metaphor: education as an entity, frequently with a bounded area (a container) as it serves as a foundation metaphor to the discourse on education. Thus, this ontological metaphor will be pervasive in this type of discourse. This explains why in the speeches there are sentences such as “having *access* to world-class education” or “investing *in* education”, or “drop *out* rates”, where education is presented as an entity with an inside and an outside. Let us look now at the additional meanings which this entity may embrace when projected onto the source domains of COMPETITION or ECONOMICS.

4.1. Competition metaphor

According to scholars (Thompson, 1996; Charteris-Black, 2004), press reporters tend to draw metaphors from the familiar domain of SPORTS. The same can be said of political speeches, where one clear purpose is to involve the audience and arouse their emotions by relying on a domain of experience which, as stated by Semino (2008: 99), “can simplify the

complexities of politics”. Other scholars (Howe, 1988; Gibbs, 1994) have equally touched on the pervasiveness of the source domain of SPORTS among American politicians, clearly eliciting the cultural values of the community where such a domain is used. Accordingly, turning to sports, where the element of competition is obvious, seems to be a safe bet when trying to describe political issues.

The generic metaphor LIFE AS A COMPETITION (Charteris-Black, 2004, 2011; Al-Zahrani, 2008), which underlies the notion of struggle for survival of the fittest, provides a supporting skeleton for politicians, the media and their audience to reflect, talk and act upon it. That is to say, the story of competition, which will be central to our analysis, is a powerful frame to make sense of our daily life (Nerlich, 2004). Hence, life can be said to be a sort of competition where to survive and to thrive, both in the social and economic spheres, you have to compete with the others around you.

Following Charteris-Black (2004), this generic metaphor can be divided into more specific metaphors by resorting to the different domains of life, education as one of them. The metaphor then becomes EDUCATION IS COMPETITION. Elaborating on that idea, since the prototype for all kinds of competition is a physical competition (such as a race), it is hardly surprising that many of the examples we come across in the speeches account for the metaphor EDUCATION IS A (PHYSICAL) COMPETITION, mainly a race. In other words, entering a physical competition such as a race is a prototypical way of being engaged in competition. A perfect illustration of this type of thinking can be found in the words by the scholar Counts (1930: 60) when claiming:

There is no principle that is more characteristic of the American theory and mode of life and that has played a larger role in shaping the development of the American educational system than the principle of individual success. [...] To the Americans the world is an arena and life is a race.

In fact, beneath the rhetoric of many of the examples in this section, we find one of the most important clusters of conceptual metaphors grouped under the Event Structure Metaphor (Gibbs, 1994; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999), where the domain of events is conceptualized in terms of the domain of motion in space. This results in the metaphor ACTIVITY IS MOVEMENT FORWARD, which in turn branches out into other projections such as DEVELOPING/SUCCEEDING IS MOVING FORWARD, INTENSE

ACTIVITY IS SPEED or ACTIVITY/COMPETITION IS RACE (Goatly, 2007). An example of this competition metaphor can be found, for instance, in the following speech:

- (1) That's why instead of just pouring money into a system that's not working, we launched a competition called Race to the Top. To all 50 states, we said, "If you show us the most innovative plans to improve teacher quality and student achievement, we'll show you the money". (January 25, 2011)

The metaphor of racing others (race) implies the idea that contenders, in this case other states, must compete to be eligible for a grant, which will translate into additional federal dollars. Moreover, this race makes also explicit the destination of such movement, the Top or reaching the highest place, which stands for accomplishing an activity very successfully. The equation between speed and intense activity pushes individuals to move as quickly as possible creating in them the illusion of greater achievement. The issue of competition is consequently essential to the policies put forward by Obama, as can be seen in the naming of his first initiative *Race to the Top Program*.

When thinking of a race, as a type of competition for speed, we picture rivals starting from the same position, so that no advantage is given to any of them. If such were the case, the situation would be considered unfair for those at a disadvantage, since to win the race they would have to invest a greater amount of effort and energy than the others. This is precisely the creative projection being exploited in the speeches: there are a number of students, mainly referring to students at an early age, who start the race from behind. Of course this is an extension of the race metaphor, where the concept of race is again used differently from its basic meaning (a competition of speed) and is superimposed over the concept of students' life; thus, life can be said to have students who are either ahead or behind, which counts as another token of metaphor. The resulting implication of being behind is that those students are more likely to fail than the others who had a privileged starting point, as shown in the following statement:

- (2) So let's do what works and make sure none of our children start the *race* of life already *behind*. (February 12, 2013)

This metaphor, where education is perceived as a race with students competing against each other, is then used as the building block for a further

elaboration of the message, which takes us to a more abstract type of competition. Thus, from a physical scenario we move to a business one, where contenders are competing to be economically more powerful. Thus, education as a race becomes education as a business race. In this elaboration, we can see that the competition scenario applies equally to individuals and nations, considered as anthropomorphic entities. Students compete against other students in the same way as nations compete against other nations. Thus, education as a race and education as a business race become the main frame of reference in the discourse on education through its repeated use by politicians, particularly by President Obama. Such repetition promotes a sense of familiarity on the part of the audience which, in turn, awakens some degree of trust and lack of emotional tension. Therefore, the audience is encouraged into accepting naturally the frame they are exposed to.

- (3) This is a prescription for economic decline, because we know the countries that *out-teach* us today will *outcompete* us tomorrow. (February 24, 2009)

This example takes us back again to the ACTION IS MOVEMENT metaphor, as those countries with a higher standard of teaching than the USA will move forward more quickly, which represents interim success. However, for the success of this competition among nations to work, it is necessary to activate the pervasive metaphor in Western thinking A STATE IS A PERSON (Gibbs, 1994; Kövecses, 2002), which allows us to project over nations skills attributed to human beings, such as racing other countries. The speed in the race metaphorically refers to the quality of teaching, in such a way that the better the standard of teaching given to students, the more advanced as a country you will be in the race on a running track, as another token of metaphor:

- (4) The quality of our math and science education *lags behind* many other nations. (January 25, 2011)
- (5) America thrived in the 20th century because we made high school free, sent a generation of GIs to college, trained the best workforce in the world. We were *ahead*. But other countries *caught on*. (January 20, 2015)

At the core of the source domain under discussion (competition), we find the journey metaphor whose importance is well accounted for in the work of different scholars such as Semino (2008) or Charteris-Black (2011).

Indeed, it serves a very important purpose for politicians as it is widely used to conceptualize any type of purposeful activity as being engaged in a race. It builds on the previously mentioned metaphor **ACTIVITY IS MOVEMENT FORWARD** (Gibbs, 1994; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999).

4.2. Economics metaphor

It seems to be a fact that the discipline of economics provides a sound framework for addressing many critical educational issues faced by policymakers, as stated by Hanushek and Wößmann (2007). Some of those issues, such as vouchers, school management, education expenditures or making schools accountable to education outcomes have come to the fore over the last few years. However, this is not something new, but rather a line of thinking which has been pursued for decades. It means that the addressee is invited to look at the target of education from a different perspective, through the eyes of the domain of economics. In this new frame, there are a number of correspondences which are mapped between both domains and which are exploited by Obama in his speeches.

One correspondence that is projected through the use of this metaphor is education seen as an investment. Hence, in the public and compulsory levels of education, it becomes an activity where students commit resources, mostly their time - as money will be provided by the state - which needs to be accompanied by hard work in the hope of gaining some type of future benefit: a well-paying job, as the well-deserved prize for the person who is willing to put in all the effort needed for that future success. This is clearly implied by Obama when saying: “It’s a simple fact the more education you’ve got, the more likely you are to have a good job and work your way into the middle class” in the speech given on February 12, 2013 or “real opportunity requires every American to get the education and training they need to land a good-paying job” in the speech given on January 12, 2016. That is to say, education becomes a type of investment since everything is done with an eye on the future: great expectations are generated regarding both the type of job that will be open to students, and the income they will have access to as long as they work hard enough. However, education can also be seen as an excellent investment choice on the part of the government when investing money in students. This line of thinking can be found in some of the statements by Obama:

- (6) Every dollar we *invest in* high-quality early childhood education can save more than seven dollars later on - by boosting graduation rates, reducing teen pregnancy, even reducing violent crime. (February 12, 2013)

In this example we can see two metaphors. The first one, as mentioned above, touches on the issue that education is an investment, where the long-term benefits are: higher graduation rates, fewer teen pregnancies and less violent crime. The second one is the preposition “in”. Its basic meaning opens up the scenario for a container, but in the contextual meaning the preposition is applied not to a container but to an abstract concept, namely “high quality early childhood education”. Thus, this abstract concept is turned into a physical space.

Another correspondence which is exploited through the use of this metaphor is that education is treated as a commodity to be possessed (Giroux & Schmidt, 2004; Ball, 2007; Goatly, 2007), as an external object which can be obtained at a certain price to satisfy a certain need or even be sold later, in the same manner as we purchase or sell marketable items. That is to say, a great deal of emphasis is placed on having the financial means needed to bear the cost of education, as the more academic studies you do, the more expensive it becomes. For that reason, President Obama, fighting in the direction of making education accessible to all, claims that it should be made more affordable and not a luxury:

- (7) Higher education can't be *a luxury*. (January, 24, 2012)
- (8) We have to make college *affordable* for every American. (January 12, 2016)

As tuition fees continue to rise, college education is still out of reach for many families. However, the Obama administration affirms that higher education is in fact the “pathway to individual opportunity” and a necessity for “America’s competitiveness”. For that reason, they want to ensure that every student has access to “an affordable and high-quality postsecondary education” since their success in life will depend on their skills and education (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Since it is true that metaphors are illuminating not only by what is retained in the mapping between source and target, but by what is left out, we must turn our attention to what is left in the dark. Thus, education could also be seen as an enriching personal process where effort and hard work make sense not just from the standpoint of likely future success, but also because

of the present benefits of developing the potential of the mind as an individual task and as collaborative learning. However, collaborative learning seems to be left aside, since the competitive environment arising out of a marketing-based scenario appears to promote a more individual approach to learning issues.

5. Conclusions

The main purpose of this paper was to identify the main source domains used to talk about the target domain of education by the Obama administration. For the analysis, the data we collected and used were all the State of the Union Addresses given by President Obama (2009-2016).

Two source domains were chosen for analysis based on their high frequency. As for the domain of COMPETITION, it is interesting that it has a physical version EDUCATION IS A (PHYSICAL) COMPETITION, as when two or more contenders enter a race, and an abstract version EDUCATION IS A (BUSINESS) COMPETITION, as a metaphorical elaboration of the physical one, where the competition holds among nations. Regarding the domain of ECONOMICS, it makes sense because resources available to students (mostly money) are scarce, which gives way, in turn, to the competition frame.

The overarching idea giving structure to the whole discourse on education and permeating the other source domain is precisely the scenario of competition, which is a concept that triggers much emotional activity (De Landtsheer, 2009) and which has a high cultural salience in the USA (Kövecses, 2005). Thus, competition clearly underpins the domain of economics as education is portrayed as a skill to be attained through confrontation with other contenders since resources are limited.

The repetition of these source domains in the same speech and across speeches - operating as rhetorical devices which direct people's attention - helps in the establishment of coherence running between those texts (Semino, 2008) and in creating the intended meaning as the naturalized discourse on the topic. The fact that no new source domains apart from COMPETITION or ECONOMICS (very marketing-based) have been tried and tested proves that replacing conventional metaphors, at least in this type of discourse, appears to be a challenging task.

Let us now go back and analyze the guiding question that was stated at the beginning of the paper. Could conceptual metaphors reflect a certain ideological position on the part of politicians? The answer is a clear “yes”. Taking into account that metaphors are used to focus an audience’s attention on certain elements of a communicative situation while ignoring others (Semino, 2008; Charteris-Black, 2011), we can see in this paper that President Obama relies mostly on a traditional view of education by highlighting ideas such as those of “competition” (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ravitch, 2010).

Even though this competition scenario has been equally relied upon by the last five Presidents (Cuban, 2013) in order to address the so called crisis of American public education, the question remains whether, as advanced by other scholars (Miller & Fredericks, 1990; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Goatly, 2007; Lakoff & Wehling, 2012), alternative metaphors should be introduced to emphasize new aspects of education such as, for example, enhancing the importance of students’ role - focusing on their motivation to learn and their individual growth - or the fact that classmates can be seen as cooperators and not as competitors. Therefore, it matters greatly which metaphors are used because of the impact they can have on political action and on shaping the minds of politicians’ audiences.

Another interesting point to mention is that, in the light of the results shown in Appendix 4, the topic of education does not seem to play a very important role when an election year is on the horizon. Consequently, metaphors on education were less visible in 2012, which was the last year of President Obama’s first term in office, and this year, 2016, as it is the last year of his second and final term in office.

As a concluding remark, let us say that the unifying and communicative potential of Obama’s discourse on education relies on the repeated use of the story of competition, which everybody can easily relate to and which simplifies the complex flow of political events into very manageable terms. At the same time, this competition frame makes his rhetoric persuasive and compelling for Americans, and bestows authority to his discourse making it sound right.

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Appendix 1

Corpus Sources

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Appendix 2

Source domains found in Obama's State of the Union Addresses, 2009-2016

Source domain type

A) COMPETITION:

- 1) This is a prescription for economic decline, because we know the countries that *out-teach* us today will *out-compete* us tomorrow. (2009)

- 2) [...] by launching a national competition called *Race* to the *Top* to improve our schools. (2010)
- 3) But if we want to win the future [...] then we also have to win the *race* to educate our kids. (2011)
- 4) The quality of our math and science education *lags behind* many other nations. (2011)
- 5) That's why instead of just pouring money into a system that's not working, we launched a competition called *Race* to the *Top*. (2011)
- 6) *Race* to the *Top* is the most meaningful reform of our public schools in a generation. (2011)
- 7) And *Race* to the *Top* should be the approach we follow this year as we replace No Child Left Behind with a law that's fully... (2011)
- 8) Of course, the education *race* doesn't end with a high school diploma. (2011)
- 9) So let's do what works and make sure none of our children start the *race* of life already *behind*. (2013)
- 10) And four years ago, we started *Race* to the *Top* [...]. (2013)
- 11) *Race* to the *Top*, with the help of governors from both parties, has helped states raise expectations and performance. (2014)
- 12) [...], we'll invest in new partnerships with states and communities across the country in a *race* to the *top* for your youngest children. (2014)
- 13) America thrived in the 20th century because we made high school free, [...] We were *ahead of the curve*. But other countries *caught on*. (2015)
- 14) [...] so that two years of college becomes as free and universal in America as high school is today. Let's stay *ahead of the curve*. (2015)

B) ECONOMICS:

- 1) [...] where the most valuable skill you can *sell* is your knowledge [...]. (2009)
- 2) [...], we've made historic *investment in* education [...]. (2009)
- 3) We've made college *affordable* for nearly 7 million more students. (2009)
- 4) [...], we will make sure that you can *afford* a higher education. (2009)
- 5) To make college more *affordable*, [...]. (2010)
- 6) To compete, higher education must be *within the reach* of every American. (2011)
- 7) [...], and used the savings to make college *affordable* [...]. (2011)
- 8) Higher education can't be a *luxury*. (2012)
- 9) It is an economic imperative that every family in America should be able to *afford* [higher education]. (2012)
- 10) [...] skyrocketing costs price too many young people *out of* a higher education, [...]. (2013)
- 11) [...] we've made college more *affordable* [...]. (2013)
- 12) Every dollar we *invest in* high-quality early childhood education [...]. (2013)
- 13) [...], so that no middle-class kid is priced *out of* a college education. (2014)
- 14) [...] too many bright, striving Americans are priced *out of* the education they need. (2015)
- 15) We have to make college *affordable* for every American. (2016)

Appendix 3

Number of words per speech forming the final corpus

- 1) February 24, 2009: 6,176 words
- 2) January 27, 2010: 7,465 words
- 3) January 25, 2011: 7,036 words
- 4) January 24, 2012: 7,172 words
- 5) February 12, 2013: 6,945 words
- 6) January 28, 2014: 6,795 words
- 7) January 20, 2015: 6,893 words
- 8) January 12, 2016: 5,465 words

Appendix 4

Number of tokens of each source domain in each speech

	Nº tokens	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
COMPETITION	27	2	2	10	x	4	4	5	x
ECONOMICS	17	5	1	2	2	4	1	1	1

