On the role of metaphors in COVID-related political communication: an examination of Jacinda Ardern’s metaphorical language in managing the health crisis

Abstract: In comparison to many other countries across the world, New Zealand stands out as a positive example of successfully dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic during its first outbreak. A pivotal role in this has been attributed to Jacinda Ardern, New Zealand’s prime minister, who has been praised for her effective communication throughout the crisis and her capacity to connect empathetically to the people. The present study explores Ardern’s crisis discourse by focusing on her use of metaphors to talk about COVID-19, its transmission, and the measures adopted by the New Zealand government to contain its spread. This analysis, which adopts the framework of Critical Metaphor Theory, aims at disclosing which metaphors were used by Jacinda Ardern and whether there is anything exceptional in these metaphors and their usage that could relate to Ardern’s successful management of the health crisis in its initial phase. The data consists of eight post-Cabinet press conferences given by Ardern from the beginning of the outbreak at the end of February 2020 to the day when she declared that community transmission was over (27 April 2020).

Keywords: COVID-19; Jacinda Ardern; metaphor use; New Zealand; political discourse

1 Introduction

The outbreak of the infectious disease COVID-19 has posed a number of challenges across the world starting from its initial detection in January 2020. Since then, the entire world has mobilized and called upon the professional expertise of doctors, virologists, and epidemiologists in order to identify the most effective means and measures to cope with and overcome what had quickly turned into a pandemic. Relying on this knowledge, many legislators and politicians introduced policies that brought about new norms of social and individual behavior (from social distancing to hygiene measures) and, more generally, new ways of life that (temporarily) transformed one’s home into the “safest” retreat while conflating the professional and private spatial dimensions.

Managing such a global crisis has not been an easy task for anyone involved, but some among the people directly in charge of the situation seem to have (re)acted more effectively. Jacinda Ardern, New Zealand’s former prime minister, stands out as a positive example and one that has been acclaimed internationally at the beginning of the health crisis. As a political leader, she has been considered exceptional in her initial approach to the health emergency in New Zealand (NZ). Previous research has identified that Ardern has been able to combine strong and decisive action1 with an empathetic and caring attitude (see Degani 2022; Jamieson 2020; McGuire et al. 2020; Wilson 2020), which might explain part of her impact on and appreciation by NZ citizens. New Zealanders’ very

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1 To provide a brief illustration of Ardern’s “strong” approach, one can consider that the first substantial restrictions (e.g. people have to work from home, gatherings of more than 10 people are prohibited, public venues are closed, interregional travel is highly limited) were introduced on 23 March 2020, with about 50 confirmed cases of infection in NZ. For an outline of the strict measures adopted by the NZ government from 30 January 2020 to 9 June 2020 consult Jamieson (2020: 599–600).
high level of compliance\(^2\) with the imposed severe restrictions and regulations since the beginning of the health crisis in March 2020 (Cooke 2020; Coughlan 2020) might indeed be interpreted as an outcome of Ardern’s powerful combination of authority and compassion.

While Ardern’s capacities to act as a competent leader, or even a model or source of inspiration for other countries facing crises, have already been emphasized, little attention has been devoted to the peculiarities of her language use. Previous research (Degani 2022) has illustrated the range of rhetorical and discursive strategies employed by Ardern at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic to engage her citizens in cooperative and communal efforts against the virus. The current study intends to explore another facet of Ardern’s crisis discourse by focusing on her use of metaphors to talk about COVID-19, its transmission, and the measures adopted by the NZ government to contain its spread. Considering the metaphors in a data set of Ardern’s speeches during the early COVID-19 pandemic in NZ, the study addresses the following research questions: (1) which metaphors were used by Jacinda Ardern in the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic?; and (2) is there anything exceptional in these metaphors and their usage that could explain Ardern’s successful management of the health crisis in its initial phase?

\(2\) Data and methods

The texts analyzed in this study consist of eight post-Cabinet press conferences held during a period of two months, from the end of February 2020 (the first outbreak of the virus in NZ) to the end of April 2020 (community transmission declared over). The transcripts amount to a total of 49,087 words with an average length of 6,135.9 words per text. The source of the data was the official website of the NZ government (https://www.beehive.govt.nz), from which the texts were freely downloaded. In these press conferences, Ardern informed the public and the media about political joint decisions that would motivate domestic policies, particularly in relation to COVID-19 management.

The time span selected for the analysis is important for two distinct reasons: it corresponds to the initial phase of successfully coping with COVID-19 in NZ, and it allows the analysis of discourse that back then was still very new for everyone. In this way, the possibility of investigating virus-related metaphors that might have already become entrenched in political discourse about COVID-19 worldwide is minimized. As is known, metaphors used in the public sphere circulate very rapidly and can be picked up easily by other users.

The study shares the theoretical approach of Critical Metaphor Analysis (Charteris-Black 2004, 2005; Musolff 2016; Semino 2008) since metaphors are conceived not only as conceptual in nature, but also in their pragmatic and sociocultural/historical dimensions as deliberate tools of political communication, which can be ideologically motivated and are also affected by values rooted in cultural and historical knowledge.

All texts were closely read and metaphors were extracted manually adopting a bottom-up method (Cameron and Deignan 2003). In line with a three-dimensional approach to the study of metaphors as conceptual, linguistic, and communicative tools (see Musolff 2016; Steen 2011), the metaphorical analysis was conducted on three levels: metaphor identification, interpretation, and explanation. First, metaphorical linguistic expressions used to talk about the virus, its spread, and the measures adopted by the NZ government were identified in the texts following the well-established Metaphor Identification Procedure (Pragglejaz Group 2007). As a second step, conceptual metaphors were postulated for each of the metaphorical expressions.

In cases where one metaphorical linguistic expression could be taken as potentially expressive of more than one conceptual metaphor (e.g. the virus has overwhelmed, interpreted as either THE VIRUS IS A FORCE or THE VIRUS IS AN ENEMY), the selection of metaphor was guided by co-text. In this study, the notion of co-text refers to the paragraph in which the metaphorical expression occurs as well as its immediate vicinity (the preceding and following

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\(^2\) Public opinion polls in March and April 2020 recorded more than 80 % support for governmental action, including the lockdown (see, e.g., Cooke 2020; Manhire 2020). Furthermore, as reported in Jamieson (2020: 602), “beyond supporting lockdown measures, … New Zealanders also complied with them. By April 17, the data suggested reductions of 90 % in retail and recreation, 81 % in parks, 87 % in transit situations, and 72 % in workplaces compared with the baseline.”
paragraphs). This means that in ambiguous cases the framing of the co-text was taken as a criterion for metaphor interpretation. Thus, for example, if the co-text of the metaphorical expression the virus has overwhelmed was framed according to a war scenario, that expression was classified as an instance of the metaphor the virus is an enemy (instead of the virus is a force). Furthermore, in order to guarantee coherence in the metaphorical interpretation, multiple occurrences of the same metaphorical expression within one speech were interpreted as giving rise to the same conceptual metaphor. This is also in line with the idea that within a speech the repetition of lexical choices that can be seen as fitting one specific scenario (e.g. overwhelm as an expression of the war scenario) is more likely to evoke the same scenario than a different one. As a third and final step in the analysis, the identified metaphors were discussed, also in relation to main findings from previous literature on COVID-19 metaphors. This latter type of analysis (see Section 4) provides insight into whether Ardern's metaphors are special and might have contributed to her ability to reach out effectively to NZ's population.

3 Analysis of metaphors

Infectious diseases like COVID-19 are complex and abstract phenomena, which lie beyond our intuitive phenomenological capacities to conceptualize the world. As such, diseases and epidemics need to be talked about in terms of concrete entities in order to become more graspable. Metaphors can perform this important function of fostering our understanding of abstract concepts and have indeed already been used in the past to describe multiple sicknesses including different varieties of flu (Spanish/avian/swine), Ebola, AIDS, SARS, and cancer (see, e.g., Craig 2020; Seixas 2021; Semino 2021). Metaphors, however, are anything but a neutral means of communication (cf., e.g., Mitchell [2012] for an interdisciplinary study on metaphors of contagion). As Sontag pointed out in her seminal work (1978), the different metaphors that have been used to talk about tuberculosis and cancer in medicine, psychiatry, and literature have mythicized the sicknesses and led to falsified perceptions and evaluations of the actual medical conditions and of the ill (e.g. a person dying with tuberculosis seen as a romantic personality and a person with cancer seen as culpable). Metaphors simultaneously "hide and highlight" (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), and their perspectival qualities can contribute to the spread of certain framings of reality. This is particularly noticeable when metaphors are employed in public contexts by leaders and representatives of society such as politicians and when metaphors circulate and get popularized through the media. This, in turn, can have effects and consequences on policymaking. For instance, Spencer (2012: 399) notes that "metaphors … open up a space for policy possibilities" and highlights how specific metaphorical constructions of terrorism in the media make certain counterterrorism policies appear both logical and appropriate while discouraging others (e.g. if terrorism is described through war metaphors, a military response is incentivized while negotiations and engagement are considered inappropriate). Metaphorical language use, media discourse, and policy are indeed intertwined in complex ways. As illustrated by Larson et al. (2005), the avoidance of war metaphors in the UK coverage of SARS can be seen as resulting from a political and scientific discourse which framed the disease as a problem of control rather than a matter of defeat. The reluctance in using militaristic metaphors was also affected by the media need to differentiate news coverage at a time when the literal war in Iraq featured prominently. Furthermore, the absence of war metaphors was related to the government wish to avoid panic, particularly in view of the scientists’ pessimistic assessment for treating and containing the disease. All of this makes an investigation of metaphorical usage in relation to COVID-19 worth pursuing, especially when it comes to shedding some light on NZ’s “success story” in dealing with the health crisis.

3.1 Results

The analysis of Ardern’s discourse focused on the identification and interpretation of the metaphors she used to talk about three different aspects relating to COVID-19: (1) the virus, (2) its transmission, and (3) the measures to contain its spread. The quantitative results of this metaphorical analysis are reported in Tables 1–3, respectively. Each table provides: (a) a list of the identified conceptual metaphors, (b) a representative example of a
metaphorical linguistic expression corresponding to each conceptual metaphor, (c) information about the frequency of occurrence of each conceptual metaphor, and (d) details about the distribution of individual metaphors across the analyzed texts (i.e. in how many texts out of a total of eight the metaphor was found).

As the numbers in Table 1 indicate, the virus is chiefly portrayed in terms of a metaphorical enemy (THE VIRUS IS AN ENEMY), functioning as an expression of a more general WAR scenario that conspicuously frames Ardern’s discourse about COVID-19. The relevance of this metaphorical depiction is illustrated not just by its overall frequency. It is indeed noteworthy to observe that the conceptual metaphor is encoded in a wide range of different lexicalizations (e.g. **aftermath**, **stamp out**, **battle**, **explosion**), as signaled by the type/token ratio (types: 23, tokens: 47). Furthermore, the fact that different aspects of the WAR scenario are evoked in the texts suggests a high degree of metaphorical elaboration. These diverse facets include the following:

- the fight as such (**fight**, **fighting chance**, **battle**)
- strategies for competing (**get ahead**, **take hold**)
- actions against the enemy (**stamp out**, **stare down**, **eliminate**, **pounce**, **shut down**)
- use of arms (**weapon**, **explosion**)
- positions in the battle field (**at/on the front line**, **frontline (health) workers, on all fronts**)
- perception of the enemy (**threat**, **rearing its head**)
- consequences of the fight (**aftermath**, **damage**, **devastating impacts**, **overwhelmed**)
- positive outcomes of the fight (**the gains**)
- avoidance strategies (**have escaped**)

### Table 1: Metaphorizations of the virus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metaphor</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Frequency (types/tokens)</th>
<th>In how many texts (of 8)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>THE VIRUS IS AN ENEMY (WAR SCENARIO)</td>
<td>the fight against Covid-19</td>
<td>23/47</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE VIRUS IS A MOVING ENTITY/AGENT</td>
<td>slow the virus down</td>
<td>10/22</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE VIRUS IS A FORCE</td>
<td>workers and businesses that are being impacted (by the virus)</td>
<td>2/20</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE VIRUS IS A FLOOD</td>
<td>from a tidal wave to small waves</td>
<td>2/7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE VIRUS IS FIRE (DANGER IS HEAT)</td>
<td>smouldering ashes</td>
<td>4/4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE VIRUS IS A BAD WEATHER CONDITION</td>
<td>this short-term storm of Covid-19</td>
<td>2/3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Types* here refer to the linguistic expressions of the conceptual metaphor.

### Table 2: Metaphorizations of the spread of the virus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metaphor</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Frequency (types/tokens)</th>
<th>In how many texts (of 8)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TRANSMISSION OF THE VIRUS IS A CHAIN</td>
<td>to break the chain of community transmission</td>
<td>1/2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROGRESS OF THE DISEASE IS FAST MOTION</td>
<td>the clock starts running and counting down as soon as you feel sick</td>
<td>1/1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS</td>
<td>herd immunity</td>
<td>1/4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3: Metaphorizations of measures to contain the virus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metaphor</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Frequency (types/tokens)</th>
<th>In how many texts (of 8)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DEGREES OF EMERGENCY ARE FLOORS IN A BUILDING + INCREASE IS UP</td>
<td>level(s) 2/3/4</td>
<td>4/60</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROTECTION FROM THE VIRUS IS CONFINEMENT</td>
<td>lockdown</td>
<td>1/50</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OVERCOMING THE VIRUS IS A JOURNEY</td>
<td>it is about moving with certainty</td>
<td>7/15</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISOLATION IS BEING IN A BUBBLE</td>
<td>so stick to your bubble</td>
<td>1/14</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NZ CITIZENS ARE PLAYERS IN A SPORTS TEAM</td>
<td>our team of 5 million</td>
<td>2/7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In Ardern’s words, facing the virus is like being at war since COVID-19 is portrayed as an invisible enemy (also a threatening evil) which advances, occupies new territory, takes control, and causes damage. Accordingly, an important goal of the government is to take over, defeat, and eventually destroy this adversary.

Less frequently, Ardern relies on additional non-belligerent metaphors to talk about the virus. She refers metaphorically to COVID-19 in terms of a moving entity, a force, a flood, a bad weather condition, and a fire. While it is true that the use of these metaphors is expressive of Ardern’s alternative framings of the virus, data indicate that these other metaphors rely on either conventional linguistic expressions or a limited set of lexicalizations, which can be expected to reduce their actual impact. Thus, the metaphor of the virus is a moving entity/agent, which is relatively frequent and occurs in six out of eight texts, is based on conventional metaphorical expressions such as slow down, limit, contain, stop, and move. On a related note, the virus is a force metaphor is transmitted almost exclusively through the use of the term impact in its verbal and nominal senses (19 out of 20 total occurrences). As a metaphorical force, Ardern describes the virus as having had an impact on NZ businesses, employees, workers, and the global economy more generally. Very similarly, the metaphor of the virus is a flood basically relies on one single conventional expression, wave (six out of seven occurrences), which is variably pre/post-modified (tidal, small, manageable, second, of devastation). The most notable example of this metaphor is possibly the one reported in Table 1 (from a tidal wave to small waves) since it cogently renders the idea that one important aim of the government is to reduce the size (i.e. the effects) of the virus, while at the same time creating connections to the local experiences of New Zealanders with the ocean. Ardern also depicts the virus as a bad weather condition that New Zealanders need to withstand. This metaphor (the virus is a bad weather condition) is communicated through the word storm. Lastly, the metaphor of the virus is fire was only found in a stretch of reported speech in which the prime minister quoted a microbiologist. Its entailed metaphor, danger is heat, is only used in relation to the term hotspot.

As Table 2 illustrates, the metaphors used to talk about the spread of the virus are few and far between and overall just occur in three texts. In line with the metaphor transmission of the virus is a chain, the spread of the virus is visually rendered through the image of a chain that becomes longer. Ardern suggests people should break this metaphorical chain in order to stop the transmission of the virus. The metaphor progress of the disease is fast motion captures the effects of the virus once it enters a human body and the affected person experiences the developing sickness. Ardern also relies on the common metaphor people are animals to refer to the immunization effects (of the virus, while at the same time creating connections to the local experiences of New Zealanders with the ocean. Ardern also depicts the virus as a bad weather condition that New Zealanders need to withstand. This metaphor (the virus is a bad weather condition) is communicated through the word storm. Lastly, the metaphor of the virus is fire was only found in a stretch of reported speech in which the prime minister quoted a microbiologist. Its entailed metaphor, danger is heat, is only used in relation to the term hotspot.

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In relation to the measures adopted by the NZ government to contain the spread of the virus, Ardern uses the range of metaphors that are reported in Table 3. In this case, two metaphors are particularly frequent. The first is actually a mixture of two metaphors: degrees of emergency are floors in a building + increase is up. The other one is protection from the virus is confinement. Both metaphors are used consistently across all texts and without any lexical variation. The prime minister only talks about the perceived extent of the health emergency by using the term level(s) followed by a number from 2 to 4. Similarly, the notion of protection as confinement is conveyed exclusively through the well-known expression lockdown. The idea of isolation, however, is also rendered metaphorically through the use of a different image, that of a bubble, which will be discussed in more detail in Section 4. The overcoming the virus is a journey metaphor is based on a range of conventional expressions about motion along a path (e.g. go backwards, move forward, get back) and it is used to describe: (a) the general progress (or lack thereof) towards overcoming the virus and eventually getting rid of it (the metaphorical destination) and (b) motion across the different levels of the introduced emergency system (i.e. the alert level system). In this metaphorical context, the trajectory of the journey is defined according to two axes: front-back and up-down. The front-back orientation stands for progress (motion forward) or regress (motion backwards) in overcoming the virus. The up-down orientation indicates possible trajectories of motion to either higher or lower levels of emergency, as coded by the numbers (1–4, where 1 stands for the lowest state of emergency). Lastly, the NZ citizens are players in a sports team metaphor, though the least frequent in this group, appears as distinctive since it connects to some of NZ cultural habits and values, as explained in Section 4.
4 Discussion of the main findings

After having illustrated the different COVID-19 metaphors used by Ardern at the beginning of the pandemic, Section 4 intends to discuss the findings in view of the research questions: (1) which metaphors are used?; and (2) are these metaphors exceptional?

As the data have shown, Ardern relies most of all on a war scenario to talk about COVID-19 in terms of an (invisible) enemy to be eliminated. This kind of militaristic framing is neither novel nor unique to the former NZ prime minister. Starting from the 1970s, US politicians have declared war on a wide range of problematic issues, including drugs, poverty, crime, inflation, and cancer, and the “war on x” frame has become ubiquitous in public discourse (see Flusberg et al. 2018). In the context of COVID-19, one significant point of convergence in the linguistic literature that has been published in the last three years (e.g. Chapman and De Mond 2020; Hanne 2022; Musolff et al. 2022; Rajandran 2020; Seixas 2021; Semino 2021) is that politicians all across the world have relied consistently on the war domain to describe the virus. To give just a few examples, Boris Johnson announced a “battle plan” against COVID-19, Donald Trump declared that he was “a wartime President”, Xi Jinping promised “a people’s war” against the epidemic, Emmanuel Macron said that his nation was “at war” with an invisible enemy, and Giuseppe Conti sought to build “alliances” with other political leaders (Hanne 2022: 90). Valid reasons can actually motivate the strategic use of war metaphors in political discourse on COVID-19 worldwide. These metaphors capture attention, provoke emotional responses which can affect people’s thought and behavior by increasing feelings of urgency and risk, and convey the need to form and sustain a united front (see Flusberg et al. 2017). Much emphasis has also been put on the disadvantages of using militaristic metaphors in relation to the virus (e.g., Hanne 2022; Panzera et al. 2021; Sabucedo et al. 2020; Wicke and Bolognesi 2020). This practice has been criticized for multiple reasons since it has been described as: inherently negative; masculine and patriarchal; normalizing and neutralizing actual war; enabling unscrupulous leaders to augment their power; provoking or legitimizing xenophobia; fostering nationalist, rather than internationalist, approaches; and misleading in suggesting that a total “victory” would be possible and the virus would be eventually “defeated”. This criticism has also given rise to proposals for alternative framings of COVID-19 (cf. Nerlich 2020; Semino 2020) which rely on the source domains of fire, flood, storm, and journey and do not share the type of negative semantic valence characterizing war.

In view of the fact that most (if not all) of the international politicians using war metaphors have not performed so brilliantly in dealing with the pandemic, the question arises of what might have been different in the NZ context. It was certainly not the war metaphor in itself that contributed to Ardern’s effective management of the health crisis. As other leaders also did, the former NZ prime minister depicted the virus as an enemy and framed the crisis as a war. This kind of metaphorical portrayal of COVID-19 in NZ as elsewhere served the purpose of communicating urgency and inciting mobilization. In the case of NZ, however, this framing was beneficial to governmental policies since war metaphors were coherent with and supported the early introduction of strong measures. Furthermore, through the use of war metaphors, Ardern could offer people the prospect of winning the fight through collective and concerted action. In this respect, the metaphorical framing was used to foster unity and promote resilience. Not less importantly, this metaphorical depiction supported Ardern’s discursive moves aimed at showing empathy and compassion for all New Zealanders (fight the virus, save lives, and save livelihoods).

Among all the identified COVID-related metaphors used by Ardern, two stick out because of their special relation to the NZ context: isolation is being in a bubble and NZ citizens are players in a sports team. The peculiarity of the bubble metaphor has to do first of all with its coinage since it emerged as a NZ creation right at the start of the health crisis. As Kearns (2021) explains, the metaphor was initially elaborated by Dr. Tristram, Professor in Medicine at the University of Otago, with the aim of making public health messages “simple and empowering so that people can have some sense of control” (Kearns 2021: 327). The metaphor must have appeared particularly attractive since it was taken on immediately by Ardern and started being used by the NZ government more widely. New Zealanders were urged to quickly identify their own “bubble” and stick to it. Infringements of this
rule were allegedly punished with severity. This captivating metaphor basically refers to the social space within which families should isolate themselves, “bubbles are the people that you’re living with” (Ardern, 30 March 2020). The NZ government identified three types of bubbles: regular bubbles (household units), extended bubbles (could include nearby relatives), and single-person bubbles for people living alone. Even though the bubble metaphor in the end could not deliver as much as it promised (see Trnka and Davies 2020), the flexibility of the bubble as a concept remains undeniable. As alluded to in Kearns (2021) and Trnka and Davies (2020), the bubble metaphor is a very good candidate for describing isolation because it is adaptable and serviceable. The actual advantages of the metaphor are connected to the multiple attributes of real bubbles. Since bubbles represent enclosed spaces, they can portray the concept of isolation very well. The fact that they have variable sizes make them particularly fitting for describing different households. Since bubbles move across space, they can render the idea that performing your everyday activities with your family is possible. The transparency of bubbles is useful for transmitting the idea that, though in isolation, you can still see and look at the world outside. The fragility of a bubble indicates that people need to be careful in avoiding metaphorical collisions with other groups of people, which could put someone at risk. Finally, there is a certain lightness and playfulness in this metaphor since it connects to a fun activity. Given the outlined intrinsic beneficial properties of the bubble metaphor, other politicians tried to imitate Ardern’s discourse (cf. Neagu 2022), which made the bubble metaphor migrate to other English-speaking countries, the most remarkable example being probably that of the UK. However, as pointed out by Neagu (2022), there is a basic difference in the use of the bubble metaphor in NZ and the UK since Ardern made the metaphor coincide with an early introduction of severe restrictions, including lockdown, whereas Johnson started using the metaphor at a later stage when the lockdown was eased.

Another interesting metaphor used by Ardern is NZ CITIZENS ARE PLAYERS IN A SPORTS TEAM. In their discussion of sports metaphors, Flusberg et al. (2018: 5) point out that these metaphors “are often linked to a salient structure like the value of teamwork to achieve a common goal”. They also observe that sports metaphors have “cultural resonance” (2018: 5). What makes Ardern’s sports metaphor somewhat special is its cultural rootedness (see Kearns 2021; Hafner and Sun 2021) since it connects to the spirit of NZ as a sportive nation, especially in relation to the All Blacks, the NZ rugby team that has received international acclaim. The metaphor is part of a SPORTS GAME scenario whose different facets are highlighted by the prime minister. These aspects include: the playing field (i.e. the social space of the nation), the role of the coach leading the sports team (we will play the role of enforcer), the tactics (here, an assertive style of play, going hard and early), the rules (with an emphasis on fairness, everyone plays their part) and the values of unity and membership (our team of 5 million, with reference to an approximate size of the nation’s population). This metaphor can be expected to have resonated well with New Zealanders, thus encouraging loyalty to both the nation and one another and stimulating commitment to the purpose of eradicating COVID-19.

5 Conclusion

This paper intended to explore the range of metaphors used by Ardern during the first COVID-19 outbreak (research question 1) and their potential exceptionality (research question 2) against the background of NZ having been seen as successfully managing the first phase of the pandemic. The metaphorical analysis has shown that most of Ardern’s conceptual metaphors are conventional and the linguistic encodings of many of them display a limited amount of lexical variation. This first finding indicates that Ardern’s metaphorical rhetoric relies on expressions that are well known and widespread.

A second finding concerns her use of military metaphors. Like many other politicians across the globe, Ardern relied on the WAR scenario and described the virus as an enemy to be eliminated. Some important differences, however, need to be pointed out. Since the very beginning, Ardern also relied on other domains (FLOOD, BAD WEATHER CONDITION, and FIRE), which have been described as potentially better “alternatives” in the literature on COVID-19 (cf. Nerlich 2020; Semino 2020) and were only introduced later by politicians worldwide. Moreover, Ardern used a WAR scenario, which is generally apt in attracting attention, as an initial call for engagement against the virus, and she coupled her metaphorical verbal expressions with coherent government
action. The military metaphors that were employed in the early phase of the pandemic were accompanied by the introduction of strong measures and severe regulation.\(^3\)

The last major finding concerns Ardern’s use of two specific metaphors, **isolation is being in a bubble and NZ citizens are players in a sports team**, which have a special connection to the NZ context. The bubble metaphor, which was coined and first used in NZ, indicates a more unusual and creative metaphorical engagement in comparison to metaphors pertaining to the **war** scenario. Due to its imaginative associations, the bubble metaphor might indeed have facilitated compliance with the early introduced social isolation measures. The sports team metaphor is in line with important cultural habits in NZ and evokes a domain that is highly valued in the country. For this reason, the metaphor might have supported Ardern’s appeals to unity (“unite against Covid-19” as the NZ government motto) by inspiring collective action in line with the strong communitarian values of the nation (cf. McGuire et al. 2020).

**References**


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3 As hinted at by a reviewer, the use of war metaphors at a later stage of the health crisis might have been less effective in framing action against the spread of the virus. After all, New Zealanders eventually became critical of the strict measures put in place. Ardern’s unexcepted resignation (announced on 19 January 2023) has also been interpreted by some commentators in light of this late criticism of her crisis management.


