
6-30-2000

Trends. Mixed Messages and Mixed Metaphors: 21st Century Political Discourse

IBPP Editor
bloomr@erau.edu

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Recommended Citation

Editor, IBPP (2000) "Trends. Mixed Messages and Mixed Metaphors: 21st Century Political Discourse," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*. Vol. 8 : Iss. 22 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol8/iss22/3>

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Title: Trends. Mixed Messages and Mixed Metaphors: 21st Century Political Discourse

Author: Editor

Volume: 8

Issue: 22

Date: 2000-06-30

Keywords: Metaphor, Political Communication

A common observation about effective communication is that the metaphor can be a powerful rhetorical device both for imparting meaning and for persuasion--especially to large audiences in the political arena. Another common observation is that the mixed metaphor impedes meaning and persuasion.

These observations may already have been problematic, but politics in the 21st century may completely overturn them. This is because the increasing contacts among disparate concepts, constructs, behaviors and, ultimately, phenomenologies throughout the globe may render mixed metaphor more likely. In turn, the probability of accepting the power of mixed metaphor may also increase.

The essence of mixed metaphor's power resides in the lack of complete correspondence between (on the one hand) an idea to be communicated and engaged in for persuasion and (on the other hand) the nature of the imagery employed for these purposes. Given this lack of correspondence, one should note that reason, observation, and experimentation all suggest situations in which either unmixed or mixed metaphors may be optimal. In fact, all metaphor is, in essence, mixed in that there is a lack of correspondence between the metaphor and that to which it refers. In addition, the mixed metaphor may more closely capture the power of an idea by implicitly noting that the unmixed metaphor is not powerful enough to capture that idea's novelty, salience, and, indeed, its own power. Finally, the mixed metaphor may possess an added sense of what may be termed phenomenological realism, in that people may well think in such a mixed fashion--in dealing both with the common and uncommon.

As mixed metaphor becomes more acceptable and its power more commonly recognized, there will be political winners and losers. Both empowerment and exploitation will be furthered dependent on the intentions of political leaders and the expectations of their followers. (See Blasko, D. G. (1999). Only the tip of the iceberg: Who understands what about metaphor? *Journal of Pragmatics*, 31, 1675-1683; Kitis, E., & Milapides, M. (1997). Read it and believe it: How metaphor constructs ideology in news discourse. A case study. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 28, 557-590; Mio, J.S. (1997). Metaphor and politics. *Metaphor and Symbol*, 12, 113-133; Ottati, V., Rhoads, S., & Graesser, A. C. (1999). The effect of metaphor on processing style in a persuasion task: A motivational resonance model. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 77, 688-697; Shen, Y., & Balaban, N. (1999). Metaphorical (in) coherence in discourse. *Discourse Processes*, 28, 139-153.) (Keywords: Metaphor, Political Communication.)