

Metaphorical Profile of Keir Starmer in His Key Public Speeches

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Abstract

The article examines the metaphorical profile of the current UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer in his key speeches, aiming to reveal his communication strategies and persuasive power. The methodology used combines MIVPU, CMA, and CDA, which reflect a qualitative approach supported by descriptive statistics. The analysis revealed five dominant metaphorical domains with a consistent intensity of 26-30 metaphors per 1000 words across four speeches. These frameworks legitimise Labour as a pragmatic and responsible alternative to delegitimised Conservative discourse through metaphors of decay and performance.

<https://doi.org/10.53465/JAP.2025.9788022552806.382-393>

Keywords: conceptual metaphor, critical metaphor analysis, critical discourse analysis, political identity.

Introduction

Metaphor represents one of the most significant means through which social reality is constructed in political discourse. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that metaphorical conceptualisations are not just decorative aspects of language, but form the core of our cognitive structure and frame the ways how we perceive the world. In political communication, metaphors allow persuasive frames, that shape public opinion and legitimise political decisions (Charteris-Black, 2011). Particular attention in this context is given to the Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA), which, according to Charteris-Black (2004), connects linguistic procedures of metaphorical identification with critical examination of their ideological functions. This approach draws on the methodological impulses of quantitative linguistics and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2010), which allow it to unveil how metaphorical frames support the construction of the identities of political actors, as well as their stance towards the opposition of voters

(Musolff, 2017). The political speeches of Keir Starmer, the current leader of the Labour Party and the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom since 2024, provide suitable material for examining this phenomenon. Starmer consistently uses metaphors to frame his political identity as a reformer, responsible manager, and fighter against injustice. Considering the turbulent context following Brexit and the Labour Party's efforts to regain public trust, his rhetorical strategy, centred on metaphorical themes of reconstruction, navigating crises, or fairness, is notably significant.

The aim of this article is to identify, analyse and interpret the metaphors in four Starmer's key speeches (2024-2025). The analysis is based on methodological processes of MIVPU (Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije Universiteit) (Steen et al., 2010) followed by CMA frames and CDA. The result of the research is systematic mapping of metaphorical domains, their frequencies, ideological functions and their roles by construction of Starmer's political identity.

Literature review

Metaphors play a vital role in politicians' rhetoric because they facilitate the transition of complex political issues into familiar, easily understandable expressions, making their targets and policies clearer for the general public. Metaphors such as "politics is war" or "nation is family" help translate abstract goals into specific images, clarifying the politicians' aims and the perception they wish to create among the public (Feng & Wang, 2020; Lapka, 2021; Anber, 2023; Chachbane & Zrizi, 2023). Such framing can emphasise intensification, unity, or conflict depending on the politician's aims.

Politicians employ metaphors as persuasive tools to evoke emotions, influence public opinion, and garner support for their visions and goals. Metaphors of war can rally people to collective action or justify aggressive policies, while metaphors of travel can inspire hope and a sense of progress (Lapka, 2021; Chachbane & Zrizi, 2023; Akintayo & Olatokunbo, 2024). Metaphors aid in constructing a positive self-image for politicians or a negative portrait of their opponents, aligning with their strategic aims (Guo, 2025; Musolff, 2017).

The use of metaphors can reinforce a politician's ideological stance and leadership style. By purposely selecting specific metaphors, politicians reflect their values of power, protection, inclusion, etc., and connect to particular narratives (e.g., "the protector of the nation", "a mentor on the path")

(Rendell & Yerbury, 2020). This helps to build coherent political identity and to establish contact with target groups of voters.

Drawing on papers analysing Starmer's rhetoric style, his choice of language chiefly utilises stability, managerial competence and a departure from ideological extremes. His frequent use of metaphor "rock of stability" aims to form an image of strong leadership and distinguish himself from his predecessor and a long-term conservative leadership. Bonnet (2025) claims, that he uses it to present the Labour Party as trustworthy, inclusive alternative. This metaphorical framing signals a shift from radical change towards a calm and responsible attitude. Johnson et al. (2024) points out that the choice of metaphorical frames supporting a technocratic orientation, based on adhering to legitimacy and compliance with procedures, strengthens his managerial, administrative style of governance. Keir Starmer is described as forensic, drawing on his law experience, framing his political debates as questions of proof, control, and competence (Johnson et al., 2024). His style does not focus on emotions or populist appeals; rather, it emphasises reliability, professionalism, and a steady hand representing qualities to rebrand the Labour Party's image as a party of dependable governance (Thomson et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2024; Bonnet, 2025). Starmer's metaphors reflect a political ideology rooted in pragmatism and order, based on rules, with a leadership style characterised by managerialism and stability.

Methodology

The research aimed to analyse four significant speeches by Keir Starmer within the period from July 2024 to May 2025: Fixing the Foundations (S1), Labour Party conference speech (S2), First speech as Prime Minister (S3), and Immigration White Paper remarks (S4). The total corpus comprised 9,965 words (S1=2,298 words, S2=5,751 words, S3=738 words, S4=1,219 words). The selection of the corpus was motivated by key milestones in the current Prime Minister's career, including the inaugural speech, programme speech, party conference, and the presentation of the principal political document on migration.

The metaphorical identification adhered to the Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije Universiteit (MIVPU) (Steen et al., 2010). The process involved four steps, each requiring separate analysis of each lexical unit: 1. the basic lexical meaning was defined based on the Cambridge online dictionary regardless of context, 2. the meaning was defined based on the context within a sentence, 3. a comparison of the two defined meanings was

made to identify contrasts and facilitate mapping between two domains, 4. when a contrast was identified, the unit was classified as metaphorical. Word-for-word repetitions were systematically excluded, and each repeated use of the same metaphorical expression was counted as a distinct occurrence only when functioning as an independent lexical unit. The identified metaphorical units were classified in 12 conceptual domains (construction, disease/decay, void, journey/progress, conflict, container/belonging, household, nature/weather, performance/theatre, embodiment, technology/science, law/game). Such procedure allowed for frequency distribution and identification of ideological frameworks within Starmer's rhetorics.

Four nuanced interpretations, Charteris-Black's (2004) Critical Metaphorical Analysis (CMA) was employed, which reconstructed superior conceptual metaphors, e.g., nation as *a construction under maintenance* or *politics as a theatre play*. This framework was supplemented with elements of a combination with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) by Fairclough (1995), broadening the analytical context. CDA provided an interpretation of the use of metaphors as language tools in the construction of the leader's identity, the legitimisation of Labour Party frameworks, and the delegitimisation of former government discourses.

Descriptive statistics was employed as a quantitative research method. The total number of metaphorical units N_s , the total number of words W_s , and the intensity of metaphorisation per 1000 words, where I stands for relative intensity of metaphorical use, were identified for each speech and calculated using the formula:

$$I = N_s / W_s \times 1000$$

Results

Through quantitative analysis, 284 metaphorical units were identified across four speeches by Keir Starmer. The highest occurrence was found in the conference speech in London (S2), totalising 168, whereas the inauguration speech (S3) contained only 20 units. This notable difference was primarily due to the content scope of the speeches. Nonetheless, when adjusted for relative intensity, a remarkable consistency was observed. The metaphorical occurrence in all four speeches ranged between 26-30 metaphors per 1000 words, illustrating that metaphor in Starmer's rhetoric is a stable and deliberate tool (Table 1).

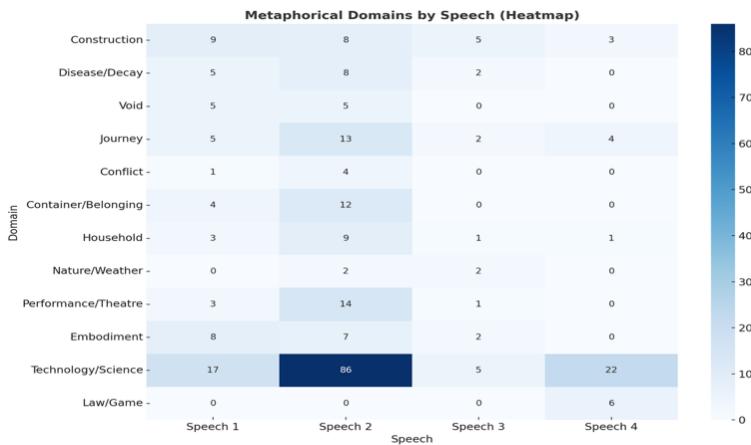
Table 1: The intensity of metaphor use within 4 speeches

	Number of words	Total number of metaphors	Metaphors per 1000 words
Speech 1	2298	60	26,11
Speech 2	5751	168	29,21
Speech 3	738	20	27,1
Speech 4	1219	36	29,53

Source: Author's own elaboration

The division of metaphorical frameworks based on their conceptual domains (Picture 1) reveals clear tendencies. The most frequently occurring metaphors of semantic categories were technology/science, construction, embodiment, and travel/journey. These domains were crucial for positive framing of the Labour Party and their political vision. On the other hand, the domains of theatre/performance and disease/decay were used mainly to frame criticism of their conservative opposition. Less frequent, but of significant meaning within specific contexts, were the metaphors of void, household and nature/weather. The heatmap (Picture 1) illustrates the differences among the four speeches. S1 is notable for a combination of constructive (9) and technological (17) metaphors. S2 is dominated by technological frameworks (86), followed by theatre (14) and void (13). The inauguration speech was characterised by a high occurrence of metaphors, with its core consisting of construction (5) and embodiment (2) metaphors. In S4, there was an increased number of technological metaphors (22), complemented by the framework of rules/game (6), which was absent in the other three speeches. This result highlights the adaptability of Starmer's rhetoric based on political context. The pattern of language focused on reconstruction and modernisation in party programme speeches contrasted with the language of rules and norms emphasised in political documents. The results of descriptive statistics (Table 1) confirm that, despite the variability in the total number of metaphorical units, the relative intensity of metaphor use remains constant, which indicates that a metaphor is an integral and consistent part of Starmer's rhetoric.

Picture 1 : Metaphorical domains by speech



Source: Author's own elaboration

Picture 1 outlines the distribution of twelve metaphorical domains across Starmer's four speeches. The dominant categories: technology/science (and construction define the core of his rhetorical strategy. Expressions such as "*harness the power of AI*," "*the experiment is over*," or "*fix the foundations of our country*" frame governance as a rational, evidence-based process of repair and innovation. These metaphors legitimise Labour as the *architect and engineer* of national renewal and reflect Starmer's technocratic ethos. The embodiment and journey domains add emotional and moral resonance. Phrases like "*the backbone of this country*," "*heart and soul of the nation*," and "*step on a longer journey*" personify the state and portray collective progress as a shared physical effort. This blend of corporeal and kinetic imagery humanises the otherwise managerial discourse and strengthens the bond between leader and citizens. By contrast, performance/theatre and disease/decay frames serve delegitimising functions. References such as "*politics of performance*," "*bringing the curtain down*," or "*deep rot in the heart of a structure*" depict Conservative governance as superficial spectacle or moral decline. These negative metaphors reinforce a dichotomy between *responsible management* and *performative chaos*. Less frequent domains: law/game, void, and household appear contextually, reflecting Starmer's legal background ("*rules must apply*," "*playing by the same rules*") or social agenda ("*homes for heroes*," "*roof over their head*").

They enrich his discursive repertoire with appeals to fairness and social responsibility.

Overall, the data confirm that Starmer's metaphorical repertoire functions as an integrated ideological system. Constructive and technological frames project competence and progress; bodily and journey metaphors communicate empathy and perseverance; and oppositional frames delineate ideological boundaries. Together they establish Starmer's image as both a technocratic reformer and a moral guide, whose authority is grounded in expertise, stability, and collective renewal.

The CMA analysis, drawing on Charteris-Black, demonstrates that Starmer's metaphors do not function as separate lexical units; instead, they form coherent conceptual frameworks with strong ideological influence. Five main metaphorical domains were identified within four key speeches. One of the dominant frames in Starmer's rhetoric is a metaphor of *a nation as a construction project*. Lexical expressions such as *fixing the foundations, rebuilding Britain, or brick-by-brick* reinforce the image of the Labour Party as a competent architect of reconstruction, which behaves towards the state as to a technical object in need for expert intervention. This framework is also contrasted with the image of the Conservative Party, whose heritage is portrayed as *rot and decay*, emphasising the opposition between restoration and decay, stability and neglect.

This framework contrasts theatre play with management. Phrases like *politics of noisy performance, bringing the curtain down, or charade* diminish conservative policies as superficial staging focused on spectacle and media attention. The Labour Party is seen as a responsible manager capable of serious work and effective leadership. This framework employs values of rationality, pragmatism, and professionalism, creating a clear contrast between performative populism and technocratic competence.

The metaphor of the future as a journey legitimises gradual, collective progress and articulates the vision of transformation, which does not embody revolution but rather evolution. Journey, as a concept, activates values of patience, resilience, and perseverance, while Starmer admits that change requires time, continuity, and collective effort. This framework portrays an inclusive image of a political process, in which a voter is a companion, not a passive recipient.

The framework of a nation as a body (*backbone of the country, heart of the nation, back on its feet*) allows for personification of the state and its political or economic condition through bodily categories. Starmer depicts himself as a healer of the nation, who restores its health, well-being, and functionality. This type of metaphors possesses a strong emotional impact

and enables the leader to act as an empathetic savior, which strengthens his ethos and moral authority.

Last but not least, the framework of the economy as an experiment or scientific process (*harness the power of AI, experiment is over, addicted to cheap labour*) presents the Labour as a party of the future, capable of facing the challenges of the modern world through technological rationality, innovation, and expertise. This framework also criticises conservative economic policies as unethical and unsustainable experiments, activating an opposition between scientific competence and ideological improvisation.

Following the three-dimensional model of Fairclough's CDA (1995, 2001): textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice, the identified metaphorical frameworks can be further interpreted as language sources used by Starmer to negotiate legitimacy, power, and identity. While CMA identified coherent clusters of metaphorical domains, CDA reveals the ideological grounding in broader socio-political contexts.

1. Textual dimension

Starmer's speeches are saturated with evaluative language and contrastive pairs at the textual level: „*rot* vs. *renewal*“, „*performance* vs. *service*“, „*chaos* vs. *control*“. These binary constructions discursively reduce political complexity into moral dichotomies, where Labour signifies renewal, rationality, and justice. The repetitive grammar structures empower this framework: declarative modality (*we will, we must*) functions as performative commitment, while inclusive pronouns (*we, our country*) build solidarity with the audience. Intertextual echoes of Brexit campaigns „*take back control*“ in S4 are integrated into Labour discourse, transforming past discourses into new political objectives.

2. Discursive practice

Institutional references and legal terminology are combined with emotional appeals such as embodiment, household, and journey metaphors. This hybridity demonstrates a dual approach, simultaneously addressing political elites and the general public (*the backbone of the country*). Interdiscursively, the managerial discourse (*efficiency, reform, planning*) merges with moral discourse (*dignity, justice, fairness*), strengthening the Labour Party's image as competent and ethical.

3. Social practice

At the level of social structures, the metaphorical repertoire justifies a technocratic-pragmatic ideology that addresses the turbulence following Brexit, economic stagnation, and declining public confidence. The framework of construction depicts Labour as the architects of national renewal, while the framework of disease and decay pathologises the conservative legacy. The path normalises the gradualness and postponement of reforms, thus managing expectations of slow improvement. Rules and games, along with science and experimentation, portray Labour as the guarantors of procedural fairness and rational modernisation, aligning with neoliberal values of regulation, responsibility, and innovation. Citizens are framed as co-creators ("we build together"), but simultaneously conditioned by responsibility („migration as deserved privilege“), which reflects the tension between solidarity and control typical for current European socio-democratic politics.

CDA analysis showcases, that Starmer's metaphorical rhetorics does not fulfil only ornamental role, but systematically reproduces socio-political order, in which the Labour grasps authority as rational renovator of stability. The speeches contribute to construction of three interconnected identities:

- A) **Leader as a technocrat** (engineer, manager, scientist)
- B) **Leader as a moral guide** (healer, protector, truth carrier)
- C) **Citizens as responsible co-builders** of the project called nation

Simultaneously, the conservative opposition is consistently portrayed in discourse to the role of actors, experimenters and purveyors of decay. The ideological function of this framing is to reinforce the hegemonic image of Labour as a pragmatic, fair and inclusive alternative, while previous governments are delegitimised as irresponsible, theatrical and destructive.

Conclusion

The analysis of Keir Starmer's four key speeches demonstrates that metaphor constitutes a consistent and deliberate tool in the construction of his political identity. By systematically employing the domains of construction, embodiment, journey, science, and rules, Starmer frames Labour as a competent, pragmatic, and ethical alternative to previous governments. The integration of CMA and CDA has shown that metaphors not only reflect cognitive structuring but also function ideologically, legitimising Labour's

technocratic pragmatism and moral authority while delegitimising Conservative legacy through frames of decay and performance.

The findings suggest that metaphor in Starmer's rhetoric is not ornamental but central to the process of discursive identity construction, expectation management, and mobilisation of the electorate. Implications for further research lie in expanding the corpus to other speeches and contexts including debates and interviews and in comparative studies with previous Labour leaders to explore whether this metaphorical pragmatism represents a broader trend in European centre-left discourse. Future research might also incorporate quantitative corpus tools and cross-linguistic analyses to capture how metaphorical repertoires shift across genres, audiences, and media.

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