
FROM WARMING UP TO BURNING DOWN: THE IDEOLOGY OF FIRE IN BRITISH AND BULGARIAN MEDIA TEXTS

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Abstract: The paper aims to study the metaphorical use of fire and its entailments in British and Bulgarian media texts. They are used in media texts on various topics: foreign affairs, political analysis, media coverage of crime events and natural disasters, sports events and texts related to celebrities. Fire metaphors can be found in both serious press and the tabloids. They are very productive and an effective means of forming ideologies.

Since the dawn of humanity, fire has had a central role in human civilization. Fire is a universal concept and apart from its indispensable role in people's everyday life, fire is loaded with symbolic and cultural meaning. The invention of fire was a turning point in human evolution. With its use, it became possible for human beings to warm themselves and their homes, to cook, and to illuminate their surroundings. They could also protect themselves from wild animals. From increasing brain growth in our ancient ancestors to powering the development of complex societies, „humanity's first encounters with fire set the stage for life as we know it today” (British Museum, 2026). According to Hough, “an early stage in man's acquaintance with fire the effect of heat on food substances would be discovered and the preference for cooked food would arise. Cooking extends the range of the food supply and promotes its preservation for future consumption (Hough, 1916 www.archive.org)”. Fire has also influenced human biology, “assisting in providing the high-quality diet which has fuelled the increase in brain size through the Pleistocene” (Gowlett, 2016, p.1) and, eventually, fire became „embedded in human behaviour, so that it is involved in almost all advanced technologies” (Gowlett, 2016, p.1).

Fire metaphors can be used both with positive and negative connotation. Fire can be a symbol of life, eternity, care and survival. It can be associated with love, warmth, coziness, affection, ingenuity, purification, rebirth, wisdom, courage and power. Expressions like *warm up to someone*, *rekindle the flame*, *sparking the hope* typically have positive connotation. On the other hand, fire can symbolize destruction, evil, and despair, hence expressions like *burn down*, *be at stake*, *fanning the flames*, *add fuel to fire* are associated with something negative. Charteris-Black explains the dual and contradictory role of fire in human conceptualization (Charteris-Black, 2018). In his view, “since fire changes the state of the material world, it has agency; it is transformational and this ability to change the state of matter forms the basis of its symbolic meaning” (Charteris-Black, 2018, p.5).

The study traces the way expressions from the domain of fire are used metaphorically in media texts. In order to understand the use of ‘fire’ metaphors, it is necessary to include vocabulary that is associated and related to the characteristic features of fire.

Keywords: fire metaphors, media texts, ideology

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the dawn of humanity, fire has had a central role in human civilization. The invention of fire was a turning point in human evolution. With its use, it became possible for human beings to warm themselves and their homes, to cook, and to illuminate their surroundings. They could also protect themselves from wild animals. The invention of fire was a turning point in human evolution. With its use, it became possible for human beings to warm themselves and their homes, to cook, and to illuminate their surroundings. They could also protect themselves from wild animals. From increasing brain growth in our ancient ancestors to powering the development of complex societies, „humanity's first encounters with fire set the stage for life as we know it today” (British Museum, 2026).

Fire is a universal concept and apart from its indispensable role in people's everyday life, it is loaded with symbolic and cultural meaning.

The study traces the way expressions from the domain of fire are used metaphorically in both Bulgarian and English-language media texts. In order to understand the use of ‘fire’ metaphors, it is necessary to include vocabulary that is associated and related to the characteristic features of fire.

According to Lakoff and Johnson, “a conceptual metaphor is understanding one domain of experience (that is typically abstract) in terms of another (that is typically concrete)” (Lakoff, Johnson 1980, p.6). Semino points out that “target domains tend to correspond to relatively complex, abstract, subjective, and sensitive experiences (such as life, death, time, and the emotions), whereas source domains tend to correspond to relatively simpler, more image-rich, and intersubjectively accessible experiences (such as motion, combat, people, and animals)” (Semino, 2021, p.50).

It is expected that similarity and differences in the use of fire metaphors are based on cultural similarities and differences. As stated by Steiner, cultural models “vary between cultures and historical epochs, and they influence how people in diverse social, historical, linguistic, and cultural settings experience and evaluate their own emotions and those of others” (Steiner, 2025, p. 2). They are also “reflected in the emotion lexica of different languages, which consist of a variety of emotion terms that carry culturally immanent meanings and are linked to different ways of categorising emotions” (Steiner, 2025, p. 2).

Fire is used metaphorically both with positive and negative meaning. It can be a symbol of life, eternity, care and survival. Fire can be associated with love, warmth, coziness, affection, ingenuity, purification, rebirth, wisdom, courage and power. Expressions like *warm up to someone*, *rekindle the flame*, *sparking the hope* typically have positive connotation. On the other hand, fire can symbolize destruction, evil, and despair, hence expressions like *burn down*, *be at stake*, *fanning the flames*, *adding fuel to fire* are associated with something negative. For instance, as state by Rumman, corruption is depicted as fire, since it destroys everything around, suggesting its devastating influence (Rumman, 2024). Charteris-Black explains the dual and contradictory role of fire in human conceptualization (Charteris-Black, 2018). In his view, “since fire changes the state of the material world, it has agency; it is transformational and this ability to change the state of matter forms the basis of its symbolic meaning” (Charteris-Black, 2018, p.5).

Fire is a process that has several stages. It is first kindled with a spark, then it flares up, especially when fuel is added to it, and it is possible do burn everything down. The vocabulary used to name each of those stages is mapped onto the target domain. The positive or negative connotation attributed to it is based on people’s subjective experiential knowledge. For instance, the first stages of fire related to its start, it being kindled or rekindled with a spark when we see light and start feeling slight warmth, are usually used metaphorically in relation with something positive. When fire gets too strong or uncontrollable and destroys what is around and becomes even life-threatening and fatal (burn, explode, burn to ashes), the metaphorical use of vocabulary related to those processes is loaded with negative connotation.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The materials used in the present study are excerpt from media articles from Bulgarian media and English-language media. In order to reach the results in the research, Charteris-Black’s Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMI) was applied.

3. RESULTS

A key finding in the present research is the interdependency of the metaphorical use of ‘fire’ expressions and the events portrayed in the media discourse regarding their intensity, both in English-language and Bulgarian media. When the event specified by ‘fire’ expression is of higher intensity, the expression from the ‘fire’ domain it is used with is also more intense, and it could be thought as having a higher ‘degree’ in the ‘fire’ scale.

4. DISCUSSIONS

Fire and its metaphoric entailments are used to portray relations – both interpersonal and interinstitutional. In the following headline from [The Guardian](#), the expression *warm up* is used to stand for development in international relations:

“India and China hail warming ties amid Trump-induced geopolitical shake-up”

(www.theguardian.com)

In the above excerpt, *warmth/increasing temperature*, a concept from the domain of *fire*, is used to stand for improvement and positive development of diplomatic relations between two countries.

In Bulgarian media, warmth as a symbol of friendship and stable international relations is also used, as evident in the next excerpt:

“Армения и Турция затоплят отношения

Външният министър на Армения Арарат Мирзоян заяви, че арменско-турският диалог е съзрял достатъчно за установяването на дипломатически отношения между двете страни и границата между тях да бъде напълно отворена, предаде националната новинарска агенция АРМЕНПРЕС, цитирана от БТА.....“Диалогът Турция-Армения достигна достатъчно равнище, за да може протичащите процеси да доведат до пълния резултат, а именно до установяване на дипломатически отношения между двете страни и пълно откриване на границите” (actualno.com)

Here, the source domain *warm up/getting warm* (*затоплят*) activates the target domain *establish diplomatic relations* (*установяване на дипломатически отношения*).

Another verb from the domain of fire that is used to portray positive events is *kindle*. In the next headline from www.bbc.com the expression *kindle hope* is used, meaning to create a feeling of optimism:

“Ceasefire *kindles* hope of hostage son's return to Nepal

(www.bbc.co.uk)

In the above text, a notion standing for the physical act of starting a fire is used stand for an awakening of an emotion.

The concept from the source domain *kindle* (start a fire) activates the target concept *start an emotion*.

Kövecses argues that “the concept of...fire not only to love but also to anger” (Kövecses,2000, p. 79). Regarding the use of fire metaphors with negative meaning, Raffat argues that fire “is a concrete concept whose meaning is grasped in terms of the burning huge flames where it catches things in its control due to negligence and turns everything into ashes by causing suffocation which ultimately leads to death” (Raffat 2022, 47). In the following excerpt, *argument is fire* is used with the metaphoric entailment *inflammation*:

“Iran Strikes *Inflammation* War Powers Debate in Congress, Dividing Both Parties

Speaker Mike Johnson signaled he was not inclined to allow a vote on whether to authorize military strikes in Iran, while leading Democrats demanded a briefing and said the president had overstepped his power”.
(www.nytimes.com)

As stated by Kövecses, “metaphorical expressions under the ‘fire’ source domain in the lexical dataset highlight the intensity and dangerousness of anger” (Kövecses, 2024, p. 69). In the above excerpt, argument is seen as flame. The used metaphor is characterized by emotional intensity, evident in the use of expression *searing* later in the text, also from the domain of fire, signifying that the debate is not a calm discussion, as it is accompanied by anger and extreme passion.

In Bulgarian media, the expression *разпалва* is used to achieve the same effect. In the next excerpt, *разпалва* (inflaming) is used to emphasize on the intensity of the emotion, in this case – fear:

“Европейските борси се оцветиха в червено, тъй като конфликтът в Близкия изток *разпалва* опасенията за инфлацията

Европа е особено уязвима от покачващите се цени на суровия петрол, тъй като Ормузкия проток остава затворен, което *разпалва* опасенията за инфлация и растеж. Индексът STOXX 600 се е понижил с повече от 8% от началото на войната срещу Иран и е на прага на навлизане в корекция”
(manager.bg).

When the event specified by ‘fire’ expression is of higher intensity, the expression from the ‘fire’ domain it is used with is also more intense, and it could be thought as having a higher ‘degree’ in the ‘fire’ scale. As demonstrated in the above examples, hope can be kindled, relations can be warmed up, debates can be inflamed. However, when a text discusses something with stronger intensity, such as tensions, or even clashes, the metaphoric entailments used are related to the more intense stages of fire as a process. The following excerpt is an example of this interdependency:

“The *burning fires* of internal political party tension — before the local elections

The *burning fires* of internal political party tension — before the local elections. While the political headline of this year is likely to be...” (www.dailymaverick.co.za)

In the above excerpt, *burning fire*, an expression reflecting the destructive power of fire, is used to convey the meaning of dangerous actions that could lead to destruction and failure.

In Bulgarian media, the expression *избухват* (*explode*) is used to show the intensity of the protests portrayed in the text:

“Протести *избухват* в цял Китай, докато режимът затяга мерките за сигурност и ограничава използването на дронове

В някои случаи недоволството изглежда излиза извън рамките на конкретни спорове и прераства в по-широко политическо раздразнение.

Наскоро *избухнаха* протести и сблъсъци между населението и полицията в редица региони в Китай.”
(epochtimes.bg)

5. CONCLUSIONS

Fire is a process that has several stages. It is first kindled with a spark, then it flares up, especially when fuel is added to it, and it is possible do burn everything down. The vocabulary used to name each of those stages is mapped onto the target domain.

There is an interdependency of the metaphorical use of ‘fire’ expressions and the events portrayed in the media discourse regarding their intensity that is present in both in English-language and Bulgarian media. When the event specified by ‘fire’ expression is of higher intensity, the expression from the ‘fire’ domain it is used with is also more intense, and it could be thought as having a higher ‘degree’ in the ‘fire’ scale.

NOTE

The study leading to these findings has been funded by project ПД-08-97/03.02.2026 of the Department of English Studies at the University of Shumen, Bulgaria entitled “Идеологически ракурси в изследването и преподаването на английския език и литература/Ideological perspectives in researching and teaching English language and literature”.

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