

Theses of Doctoral (PhD) dissertation

**Ghana in Cartoons:
Thematic Analysis of Cognitive Devices in Political
Cartoons**

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1. Introduction and background of the dissertation

Communication has undergone a significant paradigm shift over the last several decades, with visual and multimodal forms of expression gaining predominance. Communication is no longer restricted to traditional text-only or verbal forms; it is increasingly adorned with images, videos, graphics, and interactivity to convey meaning more effectively. This has been greatly influenced by journalistic practices, in which professionals have adopted multimedia applications to tell stories to wider and more diverse audiences. Today, journalists are no longer mere writers but also creators of content who can merge text, audio, images and information to create powerful stories. This shift is a result of the development of digital technologies and the high rate of internet accessibility. The availability of social media, online news websites and mobile applications has enabled rapid information sharing in visually rich formats, thus redefining the expectations and consumption behaviour of the audience. Ademilokun and Olateju (2016) argue that text producers require a range of semiotic resources to generate meaning. With increased globalisation and digital expansion, digital communication is shaping how we interact with one another. Visual communication requires us to use various related available items to convey information, while its interpretation equally demands rigorous and reliable approaches. Ghana is not an exception to this paradigm shift in visualising issues. The public's focus is gradually shifting from traditional media to internet-based journalism.

Many social issues, such as corruption and questionable leadership, have been explored by visual journalists through their creative prowess. Visual journalists rely on a range of conceptual devices, including metaphor, metonymy, symbolism, simile, exaggeration and

distortion of characters to convey their messages. One key area that has become a haven for visual journalists is the use of political cartoons, as they possess the power to communicate complex issues through their drawings. According to El Refaie (2009, pp. 184-185), in her work on multimodal metaphor, explains “political cartoons an illustration, usually in a single panel, published in the editorial or comments pages of a newspaper which may refer to a current political development or a popular person, but in a way that takes a stand or presents a particular point of view”.

The concept of metaphor, central to this study, has evolved from Aristotle’s rhetorical conception to the modern cognitive perspective formulated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). While Aristotle regarded metaphor as a stylistic device that illuminates abstract ideas through analogy, Lakoff and Johnson reconceptualised it as a fundamental mechanism of thought: humans understand and experience one conceptual domain in terms of another, thus, the source domain and the target domain. This cognitive approach has since expanded into multimodal discourse, recognising that metaphors operate not only linguistically but also visually (Forceville, 2008, 1996, 1994). Political cartoons exemplify this multimodal potential, as they combine linguistic and visual signs to produce layered meanings. Lakoff and Johnson’s groundbreaking book, “*Metaphors We Live By*,” which they published in 1980, shifted the study of metaphors away from language and toward conceptual analysis. According to proponents, our daily lives are shaped by metaphoric thinking. This study seeks to examine how Ghanaian cartoonists cognitively employ conceptual metaphors and conceptual metonymies to illustrate socio-economic, socio-political, and current issues.

2. Aims/objectives of the dissertation

- (i) To examine how cartoonists use images and symbols as semiotic and metaphorical devices to construct messages on economic topics.
- (ii) To analyse how Ghanaian cartoonists employ health and hospital imagery as metaphorical resources for conveying implied socio-political meanings.
- (iii) To examine how cartoonists rely on sports elements to construct socio-political messages.
- (iv) To interpret the role of journey imagery in Ghanaian political cartoons as symbolic strategies that construct socio-political meanings.
- (v) To examine how Ghanaian cartoonists draw on biblical allusions as metaphorical resources for constructing and communicating socio-political messages.

3. Research questions guiding the dissertation

- (i) How do Ghanaian cartoonists use images and symbols as semiotic and metaphorical devices to construct messages on economic issues?
- (ii) How do Ghanaian cartoonists employ health and hospital imagery as metaphorical resources to convey implied socio-political meanings?
- (iii) In what ways do Ghanaian cartoonists draw on sports concepts to construct socio-political commentary?
- (iv) How are journey elements mobilised in Ghanaian political cartoons as symbolic strategies for shaping socio-political messages?
- (v) How do Ghanaian cartoonists make use of biblical allusions as metaphorical devices to communicate socio-political messages?

4. Theoretical Framework

The study drew on a synthesis of theoretical frameworks within cognitive linguistics. These theories are Lakoff and Johnson's 1980 conceptual metaphor, Fauconnier and Turner's 2002

conceptual blending, Barcelona's 2000 Conceptual metonymy, and Forceville's 1996 multimodal metaphor. In 1980, Lakoff and Johnson co-authored "Metaphor We Live By"-this book changed the direction of metaphor discussion. According to the proponents, human beings think metaphorically, making metaphor pervasive in our everyday lives. To Lakoff and Johnson, metaphor is not a figure of speech but a figure of thought. Based on this, they define metaphor as understanding and experiencing one entity in terms of another (1980, p.5). In light of the above, they propose two domains: source and target. The source domain is the familiar entity, while the target domain is an unfamiliar and abstract entity. To understand the two entities, they offer a structural mapping phenomenon from the source domain to the target domain, where the elements within the familiar entity are mapped onto the unfamiliar domain, which enhances understanding based on salient mappable features. On the one hand, Conceptual Blending Theory (CBT), developed by Fauconnier and Turner (2002), provides a robust cognitive framework for explaining how novel meanings emerge through the dynamic integration of multiple mental spaces. The theory also explains the complex way people integrate specific experiences, such as emotions, culture, or the body, into language. Unlike Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), which focuses on relatively stable mappings between the source and the target domain, CBT proposes that meaning construction frequently involves the simultaneous activation of different, distinct mental input spaces, including linguistic expressions, visual cues, cultural knowledge, and contextual information. Elements from these inputs are selectively projected into a new, integrated mental space known as the *blend*. Within this blended space, the projected elements interact to produce emergent structures, features, relations, or interpretations that are not present in any of the original input spaces when considered independently. Other scholars within the cognitive field describe conceptual

metonymy as a second fiddle to metaphor. In light of this, Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 36), as advanced by proponents of conceptual metaphor theory (CMT), allow for the substitution of one concept for another. On the other hand, the work of Kashanizadeh and Forceville (2022) further enhances the discourse on metonymy, which they define as the “cognitive process in which the prominent or well-known part of something is employed to mean, or to stand in, for the thing in all its complexity.” This view is fundamental in the conceptualisation of political cartoons, in which “picking out one visual feature, such as an emblem, hairdo, or dress, can be taken to signal the whole politician, organisation, or ideology.” Visually based substitutions in political cartoons highlight the resourceful and minimalist approach offered by metonymy in multimodal discourse.

Following CMT, Forceville (1996) espouses that metaphor manifests in different modes apart from language, including advertisements, political cartoons, pictures, wall painting, music/sounds, gesture, and arts. To account for metaphor in the listed areas, Forceville proposes a multimodal metaphor approach. He argues that this approach, to some extent, addresses the limitations of conceptual metaphor theory in analysing non-verbal metaphors. He defines multimodal metaphor as the type whose target and source domains are rendered exclusively or predominantly in two different modes (Forceville, 1996, p. 24). Thus, for a metaphor to be classed as multimodal, the source domain must be encoded in one mode (e.g. a visual element) while the target domain is encoded by another (e.g. a verbal form). He also proposes a monomodal type of metaphor where both the source domain and the target domain are rendered in pictorial form. Considering the nuanced and complicated nature of political cartoons, it is advisable to rely on different theories to really account for the actual meaning behind these cartoons.

5. Data

In this dissertation, corpora from two famous Ghanaian cartoonists, namely Tilapia Da Cartoonist of TV 3 News fame and Akosua of the Daily Guide, were used for the study. One hundred and twenty political cartoons spanning 2016 to the first quarter of 2025 served as the source of the dissertation's data. Based on availability and the frequency of publication, the selected cartoons were grouped under five thematic areas. These are the themes of economy, health, journey, sports and religion. Some of the themes have other subtopics. For instance, the theme of the economy has sub-themes such as the economy as a living organism and the economy as non-living things. The theme of sports also has subtopics such as race, boxing, football, high jump, etc. Out of the one hundred and twenty cartoons selected, forty-two (42) were used in the analysis shared among the various dominant themes. Notably, some themes appeared more often than others in the analysis, reflecting their higher incidence. One major challenge that I encountered during this project was the uneven distribution of data, as some cartoons and their themes appeared more than others. The remaining data that did not appear in the discussion have been placed in the appendix section.

6. Discussion and Analysis

Chapter four of the dissertation is described as the heartbeat or the engine of the study, where it delves extensively into the corpus of data. The analysis is based on the various themes mentioned in the previous page. The chapter of the dissertation is divided into various subsections, with each section detailing each theme. With respect to the economic theme, the corpus is categorised into two subthemes: the economy as a living organism and the economy as a non-living organism. In all these, Ghanaian socio-political issues served as the target domain. The corpus was analysed using Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory to identify the conceptual mappings

underlying the data. After identifying the conceptual metaphor, the structural cross-mapping was provided from the source to the target domain. This was presented mostly using the conceptual blending theory diagram. The following are some of the conceptual metaphors that were identified within this domain: THE ECONOMY IS A PLANT, THE ECONOMY IS A SICK PERSON, THE ECONOMY IS A MALNOURISHED CHILD, THE ECONOMY IS PATIENT ON LIFE SUPPORT, THE ECONOMY UNDER THE ICU, THE ECONOMY UNDER PHYSIOTHERAPY TREATMENT, THE ECONOMIC SCENE AS A CRIME SCENE, etc. All these fall under the economy as a living organism. In terms of the economy as a non-living thing, these were the identified metaphors: THE ECONOMY AS A BROKEN VEHICLE, THE ECONOMY AS A WAR ZONE, THE ECONOMY AS A SCIENCE EXPERIMENT, etc.

Section 4.2 of Chapter 4 explored the theme of health and hospital imagery in detail. The use of health and illness as a thematic tool in political cartoons has become a powerful mode of communication, employed to critique governance processes, leadership decisions, and the country's current situation. By rendering socio-political problems in medical terms, such as disease, diagnosis, treatment, surgery, and even death, the cartoonists successfully translate the extremely complex policy issues into a context that can be easily comprehended and appeals to emotions. Cartoonists depict Ghana metaphorically as a sick patient, using the domain of illness and healthcare to highlight national issues. According to this metaphor, political leaders are compared to caregivers, and economic poverty is presented as an infectious or chronic illness. Some of the identified conceptual metaphors were GOVERNMENT POLICY IS A PATIENT, CANCELLING A POLITICAL PROCESS (REFERENDUM) IS AN ABORTION, THE CEDI IS A SICK PERSON, TREATING A SICK PERSON IS SAVING THE ENERGY SECTOR,

TREATING A SICK PERSON IS TREATING THE ECONOMY OF GHANA, REATING THE ECONOMY IS TREATING A SICK PERSON, etc

Section 4.3 of the analysis discussed the use of sporting and gaming metaphors to convey issues on governance, leadership, public policy, and socio-economic performance. The cartoonist successfully conveys the intricacies of the political landscape to the audience by employing the metaphorical paradigm of sports, characterised by a competitive, rule-bound, and performance-oriented dynamic, to the political sphere. By relying on familiar conceptual frameworks, this strategy helped the audience make sense of complex political scenarios, thereby facilitating a more nuanced and accessible understanding of political situations. Some of the identified conceptual metaphors include POLITICS IS A BOXING MATCH, WINNING AN ELECTION IS WINNING A BOXING MATCH, POLITICAL DEBATE IS A PHYSICAL FIGHT (WRESTLING MATCH), PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IS A COMPETITIVE RACE, WINNING AN ELECTION IS FINISHING FIRST IN A RACE, WINNING AN ELECTION IS FINISHING FIRST IN A HORSE RACE, LIFE IS A RACE, etc. With the identified conceptual metaphor, the winning mentality and winner takes all that characterise sports and games are attributed to politicians' zeal to win elections

Section 4.4 -This part of the study examined how political cartoonists in Ghana utilise the metaphor of journeys, based on regions of travel, transportation, and logistics, to portray the complex realities of socio-political and economic issues in visual representations using cartoons as a medium. In the domain of political cartoons, such metaphors, symbols, and representations are employed for illustrative purposes only. In the domain of transportation, vehicles such as troksis, buses, taxis, boats, ships, aeroplanes, and trains denote complex conceptual blends. This phenomenon typically entails the presence of movement and direction towards a specific

destination. These were the identified conceptual metaphors within this domain: THE NATIONAL BUDGET IS A VEHICLE OVERLOADED, ILLEGAL MIGRATION IS A DANGEROUS SEA JOURNEY, ECONOMIC HARDSHIP IS A PREDATORY THREAT, GOVERNANCE IS A JOURNEY, POLITICAL DEFEAT IS A FORCED JOURNEY, ELECTORAL DEFEAT IS AN EVICTION, etc.

Section 4.5-This session of the analysis explored how Ghanaian cartoonists demonstrate a marked tendency to draw upon religious and biblical allusions as a significant semiotic source. This underscores the close interrelationship between faith, politics, and both national and popular life. The role of Christianity and other religious customs in shaping moral values, political expectations and general interpretations of events in everyday situations is significant. Cartoonists selectively rely on commonly recognised scriptural accounts, symbols and theological patterns as a means of commenting on current socio-political realities. The subsequent section of the analysis discusses how the Ghanaian cartoonists utilise these allusions to visualise politics, criticise leadership, and present national issues in familiar religious paradigms. The employment of biblical figures, prophetic forms and religious imagery by cartoonists serves a dual purpose. Firstly, it renders their messages more interpretively accessible. Secondly, it enables them to leverage the weight of religious discourse to make their satirical commentary more resonant and powerful. The identified conceptual metaphors were POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IS SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP, AVOIDING RESPONSIBILITY IS WASHING ONE'S HANDS, POLITICAL CORRUPTION IS A SACRED FEAST, POLITICAL ENDORSEMENT IS RELIGIOUS BAPTISM, ECONOMIC HARDSHIP IS CRUCIFIXION, LEGAL INVESTIGATION IS DAVID'S BATTLE AGAINST GOLIATH, etc. All these were examined using the conceptual blending theory, with the help of

conceptual metaphor theory and conceptual metonymy, as the combination of these theories enhances the understanding of the intended messages.

7. Conclusion

Regarding the theme of the economy, both cartoonists have conceptualised the economic problems in their respective works through concepts familiar to them. Analysing and discussing the economy-related cartoons, it is evident that the cartoonists resort to different spheres of life, and they may be categorised in general into the living and the non-living entities. Under the classification of living things, both cartoonists basically use the animate objects with breathing and movement. Interestingly, personification is one of the main strategies connected to the depiction of problems concerning the Ghanaian economy. This significant use of personification reflects an inclination to present economic events in human terms, thereby increasing their accessibility and appeal to the masses. In this way, cartoons portray the state of the economy, be it healthy or unhealthy, in forms that are close to the lived experiences and perceptions of the people. Cartoonists drew on non-living elements, those incapable of breathing, to reflect the state of the Ghanaian economy. By drawing on these familiar source domains, the two cartoonists effectively conveyed the state of the economy in ways that resonate with most Ghanaians, making their messages more accessible and easier to understand.

With respect to the issue of health and illness concepts, to represent socio-political and economic issues. It is established that cartoonists use different units of health concepts depending on the severity of the situation. Health metaphors rely on the idea that the experience of the body serves as the primary foundation for thinking about and describing different things. This is grounded in our understanding of how the human body operates and functions. Employing these hospital-related domains aids in interpreting the implied meaning of the cartoons. The study shows

that the most critical situations are primarily portrayed within the Intensive Care Unit (ICU), highlighting the severity of these circumstances. The utilisation of these health concepts signifies the despondent state of specific government policies and initiatives, thereby indicating an urgent need for immediate intervention to rectify the present circumstances. Also, the employment of health-related themes by cartoonists is attributable to the fact that such themes are characterised by their capacity to transcend geographical and cultural boundaries, consequently facilitating a universal comprehension beneficial to their intended global audience.

With regard to the application of health and illness concepts to model socio-political and economic matters, the analysis defines that cartoonists will choose certain areas of health application selectively depending on the degree of the depicted situation. The health metaphors rest on the assumption that bodily experience forms a core foundation of the conceptualisation and articulation of abstract phenomena based on shared knowledge of the way the human body works. The integration of the domain of the hospital allows one to understand the meanings carried by the cartoons in a more in-depth manner. The paper also evidences that the most important circumstances are presented in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU), which proves the severity of the scenarios described. The introduction of such health metaphors is an indication of the precarious nature of some government policies and programs, thus pointing to the need to correct them immediately. In addition, the application of health-related themes is driven by the fact that they are able to cut across geographical and cultural boundaries, making it easy to have a mode of communication that is universally understood by a global audience.

With respect to the cartoonist's use of sports- and games-related domains to conceptualise the socio-political processes in Ghana. The analysis reveals that the cartoonists use diverse sporting activities such as boxing, wrestling, athletic events, high jump, hurdling, and football, among other

activities. The popularity of these areas is an indication of how politics is competitive by nature, and how it closely resembles the sporting nature, especially the aspect of winning and losing. One way to illustrate this is through the metaphor of boxing to represent electoral outcomes, where the winners are those who remain standing in the ring, while the losers are those who have been knocked down. In like manner, elections are also geared as a race where winning candidates are portrayed as the leaders and the losing candidates come behind. The cartoonists use high jump and hurdling metaphors to represent tasks that are challenging or even impossible to complete. In most cases, bars are placed at very high heights to depict the additional effort that is necessary to complete whatever is perceived to be a challenge. The horse race analogy is especially relevant in explaining how utility prices are rapidly increasing, and that, as a comparison, their increasing pace is likened to racing horses. The metaphorical imagery of football substitution of players is employed to signify the changes in the government or the political appointment changes, which is a very powerful metaphor to the masses. There are also violent clashes between political groups, particularly the majority and the minority in the Ghanaian parliament, which are embodied by wrestling, as it is physical and confrontational. Cartoonists are able to pass on complex political and economic messages in an easily accessible and interesting way using these and other sporting metaphors.

In terms of the cartoonist's use of journey, both cartoonists use a broad spectrum of transportation modes, including road, water, and aircraft cartoons to convey their messages, namely cars, trucks, ships, and boats, along with aeroplanes. All forms of transportation, as the author notes, have their routes and potential delays, such an obstacle can be a roadblock, crossing a river, derailment, or even sinking (Forceville, 2016: 89). The typical path through which journey metaphors have been described consists of three fundamental elements: a point of origin (source),

a path or a journey, and an endpoint (goal), also known as SPG structure. In cartoon discourse, the journey metaphor is the standard metaphor used to illustrate progress or the absence of progress toward a desired goal. Through appeals to travel and journey, the cartoonists give their messages a global dimension, since the image of journeys is highly universal and transcends cultural boundaries, making interpretation easier. However, with this universality, the research shows that such metaphors are often pegged on the recognisable aspects by the cartoonists based on their surrounding sociocultural context.

In relation to the cartoonists' use of religious concepts and biblical references to convey the socio-political and economic problems in Ghana. Both cartoonists used biblical allusions to communicate their messages through well-known stories, including the Last Supper of Jesus, His crucifixion and baptism, the story of David and Goliath, among others. The use of biblical accounts gave the cartoons a universal touch since the biblical stories are known throughout the Ghanaian society. This universality has two important purposes: to make cartoons more intelligible on the universal level; second, to enable audiences to connect with the messages more by being familiar and weighty with the morality of the stories. The biblical tales go beyond geographical and cultural borders, therefore broadening the interpretive capacity of the cartoons and their applicability to a wider audience, beyond local communities.

8. Implication of the Study

This study makes a significant contribution to scholarship on political cartoons within the Ghanaian context. The book provides original insights into the use of visual communication strategies as tools for engaging with and critiquing pressing political and social issues. It thereby reinforces the role of visuals as powerful instruments of social commentary and reflection. Furthermore, these findings initiate prospects for future research by advocating the implementation

of analogous analytical frameworks to political cartoons in other West African nations. The employment of comparative approaches in this field would serve to enhance the existing regional discourse and provide greater insight into the broader social and cultural functions of visual communication in West Africa.

The results of the present study also demonstrate that the familiarity of the source domains and cultural resonance of sports and games, travel, religion, health and illness, and the economy game have a significant impact on increasing the understanding of socio-political and economic problems manifested in Ghanaian political cartoons among the audience. This study highlights the unique effectiveness of political cartoons in the Ghanaian media industry, especially in presenting controversial or otherwise very complicated political messages that the discourse of traditional journalism is usually unable to give equal clarity and receptiveness among the general population. This can be done using a special type of communicative affordance of the cartoonists.

9. Recommendation

The interpretation of the obtained data provided a number of potential directions for further studies. But since these issues were not considered as the main topics of the current research, they were not examined in detail. Although the results were predominantly focused on the well-known themes which Ghanaian cartoonists use to express socio-political and economic concerns, the results also gave a strong path to the way the research will be continued in the future: the variety of semiotic instruments used to complement political cartoons. Such resources might comprise character description, setting decisions, colour play, font size and style, and other visual and textual elements that make up meaning-making. These aspects should be examined in greater depth because they would help to gain a broader understanding of the multimodal strategies, which form the basis of political communication within the Ghanaian setting.

Another useful direction for future research is the linguistic heterogeneity of bubble speech that accompanies political cartoons. Researching this dimension would shed light on the logic behind cartoonists' use of language and the frequency with which specific languages appear in their communication. As mentioned above, additional studies may also involve the syntactic arrangements of these bubble speeches, whereby it is observed whether there is a prevalence of simple, compound or complex sentences.

Moreover, analysing sentence functions would provide valuable insight into whether a discourse is dominated by declaratives, interrogatives, or other forms, thereby revealing how language is strategically used to persuade, provoke, or inform readers.

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List of publications related to the dissertation

Foreign language scientific articles in Hungarian journals (1)

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Argumentum. 19, 267-286, 2023. EISSN: 1787-3606.
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2. **Boakye-Yiadom, G.:** Coterminous Uppercut: An Analysis of Boxing Metaphors in Selected Ghanaian Political Cartoons.
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5. **Boakye-Yiadom, G.:** A Visual Representation of Ghana's 2021 Presidential Election Petition

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