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Metaphorical *parasites* and “parasitic” metaphors

Semantic exchanges between political and scientific vocabularies

Andreas Musolff

University of East Anglia

The metaphorical categorization of social and political adversaries as “parasites” has an infamous history in public discourse: For two centuries it has been routinely used for the purpose of racial and socio-political stigmatization. In cognitive accounts, the *parasite*-metaphor has usually been treated as an example of semantic transfer from the biological to the social domain. Historically, however, the scientific uses cannot be deemed original or primary, as their emergence in the 17th and 18th centuries was preceded by a much older tradition of religious and social meanings. The paper charts the main traditions of diachronic variation in the discourse history of the *parasite*-metaphor and discusses the implications of its findings regarding the assumption of “uni-directionality” of metaphorization processes, which has been a central tenet of cognitive analyses. In conclusion, we ask whether metaphors in political discourse might fruitfully be viewed as a “parasitic” form of communication.

Keywords: Anti-Semitism; Chain of Being; Discourse-historical approach; metaphor; meme; metonymy; parasite; racism.

1. Introduction: What it means to call somebody a “parasite”

- (1) South Wales man *called Jews “parasites”*. [...] Trevor Hannington, 58, pleaded guilty at Liverpool Crown Court [...] to one count of *inciting racial hatred by writing posts on the internet that Jews were “parasites feeding on others”* and “utterly evil sub-beings”.

(WalesOnline: 9 June 2010)¹

1. Italics of relevant metaphorical expressions here and in other examples by AM.

- (2) Ultra-Orthodox Jews rally round parents jailed for defying Israeli Court. [...] “The ultra-Orthodox community is getting stronger and stronger,” said Yitzhak Brudny, a political scientist at Jerusalem’s Hebrew University. [...] “The ultra-Orthodox are dirt poor. *Among secular Israelis and moderate Orthodox Jews, they are seen basically as parasites.* And they have no desire to integrate with other communities”. (The Guardian, 18 June 2010)
- (3) Collier Capital is the private equity firm set up by Jeremy Collier, who has built up a £ 90 million fortune picking up unwanted distressed assets. [...] Mr Collier pioneered the idea of secondary buyouts – where one private equity house purchases a business from another – when he worked as a pension fund manager at ICI [...] He once recalled: “Lots of institutions said: “Why would we want to buy other people’s rubbish?” *We were seen as a leech on a leech’s back.*” (The Times, 6 July 2010)

The three texts quoted above all refer to evaluative utterances, i.e. accusations that certain groups of people (i.e., “Jews” in general, “ultra-orthodox Jews” in Israel, a private equity firm) engage in the *parasitical* exploitation of others (non-Jews, non-ultra-orthodox Israelis, other companies). The lexical items *parasite* and *leech* are thus employed in a metaphorical sense, which is recorded, for instance, in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*:

- (4) parasite [...]: A person who lives at the expense of another person or of society in general; a person who obtains the hospitality, patronage, or favour of the wealthy or powerful by obsequiousness and flattery. (SOED 2002, 2096)
- (5) leech [...] (fig.): A rapacious, exploitative person. (SOED 2002, 1566)

To categorize somebody as a *parasite* or a *leech* is not a neutral statement but expresses disapproval and derision, i.e. it functions as an accusation and/or denunciation. As such it is open to ethical and social disapproval, to the point where it can be prosecuted as a criminal offence, as in the case of racist abuse reported in Example (1). It can be seen as an indicator of social tensions, as evidenced in the political scientist’s comment that is reported by the *Guardian* (2). In Example (3), Mr Collier, who is presumably proud of his own business achievements, recalls the derogatory views of competitors at a time when his success was not yet confirmed. Interestingly, the assessment of his company being “*a leech on a leech’s back*” implies that the financial institutions that the company “preys on” (and perhaps all such institutions) are themselves seen as “leeches”. This view of financial institutions and especially of banks trading in “derivative” assets as exploitative, “leech”-like entities has indeed become wide-spread since the global banking crisis of 2008–2010, as can be gleaned from a manifestation placard that referred to bankers receiving bonuses as “Parasites” who “prey on Jobless” [*sic*] (*The Independent*, 1 May 2010).

If, as seems to be the case in (3), a banker self-referentially uses such a derogatory classification, the utterance could be interpreted as a reportative and (self-)ironical description. Nonetheless, the disapproving stance is still present; otherwise the speaker could not recall the characterisation as a “*leech on a leech’s back*” as a past criticism that has been disproved by his subsequent financial success.

2. Cognitive accounts of “racial parasites”

On account of their derogatory connotations, the terms *leech* and *parasite* are considered to be instances of discriminatory hate speech when used as references to human beings (cf. Bosmaian 1983; Wodak 1989; Charteris-Black 2005, 182–184). The infamous case of the genocidal Nazi propaganda against Jewish people and other minorities as *parasites* on the German people’s *body* has been given special attention in Critical Discourse Analysis and Cognitive Linguistics (cf. Bein 1965; Hawkins 2001; Chilton 2005; Rash 2006; Musolff 2007, 2010). In Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda and ideology, *parasite* and *leech* were parts of a vast lexical field of vocabulary denoting disgusting and dangerous organisms, e.g. *bacteria*, *viruses*, *bacilli*, *elements of decomposition*, *maggots*, *bloodsuckers*, *vipers*, *vermin*, which cause or spread *deadly illnesses* (cf. Dawidowicz 1986, 19, 70, 115; Rash 2006, 155–156, 174; Musolff 2010, 1–22, 24–26, 36–74). This metaphorical field of biological entities, which are anthropomorphized in order to dehumanise specific social groups, can be found in racist discourses to this day (cf. van Dijk 1991; Inda 2000; Pörksen 2005, 26, 67, 232; Kienpointner 2005).

From the viewpoint of Conceptual Metaphor Analysis (CMT) within the larger field of Cognitive Linguistics,² such a systematic relationship among lexical items is seen as evidence of a “source domain” for an underlying conceptual metaphor, which could be paraphrased in this case in a statement such as: ‘Racial/social enemies are parasitic (and thus, destructive) organisms’. The whole domain of *parasitic and destructive organisms* in biology is available for derogatory and abusive depictions of perceived racial/social adversaries. The semantic relationship between the source and target domains of the metaphor is characterized by the distinction of “concrete” and “abstract” meanings: the category for a group of concrete, biological source entities is mapped onto the abstract domain of social, political or ethnic groups. Further cognitive generalizations concerning *parasite*-metaphors have been highlighted in Hawkins (2001) and Chilton (2005). Building on George Lakoff’s and Mark Turner’s (1989) analysis of the *Great Chain of Being*

2. For the positioning of CMT within CL, see Croft and Cruse 2004, 193–203.

as a “cultural model that concerns kinds of beings and their properties and places them on a vertical scale” (Lakoff and Turner 1989, 166), Bruce Hawkins points out that in the Nazi version of the *Chain of Being* as a hierarchy of human races, “Aryan Germans assume the lofty status of superhumans”, whereas “the Jews are reduced iconographically to subhuman beings, ‘parasites’”, which makes them “at best [...] a lower animal [...], at worst [...] a plant of some kind” (Hawkins 2001, 45). Furthermore, in popular understanding, parasites “maintain life within their own bodies by sucking life-sustaining nutrients out of some other body”, which “adds an additional measure of the negativity” (ibid., 46). Paul Chilton interprets the combination of biological and socio-ethnic categories in the Nazis’ equation of parasites and Jews not just as a conceptual “mapping” but as an emergent, “blended” conceptual structure, for which source and target concepts both serve as inputs. Once established, the resulting blend of the *Jew = parasite* can be filled in further within the “disease and medicine frames” as regards aetiological and therapeutic implications: it then “follows” that “the fatal disease caused in the host can be cured by removing it or destroying the parasite”.³

This cognitive perspective on racist imagery provides a stimulating impetus for research but needs to be checked carefully with regard to its empirical linguistic claims. One fundamental problem with the project of connecting Nazi and other racist hate speech to the *Great Chain of Being* concept has been pointed out by Felicity Rash (2006):

The original *Great Chain* was characterized by the principle of ‘continuity’ [...] each level in the *Chain* is seamlessly connected with the next level [...]. Hitler, on the other hand, proclaimed a discontinuity between Aryan and Jew: there was a gulf between the two, one race being good and the other evil. (Rash 2006, 116)

Thus, even if Hitler’s characterisations of “the Jew” as a *parasite* can be compared to entities at the lower end of the traditional *Chain of Being* hierarchy, its formulation in *Mein Kampf* as the absolute, completely separate and contrasting “Other” of the Aryan contradicted the “continuity” principle of the *Chain of Being* (which, as a chain, is continuous by definition).

In fact, Hitler’s metaphors had very little to do with the philosophical tradition of the *Great Chain of Being*, which was analyzed in Arthur Lovejoy’s classic 1936 account of that concept. At the core of the tradition, which spanned almost two millennia, lay a “conception of the universe” that was “composed of an immense [...] number of links ranging in hierarchical order from the meagerest

3. Chilton 2005, 39. For the notion of metaphor as the result of a “blending” operation cf. Grady, Oakley and Coulson 1999; Fauconnier and Turner 2002.

kind of existents [...] through ‘every possible’ grade up to the *ens perfectissimum*’ (Lovejoy 1936, 59). Lovejoy identified three basic principles that formed the conceptual core of this philosophical tradition; besides “continuity” and “gradation” it included also the principle of “plenitude”, i.e. the concept that all parts of the universe – from the “lowest” to the “highest” – were necessary, in a logical as well as an ontological sense, to its being well-ordered and complete (Lovejoy 1936, 20). Compared with this vision, Hitler’s hate-filled view of “the Jew” as the *parasitic* Other of the “altruistic” Aryan race not only violated the notion of continuity, as pointed out by Rash, but also the principle of plenitude: for Hitler – and, it would seem, for present-day antisemites (see Example 1) – the universe was complete only *without* “the Jew”.

A second problem for the traditional cognitive analysis of *parasite* imagery concerns the presumed “concreteness” of biological source concepts vis-à-vis “abstract” social and political categories, which seems to predispose the former to serve as “source” input for the latter. Biological *parasites* and *leeches* are “concrete” in the sense that their effect on a human body can be physically experienced and scientifically demonstrated. Leeches, though small compared with other animal organisms can also be directly seen and felt; however, viruses, bacilli etc. are hardly ever experienced directly; and even the general public’s popular understanding of them as causes of illnesses has been acquired as part of mediated, complex socialization processes. It is therefore debatable whether popular parasitological knowledge can be deemed “concrete” in the experientialist sense favoured by cognitive approaches (cf. Johnson 1987, Gibbs 2005). The “knowledge” about biological parasites that racists invoke and transfer in their rhetoric onto the socio-political groups they dislike is certainly not experientially accessible; rather, it is construed and disseminated through textual and other symbolising media.

3. From society to biology and back: *parasite*-metaphors in history

Even at the level of semantic history, as recorded in dictionaries and encyclopaedias, it is dubious to assume a “primary” biological concept as the source of *parasite* metaphors. The SOED’s definition of *parasite* in a social meaning quoted in Example (4) is the first and earliest definition listed; it is *not* marked “fig.” and it has the indication of first documented usage around the middle of the 16th century (SOED 2002, 2096). Etymologically, the term *parasite*, like its cognates in other European languages, was derived from ancient Greek *parasitos*, which as a noun denoted a “person who eats at the table of another” and may have originally designated a “class of priests who had their meals in common”, without pejorative connotation (cf. SOED 2002, vol. 2, 2096 and Liddell and Scott 1869, 1193).

However, the negative sense of a *parasite* as a type of person that lives at the expense of another and “repays” his inadvertent “host” with flattery and sycophancy appears to have been established already in Antiquity⁴ and was taken over as the dominant sense into the European vernacular languages in the Early Modern period. In Ben Jonson’s 1606 comedy *Volpone, or the Fox*, the attribute “a parasite” designates the character of the wily manservant “Mosca” (The Fly), who aids and abets the scheming nobleman, Volpone. In Shakespeare’s 1608 play *Coriolanus*, the term *parasite* is used by Caius Martius (later surnamed Coriolanus) as a synonym for a toadying courtier (Jonson 1966, *passim*; Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, Act I, Scene 9, line 45).

A biological meaning of *parasite* as an organism that “lives in or on another and draws its nutriment directly from it, harming it in the process” is only attested from the 18th century onwards in the SOED (SOED 2002, 2096), and in the political language of the French revolution we find the first instances of the biologically informed use of the social category *parasite*. In his vindication of the “Third Estate” of 1789, Abbé Sieyès attacked the aristocratic privileges as a system of “parasitic growths that cannot live except on the sap of plants that they exhaust and deplete” (Sieyès 1989, 30). The “therapeutic” solution implicit in such a “diagnosis” was formulated by Thomas Paine who, in *The Rights of Man* of 1791, denounced the *Ancien Régime* as an “augean stable of parasites and plunderers too abominably filthy to be cleansed, by any thing short of a complete and universal revolution.”⁵ Soon, the denunciation of aristocratic privilege as *parasitic* was combined with *bloodsucker* and *vampire* imagery in discourse of the most radical revolutionaries (cf. Hunt 1984, 1991; Schama 1989, 72–73; Desmet, Rooryck and Swiggers 1990, 185–186; Walzer 1992, 191; Hamerton-Kelly 1994, 12–13; de Baecque 1997, 85, 102–106), and in the following centuries, the “Jacobin” condemnation of aristocratic *parasites* would serve as a model for attacks on the bourgeoisie, e.g. by Karl Marx and Vladimir I. Lenin.⁶ In the Soviet Union, the category of *social parasite* was even given a legal definition that designated alleged “enemies of the people” who had to be isolated and imprisoned or expelled (cf. Beermann 1964; Gitelmann 2001, 168).

4 For antique literary sources see Liddell and Scott 1869, 1192–1193.

5 Paine, *Rights of Man. Being an Answer to Mr. Burke’s Attack on the French Revolution*, quoted in Hodson 2007, 139.

6 In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* [1852], Marx depicted bourgeois bureaucracy as a “parasite body” [*Parasitenkörper*] (Marx 1960, vol. 8, 150); Lenin, in *The State and Revolution* [1917], portrayed bourgeois society as a “parasitic organism” that fed on the people (1963–69, vol. 25, chapters 2 and 3).

From the end of the 18th century onwards, *parasite*-status was also ascribed to Jews as a “nation” (which was at first culturally, then ethnically defined). In his *Philosophy of the History of Mankind*, Johann Gottfried Herder described Jews as a *parasitical plant*: “God’s own people who were once given their fatherland as a divine present, have been, almost since their inception a parasitic plant on the stems of other nations”⁷ Soon, however, the *parasite* concept was remapped into the source frame of human physiology, with the new term *nation’s* or *people’s body* [*Volkskörper*] emphasizing the supposed “bodily” nature of nation states.⁸ The emerging new concept of socio-parasites, which did not completely replace but existed alongside the older one, was thus not only informed by its ‘scientification’ in the 18th century (in biology, specifically botanics) but also by a concomitant ‘naturalisation’ of the idea of peoples as physiologically – biologically – grounded wholes. Once combined, the notions of *social parasites that can endanger the lives of their hosts* and of *national bodies that are entitled to self-protection* proved to be an extremely powerful mega-metaphor that fitted exactly the needs of racist, especially anti-Semitic ideologists.

In consequence, the focus shifted decisively to the “race”-*parasite’s* destructive effect on the *host people*, as statements from the second half of the 19th century show. In his book on the allegedly imminent Jewish *Conquest of the World* of 1875, Osman Bey described Jews as “unproductive parasites” that threatened to win global supremacy unless the other nations destroyed “the World’s greatest plague” (cf. Bey 1875, 27, 58). The Prussian Court preacher, Adolf Stöcker denounced “modern Jewry” as an “alien drop of blood in our people’s body, [...] a destructive, wholly destructive force” (Schmitz-Berning 1998, 667–8). In his bestselling anti-Semitic propaganda book on the so-called “Jewish Question” (1881), Eugen Karl Dühring declared that “the Jew” only came into his own when he could “act as a parasite in an existing or impending process of corruption”, and he concluded that “wherever [the Jew] has made his home in the nations’ flesh, one needs to look closely whether it is still healthy”⁹ The National Socialists built on these traditions

7. Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1784–91): “eine parasitische Pflanze auf den Stämmen anderer Nationen”, quoted in Schmitz-Berning 1998, p. 460.

8. Grimm (1984, vol. 26, p. 486) quotes as the earliest source a passage from F. C. Dahlmann’s *History of the French Revolution* (1844–45), which speaks of a “healthy principle of state” that “invigorates the blood circulation in the whole national body” (*ein gesundes staatsprinzip ... erfrischt zugleich den blutumlauf im ganzen volkskörper*).

9. See Dühring, *Die Judenfrage als Racen-, Sitten- und Culturfrage* (1881), quoted in: Schmitz-Berning 1998, 461; for the development of the *body-parasite* scenario as a pseudo-scientific justification in 19th century anti-Semitic literature see also Bein 1965, 128–129.

and radicalised them even further to the point where the alleged dangers for the German people’s existence from the racial *parasites* supposedly required immediate and radical measures, as Hitler spelt out in *Mein Kampf*:

[The Jew] was [...] always a parasite in the body of other peoples. [...] He is and remains the typical parasite, a sponger who like an infectious bacillus keeps spreading as soon as a favourable medium invites him. And the effect of his existence is also similar to that of spongers: wherever he appears, the host nation dies out after a shorter or longer period.¹⁰

As many studies have shown,¹¹ this inherently genocidal metaphor frame survived (and was to some extent legally tolerated) in the margins of right-wing extremist discourses in Germany and Austria also after 1945, and even gained new followers in other countries, despite official declarations declaring it to be taboo. Example (1) is only one of many instances of use in present-day xenophobic discourses that could be cited: what makes it remarkable is that it was successfully prosecuted.¹²

To summarize this overview, we can distinguish four strands in the modern discourse history of the *parasite*-metaphor:¹³

1. From the 16th century onwards, the term *parasite*, borrowed from ancient Greek (via Latin) has been used to denote a social concept of a sponging, freeloading person or group of persons, with pejorative connotations that are based on ethical disapproval. This type of sponger-parasite, whose effect lies in the damage to other people’s resources, has been treated predominantly as an object of derision and ridicule.
2. In the 18th century this social meaning was extended to refer to *biological* entities (cf. Price 1980; Zimmer 2001; Cox 2002). Crucially, the potentially fateful consequences for the *host* organism were now foregrounded: host organisms can die if their parasites draw too much nutriment from them or act as transmitters of dangerous diseases. Defined as a scientific, biological category, the term should in principle have no ethical or political connotations. However, in popular, anthropomorphizing representations of science,

10. Hitler 1933, 334; for analyses of the central function of the metaphor of *blood-poisoning* in the context of anti-Semitic *parasite* imagery in *Mein Kampf* see Friedländer 1998, 33, 87; Rash 2006, 174, 177; Musolff 2010, 38–42.

11. See Benz 1995; Hartmann 1994; Heer et al. 2008; Steiner 1987; Eitz and Stötzel 2007; Kopperschmidt 2006; Pollak and Wodak 2001; Wodak 2011.

12. See van Dijk 2000; Musolff 2011; Messer, Schroeder, Wodak 2012.

13. For the concept of “discourse history” within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis see Wodak 2009 and Reisigl and Wodak 2009.

we find a reversal of the mapping “direction” between biological and social-ethical meanings: biological entities are endowed with intention and volition and thus moral responsibility. Popular medical self-help or advice websites, for instance, describe *parasites* to this day as *insidious*, *harmful* or *destructive*.¹⁴ This is by no means a recent phenomenon: even Charles Darwin, when he used the concept of the mistletoe as a parasite in *On The Origin of Species*, found it necessary to stress the inapplicability of humanizing attributes: “it is [...] preposterous to account for the structure of this parasite, with its relations to several distinct organic beings, by the effects of external conditions, or of habit, or of the volition of the plant itself” (Darwin 1901, 5, Foreword to the third edition). Evidently, even he had to contend with strong anthropomorphizing tendencies of *parasite* representation among his audience.

3. Towards the end of the 18th century, this biologically influenced meaning aspect was in turn used to inform the new concept of political adversaries as social *parasites* that pose an imminent and deadly threat to their *host people* and therefore must be destroyed at all cost.
4. Since the 19th century, a further strand of *parasite*-metaphorical discourses has developed which targets specifically ethnically and racially defined groups. In its most extreme form, in Nazi jargon, this “biologized” social concept was invested with further connotations based on the doctrine that nations and human “races” were “organisms” which competed in a deadly struggle for existence against each other. This conceptual version still underlies present-day racist uses and makes *parasite* a term of disapproval and abuse. Its denunciatory quality would be unthinkable without the biological background but, as we have seen, the biological meaning in turn rests on the foundation of a social category.

4. Conclusions

On the evidence of the discourse-historical data, any unidirectional model of the *parasite*-metaphor as the mapping of a “concrete” source concept based on direct bodily experience onto an abstract socio-political concept is revealed as an oversimplification. Rather, the mapping direction of this metaphor has “turned round”

14. See, for instance: <http://www.healingdaily.com/colon-kidney-detoxification/parasites.htm>; <http://dailyparasite.blogspot.com/>; <http://www.allergyescape.com/human-parasites.html>; <http://www.appliedozone.com/parasites.html>; <http://student.biology.arizona.edu/honors98/group15/whatisaparasite.htm>. (accessed 10/01/2011).

at least twice: first from the socio-ethical to the biological domain and later from the biological domain again back to the social, each time also introducing new semantic aspects. Its social and political applications and connotations in the 19th and 20th centuries are therefore by no means identical to those from the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods. When we connect this discourse “career” of *parasite* in modern times to its pre-modern semantic background, especially to its etymological source terms Latin *parasitus* and Greek *parasitos*, we gain an overview of the long-term history of an ever-changing metaphor. Only in the very earliest phase it appears to have been the metonymic transfer of a term denoting communal eating habits among priests in ancient Greece to a group name for these priests themselves. Even in ancient times, this metonymy became metaphorically extended so as to designate spongers and freeloaders who take advantage of others. Since then, the metaphor has developed into a denunciatory accusation, which appears to have gained only further polemical potential from its contact with scientific terminology.

The scientific insight into the detrimental or fatal effects that some bio-parasites can have on their hosts seems to have added a degree of negativity (and therapeutic urgency) that was absent from earlier uses. The racist use of the *parasite* metaphor and other pseudo-biological imagery in Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* to “justify” their genocidal policies, and its persistence in racist discourses, has motivated both scientists and linguists to speak of it as a *mind virus*, i.e., as a case of cultural “replicator” or “meme”, in the sense in which this category had been introduced by Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* (cf. Brodie 1996; Dawkins 2004, 166–171, 415; Chilton 2005, 42; Alexander 2009; for the *meme* concept see Dawkins 1989, p. 192). In as much as metaphors “depend” on human brains to entertain and (re-)produce them, they can be considered to be *mind viruses*, but so are all other types of concepts, regardless of whether they are useful or harmful. Furthermore, in common language use, the term *virus*, like *parasite*, has negative connotations on account of its connection with illness and is therefore also a favourite source concept for racist and xenophobic metaphors (cf. Sontag 1991, 179–180; Musolff 2010, 26–27, 35, 40–41). Apart from the irony that racist concepts and discourse themselves become the “target” of derogatory comments,¹⁵ the metaphor of the *mind virus* appears to be of little explanatory value.

The same argument applies also to using *parasite* as a metaphor for political imagery; however, if it were possible to avoid the derogatory connotations of

15. The British daily *The Independent*, for instance, ascribed to far right parties in Europe the ability to act as “a virus which spreads through the democratic institutions that it abhors like some kind of superbug, a political ‘MRSA’” (*The Independent*, 16 January 2007).

its non-scientific use, it could perhaps still be of analytical value for the analysis of metaphorical concepts in discourse history. Among the most striking features of discourse metaphors (as opposed to the notion of ahistoric, static “conceptual metaphors”) is their adaptability to new contexts of use.¹⁶ As we have seen, the *social parasite* metaphor shows a high degree of semantic variability on account of the interaction between its source and target domains, but we might still wonder whether this is perhaps an exceptional case. There is, however, substantial evidence from recent corpus-based studies of political metaphors in various languages and text genres that shows seemingly unlimited variability in their cognitive import as well as in their pragmatic effects.¹⁷ This conceptual variability is, of course, closely related to general features of political discourse, such as its adversarial style, the need for novelty effects, and its permeability for semantic exchanges with other types of discourse, in particular with everyday language use as well as with “special languages”. The mutual influence of scientific and social meaning aspects that we observed in the discourse history of the *parasite* metaphor is a case in point.

In order to allow for such cross-influence and maximum adaptability, the linguistic unit in question must be open to the integration of new semantic input; it must be able to absorb and accommodate a maximum degree of context information and make it accessible for its users to achieve new cognitive constructions and pragmatic effects. This is the feature that may allow us to compare political metaphors with bio-parasites, i.e. their dependence on, and exploitation of, a “host” context that furnishes them with material for their own “replication”. This view of political metaphor is indebted to the “virological” approaches to conceptual and cultural history mentioned above but attempts to avoid their tendency to reify metaphoric discourse phenomena into conceptual substances that have their own teleology. Its purpose is to highlight the lack of semantic independence of political metaphors as the necessary pre-condition for their characteristic ability to foster innovative communication. All metaphors “depend” on non-figurative meanings, but in the case of political metaphors, this feature is enhanced to the point where the derivative semantic status of the metaphor allows the speakers to achieve new emergent meaning structures and special rhetorical effects.

16. For the concept of “discourse metaphor” see Zinken 2007; Zinken, Hellsten, and Nerlich 2008; Zinken and Musolff 2009; Kövecses 2009.

17. See e.g. the following selection from the past decade only: Dirven, Frank and Ilie 2001; Baranov and Zinken 2003; Charteris-Black 2004 and 2005; Zbierska-Sawala 2004; Drulák 2004; Bärtsch 2004; Musolff 2004; Bednarek 2005; Cap 2006; Fabiszak 2007; Goatly 2007; Semino 2008; Kornprobst, Pouliot, Shah and Zaiotti 2008; Gavriely-Nuri 2008; Petraškaite-Pabst 2010.

This functional advantage of political imagery is, unfortunately, available to all its users, whatever their social, political or ethical purposes may be. Notorious political metaphors, such as *parasite* and *illness*, *war* and *flood* imagery have doubtless been used and instrumentalized with devastating historical consequences, but the ethical condemnation of these consequences cannot be derived from their analysis as derivative, or “parasitic” semantic status. Instead, the discourse-historical perspective on metaphors as discursive “parasites” aims to explain their remarkable power to establish new social meanings and, if they prove dangerous or criminal, to combat them in counter-discourses.

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Author’s address

Andreas Musolff
School of Language and Communication Studies
University of East Anglia
Norwich Research Park
Norwich NR4 7TJ
UK

a.musolff@uea.ac.uk

About the author

Andreas Musolff, Dr. phil., habil., is Professor of Intercultural Communication at the University of East Anglia in Norwich (UK). His monographs include *Metaphor, Nation and the Holocaust* (2010) and *Metaphor and Political Discourse* (2004) and *War against the Public: The Language of Terrorism* (1996, in German); he has co-edited five volumes on political discourse in Europe and metaphor theory.