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**Designing the Welfare State:  
Selected Building Metaphors of the Welfare State  
across the British Press**

ABSTRACT

This paper, drawing on insights from discourse-historical approach to discourse analysis and applying Conceptual Metaphor theory, examines selected BUILDING metaphors of the welfare state in a corpus of four British newspapers. The paper compares the use of these metaphors in the four newspapers and considers their argumentative function, finding that while the metaphors largely overlap between the newspapers, their argumentative functions are more though not completely distinct, legitimising government reforms of the welfare state in the conservative newspapers, with the left-leaning newspapers using them to support and oppose these reforms.

Keywords: welfare state; metaphor analysis; conceptual metaphors; media discourse; political discourse

1. Context, corpus, and timeframe

It is perhaps not surprising that Raymond Williams includes welfare, rather than the welfare state, in his *Keywords. A Vocabulary for Culture and Society*: what he calls its 'extended sense', 'organized care or provision' (1988: 333), remains undisputed even if it joined

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“most of the older words in its sense” in having “acquired unacceptable associations” (ibidem). With the welfare state, there is no agreement not only concerning its evaluation, but also the referent of the term, to the extent that a historian of the welfare state declares he would rather not have had to use the term, and that the welfare state does not exist as an entity (Timmins, 2001: 7), despite being an important element of the British political system and social organisation. This contradiction is what makes the study of the concept, as reflected in the use of the term, so interesting, and the present paper sets out to analyse selected metaphors of the welfare state in the British press.

The choice of the press as the object of analysis is motivated not just by its relatively easy availability, but primarily by its position as both a reflection of the public opinion and as a formative factor shaping it. This appears to be the case particularly in the UK, where recent reports (Ponsford, 2015) estimate that 94% adults “interact with national newspapers or magazines in print or online”, and is especially important at the time of a financial crisis and spending cuts by the Coalition government, both of these affecting the welfare state during the timeframe (2008 — the onset of the financial crisis in the UK — to end of April 2015, just ahead of the general election scheduled for May) selected for that reason. The newspapers have been chosen to cover the opposite ends of the political spectrum, with the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail* self-identifying as conservative and the liberal *Guardian*, along with the largely left-wing the *Daily Mirror*, here referred to as left-leaning. At the same time, this selection covers two quality newspapers — the *Telegraph* and the *Guardian* — with the remaining two newspapers classifiable as tabloids, a divide that has turned out to be less important than the former. The corpus has been compiled from the LexisNexis database and has four separate subcorpora with texts from the four newspapers (along with their Sunday sister papers) containing at least two occurrences of the search term ‘welfare state’.

## 2. Theoretical and methodological assumptions

### 2a. Discourse-historical approach to discourse analysis

This paper is informed by the discourse-historical approach (DHA) to discourse analysis, and so Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), which views ‘language as social practice’ (Fairclough and Wodak 1997). DHA understands discourse as a “strictly historical construct which is based on the ongoing negotiation of concepts and ideas developed in both synchronic and diachronic dimension” (Wodak 1996, quoted in Krzyżanowski, Triandafyllidou, and Wodak 2009). This paper adopts this definition, although it uses the countable form of the term for this sense, and the concept in question is that of the welfare state.

The original application of DHA was the analysis of xenophobic discourses (see Reisigl and Wodak, 2001), and while it encouraged a multidisciplinary approach, it centred on text analysis, where it examined discursive strategies in the representation of marginalised groups: nomination; predication; argumentation; perspectivation; and intensification or mitigation (see Wodak 2001:73). The focus on a concept rather than a group necessitates a slightly different toolbox. This paper retains the focus on context-informed textual analysis, and concentrates on what Wodak calls argumentation strategies, which she designates ‘topoi’, and defines as “content-related warrants or ‘conclusion rules’ which connect the argument or arguments with the conclusion, the claim” (2001:74). It also adopts a simplified understanding of what a topos is: here, the topos of x recommends or discourages a course of action because of x which is self-evidently right or wrong (for instance, the topos of help — referenced among others in Krzyżanowski 2009 — would recommend that an action be performed because it is tantamount to help, and helping someone in need is self-evidently right). The focus of analysis in this paper is the function of selected BUILDING metaphors in the topoi present in the corpus, referred to as their argumentative function.

## 2b. Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Metaphor is here understood as speaking of one thing in terms of another, and the framework for metaphor analysis is Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). Its original formulation (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) holds that language is metaphorical because thought is metaphorical: *“the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one thing in terms of another”* (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 5, emphasis original), as abstract concepts are systematically structured by ones that are more concrete and based on embodied experience. A conceptual metaphor is understood to comprise systematic correspondences, or mappings, between the source and target domains, where a domain is “any coherent organization of experience” (Kövecses, 2010: 4) and is posited on the basis of linguistic expressions. The conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR<sup>1</sup> thus comprises a number of mappings from the source domain of WAR to the target one of ARGUMENT, as interlocutors correspond to enemies and arguments to weapons or missiles. Entailments are what can be inferred from the metaphor, such as the hostility that underlies an argument, or the construal of a temporary setback in a quest for a long-term outcome as losing a battle to win a war (Musolff, 2016: 7-8). Similar points apply to conceptual metonymy, although the mapping takes place between two entities within the same domain rather than across domains (COMMANDER FOR ARMY is one example). While Lakoff and Johnson (1980) originally posit that mapping takes place at the level of domains, this paper assumes that it may occur at the level of other mental representations, such as the more abstract image schema (Kövecses, 2017) or the less abstract scenario (Musolff, 2006, Semino, 2008).

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<sup>1</sup> This paper uses the terms ‘Vehicle’ and ‘Topic’ for figurative expressions, while SMALL CAPITALS denote conceptual metaphors, metonymies, or elements of conceptual structure, and individual mappings are Capitalised. Metaphors in the course of the analysis have been identified with recourse to MIPVU (a variant of the Metaphor Identification Procedure by the Pragglejaz group, see Steen et al 2010).

### 2c. Metaphor in CDS

The recourse of CDS-informed analyses to CMT (examples include Charteris-Black, 2004; Hart, 2010, which supplements CMT with Blending Theory; or Musolff, 2016) is not surprising, given some claims made on the functions of metaphor in discourse even in studies without an explicit commitment to CDS. Perhaps the most far-reaching claim comes from Lakoff and Johnson (1980), where metaphors have been declared able “to create realities, especially social realities, for us”: a metaphor ‘guides’ a course of action that conforms to it, becoming a ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ (156). Musolff (2016: 31) gives an attenuated interpretation of this claim, referencing the consent of a discourse community to a metaphor as a necessary element of such a self-fulfilling prophecy. Less radically, Hart (2010: 127) designates metaphor — both in CMT and CDS — as “both strategic and ideological”, and its “added communicative value” that Musolff (2016: 136) sees as pragmatic effects can also be identified as carrying a covert evaluation (Charteris-Black, 2004) or inferences preferring certain resolutions or world-views (see Musolff, 2006).

### 3. BUILDING metaphors

Metaphors with BUILDING as the source domain are not uncommon in political discourse, with their potential to represent collective action or complex entities with many parts, typically a country or a society. Charteris-Black (2004: 69-85) finds it one of the most productive source domains in his corpus of Conservative and Labour election manifestos, with the conceptual metaphors (that he refers to as ‘underlying’) formulated as SOCIETY/COUNTRY IS A BUILDING and WORTHWHILE ACTIVITY IS BUILDING prominent in his sample of political discourse. He finds such metaphors have an overwhelmingly positive evaluation (though he does give an example to the contrary), expressing as they do ‘aspiration towards desired social goals’ (70) and allowing a positive presentation of delayed rewards, justifying ‘patience and effort’ (71). Lu and Ahrens (2008) relativise his conclusions somewhat, finding different functions and connotations of BUILDING metaphors in a corpus of Taiwanese political speeches.

Their account highlights the impact of local factors, or ‘social resources’ (also noted by Charteris-Black, whose 2004 study they discuss at length), on the use and form of metaphorical expressions. Their analysis finds two significant groups of BUILDING metaphors which differ with regard to mapping principles (Ahrens, 2010), a concept somewhat similar to Kövecses’ meaning focus (see Kövecses, 2017), and partly to Charteris-Black’s ‘underlying conceptual metaphor’ (2004). The group they describe as retrospective BUILDING metaphors highlight the foundation of the country and the achievements of past leaders, where ‘founders are builders’ and ‘past achievements are cornerstones’ are the mapping principles in operation. The other group, labelled reconstruction metaphors, bears in the authors’ view a closer (though not complete) resemblance to Charteris-Black’s account of BUILDING metaphors as expressing the need for collective effort.

In this corpus, the construal of the welfare state as a building is interpretable as an instance of a more general conceptual metaphor COMPLEX SYSTEMS ARE BUILDINGS. Metaphorical expressions indicating this conceptual metaphor are attested across all subcorpora, and the bulk of them can be categorised into three broad groups with distinct meaning foci on the planning, structure, and disintegration of the welfare state. This paper deals with the first group, which highlights the design stage within the entailed mapping ‘Planning the Welfare State is Designing a Building’, with the boundary between planning and the actual construction process obscured by the presence of the metonymy PLANNING AS BUILDING.

These metaphors often foreground the authorship of the welfare state, or the agency of one or several individuals (rather than a group) in establishing it. The typical reference point is the 1940s, the decade of the Beveridge Report and the reforms of the Attlee government. The Vehicles are:

*Telegraph*: foundations; architect; blueprint; designed

*Mail*: foundation; foundations; blueprint; designed; drawn up; architect; cornerstone

*Guardian*: architect; foundations; blueprint

*Mirror*: blueprint; foundations

The designation of the ‘architect of the welfare state’, if associated with a proper name, is most often ascribed to William Beveridge as the author of the Beveridge Report. He is referenced as such in the *Telegraph*, *Mail*, and *Guardian* subcorpora. Though the term ‘architect’ is not attested in the *Mirror*, the ‘blueprint for the welfare state’ is attributed to Beveridge, just as in all three occurrences of the term ‘blueprint’ in the *Mail* subcorpus. The verbs ‘designed’ or ‘drawn up’, compatible with the BUILDING as part of what might be termed the DESIGN scenario, also attribute the authorship of the welfare state to Beveridge in the *Mail*. While ‘foundation(s)’ or ‘cornerstone’ can denote structurally important parts of a building, they are also strongly associated across the corpus with the establishment of the welfare state within the PLANNING AS BUILDING metonymy, as specific individuals are stated to have laid its foundations or cornerstones. This is again most typically but not exclusively Beveridge, although the names of Lloyd George and Attlee also recur, the former particularly in the *Guardian*. The *Telegraph* has one instance where someone contemporary has that function: ‘If Mr Miliband is to be the architect of a reborn welfare state and the prime minister Britain needs, he has something far more difficult to prove’ (Riddell, *Telegraph* 2013). This is a conditional use, however, and works to throw doubt on the Labour leader’s capacity to fulfill it).

The most distinctive context of these ‘planning’ metaphorical expressions across the corpus is what might be termed the topos of original intention, where the intentions of the founders of the welfare state are a valid factor that can determine its shape. In the conservative subcorpora this topos typically works to provide rationale for welfare reform, whether by New Labour or the post-2010 Coalition government, by stressing its compatibility with the principles behind the original design of the welfare state and/or views proffered by Beveridge. Consistency with the original design can be expressed as a

virtue in itself, in a strong form of the topos, as in the passage below, where the verb ‘built’ is part of an extended, paragraph-structuring metaphor which opens an editorial about the impact of immigration on the welfare state:

- (1) The welfare state of the Forties was built to provide a safety net for the poor and vulnerable of Britain. Its architects had no idea that it would one day be available to millions of migrant European workers. Such a proposition not only departs from the original design of the welfare system, but also risks undermining it. (*Telegraph* 2013)

The establishment of the welfare state is compressed into a complete process of building with a firmly established purpose, further foregrounded by the references to the design and unnamed architects of the welfare state, which blurs the boundary between planning and construction. Departure from the intentions of the original designers is deemed problematic in itself: undermining the welfare system, here textually synonymous to the welfare state, is expressed as a merely additional (introduced by ‘but also’) problem. The reference to design appears to underscore the fixity of purpose, where the original design determines later use and leaves no room to accommodate social and/or political change, such as the changing reasons for poverty and new ways of alleviating it. The topos of original intention is thus clearly in operation.

A perhaps weaker form of the topos can be discerned in a *Mail* column on the welfare state occasioned by the Philpott case:

- (2) What the Philpott trial showed was the pervasiveness of evil caused by benefit dependency. The welfare state, which was designed to provide a safety net for those in genuine need, worked only in those vanished times, more than half a century ago, when there remained a culture of honesty, respect for the police and the law. (Wilson, *Mail* 2013)

The figurative use of ‘designed’ again highlights what is stated to be the intended purpose of the welfare state, as well as its original environment. The latter—which appears more than a little idealised—is deemed incompatible with modern attitudes. These in turn are attributed to the impact of the present-day welfare state which causes benefit dependency, as in the passage above. The failure of the



welfare state — expressed with a metaphorical expression from the MACHINE source domain (compatible with the verb ‘designed’, which may be reinterpreted accordingly) — is thus not an indictment of the original design, but of its present form, and so of modern society, and the topos of original intention works to discredit both.

The topos of original intention draws on ‘planning’ metaphors also in the left-leaning subcorpora. In the *Guardian* subcorpus, the range of views or policies legitimised with recourse to this topos is broader, however, and it has examples of such metaphors deployed in contexts supporting and opposing welfare reform. These are evidenced by two excerpts from *Observer* columns, one on fairness, the other on universal benefits:

- (3) The coalition has stumbled on political gold; using fairness to create new categories of the deserving and undeserving. Even William Beveridge, the architect of the welfare state, was mindful of the risk of a system that people might cheat. Legitimacy, he knew, required that the principles and practice of his system respected a basic human instinct; that you should be rewarded in some degree to your contribution — hence his conception of national insurance. (Hutton, *Observer* 2010)
- (4) The only case she can make, which used to be a good one, is that benefits should be universal because that way the middle classes are bound into the welfare state and experience reward from all the contributions they have made in the past. And universalism banishes the stigma of means-tested state handouts, an aspiration dear to the architect of the welfare state, William Beveridge. (Porter, *Observer* 2013)

In both, Beveridge is referred to as the architect of the welfare state, and something he knew or felt is implied to be reflected in a feature of the original welfare state: the contributory aspect to (some) benefits in the former passage, seen as preferable in the discourse of welfare reform, and universal provision, restricted by the Coalition reforms, in the latter. Both policies are legitimised in the excerpts by the reference to the thoughts and feelings of Beveridge, cited as supporting arguments within the topos of original intention, perhaps better described here as the topos of Beveridge.

The *Mirror* subcorpus has instances of the metaphorical expressions highlighting the design of the welfare state in two texts;

neither works within the topos of original intention (though the topos itself is present in the subcorpus). One text, headlined ‘100 Radical Heroes who Changed the World’, lists David Lloyd George at number 61, with the brief gloss stating that ‘the Welsh Wizard laid the foundations of the welfare state’ (Maguire, *Mirror* 2015), reiterating the welfare state as a self-evidently worthwhile past achievement. The other text is a profile of the then Health Secretary, Andy Burnham, published not long before the 2010 election:

- (5) In his 1944 blueprint for the welfare state, Beveridge identified five "giants" — Want, Ignorance, Disease, Squalor and Idleness — to be slain after WW2. "Because people are living longer, there's a sixth giant — fear of old age," says Andy. "That's why we propose a National Care Service, on NHS terms, free at the point of use, according to need. If we provide social care on the same basis as health care we can finally make them one system, integrating the two. That's what we should do in the next decade. (Routledge, *Mirror* 2010)

In the passage, Burnham speaks of the need for a workable social care system to be integrated in the welfare state, necessitated by the increased life expectancy. This, interestingly, is not designated as a reform of the welfare state. The reform is nonetheless articulated in terms compatible with those used in or about the Beveridge Report, the ‘blueprint for the welfare state’ (misdated to 1944), with another giant added to the original five. The need to remedy a shortcoming of the welfare state is thus expressed in a way which not only does not detract from what is seen as the founding document, but co-opts its vocabulary (as well as positive associations with it and Beveridge himself) to garner support for the reform. This is facilitated by the prefatory status of a blueprint, a Vehicle better suited for this context than ‘foundations’ or ‘cornerstone’, allowing as it does more flexibility.

There are also instances across the corpus of metaphors highlighting the planning of the welfare state which do not function within this topos, however, such as the following excerpt from a *Telegraph* column on the broader shape of social security by a (conservative) Labour MP, Frank Field:

- (6) Arguably, our current welfare system is more aligned to what was available pre-Beveridge, this despite Beveridge being still actively acknowledged as the architect of the modern welfare state. (...) Beveridge's proposals, which Clement Attlee, the prime minister, endorsed, were value-driven. (Field, *Telegraph* 2012)

This passage also notes the difference between Beveridge's design and the current form of the welfare state, evaluating the former more positively than the latter. In this case, however, the positive evaluation of the product is expressly justified by the claim in the last excerpted sentence, and the subsequent paragraphs outline the features of the 1940s welfare state the author considers preferable to its present-day shape. The positive evaluation of the original welfare state is thus justified by the specific advantages it purportedly has, rather than presumed within the topos of original intention. The 'architect' metaphor is thus consistent with the overall evaluation of the original welfare state but is not responsible for it. Rather, ARCHITECTURE (as a sub-domain of BUILDING) simply appears an accessible source domain for planning large-scale projects, and what seems relevant here is the substantial personal imprint of the designer on the product the 'architect' metaphor entails.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

While not all metaphorical expressions in the 'planning' category co-occur with references to Beveridge, he is clearly a looming figure in the passages above. This is likely because he is a convenient vehicle to channel conservative criticism of the welfare state, having expressed such criticism himself, and at the same time a figure cherished on the Left as a founder of the welfare state. It is perhaps significant that the last passage which avoids the topos of original intention also mentions Attlee, who is only sporadically designated as a constructor and never as architect of the welfare state in the corpus, and does not typically evoke said topos.

More generally, it is clear that BUILDING metaphors are a stock part of political discourse, and apart from conferring a basic positive evaluation on the target concept, their presence is not particularly

significant. However, what appears interesting in this sample of discourse is that the Vehicles largely overlap between the subcorpora and have a similar, legitimising function, but there is a disparity in what they legitimise. Further, in the data analysed, the metaphors that highlight planning appear to entail, or at least correlate with, the assumption that the original design is binding, which is not the case for either design or architecture generally. Examining this aspect of these ‘planning’ metaphors in general discourse could yield interesting insights.

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