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**Research Paper**

## Conceptual Operations in Multimodal Political Humor

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### Abstract

This paper examines how different construals realized in semiotic modes create humor in Persian multimodal political discourse. The paper also elucidates the mechanisms of intersemiotic relations between images and linguistic items in political humor. To this end, humorous multimodal texts from a Persian political news website were analyzed. The results show that although conceptual mappings of type metaphor, metonymy, or metaphonymy are the most prominent Logical Mechanisms in humorous political co-text images, various conceptual operations help to convey a comical sense. These conceptualization strategies include schematization through different image schemas, framing through different categorizations, identification through profiling different aspects of the scene, and positioning through realizing different points of view. Moreover, unlike other multimodal news texts, divergence rather than convergence better explains the intersemiotic link between the two modes in this discourse genre. The findings reveal some promising potentials of the cognitive approach to multimodal discourse studies.

**Keywords:** Cognitive linguistics, Conceptual operations, Political discourse, Humor, Multimodality.

"A detailed characterization of the conceptual structures being built and manipulated is as fundamental and indispensable to discourse study as it is to the grammatical investigation" (Langacker, 2001)

### 1. Introduction

In the first issue of the journal *Cognitive Linguistics*, Lakoff (1990) introduces generalization and cognitive commitments as two critical commitments in cognitive linguistics. While the former concerns "the characterization of general principles that are responsible for all aspects of human language," the latter emphasizes that such principles should "accord with what is known about the mind and brain from other disciplines" (Evans and Green, 2006: p. 27). In this regard, the cognitive approach to language provides a valuable framework for analyzing multimodal discourse (Hart and Queraltó, 2021) and other discourse studies, as emphasized by Langacker in the quotation above. Cognitive considerations have also been shown to be pivotal in humor studies. Veale, Kurt and Brone (2006) assert, "humor is undoubtedly a cognitive phenomenon," and so "a cognitive linguistic approach to humor research *should* yield the deepest and most coherent insights" (emphasis added). Similarly, Brone (2017: p. 250) argued that linguistic humor research and cognitive linguistics have "a shared epistemological basis." Both areas of research deal with "specific aspects of the world, rooted in experience" (Raskin 1985, p. 81), which are called the semantic script in the former and frame, domain, or idealized cognitive model in the latter tradition.

In this paper, presuming the cognitive basis of interaction and adopting the construal theory stance, I investigate how different conceptual operations contribute to meaning construction in multimodal political humor. To this end, I employ the cognitive model proposed by Hart (2014) and Hart and Queraltó (2021) to qualitatively analyze multimodal political humorous texts. Our dataset includes multimodal texts collected from the *Talxand* ('bitter laugh') page of the Iranian *Tabnak Professional News Site*, published online from June 2021 to September 2021.

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I present a concise overview of some of the most relevant notions and studies in humor discourse in section 2. Then, in section 3, we briefly review multimodality studies, focusing on the cognitive approach to multimodality accounts. In section 4, a review of conceptualization and construal operations is presented. This section sketches the theoretical framework of this study. Section 5 analyses the data; finally, section 6 presents the concluding remarks.

## 2. Humor

Broadly defined, humor refers to "all types of phenomena that generate mirth" (Attardo, 2021) and often (but not necessarily) results in laughter. Humor in discourse has been studied from various perspectives, including conversation analysis (e. g., Sacks, 1989; Attardo, Pickering and Baker, 2011), the functionalist approach (e. g., Attardo, 2015a), corpus linguistics (e. g., Partington, 2007). Although there have been debates on the all-encompassing cognitive approach to studying humor (See Attardo, 2021, for a review of this theme), this approach has recently gained popularity. This trend includes but is not limited to the study of frame-shifting in humor (Coulson, 2015), mental spaces in humor (Brone, 2008), conceptual metaphor and humor (Goatly, 2012; Attardo, 2015b), conceptual blending in humor (Abdel-Raheem, 2018), and embodiment in the ealeguage of humor (Samermit and Gibbs, 2016).

In his influential Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH), Raskin (1985) argues that a text can be characterized as humorous if it satisfies two conditions: "i) The text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts; ii) The two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite" (p. 99). The term script, similar to what a cognitivist would consider a frame, is a unit of encyclopedic knowledge evoked by lexical items in a text. The scripts actualized by elements within a text may be compatible, overlapping, or incompatible (Attardo, 2001: p. 17). However, script incompatibility or Script Opposition is crucial when generating humor in language. There are a few types of high-level or abstract script opposition introduced mainly by Raskin, including actual/ none-actual, normal/abnormal, possible/impossible, good/bad, life/death, sex/none-sex; money/no-money and high stature/ low stature (Raskin, 2017: p. 112). Attardo (2017) states that "each humorous text will instantiate one very abstract Script Opposition in a very concrete text-specific opposition" (p. 134).

Attardo and Raskin (1991) broadened the SSTH into the "General Theory of Verbal Humor" (GTVH) and introduced five other Knowledge Resources (KR) that are necessary for generating a joke, in addition to the script opposition of the SSTH. The first is 'the language,' the knowledge resource responsible for the exact wording and the distribution of lexical items in a humorous utterance. The second KR is 'the target,' determining the person or group to whom the humorous stereotype is addressed. The third is 'the narrative strategy,' which explains the genre or narrative to which the humorous text belongs. The fourth resource is 'the situation,' the information about the setting where the humor takes place, and, finally, 'the logical mechanism (LM),' that is, the local logic or the strategy behind the joke (Attardo, 2001: p. 22- 27). As an instance, see example (1) cited in Attardo (2001: p. 26):

"(1) Madonna does not have it; the Pope has it but does not use it; Bush has it short, and Gorbachev long. What is it?"

Answer: a last name."

The KR development in (1) is described in (2).

- |                        |  |
|------------------------|--|
| (2) Script Opposition: | obscene/ none- obscene                             |
| Logical Mechanism:     | garden-path phenomenon                             |
| Narrative Strategy:    | dialogue   |
| Target:                | famous people                                      |
| Language:              | (less directly relevant) the ordering of the items |
| Situations:            | (less directly relevant) the time and the place    |

Kayam, Sover, and Galily (2014) believe, "Just as politics deals with every aspect of life, so can humor be found everywhere, including in politics itself." Much of the politics and political practices are grounded upon the rhetorical maneuvers of political practitioners. Therefore, as a rhetorical adroitness, humor finds its way into politics by applying a thin veneer of playfulness to critical issues to add to its appeal. Furthermore, humor is used in media discourse to implicitly convey political perspectives and persuade, manipulate, and sometimes criticize politics.

## 3. Multimodality

Multimodality is a phenomenon in which different semiotic modes<sup>1</sup> are combined to construct meaning in a given instance of discourse (van Leeuwen, 2015). In a multimodal discourse, a coherent text is woven by diverse threads, from speech and writing to image, gesture, and music (Kress, 2012). Multimodality is a rule rather than an exception in everyday communication. In other words, language is not alone in shouldering the responsibility for constructing and

<sup>1</sup> The definition and determination of the types of modes is a disputable issue. Forceville (2006), for instance, has attempted to make a partial inventory of the modes, namely, spoken language; written language; visuals; music; sound; taste; smell; touch; and gestures. Yet, the issue is debatable and worthy to be studied more. To see more details see Forceville (2021).

exchanging meaning; instead, it is only one part of the whole, along with other modes at work in social and linguistic interaction. In a multimodal text, multiple semiotic modes, including facial expressions, gestures, tones of voice (within spoken discourse), and visual conventions such as bolding, capitalizing, italicizing, and quotation marks (within written texts), are integrated with linguistics elements to facilitate meaning-making processes. In a sense, "even supposedly mono-modal spoken and written language" comprises more than one semiotic information resource (Forceville, 2021).

What is mainly at stake in multimodality is the intersemiotic relations among different modes. A semiotic mode is 'redundant' when it does not contribute significantly to meaning-making processes in the multimodal discourse (Abner, Cooperrider, and Goldin-Meadow, 2015). Quite to the contrary, the intersemiotic relation in the meaning-making process can be characterized as 'convergence', the process through which meanings conveyed by different modes are supplementary, and one mode reinforces the meaning conveyed through another mode (Hart and Queralto, 2021). In addition, the third type of intersemiotic relation is deemed 'intersemiotic divergence', where, according to Guilbeault (2017), "different modes may simultaneously express competing perspectives."

Although interests in multimodal studies have roots in the Prague School and the structuralist semiotics in Paris School (van Leeuwen, 2015), within recent decades, research in this area has enthusiastically proceeded in three different directions: the social semiotics approach (e. g., Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006; Kress, 2012), the interactionist approach (e. g., Norris, 2004, 2020; Wilmes and Siry, 2021) and the cognitive approach to multimodality (e. g., Forceville, 2006; Pinar Sanz, 2015; Cienki, 2017; Hart and Queralto, 2021; Hart and Winter, 2022).<sup>1</sup>

Particularly within the last two decades, there have been valuable attempts to extend the methodology and concepts of cognitive linguistics to the analysis of multimodality. Pinar Sanz's (2015) volume 'Multimodality and Cognitive Linguistics' proves that the cognitive approach has significantly contributed to this field of study. Three areas in cognitive linguistics seem to influence works in multimodality profoundly: conceptual metaphor theory, construction grammar, and conceptualization and construal operations.

Forceville (1996, 2006, 2018), Forceville and Palling (2018), and Forceville and Urios-Apparisi (2009) are among some engrossing scholarly works to elaborate the meaning construction role of metaphor in different multimodal texts, including advertising, political cartoons, animations, co-speech gestures, music, and film. Some others (e. g., Steen and Turner, 2013; Dancygier and Vandelanotte, 2017; Zima and Bergs, 2017; Hoffman, 2021) have extended the concepts of construction grammar to the study of multimodal discourse. However, the controversial domain of multimodal construction grammar is very much in the process of inventing its identity.

As mentioned above, the third direction in the cognitive approach to multimodality is rooted in conceptualization and construal operation studies. As this perspective is the framework of the current study, I will explain it in detail in part 4 below.

#### 4. Conceptualization and Conceptual Operations in Discourse

As mentioned above, cognitive linguists' methodology for studying the mechanisms of meaning construction has been recently applied in analyzing multimodal discourse. Dancygier and Vandelanotte (2017: 567) maintain that multimodality "urgently needs more detailed analysis in cognitive linguistics circles." Equating semantic structure with conceptual structure and considering meaning construction as conceptualization are two of the four central assumptions of cognitive linguistics<sup>2</sup> (Evans and Green, 2006: pp. 157-163; Langacker, 1987). So, studying meaning construction or meaning comprehension in multimodal political discourse opens the door to investigating conceptualization processes. According to Evans and Green (2006: 162), conceptualization is "a dynamic process whereby linguistic units serve as prompts for an array of conceptual operations and the recruitment of background knowledge."

Cognitive linguistics rejects the direct word-world association and posits that a single entity or event can be conceptualized with different linguistic items or structures of discrete construals. Evans (2019: p. 7) defines construal as "the ways in which we construe or 'see' the range of sensations, experiences, reflections and so on, that make up our mental life." Thus defined, conceptualization goes hand in hand with construals of different types. Hamawand (2021) also asserts that a construal theory posits that 'the meaning of a linguistic expression is linked to the way it is construed.' Further, he elaborates, "Construal is meant the mental ability of a speaker to construe a conceived situation in many alternate ways. Each construal is a reflection of a speaker's experience of the world. Differences in construal spell differences in meaning" (Hamawand, 2021: p. 244).

Conceptualization and construal operations have recently been implemented as an analytical toolkit to analyze political and multimodal discourses (e. g., Hart, 2014; 2016; Hart and Queralto, 2021; Hart and Winter, 2022). Hart explains how different conceptualization strategies, including event structure, viewpoint, distribution of attention, and metaphor, are represented in political media (Hart, 2014) and multimodal (Hart and Queralto, 2021; Hart and Winter 2022) discourses. Hart's approach is grounded upon Croft and Cruse's (2004) conception of conceptualization and construal operations. These cognitive processes, in principle, reflect the conceptual mechanisms introduced by Talmy (2000) and Langacker (2008). In this vein, Hart and Queralto (2021) show how "intersemiotics convergence" takes place in multimodal texts,

<sup>1</sup> Due to the pervasiveness of multimodal studies and the vast literature in the area, it seems onerous to propose a fully inclusive classification of the literature. However the tripartite grouping proposed here concerns the mainstream trendy works on multimodality. For a more detailed review of the literature, one can see van Leeuwen (2015) and Forceville (2021).

<sup>2</sup> The two other assumptions are: conceptual structure is embodied; and meaning representation is encyclopedic.



including photographs and linguistic captions. They indicate that "the images and linguistic usages that are proximal to each other in a multimodal text convey the same or consistent meaning through the same construal of the target scene" (Hart and Queralto, 2021).

In critical discourse studies, different construal operations are viewed as ideological discursive strategies since they result in "legitimizing or delegitimizing representation of reality" (Hart and Queralto, 2021). Hart (2014) models the interplay between four types of discursive strategies, i. e., structural configuration, framing, identification, and positioning, with our cognitive endowments. These strategies each take advantage of the four human cognitive capabilities or conceptual systems, i. e., Gestalt, comparison, attention, and perspective, respectively. The resulting construal operations arrange the symbols in different semiotic modes or micro-level structures of discourse to ideologically represent the macro-level structures of reality. The model is shown in Figure (1).

System Strategy		Gestalt	Comparison	Attention	Perspective
		Construal operations	Structural Configuration	Schematization	
Framing			Categorization		
			Metaphor		
Identification				Figure/Ground	
				Granularity	
Positioning				Viewing Frame	
					Point of View
					Deixis

Figure 1- Construal operations in critical discourse analysis taken from Hart (2014).

The structural configuration is realized through schematization in discourse and arises from the conceptualizer's ability to construct a holistic abstraction of a scene and represent the entities, participants, and relations involved through an image schema. Schematization is also rooted in our Gestalt perception, which is responsible for humans' ability to group similar elements and identify patterns out of complex scenes to understand a complex scene even beyond the sum of the meaning of its parts.

As the second conceptual strategy, framing manifests through categorizations and conceptual metaphors. It concerns "the attribution of particular qualities to the entities, actors, actions, and processes that make up a situation or event" (Hart, 2014). The main prerequisites for framing include the fundamental cognitive capabilities of analogy and comparison, the ability to establish holistic abstractions deemed necessary for categorization, and cross-domain mappings at the heart of conceptual metaphor<sup>1</sup>.

Identification strategies are associated with the ability to adjust attention. According to Croft and Cruse (2004), identification mainly subsumes "selecting an object of attention; having a focus of attention in a scope of attention; and fixing or shifting attention." These operations can be linked to salience or profiling, granularity, and viewing frame.

Positioning strategies "are realized in the vantage point from which the scene is construed and the location, orientation, and distance of other discourse elements relative to this ground" (Hart, 2014). Perspective, i. e., the real or abstract position of the speaker in the scene, would result in different types of deixis and deictic centers that play significant roles in the conceptualization of an event.<sup>2</sup>

Brône, Feyaerts and Veale (2006: p. 20) argue that "different types of humorous texts involve the creative manipulation of cognitive mechanisms such as metaphor, metonymy, compression, figure/ground alignment, generalization, specialization." Among the conceptual operations discussed, the role of metaphor (as a framing operation) and metonymy (as an identification strategy) and their interaction in meaning construction has had a remarkable space in multimodal and humor discourse studies. The conceptual relationship and the boundaries between

<sup>1</sup> Croft and Cruse (2004) have added a third category to framing namely 'figure and ground alignment', that is the realization of the entity with relative salience (the figure) in comparison to the less salient entity (the ground) in a scene. Hart (2014), considering the fact that these adjustments are of the type 'focal adjustment' has classified this strategy under identification operations related to attentional abilities, as is shown in Figure (1).

<sup>2</sup> Adopting the terminology of film studies, Hart (2014) has used the terms 'zooming' and 'panning' to refer to identification and positioning respectively. His reason for adaptation of this terminology comes from considering language as a mode linked to other semiotic modes involved in meaning-making processes in discourse (Hart, 2014).

metaphor and humor are addressed by different researchers, including Pollio (1996), Attardo (2015b)), and Stonayova (2021). Stonayova (2021) believes metaphor is one of the cognitive mechanisms pervasive in constructing humor since the two phenomena share semantic duplicity and involve degrees of "departure from predictability or a deviation from the norm." For Polio (1996), the distinction between the two phenomena is that metaphors map the information from the source onto the target domain to form a unified conceptual entity, restraining the domain boundaries. In contrast, humor foregrounds incongruity and oppositions.

Attardo's (2015b) primary concern is to answer the question of what makes metaphors humorous. Influenced by Pollio's (1996) explanation and in line with Oring's (2003) discussion, he proposes that the answer should be found in the incongruity-resolution phase of humor rather than the incongruity phase. In other words, distinguishing the two separate domains is a semantic step necessary in both metaphoric and humorous mappings. In contrast, resolving the incongruity or considering the mappings inappropriate as a pragmatic decision is a distinguishing feature of humor (Attardo, 2015b: p. 5).

Since both metonymy and humor are described in terms of 'frame-shifting' in the literature, it is unsurprising that metonymical mappings are so pervasive in humor discourse (for more details, see Barcelona, 2003 and Coulson, 2015). Also, the interaction of metaphor and metonymy in multimodality and humor has attracted some attention (e.g., Kashanizadeh and Forceville, 2020; Ruiz, 2019).

Some other studies have attempted to apply other findings of cognitive linguistics in humor discourse. A line of research is followed by Coulson (e. g., 2015), for instance, to explain the humor in discourse in the light of conceptual blending. Giora (2003) used the salience principle to analyze the same phenomenon, while Antonopoulou (2015) used construction grammar as the framework to scrutinize humor in discourse.

In the next section, some instances of multimodal texts are analyzed to account for meaning construction in political humor discourse.

### 5. Construal Operations in Multimodal Political Humor

The dataset for the present study comes from multimodal texts in which a linguistic caption accompanies each photo. These texts were collected from the *Talxand* ('bitter laugh') page of the Iranian *Tabnak Professional News Site*, published online from June to September 2021. The texts cover Iran's political, domestic, and international issues, including the government's criticism, the COVID-19 pandemic, political meetings, and the Iranian nuclear issue. Due to SSTH and GTVH's definition of humor discourse, a text is humorous if it "is compatible fully or in part with two scripts, and the two scripts happen to be opposed to each other" (Attardo, 2001: p. 20). In what follows, first, the two opposing scripts at work in the multimodal text are distinguished. Then, each mode's roles and different construal operations involved in meaning construction are identified. Since different construal strategies may be at work in structuring any text, I, unlike Hart and Queraltó (2021), refuse to isolate different types of construal operation in different subsections.



وضعیت مردم در مقابل کروناوی دلتا  
**Picture 1- 'The status of the people confronting the Delta Coronavirus variant'** (tabnak.ir, July 31, 2021)

The first co-text image was published on June 31, 2021, when the Covid- 19 reached its fifth peak, the deadliest stage of the pandemic in Iran since its outbreak. It was the last days of President Rohani in power, and his administration was severely under attack by opponents, especially the conservative media, for the so-called passivity against the upsurge of the pandemic.



The first conspicuous conceptual operation in Picture (1) is framing through a humorous conceptual metaphor. There is a Script Opposition in Picture (1) in which the linguistic mode evokes the script '*Person affected by Delta Coronavirus*' while the visual mode prompts the script '*powerlifter attempting a lift*'. These two opposing scripts are linked via metaphorical mappings as the Logical Mechanism. In a sense, the two domains are mapped to form the conceptual metaphor PERSON AFFECTED BY COVID-19 IS A POWERLIFTER FAILED HIS ATTEMPT. Additionally, to arrive at this metaphoric interpretation, the part-whole metonymy '*person for all people*' organizes the source domain. This metaphonymy, i. e., the interaction of metaphor and metonymy (Goossens, 1990), is the type 'metonymical expansion of the source domain in the taxonomy of Ruiz de Mendosa and Galera (2011). To explain, metaphorical mapping as a framing operation functions like a Logical Mechanism to put forward the incongruity necessary in humorous meaning construction. Through the metaphor and metonymy interaction, the athlete's holding pressure on his face and having a protruding vein while the bar is behind his neck is associated bittersweetly with people undergoing severe pressure during the Delta variant of COVID-19.

Nevertheless, in the incongruity resolution phase, the mappings between the two scripts seem inappropriate, resulting in the sense of humor in the multimodal text. The photo also introduces the spotter present by his hand in the photo, as another participant in the scene whose only duty is to stand behind the athlete to ensure that the powerlifter will not be injured if he fails to handle the bar load. That is to say, the spotter is shown as an inactive entity not involved in confronting the pressure exerted on the weightlifter. What intensifies the sense of inappropriateness at the incongruity phase is that through metaphorical entailment, the spotter behind the lifter is conceptualized as the government, featured with inaction and procrastination in controlling and preventing the critical situation. While in the source domain, the inaction of the spotter is normal, in the target domain, the inaction or indifference of the government is abnormal and questionable. Accordingly, the script opposition at the concrete textual level is between the Iranian people and the powerlifter, but at the abstract level, it is between normal and abnormal. Also, note that since the specific genre prompts the viewer to look for incongruities, the spotter element is selected to be mapped onto the government.

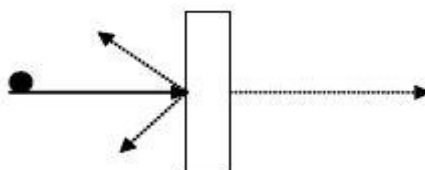
The incongruity discussed is also partly reflected in the underlying image schemas related to the two modes. An image schema is "an imagistic experience [that] relates to and derives from our experience of the external world" (Evans and Green, 2006: p. 178), which is essential in the understanding of many specific concepts and the embodied basis for some metaphors. The schematization in the linguistic caption portrays two opposing forces: the 'agonist force' (Talmy, 2000), which is the force enacted by the muscles of the powerlifter, and the antagonist force, the pressure of the weight. Since this resembles the experience of two entities meeting with equal force, the resulting schematization is a COUNTERFORCE image schema. This image schema is shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2-** The counterforce image schema, taken from Evans and Green (2006: p. 188)

As the result of the mentioned conceptual mappings between the two modes, the agonist and antagonist forces in this image schema are then mapped onto the efforts of people to survive and the pressure and suffering resulting from the Delta Coronavirus, respectively.

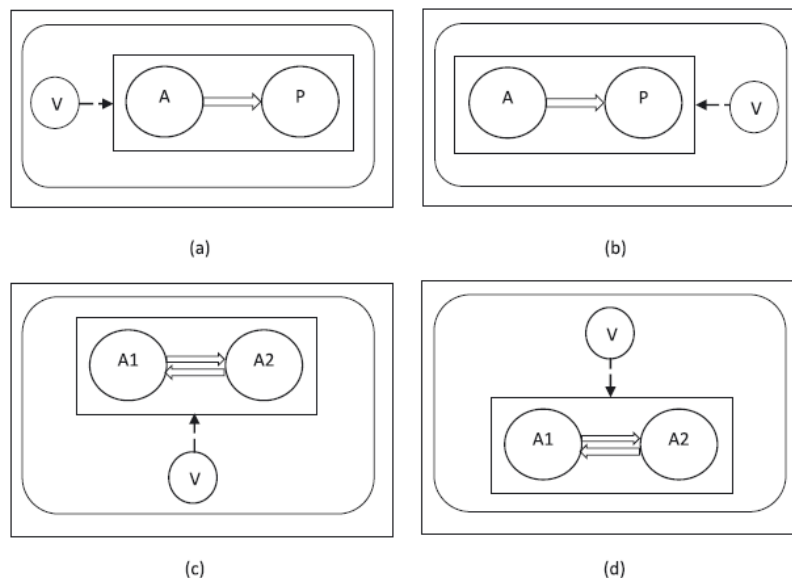
However, the facial gestures of the powerlifter and the bar near his shoulder imply the athlete's failure to lift the weight, so the COUNTERFORCE image schema underlying the linguistic caption is subject to transformation into BLOCKAGE image schema in the image mode. The latter schema is rooted in our experience of the force-dynamics where obstacles resist force, as shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3-** The BLOCKAGE image schema, taken from Evans and Green (2006: p. 188)

According to Evans and Green (2006: p. 188), "because image schemas arise from embodied experience, which is ongoing, they can undergo transformations from one image schema into another." Considering that image schemas are intrinsically meaningful<sup>1</sup>, the transformation from COUNTERFORCE to BLOCKAGE image schema reinforces the script opposition and inappropriateness of the incongruity in the metaphorical mappings as the logical Mechanism we discussed. This incongruity at the deepest level of image schemas, in turn, strengthens the humorous sense of the text in contrast to its possible monomodal linguistic counterpart. As noted, a humorous effect may arise when the comparison is deemed inappropriate because a particular incongruity cannot be (fully) resolved in a given context (Attardo, 2015b).

Importantly, this text is not ideologically- neutral. Hart (2014) notes that construal operations are sites "responsible for the enactment of ideology in discourse." One example is the system of perspective and attention realized in different discourse viewpoints. Following Langacker (2008), Hart and Queralto (2021) portray the different spatial points of view or 'viewing arrangements' as in Figure 4.



**Figure 4- Viewing arrangements** (Hart and Queralto, 2021): **a. and b. asymmetrical action schema; c. and d. reciprocal action schema; V=Viewer; A=Agent; P= Patient**

The selection of any of the viewpoints to represent the action chain schema (i. e., an interaction involving the transference of energy through forceful physical contact from one participant (the agent) to another (the patient)) is ideologically motivated. Picture (1) instantiates the asymmetrical action chain (Figure 4. b.) through which the viewer encodes a view from the patient's perspective (here, the powerlifter that is metaphorically conceptualized as Iranian people). However, the text does not show the agent (the weight that is metaphorically conceptualized as Delta Coronavirus). The asymmetric action chain used, and the absence of the weight from the scene is not accidental. This choice can be linked to the media's ideological stance that results in pointing the finger at the government for people's suffering rather than the pandemic itself. In other words, the government in this construal is depicted as indifferent in controlling the situation. Criticisms as such are reflected more directly in the opponents' media while reporting the pandemic news: "The 700 death toll during the fifth peak of the pandemic was due to the mismanagement of President Rouhani", said the Chairman of the Iranian Parliamentary Health Commission (tasnimnews.com, November 7, 2021). The incompetency of the government in office in controlling the COVID-19 pandemic is the subject of another multimodal humor, as depicted in Picture (2).

<sup>1</sup> According to Johnson (1987: p. 42) image schemas "work their way up in to our system of meaning".



نحوه مدیریت کرونا همزمان با برخورد با تورم در آستانه آغاز سال تحصیلی  
**Picture 2-** 'How to manage COVID-19 while dealing with inflation on the eve of the beginning of the school year' (tabnak.ir, July 31, 2021)

In this text, two opposing domains, including 'the management of the COVID-19 crisis' and 'Playing Canoe polo', are realized in the linguistic and visual modes. In other words, the player with the white canoe trying to approach the opponent's goal is projected onto the government endeavoring to end COVID-19. The conceptual metaphor entails considering the two challenging issues, 'inflation', and 'the beginning of the school year' that has coincided with the spread of COVID-19 as two red Canoes confronting the white Canoe (the government) obstructing its path to proceed. This framing through conceptual metaphor goes hand in hand with the schematization through BLOCKAGE image schema in which some obstacles serving as antagonist forces (here inflation and school year beginning) resist an agonist force (government's efforts to control Coronavirus) as was schematically shown in figure (3) above. In the incongruity resolution phase, the inappropriateness of the script opposition (i.e., the unsolved resolution) arises because the answer to the 'how' aspect in the linguistic caption seems to be 'in no way', based on the image and the metaphor. Part of the incongruity arises from the fact that the red canoe may find its way to the goal with the help of the teammates; however, the government is realized as incompetent in managing the crisis.

Given these accounts, what distinguishes political humor as a genre from other instantiations of humor discourse is that humor, in its political working, is not the objective in itself. Nevertheless, it serves as a medium to take an ideological or critical position (Kayam et al., 2014) and to criticize the government's policies. This critical facet and function of political humor can represent dire problems and situations, such as drought and migration, in the following image.



دیگه اینجا به درد نمیخوره بیابین مهاجرت کنیم مراتع خارجه، وگرنه از تشنگی می میریم  
**Picture 3-** 'Here is no longer a proper habitat. Let's migrate to foreign pastures, or we will die of thirst.' (tabnak.ir, July 17, 2021)



<https://doi.org/10.22108/jrl.2024.143366.1879>



The title above Picture (3) says, 'Water crisis in Hur al-Azim Wetland and the death of animals.' This caption shows that the photo had been used elsewhere as part of a news report on the effects of drought in the Hur al-Azim Wetland in Khuzestan province, in Southwest Iran. However, the caption below the photo has changed it into a humorous multimodal text and extends its message from drought to other crises in Iran, including the social and economic crises and the migration crisis.

The most outstanding construal operation in Picture (3) is the framing realized by two semiotic modes. The linguistic caption is so as one of the domestic water buffalos, native to the Hur al-Azim wetland, complains about the drought and invites other buffalos to migrate to a foreign pasture. In this, the first framing strategy is the personification metaphor, i. e., the conceptual metaphor ANIMAL IS HUMAN. This conceptual metaphor brings about the idea of a 'talking animal', an established construal in political discourse. Interestingly, then, at the second stage of meaning construction, the target domain of the first metaphor becomes the source domain for the second metaphor, HUMAN IS ANIMAL, which allows us to conceptualize the poor living conditions of the Iranians through the drought in the buffalos' wetland. The two conceptual metaphors in sequence can be explained in terms of 'metaphoric chains', i. e. 'the cognitive exploitation of a single conceptual domain as both a metaphoric target and a metaphoric source' as discussed by Ruiz de Mendoza and Galera (2011). This chain metaphor is illustrated in Figure 4.

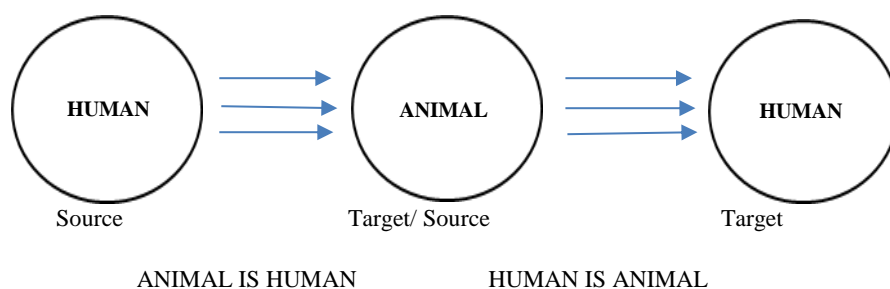


Figure 5- The chain metaphor in Picture 3

The metaphorical mappings function as a solid argumentative ground to justify and legitimize the migration of the Iranian people to foreign countries. This reading is justifiable in light of the social context of Iran, in which migration, and mainly the brain drain phenomenon, is one of the significant national crises of the time. The conceptual metaphor is the Logical Mechanism involved in the animal/human Script Opposition. So far, there is no humorous sense. However, a partial resolution in the incongruity phase results in inappropriateness and has a humorous effect. In other words, though the metaphorical images of 'a talking buffalo' and 'immigrants as a herd' are not strange and humorous, a full incongruity resolution becomes out of reach when the two metaphors coincide. In a sense, "the two domains in the metaphorical construal becomes "stretched" (i.e., too distant in Oring's (2003) terminology) and is therefore perceived as humorous" (Attardo, 2015b).

The linguistic caption of the multimodal text is also enriched with a future-configuring discursive strategy to convey the ideological stance communicated through political humor. It construes an 'oppositional future', a subtype of alternative future, as an ideological component of political communication (Cap, 2021). Cap (2021) states that an oppositional future involves an antagonistic and threatening vision expressed by probabilistic modality and interrogative mood<sup>1</sup>. Here, the clause *Let's migrate to foreign pastures, or we will die of thirst*, puts forward the risk of death due to refusing to migrate. In other words, through an objective epistemic modality (Lyons, 1995), an evaluation of the state of affairs is encoded through multimodality. To set up this probable evaluation or oppositional future, the speaker first presupposes a territorial affiliation using 'let's construction' and also 'inclusive we' and then s/he warns about a highly prospective threat to the home group (US) as a consequence of not taking action (migrating) through the clause "...or we will die of thirst...".

Through an identification strategy and giving salience to one part of the reality, the co-text image (3) casts attention on drought, social and economic crises, and migration and remains silent about the political system's mismanagement as the cause of these effects. Picture (4), in contrast, ideologically construes the hypocrisy of political power holders through several construal operations.

<sup>1</sup> Privileged future as another type of alternative future "involves speaker's preferred vision and is articulated through absolute modality and evidential markers which derive from factual evidence, history, and reason" (Cap, 2021).



**Picture 4-** 'When the officials have an unplanned visit!' (tabnak.ir, August 15, 2021)

In Picture (4), there is a semiotic divergence wherein the linguistic and visual modes put forth two opposing scripts: 'an unexpected visit' and 'a planned visit'. The opposition corresponds to a normal-abnormal dichotomy at the abstract level. In other words, as a framing strategy, categorization ends in evoking two incongruent frames in the two modes: The linguistic caption realizes an unplanned visit frame that is featured with media absence, whereas the visual mode shows the presence of a considerable number of media agents as is customary in the carefully planned visits of the political officials. This opposition between the two categories makes the co-text image surprising and humorous, representing the alleged surprise visit as hypocritical and condemnatory.

Notably, in visual mode, the meaning of a planned visit is constructed through the picture of many media camerapersons and photographers. In other words, the conceptual metonymy PART FOR THE WHOLE allows profiling one aspect of an event to refer to the whole. The aspect or part profiled in metonymy is motivated rather than triggered in a vacuum. In our example, since the presence of the media agents is a critical factor in differentiating the unexpected and planned official visits (as the theme of this multimodal text), this aspect of the event becomes the active zone of the scene via metonymy as an identification strategy.

The type of viewing frame used also ties the two modes. The photo is a close-up shot of the events, which excludes causation issues, according to Hart (2014). Thus, the AGENT or the one who has invited many journalists (PATIENTS) to cover the visit remains unstated, strengthening the humorous effect. However, in the linguistic caption, one can find a possible candidate for this missing slot: the officials! Interestingly enough, this picture is also an instance of the 'when construction' as a case of internet memes studied by Dancygier and Vandelanotte (2017). Since I have not employed a constructionist account, I do not go into the details of this point.

The linguistic mode provides the first category that evokes information in (4), i. e., an unexpected visit. However, it is not the only pattern regarding the modes' order and function in multimodal texts. Co-text image (5) is a counter-example in which the visual mode puts forward the first script.



**Picture 5-** '- [Grossi:] Shall we agree?' '[Islami:] First, let's play Rock, paper, scissors, and then I won't spill the beans to you.' (tabnak.ir, 13 September, 2021)

Picture (5) shows the greeting at the beginning of a visit paid by Rafael Grossi, the director of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), to Mohammad Eslami, the Head of the Atomic Energy Organization of the Islamic Republic of Iran (AEOI), in September 2021, to discuss current issues and future cooperation between Iran and IAEA regarding Iran's challenging nuclear program at that time. This meeting occurred before the new rounds of negotiations over Iran's nuclear activities between Iran and P5+1 countries. This round was resumed after a long delay due to the US's withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Actions (JCPOA) deal and Iran's disinclination to meet the agreed commitments. The Grossi-Islami meeting was held in Tehran a couple of days after the fifth peak of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. Upon seeing each other, Grossi showed up to shake hands as greetings, and simultaneously, Islami cautiously decided to exchange fist-bumps, probably conforming to the social distancing protocols for COVID-19. Along with the first turn of the hypothetical conversation noted in the caption, *tavāfoq konim?* ('Shall we agree?'), this evokes the domain of 'negotiation to reach an agreement'. In the meantime, the first sentence of the second turn in the caption, *sang, kāqaz, qeīci konim* ('First let's play Rock, paper, scissors') introduces the domain 'Rock, paper, scissors hand game' to become the source domain of the conceptual metaphor NEGOTIATION IS PLAYING ROCK, PAPER, SCISSORS. The high-level or abstract script opposition is adult-child. This conceptual metaphor, then, opens the gates to reinterpreting the image in the light of the rules of that hand game: Grossi is the winner since he played the paper while Islami chose Rock. This victory can be metaphorically mapped onto Grossi's achievements in the meeting: the Iranian side's agreement to resume cooperation with the IAEA and issuing permission to IAEA's inspectors to monitor the nuclear equipment. This achievement is reflected in (1), as part of the joint statement by the two sides on September 12, 2021, the day before the release of the co-text image under study:

- (1) "In this meeting, the parties recalled and reaffirmed the spirit of cooperation and mutual trust. ... IAEA's inspectors are permitted to service the identified equipment and replace their storage media, which will be kept under the joint IAEA and AEOI seals in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The way and the timing are agreed by the two sides".<sup>1</sup>

Back to the linguistic mode, it may be thought that this is not the end of the story; after supposedly suggesting to play the hand game, Islami adds, "...*bad moštamo baz nemikonam barāt...*" (lit. then my fist I do not open for you, 'then I won't spill the beans to you'). In practice, it seems that despite the apparent loss

<sup>1</sup> This joint statement is released on 12<sup>th</sup> of September, 2021 and accessible in the official website of the IAEA, retrievable from: <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/pressreleases/joint-statement-by-the-vice-president-and-the-head-of-atomic-energy-organization-of-the-islamic-republic-of-iran-and-the-director-general-of-the-international-atomic-energy-agency>.

of the Iranian authority in the game (the negotiations in a metaphoric way) and permitting the inspectors to service the equipment and replace their storage media, Islami will not spill the beans by keeping the sealed storage media inside the country and not allowing IAEA to watch and inspect the videos. Therefore, based on its achievements as reflected in the joint statement and humorously shown in the co-text image, the negotiation has ended in a 'reservation point'. Islami's clenched hand gesture also represents Iran's unwillingness to unveil the secrets of its nuclear program.

Besides metaphor, in picture (5), metaphonymy (Goossens, 1990; Ruiz de Mendoza and Galera, 2011) also plays a determining role in meaning construction. Initially, the clenched fist of Iran's representative metaphorically conveys his 'being skeptical and cautious about negotiations'. Then, through a MEMBER AS COLLECTION metonymy, the Iranian authority's viewpoint stands for the Iranian government's viewpoint on the relationship with the world powers, including the Western members of the nuclear talks. This issue is associated with the ideological viewpoint that is explicitly reverberated by Iranian officials, in particular, the last speech addressed to the previous government by the Iranian Supreme Leader on July 28, 2021:

- (2) "Others should use the experience of Mr. Rouhani's government. One experience is distrusting the West. In this administration, it became clear that trusting the West is not helpful. They do not help, and they strike a blow wherever they can. When they did not, it was because they could not." <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2021/07/28/2545397>

Keeping all the details I discussed related to picture (5), I conclude that the 'clenched fist' in the image is highly polysemous due to the different frames this entity may evoke for the interpreter. This polysemous nature is summarized in Table (1).

**Table 1- The framing and construction of meaning in the clenched fist element of Picture (5)**

The polysemy of the linguistic and visual sign 'clenched fist'		
The frame in which the act is interpreted	The meaning conveyed	the strategy used to construct meaning
Negotiation	fist- bumping	convention
Rock, paper, and scissors game	playing Rock	iconicity- convention
negotiation	avoid releasing the secret	metaphor
Iran and the World Powers' relations	being skeptical and cautious about negotiations	metaphonymy

The last co-image text analyzed below is a good instance of the framing and identification strategies realized through categorization and metonymy.



**Picture 6- Up:** 'Allocating budget for construction projects in Ardabil [Province] during the trip of head of the Mostazafan ('the oppressed') Foundation.'  
Down: 'Our pickaxe is our validity.'



The word *e'tebar* is polysemous in the captions. It means 'budget' in the upper caption but 'validity' in the lower humorous one. The word evokes the financial frame in the former use while the moral frame in the latter, thus resulting in Script Opposition as the basis of humor. The ideologically loaded proposition aims to ridicule the groundbreaking ceremony popular among Iranian governmental departments to celebrate the initial phase of a construction project. Generally, different politicians attend such ceremonies, and various media resources cover the event. In most cases, the officials in charge of the project symbolically dig the ground with a usually ribboned pickaxe. With this piece of cultural knowledge in mind, one can interpret the photo with the help of the metonymy PART FOR WHOLE, which makes room for considering the pickaxe in (6) to stand for the groundbreaking ceremony. The implied message is that in many cases the plan to start projects is only announced officially to manipulate and affect the public opinion and give a positive image to the politicians. In practice, however, most of these projects are frozen and even remain without the allocated budget to be accomplished. The upper news piece in (6) reports allocating the budget to some of these frozen projects by the head of the Oppressed Foundation in the absence of any governmental budget.

## 6. Conclusions

In this paper, I tried to illuminate the representation of different conceptual operations in multimodal political humor. It was mainly an attempt to account for the nature of intersemiotic links and construal operations in meaning construction within multimodal discourse.

Approaching the analysis from a humor discourse point of view, I discovered that all construal operations - including structural configuration, perspectivization, framing, and windowing of attention - effectively construct the ongoing meanings in humorous political co-text images. Along with the claim that Script opposition is the primary knowledge resource (KR) in humor (Raskin, 1985; Attardo, 2001), I found that this opposition is built through framing strategies, including metaphor and categorization in all multimodal texts analyzed. Interestingly, Attardo, Hempelmann, and Di Maio (2002) have shown that the most frequent logical mechanisms in their corpus were "differential-potency mapping (of elements of one script onto those of another, most prominently human onto the animal and vice versa); substitution (one element for another); and juxtaposition (of two simultaneously presented scripts)". It seems plausible to argue that all these three LMs can be covered by the 'conceptual mappings' as a widespread logical mechanism realized in metaphor, metonymy, and metaphonymy. The analysis reveals that a metaphor is humorous when the mappings are inappropriate in a specific context or genre. In other words, in a metaphor, the source and target domains evoke two different frames/scripts. However, they are not necessarily in conflict/incongruent. Metaphor processing aims to arrive at an interpretation that makes the comparison appropriate. A humorous effect may arise when the comparison is deemed inappropriate because a particular incongruity cannot be (fully) resolved (cf. Oring, 2003).

Another point worth noting is that the intersemiotic relations involved in creating humor can be categorized as divergence. In contrast to the humorous political multimodal texts I analyzed, the links between modes interwoven in non-humorous political figures in convergence, as Hart and Queraltó (2021) reveal in their analysis of usual news co-text images. This finding reemphasizes Steen and Turner's argument (2013: pp. 17–18) that intersemiotic divergence creates "some discordant effect for purposes such as humor, satire, ambivalence, etc."

Last but not least, this study also highlights strong outcomes of implementing a cognitive approach to studying multimodal discourse. Any thorough analysis of the meaning-making process in the multimodal texts (and, tentatively speaking, other critical discourse studies) seems to inevitably rely on a deep understanding of the conceptualization process and construal operations realized in texts. Viewing the scene from an opposite angle, one can claim that multimodal discourse seems to be an appropriate site to support the Cognitive Commitment as a tenet of the cognitive linguistics. As shown, both linguistic and visual modes call up construal operations of different types. In other words, while from a cognitive perspective, words are regarded as prompts for different frames and conceptual operations (Evans and Green, 2006), the analysis reveals that the same is true for the visual elements of co-text images.

## Data Availability Statement

The datasets analyzed during the current study are available in the Tabnak Professional News Site repository (Talxand page), [https://www.tabnak.ir/fa/archive?service\\_id=1&cat\\_id=188](https://www.tabnak.ir/fa/archive?service_id=1&cat_id=188).

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