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Framing Fragile and Stable States through War Metaphors in Divisive Narratives

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ABSTRACT

The United Nations and its specialised agencies are incentivised to use bias-free language by a fundamental human rights law which prohibits discrimination of any kind. However, it is also true that these organisations are often accused of taking sides despite wanting to remain impartial in times of crisis. While accusations of bias may be greater during conflicts between member states, this paper reveals that hegemonic discourse is also apparent in reports unrelated to conflicts and published by the World Health Organisation (WHO), a specialised agent of the United Nations. This study examines war metaphors in WHO reports, focusing on how language constructs and perpetuates the identities of stable and fragile states. Drawing on two specialised corpora and using concordance software, metaphorical expressions of war were analysed within their contextual environment to investigate the use of purposeful and ideological metaphors in global health narratives. The examination of metaphorical expressions revealed that fragile states were depicted as vulnerable and dependent, reinforcing stereotypes of instability. Conversely, the same metaphors framed stable states as competent leaders and global saviours. These polarised representations contribute to legitimising existing global hierarchies and power disparities. The results offer insights into the manipulative use of nuanced language in seemingly objective reports, which in turn serve to maintain the constructed realities of stable and fragile states. By exposing bias in WHO reports the research advocates for greater accountability and transparency in global health communication. These findings provide valuable insights into the intersection of language, power, and global health governance.

Keywords: war metaphor; stable and fragile states; discursive strategies; purposeful metaphors; ideological metaphors

INTRODUCTION

Language is a powerful tool which both reflects and reinforces power in society. Beyond conveying meaning, language constructs social realities and is used to maintain or challenge established power structures (Baxter, 2016). Through the selective use of language, certain identities may be privileged while others are marginalised, and this influences the way individuals or entire communities are perceived and treated. It so follows that individuals and organisations that exert power within mainstream media possess a significant capacity to construct identities and shape attitudes due to their ability to control the dissemination of information and influence public perception (Slater, 2007).

A crisis certainly brings to the surface the dynamics of power and influence in shaping mainstream narratives. During a crisis, those in positions of authority and control have a heightened ability to direct public attention, frame issues, and influence perceptions. Those in

power forward their narratives through selective coverage, normalisation through repeated narratives, and selective use of linguistic tools to persuade and influence attitudes. In so doing, hegemony is established, with certain identities and beliefs dominating and subtly shaping norms and values (Shahin, 2023).

In times of crisis, it has been observed that war terms are used in both a literal and metaphorical sense, and this has certainly been evident in communications during the COVID-19 pandemic (Adam, 2021; Ivic, 2021; Kheovichai, 2022). In an analysis of WHO press briefings, Adam (2021) found the regular use of war terms such as "war", "enemy", "fight", "combat", "win", "battle", "defeat", and "attack" as a means to instil a degree of fear which is necessary to ensure that people are vigilant and cautious. Several other studies also investigated the use of war metaphors during the global pandemic (Hagstrom, 2020; Musu, 2020; Ranjan, 2020; Serhan, 2020; Wilkinson, 2020), indicating that the crisis offered a unique opportunity for researchers to extend investigations on crisis communication. Collectively, these studies have contributed to a better understanding of how linguistic choices in narratives shape decisions and actions during a crisis. However, these aforementioned studies have focused primarily on the narratives of political leaders. The published narratives of organisations such as the WHO have been under-researched in spite of the fact that WHO reports inform the national health agenda of nations across the world. The most recent investigation among the few studies that examined the narratives of the WHO during the pandemic was conducted by Ho et al. (2021). They investigated partiality and political bias in WHO narratives by comparing references to China during the COVID-19 outbreak and references to African nations during the Ebola Virus disease. Based on speeches by the WHO Director-General; Ho et al. (2021) found unequal emphasis on the traits and practices of WHO member states, with bias in reporting practices. They concluded that despite claims of being founded on principles of impartiality and egalitarianism, WHO was guilty of bias in its reporting of member states. As a result, WHO was contributing to "misperceptions and prejudices" against certain countries (p.2). The viewpoint paper was, however, limited by methodological and procedural flaws. Despite claiming to draw on both quantitative and qualitative analyses, the paper did not describe the method employed, nor did it anchor the analysis to a theoretical foundation. More importantly, despite focusing on the narratives of the Director-General, the investigation failed to consider the powerful role of language in shaping bias. Instead, conclusions about imbalanced reporting were drawn by referencing the frequency with which countries were mentioned in the speeches.

The present study is anchored to the contention that investigations focusing on the narratives of global organisations in times of crisis must consider the powerful role of language in shaping attitudes as well as reinforcing or challenging long-established perceptions. Therefore, considering the limitations of Ho, et al. (2021) investigation, the present study undertakes an analysis of the strategic use of war metaphors in reports published by WHO on the performance of both fragile and stable states in managing a global crisis. The goal is to determine how choices in language use in supposedly objective reports contribute to reinforcing widely held bias. Numerous studies have been undertaken to examine the use of war metaphors in the context of some crisis or other, and several have investigated social power and control through the use of metaphoric language (Liu & Wang, 2020; de Saint Preux & Blanco, 2021; Schnepf & Christmann, 2022). There have also been extensive investigations on the use of metaphors in healthcare discourse (Abdel-Raheem, 2021; Cotter et al., 2021). However, limited attention has been given to distinguishing the strategic use of metaphors for immediate communicative purposes and for suggesting deeper, long-standing ideological constructs. The present study extends research in this

specific area by investigating the strategic intent behind the use of war metaphors in global reports referencing stable and fragile states, specifically by examining the use of purposeful metaphors for manipulating short-term emotions and ideological metaphors for sustaining broader ideological beliefs. Furthermore, guided by the notion that choices of metaphors frame views, opinions, and direct reactions (Semino et al., 2018), the present study also examines the framing process of ideological metaphors by focusing on aspects such as agency and (dis)empowerment.

Several cross-country indices have been advanced in an attempt to assess fragility (Ferreira, 2017). To determine the parameters for defining fragile states, the present study drew on the Fragile States Index (FSI) developed by the Fund for Peace to measure the vulnerability of a state to collapse. Based on the 2022 FSI scores, which reported fragility in 2021, it was reported that the five most fragile countries with the highest FSI scores were Yemen, Somalia, Syria, South Sudan, and Central African Republic. Also among the most fragile states on the list was Iraq, despite some improvement in position since the defeat of ISIS. Further highlighting Iraq's position was a UNDP fragility assessment report, which predicted a bleak future for the nation's public health capacity as a result of vulnerabilities related to the COVID-19 pandemic (United Nations Development Programme, 2020). States that ranked lower in the list, with an FSI score below 60.0, were named stable and sustainable states. In addition to identifying stable states based on the FSI scores, the present study also narrowed the selection of stable states to those which were officially listed as voluntary donors to WHO. The decision to focus on these particular stable states was also motivated in part by past studies which have observed the reporting practices of WHO when referencing the management of the pandemic by donor states. Suzuki and Kentaro (2021) found that Japan's management of the pandemic was reported as more effective than various other industrialised states as it was described as having adopted a careful and self-restraint-based approach rather than one which imposed strict, legally binding measures for testing and tracing possibly infected citizens. Okina (2020) found that Germany was reported in a positive light as one of the most successful states in responding to COVID-19 as it increased testing early and accepted patients from other European nations. It so follows that the specific research questions are:

1. How do war metaphors serve purposeful and ideological means to reinforce the established dichotomy between fragile and stable states?
2. How are ideological metaphors used to frame events and attitudes so as to construct particular ways of seeing fragile and stable states?

LITERATURE REVIEW

PURPOSEFUL AND IDEOLOGICAL METAPHORS: A THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Metaphors are especially crucial in political and public discourse because they are used as interpersonal devices to establish a strong persuasive bond with recipients of messages (Charteris-Black, 2004, 2018; Kitis & Milapides, 1997; Olimat, 2020); hence, metaphors are fundamental linguistic devices for building social relations and constructing particular cultural, social, or ideological and political representations of the world (Charteris-Black, 2004; Fairclough, 2001). The use of specific metaphors shapes how people perceive the world, thereby influencing behaviour and even altering worldviews. For this reason, metaphors have been examined in narratives that frame health crises that affect the global community. Larson et al. (2005), Wallis

and Nerlich (2005), Chiang and Duann (2007) as well as De la Rosa (2008) investigated the use of metaphors in the context of large-scale epidemics such as SARS and the Avian flu, revealing the consistent use of metaphors to mobilise people and resources, invoke a sense of duty, and even create dichotomies of heroes and villains.

Considering the fact that global health reports published by the WHO guide national and international health efforts, it is important that attention be given to the accurateness of narratives which these reports forward, particularly with regard to disparities in health outcomes, as well as limited access to healthcare as experienced by marginalised populations, including low-income countries, minorities, women, and rural communities. Researchers have drawn attention to weaknesses in such reports in the past. For example, Almeida et al. (2001) raised methodological concerns related to WHO reports when they found that WHO's index for measuring inequalities was not consistent with more widely accepted measures of socioeconomic inequalities. Ho et al. (2021) observed strong bias in the way WHO favourably reported China's actions in containing the spread of COVID-19 while being very critical of African nations when they managed the spread of the Ebola virus. Language use in these reports serves as the tool for directing biased narratives; therefore, it comes as no surprise that investigations of bias in health reports draw attention to the use of metaphors to convey ideological positions. Indeed, the selective use of metaphors in global health reports can serve political agendas by positioning certain states as capable of withstanding the impact of a pandemic while other states may be described as unprepared or inept (Huang, 2022).

Metaphors can create a dichotomy which perpetuates certain stereotypes, and in health care reports, they may be used to construct the identity of marginalised communities. For example, Putnis and Burr (2020) reported on references to sex workers using language with moralistic undertones rather than hard evidence in health reports. Furthermore, metaphors help simplify complex realities and communicate the strengths and weaknesses of health systems, and they also carry ideological undertones that can shape perceptions (Checkland et al., 2020). Focusing on communication and discourse, Charteris-Black (2012) forwards the view that metaphors are used purposefully, that is, used for an intended outcome, although the use of the metaphors may be conscious or otherwise. Purposeful metaphors in the healthcare context may be used to emphasise urgency or gravity or call for action. Purposeful metaphors become ideological when they are used frequently and intentionally to establish broader beliefs and suggest shared assumptions. Charteris-Black (2017) describes ideological metaphors as those used to establish greater significance and to suggest a set of shared beliefs and values. Metaphors in texts may be used in such a way as to reinforce ideologies and normalise narratives. Semino et al. (2018) caution about "potentially negative consequences" (p.631) resulting from the use of war metaphors, thus emphasising the significance of investigating the use of such metaphors in documents circulating in the public domain. Drawing attention to the method of examining war metaphors, Semino et al. (2018) call for a more critical approach which considers metaphor scenarios, that is, the settings in which the metaphors are present and events framed. This is so that the metaphors are not merely considered in isolation but rather in relation to participants, relationships with other actors, events and actions. For this reason, the present study also draws on the notion of identity and polarisation as reflected in van Dijk's (2006) ideological square. Polarisation refers to the process by which social groups, individuals, or ideas become increasingly divided, creating a distinct 'us versus them' dynamic characterised by stark contrasts in values, beliefs, and identities (van Dijk, 2017). Based on van Dijk's (2006) ideological square, polarisation has to do with the formation of in-groups and out-groups, where positive attributes are ascribed to the in-group and negative attributes to the out-

group. Four conceptual possibilities are treated in van Dijk's model and may be applied in the investigation of texts. These possibilities focus on emphasising "Our" good things and "Their" bad things, as well as de-emphasising "Our" bad things and "Their" good things (van Dijk, 2006).

Given that global health reports are able to shape attitudes and construct identity, investigating the use of purposeful and ideological metaphors is necessary to understand how the selective and consistent use of purposeful metaphors becomes ideological to legitimise power relations. WHO reports, which are widely accepted as accurate and objective at face value, may, in reality, be advancing narratives which further divide and perpetuate stereotypes. Drawing on the framework offered by Charteris-Black (2017), the present study seeks to examine the use of purposeful and ideological metaphors in the framing of stable and fragile states in WHO reports.

GLOBAL GOVERNANCE AND THE POWER OF FRAMING IN WHO REPORTS

Global governance has to do with collaboration between various global actors to address cross-border issues, including health. WHO is an organisation that plays a central role in global health governance (Lidén, 2014). One of the most powerful tools this organisation possesses is the ability to frame health narratives in its reports, which significantly influences global health priorities, resource allocation, and interventions. However, its narratives have not been entirely free of bias (see Ho et al., 2021). Depending on the choices made to frame events and actions, the narratives published by WHO can shape perceptions and attitudes, impacting individuals, agencies and entire nations. Global health reports serve as authoritative references for governments, donors, and civil society, shaping both the discourse and practical responses to health issues globally. Therefore, when WHO reports frame fragile states negatively, it can affect how health challenges in these nations are understood and addressed. In addition, such framing may also reinforce widely held stereotypes of incompetence and helplessness, thereby weakening the capacity of nations to formulate and implement their own health strategies for long-term health system resilience (Gallagher & Updegraff, 2012).

Global health governance is inherently political, and the power of framing a health-related crisis certainly shapes the international community's response (Kickbusch & Liu, 2022). In addition, narratives about health governance by different nations can also contribute to different ways of framing their identity. The narratives may frame some nations as capable of managing their healthcare and even leading global reforms, while other nations may be framed as highly susceptible to vulnerabilities and limitations. The direction of narratives in global health reports by organisations such as WHO is influenced by global health actors who include powerful donor nations. According to Spicer et al. (2020), the divergent interests of such global health actors may complicate interventions at the global level. Thus, there is a need to critically evaluate the narratives of global health organisations such as WHO to identify disparities in how health challenges are framed. This is so that inequalities in global health governance may be better addressed.

METHOD

The present study drew on a non-experimental descriptive research design. The first objective was to examine the realisation of purposeful and ideological war metaphors used in reference to fragile and stable states. Next, metaphor scenarios were analysed to investigate how ideological

metaphors are used to discursively construct the identities of stable and fragile states, reinforcing widely held perceptions of differences between these states.

DATA SOURCE

Baker (2006) submits that any investigation of texts focusing on a specific variety or genre of language or aspects which are related to a particular topic anchored to a specific time and place requires the selection of a specialised corpus. Anchored to this assertion, two specialised corpora were built, one comprising WHO reports published during the pandemic, between November 2019 and May 2023, and referencing fragile states, and a second comprising WHO reports published during the same time frame but referencing stable states. The list of fragile states was guided by the Fragile States Index (FSI) 2023, developed by the Fund for Peace. The index is the outcome of an annual assessment aimed at measuring the vulnerability of a state to collapse. It is based on 12 primary social, economic, and political indicators used to determine various pressures faced by a state (Carlsen & Bruggemann, 2017). Despite methodological limitations, including reliance on subjective data and the adoption of a single score to report fragility, the index is generally accepted as a useful tool (Kaplan, 2014).

Given that a specialised corpus had to be created, the accurate selection of texts had to be prioritised over the size of the corpus (see Baker, 2006). Nevertheless, a target word count of 100,000 for texts referencing fragile states and another 100,000-word count for texts referencing stable states was set to guide the building of the corpora. It was found that WHO did not publish reports on every fragile and stable state, and so the selection of the states to be included in the present study involved cross-checks to confirm that the states reported by WHO were indeed fragile or stable states as listed in the 2023 FSI. Reports were first compiled for the three most fragile states, namely, Yemen, Somalia, and Syria. However, the word count for all three nations did not amount to the target word count of 100,000. As such, reports on other fragile states were gradually added. The final list of fragile nations, selected based on the FSI 2023 listing, also included Afghanistan (ranked 6th most fragile), Sudan (ranked 7th most fragile), Libya (ranked 17th most fragile), and Iraq (ranked 27th most fragile). Once the target word count was achieved, attention turned to building a similar corpus size for stable states. In addition to referencing the FSI 2023, the list of top donor nations to WHO, which was available on the organisation's website, also guided the selection of stable states to be included in the corpus. The final list of stable and fragile states, which were included to ensure a balanced corpus size, is listed in Table 1:

TABLE 1. List of stable and fragile states in the corpora

	Country	Number of Reports	Word Count
Fragile States	Somalia	25	17,500
	Yemen	28	18,200
	South Sudan	20	14,000
	Syria	30	19,000
	Afghanistan	27	17,800
	Libya	20	13,700
	Iraq	35	20,029
	TOTAL	185	130,229
Stable States	Germany	22	15,200
	United States of America	30	21,500
	United Kingdom	18	13,000
	Japan	25	17,800

	Canada	20	14,300
	France	22	15,306
	New Zealand	15	10,400
	Italy	15	10,200
	Denmark	10	7,200
	Spain	8	5,500
	Portugal	10	5,800
	TOTAL	185	130,206

All reports referencing the performance of the states in managing the COVID-19 pandemic were downloaded from the WHO website and saved as TEXT files.

DATA MANAGEMENT AND ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

Once the fragile and stable state corpora were finalised and converted, the focus turned to the efficient management of the files. The priority was the management of the files to ensure easy retrieval from the two specialised corpora of WHO reports referencing the performance of fragile and stable states during the pandemic. The files were uploaded into the AntConc 3.5.0. concordance software to ensure an efficient search for metaphorical expression of war, and the examination of occurrences within their contextual environment (Weisser, 2016). The use of the software allowed for the presentation of metaphors within the "Key Word in Context" (KWIC), and this allowed for the examination of words contextually (Deignan, 2017).

In the first phase of the analysis, a search was undertaken for words related to the lexical field of war. This lexical field was established by relying on lists proposed by Fabiszak (2007) and Hu and Xu (2017), who collectively offered a list of 62 lexical items in the domain of war. For every lexical item found, there was a need to determine if it was used metaphorically. This phase of the analysis was guided by the metaphor identification procedures proposed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007) to identify metaphorical linguistic expressions. The procedure consists of four steps, namely (1) reading all texts to understand context, (2) searching for the target lexical units, (3) examining the lexical units in context to determine if the word has a more basic meaning in other contexts and decide if the meaning within the current context is beyond the basic meaning, and finally (4) marking the lexical unit as metaphorical if its contextual meaning contrasts the basic meaning. Next, the focus turned to determining instances where purposeful metaphors became ideological. For this, the analysis was guided by the contention of Charteris-Black (2017) that ideological metaphors are purposeful metaphors which are used frequently enough and intentionally to forward broader beliefs and shared assumptions to reinforce ideologies and normalise narratives.

To address the second research question, ideological metaphors were examined within the scenarios they were found in order to illustrate how their use facilitated particular ways of understanding and evaluating entities, situations and issues. For this, the metaphorical expressions were analysed in the context of the clauses they appeared in so as to understand the points of view they were normalising. This phase of the analysis was also informed by van Dijk's (2006) framework for examining social power, control and discursive interaction through expressions of the positive Self and negative Other. The clauses in which each ideological metaphor was found were isolated and individually examined to identify participants, goals and actions with the aim of determining how stable and fragile states were positioned and (dis)empowered through the use of metaphors and other discursive devices.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section answers the two research questions on the use of war metaphors referencing fragile and stable states in WHO reports. The aim is to bring to the surface the use of purposeful and ideological war metaphors in the reports, in addition to also locating the use of metaphors within wider discursive strategies used to construct the identity of fragile and stable states.

FROM PURPOSEFUL TO IDEOLOGICAL METAPHORS

The analysis of the WHO reports on fragile state responsiveness to COVID-19 revealed the use of 849 metaphorical linguistic expressions of war, while the analysis of WHO reports on stable state responsiveness to COVID-19 revealed the use of 390 metaphorical linguistic expressions of war. The metaphorical expressions of war used in reference to fragile states were, therefore, more than twice the number found in reference to stable states. Occurrences of the war metaphors are presented in Tables 2 and 3.

TABLE 2. Number of metaphorical linguistic expressions of war in the corpus of fragile states

LEMMA	Freq.	Examples of metaphorical lexical expressions
CAMPAIGN	173	community sensitisation campaign, xenophobia and scapegoating campaigns
FIGHT	164	the fight against COVID-19, fight hard with a common enemy
FRONTLINE, FRONTS	87	frontline health workers, frontline responders
TARGET	80	the target for this virus
THREAT	73	growing threat of COVID-19, looming threat of COVID-19
LOSE	63	lose someone due to COVID-19, lives lost to the disease
MOBILISE	38	to mobilising communities, to mobilise support
FORCE	24	join forces in the fight against COVID-19
SURVIVE	24	survive the pandemic
BATTLE	21	spearhead the battle against COVID-19, win the battle against COVID-19
COMBAT	18	combat COVID-19, combat the spread of the virus
STRUGGLE	13	the struggle against COVID-19, the struggle to contain the virus
HIT	8	outbreak hit a country, the hardest hit people
DEFEAT	8	defeat the pandemic, defeat the outbreak
SHIELD	8	shield medical workers, shield communities
SAFEGUARD	8	safeguard children, safeguard refugees
HERO	7	healthcare workers are real-life heroes, true heroes
ARM	7	armed with enhanced IPC measures, armed with knowledge
ENEMY	6	common enemy
WIN	6	Win the battle against the pandemic
WAR	2	this disease has declared war on us
ARMY	2	white army
ATTACK	2	the attack of the virus
TAKE OVER	2	COVID-19 take over the limelight, COVID-19 came about and took over
DOMINATE	2	COVID-19 dominated global attention; the COVID-19 response dominates community health concerns
SACRIFICE	2	the sacrifice of healthcare workers
SOLDIER	1	foot soldiers in the battle against COVID-19
Total	849	

TABLE 3. Number of metaphorical linguistic expressions of war in the corpus of stable states

LEMMA	Freq.	Examples of metaphorical lexical expressions
FIGHT	55	the fight against COVID-19, fight the growing fear
CAMPAIGN	49	Global Coronavirus Response pledging campaign, 'We are in this together' campaign
TARGET	42	target the virus instead of targeting society to reach the COVID-19 vaccine target
LOSE	40	people have lost their lives to COVID-19, people have lost loved ones to the virus
THREAT	38	The COVID-19 pandemic is threatening the livelihoods and social well-being, and the threat of new and emerging variants
SACRIFICE	24	the health who sacrificed their own lives
FRONTLINE	23	frontline health workers
HIT	16	places hardest hit by the pandemic, COVID-19 cases hit an all-time low
ENEMY	12	public enemy number one, common enemy
STRUGGLE	11	struggling with long COVID symptoms
DEFEAT	11	defeat COVID-19
COMBAT	10	combat ongoing health emergencies, combat COVID-19
FORCE	10	get the full force of the actual virus, join forces to advance COVID-19 vaccination
SAFEGUARD	10	to safeguard the technical work, safeguard the economy
BATTLE	6	valiantly battled COVID-19, global battle with the novel coronavirus
MOBILISE	7	to mobilising communities, to mobilise support
VICTORY	6	global access to COVID-19 vaccines is a huge victory, marked by hope for victory
ERADICATE	5	to eradicate disease, to eradicate all forms of harassment
HERO	4	the health workers are the real heroes
WAR	3	war against the virus
ATTACK	3	attack of the virus
WIN	2	science will win; we cannot let exhaustion win
SHIELD	2	shielding high-risk groups
SOLDIER	1	soldier on
KILL	1	fight a common enemy that is killing people indiscriminately
Total	390	

War metaphors generally relate to death, disaster, and turmoil, and the use of such language in the wider media discourse carries greater news value (Bednarek & Caple, 2014). Although WHO reports may not fall within the category of mainstream media, they are widely quoted by news agencies, and in that way, the narratives of WHO significantly shape media representations of nations. Tables 1 and 2 show that some words were being used in metaphorical linguistic expressions far more frequently than others. For example, "campaign" and "fight" were the most commonly used metaphorical linguistic expressions in both corpora. However, the frequency of these metaphorical terms in reports on fragile states was more than double that in reports on stable states.

The greater frequency with which metaphors like "fight," "threat," and "target" were repeated in reference to fragile states aligns with the ideological goals of framing these nations as embroiled in perpetual struggle. Such language serves to naturalise a worldview where instability and conflict are seen as inherent, thereby reinforcing widely held narratives about these states. This persistent framing, when echoed in global reports like those from WHO, transcends mere rhetoric and begins to influence public consciousness and international perceptions, aligning with what Charteris-Black (2017) describes as the legitimisation of particular viewpoints. However, it would

be premature to make conclusive claims based merely on mere frequency counts. Charteris-Black (2018) cautions against drawing such conclusions because war metaphors are not always used to convey negativity. Depending on context, war metaphors may be used in calls for action or for uniting people against a common enemy.

The value in determining the frequency with which war metaphors are used to reference fragile and stable states lies in furthering discussions on purposeful metaphors serving ideological goals. Purposeful metaphors, according to Charteris-Black (2017), are metaphors which serve a rhetorical purpose aimed at advancing and legitimising a particular point of view. Purposeful metaphors *become* ideological when they move beyond serving a rhetorical function to also reinforce and legitimise a worldview. This is achieved by naturalising viewpoints and reinforcing widely-held narratives through persistent use (Flusberg et al., 2018). The frequency with which some war metaphors are found in reference to stable and fragile states, therefore, serves to indicate how particular war metaphors become ideological. Metaphorical linguistic expressions occurring with greater frequency serve to reinforce a dominant frame, normalising certain ways of seeing. Furthermore, the frequent use of metaphors also facilitates the embedding of ideas in public consciousness. However, this is not to say that high frequency alone makes purposeful metaphors ideological. The context in which the metaphors are found has to advance a particular viewpoint and should be used with the intent to influence beliefs. For this reason, ideological metaphors need to be considered in the context in which they occur. The following section expands on the investigation of context in metaphor scenarios.

AGENCY AND (DIS)EMPOWERMENT IN METAPHOR SCENARIOS

Extending the investigation of ideological metaphors, this section reports on the use of metaphors in shaping agency and empowerment as communicated within discourse. Metaphors frame scenarios in ways that influence how agency is attributed, enacted, or diminished (Charteris-Black, 2017; Semino et al., 2018). Metaphor scenarios are, therefore, inherently ideological, as they carry assumptions about who holds power, who acts, and who is acted upon. In the second phase of investigation, the focus of the present study turned to the analysis of metaphorical expressions within clause structures. The researchers were particularly interested in understanding the points of view the metaphorical expressions were normalising. For this, the texts were examined for representations of the self and the other, with the self-being of WHO and the stable states that fund its activities and the other being fragile states.

In total, 55 sentences containing the war metaphor “fight” also made references to WHO donor nations, positioning them as the positive self. The following extracts illustrate the use of this metaphor:

PS1 This is a monumental moment in the fight against COVID-19. The commitment of the President of the United States, Joe Biden, and Ambassador Katherine Tai, the US Trade Representative, to support the waiver of IP protections on vaccines is a powerful example of American leadership in addressing global health challenges.

PS2 This support for the Gavi COVAX AMC shows great commitment to equitable, global access to COVID-19 vaccines and is a major boost to our efforts to fight the acute phase of the pandemic. We thank G7 countries, particularly Germany and the United States, as well as the EU, for this strong leadership in the fields of global health and global health security.

The use of adjectives such as "monumental" and "powerful" in PS1 and "great", "major", and "strong" in PS2 serve as intensifiers to draw attention to the significant role of countries such as the US and Germany, as well as their leaders. References to a global health challenge (PS1), global health (PS2), and global health security (PS2) serve to position the US, Germany, the wider G7 nations and the EU as leaders for the rest of the world in the fight against the pandemic. Furthermore, the use of the collective pronoun "we" in PS2 is left to interpretation by readers of the report. It could be in reference to WHO, or it could be used in reference to the entire global community who are thankful to these nations.

WHO reports on the responsiveness of fragile states made use of the word "campaign" most frequently (173 times). In contrast, references to campaigns in reports on stable states were found 49 times. The organised courses of action, such as raising awareness about preventive measures, were likened to campaigns in the reports. Definitions for the word "campaign" in the Oxford Dictionary also include "a series of military operations intended to achieve a particular objective, confined to a particular area, or involving a specified type of fighting". In the corpus, the word appears in the context of "COVID-19 awareness-raising campaign", "community awareness campaign", "national vaccination campaign", "community sensitisation campaign", and "immunisation campaign". As such, references to campaigns suggest the need to continually disseminate information to a society which lacks education (Kellner, 1995). This is clearly reflected in the following extracts:

NO1 Preparations begin for the community awareness campaign in the Kurdistan region. More than 150 volunteers have been trained and are being mobilised to deliver supplies, such as masks, and educational items, including flyers, banners, posters …. to dispel common myths related to the virus.

N02 Community Volunteers working under the supervision of WHO's implementing partner educate members of the public on the importance of wearing face masks and measures to protect themselves against COVID-19… This community sensitisation campaign will go a long way in reinforcing earlier messages of how people can stay safe as border interactions resume. It also serves as a reminder to the population that COVID-19 remains a serious public health problem.

The presentation of the negative Other in NO1 is achieved by drawing attention to the fact that volunteers needed to be trained to "dispel common myths". Reality is therefore constructed for consumers of this text that Kurdistan is a backward nation in need of education to free them from accepting baseless beliefs. Similarly, in NO2, reference to the support of an "implementing partner" to train community volunteers for a "sensitisation campaign" implies that the nation (Iraq) is helpless and highly dependent on external support, while the people are ignorant about the seriousness of the situation and in need of reinforced messages and reminders.

The following extract also provides evidence of how the pandemic provided more opportunities to forward the impression that fragile states like Yemen lack the rule of law and need to be closely monitored:

NO3 Migrants in the country are facing stigmatisation and are labelled as transmitters of disease. Xenophobia and scapegoating campaigns are leading to retaliation against these vulnerable communities, including physical and verbal harassment, forced quarantine, denial of access to health services, movement restrictions, and forced movements to frontline and desert areas, leaving them stranded without food, water and essential services.

In reference to Yemen, NO3 positions WHO as the voice of marginalised communities, the voice of migrants in this case. The report goes as far as to claim that there are xenophobia and scapegoating campaigns targeted at this vulnerable community. The campaign metaphor connotes the idea that discriminatory practices are not organic; rather, they are calculated and planned. It is interesting to note that similar expressions suggesting discriminatory practices were not found in reports referencing stable states. This is despite widely reported narratives of leaders such as President Donald Trump, who made divisive and even racist statements, which contributed to a rise in xenophobic violence against Asian Americans (Benjamin, 2021).

The word campaign in WHO reports referencing stable states occurred 43 times but was consistently found to reflect positivity and solidarity through phrases like “We are in this together campaign" and “Be a Superhero, Wear a Mask campaign”.

PS3 The 'We are in this together' campaign launched with prominent public figures, religious leaders and heads of different United Nations organisations to promote kindness and equality.

PS4 In mid-2020, survey results revealed that nearly 80% of respondents, particularly youth and young working adults, did not perceive COVID-19 as a severe disease. In response, the United Kingdom developed an inclusive strategy targeting youth. The “Be a Superhero, Wear a Mask” campaign was a notable success, generating millions of views on social media in the UK and globally.

PS5 Dr Mariana, Ministry of Health, Italy, emphasised two core priority areas for public health engagement with youth following the pandemic: first, health officials and the government must invite young people to the table, ensuring they also have a say in which other groups are engaged; and second, the ministry must recognise that young people are already involved in community groups and COVID-19 campaigns, trying to make a better world.

In PS4, the description of the “Be a Superhero, Wear a Mask” campaign as a “notable success” showcases the UK’s ability to implement successful public health campaigns that resonate both locally and globally. This creates an implicit narrative of competence. References to campaigns in PS5 also serve to highlight other positive traits. Italy is portrayed as a progressive and inclusive state committed to engaging and empowering its youth in public health initiatives. It highlights Italy's focus on inclusivity, equity, and democratic participation.

WHO reported that the campaigns conducted in stable states served to reinforce an already stable environment which prioritised people’s health. The campaigns were to ensure that there were no inequalities in healthcare access. The narrative highlighted the close working relationship between stable nations and organisations such as the United Nations to battle stigma and discrimination. Also, the pandemic was consistently positioned as one which required the leadership of stable states:

PS6 Dr Gerd Müller, Federal Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development, Germany, said: "We either beat the pandemic worldwide, or we will not beat it at all. The only way out of the crisis is a global immunisation campaign.

PS7 The United States and the European Union announced a joint agenda for combatting the global pandemic, reemphasising commitments to share doses with COVAX and support critical readiness activities and calling on other nations to do the same.

By highlighting the global nature of the pandemic, the reports were successful in drawing attention away from the management of the pandemic within their stable states. In PS6, references to a worldwide pandemic and a global immunisation campaign serve to highlight that the source of the problem is beyond the borders of Germany. The role of this stable state is, therefore, to provide support to others in fighting the pandemic. The use of the first-person plural pronoun, we, serves to position Germany as part of the larger global community which she needs to engage in order to "beat" the virus. In PS7, the United States, along with the European Union, are positioned as the main actors who call for other nations to follow their example. In presenting the polarisation manipulation theory, van Dijk (2006) describes this discursive positioning as a way of constructing an identity of the positive self at the expense of others.

The second most frequently occurring war metaphor was the word "fight", which occurred 164 times in reference to the responsiveness of fragile states. It occurred in metaphorical phrases such as "fight against COVID-19/coronavirus/pandemic" (100 times) and "fight a common enemy/threat" (39 times). When the word fight was used in reporting the responsiveness of fragile states, it was frequently juxtaposed with references to the support of stable states:

NO3 Dr Adham Ismail, WHO Representative in Iraq. Said that "Partnership and community engagement are critical components in the fight against COVID-19, and the success of this campaign would not have been possible without the generous financial support of our donors and partners, the European Union Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid (ECHO) and the Government of Kuwait,"

NO4 "The Government of Germany has extended its valuable support to Somalia in the fight against COVID-19, and we would like to thank them for this," said Dr Fawziya Abikar Nur, the Minister of Health and Human Services of Somalia".

In NO3, the ability of Iraq to fight the virus was only made possible with the support of other nations. In NO4, Somalia is dependent on the support of Germany. Germany is placed in the subject position for the act of extending valuable support, while Somalia (we) is made subject for the act of thanking Germany (them). This type of positioning of the fragile and stable states within sentence structures serves to construct a powerful versus powerless dichotomy (Fairclough, 2003).

Another frequently occurring word used in WHO reports on fragile states was the word "fragile", which occurred 52 times and appeared in phrases such as "fragile health system", "fragile context", "fragile setting", "fragile-low-income country", and "fragile situations".

NO5 Yemen's health system is already fragile, and an outbreak of COVID-19 would be catastrophic — overwhelming hospitals, health facilities and healthcare workers," said Altaf Musani, WHO Representative in Yemen.

NO6 Especially in the context of Syria, where the state is fragile, systems are disrupted, the economy is worsening, and people's vulnerabilities continue growing with the impact of COVID-19, coordinated support from all is paramount to defeat the public health emergency and save lives and livelihood.

The use of the word "fragile", as illustrated in NO5 and NO6, serves to highlight vulnerability and instability. The repeated use serves to emphasise the severity of the situation in these states, contrasting them sharply with stable states and perpetuating stereotypical and biased images of backwardness. The call for "coordinated support from all" in NO6 underscores Syria's dependence on external assistance from the international community, particularly from stable states that have led the global fight (see PS1 and PS2).

In contrast, the word "fragile" occurred only twice in the stable corpus and was used in other fragile states:

PS8 But the fight against the virus is far from over: we must continue to support COVAX and accelerate equitable access to vaccines in fragile countries, in particular through the sharing of vaccine doses. This is what France wants to do, together with its EU and G7 partners."

PS9 In recognition of the fact that 70% of disease outbreaks to which WHO responds take place in fragile, conflict-affected and vulnerable settings, this parallel session provided an opportunity to discuss the question of how health can serve as a stabiliser for peace. Mark Holland, Minister of Health of Canada, drew on the experiences of the Canadian Health Network, underlining that harnessing countries' specific expertise in different health areas across the Network was vital to building bridges and promoting stability, peace and prosperity.

In the extracts above, it is evident that the depiction of the positive self is at the expense of the negative Other (van Dijk, 2006). This involves presenting one's own group (the self) in a favourable light while portraying an out-group (the Other) negatively. This contrast serves to enhance the perceived moral, intellectual, or cultural superiority of the self, often justifying actions or policies that benefit the in-group while marginalising or demonising the out-group. The use of the pronoun "we" in PS8 serves to further distance fragile states from developed nations, contributing to increased polarisation between nations (van Dijk, 2017). The pronoun offers the stable states a collective identity and establishes solidarity and a shared purpose while implicitly excluding fragile states from being able to provide any support during the global pandemic. Similarly, extract PS9 creates a polarised dynamic where stable countries are portrayed as problem-solvers, peace-bringers, and sources of stability, while fragile countries are seen as inherently problematic, conflict-ridden, and unstable. This division reinforces the idea that the solutions lie with the stable countries, enhancing their positive self-image at the expense of the negative depiction of the other. Mark Holland, the Minister of Health of Canada, speaks from the perspective of a stable and resource-rich country. The Canadian Health Network's experiences are highlighted as a model to follow, suggesting that stable countries have the expertise and capacity to aid others. This frames Canada (and similar stable countries) as the positive self, capable and generous, ready to assist. By contrast, fragile countries are implicitly positioned as the negative Other—settings that are less stable, more conflict-affected, and need outside help. They are depicted as recipients of aid rather than as active agents in their own right.

Metaphorical expressions read in context reveal polarised representations that reinforce power relations and hierarchy. Though present in both corpora, metaphors are found to frame stable states as empowered agents of change and fragile states as dependent and incapable, perpetuating a dichotomy of global inequalities. This dichotomy aligns with Fairclough's (2003) concept of constructing powerful versus powerless identities through language. By positioning stable states as indispensable actors, these metaphors legitimise their dominance in global governance and development efforts. While stable states and their respective agencies are framed as empowered and altruistic, fragile states are depicted as dependent and deficient.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of war metaphors in WHO reports highlights the strategic role of language in shaping perceptions and constructing identities of stable and fragile states. By examining the frequency and contextual usage of metaphorical expressions, this study reveals a dichotomy in how states are framed while emphasising the ideological implications of such metaphorical framing. In fragile states, metaphors are deployed to emphasise vulnerability and dependency, aligning with narratives that depict these states as needing external intervention and support. Conversely, in stable states, the same metaphors are framed positively, emphasising solidarity, competence, and leadership. This polarised representation perpetuates the "positive Self" versus "negative Other" dynamic described in van Dijk's (2006) ideological square, contributing to the normalisation of unequal power relations in global health governance.

While purposeful metaphors in WHO reports serve rhetorical goals, their repeated use in framing fragile states suggests an ideological function that legitimises specific worldviews and power structures. The metaphors not only guide immediate reactions but also embed long-term beliefs about state capability and global responsibility. These findings align with the theoretical framework proposed by Charteris-Black (2017), emphasising that metaphors are not neutral linguistic devices but tools of persuasion and ideology. While Kohler and Bowra (2020) contend that organisations such as the WHO have made significant attempts at improving transparency and accountability, the findings of the present study suggest that, to some extent, at least, the WHO has failed to uphold principles of neutrality and egalitarianism in its reporting practices.

The findings of the study were limited by several factors. Firstly, the study exclusively analyses WHO reports, excluding other relevant sources of health communication, such as reports from other international health organisations or local health authorities. Including these sources might have provided a more comprehensive view of the discourse on global health governance. Secondly, the analysis is limited to the timeframe of the COVID-19 pandemic. This temporal constraint may not fully capture the evolution of WHO's narrative or the longer-term implications of its communication strategies. Future research could benefit from a longitudinal approach to understand changes over time. Future research could explore how these narratives influence stakeholders' behaviour and decisions, providing a more concrete understanding of their effects.

Despite these limitations, this study holds significant value in several key areas. By analysing the strategic use of war metaphors in WHO reports, the study highlights how language can reinforce ideological narratives. Specifically, it demonstrates how metaphorical expressions are not merely descriptive but serve to construct and legitimise power dynamics between stable and fragile states. The research builds on existing theories of purposeful and ideological metaphors, extending them to the context of global health communication. It demonstrates how

frequent use of metaphors contributes to framing narratives that naturalise and perpetuate global hierarchies. The research illustrates how metaphors serve to construct identities of the "positive Self" (stable states) and "negative Other" (fragile states). This dynamic reinforces stereotypes and legitimises the dominant roles of certain nations in global governance while marginalising others.

By identifying the presence of biased narratives, the present study advocates for institutional changes to promote transparency and impartiality, which are crucial for fostering equitable global health development. Future studies can build on these findings to explore the impact of discursive strategies on public perception and policy-making, as well as to develop more comprehensive taxonomies of discursive strategies.

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