

## Obama's Jokes and Metaphorical Expressions in the White House Correspondents' Dinner (2009~2016)

Yuuki Tomoshige

(Graduate School of Language and Culture, Osaka University)

yuuki.osaka.u@gmail.com

### ● Introduction

The aim of this paper is to analyze Barack Obama's jokes and metaphorical expressions in the White House Correspondents' Dinner (WHCD) to show how his audience's reaction to his humor is linked to the use of metaphors. The study contains not just verbal metaphorical analysis but also effective visual metaphors in an attempt to understand Obama's hidden intentions behind them, and shows that background knowledge concerning the rhetorical devices is essential (Charteris-Black 2011, 2014, 2018; Fillmore 1982, Lakoff 1980, 1987, 2014; Waisanen 2015).

(1) The WHCD speeches demonstrate how the rhetorical capacities of presidents have been extended through jokes' enthymematic smoke, attempting to turn perceived losses into gains by creeping up to the edge of the fire—a precipice that holds the possibility for tragedy to become comedy, and vice versa, given the risk involved (Waisanen 2015).

### 1. The aim of the research

- To supplement the scarcity of the previous study (Waisanen 2015).

- Waisanen (2015) only touches on Obama's 2010, 2011 and 2012 speeches.

- He didn't analyze metaphorical expressions and visual metaphors.

### 2. Method

#### Framework

Critical Metaphor Analysis (Charteris-black 2011, 2014, 2018)

#### Source

Obama's White House Correspondents' Dinner speech (2009~2016) (<https://www.americanrhetoric.com>)

#### The procedure of the analysis

- ① Extracting verbal similes and metaphors
- ② Extracting visual metaphors (Forceville 2008)
- ③ Classifying types of metaphors

#### ► Visual metaphor (Forceville 2008)

##### (2) a. contextual metaphor

An object is metaphorized because of the visual context in which it is placed.

##### b. Hybrid metaphor

Two objects that are normally distinct entities are physically merged into a single "gestalt".

##### c. Pictorial simile

Two objects are represented in their entirety in such a way that they are made to look similar.

### 3. Data

Table1 Verbal metaphor and simile

year	topic of simile	metaphor (source domain)
2009	youth, fire	bridge, whirlwind, friend, enemy, iron, fire, color
2011	×	marriage
2012	×	war
2013	trap	energy, food, journey, light
2014	×	color
2015	magic, the Ptolemaic theory	×
2016	marriage, Hillary	fire

\*× refers to (0)

Table2 Types of Visual Metaphors

year	type (Forceville 2008)	metaphor
2011	Hybrid metaphor	THE WHITE HOUSE IS THE TRUMP TOWER
2012	Contextual metaphor	DONALD TRUMP IS OSAMA BIN LADEN
2013	Hybrid metaphor	OBAMA IS THE SATAN
2014	Hybrid metaphor	THE CONGRESS IS THE FROZEN HELL OBAMA IS EDDARD STARK PUTIN IS A TEENAGE STAR
2015	Hybrid metaphor	JOE BIDEN IS THE NEW SECURITY SYSTEM
2016	Hybrid metaphor	OBAMA IS A SKELTON
	others types	metaphor/metonymy
2012	Metaphor from metonymy (Goosense 1990)	EXPRESSIONS ARE EMOTIONS
2013	Metonymy	A CAT STANDS FOR OBAMA
2016	Metaphor from metonymy (Goosense 1990)	EXPRESSIONS ARE EMOTIONS

In this presentation....

- Fire, marriage and color metaphor (Verbal metaphor)
- Hybrid metaphor (THE WHITE HOUSE IS THE TRUMP TOWER)
- Contextual metaphor (DONALD TRUMP IS OSAMA BIN LADEN)

### ● Fire metaphor and simile

(3) a. In the next hundred days, we will houstrain our dog, Bo, because the last thing Tim Geithnerneeds is someone else **treating him like a fire hydrant**. In the next hundred days, I will strongly consider **losing my cool**. (2009)

b. Bernie's slogan has helped his campaign **catch fire among young people**. **'Feel the Bern.'** **'Feel the Bern.'** (2016).

- simile→ "treat him like a fire hydrant" (2a)  
→someone should treat him as a key person to adjust a function of the government.
- idiom→ "lose one's cool" (2a)  
→ "Not stay in cool and in control" (*Urban Dictionary*) (UD)
- idiom→ "catch fire" (2b)  
→ Begin to burn. 《 figurative 》 become interesting or exciting (*Oxford Dictionary of ENGLISH*)

- slogan → “Feel the Bern”
- “An expression one uses when he/she supports Senator Bernie Sanders for President of the United States.” (UD)

**Table 3 Meanings of the metaphorical expressions**

Expression	Politician	meaning
like a fire hydrant	Tim Geithner (United States Secretary of the Treasury)	To extinguish fire = Using Tim Geithner to control Obama. =To handle emergency
lose one’s cool	Obama	Not stay in cool and in control = Obama would be able to anything by using his power. =To set fire

- three types of fire: natural fire, functional fire and organic fire (Charteris-black 2018).
- natural properties of fire, and the attribute is linked to its appearance and its intensity, which means that humans have limited control over fire. This type is classified into NATURAL FIRE.
- its effects such as providing light or providing heat indicates the aspect of the function of fire: FUNCTIONAL FIRE.
- ORGANIC FIRE: “a sequence of events from its start, and its growth through to its end” (Charteris-Black 2018: 30).

**FrameNet**

(<https://framenet.icsi.berkeley.edu/fndrupal/FrameGrapher>)

- Fire\_burning frame                      ORGANIC FIRE
- Fire\_emergency\_senario

**pun**

“Feel the Bern” → “Feel the burn”  
Idiom → “Feel the burn” “feel someone”

Target	Source
catch fire	become interesting or exciting
burn	Young people start to join Bernie Sanders (context)
feel the burn	desire (political ambition)
	feel the burn
	People are supporting Bernie Sanders because his intense work (context)
	feel someone (sympathy)

**Figure 1 A metaphorical mapping of “catch fire” and “feel the Bern”**

● **Marriage metaphor and simile**

- (4) a. Yes, I think it is fair to say that when it comes to my presidency, the honeymoon is over. (2011)
- b. Judge Merrick Garland come on out. We are going to do this right here. Right now. It’s like the red wedding. (2016)

- (4a) → THE PRESIDENCY IS BEING IN MARRIAGE

**Table 4 Meanings of honeymoon (OED)**

honeymoon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The period immediately following marriage, as characterized by love and happiness. Later also: a period of love and happiness at the beginning of a similar relationship.</li> <li>• An initial period of friendly relations, goodwill, or enthusiasm. Frequently in political contexts</li> </ul>
-----------	---

**Table 5 A mapping of the marriage metaphor**

Honeymoon	Presidency
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The beginning of a marriage</li> <li>• Love and happiness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The beginning of the presidency</li> <li>• goodwill, enthusiasm.</li> <li>• friendly relations</li> </ul>
<A honeymoon is over>	<The beginning of the presidency is over>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A real start of a marriage</li> <li>• To face a reality (both pros and cons)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A real start of the presidency</li> <li>• To face a reality (both pros and cons)</li> </ul>

- (4b) → red wedding → *Game of thrones*

\*red wedding

A total disaster; a sudden event resulting in a complete change of fortune among rivals, involving immense loss on one side and the total triumph of the other, often involving a carefully planned betrayal and brutal bloodletting. Based upon the "Red Wedding" event in "Game of Thrones". (UD)

- *Game of Thrones* as the background knowledge
- OBAMA IS EDDARD STARK

(5) Anyway, this year, I’ve promised to use more executive actions to get things done without Congress. My critics call this the “imperial presidency.” The truth is, I just show up every day in my office and do my job. I’ve got a picture of this I think. (2014)

<picture 1> (hybrid metaphor)

→ *Games of Thrones* is the continuous theme (background knowledge) of metaphors in 2014 and 2016.

● **Color metaphor (idiom)**

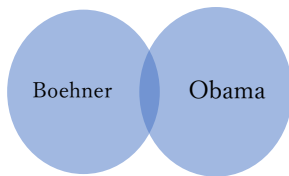
(6) In the next hundred days, our bipartisan outreach will be so successful that even John Boehner will consider becoming a Democrat. After all, we have a lot in common. He is a person of color. Although not a color that appears in the natural world. What's up, John? (2009)

**Table 6 The meaning of “person of color”, “the natural world” and “world”**

Dictionary	Meaning
Person of color (UD)	White liberals invented the expression so colored guys would not be offended when people called them colored guys. If you said, “Hey colored guy, get your lazy black ass off of my car,” the colored guy would be offended and have his feelings hurt. So now, all good white liberals say, “Hey, person of color, get your employmentally challenged black backside off my car,” the colored guy is not offended, and his feelings don’t get hurt.
The natural world (Merriam-Webster)	All of the animals, plants, and other things existing in nature and not made or caused by people.
World (OED)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A group or system of (usually similar) things or beings associated by common characteristics (denoted by a distinguishing word or phrase), or considered as constituting a unity.</li> <li>• The human race; mankind as a whole; human society.</li> </ul>

► Obama’s biracial background

(7) As the child of a black man and a white woman, someone who was born in the racial melting pot of Hawaii, with a sister who’s half Indonesian but who’s usually mistaken for Mexican or Puerto Rican, and a brother-in-law and niece of Chinese descent, with some blood relatives who resemble Margaret Thatcher and others who could pass for Bernie Mac, so that family get-togethers over Christmas take on the appearance of a UN General Assembly meeting. (Obama 2006: 274)



[not white] → [common feature]  
→ [Boehner will become a Democrat]

[black] → [a color that appears in the natural world]  
→ [natural for politics]

[a color that does not appear in the natural world]  
→ [unnatural for politics]

**Figure 2 A contextual interpretation of “a person of color” and “not a color that appears in the natural world”**

● Visual metaphor

► THE WHITE HOUSE IS THE TRUMP TOWER

(8) Donald Trump is here tonight! Now, I know that he’s taken some flak lately, but no one is happier, no one is prouder to put this birth certificate matter to rest than the Donald. And that’s because he can finally get back to focusing on the issues that matter — like, did we fake the moon landing? What really happened in Roswell? And where are Biggie and Tupac? But all kidding aside, obviously, we all know about your credentials and breadth of experience. For example -- no, seriously, just recently, in an episode of *Celebrity Apprentice* -- at the steakhouse, the men’s cooking team cooking did not impress the judges from Omaha Steaks. And there was a lot of blame to go around. But you, Mr. Trump, recognized that the real problem was a lack of leadership. And so ultimately, you didn’t blame Lil’ Jon or Meatloaf. You fired Gary Busey. And these are the kind of decisions that would keep me up at night. Well handled, sir. Well handled. Say what you will about Mr. Trump, he certainly would bring some change to the White House. Let’s see what we’ve got up there. (2011)

<picture 2> (hybrid metaphor)

• Captions as the characteristics of Trump  
“TRUMP the WHITE HOUSE”, “HOTEL”, “CASINO”, “GOLF COURSE”, and “PRESIDENTIAL SUITE”

(9) He had no ability to plan and organize and pay attention and switch focus; he had never been able to tailor his behavior to what the goals at hand reasonably required. On the most basic level, he simply could not link cause and effect. (Wolf 2018)

• An interpretation of the visual metaphor

The former leader intends to imply that Donald Trump is reckless, impetuous, and irrational, and his implication hits the nail on the head in that Obama brings to the audience’s attention to an awareness of public opinion at that time.

► DONALD TRUMP IS OSAMA BIN LADEN

(10) My fellow Americans, we gather during a historic anniversary. Last year at this time -- in fact, on this very weekend -- we finally delivered justice to **one of the world’s most notorious individuals**. (2012)

<picture 3> (contextual metaphor)

► Obama’s remark on the death of Osama Bin Laden

(11) Tonight, I can report to the American People and to the world that the United States has conducted an that operation that killed Osama bin Laden, the leader of Al-Qaeda, and a terrorist who’s responsible for the murder of thousands of innocent men, women and children. (2011)

► A mapping of the contextual metaphor

**Table 7 A mapping within the same category**  
Notoriousness

Osama Bin Laden	Donald Trump
murderer	No scruples
cruel	Rebel
inhuman	Disruptor
	Living outside the rules

- hyperbole as a joke

→ Obama emphasizes Trump’s notoriousness by comparing with the terrorist, Osama Bin Laden.

**4. Summary**

**Table 8 Effects of using the metaphorical devices**

Types of metaphor	Effects
Fire (simile)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To evoke the fire frame (FrameNet)</li> <li>• To map the sequence of events onto the degree of the intensity of the emotion.</li> <li>• The image of Tim Geithner as the fire hydrant.</li> </ul>
Fire (slogan)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pun (various meanings are attached to the slogan)</li> </ul>
Marriage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To indicate the beginning of a happy moment is over.</li> <li>• To face a reality</li> </ul>
Color	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• self-deprecating</li> <li>• irony</li> <li>• racial awareness</li> </ul>
Hybrid metaphor (Trump)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To show everyone’s thoughts or images of Trump by using the visual metaphor. (sympathy)</li> <li>• a eureka moment</li> </ul>
Contextual metaphor (Trump)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To share the same property (notoriousness)</li> <li>• hyperbole</li> </ul>

• In this presentation, I pointed out the analysis of the previous study (Waisanen 2015) was insufficiency.

• Background settings (political figures, celebrities, movies (dramas), idioms, slogans) are significant to understand each joke.

• Metaphorical expressions including visual metaphors play an important role to understand jokes in the WHCD.

• Jokes include irony, self-deprecating, hyperbole, a eureka moment, and sympathy.

• Since the current study has only examined verbal and visual metaphors, more broad-ranging modes (movies gestures ) should be analyzed.

**References**

Charteris-Black, Jonathan. (2011). *Politician and Rhetoric*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Charteris-Black, Jonathan. (2014). *Analysing Political Speeches: Rhetoric, Discourse, and Metaphor*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Charteris-Black, Jonathan. (2018). *Fire Metaphors. Discourses of Awe and Authority*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Forceville, Charles. (2008). Metaphor in Pictures and Multimodal Representations. Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr, (Ed.), *The Cambridge Hand Book of Metaphor and Thought*, (pp462-482). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fillmore, C. (1982). Frame Semantics. In Linguistic Society of Korea, (Ed.), *Linguistics in the morning calm*, (pp.111-138). Seoul: Hanshin.

Goossens, Louis. (1990). Metaphonymy: The Interaction of Metaphor and Metonymy in Expressions for Linguistic Action. *Cognitive Linguistics* 1(3): (pp323-342).

Kress, Gunther. (2011). Multimodal Discourse Analysis. James Paul Gee, Michael Handford, (Ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. (pp35-50). London: Routledge.

Lakoff, George and M, Johnson. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lakoff, George. (2002). *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Lakoff, George. (2014). *Don't Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate*. Chelsea Green Publishing.

Obama, Barack. (2006). *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*. New York: Vintage.

Speier, Hans. (1998). Wit and Politics: An Essay on Laughter and Power. *American Journal of Sociology* 103 (5): (pp1357-58).

Waisanen, Don J. (2015). Comedy-in- Chief: Presidential Jokes as Enthymematic Crisis Rhetoric. *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 45 (2): (pp335-360).

Wolff, Michael. (2018). *Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House*. Little, Brown.

(Dictionaries)

Meriam-Webster

(<https://www.merriam-webster.com>)

Urban Dictionary

(<https://www.urbandictionary.com>)

Oxford Dictionary of ENGLISH: Second Edition revised. (2008). Oxford University Press.

Oxford English Dictionary

(<https://www-oed-com>)