

METAPHORICAL FRAMING OF THE ENEMY: POWER, MORALITY, AND IDENTITY IN DISCOURSE

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The language we use to describe our enemies reveals more about us than about them. Metaphors play a powerful role in shaping how we understand conflict, difference, and morality. This article explores how the concept of the enemy is framed through metaphorical language and how those metaphors influence perceptions of power, moral judgment, and group identity. It argues that the metaphors we live by are not neutral—they can divide or connect, justify violence or invite understanding. By examining how ordinary words carry extraordinary power, this study shows that changing the way we speak about enemies may be the first step toward changing the way we see them.

Keywords: metaphor, enemy, discourse, morality, identity, power, language

When people talk about enemies, they rarely use plain words. Instead, they reach for images, comparisons, and metaphors. We hear phrases like “crush the enemy,” “fight the virus,” “defeat poverty,” or “the battle for truth.” These expressions reveal something deeply human: our tendency to think about conflict in physical, emotional, and moral terms. Language gives shape to invisible fears and abstract struggles.

Metaphors are not just decorative figures of speech—they are cognitive shortcuts that help us make sense of complex realities. When we describe an enemy as a disease, we imply something contagious that must be eliminated. When we call them a beast, we suggest something wild, uncivilized, or less than human. Such words carry emotional weight. They invite fear, disgust, and sometimes hatred. And yet, these metaphors are so common that we barely notice them. Power often hides in language. The way we describe an enemy can determine who holds the moral advantage and who appears justified. When political leaders call opponents “evil,” “terror,” or “infestation,” they are not just describing—they are persuading. These words frame a narrative in which their own side becomes the defender of order and morality, while the other becomes a threat to humanity itself.

Such framing is powerful because it simplifies reality. Complex political or cultural disagreements are reduced to stories of heroes and villains. Once the enemy is metaphorically dehumanized, almost any action against them can seem acceptable or even necessary. The metaphor does the dirty work: it makes power look like protection and aggression look like justice. But power can also shift through language. When individuals or movements reclaim metaphors—when they call themselves “warriors of peace” or “freedom fighters” instead of “rebels”—they challenge the dominant narrative. They use metaphor not only as defense but as resistance. In this way, metaphors become a battlefield of meaning, where power is constantly negotiated.

The idea of the enemy is deeply moral. From childhood, people learn to sort the world into good and bad, light and dark, safe and dangerous. These moral categories are often reinforced by metaphor.

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Darkness becomes a symbol of evil, light of goodness. When we describe the enemy as “dark forces” or “a shadow over our nation,” we are not only describing them—we are judging them. This moral language gives people a sense of purpose and clarity in confusing times. It tells them who to trust and who to fear. However, it also creates emotional distance. Seeing the enemy as morally corrupted means there is little room for dialogue or empathy. The moral metaphor turns conflict into a kind of spiritual drama where compromise feels like betrayal. Still, morality can be reframed. Some peace activists use metaphors of healing instead of fighting. They speak of “repairing broken relationships” rather than “defeating the enemy.” Such language softens the boundaries between right and wrong, opening a space for shared humanity. It reminds us that morality is not only about punishment but also about restoration. An enemy is never just an outsider—they are a mirror in which we see ourselves. How we describe others often reveals who we believe we are. Calling someone “barbaric” implies that we are civilized. Labeling another group “irrational” affirms our own reason. Every metaphor about the enemy secretly defines the self. This dynamic explains why conflicts can feel so personal and emotional. The enemy becomes a symbol of everything we reject or fear within ourselves. When societies dehumanize their enemies, they are often protecting a fragile sense of identity. The more uncertain people are about who they are, the more they need someone else to stand against.

Yet identity can also grow through the recognition of shared humanity. When individuals begin to see the enemy as a person—with fears, hopes, and contradictions similar to their own—the metaphor starts to lose its power. Words like “rival,” “opponent,” or even “neighbor” can gradually replace harsher labels. Changing metaphors is not a simple linguistic act—it is an emotional and moral transformation.

Metaphorical framing of the enemy is not a linguistic accident—it is a window into the human mind. It reflects our struggles with fear, morality, and identity. The metaphors of war, disease, and darkness may feel natural, but they are choices—choices that shape our reality. By paying attention to those choices, we can resist the language that divides and seek words that connect. In the end, the enemy is as much a creation of imagination as of conflict. And if imagination can create hostility, it can also create understanding. To change our metaphors is, in a quiet way, to change the world.

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