Jarosław WILIŃSKI

University of Siedlce
jaroslaw.wilinski@uph.edu.pl

BOXING METAPHORS IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE: A QUANTITATIVE CORPUS-BASED STUDY

Abstract: This paper utilizes the cognitive theory of metaphor and a corpus-based methodology to investigate the prevalent usage of metaphorical expressions derived from boxing terminology in the domain of politics. The objective is to identify and analyze the boxing metaphors that are commonly employed in political discourse. The findings of this study demonstrate the existence of boxing metaphors that exhibit strong or loose associations with the political domain. These metaphors possess distinct figurative meanings, originate from diverse metaphorical mappings, and serve multiple functions within the realm of political discourse.

Key words: metaphor, boxing, political discourse, corpus, COCA

1. Introduction

In the last three decades, the increasing availability of electronic resources has created perfect opportunities for empirically supported linguistic investigations of boxing metaphors in naturally-occurring political discourse, as shown by several studies (e.g., Chen, 2009, pp. 13-17; Hang, 2016; Pérez López, 2018, pp. 17-19; Wiliński, 2022). For example, Chen's (2009) study investigated how boxing terms are used in different contexts, such as life, morality, politics, or business. The analysis focused on determining different aspects of politics that are described metaphorically by the use of boxing terms, and on explaining the possible reasons why a particular boxing term is used as the source to understand a particular target context. Hang's (2016) study, in turn, aimed at investigating sports metaphors, including boxing terms, in news headlines of some electronic articles on the 2012 US presidential election campaign. The study uncovered several boxing terms that occur commonly in political news. The study by Pérez López (2018) compared the

use of military and sports metaphors in political headlines in English and Spanish, revealing the connections between the target domain of politics and the source domains of boxing and other sports. Finally, Wiliński's (2022) study attempted to formulate the concept of metaphodiom and identify different structural, distributional, and semantic properties of idiomatic metaphors based on examples derived from boxing terminology.

Thus far, however, the bulk of such studies have tended to concentrate on a qualitative analysis of boxing complex words and phrases, with particular emphasis on establishing their semantic properties and uncovering the cognitive motivation behind their meanings. To the best of the author's knowledge, no single study has hitherto attempted to quantify boxing metaphors in political contexts, statistically evaluate their distribution, and describe their discourse-functional properties based on their occurrences in linguistic corpora. The previous research (see Wiliński, 2022) was restricted in its scope to distributional properties of some metaphorical idioms derived from boxing. Thus, the primary aim of this study is twofold: first, to carry out a qualitative and quantitative investigation of boxing words and phrases occurring in specific political contexts (debates, campaigns, elections, statements, etc.), and second, to determine their discourse-functional features in political discourse.

The rest of this paper is organized into 3 sections. Section 2 considers theoretical and methodological assumptions relevant for corpus-based analysis, and it also discusses the corpus, data, tools, and procedure applied in the analysis. Section 3 reports the results of the quantitative analysis, which are then interpreted linguistically and cognitively. Section 4 summarizes the findings and provides concluding remarks about limitations and future directions for empirical work on boxing metaphors.

2. Theoretical and methodological background

2.1 Theory and method

The theoretical framework is based on the notion of the conceptual metaphor, generally defined by cognitive linguistics researchers as apprehending one conceptual domain (target), usually an abstract one, in terms of another, concrete domain (source) (cf. Kövecses, 2002). This study also adopts a broader perspective on metaphor, a view that assumes that the use of metaphor hinges on contextual factors, including situational, discourse, and conceptual-cognitive contexts (cf. Kövecses, 2015, 2020). Hence, boxing metaphors (metaphorical linguistic expressions) in this study are interpreted from a linguistic, cognitive, and discourse-functional perspective.

The methodological framework rests on quantitative corpus-based linguistics. In other words, data are examined in quantitative terms utilizing Schmid's (2000)

measures of attraction and reliance. Attraction is expressed as the proportion in which a particular expression appears in a target context, while reliance is the proportion in which an expression occurs solely in this particular domain (cf. Schmid & Küchenhoff, 2013, pp. 548). In the present investigation, the first proportion can be understood as reflecting the attraction exerted by the target domain on a boxing term, and the latter as reflecting the reliance of this term on the target domain in question. The second formula was employed to capture, in quantitative terms, the intuition that some domains or contexts can be more relevant to certain boxing terms than the target domain of politics in which these expressions occur.

Strictly quantitative and objective as the method might seem, the results of the corpus-based analysis are evaluated qualitatively. For example, boxing expressions that are strongly and loosely associated with the domain of politics are grouped under the headings of specific metaphorical mappings or entailments based on a simple semantic test: a boxing expression is used metaphorically in a particular context when its most basic, physical or concrete sense stands in contrast to its current contextual meaning and a meaningful comparison is drawn between them (cf. Pragglejaz Group, 2007; Steen *et al.,* 2010).

2.2 Corpus, procedure, and tools

Data was extracted from an earlier version of the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), covering the years between 1990 and 2017. This version contains more than 560 million words; it is equally divided among spoken (transcripts of conversation from different TV and radio programs), fiction (short stories and plays), popular magazines (nearly 100 different magazines covering specific domains such as news, health, home, finance, religion, sports, etc), newspapers (ten newspapers: USA Today, New York Times, Atlanta Journal Constitution, etc.), and academic texts (nearly 100 different journals). The most recent update was made in March 2020. Thus, COCA currently includes more than one billion words of text from eight genres: fiction, spoken transcripts, academic texts, newspapers, popular magazines, TV and Movies subtitles, blogs, and other web pages.

The procedure adopted in this quantitative study consisted of four stages. The first stage involved searching for boxing expressions and extracting all their occurrences in the corpus. For this purpose, the list containing 145 boxing words and phrases and their contextual variants was compiled and then each term was searched for its occurrence in COCA. The selection of boxing expressions was based on *a priori* knowledge, existing word-lists (e.g. https://www.englishclub.com/vocabulary/sports-boxing.htm), online glossaries of sporting terminology (see data sources), and current dictionaries of idioms (*Collins Cobuild Dictionary of*

Idioms and *The Farlex Dictionary of Idioms*). The concordance tool in the corpus constructed concordance lines (see Figure 1 below), which were then manually inspected (along with their co-text) to determine the frequencies of all boxing expressions occurring in the contexts of politics.

The second stage entailed calculating the observed frequencies. For the word *infighting* in Table 1 (see section 3), for example, all occurrences of this term in the target domain of politics were first identified from the corpus, yielding 223. Then, the total frequency of the term (*infighting*) in all other contexts, was determined, yielding 548. Finally, the total frequency of all boxing terms in the target domain was worked out, giving 1591. These three figures were extracted from the corpus manually by reading concordance lines and their co-text and counting all the occurrences of boxing expressions under investigation. Frequencies of variants such as *infighting* or *in-fighting* and *rough and tumble* or *rough-and-tumble* were counted separately, in order to establish which of the variants occurs more frequently in the corpus and the target domain of politics.
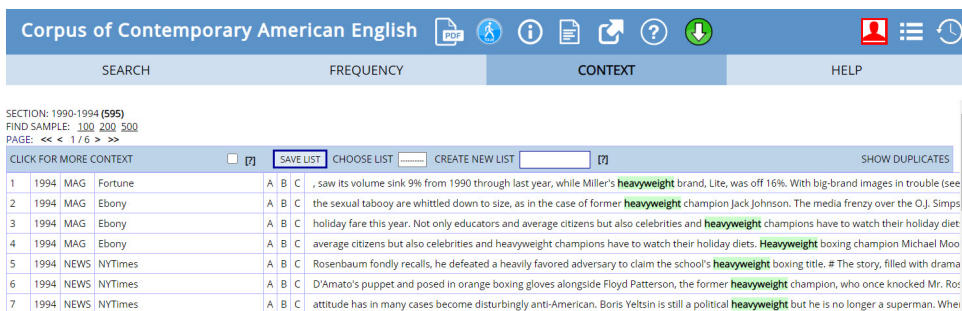

Figure 1. A screenshot illustrating concordance lines in COCA

The third stage required computing measures of attraction and reliance (Schmid, 2000; Schmid & Küchenhoff, 2013). To this end, the frequencies mentioned above were entered into an Excel spreadsheet and examined using these arithmetic tests. Attraction was computed by dividing the observed frequency of occurrence of a boxing term in the target domain (i.e. in all political contexts identified in the corpus) by the total frequency of boxing expressions in politics. Reliance, in turn, was calculated by dividing the frequency of occurrence of a boxing term in the target domain by the frequency of its occurrence in the whole corpus (cf. Schmid, 2000, p. 54). The results of these measures are converted to percentages by multiplying the observed frequency of a particular term in the target domain in each case by one hundred. The percentages provided by these calculations were taken as indicators of the association between boxing expressions and the target domain of politics: the higher the percentage, the stronger the attraction to, and reliance on, the domain in question. As illustrated in Table 1 (see Section 3), the percentages resulting from the calculation of attraction and reliance for the term *infighting* are

very high: 14.02% and 40.69%, respectively. This means that the term accounts for 14.02% of the uses of boxing expressions in politics: in other words, *infighting* is a highly significant term in this domain. In addition, 40.69% of the occurrences of the same term are found in this domain, which means that *infighting* relies on other domains in a proportion of 59.31%.

At the final stage, the results were arranged according to their strength of attraction, and then, interpreted qualitatively. The results show that there are indeed boxing expressions that are strongly or loosely associated with this domain, that these expressions carry different semantic and functional properties, and that the mutual association between particular boxing expressions and the target domain under study seems to be determined by the conceptual metaphor POLITICS IS A BOXING BOUT, a metaphor whose nature and significance were explored either by case studies or mentioned in passing by other researchers (e.g., Hammer & Kellner, 2009; Kövecses, 2010; Semino & Koller, 2009; Gibbs, 2015; Mussolf, 2016).

Practically all definitions of boxing terms, implemented in the description of semantic properties of boxing metaphors, were created by the author himself based on the definitions found in *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms* (2002) and *The Free Dictionary by Farlex* (https://www.thefreedictionary.com/).

3. Results and discussion

The corpus search for 145 boxing expressions resulted in detecting a small proportion of such expressions in political contexts. Thus, a complete collection of data, extracted from COCA, contains only 86 types of metaphorical phrases derived from boxing terminology, out of which 8 occurred only once in politics. However, since it is impossible to present and assess the findings for all these boxing terms in the space here allotted, this section will report the results for the 30 expressions that are strongly and loosely associated with the target domain under discussion. The rest of the boxing metaphors observed in COCA are listed in Table 2 in section 3.3 and Table 3 in Appendix 1.

3.1. The most significant boxing metaphors

Table 1 below shows the results of the measures of attraction and reliance for the 30 most strongly attracted terms of the target domain. It also provides the observed frequency of boxing expressions in the target domain, the total frequency of all boxing terms in politics, and the frequency of their occurrence in the whole corpus.

Table 1. The results of attraction and reliance for the thirty most strongly attracted[1]

rank	metaphorical expressions	a	x	e	attraction	reliance
	a = Frequency of term (e.g. *infighting*) in politics; **x** = Total frequency of all boxing terms in politics; **e** = Total frequency of term (e.g. *infighting*) in corpora					
1.	*infighting*	223	1568	548	14.22%	40.69%
2.	*square off*	131	1568	582	8.35%	22.51%
3.	*heavyweight*	122	1568	2374	7.78%	5.14%
4.	*come out swinging*	76	1568	157	4.85%	48.41%
5.	*rough and tumble*	52	1568	165	3.32%	19.32%
6.	*rough-and-tumble*	50	1568	332	3.19%	15.06%
7.	*lightweight*	40	1568	207	2.55%	19.32%
8.	*counterpunch*	39	1568	136	2.49%	28.68%
9.	*knock sb down*	38	1568	2800	2.42%	1.36%
10.	*catch sb off guard*	36	1568	752	2.30%	4.79%
11.	*fighting chance*	31	1568	251	1.98%	12.35%
12.	*have sb in your corner*	31	1568	287	1.98%	10.80%
13.	*in-fighting*	29	1568	85	1.85%	34.12%
14.	*put/toss/throw your hat in the ring*	29	1568	55	1.85%	52.73%
15.	*stick your neck out*	29	1568	129	1.85%	22.48%
16.	*take the gloves off*	28	1568	59	1.79%	47.46%
17.	*on the ropes*	27	1568	226	1.72%	11.95%
18.	*toss/throw your hat into the ring*	27	1568	42	1.72%	64.29%
19.	*throw in the towel*	26	1568	293	1.66%	8.87%
20.	*go the distance*	26	1568	167	1.66%	15.57%
21.	*knockout punch*	21	1568	127	1.34%	16.54%
22.	*below the belt*	20	1568	131	1.28%	15.27%
23.	*punching bag*	19	1568	254	1.21%	7.48%
24.	*the gloves come off*	19	1568	45	1.21%	42.22%
25.	*pull no punches*	19	1568	108	1.21%	17.59%
26.	*take off the gloves*	18	1568	40	1,15%	45.00%
27.	*take it on the chin*	18	1568	109	1.15%	16.51%
28.	*knock-out/knockout blow*	16	1568	62	1.02%	25.81%
29.	*push into a corner*	16	1568	41	1.02 %	39.02%
30.	*win on points*	14	1568	22	0.89%	63.64%

As can be noted in Table 1, the results are sorted according to the measure of attraction. The top of the table contains relatively frequent expressions, such as *infighting, square off,* or *heavyweight.* The most rational explanation for this is that the total frequency of these terms in COCA overall is likely to considerably influence the likelihood of their occurrence in the target domain

---

[1] The quantitative data from this table were applied in the previous research (Wiliński, 2022, pp. 123-124) to define one of the criteria of the concept of metaphodiom (its frequency of occurrence) and characterize the distributional properties of several metaphorical idioms.

under consideration. For example, *infighting* (attraction score 14.22%) and *square off* (attraction score 8.35%) obtained much higher scores for attraction than *push into a corner* (attraction score 1.02%) and *knock-out/knockout blow* (attraction score 1.02 %), as they occurred much more frequently in politics than *push into a corner* and *knock-out/knockout blow*, as shown in Table 1. In addition, *infighting* and *square off* do not refer to a domain-specific boxing scenario. Rather, they are used in a general sense to pertain to many different types of confrontations and disagreements between different opponents, including political rivals. *Push into a corner* and *knock-out/knockout blow* in turn are domain-specific boxing expressions that convey a higher degree of aggressiveness or emotional (over)tone than *infighting* and *square off*. Hence, journalists and politicians might avoid them due to political correctness in today's global media.

By contrast, the list for reliance includes much higher scores for less frequent expressions occurring in politics, such as *toss/throw your hat into the ring* (reliance score 64.29%), *put/toss/throw your hat in the ring* (reliance score 52.73%), and *take the gloves off* (reliance score 47.46%), since the formula employed for the calculation of reliance considers the total frequency of each expression in the corpus. The restrictive domain-specific nature of these boxing phrases may have a strong influence on their high reliance score in the corpus. In contrast, the exact opposite holds for *infighting*. Although *infighting* occurs much more frequently in political contexts than *toss/throw your hat into the ring*, the latter achieves a much higher score for reliance because its overall frequency of occurrence in the corpus is much lower (42 occurrences). Consequently, the mutual association between *toss/throw your hat into the ring* and the target domain under scrutiny also appears to be stronger (64.29%). One possible theoretical explanation for this is that the term *ring* and the whole expression evoke a domain-specific boxing scenario, whereas *infighting* is not boxing-specific *per se*, but it generalizes over any confrontations between whichever type of opponents and antagonistic situations (a boxing fight, group rivals, a clash between members in a company, etc.).

The first set of the most strongly attracted terms of the target domain consists of expressions based on the underlying idea that A POLITICAL CONFLICT, DISPUTE, OR DISAGREEMENT IS A BOXING FIGHT. Its leading lexeme *infighting*, ranked first, is accompanied by *rough and tumble, rough-and-tumble,* and *in-fighting*, occupying ranks 5, 6, and 13. The scores of attraction and reliance reveal that the term *infighting* accounts for 14.22% of the uses of all boxing terms in the contexts of politics, and that 40.69% of uses of the same term are found in politics. Hence, *infighting* is attracted to the target domain in a proportion of 14.22%, relies on politics in a proportion of 40.69%, and is the most significant term for this domain. By comparison, its variant form *in-fighting* is a much less important term of the target domain (attraction score 1.85%) and relies on politics to a lesser extent (reliance score 34.12%).

The terms *infighting* and *in-fighting* refer to 'contentious rivalry or intense competition between members of the same political organization', as in

Infighting within the Georgia Republican Party intensified the next year. This competition is conceptualized in terms of fighting or boxing at close quarters in line with the correspondence POLITICAL COMPETITION IS A BOXING FIGHT. *Rough and tumble* and its variant, activating the same underlying conceptualization, are applied to 'rough and unrestrained competition or fighting devoid of any moral rules', as in *You had a tough introduction into the rough and tumble of politics.*

The top of the ranking list also includes *square off* in rank 2, followed by *heavyweight, come out swinging,* and *lightweight* in ranks 3, 4, and 7, respectively. *Square off* (attraction score 8.35%)*,* based on the mapping PREPARING FOR A POLITICAL CAMPAIGN IS PREPARING FOR A BOXING FIGHT, metaphorically denotes 'to face a political opponent in a debate or election', as in *The winner will square off against Democratic U.S. Sen. Claire McCaskill in November.* The term alludes to boxers preparing to fight, assuming a fighting stance, and facing each other at the beginning of a boxing match. *Heavyweight* (attraction score 7.78%), ranked third, means 'a boxer in an unlimited weight division' or 'an influential and important politician', as in *In Massachusetts, Sunday, former President and Democratic heavyweight, Bill Clinton, rallied supporters on behalf of Congressman Barney Frank,* while *lightweight* (attraction score 2.55%) pertains to 'a boxer who falls within a lightweight category' or 'a politician being of little influence and importance', as in '*Many ministries were led by political lightweights who were appointed solely to keep Chatichai's coalition together.* Both terms reflect the same idea POLITICIANS AND POLITICAL ORGANIZATIONS ARE BOXERS.

Come out swinging, instantiating the concept POLITICAL STRATEGIES ARE STRATEGIES ADOPTED BY BOXERS, designates 'to compete against a political opponent in an aggressive or confrontational manner', as in *Donna, Al Gore, is he going to come out swinging this weekend against President Bush?* A close analogy with a boxer's strategy can be made here: when a boxer comes out swinging, he leaves his corner immediately after the bell and attacks his opponent aggressively. Its variant *come out fighting,* ranked number 41 (see Table 3 in Appendix), also seems to reflect the same analogy, as in *Till then, Bush had ignored repeated warnings to come out fighting for his presidency or risk losing it.* However, the first expression obtained higher scores for attraction and reliance (attraction score 4.85% and reliance score 48.41%) than the latter (0.57% and 37.50%), since it occurred more frequently in the target domain.

The third group in the ranking is constituted by terms, such as *counterpunch, knock sb down, catch sb off guard, fighting chance,* and *have sb in one's corner* in ranks 8 to 12, which can be understood relative to the idea DISTINCT STAGES OF A POLITICAL CAMPAIGN OR DISPUTE ARE DIFFERENT PHASES INVOLVED IN A BOXING FIGHT. The terms *counterpunch* and *knock sb down* obtained higher scores for the attraction (2.49% and 2.42%) than *fighting chance* (attraction score 1.98%) and *have sb in one's corner* (attraction score 1.98%) since they occurred much more frequently in the target domain. *Knock sb down* and *catch sb off guard* obtained low scores for

reliance (1.36% and 4.79% respectively) than *counterpunch* and *fighting chance* (28.68% and 12.35%), as they occurred more frequently in other contexts.

Counterpunch is used to denote 'to deliver a countering blow' or 'to attack a political opponent verbally in return for his previous attack or criticism', as in *Senator Obama seemed content to absorb the attacks and counterpunch. Knock sb down* means 'to bring to the ground with a blow' or 'to cause a political opponent to start losing his support by revealing some information', as in *Democrats hoped that more information about the president's youth would knock him down.* The expression *catch sb off guard* bears the meaning: 'to surprise a political rival when he becomes less careful, vigilant, or cautious about potential trouble or danger', as in *Down in Texas, Bush seemed to be caught off guard by Gore's offer.* A veiled allusion here is made to a situation in boxing when a boxer fails to protect himself from an opponent's blow by dropping his guard (a defensive posture). *Fighting chance* applies to 'a chance of fighting for a boxing title' or 'a possibility of winning an election, but only with a great effort or struggle', as in *At least Mitt Romney had a fighting chance in the last election.* Finally, *have sb in one's corner* in rank 12 means 'to have someone supporting one's political position or goals', as in *Mitt Romney already has establishment figures like Senator John McCain and Governor Chris Christie in his corner.* The expression alludes to a boxing match in which each boxer is given a corner of the ring. Trainers and helpers come into a boxer's corner between rounds and provide assistance and support.

Another set includes expressions, such as *put/toss/throw your hat in the ring, take the gloves off, toss/throw your hat into the ring, the gloves come off,* and *take off the gloves,* activating the same underlying conceptualization DISTINCT STAGES OF A POLITICAL CAMPAIGN OR DISPUTE ARE DIFFERENT PHASES INVOLVED IN A BOXING FIGHT. *Put/toss/throw your hat in the ring,* ranked number 14, and its variant *toss/throw your hat into the ring,* ranked number 18, denote 'to announce one's intentions to be a candidate in a political election', as in *Now, Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, he threw his hat in the ring last night right here on.* This figurative sense derives from the custom of a boxer throwing his hat into a boxing ring when he attempts to issue a challenge and take on a random opponent (Flavell and Flavell 2006: 150). *Take the gloves off* in rank 16 and its variants *the gloves come off* (rank 24) and *take off the gloves* (rank 26) are used to describe a political dispute in which political opponents begin to compete in a more hostile or tenacious way, as in *Republicans take the gloves off, Romney goes on the attack,* in *The gloves are coming off. The GOP presidential candidates squaring off in Iowa,* or in *As the campaign winds down, the incumbent has taken off the gloves.* The analogy here is made to boxers fighting with bare fists, which inflicts more damage than fighting with gloves on.

In addition to the expressions mentioned above, the ranking list contains expressions, such as *stick your neck out, on the ropes, pull no punches, take it on the chin,* and *push into a corner,* which are also based on the same idea: different

stages of a political dispute are construed as different phases of a boxing bout. *Stick your neck out*, ranked number 15, means 'to risk incurring criticism by acting or speaking bravely', as in *In last year's gubernatorial race, Roberts stuck her neck out on several issues.* The term originated in boxing, where boxers need to keep their necks and chins drawn in or protected to avoid being hit by their opponent. *On the ropes* in rank 17, alluding to a boxer pushed back against the ropes of the ring, figuratively refers to a political confrontation in which a politician is on the verge of failure or defeat, as in *Romney is on the ropes and Obama's throwing all the punches. Pull no punches,* ranked number 25, is used in the context of politics to criticize a political opponent openly by saying exactly what somebody thinks, even though this might offend or upset this opponent, as in *Donald Trump pulls no punches when he's talking about President Barack Obama.* Its variant *not pull your punches* in rank 33 (see Table 3 in Appendix) also carries the same meaning. The image here is of a boxer who pulls punches so that his blows fail to land with all possible force.

Take it on the chin in rank 27, in turn, conveys the metaphorical meaning: 'to bravely accept criticism or a difficult situation', as in *So while Sarah gets beaten up by the Left, Obama is taking it on the chin from the Right.* The analogy here is made to a boxer receiving a physical blow on the chin. Finally, *push into a corner,* ranked number 29, denotes 'to force or be forced into a difficult situation from which one cannot easily escape', as in *Obama was pushed into a corner when Vice President Biden declared his support on NBC's Meet the Press.* This idiom alludes to a boxer being forced into a corner of the ring and having no way of escaping.

The next group of metaphorical idioms consists of terms reflecting the conceptualization THE OUTCOME OF A POLITICAL CAMPAIGN IS THE OUTCOME OF A BOXING GAME. *Throw in the towel,* ranked number 19, is the most strongly attracted term belonging to this set (attraction score 1.66%). It is followed by *go the distance, knockout punch, knock-out/knockout blow,* and *win on points* in ranks 20, 21, 28, and 29, respectively. Note that *win on points* relies on the target domain to the highest degree (reliance score 63.64%) as compared to other expressions in this set, which means that this phrase appears less frequently in other contexts. *Throw in the towel* means 'to admit defeat or give up some endeavor', as in *Romney threw in the towel during the second round.* This meaning is a figurative extension of the sense: 'to throw a towel or sponge into the ring as a signal of defeat to stop the fight before there are any more injuries.' *Go the distance* denotes 'to manage to continue with some activity or pursuit until its completion', as in *The great advantage for Romney is he has the money and the organization to go the distance.* The image here is of a boxer who manages to last for all the rounds scheduled until the end of the match.

Knockout punch and *knock-out/knockout blow* are used metaphorically to refer to 'an action or event that causes defeat or failure', as in *Coming up, Obama could be poised to deliver a knockout punch to Clinton in Pennsylvania,* or as in *No*

presidential candidate in recent memory has taken so many knockout blows in a primary campaign. Both expressions come from boxing, where they are applied to 'a hard hit that renders the boxer unable to continue boxing.' *Win on points* designates 'to succeed or achieve victory in a political debate by accumulating a series of technicalities or minor gains rather than by true dominance', as in *You know, you can say Gore won the debates on points, but they liked Bush better.* This expression derives from a bout where, in the absence of a knockout, the winner is decided on the basis of points awarded for each round by the referee and judges.

Among the most significant expressions, there are also terms, such as *below the belt* and *punching bag,* activating two different conceptual correspondences. The first, ranked number 22, is based on the idea AN UNFAIR COMMENT IS AN UNLAWFUL BLOW, while the latter, ranked number 23, is direct evidence of an underlying conceptual representation of A POLITICIAN AS A PUNCHING BAG. *Below the belt* is used metaphorically in modern political parlance to describe a comment, remark, or action which is considered unfair, abusive, or hurtful, as in *Sen. Hillary Clinton won Pennsylvania, and it was a big win. She didn't win it because she hits below the belt.* The phrase refers to boxing, in which hitting an opponent below the waist is prohibited. A similar meaning also is conveyed by the term *low blow*, ranked number 31 (see Table 3 in the Appendix). *Punching bag,* alluding to 'an inflated or stuffed bag, usually suspended, punched with the fists for training in boxing', is applied to a politician that is routinely abused and defeated, as in *His role in the race is as a punching bag for Republicans and as an off-camera fund-raiser for Democrats.*

3.2. Discourse-functional and pragmatic properties of boxing metaphors

A possible explanation as to why the expressions mentioned above exhibit strong associations with the domain in question lies in the role of positive or negative emotions, attitudes, or sentiments (aggressiveness, intimidation, hostility, disapproval, congeniality, approval, respect, praise, etc.), which are denoted and connoted by the semantics of the expressions themselves and by the communicative contexts where they are used. For example, by using the term *heavyweight* to refer to an important politician, journalists aim to express strong approval or admiration for such a political leader in public, while by using *rough and tumble*, they attempt to emphasize the brutal way in which political campaigns or affairs are conducted. *Below the belt* and *low blow* can be used by journalists to show disapproval of insulting and unfair remarks expressed by a politician, whereas the phrase *a punching bag* is intended to show a lack of respect for a particular politician.

Boxing terms such as *infighting* and *square off* in turn convey a lower degree of aggressiveness or emotional (over)tone than *rough and tumble*. Hence, journalists and politicians might use them to stay politically correct in today's world media. In

addition, these terms occur very frequently in political discourse in comparison to their common use in the remaining contexts, since they highlight confrontational aspects of politics, thus playing a more pivotal role in apprehending political issues than less significant metaphorical expressions such as *up to scratch, ringside view,* or *boxing ring. Infighting*, for example, occurs 223 times in politics and 548 times in other domains, which may mean that this term is deeply entrenched in politics. This and two other strongly attracted metaphorical phrases such as *square off* and *rough and tumble* seem to be deeply rooted in political contexts, and thus they can also be treated as dead metaphors, i.e. words and phrases whose metaphorical meaning has become so familiar over time that their literal sense is unnoticed or forgotten, primarily due to extensive, repetitive, and popular usage in political discourse.

Another reason why such expressions are so ubiquitous in political contexts may be that politics is fierce competition conceptualized in terms of fighting and gaming. Politics is a highly competitive activity that necessitates competing for the position of power and influence. It is a rivalry between politicians and political parties to ascertain who or which organization is more effective in gaining power, winning an election, or convincing voters of political views. Hence, it is not entirely surprising that politics is construed as other forms of competition, particularly a boxing fight. Politics, like a boxing bout, entails planning, preparing for a confrontation, competing against an opponent, seeking to gain an advantage, and adopting the appropriate strategy for achieving victory (Howe 1988; Charteris-Black 2005).

Though politics is not boxing in a traditional sense of fighting, there is no escaping the fact that political competition is perceived as a boxing bout. Not only does politics use boxing idioms to apprehend distinct stages of a political dispute, political tactics, and strategies, or the outcome of a political campaign, but it also uses boxing idioms to motivate politicians or supporters (as in *If Senator Dole has a chance, it's to take off the gloves*), to raise their morale (as in *And I think McCain is just being a pussycat. He needs to come out fighting if he wants to win the election*), or to emphasize success or failure (as in *Rick Santorum throws in the towel, ending his quest to be the GOP's pick*). Boxing metaphors are employed to inspire voters (*Not a big surprise, but the White House is counting on Nevada to be in their corner for the Electoral College votes*), to issue a challenge (as in *Senator Joseph Lieberman has thrown his hat into the ring for the Democratic nomination for the presidency*), to praise good performance (as in *In boxing terms, the White House had clearly won on points, Kurtz writes*), to reinforce hierarchy (as in *Many ministries were led by political lightweights who were appointed solely to keep Chatichai's coalition together,* or as in *McCain's path for the nomination continues to clear with more and more party heavyweights giving him the thumbs up*), to excite and arouse interest in a political election or campaign (as in *The gloves are coming off. The GOP presidential candidates squaring off in Iowa*, or as in *This*

was a gruelling campaign, a hard-fought campaign, at times, an ugly campaign where both of the two campaigns hit below the belt), and to highlight some aspects of a political campaign (*Well, I will tell you that the Romney campaign was caught off guard by this today, John*).

Politics is also conceptualized in terms of a boxing fight by journalists, who consider all states of affairs as being appealing, extraordinary, shocking, or sensational. Hence, it is possible that metaphors, derived from boxing, are used in political contexts to interpret events in a way that attracts the recipients' attention. Journalists evoke the simplicity and straightforwardness of a boxing fight, in order to generate interest and excitement among readers and listeners and avoid difficulties in apprehending political issues. This means of deepening apprehension is employed to make political affairs easily comprehensible to recipients or to attract their interest by providing examples of boxing expressions building action and suspense as well as adding power and aggressiveness to political and social commentaries (as in *The gloves are off and the hits keep coming. At last night's presidential debate, GOP hopefuls took aim at front runner Rick Perry*).

3.3. The least strongly attracted boxing expressions

At the final stage of the exposition, it is also essential to point out uncommon occurrences of boxing terms in politics, i.e. those expressions that are not strongly attracted to the target domain in question. Table 2 below displays the results of the measures of attraction and reliance for the 30 least strongly attracted terms in politics. As shown in Table 2, expressions such as *defend your corner, fight your corner, ringside view, lower your guard, take sb off guard, toss in the towel,* or *up to scratch* are loosely associated with this domain, since their occurrence in the target domain under study is extremely rare and the scores resulting from the calculation of the measure of attraction are very low: 0.06%. Apart from *defend your corner*, which only occurred once in COCA, most of the terms obtained low scores for reliance, which means that more occurrences of these expressions were observed in other contexts. This, in turn, may suggest that each use of these terms in politics should be considered exceptionally rare. *Take sb off guard*, for example, only accounts for 0.06% of uses in politics and relies on this domain in a proportion of 1.54%, which implies that this expression occurs in other contexts in a proportion of 98.46%.

The most logical explanation as to why the bulk of these domain-specific expressions are less frequently used in the contexts of politics may lie in their limited significance for apprehending political issues and in the higher degree of aggressiveness or emotional (over)tone that these phrases convey. The politically correct stance that today's mainstream media adopt might explain these corpus percentages. For example, the expressions *defend/fight your corner, receive a blow, knock-out, exchange of blows, take sb off guard, back/box into a corner,* or *lower your*

guard seem to convey strong overtones of aggression and hostility towards addressees (political opponents or parties). Thus, politicians and journalists display a common tendency to avoid expressions that hold potentially negative or offensive implications.

Table 2. The 30 least strongly attracted boxing expressions in politics

rank	metaphorical expression	a	x	e	attraction	reliance
a = Frequency of term (e.g. infighting) in politics; x = Total frequency of all boxing terms in politics; e = Total frequency of term (e.g. infighting) in corpora
57.	glass jaw	5	1568	17	0.32%	29.41%
58.	soften the blow	5	1568	124	0.32%	4.03%
59.	box into a corner	5	1568	14	0.32%	35.71%
60.	bob and weave	4	1568	77	0.26%	5.19%
61.	knockout/knock-out	4	1568	776	0.26%	0.52%
62.	let down your guard	4	1568	145	0.26%	2.76%
63.	roll with punches	4	1568	81	0.26%	4.94%
64.	ringside seat	4	1568	57	0.26%	7.02%
65.	double blow	3	1568	28	0.19%	10.71%
66.	decisive blow	3	1568	41	0.19%	7.32%
67.	boxing match	3	1568	161	0.19%	1.86%
68.	sucker punch	3	1568	85	0.19%	3.53%
69.	shadow boxing	3	1568	20	0.19%	15.00%
70.	back into a corner	3	1568	28	0.19%	10.71%
71.	out for the count	3	1568	13	0.19%	23.08%
72.	exchange blows	2	1568	24	0.13%	8.33%
73.	receive a blow	2	1568	66	0.13%	3.03%
74.	boxing ring	2	1568	153	0.13%	1.31%
75.	at the drop of a hat	2	1568	158	0.13%	1.27%
76.	saved by the bell	2	1568	93	0.13%	2.15%
77.	drive into a corner	2	1568	8	0.13%	25.00%
78.	down but not out	2	1568	15	0.13%	13.33%
79.	up to scratch	1	1568	23	0.06%	4.35%
80.	toss in the towel	1	1568	8	0.06%	12.50%
81.	exchange of blows	1	1568	6	0.06%	16.67%
82.	take sb off guard	1	1568	65	0.06%	1.54%
83.	lower your guard	1	1568	35	0.06%	2.86%
84.	ringside view	1	1568	5	0.06%	20.00%
85.	fight your corner	1	1568	4	0.06%	25.00%
86.	defend your corner	1	1568	1	0.06%	100.00%
						11100100,00%

By contrast, phrases such as *ringside view, up to scratch,* or *boxing ring* seem to be used by journalists and politicians to understand and structure less significant actions, activities, and events in politics. Such terms fail to substantially improve the attractiveness of political affairs, since they do not accentuate confrontational aspects of politics, do not arouse any negative emotions, and do not carry strong overtones; thus, their use appears to be less attractive and appealing to potential recipients. Consequently, political discourse seems to display a stronger preference for terms such as *infighting, square off,* or a *heavyweight* over those included in Table 2.

Finally, a closer inspection of the results in Table 2 and their comparison with those in Tables 1 and 3 also reveal that boxing terms such as *knockout/knock-out* (4 occurrences), *back into a corner* (3 occurrences), *out for the count* (3 occurrences), *toss in the towel* (1 occurrence), or *take sb off guard* (1 occurrence) occur less frequently in political contexts than their idiomatic variants such as *knock-out/ knockout blow* (16 occurrences), *force into a corner* (7 occurrences), *down for the count* (8 occurrences), *throw in the towel* (26 occurrences), or *catch sb off guard* (36 occurrences).

4. Conclusions

The present study confirms previous findings (e.g. Hammer & Kellner, 2009; Kövecses, 2010; Semino & Koller, 2009) and contributes additional evidence to suggest that politics is extensively conceptualized in terms of boxing. Furthermore, these findings confirm the prediction that there are indeed metaphorical expressions significantly attracted to, or loosely associated with, the target domain of politics, and that these reflect various conceptual mappings. The results have shown that boxing expressions that are directly related to a boxing fight, boxers, strategies adopted by fighters, and different phases involved in a boxing fight, such as *infighting, rough and tumble, square off, heavyweight, lightweight, knock sb down, catch sb off guard, have sb in one's corner, put/toss/throw your hat in the ring, take the gloves off, the gloves come off,* and others, constitute the bulk of the most strongly attracted boxing metaphors in the ranking list. Among the most significant expressions in the list, there are also metaphorical expressions referring to the outcome of a boxing match (*throw in the towel*, *go the distance, knockout punch, knock-out/knockout blow,* and *win on points*), pertaining to an unlawful blow (*below the belt* and *low blow*), and denoting a piece of equipment used for hitting (*a punching bag*).

Finally, the current findings add substantially to our understanding of the function of boxing terms in political discourse. First, the illustrative examples from the corpus show that such expressions are used by journalists for provoking intense emotions (positive or negative) among potential readers and political supporters,

for expressing hostile or favorable attitudes toward politicians, or for arousing public sentiments against, or in favor of, political affairs. Second, they are intended for motivating politicians or supporters, raising their morale, emphasizing success or failure, inspiring voters to support a particular politician, issuing a challenge, praising a politician for good performance, reinforcing hierarchy, exciting and arousing interest in a political election or campaign, and highlighting some aspects of a political campaign (e.g., its aggressiveness).

The usage-based approach adopted in this quantitative research can be applied to the investigation of boxing expressions in other target domains. A further study might concentrate on comparing the use of boxing metaphors in two different target domains, e.g., in politics and business, or on comparing the occurrence of such phrases in English and their counterparts in other languages. In addition, it is recommended that future research focus on sentiment analysis of the degree of aggressiveness of each metaphorical expression. Such an analysis would account for the emotional (over)tones underlying the phrases investigated in this study in much detail. Considering the current study was confined to COCA, it would also be worth carrying out a comparative study of boxing expressions in COCA and BNC (The British National Corpus), in view of the possible existence of linguistic and cultural variation in these corpora.

References

Charteris-Black, J. (2005). *Politicians and rhetoric: The persuasive power of metaphor*. Palgrave MacMillan.

Chen, L. (2009). *The metaphorical use of boxing terms in everyday language* (dissertation). Retrieved from http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:hkr:diva-5518

Flavell, L., & Flavell, R. (2006). *Dictionary of idioms and their origins.* Kyle Cathie Limited.

Gibbs, R. W. (2015). The allegorical character of political metaphors in discourse. *Metaphor and the Social World*, 5, 264-282.

Hammer, R., & Kellner, D. (eds.) (2009). *Media/cultural studies: Critical approaches.* Peter Lang Publishing.

Hang, N. T. T. (2016). Sport metaphors in political news headlines. *VNU Journal of Science: Foreign Studies*, 32(2), 12-20.

Howe, N. (1988). Metaphor in contemporary American political discourse. *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity*, 3(2), 87-104. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327868ms0302_2

Kövecses, Z. (2010) [2002]. *Metaphor: A practical introduction.* Oxford University Press.

Kövecses, Z. (2015). *Where metaphors come from: Reconsidering context in metaphor*. Oxford University Press.

Kövecses, Z. (2020). *Extended conceptual metaphor theory.* Cambridge University Press.

Mussolf, A. (2016) *Political metaphor analysis. Discourse and scenarios.* Bloomsbury.

Pérez López, C. (2018). *A comparative study of war and sport metaphors in political news headlines.* Grau en Estudis d'Anglès i de Francès, Available from <https://ddd.uab.cat/record/196074> [Access: 9 June 2022].

Pragglejaz Group. (2007). MIP: A method for identifying metaphorically used words in

discourse. *Metaphor and Symbol,* 22(1), 1-39. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10926480709336752

Schmid, H.-J. (2000). *English abstract nouns as conceptual shells. From corpus to cognition*. Mouton de Gruyter.

Schmid, H.-J., & Küchenhoff, H. (2013). Collostructional analysis and other ways of measuring lexicogrammatical attraction: Theoretical premises, practical problems, and cognitive underpinnings. *Cognitive Linguistics,* 24(3), 531-577. https://doi.org/10.1515/cog-2013-0018

Semino, E., & Koller, V. (2009). Metaphor, politics, and gender: A case study from Italy. In K. Ahrens (Ed.), *Politics, gender and conceptual metaphors* (pp. 36-61). Palgrave-MacMillan.

Sinclair, J., & Moon, R (eds.) (2002). *Collins Cobuild dictionary of idioms* (2nd ed.). Harper Collins.

Steen, G., Dorst, A., Herrmann, B., Kaal, A., Krennmayr, T., & Pasma, T. (2010). *A method for linguistic metaphor identification*. John Benjamins.

Wiliński, J. (2022). Metaphodioms: Connecting metaphors and idioms. *Brno Studies in English*, 48(1), 117-135. https://doi.org/10.5817/BSE2022-1-6

Data sources

55 boxing idioms. Available from https://www.dailywritingtips.com/55-boxing-idioms/

Boxing vocabulary. Available from https://www.englishclub.com/vocabulary/sports-boxing.htm

Glossary of boxing terms. Available from https://genius.com/Sports-genius-glossary-of-boxing-terms-annotated.

The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). Available from https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/

The Free Dictionary by Farlex. *The Farlex Dictionary of Idioms.* Available from https://www.thefreedictionary.com/

Appendix

Table 3. The rest of strongly attracted boxing metaphors in politics

a = Frequency of term (e.g. *infighting*) in politics; **x** = Total frequency of all boxing terms in politics; **e** = Total frequency of term (e.g. *infighting*) in corpora

rank	metaphorical expressions	a	x	e	attraction	reliance
31.	*low blow*	12	1568	101	0.77%	11.88%
32.	*beat sb to the punch*	12	1568	134	0.77%	8.96%
33.	*not pull your punches*	12	1568	40	0.77%	30.00%
34.	*split decision*	10	1568	94	0.64%	10.64%
35.	*knock-down, drag-out fight*	10	1568	30	0.64%	33.33%
36.	*strike a blow*	10	1568	63	0.64%	15.87%
37.	*come to blows*	10	1568	154	0.64%	6.49%
38.	*body blow*	9	1568	94	0.57%	9.57%
39.	*one-two punch*	9	1568	246	0.57%	3.66%
40.	*heavy blow*	9	1568	72	0.57%	12.50%
41.	*come out fighting*	9	1568	24	0.57%	37.50%
42.	*down and out*	9	1568	248	0.57%	3.63%
43.	*rope-a-dope*	8	1568	49	0.51%	16.33%
44.	*the gloves are off*	8	1568	27	0.51%	29.63%
45.	*let your guard down*	8	1568	243	0.51%	3.29%
46.	*on guard*	8	1568	511	0.51%	1.57%
47.	*sparring partner*	8	1568	104	0.51%	7.69%
48.	*down for the count*	8	1568	74	0.51%	10.81%
49.	*knockdown*	7	1568	179	0.45%	3.91%
50.	*run rings around*	7	1568	35	0.45%	20.00%
51.	*force into a corner*	7	1568	8	0.45%	87.50%
52.	*death blow*	7	1568	79	0.45%	8.86%
53.	*pull punches*	6	1568	35	0.38%	17.14%
54.	*blow-by-blow*	6	1568	86	0.38%	6.98%
55.	*lead with your chin*	6	1568	17	0.38%	35.29%
56.	*punch above your weight*	5	1568	12	0.32%	41.67%