

# Migration, media and “deliberate” metaphors

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## Abstract

The topic of migration appears to hold a particular attraction for metaphor users, due to its rich potential for polemical and emotional language as well as its socio-political and historical significance. Discourse-analytical studies of such imagery have highlighted figurative categorizations of immigration as a *flood* or some kind of *natural disaster*, or as a military *invasion*, and of the “host” nation’s response as *containment* or *defence*. Such imagery can also be found in the recent public debates about international students as “immigrants” in Britain. From the viewpoint of Critical Discourse Analysis, the argumentative and thus, political, success of the government’s metaphorical rhetoric appears to be dubious, because it implies a simplistic understanding of the social processes involved and makes commitments for their solution that are unlikely to be met. The article discusses the functions of such imagery and its impact on the public’s expectations about immigration policy in the light of recent theoretical debates about “deliberate metaphors”.

Der Artikel behandelt methodologische Fragen der Metapherntheorie anhand des Beispiels der aktuellen britischen Diskussion zur „Einwanderung“ internationaler Studenten. Diese öffentliche Debatte ist größtenteils von Metaphern der *Überflutung* und *Invasion* sowie deren *Eindämmung* und *Abwehr* geprägt, die auch in früheren Studien zu Migrationsdiskursen aufgezeigt wurden. Angesichts ihrer Dominanz lässt sich fragen, ob es sich dabei um quasi-automatisch oder geplant verwendete Deutungsmuster handelt, wie sie in der psycholinguistischen Metaphernanalyse untersucht worden sind. Der Artikel kommt zu der Schlussfolgerung, dass für die Beurteilung der ‘Geplantheit’ von Metaphern nicht nur psycholinguistische, sondern auch soziolinguistische und diskursanalytische Kriterien berücksichtigt werden müssen.

## 1. Students and “immigration”

In the spring and summer of 2011, the *Times Higher Education (THE)* magazine, whose articles are usually couched in sober style and academic gravitas, witnessed a sudden flourish of impassioned argument, in some cases from quarters that normally can be expected to be highly cautious in criticizing government measures, i.e. Vice-Chancellors and their committees and public representatives. The reason for the excitement was a governmental consultation exercise on planned changes to the legal framework under which international students (so-called “Tier 4” applicants in the technical jargon of the UK immigration service) can stay in the UK. The Chief Executive of “Universities UK”, Nicola Dandridge, castigated the government’s plans in an article entitled “Cutting foreign students visas is the wrong move at the wrong

time" (Dandridge 2011). Another article in the same number of the *THE* (Fearn 2011), cited statements supporting this criticism by influential representatives of the UK Higher Education sector, e.g. the Vice Chancellor of the University of East Anglia, Edward Acton, as well as the chief executive of the language teaching association "English UK", Tony Millns, the chief executive of the UK Council for international student affairs, Dominic Scott, and the president of the National Union of students, Aaron Porter.

The *corpus delicti* was a document entitled *Securing our border: Controlling immigration, The Student Immigration System*, which had been published in December 2010 by the Home Office (Home Office, UK 2010). The categorization of international students as a special "tier" in the "immigration system" already indicates a specific political stance: after all, "immigrants" are usually considered to be people who try to settle for good in the country of destination, whereas students typically move on or go back to their home countries after finishing their degree. Some students may stay in the host country (as for instance, the author of this article did) but this has not normally been a defining feature of the foreign student population. To represent all international students as "immigrants" implies a substantial numerical increase in what counts as immigration overall and it indicates a suspicion that the "target" group is not expected to leave the host country.

In her ministerial foreword, the Conservative Home Secretary, Theresa May, makes unambiguously clear what the purpose of the proposed re-categorization is. Whilst conceding that immigration in general "has enriched our culture and strengthened our economy" and insisting that the government "must continue to ensure that UK continues to attract the brightest and best students" from abroad, she forcefully asserts a determination to "weed out abuse of the student system" and pursue the overall "aim to reduce net immigration" (Home Office, UK 2010: 4). The allegation of "abuse" is repeated 16 times in the document, with reference to a perceived widespread non-compliance by international students with their existing visa requirements (which already impose detailed obligations regarding English language competence and funding, and restrictions on the permission to work in the UK during and after the study stay, especially for family dependants). The Home office document specifies estimates of 8% non-compliance among university students, 14% among language school students, and 26% in private education

institutions, whilst conceding that there are also much lower estimates of non-compliance of just 2 per cent (Home Office, UK 2010: 9). The higher estimates, which have been sourced from the conservative-leaning organisation *Migrationwatch* have been contested (Mulley 2011) but in the Home Office text they are clearly foregrounded as the best available data. They are highlighted as prominent bullet points in the main text whereas the references to conflicting data are tucked away in a footnote.

So far – so un-metaphorical, one might think, given that the talk of “student immigrants” is explicitly signalled as a specific categorization, that it is argued for by way of citing “hard” figures and statistics. The figurative term *weed out* used by May has such a wide a range of uses (from *weeding out* unwanted plants in the garden or typographic mistakes in a text to *weeding out* hate) that it can arguably be judged to be only faintly metaphorical anymore. In the following sections I shall try to show, however, that the Home office document and the public reaction to it are part of a discursive metaphor framework that has important ideological implications and also has social and political consequences that may reach beyond the intentions of its users.

## **2. The defence of student “immigration” as an “income stream”**

The 2010 Home Office consultation document also states, perhaps surprisingly, that the financial contribution by international students to the UK economy “approaches £ 5 billion”, 2.2 billion of which come from tuition fees (Home Office, UK 2010: 3, 9). This economic benefit has figured prominently in the critics’ responses, which comes as no surprise. The economic context in which British universities (and not just them!) operate these days is characterised by budget cuts, competition and hardnosed marketing strategies. However, even if we accept such a contextualisation of the “student immigration” debate, the metaphors that have dominated the reports emphasize the economic aspect in such a way that the human beings involved in the process seem to disappear. In this discourse, foreign students are “big business” or “an attractive income stream” (Partridge 2010). They guarantee the UK’s status as “second in the global student market, ... behind the US” (Travis 2011). On the assumption that international students represent an elite group of highly qualified and motivated applicants, one professor of Imperial College insisted that British universities shouldn’t be forced to pass

up “an opportunity to pick the cream of the crop” (Slack 2011). The vice-chancellor of the University of Bristol, Eric Thomas, described international students as “a movable feast” (Baker 2011b). In this perspective, foreign students are portrayed as a *business commodity* or a *resource* that is globally in high demand. British universities that *compete* for this resource might suffer a disadvantage if they were hindered from *accessing* and *acquiring* it.

This argument resembles to some extent earlier debates, when the media reported that the Cabinet were considering plans to cap the number of skilled immigrants in general, including those working in higher education. In his reaction then, the president of Universities UK, Professor Steve Smith, pointed out that the “investment” in universities by “competitor countries such as the US and China” made them “more likely to poach staff at British universities” (Lipsett 2010). This kind of hunting and “struggle for survival” vocabulary is widely established in economic and business discourse and reflects the ideology of modern capitalism as a competitive activity; its application to the academic “labour market” is therefore only to be expected. However, the application of such imagery to students is different. It is, of course, motivated semantically (and politically) by the fees income generated by international students but, however transparently motivated, it is still a metaphor! Students are not in reality *commodities*, *income streams*, *cream to be picked* or *prey to be poached*. Of course, one might defend the authors of such statements by pointing out that this imagery has become so pervasive that its cynical, dehumanising implications are not in the focus. Nevertheless, they are indicative of the general trend to view social issues in terms of economic realities, but these “realities” are in turn conceptualised in terms of a vague but persistent Social Darwinism (Goatly 2007: 119-161). If even the defenders of international student migration borrow this imagery from those who wish to reduce international student numbers, the whole debate is framed in terms of economic Darwinism and the only problem left to discuss lies in figuring out how to best “pick the cream” and “poach” the most valuable “prey”.

### **3. The “Defence” against “student immigration”**

The above-mentioned argumentation *in favour* of student immigration (for the benefit of the UK economy) is, however, characteristic for only a minority of the press coverage, mainly the *Times Higher Education Supplement* and the

*Guardian*. The vast majority of the 60 articles so far collected from English speaking print media, which add up to a small pilot corpus of just above 40.000 words, conveys the impression of being obsessed with the themes of control and punishment which could have found the interest of Michel Foucault, maybe even approval from Marquis de Sade. Here is a representative sample of headlines and statements on the subject of international students that covers a period from the last year of the former Labour government’s term of office to that of the new Tory-Liberal coalition government (in office since May 2010):

- (1) Tens of thousands’ of bogus students in Britain [...] *Firm enforcement* action must be taken against any individual whose student visa has expired to ensure that they leave the country. (*The Daily Telegraph*, 21 July 2009; italics here and in further examples by the author)
- (2) Immigration rules result in *flood of bogus students*. [...] Our undercover reporters have exposed a host of scams offered to foreign nationals desperate to come to Britain as bogus students. (*The Daily Telegraph*, 6 December 2009)
- (3) Foreign students from outside the EU *will have to be slashed*. (*The Daily Telegraph*, 18 November 2010)
- (4) Alan Johnson announces *crackdown* on student visas. (*The Guardian*, 7 February 2010)
- (5) Foreign students *must take brunt* in immigration *cuts*, says adviser. [...] *The door will have to be closed* on more than 87,000 overseas students a year if overall net migration is reduced to the “tens of thousands” as promised by David Cameron. (*The Daily Telegraph*, 19 November 2010)
- (6) Foreign students forced to go home after studies under *tough* new immigration rules. (*The Daily Telegraph*, 7 December 2010)
- (7) Keep British jobs for British graduates! [...] Mr Green said he wanted to *slash* the numbers of student visas [...] in a *hard-hitting* speech [...] (*The Daily Mail*, 30 January 2011)
- (8) MPs were warned that changes to the student immigration system would “*savagely cut*” recruitment. (*The Guardian*, 1 February 2011)

- (9) Students coming to the UK from outside the EU to study should be stopped from *seamlessly moving* into work (*The Guardian*, 1 February 2011).
- (10) UK visa curbs will *hit* Indian MBA students. (*The Economic Times/India Times*, 7 February 2011)
- (11) [...] the immigration minister, Mr Damian Green said that non-EU students could not be allowed *unfettered access* to the UK labour market. (*The DeccanTimes*, 8 February 2011)

The scenario emerging from these examples is that of antagonistic forces: on the one hand, there is the *flood* of “bogus”, i.e. fraudulent immigrant students who seek *seamless* or *unfettered access*; ranged against them is the government whose actions are described as *slashing, curbing, cutting, hitting, forcing, cracking down*, or at least *closing doors*. The message of these metaphors is unambiguous: they reveal an almost Manichean pattern that pits the government as the *heroic fighter* against an amorphous, dangerous mass of creatures that *invade* the country and have already been so successful in their *attack* that it is almost impossible to *resist* them.

This pattern has also been found and analysed by Critical Discourse Analysis research in debates about immigration in general, which routinely - and across many Western countries - convey the notion of the host nation's defensive stance against migration as a *natural disaster* (hence the pervasive *flood* imagery), an *invasion of enemies*, an *epidemic*, or the *spread of disease-carrying, parasitic organisms* (Böke 1997; Charteris-Black 2006; Hart 2011; Hönigsperger 1991; Semino 2008: 118-123; van Dijk 2000a, b; Wengeler 2003; Wodak and Leeuwen 1999). The occurrence of this “defence against immigration-floods/invasions” imagery in British debates about international students is therefore not surprising as such. What is surprising or at least noteworthy, however, is the co-occurrence of repeated, strenuous statements by the same government officials who have initiated the debate and imbued it with *control/cracking down* imagery to the effect that a rejection of international student immigrants is the last thing they want. As we have seen earlier, even the Home Secretary who initiated these *curbing* initiatives goes out of her way to acknowledge the “enriching” influence of immigrants on British culture and economy (Home Office, UK 2010: 4), and so have Home Secretaries done before (see e.g. BBC-interview with the then Labour Home Secretary Alan

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Johnson, 7 February 2010: “Tougher rules to stop abuse of student visa system”). It would be easy for political/ideological critics of the respective governments to denounce such contradiction between their official pronouncements of sympathy for immigration and the background imagery of *curbing, slashing* etc. as evidence of hypocrisy, or as a reason to suspect that they had not thought through the logic of their own statements. A government supporter, on the other hand, might argue that there is no true contradiction between letting “good”, genuine international student immigrants into the country and excluding the “bogus” applicants, thus taking the government rhetoric at its face value. Lastly, from the standpoint of traditional conceptual metaphor theory (CMT), it could be maintained, that the metaphor system of *flood/invasion control* as operated by politicians and the media is being used “non-deliberately” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Gibbs 2011a, b) in the sense that even though the respective authors/speakers composed their texts consciously, they *inadvertently* use an “entrenched” conceptual frame that ‘gives away’ their ideological, xenophobic or racist bias.

#### **4. Unintended consequences of “deliberate metaphors”**

It is this latter issue I want to explore further as it raises important questions about the function of figurative language in political and media discourse. My starting point is a theoretical debate among Raymond W. Gibbs, Gerard Steen, Alice Deignan and Cornelia Müller in the first issue of the journal *Metaphor and the Social World* (Gibbs 2011a, b; Steen 2011; Deignan 2011 and Müller 2011), all of which relate to Steen’s earlier positing of the category of “deliberate metaphor” in Steen (2008). In it, Steen distinguishes “deliberate metaphor” from the “unconscious”, “automatically” produced and understood metaphors that CMT has foregrounded over the past three decades and that have led Lakoff and Johnson to arrive at the so-called “neural theory of metaphor” (Lakoff and Johnson 1999; Lakoff 2008) which distances metaphor as much as possible from language use and locates it in the “co-firing” of neural circuits (Lakoff 2008: 26).

Whilst not committing to this “hard” version of neurally grounded conceptualism, Gibbs criticises the category of “deliberate metaphor” as “not essentially different from other forms of metaphoric language” (Gibbs 2011a: 21), i.e. by the measure of Ockham’s razor, superfluous. After reviewing a

substantial body of psycholinguistic evidence about metaphor understanding and about “conscious” but often mistaken awareness of seemingly “deliberate” actions, he arrives at the “inevitable conclusion that ‘deliberate’ metaphor may be a methodological and theoretical idea without much substance” (Gibbs 2011a: 49). Steen’s, Deignan’s and Müller’s responses to Gibbs defend the category of “deliberate” metaphor by discussing various alleged misunderstandings, e.g. confusion of “deliberate” with “conscious” or “conventional”, but also by raising a point “at the heart of metaphor theory: what is it that makes a metaphor vital, active, deliberate?” (Müller 2011: 64). Can the imagery deployed in the British “student immigration” debate be considered to be a case in point, of vital (or re-vitalized) metaphor?

In comparison with some of the examples discussed in the debate between Steen, Gibbs et al., which range from Shakespeare’s *Juliet is the sun* over headline writers’ puns and overt metaphor signalling or clueing through discursive “tuning devices” to complex multimodal metaphors, the imagery used in the British “student immigration” debate is highly predictable, clichéd and, as established in previous research, ubiquitous in international public discourse. It might therefore appear to represent a prime example of an “unthinkingly” (re-)produced metaphor system that exhibits deep-seated xenophobic attitudes towards strangers who are seen as violating the boundaries of the “container” of collective identity and therefore must be brought under control and whose “unfettered access” must be stopped. However, without wishing to question the depth of home-protective feelings held by the British Home Secretary and her political allies, I would still tend to describe their use of *defence against floods/invasions* imagery as “deliberate” in the sense that it is intended to achieve a specific communicative purpose, which Theresa May explicitly states: “This consultation sets out ways in which we believe the new system for international students should operate in future. These changes seek to ensure that our high-quality institutions remain able to attract genuine students from overseas, while bearing down on abuse” (Home Office UK, 2010: 4).

It may well be that Theresa May’s conscious and unconscious thinking processes when signing this document may also have been occupied with other issues and were not exclusively focused on these two sentences, but to describe her use of language – including the metaphoric *bearing down on abuse*



formula – as “non-deliberate” would seem to me disingenuous. Of course, she did not set out to create a striking new image, nor did she need to know that *bearing down* is a figurative expression in order to use it. It is even likely that she would deny using metaphors: politicians, after all, like to pose as speaking “plain, honest” language. However, it would be highly naïve to take such a statement at face value: after all, the insistence on “plain talking” is part of a strategic image that politicians try to exploit for specific socio-pragmatic purposes.

It could be argued that this characterization of metaphor use in political discourse as “deliberate” is different from Gibbs’s psycholinguistic definition of “deliberateness” and its exclusion from metaphor. However, Gibbs himself maintains, “Metaphor is not like murder in the sense that we may try to stay back and decide [...] whether that act was done deliberately or by accident” (Gibbs 2011a: 48). Apart from the fact that some political metaphors have, empirically, led to real murders in the course of human history (Bosmaïjan 1983; Rash 2005, 2006; Fabiszak 2007; Musolff 2010), the formulation obfuscates the underlying issue of metaphorical discourse as a deliberate social action. Not all uses of language, including metaphor, are “murder” but they all constitute socially meaningful actions whose effects create social (sometimes, legal) responsibilities. In this sense they can be termed “deliberate”, and any theoretical denial of “deliberateness” as an analytical category on the grounds of psycholinguistic evidence should, at the very least, acknowledge the existence and relevance of alternative, i.e. sociolinguistic and discourse-analytical, senses of this category for the analysis of metaphor use.

Such a demand is not meant as a plea to designate any communicative effect triggered by language use as being “deliberately” intended, on the contrary! Thus, in a response to an article by Theresa May from March 2011 in *The Sun*, in which she announced the results of her consultation process under the policy-indicative title “I’m axing bogus diploma factories” (May 2011), one enthusiastically xenophobic blogger responded, “Good!!! Next step: impose a cap on people coming here from INSIDE the EU for work [...]. Our people should come first!!!!!!” (<http://www.thesun.co.uk>, 22 March 2011). Evidently, this respondent had understood May’s statements on this topic as implying an enforced reduction of all foreign workers, including EU citizens, which would violate British law as it stands. This is clearly an unintended meaning aspect

that could not be attributed to Theresa May's deliberate language use, without adducing specific evidence, given that she, as Home Secretary, is supposed to uphold the law of the land.

Does this absolve May and other politicians as well as the media from social/political responsibility for xenophobic reactions like that of the *Sun* reader? It is here where distinctions between deliberate and non-deliberate metaphoric speech actions, and their intended and non-intended effects become relevant. Anti-immigration statements by May and other mainstream politicians and media usually eschew overtly xenophobic pronouncements and are full of hedges and disclaimers that pretend to be generally in favour of "diversity", "free movement" etc. However, their ubiquitous use of *control* and *defence-against-flood/invasion* metaphors creates an emotionally charged frame and, within it, expectations regarding further political actions, which are unrealistic. Those parts of their audience that may be genuinely alarmed by news about the alleged impending *tide* of "bogus" students are being promised *tough* measures of *cutting, slashing, cracking down* etc. to "resolve" the perceived problem – but is that promise ever to be fulfilled? Let us consider a further quotation:

(12) The British embassy in China has *tightened up* its student visa process to prevent abuse, but universities say that this is *barring* other students from travelling to British universities this autumn.

You might be forgiven for assuming that this quotation also dates from the winter of 2010-11 but in fact it is from 2004 (*The Guardian*, 10 August 2004: Visa fraud crackdown *hits* China's students), when the Labour government under Tony Blair was in charge of British immigration policy. It would seem that the foreign relations agencies of whichever government happens to be in power, as well as their opponents and the mainstream media are all obsessed with the need to take *tough action* against alleged bogus students. If we went back further in time we would probably find that a succession of previous governments had also been promising *tough, hard-hitting curbs*, only to be accused by the respective opposition (and by the same media that had disseminated their previous promises) of not *closing the doors* efficiently enough. On the other hand, however, the repeated announcements of a *crackdown* etc. do create an impression on the international scene that Britain is *closing its doors* to foreigners from beyond Europe. International student-

recruitment agencies have already reported shifting preferences and choice patterns among international applicants for studying in Britain (Cunnane 2011a, b; Baker 2011a, b). Deliberate metaphors thus *do* have effects – but perhaps not always the intended ones. In the first place, they cannot reassure a home audience used to hearing repeated promises of *cutting, slashing* and *curbing* immigration from one government to the next, only to be routinely disappointed by such policies never achieving their aims. On the other hand, such metaphor use conveys an image to the outside world of a national academic culture that *closes its doors*. Thus, in spite of the official statements expressing a welcoming attitude towards foreigners and acknowledging the benefits Britain has received from immigration, a dominant discourse of restriction, border-strengthening, control and punishment is being established that is detrimental to the further development of cultural and scientific exchange.

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