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***What can Critical Metaphor Analysis Add to  
the Understanding of Racist Ideology?  
Recent Studies of Hitler's Anti-Semitic  
Metaphors***

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**Abstract**

*Over the past decade several studies have been published that investigate the metaphors employed in Nazi racist ideology from the combined perspectives of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Cognitive Semantics. The paper reviews these studies, and discusses their differences to earlier studies that were based on traditional rhetorical definitions of metaphor. Particular attention is paid to comparisons between Hitler's metaphors and recent discriminatory propaganda, as well as to the interpretation of such ideological metaphors as 'viruses of the mind', and to the relationship between Hitler's use of the Great Chain of Being and classical versions of this concept. In conclusion, it is argued that cognitively oriented CDA studies of metaphor use can contribute significantly not only to the conceptual reconstruction of metaphoric mappings but also to understanding their discursive history.*

**1. Nazi Ideology and Metaphor Analysis**

The study of Nazi ideology and discourse, and specifically of its imagery, has been a long-standing feature of Cultural Criticism and of Discourse Analysis. In English-speaking countries this interest started in the wake of the first translations of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and his speeches; it intensified during the run-up and the duration of World War II and found its application in the Western Allies' 're-education' programmes and their perception of the Federal Republic's ability to face up to the Nazi past (cf. Steiner 1979; Michael and Doerr 2002; Niven 2002; Deissler 2003). One of the highlights of this early criticism was Kenneth Burke's essay "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'", first published on the eve of World War II, in which the author insisted on taking his 'nauseating' object seriously instead of producing just 'a few adverse attitudinizations' (Burke 1984: 61). Burke's analysis focused on the Hitler's technique of projecting a religious concept, i.e. the devil, onto a 'visible, point-to-able form of people with a certain kind of 'blood''. This mapping worked as an 'effective weapon of propaganda', because it suggested the transfer of the religious implications (i.e. permanent and relentless fight against the devil) onto of the socio-political level and presented its desired outcome - the destruction of the *devil/Jew* – as a *cure* for Germany's national *ills* (1984: 63-68). On the question of whether Hitler used this projection just as a

Machiavellian propaganda ‘trick’ or believed in it earnestly, Burke concluded that the German leader’s ‘powers of persuasion derive[d] from the fact that he spontaneously evolved his ‘cure-all’ in response to inner necessities’ (1984: 73).

By insisting on the dual nature of Hitler’s ‘rhetoric’ as an propaganda technique *and* as a genuine world-view, Burke touched on a fundamental problem of metaphor analysis that has informed much of the criticism levelled by cognitive linguists against traditional analyses of figurative language use, i.e. that the latter did not take the conceptual import of metaphors seriously enough and instead treated them as mere stylistic ‘ornaments’ (Lakoff 1993: 202-3; 1996: 386-7; 2004). As regards political discourse, the cognitive claim of going beyond rhetorical analysis is of special significance. If metaphors shape the conceptual structure of world-views, their critical analysis can provide ‘particular insight into why the rhetoric of political leaders is successful’ (Charteris-Black 2005: 197). Over the past ten years, several cognitive-orientated analyses of Nazi discourse, specifically of Hitler’s use of imagery in *Mein Kampf* have been published, among them Hawkins (2001), Rash (2005a, 2005b, 2006), Chilton (2005), Musolff (2007) as well as observations in Charteris-Black (2005) and Goatly (2007) – the list is by no means complete. The following discussion is not meant to give a summary overview of these studies but focuses on those insights that transcend earlier analyses. The aim is to see how the combination of cognitive and critical discourse approaches, i.e. Critical Metaphor Analysis as outlined by Charteris-Black (2004), provides new insights into the function of figurative thought and language in Nazi ideology, and in racism more generally.

## **2. Hitler’s Parasite Metaphor as a ‘Model’ of Discriminatory Ideology**

Several publications use Hitler’s anti-Semitic imagery as a negative yardstick of racist ideology. Hawkins envisages a ‘cognitive sociolinguistics’ that ‘can help us understand how categorization is manipulated to establish social dynamics which privilege certain groupings of experience and dismiss other such groupings’ (2001: 49). One central technique of such manipulative categorization is ‘iconographic reference’, i.e. the use of ‘simplistic images of our experiences’ that are associated with ‘familiar values’, with the aim of establishing ‘a powerful conceptual link between the referent and a particular value judgment’ (2001: 32). Among the examples he discusses is one translated text passage from *Mein Kampf*, quoted after Bosmajian (1983):

This contamination of our people is carried on systematically by the Jew today. Systematically these *black parasites* of the nation defile our inexperienced young blonde girls and thereby destroy something which can no longer be replaced in this world. (Hawkins 2001: 37; original emphasis).

In his analysis, Hawkins focuses on Hitler’s characterization of the Jew as ‘black parasites’ along three ‘iconographic frames of reference’ – *colour* (of skin), the *Great Chain of Being*, and the *Human Body* (Hawkins 2001: 36, 38-40). Unfortunately, Hawkins’ source translation lets him down on the first criterion. The relevant original passage in *Mein Kampf* has no references to

Jews as 'black' parasites or 'blonde girls'. It reads, in the version of Ralph Manheim's English translation:

With satanic joy in his face, the black-haired Jewish youth lurks in wait for the unsuspecting girl whom he defiles with his blood, thus stealing her from her people. With every means he tries to destroy the racial foundations of the people he has set out to subjugate. (Hitler 1992: 295)<sup>1</sup>

Hitler's text is certainly racist but it is not colour-coded. Rather, it is obsessed with the danger of race-mixing, which the Nazi leader regarded as abhorrent in principle and especially disastrous in the case of an Aryan being seduced or raped by a Jew. There is no doubt that Hitler subscribed to white supremacy, but there is no indication in *Mein Kampf* that Jews are systematically associated with the colour BLACK, nor are they portrayed as being on the same racial level as African people.<sup>2</sup> Hawkins' argument as regards an alleged specific contrast of 'Aryans' vs. 'the Jew' in terms of the colour spectrum is thus not backed up by textual evidence. At a general level, however, a viable link can still be found if we consider the conceptual metaphor GOODNESS IS PURITY (Goatly 2007: 47-8). The respective source notion is one of a white surface that 'is spoilt by black marks which are of a different colour' (Goatly 2007: 47). At this more abstract level, any mixing, mingling or hybridisation of supposedly 'pure' substances – including human 'races' – is an act of pollution and defilement.<sup>3</sup>

Rather than to colour coding, the specific 'eliminatory', or 'redemptive' aspect of Nazi anti-Semitism, which has been emphasized in modern Holocaust studies,<sup>4</sup> is connected to the status of 'the Jew' as a *parasite*, for which there is indeed plenty of evidence in *Mein Kampf*.<sup>5</sup> According to Hawkins, this *parasite* concept is integrated in two further frames of iconographic reference: the *Great Chain of Being* and the *Human body*. In referring to the *Great Chain of Being*, Hawkins builds on Lakoff and Turner's (1989: 166) view of it as a 'cultural model that concerns kinds of beings and their properties and places them on a vertical scale'. This conceptual complex has its roots in ancient philosophy but it also still exists today in popular knowledge and idioms in 'a highly articulated version' that is 'indispensable to our understanding of ourselves, our world, and our language' (1989: 167). In its Nazi version, 'Aryan Germans assume the lofty status of superhumans' on the vertical scale whilst 'the Jews are reduced iconographically to subhuman beings, 'parasites' – i.e. a kind of 'lower animal', or in the worst case 'a plant of some kind' (Hawkins 2001: 45).

The iconography of the *Human body* adds a further 'measure of the negativity', insofar as in popular understanding parasites 'maintain life within their own bodies by sucking life-sustaining nutrients out of some other body' (Hawkins 2001: 46). This reference legitimizes complete racial extermination, because in the Nazi perspective, the victim 'body' of the German nation (or the Aryan 'race') is, of course, entitled to self-defence against the potentially deadly attack by the *parasite*.

Charteris-Black (2005) also refers to the derogatory positioning of Jews as *parasites* in the *Great Chain of Being* hierarchy and interprets it as a (negative) model for the way in which some US politicians and media refer to their enemies in the 'war against terror':

[G.W. Bush] employs an extreme form of rhetoric when referring to perpetrators of terrorism because his metaphors slide down the *Great Chain of Being* from hunted animals to ‘parasites’ in need of total elimination [...]; another political text in which the word ‘parasite’ was used with reference to a human topic is Hitler’s autobiographical account *Mein Kampf*. [...]. It was only by thinking of Jews *as if* they were animals or insects that permitted those in charge of following instructions to implement the policy of the Final Solution. (Charteris-Black 2005: 182-4; original emphasis).

Charteris-Black’s observation responds to the issue of the special, ‘exterminatory’ anti-Semitism mentioned above. With the formulation ‘... only by thinking of the Jews *as if* they were animals ...’, Charteris-Black implicitly raises the important question of whether the *parasite* imagery of *Mein Kampf* was perhaps not a metaphor at all but that instead it was intended and understood as a literal description. This interpretation matches the so-called ‘intentionalist’ perspective in Holocaust research. The historian Eberhard Jäckel, for instance, claimed that Hitler, in his elimination plans against the Jews and other groups whom he held responsible for Germany’s defeat in World War I as outlined in *Mein Kampf*, ‘indubitably meant what he said quite literally’ (Jäckel 1981: 58). However, such ‘literalness’ can be understood only as seriousness of intent. From the cognitive viewpoint, there is no need to jump from the premise of Hitler’s belief in the equation JEW = PARASITE to a conclusion that he was making a kind of weird category-mistake. The relevant passages in *Mein Kampf* show clearly that Hitler was perfectly capable of rephrasing the basic mapping JEW = PARASITE in all kinds of sophisticated rhetorical forms, i.e. as a simile or a comparison, whilst leaving no doubt about his serious belief in the analogy.<sup>6</sup>

### **3. Nazi Metaphors as ‘Viruses of the Mind’**

Chilton (2005) analyses the key chapter on ‘Nation and Race’ in Hitler’s book with view to answering the question of how ‘it contributed to the spread of ideas that led many people to perform or accept the most inhumane acts’ (Chilton 2005: 11). This focus on ideology propagation is embedded in a perspective on conceptual/cultural evolution informed by ‘meme theory’ as introduced by Dawkins (1989 [1976]) and modified by Sperber (1996, 2000). The basic idea is that cultural constructs can be treated as ‘replicators’ in analogy to genetic replication: just ‘as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation’ (Dawkins 1989: 192). The historical development of cultural constructs as ‘memes’ can thus be calculated and plotted statistically in a similar way as the evolutionary survival of genes (Dawkins 1989: 193-201; 1999: 109-11).

Sperber (1996) shares with Dawkins a basic ‘naturalistic view’ on cultural history but proposes an epidemiological analogy, on the grounds that cultural constructs depend on inter-personal communication for their propagation, which entails a much higher rate of innovation than in genetic mutation (Sperber 1996: 25, 102-4). Chilton takes up the *meme/virus*-idea to reformulate the question of why and how Hitler’s ideology was so successful in

attracting followers as a question of the spreading of a memetic ‘disease’:

[...] some diseases are contagious, some are not: the epidemiology of ideas should then be concerned with which are contagious or not, and why, linking micro-processes to macro-processes. The overriding question, the one we shall focus on in this chapter is: Why do some ideas or idea-clusters propagate more than others? (Chilton 2005: 7-8)

Chilton gives a detailed analysis of the macro-textual and propositional characteristics and ontology (‘actors’ and ‘entities’) of Hitler’s chapter on ‘Nation and Race’ before he concentrates on the ‘metaphorical tier’, for which he makes use of blending theory (BT), which stresses the importance of emergent conceptual structure arising from metaphors.<sup>7</sup> One key-example of such emergence of ideological meaning in the blends of Hitler’s text is the cumulative effect of equivocations between biological and social categorizations of ‘the Jew’, which Hitler achieves through using the terms *parasite*, *sponger*, and *like a bacillus* as synonymic references, supported by the use of anaphora, as in the following passage from *Mein Kampf*:

[The Jew] was never a nomad, but only and always a parasite in the body of other peoples. That *he* sometimes left his previous living space has nothing to do with *his* own purpose, but results from the fact that from time to time *he* was thrown out by the host nations *he* had misused. His spreading is a typical phenomenon for all parasites; *he* always seeks a new feeding ground (*Nährboden*) for his race. (Hitler 1992: 276, emphasis in Chilton 2005: 39)

Chilton points out that ‘the first occurrence of *he* is associated not just with ‘the Jew’, but with a blended concept: Jew-parasite, or some such’, and that ‘the successive clauses predicate actions and properties that are metaphorically isomorphic with the actions and properties of biological parasites’ (Chilton 2005: 39).<sup>8</sup> The blend PARASITE = JEW is thus built up and reinforced grammatically within the text with the effect that its chances of becoming a memorable meme are maximised. Once the blend is established, it can be filled in and elaborated further within the disease and medicine frames and their specific aetiologies: it then follows in the blend that the ‘host people’ die out inevitably if a host organism is overrun by a parasite, and ‘that the fatal disease caused in the host can be cured by removing it or destroying the parasite’ (Chilton 2005: 39).

This close reading of Hitler’s metaphoric blendings shows that a cognitively orientated critical metaphor analysis can help to answer to the seeming paradox of the literally understood metaphor, which was mentioned earlier. Due to consistent online blending of the PARASITE and JEW input concepts at every textual level, the ‘parasite actually *is* the Jew in the blend, not ‘mere metaphor’” (2005: 39). The blend PARASITE = JEW is thus not just a rhetorical extra or a form of name-calling; rather, it is constitutive for the discursive universe in which Hitler’s racism made sense, and which the readers of *Mein Kampf* were invited to join.<sup>9</sup>

Chilton (2005: 42) concludes that ‘conceptual constructs become meme-like and ‘infect’ the mind (under the right social conditions) when they have complex blending potential that recruits fundamental knowledge domains along with the core mechanisms of metaphor’. This interpretation is plausible

in general but it is debatable if medical and parasitological knowledge, even at popular level, constitutes a 'fundamental knowledge domain' that is so immediately experientially grounded that it 'almost form[s]spontaneously under the right textual stimulus' (Chilton 2005: 43). Historical research has established that the extensive terminology and expertise from the fields of medicine and hygiene that Hitler used in *Mein Kampf* was at least partly based on the specialized academic literature sent to him during the writing in 1924 by sympathizing professors and publishers (Jones 2000: 10; Weikart 2004: 220-5). In view of this evidence, it seems unlikely that the specific aetiology and implications transferred from these scientific sources onto the target domain of 'racial hygiene' were spontaneously generated by Hitler; rather they were carefully construed and elaborated even at the conceptual level, .

#### **4. Hitler's *Mein Kampf* as a Twisted Version of the Great Chain of Being?**

With her multiple contributions of a freely accessible database, article and monograph (2005a, 2005b, 2006), Rash has provided an excellent basis for research on the full range of metaphors in *Mein Kampf*. She groups the imagery of *Mein Kampf* into three main types: 'Container Metaphors', 'Metaphors of Location and Movement', and 'THE GREAT CHAIN OF BEING'<sup>10</sup>; of these it is the last group that she investigates in the greatest detail, starting with 'supernatural beings' and ending with 'non-living entities' and 'natural elements', observing that 'as we descend through the hierarchy of THE GREAT CHAIN OF BEING we notice among the images used a higher proportion of metaphors referring to Jews' (Rash 2006: 155).

Hitler's 'most repulsive' and at the same time 'distinctive images' are of Jews as 'slime, maggots, bacteria' (2006: 174). His perverse 'creativity' in using *Chain of Being* imagery lies in its intensity, underscored by repetition, hyperbole and repulsive detail and its combination with personification (2006: 169-72). Rash highlights an important point that is sometimes overlooked in references to the *Great Chain of Being* as an inventory of popular metaphors for ordering society, i.e. that whereas the 'original GREAT CHAIN was characterized by the principle of "continuity" this was a principle not recognized by Hitler (2006: 116). The continuity principle *connects* all level in the CHAIN with each other, whereas in Hitler's universe, if there was a chain, it was broken: 'between Aryan and Jew [...] there was a gulf [...], one race being good and the other evil' (Rash 2006: 116).

Rash's reference to the 'original GREAT CHAIN' refers to Arthur O. Lovejoy's famous description of the *Great Chain of Being* in the 1936 monograph, which sketched the history of this complex of ideas in Western philosophy over two millennia. In fact, Lovejoy had identified altogether *three* principles; besides 'gradation' (hierarchy) and 'continuity', the *Great Chain* concept also includes the principle of 'plenitude', i.e. the notion that all extant parts of the universe were indispensable - any loss of even its smallest part would prevent it from being a complete and well-ordered unity (Lovejoy 1936: 20). It is clear that Hitler's vision of 'the Jew' and his intention to eliminate that life form violated the third principle at least as much as that of 'continuity'. In Hitler's view, the

universe was in disarray *because* of the existence of ‘the Jew’, and it would be a much better ‘cosmos’ without him. Thus, whilst Hitler can be said to have used aspects of the *Great Chain of Being* tradition, the fact that his ideology violated two out of its three principles would indicate that Hitler’s version was very distinct from the classical model of the *Great Chain of Being* from its inception in Neo-Platonism in first centuries AD up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Lovejoy 1936: 61-182, 288-234; Gould 2000: 28-52; Musolff 2005: 56-8).

This differentiation shows that the identification of a few overlaps between complexes of conceptual metaphors (e.g. the hierarchy aspect between the traditional and Hitler’s versions of the *Great Chain of Being*) is by no means sufficient to infer that all or most ideological implications are shared. Hitler’s metaphors in *Mein Kampf* emphasised the hierarchical and discriminatory aspects of the *Chain of Being* complex at the expense of (and in logical contradiction to) its other constituent elements, in order to achieve the radical conclusions of his ‘exterminatory’ racism (as well as to exclude any mitigating or disturbing concepts of interracial coexistence and cooperation).

Another point worth noting is the fact that early historians of thought, e.g. Lovejoy and E.M.W. Tillyard, did hint at connections between the *Great Chain of Being* tradition and the political mythologies of their day, i.e. the 1930s-40s. Lovejoy saw the gradation principle of the *Great Chain* in 19th-20th century thinking perverted into a ‘kind of collective vanity’, the ‘tragic outcome’ of which had ‘been seen, and experienced, by all of us in our own time’ (Lovejoy 1936: 313). Tillyard, in *The Elizabethan World Picture* (first published in 1943), warned explicitly against the view that the exoticism of some *Great Chain* formulations from the Middle Ages or the Renaissance indicated a complete loss of their ideological appeal in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: ‘if we reflect on that habit [of mind], we may see that [...] it resembles certain trends of thought in central Europe, the ignoring of which by our scientifically minded intellectuals has helped not a little to bring the world into its present conflicts and distresses’ (Tillyard 1982: 116-7).

Hitler did not – and did not need to – know the complete conceptual history of the *Great Chain of Being* to verbalize his hatred of ‘the Jew’ in terms of the *parasite* metaphor – nor does any other racist nowadays, who wants to denigrate groups by likening them to repulsive and dangerous animals, bodily processes or diseases. Nonetheless, the historical origins, the mediating and the contrasting relations between Hitler’s source concepts for his genocidal value-system and the ‘classical’ version(s) of the *Great Chain* need to be explicated rather than presupposed. It is the merit of all the cognitive studies reviewed here to have highlighted this issue as a research object that deserves further attention. In doing so, cognitive research can continue the great tradition of critical analyses of Nazi discourse, as initiated by K. Burke who as early as 1939 took the apparent cognitive appeal of ‘Hitler’s rhetoric’ more seriously than ‘mere’ rhetoric.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The original German text is as follows: ‘Der schwarzhaarige Judenjunge lauert stundenlang, satanische Freude in seinem Gesicht, auf das ahnungslose Mädchen, das er mit seinem Blute schändet und damit seinem, des Mädchens Volke raubt. Mit

allen Mitteln versucht er die rassistischen Grundlagen des zu unterjochenden Volkes zu verderben.' (Hitler 1933, vol. 1: 357).

<sup>2</sup> Hitler deemed Africans and their descendants (whom he labeled 'negroes', German: *Neger*) to be inferior and capable only of assisting 'Aryans' in their 'culture-building' (*kulturschaffend*) work (Hitler 1933: 76, 313-9). Jews, on the other hand, were described by Hitler not just as an inferior race; 'the Jew' figured as the 'Aryan's' opposite, i.e. as the 'destroyer of culture' (*Kulturzerstörer*) (Hitler 1933: 76, 332).

<sup>3</sup> For the conceptual history of the idea of supposedly hereditary 'racial' purity cf. Jones 2000: 10-11, 38-9, 253-64.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Browning 1992, 2004, Friedländer 1998, Goldhagen 1996, Kershaw 2000.

<sup>5</sup> The respective German terms are 'Parasit', 'Schmarotzer' (*sponger*), 'Erreger' (*virus*), 'Bazillen' (*bacilli*), and there is a host of further parasitological terminology (for a complete inventory cf. Rash 2005a).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. e.g. Hitler 1992: 277: '[The Jew] is and remains the *typical* parasite, a sponger who, *like* an infectious bacillus, keeps spreading as soon as a favorable medium invites him. And the effect of his existence *is also similar to* that of spongers: wherever he appears, the host nation dies out after a shorter or longer period' (Italics: AM; for the German text cf. Hitler 1933: 334).

<sup>7</sup> For the relationship between Blending Theory and Conceptual Metaphor Analysis cf. Fauconnier and Turner 2002, Grady, Oakley and Coulson 1999; for an application of Blending Theory as well as Discourse Space Theory to racist discourse cf. Hart 2007.

<sup>8</sup> The oddity of a 'masculine' anaphoric reference to *the parasite* in English is not an issue in the original German text. In German, the head 'der Parasit' has grammatical, not natural, masculine gender; it thus demands the masculine anaphora (e.g. 'er', 'sein' etc.) as the normal, unmarked form of reference.

<sup>9</sup> For an attempt to sketch Hitler's discursive universe as a multi-layered but closed set of scenarios of national *healing/redemption* cf. Musolff 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Rash also relates the metaphors in *Mein Kampf* to idioms and further lexicographic and phraseological evidence as well as to model texts for Hitler, e.g. Houston Stuart Chamberlain and Richard Wagner's writings (2006: 29-73, 191-246).

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