**Humor as a rhetorical device in the speeches of Gamal Abdel Nasser**

**Abstract**

This article addresses how Egypt’s former President Gamal Abdel Nasser used humor as a rhetorical device in his speeches, particularly how he used humor to attack his fiercest political opponents, the Muslim Brotherhood. Using humor, Nasser emphasized that his socialist worldview built on values of equality. Nasser’s worldview was cognitively distant from that of the Muslim Brotherhood. Nasser turned to humor to emotionally arouse and manipulate his audience, thus increasing his popularity and strengthening his support. Furthermore, with humor, Nasser was able to ignite hatred against the Muslim Brotherhood, showing that their stated values and worldview served as a cover for their true intentions, namely to seize power, control the Egyptians citizens with an iron fist, and suppress their rights, thus contradicting the religious values they claimed to support.

To capture all the humor within Nasser’s political discourse we drew upon his interviews and speeches, which are accessible via online media sites. It is reasonable to suppose that the examples we have collected of humor as a rhetorical device in Abdel Nasser’s speeches are representative, as they have been assembled from the most significant speeches that can be found on the internet and there are hardly any other records of his important speeches in other sources.

**Keywords**

Gamal Abdel Nasser, humor, political discourse, rhetorical devices, critical discourse analysis

# 1 Introduction

Gamal Abdel Nasser asserted that his socialist worldview, built on values of equality, was as cognitively distant from the worldview and values of the Muslim Brotherhood as East is from West, and that the Muslim Brotherhood’s stated worldview and values served as a cover for their true intentions, which contradict religious values. Turning to humor, Nasser was able to increase his popularity, and arouse and emotionally manipulate his audience in order to strengthen their support of him, while simultaneously ridiculing the Muslim Brotherhood.

Humor is a familiar and integral part of human life. It is possible to say with a high degree of certainty that humor always has been and remains a prominent feature of humanity. There is no unequivocal definition of humor, but it can be seen to encompass all modes of human communication that make listeners or viewers smile or laugh. Humor comes in various forms: irony, satire, comedy, even sarcasm and ridicule (Rotenberg 2018: 82). Three primary theories on the essence and origin of humor in the human psyche today are the release and relief theory, incongruity theory, and superiority theory. Each of these addresses theoretical aspects of humor and its mechanisms of action (Rotenberg 2018: 82; Sover 2009).

There is a link between humor and politics (Kayam and Sover 2013: 43), and although the connection between these two phenomena may not be obvious, each contains aspects of the other. Politics is the art of the possible. To survive in the world of politics, a politician must be mentally flexible. Humor involves the ability to view a particular human condition from an unconventional perspective, to detach it from the accepted normative value system, and to treat it in an unusual and amusing way; accomplishing this requires a considerable degree of mental flexibility. It is possible to identify several points of intersection between the arenas of politics and humor:

1. Both are based on creativity and mental flexibility.
2. Both express a position. Politics is, among other things, an expression of a position. Similarly, all examples of humor are expressions of the position of the person making the joke regarding the object of the joke.
3. Both use rhetoric. Both politicians and comedians find creative solutions to the absurdities of daily life and events.

This study examines how the late Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser used humor as a rhetorical device in his political discourse. Nasser relied on humor to convey his political messages, advance his ideological positions, and sharply criticize his political opponents. A central premise of this study is that Nasser used humor to manipulate his audience’s emotions and opinions, thus creating sympathy for his political positions. That is, by using humor, Nasser strove to overcome cognitive barriers, enabling his messages to penetrate his listeners’ thinking.

A second premise is that Nasser did not use humor in his political speeches simply for amusement. His use of humor was aggressive, intended to attack his political opponents. It is inconceivable that humor would be employed in political speeches purely for amusement.

The corpus of the study consists of excerpts from Nasser’s speeches in which humor is a prominent rhetorical device. While some of his speeches were lengthy, others consisted of just a few sentences. The article draws primarily on three recorded speeches that are accessible via online media sites, since, despite the importance of these speeches, they have not yet been collected in a comprehensive book.

This study uses the method of collecting and sorting. A variety of examples from Nasser’s speeches were collected from online media sources. The rhetorical language used in them was analyzed to address the following questions: What is distinctive about the language Nasser used? What linguistic elements are prominent? Is his language anchored in humiliation, degradation, and negative relationships? How did Nasser attempt to undermine his political opponents’ ethos through this language?

The article draws on critical discourse analysis (CDA), and applies this approach to analyze humor in the political discourse of Gamal Abdel Nasser and how he constructed his messages to advance his ideological agenda, create biases, and emotionally manipulate his audience in ways that served his political interests and degraded his political opponents.

As will be extensively discussed in the article, Gamal Abdel Nasser’s use of humor in his political discourse reflects four different rhetorical strategies:

1. Humor used to reveal political opponents’ paradoxical behavior.
2. Humor based on a rhetorical division between “good” and “evil”.
3. Humor using metaphors.
4. Humor based on crude language and personal insults

As mentioned, the humor in Abdel Nasser’s speeches often rests on metaphors. When classifying the metaphors into categories, the notion of conceptualization was relied on. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) proposed a template for formulating metaphors in terms of a target domain and a source domain. The target domain is conceptualized in terms of the source domain, but not vice versa. For example, the large amount of blood spilled in wars is conceived through the concept of the sea, but the sea is not conceived of through the concept of blood. When classifying the metaphors belonging to the category of human being and human body, including unable to breathe, smothering or suffocating and pluck out their beards, it was found that in each example, the target domain of politics was conceptualized through the source domain of human being and human body. This was also the case with respect to other domains, such as nature and animals. It could be said that there is no limit to the semantic fields from which metaphors can be drawn as source domains. For example, focusing on one domain of human activity that applies to everyone, such as "the pocket": there are no limits to the semantic fields from which metaphors are drawn in this domain: illness, injury, transportation, love, courtship and marriage, animals and predators, and more: We must ensure that the Bank of Israel does not place unnecessary **mines** on the **track**. (*Ha’aretz*, January 5, 1999); When will the speculators smell **blood**? (*Ha’aretz*, January 30, 1997); The interest rate is **married** to inflation, but it **flirts** with the diagonal. (*Ha’aretz*, August 31, 1998).

 It was very important to address the concepts of “conceptual metaphor,” CDA theory, the term “topos,” and theories in the field of humor studies as these concepts describe and clarify how Nasser sharpened his overt and covert messages directly, bluntly, and with no regard to the fact that the speaker must not start with their own truth, but with the accepted consensus of the public they wish to address (see section 2.3). For example, when Nasser threatens the Muslim Brotherhood that the people will pluck out their beards as they have plucked out the beards of the reactionaries. We appealed to Critical Discourse Analysis

to show how Arafat appeals to humor that raise manipulative biases for the purpose of advancing his political goals.

Nasser’s use of humor as a rhetorical device in his speeches relied on four linguistic components, as will be extensively detailed below:

1. Revealing a paradox in political opponents’ behavior: Nasser exposed the paradox between his opponents’ stated intentions and their true intentions.

2. Discrediting the dichotomy of good vs. evil.

3. Metaphors used to mock political opponents.

4. Humor based on crude language and personal insults.

# 2 The conceptual framework

## 2.1 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a multidisciplinary approach that is used in discourse analysis. Focused on how social and political power is created and maintained through language, it seeks to expose discursive biases and manipulations that serve political interests and advance controversial ideological positions. It also highlight the methods or stratagems through which the discourse produces or maintains an unequal balance of power in a society. CDA aims to expose the linguistic, cultural, and historical roots that support the practices – the modes of action – that preserve the balance of power. The basic premise of the approach is that discourse has the capacity to shape social identities and establish relations between groups of people and individuals. CDA thus emphasizes the ways in which social structures embody the existing balance of power and control in the society through discourse: how the discourse produces them, approves them, challenges them, or legitimizes them. It seeks to understand, expose, and ultimately oppose social inequality (Hart 2010: 13–4; Livnat 2014, vol. 2: 361; Meyer 2001: 15; Reisigl and Wodak 2001: 32; van Dijk 2001: 352; Wodak 2001a: 10; Scott 2023: 1–2).

The term “power” is the main concept in CDA, and the discourse mechanism is seen as a central way to actualize power in social contexts. This premise is fostered by the thinking of social philosophers such as Karl Marx, Michel Foucault, Antonio Gramsci, Jürgen Habermas, Pierre Bourdieu, and others who drew attention to the central role of language in constructing social reality (Hart 2010: 13–14; Livnat 2014, vol. 2: 361; Meyer 2001: 15; Reisigl and Wodak 2001: 32).

For Foucault, discourse is a representation of knowledge about a certain subject; it is linked to knowledge production through language. Foucault argues that the term “discourse” relates not only to language but to action modes (practices), rules, and regulations. Discourse constructs and defines the objects of our knowledge. It controls how we talk about a subject or act in relation to it; it determines the accepted ways of talking about it, and thus also limits other possibilities for knowledge construction about the same subject. A discourse will never consist of one statement, one text, one act, or one source; it will appear in a variety of texts and different institutional contexts in the society (Livnat 2014, vol. 2: 362).

According to Foucault, “Words/Things” have meaning and can be called real only in a specific historical context. For example, ‘mental illness’ is not an ‘objective’ object that means the same thing in every era and every culture. Thus, the term “mental illness” does not signify something objective in the world. The object it represents is an outcome of the construction of knowledge that occurs within a certain discourse. This object is constructed by all that is said about it in a certain culture and in a certain period, by the way it is described, explained, judged, classified, and more (Livnat 2014, vol. 2: 362; Meyer 2001: 15). In essence, discourse constructs objects, instilling them with significance and meaning in a particular social and cultural context. Discourse determines how people see things and creates a picture of their world and their outlooks, thus influencing their actions as well.

CDA scholars regard themselves as ideologically motivated and committed, and their research is a kind of intervention in the life of society and social relations. Many researchers from this school are also active in anti-racism, feminist, and peace movements, and so forth. They state their ideological intentions openly and support weaker social groups against more powerful ones.

While analyzing texts and ‘linguistic events’ requires some analytical method, it is a principle of CDA that it is neither based on, nor prefers, a single theory or a uniform analytical method. Instead, CDA offers a kind of toolbox for the researcher, a list of linguistic and textual characteristics that can be Wodak examined when one wishes to analyze a text critically (Livnat 2014, vol. 2: 366; 2001b: 64).[[1]](#footnote-1)

## 2.2 Conceptual metaphor theory

Metaphor, as posited by cognitive linguistics, is the essential core of human thought and creativity. Since the language of politics is characterized by metaphorical themes, metaphors are a powerful tool for uncovering the essence of political thought. Metaphorical expressions nourish our worldview and shape our thinking and, in turn, our actual behavior (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 3–6; Mio 1997: 117–126; Koller 2012: 25). Examination of the context of metaphorical expressions facilitates our understanding of such metaphors and the goals that they are meant to attain in a given communicative event (Ifeanyichukwu et al. 2018: 95–96). Metaphorical linguistic usages reflect how we perceive reality (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 3–6; Mio 1997: 117–126; Koller 2012: 25). Lakoff (1991) took this idea a step further, showing that metaphors not only reflect our view of reality but also influence it. In January 1991, on the heels of the First Gulf War, he analyzed the U.S. administration’s political discourse and showed how the Bush Administration used metaphors to justify going to war. In so doing, he demonstrated how metaphor analysis can be critical in exposing discourse manipulations and normally hidden ideologies (Baider & Kopytowska 2017; Kopytowska 2010; Livnat 2014, vol. 2: 368–369).

Dalia Gavriely-Nuri (2009; 2011), studying metaphors in Israeli political discourse, shows how they help to portray war as a normal part of life. Such war-normalizing metaphors aim to naturalize and legitimize the use of military power by creating a systematic analogy between war and objects that are far from the battlefield.[[2]](#footnote-2) For example, the metaphoric phrase “Golda’s Kitchen” was the popular nickname for the most intimate circle of Prime Minister Golda Meir’s advisers. This metaphor conceals a secretive and undemocratic decision-making process, even in security matters and other central issues. In essence, the “kitchen” metaphor hides what was often, in fact, a “war room” where Israel’s most urgent security matters were decided. According to critical discourse analysis, the use of such metaphors is manipulative and helps to depict war as a normal, mundane, and unsurprising state, as expected and reasonable as medicine or business. In this way, the metaphor masks the true, terrible, and violent nature of war. Such patterns of discourse, repeated time and again (by politicians, military leaders, academics, journalists, and internet commentators), help the public become accustomed to this abnormal situation. Similarly, these metaphors help leaders convince the public of the rationality and necessity of war.

For example, Tony Blair defended his decision to send British soldiers to the Second Gulf War, in 2003, by using metaphors of progress – the successful attainment of goals (in the future) – as opposed to metaphors of regression, which reflect the failure to reach goals (in the past). These metaphors mirror the choices faced by the Labour Party and its leader, Blair, and thus establish the expected party policy: always go forward. Blair was willing to accept nothing but progress, and presented himself as a strong and reliable leader who would not be swayed by difficulty or criticism (Semino 2008). The metaphoric description of a particular problem or situation reflects the speaker’s perceptions of it and establishes his or her preferred solution (Chilton 2004: 202).

In this context, the rhetorical power of metaphors of movement, widely encountered in political discourse, is worth mentioning. One example is the metaphor (Charteris-Black 2005: 54–152; Musolff 2004: 30) that depicts the European common currency (the euro) as a train that must progress at the same speed and in the same direction with all its cars in order to avoid derailment.[[3]](#footnote-3) This metaphor reflects a specific perspective that urges European governments to adopt a uniform monetary policy and act in complete economic harmony in order to ensure the success of the European Monetary Union). Musolff presents examples of manipulative rhetorical baggage evoked by metaphors. The metaphors that he discusses express hostility toward the language of immigrants in Britain, such as the description of roads in British cities as streets in Bombay or Karachi (Musolff 2019: 257–266) and Coronation Street as having been relocated from Britain to Pakistan.

## 2.3 Topos

Topos is a term borrowed from classical Greek rhetoric that literally means ‘commonplace,’ and refers to a standardized way of constructing an argument; an intellectual theme found in a ‘stockroom’ of topics. The speaker searches in the topos for persuasive rhetorical devices. The topos contains a treasury of social or ideological conventions that are meant to elicit the mental acceptance of a given topic by an audience. The topos is the ‘glue’ that creates acommon denominator between the speaker and the target audience, based on a social consensus (Aristotle 2002: 28–32). If a leader, or speaker, who wants to be particularly effective addresses the nation, they must base their statements and appeal on what is commonly accepted by that society; in other words, on ‘the truth’ of the society, itsideological narrative, collective memory, and cognitive patterns (Gitay 2010: 135–136). A speaker who is concerned about the effectiveness of their speech must adopt the views of their audience (ibid.: 137). According to Perelman, the speaker must not start with their own truth, but with the accepted consensus of the public they wish to address. In other words, the speaker must make the consensus and accepted patterns of their audience as the starting point, because if they do not, they lose their audience (Perelman 1982: 21). According to Eco (2006: 44-45) and van Dijk (2008: 165), it is advisable for the speaker to begin by adjusting to theviews of their audience, and obviously not to mock or annoy them. The speaker must aim to connect with the audience and present the subjectin a positive, noncontroversial way.As will be explained in more detail below,Nasser does not indeed act in this way, because he speaks bluntly and aggressively against the Muslim Brotherhood and slams his thesis explicitly and blatantly.

## 2.4 Theories in the field of humor studies

### 2.4.1 The release and relief theory

Freud is one of the representatives of the release and relief theory of humor, according to which people use humor to release the tensions that life imposes on them. If people can laugh or smile at a situation, it becomes less threatening. According to Freud, people use humor as a defense mechanism, and to lighten the mood in uncomfortable and unpleasant situations (Rotenberg 2018: 82).

### 2.4.2 The superiority theory

Classic thinkers, such as Plato, Aristotle, or Hobbes have championed the theory that people use humor to express their superiority over others. Humor is a more refined way of asserting dominance over opponents, in contrast to victory achieved on a bloody battlefield. Bergson, a contemporary advocate of this theory, argued that a society may use laughter and humor in a punitive way to exert pressure on people to change unacceptable behaviors and adopt acceptable ones (Rotenberg 2018: 8).

### 2.4.3 The incongruity theory

According to this theory, humor is a response to the perplexity, discomfort, and incongruity that result from a cognitive conflict between two perspectives on reality, or between expectations and reality. A classical representative of this theory is Kant, who wrote in his *Critique of Judgment* that, “Laughter is an affect that arises if a tense expectation is transformed into nothing”.

The common denominator between these three theories is that humor is used to address the various conflicts that people experience in their lives (Rotenberg 2018: 83). Multiple studies have shown that humor serves as a defense mechanism, especially in times of crisis. Humor is a type of catharsis or emotional purification, and can even have mild physiological effects.

In her book *Without Humor We Would Have Committed Suicide*, Ostrower (2009) shows that humor is a tool for emotional coping. Humor is used to view a situation from a new perspective, minimizing the negative aspects and strengthening the positive ones. It bestows a sense of control over the situation, allowing people to “transcend” distress rather than become overwhelmed by it (see also Cohen 1994: 37–53; Keidar 2012).

Humor may be differentiated into four types, according to a typology of how people’s use of humor reflects their attitudes toward themselves and others (Martin et al. 2003, quoted in Rotenberg 2018: 84). This is largely consistent with the division presented above:

1. **Aggressive humor:** used to hurt, belittle, ridicule, or attack others, and reflecting a disrespectful attitude toward the other.
2. **Affiliative humor:** one through which people amuse themselves and others in a way that maintains respect both for themselves and for others.
3. **Self-enhancing humor:** used to lighten a situation for oneself and/or others. This type of humor reflects self-respect. It may be used in situations of crisis or distress.
4. **Self-defeating** **humor**: people direct humor at themselves, diminishing their own value in others’ eyes, in an effort to please or placate them. This type of humor does not show self-respect.

# 3 Analysis and discussion

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# 3.1 The humor of Gamal Abdel Nasser

There are many examples of humor in Nasser’s speeches. When he succeeded in making his audience smile or laugh, he was able to overcome barriers, gain sympathy, influence others, and manipulate the audience to accept his messages and ideological positions. In recordings of Nasser’s speeches, whenever he used humor, one can hear the widespread cheers, rejoicing, and praise of the audience, indicating that they were emotionally aroused.

But Nasser did not incorporate humor in his political speeches simply for amusement. He used humor aggressively, to attack and belittle his political opponents, and to cast them in a light that made them look ridiculous and absurd. His purpose was to emphasize the contrast between his socialist worldview, built on values of equality, and that of the Muslim Brotherhood, which he said was as far from his values as East is from West. He said the Muslim Brotherhood’s stated intentions only served as a cover for their true intentions, which contradict religious values.

Below are excerpts from Nasser’s speeches that show how he used humor as a linguistic and rhetorical device. These are direct quotes taken from recordings of Nasser’s speeches that are available on media platforms.

## 3.2 Humor used to reveal political opponents’ paradoxical behavior

A paradox emerges from a conflict between two coexisting yet contradictory factors. To reconcile a paradox, one of the conflicting factors must be eliminated, or some other resolution of the conflict must be found (Perelman2003: 48). In a true paradox, the two contradictory claims are both simultaneously true. If one of the claims is false, the paradox is nullified. In politics, there is a twofold motivation for presenting an opponent’s words or behaviors as paradoxical (Darshan 2000: 86; Landau 1988: 124):

1. To prove that one of the opponent’s claims is false, and thus refute their entire premise.
2. To mock an opponent’s ostensibly deviant and immoral behavior, and to cast them in a light that makes them look preposterous and absurd.
3. I met with the supreme leader of the Muslim Brotherhood. He sat there and demanded many things from me. What did he demand? First, that all women should be forced to wear a headscarf. I told him that if someone says something like that, they’ll say we’ve gone back to the time of the Fatimid Caliphate, which forbade people from walking around during the day, but allowed them to walk around at night. I told him that he should be the one to make the women of Egypt wear headscarves. He said that I should force them to do so, by virtue of my authority as president of Egypt. **I told him: “Your daughter is studying at the Faculty of Medicine, and she doesn’t wear a headscarf. Why doesn’t she have to wear a headscarf? If you can’t force your own daughter to wear a headscarf, how can you ask me to force 10 million women to wear headscarves?”**

(from Nasser’s speech on the Muslim Brotherhood).

Nasser pointed out the ironic and paradoxical nature of the request made by the head of the Muslim Brotherhood in order to make his political rival look ridiculous and absurd. Nasser mocked the request as ostensibly deviant and unjust, and implied that their true goal was to gain power under the guise of religion and observance of religious commandments. Nasser was convinced that if the Muslim Brotherhood came to power, they would impose misguided and inhumane laws on Egyptian citizens, not because they truly believed in these laws, but because they sought to suppress civil rights, silence dissent, prevent freedom of expression, and tighten their own grip on power.

Nasser’s scornful remarks about the Fatimid Caliphate, which forbade people to walk around during the day and allowed them to go out at night reflected his fears about the Muslim Brotherhood coming to power.

1. Does Islam say that one feudal family should rule the country, control its resources, and plunder its treasury, while the rest of the people will be enslaved and starving for bread? The truth is, it’s an old bearded man who is saying these things, to deceive and mislead the people. The true goal of the Muslim Brotherhood is to seize power under the guise of Islamic laws. After they seize power, they will renounce the values of Islam and plunder all the state’s treasures for their selfish interests.

(Nasser’s Labor Day speech, 1966)

1. Socialism is the sacred path through which we will defeat colonialism and reactionaryism, and prevent the theft of public funds. **The Muslim Brotherhood claims that socialism is heresy against God**. Why? I give the workers and peasants their full rights. Socialism provides health services to everyone. Socialism puts an end to feudalism. It turns a society of masters and slaves into a society of masters. Socialism takes wealth away from the capitalists and gives it to the poor. In fact, socialism implements the true laws of Islam. So why does the Muslim Brotherhood perceive socialism as heresy against God? Because socialism does not serve their purposes. They want to be rich, to steal state money. This is against the commandments and laws of Islam. They want to control the country and use its treasures for their personal benefit. Islam commands us to distribute Muslims’ money to Muslims, not to give it to exploiters. Whoever wants to implement the laws of Islam should distribute Muslims’ money to all Muslims.

(Nasser’s Labor Day speech, 1966)

1. If this old bearded man actually wanted to implement the laws and values of Islam, he would take care to distribute Muslims’ money to *all* Muslims. Why would he do that? What, is he naive? Is he an idiot? This old bearded man will never enforce Islamic laws for their own sake. He only seeks power under their guise. Anyone who opposes socialism, which seeks to grant full equality and rights to all citizens and to distribute the wealth equally as dictated by Islam, will never truly enforce the laws of Islam.

(Nasser’s Labor Day speech, 1966)

In this speech, Nasser exposed the Muslim Brotherhood’s stated intentions to implement the laws and values of Islam as deceptive. He claimed that the Muslim Brotherhood’s true intentions were to seize power, oppress people, take away their rights, control state treasures for their own use, and return Egypt to a feudal society with slavery. He saw their vehement opposition to socialism, which is centered on meeting the needs of the people, as unequivocal proof of the paradox between their stated intentions and their true, hidden intentions.

## 3.3 Humor based on a rhetorical division between “good” and “evil”

A core cultural motif is the ongoing struggle between “good” and “evil.” The Muslim Brotherhood divided the world into the “good” (themselves and those who support them) versus the “evil” (their opponents). Nasser mocked this division as based on deception and lies. He tried to expose their true nature and prove that the socialists were actually closer to the spirit of Islam, while the actual goals of the Muslim Brotherhood contradicted the spirit of the Qur'an.

1. The Muslim Brotherhood says that the whole nation is denying God, that only they are Muslims. They want to rule Egypt. They say that God should rule the people, not man, but how can God rule without a representative? We all know that in the beginning of Islam, there was a representative [of God]. But they [the Muslim Brotherhood] refuse to represent the people. They refuse to follow the parliament. They say they only accept the rule of God. What does the rule of God mean? The say their leader is the Caliph and messenger of God, while we [the Egyptian people who do not support the Muslim Brotherhood] are all infidels. And not only us, but the whole world, all the Arab countries and all the presidents and kings and rulers of these countries are all infidels. No one is a Muslim except the Muslim Brotherhood.

(Nasser’s speech against the Muslim Brotherhood)

1. Socialism is not against religion. According to socialism, there is no difference between a man with a beard and a man without a beard.

(Nasser’s Labor Day speech, 1966)

Nasser mocked the Muslim Brotherhood’s assertion that their leader was the messenger and representative of God. According to their rhetoric, the world is divided into “good” (the Muslim Brotherhood) and “evil” (everyone who opposes them). Since they claimed to be the messengers of God, they clearly presented themselves as representing the side of good, and their opponents as infidels and enemies of God. This was a form of emotional manipulation used to incite hatred and to legitimize attacking their opponents. Nasser advocated a socialist perspective that grants equal opportunity to all. He mocked the rhetoric of good versus evil, which contradicts the spirit of the Qur'an. This rhetoric conceals the Muslim Brotherhood’s true intention to control the masses. Nasser used humor to mock the Muslim Brotherhood, who viewed their leader as the divine messenger of God. In this way, Nasser expressed superiority over the Muslim Brotherhood. This was a more subtle way of expressing victory over an opponent, rather than using brute force in a power struggle.

## 3.4 Humor using metaphors

Metaphor is the essential core of human thought and creativity. Since the language of politics is characterized by metaphorical themes, metaphors are a powerful tool for getting to the heart of political thought. Metaphorical expressions nourish our worldview and shape our thinking and, in turn, our actual behavior (Koller 2012: 25; Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 3–6; Mio 1997: 117–126;). Examination of the context of metaphorical expressions facilitates our understanding of such metaphors and the goals that they are meant to attain in a given communicative event (Ifeanyichukwu et al. 2018: 95–96).

This article applies the cognitive theory of metaphor. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) sought to examine the metaphoric nature of human cognition by focusing on our common, habitual, consensual metaphors. Their work makes it clear that metaphors, which frame the world for us, are supremely efficient tools for shaping and creating thoughts. Without them, we cannot really think (Gavriely-Nuri 2011: 91; Livnat 2014: 368). Metaphorical linguistic usages reflect how we perceive reality (Koller 2012: 25; Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 3–6; Mio 1997: 117–126). Lakoff took this idea a step further, showing that metaphors not only reflect our view of reality but also influence it. In January 1991, on the heels of the First Gulf War, he analyzed the U.S. administration’s political discourse and showed how the Bush administration used metaphors to justify going to war. By so doing, he demonstrated how metaphor analysis can be critical in exposing discourse manipulations and normally hidden ideologies (Kopytowska 2010; Kopytowska and Baider 2017; Livnat 2014. vol. 2: 368–369).

Dalia Gavriely-Nuri (2009, 2011), studying metaphors in Israeli political discourse, shows how they help to portray war as a normal part of life. Such war-normalizing metaphors aim to naturalize and legitimate the use of military power by creating a systematic analogy between war and objects that are far from the battlefield.[[4]](#footnote-4) For example, the metaphoric phrase “Golda’s kitchen” was the popular nickname for the most intimate circle of Prime Minister Golda Meir’s advisers. This metaphor conceals a secretive and undemocratic decision-making process even in security matters and other central issues. In other words, the “kitchen” metaphor hides what was often, in fact, a “war room” where Israel’s most urgent security matters were decided. According to the CDA approach, the use of such metaphors is manipulative and helps to depict war as a normal, mundane, and unsurprising state of being, as expected and commonsensical a thing as medicine or business.[[5]](#footnote-5) In this way, the metaphor masks the true, terrible, and violent nature of war. Such patterns of discourse, repeated time and again in the discourse (by politicians, military leaders, academics, journalists, and online commentators), help the public to accommodate itself to this abnormal situation. In the same way, these metaphors help leaders to convince the public of the rationality and necessity of war.

For instance, Tony Blair defended his decision to send British soldiers to the Second Gulf War in 2003 by using metaphors of progress—the successful attainment of goals (in the future)—as opposed to metaphors of regression, which reflect the failure to reach goals (in the past). These metaphors mirror the choices faced by the Labour Party and its leader, Blair, and thus establish the expected party policy: always go forward. Blair was willing to accept nothing but progress, and thus he presented himself as a strong and reliable leader who would not be moved by difficulty or criticism (Semino 2008). The metaphoric description of a particular problem or situation reflects the speaker’s perceptions of it and establishes his or her preferred solution (Chilton 2004: 202).

In this context, the rhetorical power of metaphors of movement, widely encountered in political discourse, is worth mentioning. One example is the metaphor that depicts the European common currency (the euro) as a train that must progress at the same speed and in the same direction with all its cars in order to avoid derailment. This metaphor reflects a specific perspective that urges European governments to adopt a uniform monetary policy and act in complete economic harmony in order to ensure the success of the European Monetary Union (Charteris-Black 2005: 54–152; Musolff 2004: 30). Musolff presents examples of manipulative rhetorical baggage evoked by metaphors. The metaphors that he discusses express hostility toward the language of immigrants in Britain, such as the description of roads in British cities as streets in Bombay or Karachi (Musolff 2019: 257–266) and Coronation Street as having been relocated from Britain to Pakistan.

1. The supreme leader of the Muslim Brotherhood made many demands of me. He says we need to close down the cinemas and theaters, that is, make everything **completely dark**.

(Nasser’s speech on the Muslim Brotherhood)

Nasser used the word “dark” as a metaphor for ignorance, backwardness, and lack of education. Nasser was implying that the Muslim Brotherhood wanted to return Egypt to the ignorance of the medieval “Dark Ages,” and to suppress freedom of expression and other basic rights of Egyptian citizens in order to serve their own political interests.

1. We will not be defeated by colonialism and reactionaryism. As I have told you before, we will take care of them, waiting patiently, until we have worn them down and they can no longer breathe.

(Nasser’s Labor Day speech, 1966)

Nasser compared his all-out war against the Muslim Brotherhood to smothering or suffocating them, thus completely defeating the forces of colonialism and reactionaryism. In Arab culture, the cynical and mocking expression “we will stop their breath” (smother or suffocate them) conveys superiority over an opponent.

1. We are building our country. We will develop it, and march forward. You [the Muslim Brotherhood] will never achieve your goal. You are enemies and colonialists, and we will pluck out the hairs of your beards.

(Nasser’s Labor Day speech, 1966)

1. Does Islam say that one feudal family should rule the country, control its resources, and plunder its treasury, while the rest of the people will be enslaved and starving for bread? The truth is, it’s an old bearded man who is saying these things, to deceive and mislead the people. He wants the people to say “Yes, you are the Caliph.”[[6]](#footnote-6) But just as the people have plucked out the beards of the reactionaries, so **they will pluck out your beards**.

(Nasser’s Labor Day speech, 1966)

The various phrases about plucking out people’s beards are metaphors for strength and power over someone. Nasser promised to fight the Muslim Brotherhood and the representatives of reactionaryism in an uncompromising, all-out war. By threatening to “pluck out their beards” Nasser was asserting that he and his supporters would completely defeat them.

1. We will release the Muslim Brotherhood from prison and give them a second chance. But after that, **if they play with their tails**, we will put them back in jail and not let them back out.

(Nasser’s speech against the Muslim Brotherhood)

In spoken Arabic, the phrase to “play with their tails” is a metaphor for acting improperly, disrespecting societal rules, morals, and ethics, revolting against the authorities, and trampling roughshod over the law. Nasser intentionally used this phrase to threaten the Muslim Brotherhood and warn them against committing acts of criminality and misconduct. By using this phrase, he humiliated them by comparing them to animals that achieve their goals through aggression and brutality.

1. The Muslim Brotherhood wants Islamic rule in Egypt, based on the laws and values of Islam. At the same time, they devour Muslims’ money, drink their blood. They want to divide Egyptian society into feudalists and slaves who serve their masters.

(Nasser’s Labor Day speech, 1966)

The metaphoric phrases of devouring Muslims’ money and drinking their blood are meant to expose the Muslim Brotherhood as exploiting religion to advance their own interests, which Nasser said contradict the values of Islam. Again, he compared them to animals that prey on other animals, or suck their blood.

### 3.4.1 What concepts are created by the humorous metaphors in Nasser’s political discourse?

Conceptualization of the target domain through the source domain is referred to in cognitive semantics as mapping. The source domain is mapped onto the target domain, but not the other way around (see Table 1). Thus, in the metaphor “life is a vessel,” we perceive the concept of life through the concept of a vessel but we do not perceive the concept of a vessel by way of the concept of life. The metaphor “love is a journey” is based on the image of the road, and is reflected in many English-language expressions, for example: the lovers are at a crossroads; the lovers are at a dead end; their relationship has gone so awry as to have no way back; the lovers have come down a long, hard path. Each domain, source and target, has its own characteristics: the journey has passengers, means of transportation, a route, obstacles, and more. In love relationships there are lovers, events, development, and so on. The metaphor links the characteristics of the source domain to the characteristics of the target domain: lovers are travelers, the course of the relationship is the route, the difficulties in the relationship are obstacles in the path, and so on (Livnat 2014, vol. 2: 124).

Table 1 Mapping from source domain (nature, human being and human body and Animals) onto target domain (politics)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Source: nature  | Target: politics |
| Darkness  | Medieval times, the “Dark Ages” |
| Source: human being and human body | Target: politics |
| Unable to breathe | Complete defeat of the Muslim Brotherhood |
| Smothering or suffocating  | Complete defeat of the Muslim Brotherhood |
| Pluck out their beards | Humiliating and overpowering the Muslim Brotherhood  |
| Source: Animals  | Target: politics |
| Playing with their tails | Improper or immoral conduct, rebelling against the Egyptian government |
| Devouring Muslims’ money and drinking their blood | Muslim Brotherhood’s financial exploitation of Muslims |

## 3.5 Humor based on crude language and personal insults

Nasser did not hesitate to use derogatory words and insulting names to humiliate his political opponents, to arouse and emotionally manipulate his audience, increase his popularity, and ignite hatred against his political opponents.

1. One day, there were eleven broadcasts against us on illegal networks.[[7]](#footnote-7) We say, to hell[[8]](#footnote-8) with you and your eleven illicit broadcasts!

(Nasser’s Labor Day speech, 1966)

1. Where will we get the foreign currency to buy factories? We will have to save and to tighten our belts a bit. But we will not have to tighten them completely. The reactionaries[[9]](#footnote-9) will certainly attack us and call us derogatory names, saying that we are bankrupt and starving for bread. We will tell them, **eat your heart out**.

(Nasser’s Labor Day speech, 1966)

1. As the pressure on the Egyptian people increased, the Free Officers’ attempts to oust Nasser from power intensified. Following the last attempt, a restraining order was imposed on them, but it was leaked to the media. Cairo woke up in the morning to the sounds of gunfire and bombings. People who spread such rumors are probably unlucky, no?

(Nasser’s use of humor in public meetings)

1. Does Islam say that one feudal family should rule the country, control its resources, and plunder its treasury, while the rest of the people will be enslaved and starving for bread? The truth is, it’s an old bearded man who is saying these things, to deceive and mislead the people. He wants the people to say “Yes, you are the Caliph.” But just as the people have plucked out the beards of the reactionaries, so they will **pluck out your beards**.

(Nasser’s Labor Day speech, 1966)

1. They [the Muslim Brotherhood] say we have luxuries and you have nothing, that we have high-quality soap and you don’t have any. We tell them to **eat their heart out**. Who is using your soap? Who is using perfume? You left the people naked, infected with ulcers. They can’t even manage to take a shower or eat.

(Nasser’s Labor Day speech, 1966)

1. We will release the Muslim Brotherhood from prison and give them a second chance. But after that, **if they play with their tails**, we will put them back in jail and not let them back out.

(Nasser’s speech against the Muslim Brotherhood)

# 4 Conclusions

Gamal Abdel Nasser used humor as a weapon on the political battlefield against the Muslim Brotherhood, because he had a deep understanding that this type of rhetoric had wide appeal and a strong impact on his audience. He frequently used this type of rhetoric to attack, embarrass, and mock the Muslim Brotherhood, and prove that their stated and true intentions were as distant from each other as East and West.

Nasser’s use of humor as a rhetorical device in his speeches relied on four linguistic components:

1. Revealing a paradox in political opponents’ behavior: Nasser exposed the paradox between his opponents’ stated intentions and their true intentions.
2. Discrediting the dichotomy of good vs. evil: Nasser mocked the dichotomy presented by the Muslim Brotherhood, according to which they were ostensibly “good” because they supported a government based on the commandments and values of Islam, while Nasser and his supporters were “evil” because their socialist values were supposedly contrary to the values of Islam. Nasser mocked this dichotomy as deceptive and false. He sought to show that the socialists were actually closer to the spirit of Islam, while the true intentions of the Muslim Brotherhood contradicted the Qur’an, because they wanted Egypt to revert to the ignorance of medieval times, and to deny Egyptian citizens freedom of expression and other basic rights.
3. Metaphors used to mock political opponents: Nasser used metaphors to convey a sense of superiority over the Muslim Brotherhood, to cast them in an ironic and humiliating light and even to compare them to animals, and to express a sense of strength and determination to fight them in an ongoing war.
4. Humor based on crude language and personal insults: Nasser did not hesitate to use derogatory words and names to ridicule and humiliate the Muslim Brotherhood.

According to Eco (2006: 44-45) and van Dijk (2008: 165), it is advisable for the speaker to begin by adjusting to theviews of their audience, and obviously not to mock or annoy them. The speaker must aim to connect with the audience and present the subjectin a positive, noncontroversial way.As will be explained in more detail below,Nasser does not indeed act in this way, because he speaks bluntly and aggressively against the Muslim Brotherhood and slams his thesis explicitly and blatantly. It is reasonable to suppose that Nasser prefers to speak bluntly because he believes that such style increases his popularity and enhances the excitement and sympathy he receives from his audience.

Nasser emphasized the cognitive conflict between his socialist worldview, built on values of equality, and that of the Muslim Brotherhood. He asserted that their worldview was as far from his values as East is from West, and that their stated intentions contradicted religious values and only served as a cover for their true intentions, which were to seize political power, rule the citizens with an iron fist, and strip them of their rights. Nasser used humor to increased his popularity and strengthen support for him, to arouse and emotionally manipulate his audience, and to ignite hatred against the Muslim Brotherhood.

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1. See, for example, Koller (2012: 19–38), where she presents a working model for analyzing collective identity in discourse, which integrates a socio-cognitive approach as a major strand in CDA. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See further in Lakoff (1991: 25–32). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This metaphor appeared in *The Independent* (UK) in January 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See further Lakoff (1991: 25–32). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Kopytowska (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The representative of God who all people must obey. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The illegal broadcasting stations that Nasser referred to were fiercely opposed to his communist political position. A significant number of the people operating these stations were supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Nasser used the Arabic word طز to mean “go to hell.” This word “tuz” comes from a Turkish word for salt. When the Turks ruled the Middle East, they would enter Arabs’ houses to steal valuables such as gold and silver. At that time, Arabs kept quantities of salt in the house to preserve meat and other foods. If the Turks did not find anything valuable, they would say “tuz” meaning they had found only salt. The Arabs understood that whenever the Turks did not find what they were looking for they said “tuz” meaning salt, and that in this context, the Turks meant to express contempt and ridicule for what they found. To this day, Arabs use this word in spoken language to express ridicule and contempt for others. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. By reactionaries, Nasser meant the Muslim Brotherhood. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)