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When Children Are Water: Representation of Central American Migrant Children in Public Discourse and Implications for Educators

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Abstract

Since June, 2014 when the U.S. government began to document an increase in unaccompanied/separated children arriving in the United States from Central America, these children have become a frequent topic in media discourse. Because rhetoric about immigration issues have been shown to affect schooling of these children, the present paper aims to examine how these children are represented in the discourse of one community. Findings from this critical multimodal discourse analysis reveal multiple strategies of representation that result in the dominant metaphor of **IMMIGRANT CHILDREN ARE DANGEROUS WATER** and negative perceptions that have implications for the education of these students.

Keywords: Central American migrant children, metaphor, metonymy, education, media discourse

‘How many immigrants will it take to collapse the country?’ she said. ‘This is like a water main break and our nation is just trying to soak up the water with towels. At what point are we going to secure our border and turn the spigot off?’ (Appendix A, Text 16, August 2, 2014)

This quote is an example from nearly two dozen media references examined in this article that tie national discourse related to the unprecedented summer 2014 arrival to the United States of thousands of unaccompanied minors from Central America to a more local discourse in Eastern Nebraska. Beginning in October 2011, the U.S. government, as well as the governments of Belize and Costa Rica, began to document a significant increase in unaccompanied and separated children arriving in their countries from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Since the start of 2014, this increase accelerated, and by the end of 2014, an estimated 77,200 children were apprehended at the U.S. border—the majority of whom were from Central America (Lind, 2014). Since the preparation of the first draft of this article in 2014, many of the children who have come into the United States have been released to relatives already living in the country, and with the protection of the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Plyler v. Doe* (1982) decision, most have since enrolled in public schools (Sanchez, 2014). While they attend local schools, many of these children still have cases pending in immigration court (Berestein Rojas, 2015; Rogers, 2015). As such, they have become a frequent and controversial topic that has gained the attention of immigration groups, human rights activists, politicians, and educators.

Despite the fact that most of these children have left their countries for dramatic reasons that have threatened their physical and psychological safety, U.S. media discourse about them has been largely dehumanizing and often shows a “troubling progression to the further criminalization of children and youth in immigrant detention” (Sanchez, 2014, p. 10). Sadly, what we know about media discourse and the way that people are represented to the public is that media discourse not only represents what is occurring (and the social actors involved in these events), but it also evaluates it, ascribes purposes to it, and justifies it, and “in many texts these aspects of representation become far more important than the representation of the social practice itself” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 6). Moreover, media discourse bridges the national and even

international with the local, so that what is in the public sphere often has tangible consequences for interaction at the levels of city, neighborhood, school, and even classroom. Hence, the purpose of this article is to examine the ways in which the unaccompanied or separated children were represented in the media to shed light on dynamics of power and identity and their applications and reach into educational spaces. More specifically, the article will explore the following research questions:

- (1) How have the unaccompanied or separated Central American children been represented in the public discourse of one American community?
- (2) How does media discourse about child migrants affect their school experiences?¹

Before answering these questions, it is important to recognize contextual factors that shape the ontologies of the children, such as the U.S. legal framework for responding to migration. Thus, the following section will provide a brief discussion of the legal rights of immigrant children in the United States.

Legal rights of immigrant children in the United States

As a result of a “decades-long struggle for undocumented noncitizens” in Texas, but also in the United States as a whole (López & López, 2010), the U.S. Supreme Court case of *Plyler v. Doe* (457 U.S. 202) ruled in 1982 that public schools were prohibited from denying immigrant students access to public education in Grades K–12 due to their immigration status. “More specifically, under the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution, states and public schools may not deny undocumented students their right to public school on the basis of their legal status” (Samway & McKeon, 1999, p. 8). The ruling clarifies that schools also cannot ask for documentation of a student’s legal status or charge tuition for any student who meets the standard residency requirements of the district (which cannot be based on immigration status).

Besides *Plyler v. Doe*, other legal measures protect immigrant children in the United States such as the Unaccompanied Alien Protection Act, S. 119 (passed by the Senate on December 21, 2005), which established criteria for the care and protection of migrant children. This act prohibits the placement of children in adult detention facilities or facility housing for delinquent children and discourages the “unreasonable use of handcuffs, shackling, solitary confinement and strip searches” (Piwowarczyk, 2005, p. 294). It also recognizes the developmental needs of children (by making way for legal representation) but still allows for the detention of children and activity by the U.S. Border Patrol.

Despite the passage of these legal measures and “a general right to education for migrant children, obstacles to securing it in practice are common” (Bhabha, 2009, p. 440) and rulings such as *Plyler v. Doe* “still face challenges to its authority (López & López, 2010, p. 15). For example, in 2007, a school official in Northern Chicago District 187 turned away a Latina mother who produced evidence of residency (but not legal authorization) when trying to enroll her son in school (López & López, 2010, p. 38). Policy analysts have highlighted specific areas of concern for schools, including *chilling* (creating fear by requesting things like Social Security numbers when they are not needed), *exposure* (“exposing” students to the Department of Homeland Security), and *disparity* (imposition of different rules according to individual or group characteristics; López & López, 2010, p. 41). However, despite recommendations from education policy analysts as to what they cannot do, many schools have chosen not to comply, reminding us that what is “legal” or “required” may not exactly correspond to what is done.

Unfortunately, discriminatory attitudes can “lead to exclusionary pressures to reduce these children’s access to basic child protections in different ways” (López & López, 2010, p. 435). Thus, “[a]nti-immigrant sentiment still interferes with what is the ‘right thing to do’ for unaccompanied or separated youth who must flee their homes,” and often, states or local schools still “confuse what we won’t do from what we can’t do”

1. Because this issue was so widely publicized, an overwhelming number of articles and online media reports were found. Thus, to examine the content in great detail, one community was selected to confine the data to a manageable amount and keep with the dialogic nature of the discourse.

(Piwowarczyk, 2005, pp. 295–296). Public discourse on immigration can often have a great impact on the reception of these children in local communities, and research has shown that arriving in a hostile environment (as created by negative media discourse) can have a negative impact on psychological adjustment, family unity, family security, and education (Bhabha, 2009; Leudar, Hayes, Nekvapil, and Baker, 2008; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2015). The next section introduces the theoretical framework underlying the methodology of this article and connects critical (multimodal) discourse analysis to the educational arena.

Critical multimodal studies and educational research

The term “critical multimodal critical multimodal discourse analysis (CMDA)” represents a merging of two strands of discourse studies: multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) and critical discourse analysis (CDA, also referred to as critical discourse studies; Waugh, Catalano, Al Masaeed, Hong Do, & Renigar, 2016). MDA “explores the meaning-making potential of different communication modes and media and their actual use and dynamic interaction with each other and with the sociocultural context in which they operate” (Djonov & Zhao, 2014, p. 1) and “approaches representation, communication, and interaction as something more than language” (Jewitt, 2009, p. 14). In contrast, CDA, which “relies on emancipatory models that draw on Critical Theory and the Frankfurt School,” is concerned with revealing how complex social problems are represented linguistically and with revealing ways to challenge, deconstruct, understand, and possibly overcome them (Angermuller, Maingueneau, & Wodak, 2014, p. 361). Following the work of Djonov and Zhao (2014), Machin and Mayr (2012), and others, these two scholarly perspectives will be combined to examine visual and verbal elements of the online coverage in Nebraska of the unaccompanied/separated Central America-originating children.

Much research has utilized CDA or CMDA to explore educational issues (e.g., Gee, 1999/2011; Kress, 2001; Pini, 2011; R. Rogers, 2011). Educational research that incorporates CDA spans areas as different as “higher education, policy studies, adult education and language arts to studies in physical education, math and science, art education and creativity,” and CDA analysts in education are largely “concerned with a critical theory of the social world, the relationship of discourse in the construction and representation of this social world, and a methodology that allows them to describe, interpret, and explain such relationships” (R. Rogers, 2011, p. 3). Particularly relevant to the purposes of this article is CDA (or CMDA) that explores media discourse and its application to the educational arena. Santa Ana’s (2002) work is particularly salient because like the present article, he examined contemporary American public discourse while paying close attention to metaphor. In his extensive study of media discourse in the *L.A. Times* about immigration, he found metaphors such as IMMIGRANTS ARE ANIMALS or IMMIGRANTS ARE CRIMINALS/WATER,² which both reflected and shaped public opinion of immigration.

In addition to Santa Ana (2002), a substantial body of research has been conducted on the way that educational issues, policies, and educators themselves have been portrayed in the media as well as how these portrayals shape public opinion. For example, in Greenberg’s (2004) study on the media coverage of the 1997 Ontario teachers’ strike, the author found that despite positive coverage of the government’s role in the media (and negative representation of the teachers), the public still largely supported the teachers. In contrast, Goldstein’s (2011) study on the way that No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and educational reform were framed in the media revealed that media framing presented an overwhelming negative image of teachers’ unions as opposed to NCLB and other school reforms and affected public perceptions of education in a negative manner. Similarly, Gabriel and Lester (2013) found striking similarities between the way that the *L.A. Times* presented the debate on value-added measurement and a quest romance or wish-fulfillment narrative, which gave their version of events familiarity, veracity, and power over the public imagination. Catalano and Moeller (2013) investigated media coverage of dual-language programs in the United States and found that media discourse about the programs influenced public opinion. Additionally, Faltin Osborn and

2. In cognitive linguistics, the convention is to list metaphors and metonymies in small caps.

Sierk (2015) conducted a multimodal analysis of the representation of Teach for America (TFA) in media discourse and concluded that its representation in the media facilitated the formation of opinions as to its effectiveness that reinforced or created beliefs that aligned people as for or against TFA.

A final study most relevant to this article is that of Leudar et al, (2008). They examined the ways in which media representations of refugees/asylum seekers shaped policy in a dialogic process of action-criticism-defense. After conducting an analysis of media discourse of refugees/asylum seekers and the way in which policy shaped and was shaped by it (and determining that local opinion of refugees was shaped by media discourse), the authors conducted interviews with refugees in the community and found that the participants oriented to the hostility found in media discourse by changing narrative constructions of themselves. Thus, in answer to the problem of how to claim refugee status without having the negative qualities attributed to them by the media, informants constructed autobiographies in which the life in the place of origin negated personal qualities and was presented as unlivable. The authors concluded that these changing narratives as a result of a hostile environment produced and reproduced in the media resulted in conditions of trauma and psychological problems on the part of the informants.

Metaphor and metonymy in critical multimodal studies

In addition to knowing how CMDA can inform educational research, it is important to understand some of the elements that frequently surface in discourse analysis and why they are important to identify and deconstruct, such as metaphor and metonymy. Metaphor references when two different things that are alike in one way are compared (e.g., *LIFE IS A JOURNEY*), and it is often a way in which we understand and experience one thing in terms of another (Hart, 2010; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Metaphor is particularly effective in public discourse because it “draws on the unconscious emotional associations of words and assumed values that are rooted in cultural and historical knowledge” (Charteris-Black, 2014, p. 160).

Metonymy is when one thing stands for another thing to which it is related or closely associated (e.g., The White House stands for the government officials working there). Metonymy also functions as a way of highlighting or backgrounding certain aspects of an event, action, or person (Hart, 2011). Although metonymy and metaphor are different (and metonymy has been largely ignored in the past), they both affect and shape public opinion about issues and are both important. In fact, currently, scholars in the field are beginning to realize that there are few metaphors that do not involve metonymy in some way, and many metaphors are largely motivated by the frequent use of metonymies (Barcelona, 2011). Take this example from Santa Ana (2002, p. 264), which reveals a common metaphor in immigration discourse (also seen in the work of Charteris-Black, 2006; Hart, 2010; Santa Ana, 2013; Wodak, 2014, among others): “The Flood of Legal and Illegal Immigrants Streaming into the Country . . .”

In this example, the following metonymies exist: *flood*, *streaming* (**ACTIONS OF WATER FOR ACTION OF PEOPLE**), and *illegal immigrants* (**ATTRIBUTE FOR ENTITY**). In the case of *flood* and *streaming*, the actions of water stand for the actions of people and profile the manner in which they are coming (as if in a perilous flow that implies harm and displacement), while obscuring other ways of conceptualizing their arrival and presence that emphasize benefits to the receiving country (e.g., “invigorating” or “replenishing”). The metonymies *illegal* and *immigrants* highlight their legal status, as well as their status of being an outsider. These repeated metonymies encourage the reader to compare immigrants and immigration to dangerous water and criminals (i.e., *illegal*), thus creating or motivating the metaphors (also referred to as “blends”)³ **IMMIGRANTS ARE DANGEROUS WATER/CRIMINALS**.

A “primary purpose in the construction of blends is the promotion of particular representations of reality” (Hart, 2010, p. 123), and the critical analysis of these blends involves working out exactly what they bring to our attention and what they obscure (Charteris-Black, 2014). In the case of **IMMIGRANTS ARE DANGEROUS**

3. Metaphors in conceptual blending theory (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002) are referred to as “conceptual blends.”

WATER, this particular view of reality is problematic because in this frame, immigrants are inanimate and thus “do not have motives, intentions, and volition” (Hart, 2010, p. 149). When the characteristics of (dangerous) moving water are blended onto immigrants, those immigrants are dehumanized, homogenized, and differentiated from the in-group (Hart, 2010).

It is important to note that metaphors are not always used consciously (although they often are for the purposes of persuasion). Many times, people use metaphors installed by their opponents or adversaries unconsciously (e.g., tax relief). By using language that has become conventionalized or entrenched, and thus naturalized, it is no longer recognizable for the perspective that is being privileged. This is one reason why metaphor (and metonymy) can be so dangerous. As a consequence, when we repeat the language of others to argue our own point, we “repeat their ideas, enabling the ideas and values behind the language to enter the brains of the public” (Lakoff & Wehling, 2012, pp. 38–39). It is because media discourses can naturalize certain understandings of unaccompanied children (even if those understandings are highly misleading and problematic) that it is important to identify the metaphors and metonymies in use.

Method

Selected community and news source

This article investigates public discourse related to the unaccompanied minors from Central America. To limit the data and provide a more in-depth analysis, discourse from one Nebraska community (taken from this community’s most circulated print and online newspaper) was explored in detail. Articles from the *Lincoln Journal Star* were selected on the basis of whether the main topic of the article was related to the “migrant children crisis” and if the article was published in the *Lincoln Journal Star* online during June 30, 2014, to September 16, 2014.⁴

The community of Lincoln, NE, was chosen on the following grounds:

- (1) Nebraska ranks 6th in the top 10 states experiencing the highest growth rates in their immigrant populations with a 242.2% increase during the past 20 years (Pandya, McHugh, & Batalova, 2011). These profound changes in demographics have led to increases in Latino students in Nebraska schools and, in particular, students identified as “English-language learners.” Thus, although Nebraska is part of the “New Latino Diaspora” (Hamann & Harklau, 2010; Hamann, Wortham, & Murillo, 2015; Wortham, Murillo, & Hamann, 2002) rather than a border state, the issue of immigration (and schooling of immigrant students) is a relevant, controversial, and heated topic within the state and particularly within Lincoln, the state capital, where local politicians often position themselves in the state political arena. Moreover, Nebraska’s then-governor, Dave Heinemann, gained national attention for his negative characterizations of the arriving children (Meckler, Reinhard, & Nicholas, 2014). The local paper, the *Lincoln Journal Star*, provides one space for Nebraskans to engage in dialogue about issues important to the state. In addition, media accounts of Latino newcomers to Nebraska and other “fly-over country”⁵ states have been analyzed by others (e.g., Hamann & Reeves, 2012) in another hot-button issue (workplace raids and school site displacements) that this analysis updates and complements.
- (2) Because approximately 200 children apprehended at the Mexico–U.S. border were placed with sponsors in Nebraska in late June 2014 (many of them were still awaiting hearings when this analysis began in October 2014), the issue of whether these children should be allowed to come (and who they were and why were they coming) became widely discussed within local communities in Nebraska during the studied time period. According to the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement,

4. These dates encompass all major coverage of this issue and mark it a “hot topic” of the summer of 2014 in Nebraska.

5. Hamann and Reeves (2012) use the term “flyover country” to refer to the space that metropolitan Americans “fly over” as they travel between the coasts (i.e., the Midwest, Great Plains, and Mountain West).

Nebraska ranked 24th among the 50 states plus Washington, DC, in the number of migrant children temporarily relocated to relatives there for care (“Unaccompanied Children Released,” 2014). Thus, looking at Nebraska means looking at a “middle-of-the-pack” state in terms of impact—not an exceptional one.

- (3) The *Lincoln Journal Star* is the self-described “premier news and information source in Southeast Nebraska” (see <http://journalstar.com/services/about-us>). The paper’s Web site averages more than 600,000 visits per month, and the paper is one of only a few daily newspapers that experienced growth in the last year. However, compared with larger cities such as Omaha, NE, or Kansas City, MO, the number of articles published on this issue was manageable and thus suitable for the analysis here.

Data collection and analysis

Twenty articles were found by Google searches using key words germane to this analysis (i.e., “border children,” “migrant children,” and “Lincoln Journal Star”). The articles were then assigned a text number (e.g., Text 1, Text 2; see Appendix A). Once articles were selected, analysis occurred in three phases. First, a manual reading occurred in which the author read through the file with all the articles including non-verbal data and manually coded for ways in which migrant children were represented in the data. After initial coding, the author found that the use of metonymy and metaphor were dominant strategies used in the discourse, while deixis and visual data surfaced as secondary data. A text-only file was then created to examine and code the data. Finally, visual elements were examined for their interaction with the verbal texts and for the representation of child migrants. After visual analysis, three representative photos and one video were selected for further discussion. Findings from all areas of analysis are presented in the next section.

Representation of unaccompanied or separated Central American children in the *Lincoln Journal Star*

This section addresses the first research question, which seeks to document how the unaccompanied/ separated migrant children from Central America were represented in local media discourse. Findings revealed that the dominant (largely covert) strategy for representing the migrant children in the discourse was the use of metonymy and metaphor (see Table 1, Appendix B). Frequent repetitive metonymies motivated the production of the metaphor IMMIGRANT CHILDREN ARE DANGEROUS WATER. Thus, metonymies used to talk about the children arriving from Central America included words largely associated with the frame of (dangerous) water.

To understand how the metonymies work to motivate the metaphor IMMIGRANT CHILDREN ARE DANGEROUS WATER (appearing 22 times in the discourse), it is useful to view a representative sample of them in context. The first example from Text 4 features U.S. Senator Deb Fischer (R-Neb) talking with the journalist about her concerns about the children arriving in Nebraska and their impact on the community: “Sen. Deb Fischer said Wednesday her main concern in considering the relocation of children who have **spilled** across the southern U.S. border . . .” (paragraph 1, July 16, 2014).

In Text 8, Nebraska activists responded to local politicians’ handling of the issues. The following excerpt features a discussion of Senator Mike Johann’s view of the issue as summarized by the journalist: “Sen. Mike Johanns, one of the politicians criticized, has taken the position that the United States needs to change policy to address children who have been **flooding** the country’s southern border in increasing numbers” (paragraph 6, July 18, 2014).

In Text 11, local (Lincoln Public Schools) superintendent Steve Joel was given a chance to respond to the public discourse (in which he is supportive of the children’s right to education), but the journalist introduced his comments with the following statement: “The immigration crisis **bubbling up** from the border

is **seeping** into Nebraska's schools, some 200 of the thousands of unaccompanied children from Central America now here—along with the rancorous debate" (paragraph 1, July 25, 2014)."

The next example is from Text 16 in which a local march was held to rally in support of Nebraska's governor and his efforts to identify the children who had been released from custody to live with relatives or sponsors in Nebraska. The excerpt features one of the protesters explaining her objections to the immigration policies and the placement of children in Nebraska: "'How many immigrants will it take to collapse the country?' she said. 'This is like a **water main break** and our nation is just trying to **soak up the water with towels**. At what point are **we** going to secure our border and **turn the spigot off?**'" (paragraph 19, August 2, 2014).

Text 17 presents the story of Celvyn Mejia Romero who came to the United States from Honduras as an unaccompanied minor when she was 10. The article presents the compelling reasons why she came to the United States and the difficulties she faced. However, even here, the journalist referred to the current child migrants as a *flood of kids*: "The **flood of kids** at the borders has ignited a political firestorm, with the House late Friday passing strict measures that the president quickly condemned" (paragraph 6, August 2, 2014).

This final example features another personal story telling how Angela Escobar (now 14) fled El Salvador for Omaha. In the excerpt, her attorney (who worked *pro bono* to help Angela and others) talked about the legal process (as summarized by the journalist): "The waits might be longer now due to the **pressure** the latest **influx** of undocumented children has put on the system, he said, but the legal side of her story is representative" (Text 18, paragraph 44, August 3, 2014).

These examples all contain linguistic realizations of the conceptual metaphor IMMIGRANT CHILDREN ARE WATER. As discussed earlier, the comparison of migrant children to water is problematic but a successfully subtle way for those opposing immigration issues (and those unwittingly borrowing their terminology) to dehumanize, stereotype, and simplify the issue. The presented examples show that the children are not only seen as MOVING WATER, but they are often seen as dangerous moving water that is "relentless and overwhelming" (Santa Ana, 2002, p. 73) and puts pressure on the entire *system*, failing to stop unless abated. In this frame, immigration is seen as an "inward flowing stream," and the nation is seen as a basin or container into which the immigrants flow. "Greater volume and movement of water imply greater need for safe-guards and controls, and more powerful human agency to control the water (which of course is not a human force)" (Santa Ana, 2002, p. 78). Thus, the logical conclusion to this metaphor is that we must act quickly to hold this water back (and in the metaphorical blend, this translates to stopping immigration of these children) before it overwhelms the "container" and causes damage.

Despite the fact that these metaphors create negative, dehumanizing perceptions of the children (and immigrants in general), what is surprising is that they are frequently used unconsciously by supporters of the children and/or journalists who are ostensibly attempting to represent the issue in a neutral or sympathetic fashion. For example, Texts 8, 11, 17, and 18 present personal stories and/or voices of those who are attentive to the plight of the children as well as opposing views. Still, language used by the journalist in those articles often subtly conveys a different message (whether consciously or unconsciously) that redirects from the humanitarian message both metaphorically and metonymically. In Text 17, which attempts to humanize migrants by telling a compelling personal story, the journalist still chooses to describe the crisis as a *flood of kids at the borders*, which works against the neutralizing aims of the article. In Text 18, also a personal story of a child who fled El Salvador, the crisis is referred to in terms of the *pressure the latest influx of undocumented children has put on the system*. These examples demonstrate how even those who support migrant issues repeat local discourse so much that it becomes naturalized and invisible to scrutiny. Importantly, we need to recognize that just changing the language is not the entire problem, and in the words of Donaldo Macedo (2000, p. 20), "The call for language clarity is an ideological issue, not merely a linguistic one." Thus, through metaphorical thought and the way in which conceptual metaphors influence entire ways of thinking about events, actions, and people, using one term over another can greatly influence how the public thinks about it, and therefore, care must be taken in the language that is chosen as well as in the thinking that might be behind it.

Other metaphors found in the discourse work together with the WATER metaphors to denaturalize the children as in the following example in which the opinion of Governor Dave Heineman (who uses a hunting metaphor) was presented to give context to the activists' response to his comments: "He said **tracking the border children** is the only way to ensure they are not getting federal and state benefits, and he wants to know who will pay for their education" (Text 8, paragraph 19, July 18, 2014).

The word *tracking* activates the conceptual metaphor IMMIGRANTS ARE ANIMALS, and of course, animals do not merit benefits. Santa Ana (2013) noted that the predominant conventional metaphor of U.S. public discourse of the 1990s was IMMIGRANTS ARE ANIMALS, but by 2004, this metaphor was replaced by IMMIGRANTS ARE CRIMINALS. However, results from this analysis show IMMIGRANTS ARE ANIMALS to still be prevalent in the data (16 tokens). In the context of this discourse, metonymies such as *tracking* project actions of hunters onto immigration/law enforcement agencies. In addition, because tracks left by animals/children are used as evidence that they were there, it is a double metonymy because the tracks attest to the presence of the rest of the body as well.

Another dehumanizing part of the example from Text 8 is the metonymy used to describe the children. The token *border children* was found 10 times in the data and contains the metonymy ATTRIBUTE FOR ENTITY in which the place where the children were apprehended is highlighted as the defining characteristic, a place that is exotic, fraught, distant, and most importantly, *not here*, detaching the children from the circumstances (e.g. U.S. Central American policies) that could illuminate one dimension of our nation's own responsibility. This metonymy works well for those who wish to use the discourse about the unaccompanied children to connect to the larger political agenda of "securing the border." By forefronting *border*, over and over, an unconscious connection is continually made between the children and government policies that (at least some) people want to see enforced.

The next example demonstrates another way in which this connection between the children from Central America and the immigration issue at large are associated. This example hails from Text 6 in which Governor Dave Heineman's views on the migrant children are discussed, particularly his demand to know who will pay for services for the unaccompanied minors and his response to criticism of his request to identify the names of children placed in Nebraska: "Gov. Dave Heineman said Thursday the only way he can 'ensure that any **illegal individual** is not getting federal and state benefits' is to know the names of the **border children** from Central America who have been relocated in Nebraska" (paragraph 1, July 17, 2014).

A blend occurs between the frames of CRIME and BORDER CHILDREN, and thus, the mental connection between the two is made stronger with each incidence in the discourse, thereby producing the metaphor IMMIGRANTS ARE CRIMINALS. Of course, an individual cannot be ILLEGAL, but the forefronting of the legal status allows them to be immediately seen as wrongdoers and thus undeserving of our sympathy or our generosity—a point further accomplished with the agnostic INDIVIDUAL substituting for the more sympathy-inducing CHILDREN. Furthermore, media discourse that puts migrant students in the frame of criminality becomes a cultural and structural force that shapes these students' experiences (and those of Latino students more generally) because of their role in the construction of Latino identities and how Latino students are perceived by others (Hamann & Reeves, 2012; Noguera, 2003).

Other dehumanizing metonymies that led to metaphors included IMMIGRANT CHILDREN ARE OBJECTS (that can be *processed*) or DISEASE (*carrying infectious diseases*). Although no positive metaphors were found, positive metonymies of ATTRIBUTE FOR ENTITY to talk about the children and their situation (e.g., *humanitarian crisis/issue*, *young human beings*, and *horrible human tragedy*) were present in the data, taking the human characteristic of the issue and using this as the umbrella term for discussing the children and as a frame for viewing not just the children but the whole conversation. This "humanization" (referred to as "insurgent discourse" or "counterstories" by Santa Ana, 2002), represented an alternative framing and way to talk/think and act on the issue by highlighting the human characteristics of children through metonymy. Unfortunately, because these metonymies only constituted 16.3% of the discourse, this message (largely presented through the voices of local activists, the school superintendent, and immigration advocates)

is not the one heard. Like one defiant flute in an orchestra of trumpets, its sound is overwhelmed by the dominant discourse.

Deixis and visual elements

Metonymy and metaphor were the dominant vehicles of dehumanization of newcomer children in the discourse, but other elements were also utilized. One such element is deixis. Deixis are words such as pronouns (i.e., *we*, *they*) and determiners (i.e., *this*, *these*) that position “actors and events on the discourse stage, relative to their speaker, their values, and other ‘situational coordinates’ *here* and *now*” (Hart, 2011, p. 185). In discourse, actors and events are positioned as distant or close to the speaker along spatial, temporal, and social dimensions (Chilton, 2004). This positioning allows the speaker to “establish relations of distance and difference between in-groups and out-groups” (Hart, 2011, p. 185). In addition, it positions the discourse from different vantage points (i.e., in immigration discourse, deixis can allow the readers to view the event from the perspective of those already “in the container” [as in the WATER metaphor]). When deixis is used in tandem with general negative statements about the “Other,” it is known as “proximization,” a strategy where the speaker presents the events as directly affecting the readers in negative and threatening ways (Cap, 2008). Conversely, deixis can also be used to position the actors as within the same group as the speaker, which is a frequent strategy used to persuade readers/viewers to support the actors featured in the discourse. The following are some examples found in the texts that demonstrate how deixis is used both to “Other” migrant children and position them as undesirables and, alternatively, to humanize these children to garner support. The first example describes comments from protesters from conservative groups in Nebraska in regards to border control (in relation to the migrant children): “(Member of group that organized the rally pointing to opponents holding up a sign that says ‘No human is illegal’) ‘Excuse me,’ Heieck said, raising her voice. ‘What a great country **we** have. **Those people** wouldn’t be able to do that in Guatemala or El Salvador, would **they**? But **they** can do it **here** because of the freedoms that **we taxpayers** pay for” (Text 16, paragraph 6, August 2, 2014).

In this example, the speaker used the pronouns *we* and *they* as well as the determiners (which are in fact metonymies) *those people* to place opponents of the group’s political ideology and her own group in diametrically opposite positions of the discourse stage. The pronoun *we* is particularly noteworthy when coupled with the metonymy *taxpayers* as it draws attention to the defining property on which the speaker wants us to focus. “The *we* is always a significant pronoun in persuasive language as it is deliberately unclear as to whom it refers exactly,” and thus, it gains power through this imprecision and invites hearers to ally themselves with the speaker (Charteris-Black, 2014, p. 61) based on the shared characteristic of being *taxpayers*. The next two excerpts describe responses by Nebraska government officials to the crisis.

In Text 2, Senator Mike Johanns is quoted as saying, “**They** should be returned to where **they** came from. And **we** should send a very strong message to parents in Central America: **Your kids** cannot stay **here** in the United States” (paragraph 4, July 10, 2014).

In Text 3, Nebraska Governor Dave Heineman, is quoted: “**We** will treat **them** humanely while they are here,’ the governor said during an interview on KFAB radio. ‘But **we** want to keep track of **them**,’ [. . .] because **they entered the country illegally**. ‘I can’t believe the federal government is secretly transporting them to Nebraska,’ he said. [. . .] ‘**Our taxpayer dollars** could end up potentially paying for **their education and other benefits**’ (July 12, 2014).

One can again see the division of *we* versus *they/them* and the attempt to build solidarity based on the common quality of being *taxpayers* (as well as the pernicious exclusion of those not encompassed as taxpayers). Several other strategies of Othering and dehumanization are also occurring in these comments, such as the reference to the legal status of the children (*illegally*) and the accusations toward the government (and thus giving opponents of the Obama Administration a reason to align with his argument). In addition, the comment ignores the reason for the relocation to Nebraska (i.e., to be with extended families), which besides

being more humane, is cheaper. Furthermore, the comment perpetuates the inaccurate myth that “immigrants don’t pay taxes.” Finally, the topic of burden is addressed through use of “*Our taxpayer dollars*” for “*their education and other benefits*,” although Nebraska and federal law both mandate that child migrants have a right to this education.

The second example (Text 3) also continues the *we* versus *they* pattern as it requests the return of the children to where they came from, as if they were a wrongly delivered package that can be stamped “return to sender” and not humans escaping violence and danger. Not only does this statement simplify or deny very complicated situations, it deletes/omits any consequences for the children who would be returned (such as death, rape, further suffering). Finally, it presupposes that the parents of these children are alive, are in Central America, and were negligent rather than desperate in allowing/encouraging their children to leave home.

The next excerpts from Text 15 and 8 (mentioned earlier) show responses from activists and other government officials in opposition to the previous examples.

In Text 15, a community columnist response to Governor Heineman is quoted as saying, “**We** should help because it’s the right thing to do, and as a moral and just society it is **our obligation** to do so [. . .]. **This situation** goes beyond the political debate over immigration. It amounts to a humanitarian crisis. Why does this matter to **us here in Lincoln** and in Nebraska? Look around. **We** are a country founded and settled by immigrants [. . .]” (paragraph 3, July 16, 2014).

In Text 8, Omaha activist Ben Salazar is quoted as saying, “**Our** concern, at least the concern **in most Latino communities**, is that **we’re** concerned about the welfare of **these people** . . . That ought to be the number one concern of the residents of Nebraska, not these hate-filled xenophobic messages that are being uttered by the governor and others’ (paragraph 19, July 18, 2014).

In contrast to the prior three examples, the excerpts from Texts 15 and 8 show how deixis can be used as “insurgent discourse” to unify readers in support of the migrant children. In Text 15, the community columnist makes a plea for the moral obligation (“*our obligation*”) and aligns himself with fellow Nebraskans and Lincolniters as a *country* founded and settled by immigrants. In Text 8, the activist aligns himself with *most Latino communities* and refers to the migrant children as *these people* matching the “*we’re concerned about the welfare*” with “*residents of Nebraska*” and then opposing it with “*hate-filled xenophobic messages that are being uttered by the governor and others.*”

What we can see here by looking at the discourse in one community is the way in which groups on ideologically opposed sides both use deixis to persuade others to agree with their point of view. It is important to recognize the *Lincoln Journal Star*’s efforts to give voice to two sides of the issue as the paper published both government responses to the crisis and community opposition to the politicians’ calls to *return* the children. However, these efforts were neither qualitatively nor quantitatively equivalent, with the powerful and official governor, senators, and some activists on one side and community activists on the other. The overwhelming “Othering” of these children has dire implications for schools that must nonetheless prepare to welcome them as it makes it harder to rationalize spending on these children. And this Othering further perpetuates the circle of silence (Jefferies, 2014) these already vulnerable children frequently experience in school settings.

A final pattern worth examining in some detail is the use of visual elements and how they work together and interact with the verbal texts. Figures 1, 2, and 3 show various ways in which people in official positions were represented in the *Lincoln Journal Star* as they are featured in articles about their response to the crisis.

In Figure 1 and Figure 2, Governor Dave Heineman and Senator Deb Fischer are shown in close-up shots, which symbolically convey intimacy with the subject (Catalano, 2012, p. 164). In addition, there is a slightly upward camera angle, which evokes reverence, power, and control (of the subject) and admiration (Machin, 2007). In the case of Governor Dave Heineman, his facial expression with a slightly gaping mouth illustrates the article’s message, which is about his surprised and “outraged” reaction to the federal government’s response to the migrant children. The presence of the U.S. flag is also symbolic and conveys the



Figure 1. Governor Dave Heineman. Copyright Lincoln Journal Star. From Text 3; caption: *Gov. Dave Heineman*



Figure 2. Senator Deb Fischer. Copyright Lincoln Journal Star. Text 4, caption: *U.S. Sen. Deb Fischer sat down for coffee 8 August 2013, at the Mill in the Haymarket*



Figure 3. Senator Ernie Chambers. Copyright Lincoln Journal Star. Text 8, caption: *Sen. Ernie Chambers was among the activists and state representatives who gathered at the Capitol Friday to speak about the undocumented children who are coming into the United States from Central America.*

message that his side is the patriotic one, even though the verbal text in the article does not necessarily depict him in a favorable light.⁶

In the case of Deb Fischer, the very positive image put forward reflects her subtler representation on the issue (as seen in Text 4, which was run on July 16, 2014, 4 days after the article featuring the governor). Here, although she does not directly engage with the viewer (as her eyes are looking off camera at the journalist), she is smiling, calm, and naturalized through the coffee shop setting in which the journalist has positioned her as an everyday person just happening to sit down and share a coffee with the journalist. Of course we know that the interview was planned and the setting was most likely carefully chosen, but the caption “U.S. Sen. Deb Fischer sat down for coffee August 8, 2013, at the Mill in the Haymarket” makes it appear more natural. In addition, the caption anchors the photo to a local coffee house to which many readers/viewers of this local paper can relate. Despite Fischer’s smile and the relaxed setting, her body language sends a subtle message of anxiety and perhaps frustration, through clasped hands with interwoven fingers, gestures often associated with stress (Fradet, 2012).

Figure 3 stands in opposition to the two largely positive images of Governor Heineman and Senator Fischer in which they are represented in more intimate revered relationships to the viewer (via close-ups and slightly upward camera angles). Here, State Senator Ernie Chambers, who for much of the past 40 years has been Nebraska’s only Non-White state senator, is shown in a slightly downward camera angle connoting symbolic power over the subject (van Leeuwen, 2008). In addition, Senator Chambers is shown in a long shot that distances him socially from the viewer. When accompanied with his open-body pose (conveying lack of conformity and obedience) and exasperated hand gesture, his overall representation in this image is not positive (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 75).

Furthermore, although Senator Chambers’s photo is in the article (Text 8) and he is mentioned as “among the activists and state representatives who gathered at the Capitol Friday to speak about the undocumented children, (photo caption)” he is not given a voice and there are no quotations from him in the article. Sadly, on political issue after political issue, Senator Chambers is often referenced as the shrill embodiment of the political opposition whom readers are often expected to view as an exotic as well as peripheral figure.⁷ Thus, although it appears as if the *Lincoln Journal Star’s* representation of both sides of the issue is fair (as the publication of articles includes speakers from both sides), the visual representations paint a different picture.

A final visual element worth mentioning is the inclusion of videos associated with the articles on the online Web site. One example is Text 1, in which viewers are invited to read the article first and then view the video to supplement the content in the article. Text 1 demonstrates an interesting *contrast* in which the article (which features several speakers who support the Central American students’ rights to attend school) is largely supportive of the students, but the video shows subtle dehumanization through images and accompanying text featuring, again, water metaphors.

What is striking about this video is the way in which the verbal text (the journalist narrator) complements the dehumanizing camera shots. One egregious example is when the journalist says “[. . .] the House Homeland Security Hearing Committee will probe the **flood** of Central American Children into the Southern U.S. that overwhelms border patrol holding facilities [. . .]. (video)” Here, the camera focuses on children who are following a border facility official. As the journalist is saying the words “**flood of Central American children**,” the children are seen parading in front of a wired fence one after the other in a long line with their heads cut from the view of the camera. Not only are the children dehumanized by the lack of any interaction with the viewer (no faces are shown), but their action of walking one after another is metonymic and supposed to be representative of the actions the journalist is describing. Thus, although the verbal text in Text 1 is much subtler in its representation of the children, the accompanying

6. See article headlines (e.g., “Heineman Demands to Know Where the Border Children Are,” Text 3).

7. A search of “Ernie Chambers” on the New York Times Web site reveals references to him as “irascible” (Saulny, 2008), and he is depicted photographically in his trademark jeans and plain T-shirt even as Nebraska’s other state senators always are shown in suits and other formal attire. In other words, to the extent he has a national reputation, it reflects the local characterization of him more as a gadfly than “one of us.”

video clearly denaturalizes and “Others” the children as it presents them as a dangerous threat (i.e., a flood) and burden.

Media coverage and school experiences of unaccompanied/separated Central American children

This section addresses the second research question: How does media discourse about the migrant children affect their school experiences? This part of the article is necessarily more theoretical and conjectural (the examined news stories do not follow children into school), but an important and disconcerting answer can be offered that references the literature on negative media portrayals of children. In the cases of these children, media discourse such as that found in this study can result in negative effects on students’ educational experiences because it shapes public opinion that in turn influences laws, policies, and the services students will be able to acquire, including how they are received in local schools once they are placed in families (Leudar et al., 2008). Case in point, despite the fact that under federal law, states and local educational agencies “All children in the United States are entitled to equal access to a public elementary and secondary education, regardless of their or their parents’ actual or perceived national origin, citizenship, or immigration status, (paragraph 4)” (May, 2014), public discourse in areas where these children are arriving does not often recognize this, and there is frequent debate as to whether they should be allowed access to educational resources⁸ (Bhabha, 2009; see also Childress, 2015, and Maxwell, 2014).

What often follows is what Jefferies refers to as the “circle of silence,” which is propagated by misinformation, fear, and ignorance of the subject and then is perpetuated both intentionally and unwittingly by parents, students, administrators, and teachers (Jefferies, 2014, p. 279). How this works is that anti-immigration rhetoric in the public sphere creates fear within school districts and officials that encourages them to play down the arrivals of these students and their needs to avoid public backlash and unwanted attention on the schools. This circle of silence becomes so overwhelming for these newcomer students that they “do not find space to question the natural order of things,” and they begin to internalize the inferiority of being in undocumented or uncertain legal status (Jefferies, 2014, p. 289). In addition, because of the public rhetoric and lack of countering factual information, students are often afraid to ask for help or call attention to their needs (Jefferies, 2014). Teachers in turn are often unable to understand the complex dynamics of oppression, and often, their misinformation (or lack of information) about immigration laws naturalizes⁹ the oppression of these youth and influences “the kind of belonging they sense in educational institutions and society” (Jefferies, 2014, p. 290). Furthermore, this lack of information further reproduces the silence surrounding the subject and further alienates students from schooling (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2015). It then impedes students from a sense of participation in school, inhibits their advocacy for themselves, and supports their acquiescence to remaining in remedial classes designed for English learners (as opposed to requesting higher track courses that will lead them to better academic opportunities in the future), as they therefore deny themselves opportunities for educational achievement “before they have a chance to be denied” (Callahan, 2005; Harklau, 1994; Kanno & Kangas, 2014, p. 867).

Students fleeing Central American countries where they have experienced trauma, as well as possible long periods of disruption in their schooling, need an array of social services, including access to social workers and counselors to provide emotional and social support, mental health support (such as group therapy), and English skills. Additionally, many need legal support as well as housing referrals (Maxwell, 2014). Yet

8. In addition, as these children register at local schools, many have found themselves blocked from schooling because of obstacles placed on them by local districts (e.g., lack of supposedly required documents). Entering midsemester, as many of them will need to do, is “traumatic” and “stigmatizes” these students further (Mueller, 2014).

9. Naturalization is a term adopted from the field of semiotics that indicates an attempt to accentuate the positive traits of “us” while ignoring the negative. Roland Barthes explains how naturalization functions (by use of myths) to keep the true message of the discourse concealed (1957, p. 61).

each of these needs are less likely to be responded to and are more fraught in a semiotic environment that emphasizes their unmeritorious Otherness, rather than an inclusive humanity, and often results in psychological problems (Leudar et al., 2008). Hence, the constellation of services that could help such vulnerable children is impeded when they are both dehumanized and imagined as “not us.”

Since the first writing of this article, media discourse has continued to both document and regenerate this issue, as the media often reports the arrival of these students in classrooms and the issues they face there currently. For example, in Louisiana, some 2,000 unaccompanied or separated children from Central America enrolled in local schools in 2014–2015, and educators noticed the emotional toll that waiting for legal proceedings (and possible deportation) could have on students (C. Sanchez, 2015). School district personnel in Fairfax County, VA, and Prince George’s County, MD, said that the legal process the child migrants face is a challenge, but a greater challenge has been helping recently reunited families adjust to being together again and supporting the minors after the trauma of significant violence they experienced back home and during their journeys to the United States (Andrade, 2014).

In most of the cases detailed in articles following up on the child migrants after they have entered U.S. schools, school officials have been quick to point out that the young people now enrolled in their schools come from very diverse educational backgrounds but that most had experienced at some point a disruption in their schooling. Thus, a successful reintroduction to education is an important feature of the resettlement process, and support for academic and vocational education should be a high social work priority. In addition, “assessment of the children’s educational histories, language skills, attainments and aspirations” should help practitioners to identify appropriate placements, and clear links to education services should be established to ensure the support that could be provided (Wade, Mitchell, & Baylis, 2005, p. 6). Finally, strategies that help to strengthen young people’s social networks and promote self-esteem, self-efficacy, and resilience may also help the progress of their educational careers (Wade et al., 2005, p. 6).

Despite reports of a decrease in unaccompanied or separated child migrants, it appears as if children from Central America will continue to seek refuge in the United States (Ramos, 2015). This expectation has led to proposals to introduce emergency funding to school districts that receive these students, and it is hoped that “cooler heads will prevail” for Washington, DC, to set policy and provide aid as these youngsters continue to come into the country (Ramos, 2015). However, if regional media discourses continue to dehumanize these children (and assuming that the discourse from Lincoln is not atypical), the likelihood that Washington, DC, will feel pressure to be more responsive seems modest.

Conclusion

This article has investigated one community’s public discourse about unaccompanied or separated Central American children from one online news source during the period of June through September of 2014. The findings reveal multiple ways in which these children were represented to the public through the use of metonymy, metaphor, deixis, and visual elements that frequently positioned them as a threat. The dominant strategy incorporating metonymies where the actions of the children are blended with the actions of **DANGEROUS WATER** was shown to be frequent and dehumanizing. Although there was ample evidence in the data of efforts by the local community to counter this negative and damaging discourse with more humane “insurgent discourse,” both quantitative and qualitative analysis of the metaphors reveals that it was not enough to overcome the disparaging narrative that results from viewing children as **WATER** (or **ANIMALS** and **CRIMINALS** as in the secondary metaphors). Moreover, a lack of awareness about the damaging effects of the language choices people make when discussing the Central American children has led to advocates, activists, academics, and journalists often echoing these **WATER** metaphors unconsciously themselves, unintentionally furthering the metaphorical conceptualizations that dehumanize these students.

Although this study cannot be generalized to represent all public discourse of the Central American children around the United States, a simple Google search reveals a pattern of articles on the topic that exhibit similar characteristics (i.e., use of **WATER** metaphors, “Othering” of students). Moreover, as previously noted,

Nebraska is pretty “middle of the pack” in terms of the underlying empirical information (i.e., the number of child migrants sent there pending a deportation hearing), so there is no obvious reason to understand it as atypical. It seems fair to say that many communities across the United States are facing or will be facing similar situations of dehumanizing public rhetoric as was found in this study. In answer to the research question addressing the effects of the media representation of the child migrants on schooling, analysis of dialogic media discourse in Nebraska support (Leudar et al., 2008) in showing how negative representations of migrants (which viewed them as “water” or “criminals”) influenced the way local inhabitants related to the migrants such as in Text 16 when local protesters responding to critique of the governor’s anti-immigration stance compared migrant children to a water main break and immigration policy as a spigot that needed to be turned off.

In the future, as long as the “push” factors of danger, desperation, and poverty continue to propel unaccompanied or separated children from their countries looking for a better and safer environment, communities like Lincoln need to be prepared for their arrival. One way to prepare is for school districts to provide mandatory training for all staff that provides them with basic information about these students and why they are coming to the United States, as well as “the basic norms and principles of international human rights and refugee law, including the fundamental principles of nondiscriminatory treatment, best interests of the child, family unity, due process of law, and non-detention or other restriction of liberty” (Goldberg, 2014, p. 55). Furthermore, educational institutions must recognize and counter the damage that negative public rhetoric has on teacher perceptions of students, which contributes to their marginalization and the “labeling and sorting of these students once they enter school” (Catalano, 2013, p. 266), thereby positioning minority youth of color as “undesirables” (Raible & Irizarry, 2010, pp. 1197–1198). Yet current media discourses and political leadership discourage it. To clarify, Nebraska’s need to accommodate 200 unaccompanied students increased the state’s educational load by less than 0.07%; Lincoln’s share, given that it hosts 35,000 of the state’s 305,000 students, would have been around 20. So ostensible worries about new costs for taxpayers were a canard, or, worse, they were demagoguery.

Due to the fact that media discourse is not only a source of the public sphere discourse about Central American newcomer children, but also a reflection of terminology used by leaders, like Nebraska’s governor, the task is to create a bigger and stronger counter-public sphere discourse that will also find echo in the media and change what terminology persists as the default in that setting. Once the educational community is aware of the damage that anti-immigration ideology and resulting rhetoric can have on the school experiences of these children (and the services they receive), they can begin to choose their own language more carefully, while taking care that they are not reproducing dominant anti-immigrant ideologies in their own speech and working toward a more inclusive atmosphere for all students.

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Appendix B: Table

Table 1. Metaphor and metonymy with target domain: IMMIGRANT CHILDREN.

Type	Source domain	Motivating Metonymies	Totals	Percentage (%)
Dominant	DANGEROUS WATER	e.g., surge, flow, poured in, spilled across, flood (ACTION OF WATER FOR ACTION OF CHILDREN)	22	25.6
Secondary	ANIMALS	Track/tracking children, caught (ACTION OF HUNTER FOR ACTION OF LAW ENFORCEMENT)	16	18.6
	CRIMINALS	Illegally, illegal immigrants, illegal individual (ATTRIBUTE FOR ENTITY)	14	16.3
	_____	Humanitarian crisis/issue, young human beings, no human is illegal, humanity (ATTRIBUTE FOR ENTITY)	14	16.3
Occasional	OBJECTS	Scattered all over, processed (ATTRIBUTE FOR ENTITY, SINGLE EVENT FOR COMPLEX SUBEVENTS)	8	9.3
	FOUNDLINGS	Foundlings, abandoned (ATTRIBUTE FOR ENTITY)	6	7.0
	DISEASE/BURDEN	Carrying infectious diseases, (ATTRIBUTE FOR ENTITY)	6	7.0
Total	_____	_____	86	100

* Metaphors with less than 2 tokens were not included in the table.