POLITICAL COLOUR OF METAPHOR WITH FOCUS ON BLACK
THE EXTREME RIGHT DISCOURSE OF VLAAMS BLOK/VLAAMS BELANG

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Abstract
"Black Sunday" still is after fifteen years how Belgian citizens speak about the 1991 Election Day when the Flemish extreme right party *Vlaams Blok* received its famous victory. As a consequence of its condemnation by court in 2004 for being racist the party chose a softer image and a new name. This paper examines the true nature of the transformation of *Vlaams Blok* into *Vlaams Belang*. The party implemented changes in a way similar to other European extreme right parties (Coffé, 2005; Erk, 2005). But do the changes testify of profound ideological differences between the *Vlaams Blok* and *Vlaams Belang* or are these just a cleansing of the top visible layer? The paper presents a comparative metaphor analysis and a thematic content analysis of five hundred 2002-2005 party press releases. The results show that *Vlaams Blok* and its "light" version *Vlaams Belang* confront us with the same "black" discourse.

Keywords: extreme right, discourse, Belgian politics, metaphor research
Introduction

The European extreme right has been the subject of intense research during the last decades. The rise and success of extreme right parties throughout Europe attracted attention from almost all social scientists. Concerned about the future of the European democracy, scholars searched for causes that could explain the success of the extreme right (Norris, 2005). They examined social, ethical and mere political implications of the -for most of them-unanticipated electoral shift towards the extreme right. They studied the role of media (Walgrave and De Swert, 2004) and the internal functioning of the extreme right parties themselves (Spruyt, 2000).

Scholars of right-wing extremism have found the discourse produced by groups and parties of the extreme right a powerful source of information (e.g., Bonnafous, 1998). Especially in Belgium, where extreme right parties are excluded from government positions, discourse is one of the few tangible “products” to derive conclusions. There is a scarcity of observable governmental political acts and the need to focus on discourse may be obvious. This observation does not implicate, however, that scholars should abandon their attempts to uncover the core of the extreme right. In all ideologies, discourse plays a crucial role. An examination of the discourse by the extreme right parties and groups, and by their political leaders may enable to clarify the most important aspects of the extreme right ideology and, most important, to discover its implications for politics and society. (Breuning and Ishiyama, 1998: 7)

The paper investigates how a specific (right-wing extremist) discourse is used by a specific (right-wing extremist) ideology. It details the relation between extreme right discourse and extreme right ideology. Some argue that there exist no real rhetorical or style differences
between political ideologies. Studying the relation between ideology and discourse one should concentrate on the mere content aspect of discourse (van Dijk, 2004). This opinion is charged by the results of empirical studies that found important ideological variation in language style between the extreme right parties and the others (e.g. De Landtsheer, 1998; Taran, 2000). Metaphors are important style elements. One study by the authors assesses metaphor power of the discourse by Belgian political parties as it is shown in Figure 1. The study concludes that the extreme right party *Vlaams Belang* uses a more powerful metaphor language than the other parties. The results refute the idea that ideological variation should only be sought at the manifest content level of discourse. The exceptional metaphor score of *Vlaams Belang* encourages to investigate the specific relation between ideology, style and content in extreme right political thinking.

Therefore, after putting the relation between ideology and discourse more clear, we try to capture the characteristics of the extreme right’s discourse content, discourse style and ideology. Though we focus on the Belgian extreme right party *Vlaams Blok/Vlaams Belang*, at least the reasoning behind our study should be generalizable. Can we indeed find traces of an extreme ideology in the content of the discourse and in its style? By way of a traditional thematic content analysis we focus on the manifest ideological meaning the extreme right produces. We complement this traditional analysis with a metaphor style analysis that focuses on the meaning producing function of the form or style of the discourse. Our analysis reflects our opinion that form and content are inseparable and both generate meaning through the style that is being used. The application of both methods allows to detail the role of emotive metaphorical language and to clarify the relation of stylistic aspects to the manifest content. We also pay some attention to other factors that, beside of ideology, might influence content and style (e.g. events in society, personal characteristics, etc.).
Discourse and ideology

What kind of interplay do we believe to exist between the two concepts of discourse and ideology? Crucial is the insight that discourse performs both a communicative and constitutive role in relation to ideology. Both concepts of discourse and ideology are at the same time dependent and independent variables. Firstly, by saying that discourse in ideology has a communicative function, we mean that it is through discourse that ideologies are explicitly expressed and acquired, learned, propagated or contested (van Dijk, 2004). Ideology has to be shared and ideas have to be in common. Discourse is needed to “spread the ideology around”. Secondly, by saying that ideologies or ideological beliefs are discursively constituted (Weltman and Billig, 2001; Graber, 1976) we argue that ideology needs discourse as it is reproduced by it. (van Dijk, 2004) In other words, political discourse is the language of ideology and thereby structures and shapes the internal functioning of ideologies. Rhetoric or political language that this way structures politics and guides political action resembles what Burke calls “motives” or “frames”. (Burke, 1969; Brock et al., 2005) Summarizing the above, discourse uses political language in a reality building process that affects the very reality within which it is being produced, while it affects itself (Montero, 2005).

If ideologists produce discourse in order to both shape and express their ideology, then an accurate examination of the discourse itself may provide us with useful information on the core values and characteristics of the ideology (Sutherland, 2005) In order to come to a full understanding of ideology, we have to study all the aspects of discourse. Put in the terms of classical rhetoric, we have to pay attention to both what is said and how it is said. The
presence of characteristics at both the content and the style level of the discourse testifies of “ideological work” (Sutherland, 2005: 198) or it provides us with some evidence that the particular discourse is strongly connected to a particular ideology. We find evidence of attempts to construct a “persuasive version of reality” in “the deployment of tropes, like metaphor and metonymy”, “the deployment of persuasive techniques other than straight logical argument” and “the unity between style and content”. (Cooper, cited in Sutherland, 2005: 198; Hastings, 1998: 209) This version of reality or the more or less polished believe system subsequently becomes the central ideological theme. It is plausible that ideologies make efforts to adjust style and content to each other in order to develop a coherent worldview that is able to compete with other worldviews. Only in specific cases, as we will show, it may be valuable to disconnect content and style.

**Extreme right discourse and extreme right ideology**

In order to be able to observe the relation between content, style and ideology in the specific case of *Vlaams Blok/Vlaams Belang*, we need to detail, on the one hand, what constitutes the core of the extreme right ideology, and, on the other hand, which discourse complements the ideology with what effects.

It proves difficult to define the ideology of the extreme right, probably because “extreme rightism” as such does not exist. “Extreme right” only denotes a position in the political spectrum, namely the extreme of the right side, which covers this way a cluster of ideologies that have some characteristics in common, though there also exist important differences between them. Fascism, neofascism, ideological racism, extreme nationalism, totalitarianism and even Nazism are all ideologies of the extreme right. Specific extreme right political parties often produce their own specific mixture of these ideologies, which renders them often
difficult to compare. (Heywood, 1998) However, fascism, as the ideology “par excellence” (Ignazi, 2003) seems to be the most general ideology in this list and we believe that it covers most of the characteristics of the ideology we want to examine. Yet, some argue that only a very limited number of European extreme right parties must be labeled fascist as the popularity of real fascism did not survive the end of WOII. (Heywood, 1998; Ignazi, 2003) We chose, however, to label them as fascist-type parties because the name fascism can still be useful. Of course, due to evident strategic reasons, most extreme right politicians decisively deny being a fascist. For example, quoting Filip Dewinter, one of the leaders of Vlaams Blok/Vlaams Belang in the Belgian journal Gazet Van Antwerpen (31.10.2005): “One million Flemish people would not be that crackbrained and foolish to elect an inveterate racist, fascist and anti-Semite Nazi, wouldn’t they?” However, the condemnation of Vlaams Blok by a Belgian court for formulating racist messages seems to support our choice to define Vlaams Blok as a fascist party, as racism is a crucial theme in fascism (see below).

Summarizing the above, what we have done so far is defining the ideology of the extreme right as a fascist or at least fascist-like ideology. This enables us to identify some characteristics which constitute the core of this ideology. Irrationality, nationalism and strong leadership are among the most important ones. Firstly, irrationalism and even anti-rationalism are crucial as fascism “addresses the soul, the emotions and the instincts” rather than the mind. (Heywood, 1998: 217) Fascism thinking drives on basic feelings or emotions, like anxiety, that determine the people’s thinking and acting. (Lasswell, in Ascher and Hirschfelder-Ascher, 2005). Irrationality also plays a role in the second fascist theme, namely nationalism. The latter is founded on the people’s emotional attachment to the nation. This way of thinking also provides the fundaments of racism as the negative emotions can be projected onto an out-group of foreigners. (Finlayson, 2003; Gaus, 2004; Lasswell, in Ascher and Hirschfelder-
Ascher, 2005) Thirdly, fascism stresses the importance of strong leadership. Only highly charismatic leaders can ensure that the best choices are made. (Lasswell, in Ascher and Hirschfelder-Ascher, 2005) This last fascist theme exposes a fundamental difference between fascism and other ideologies as in democracy the ultimate political power is in the hands of ordinary men and women. In fact, it seems fascism is at odds with almost all aspects of our political system as the three themes or principles discussed above are mostly contrary to the democratic political system. Even those who refuse to label most of the European extreme right parties as fascist parties, consider them to be anti-system parties. (Ignazi, 2003) The extreme right propagates radical change in society, or even a completely new society. This resembles the reactionaries’ desire for a fundamental change “backwards”, in the opposite direction of “progression”. Likewise, other political positions, like radicals, liberals and conservatives have their own ideas on whether or not the current political structure or system should be conserved and on what should be the drift for the policy. (Brock et al., 2005)

Our opinion on the relation between ideology and discourse is that the themes and principles of fascism should be reflected in the discourse at both the stylistic and the (thematic) content level.

At the manifest content level, the first evident indicator is the presence of important fascist themes in the discourse, for example racism or xenophobia, nationalism, etc. Secondly, as fundamental change is needed as the present political situation and system is defined as highly problematic, the fascist discourse should contain a lot of “anti-political” and mere negative content. This anti-political content is aimed at raising support for the upheaval of the current political system, whereas the mere negative content seeks to create a general feeling of discomfort, or as Lasswell argued, of insecurity and anxiety that urge important changes.
(Ascher and Hirschfelder-Ascher, 2005) This is illustrated, though rather on the action level than on the mere content level, by *Vlaams Belang*’s decision to distribute 90,000 cheap alarm devices for free in March and April 2006. It is clear the party aims at managing the anxiety in society in order to further the own agenda.

The style level, too, reflects the emphasis on change and strong emotional feelings. In order to attain their groundbreaking goals the ideology needs a militant and carefully orchestrated rhetoric. (Breuning and Ishiyama, 1998: 7) They should speak the “language of emotion” as those who do have “a better chance of connecting with the public than those who do not”. (Jerit, 2004: 566) As their ideas are fundamentally different from the thinking inside the political system, as shown before often opposed, the task to connect with the public proves to be a difficult but necessary one. Emotive language use is also needed as emotion itself is considered to be an important resource.

The management of anxiety seems to influence both the content and style level of discourse. Scholars have observed several stylistic choices of fascism or fascist-like extreme right ideologies: for example, they tend to repeat on and on certain important words, they often employ rhetorical questions to ease persuasion and they formulate their ideas with low integrative complexity. (De Sola Pool, 1956; Vandenbussche, 1995) These characteristics resemble Lasswell’s (1949) “ornamental, effect-contrasted, emotive, repetitious and accessory” crisis style. And indeed, for fascists, the present situation is defined as an unbearable crisis situation. As we will argue below, metaphors may appear the perfect tools for the extreme right to convey their emotion-loaded messages.
We conclude this section with a little remark. Although there are important ties between discourse and ideology, it is clear that discourse is not exclusively determined by purely ideological factors. Personality traits, trends in society and political events like elections, they all influence discourse. For example, earlier researcher showed that politicians use more and other metaphors as elections approach. (Vertessen and De Landtsheer, 2006) Therefore, in our empirical research, we examine the influence of other than ideological discourse determining factors.

**Metaphors as part of persuasive ideological discourse**

Metaphors, we argue, could be the perfect tools for the ideologies of the extreme right and for other extremists, wherever they are situated in the political spectrum. As one of the most important classical forms of speech, they are important style elements, what of course does not mean they have no or minor role in the producing of “content” or “meaning”. On the contrary, as we will argue below, metaphors consist of a “distorted perception of reality” that enables them to destruct the logic of the current situation. Inherently connected to their ability to frame is their power to evoke strong emotions that ease persuasion. This way, the extreme right makes use of almost the full “political” capacity of metaphor.

Before addressing how we can actually measure metaphor power we have to elaborate some more on the defining characteristics of metaphors, on the effects of metaphor use and on why exactly they are effective. As a starting point we refer to a very broad definition: a metaphor transfers a word or word group (denominated as the vehicle, the source, or the focus) into a context (denominated as the tenor, the target or the frame) that is not the word’s or word group’s natural or common context (Beer and De Landtsheer, 2004; Cacciari, 2001; Richards, 1936). This transference generates new meaning.
In the literature on metaphor we find two types of metaphor research that have their own views on which metaphors should be studied and which effects should be expected. (Steen, 2002) On the one hand, we distinguish the linguistic research that examines the effects of all metaphors that can be found in all kinds of every day language. (see e.g., Gibbs et al., 2002) Their focus is on the combined effect of using all kinds of different metaphors as they argue that every metaphor is worth examining. On the other hand, we distinguish the cognitive-linguistics paradigm and their cognitive metaphor theory. (see e.g., Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2000) Researchers working in this more and more popular domain concentrate mainly on conceptual metaphors that guide our thinking. They generally pick out a few metaphors and examine how they are being reproduced in various forms in language. This way, metaphors can act as important framing devices. In our view, combining both of them is the best choice as the “mere rhetorical” effects of metaphor use (cfr. type 1) are able to direct thinking and perception in a particular way and thereby frame reality (cfr. type 2). By using specific images and by disregarding others, politicians are able to simplify complex problems and stress certain aspects of reality while hiding others. (Beer and De Landtsheer, 2004; Hellsten, 2002) Research also showed that metaphors ease persuasion (Sopory and Dillard, 2002), that their use evokes emotion (Gibbs et al., 2002) and that “vivid image words” enhance the perceived greatness of the speaker. (Emrich et al., 2001)

This way, metaphors can direct attention towards ambitious leaders, they can direct general levels of emotionality in society and they can promote deviating opinions and world views. These characteristics enable us to conclude that, as said before, metaphors may be the perfect tools for the extreme right. The Nazi’s “Language of the Helping Professions” (Edelman, 1977) illustrates well the functioning of metaphors in an extreme right ideology. By defining
and describing all kind of supposed threats to the Nazi state as dangerous diseases and deadly plagues, the fascist national socialist ideology firstly directed attention towards the Nazi leaders, as they were framed as the doctors that could cure society. Secondly, this language use evoked anxiety as the diseases and plagues were treated as if they were life-threatening. Suggesting solutions on self defined problems that render people anxious by the way is still a technique commonly employed by propagandists or others who aim to persuade. Thirdly, using this strategy only becomes “useful” if radical change or the consolidation of a deviant system is “necessary”. The use of for example medical metaphors makes this escape possible. (De Landtsheer, 1987) This example makes clear how important metaphors can be in extreme right discourse. Using strong metaphors enables right-extremists to make close contact with their public and influence their opinions, ideas and views on society. Therefore, the metaphorical discourse of the extreme right could be labelled “impressive” (Windt and Ingold, 1987) and “militant” (Breuning and Ishiyama, 1998). Of course, metaphors’ framing and persuasive emotive functions aren’t only employed in extreme right discourse. Just like discourses on a more general level, other than ideological factors influence the metaphors that are being used. Earlier research proved the other extreme of the political spectrum also used more and powerful metaphors. (De Landtsheer, 1998; Taran, 2000; De Landtsheer and Vertessen, 2005) Data also show a significant drop in metaphor power in crisis times (De Landtsheer, 1994; De Landtsheer and De Vrij, 2004) and at election time (Vertessen and De Landtsheer, 2006).

To measure how metaphorical the ideologies’ political discourse is, we calculate “metaphor power indices”. These indices conceptualise a quantitative metaphor content analysis or a so-called "political-semantic" metaphor analysis (e.g. De Landtsheer, 1994; De Landtsheer and De Vrij, 2004). The metaphor power index (C) is calculated by multiplying the scores on
three variables, namely metaphor frequency (F), intensity (I) and content (D). Using more metaphors results in higher F-values, using more creative or novel metaphors results in higher I-values, and using images from less emotive and less escapist content categories (“popular”, “nature”, and political/intellectual” metaphors) yields lower C-scores, whereas the more emotive and more escapist content categories (“disaster”, “sports” and “medical” metaphors) result in higher C-scores. More detailed information on the calculating of the index can be found in the articles mentioned above.

The Belgian case: Vlaams Blok/Vlaams Belang

Before turning to our empirical study we outline very briefly the key characteristics of the extreme right party discussed in our case study, namely Vlaams Blok/Vlaams Belang. In its early years, Vlaams Blok concentrated on nationalist issues. Vlaams Blok was founded in 1979 as some militant nationalists decided to break with the dominant Flemish nationalist party at that time, Volksunie. They blamed Volksunie’s leaders for being too indulgent in government. (Breuning and Ishiyama, 1998; Ignazi, 2003; Coffe, 2005) In the early eighties Vlaams Blok broadened its focus and adopted the anti-immigration theme. Anti-Walloon ideas were complemented with more general anti-foreigners opinions. This “elaborated” focus was firmly established in 1992 as Vlaams Belang issued its “70 Proposals”, or a list of often radical and sometimes racist measures that should resolve “the immigration problem”. (Ignazi, 2003) All other parties in Belgian politics reacted with the “cordon sanitaire”, or the formal decision to refuse forming coalitions with Vlaams Blok. (Erk, 2005) However, throughout the nineties Vlaams Blok further manoeuvred away from the other parties. The party adopted a broad range of typical right extremist positions, for example against a lenient view of criminality, against “the establishment” or against “permissivism”. (Ignazi, 2003) Research (Walgrave and De Swert, 2004: 484-485) shows that the core issues of Vlaams Blok during the nineties
are “Flemish nationalism, immigration, anti-politics and crime”. Referring to our own research, these four issues could be considered to be the themes that constitute the content level of discourse. On the style level, research showed that the rhetorical strategy employed in the nineties was very militant. (Breuning and Ishiyama, 1998) One can find ample illustrations of this militant rhetoric in the Vlaams Blok discourse. For example, in mid-nineties the slogan “Grote Kuis” (“The Big Cleanup”) was used to convey both anti-establishment and anti-immigrant messages. The focus on these themes and the carefully orchestrated rhetorical strategy employed, seemed to be highly successful as, by the 1999 elections, Vlaams Belang managed to attract a solid 15.3% of the Flemish votes.

However, some scholars have argued that the discourse by Vlaams Blok is subject to change. Various scholars have reported all kinds of discursive shifts, at both the content and style level. For example, Breuning and Ishiyama (1998) observed a slight moderation in the content of Vlaams Blok’s discourse between 1991 and 1995. However, most scholars who state Vlaams Blok has “softened” its messages argue the major changes took place after 1999. As part of a vote maximizing strategy and in order to break the “cordon sanitaire”, Vlaams Blok aims at shifting slightly to the centre of the right. At the content level, the party changed some of its most radical ideas on immigration (e.g., the “70 Proposals” was dismissed) and it expanded the focus by including other than typical extreme right topics in the discourse. (Coffé, 2005; Erk, 2005) These changes were reinforced and accelerated by the conviction of Vlaams Blok for being a racist party in November 2004. The conviction was the final result of a lawsuit lasting more than four years. The court judged that Vlaams Blok had offended the anti-racism law in party publications. The judges cited numerous examples of what they identified as a racist scapegoating mechanism in Vlaams Blok’s discourse (e.g. “…water proof immigration stop...” and “…in a multicultural society, rape is the most intimate form
of integration... 2"). This kind of expressions constituted the basis for the party’s conviction for fuelling and inciting hatred against foreigners. (Coffê, 2005; Erk, 2005) As Vlaams Blok anticipated this conviction, the moderation of their discourse mentioned above should also be considered against the background of this ongoing lawsuit. The need for change accumulated into the creation of a new party “Vlaams Belang” (“Flemish Interest”) - or at least the renaming of the former Vlaams Blok – a few days after the conviction. As the verdict did not explicitly force Vlaams Blok to do so, the creation of a “new party” has to be seen as a deliberate attempt to make clear that Vlaams Belang is a different party than its radical predecessor of the nineties, Vlaams Blok. However, Vlaams Belang has to make sure not to lose its “original appeal”: it’s important that the traditional hardliners support the new Vlaams Belang as they proved to be the strongest and most reliable supporters within the party. Vlaams Belang faces the difficult task of attracting a broader ideological spectrum of voters, while retaining those who particularly liked Vlaams Blok for being a party that stood out of the traditional political system.

While there has been some research on the changes at the manifest content level, the role of style in the twofold strategy has received much less attention. However, an analysis of style can be useful as Vlaams Belang has to choose between two options at the style level if they are more or less forced to soften and moderate the discourse at the content level. On the one hand, Vlaams Belang could change its style, for example using less and more weak metaphors. This reinforces the ideological break with the past, but risks driving away the traditional radicals. On the other hand, Vlaams Belang could also persist in using a militant style and thereby reconnect with its radical extreme right origin. This may conflict with the softened or broadened content, but this strategy has a chance of preserving the traditional extreme right votes. As the Vlaams Belang leaders argue their final goal is to please the biggest amount of
voters, and as they argue the softening of their discourse is due to a voluntary strategical decision rather than forced by the law, we believe *Vlaams Belang* chooses the second option, complementing a softened content with a militant persuasive rhetorical style. The assumption we make is inspired by our finding that differences in television news reporting between Belgian public and commercial broadcasting are in style rather than content (De Landtsheer et al., 2005).

**Hypotheses**

Our theoretical fundaments enable us to formulate some hypotheses on the relation between the extreme right ideology of *Vlaams Blok /Vlaams Belang (VB)*, its manifest content and its form or style.

1. Political discourse reflects ideology. We can establish typical traces of extreme right thinking in the discourse VB produces. These traces can be found at both the content and style level of VB’s discourse. At the content level, VB addresses the specific extreme right issues and themes. At the style level, VB uses strong and powerful metaphors in order to raise negative emotions that prepare the people for a radical change.

2. The transition from *Vlaams Blok to Vlaams Belang* and the long-lasting attempt of some VB politicians to render their party more “acceptable” have had an extensive impact on the parties’ discourse. We expect to see moderation at the content level, and no effect at the style level as *Vlaams Belang* aims to please both old and new voters. Although we belief *Vlaams Belang* discusses more and other, less radical issues, we expect to see no significant changes in their use of metaphors.
3. Other than ideological factors too influence VB’s discourse and style in particular. We expect to see a trend in the metaphor power values (C) as society itself in which discourse is being produced, evolves. Secondly, we expect C-values to be higher at election time. Thirdly, we also expect personal characteristics to influence the metaphorical discourse. However, this last factor is connected to the mainly ideological factors as strong leadership and strong personalities are important for extreme right ideologies.

**Sampling and coding**

We decided to examine the discourse that can be found in the press releases from *Vlaams Blok* and *Vlaams Belang*. An extensive database of their press releases is available online on their websites.[^3] We selected press releases as they provide a rich source for ideological discourse in a standard format. Normally, these press releases are targeted at the journalists that control the gates of news selection. However, we believe the press releases also aim to persuade potential voters or, at least, to inform and motivate party supporters. As Belgian journalists often refuse to select *Vlaams Blok/Vlaams Belang’s* “news”[^4], the party uses every available opportunity to reach their publics, which includes issuing press releases.

Our sample consists of 500 press releases, from 12 February 2002 till 24 October 2005. As the total sample contains 162,743 words, each press release consists of, on average, 325.5 words. 401 press releases have been written by a single author, whereas 97 press releases mention more than one author[^5].

The coding was performed by 100 second year students.[^6] They calculated metaphor indices (C) for each press release and they also coded the subject or theme of the press releases. The
content coding was based on the titles of the sections that can be found in the *Vlaams Belang* manifesto. The manifesto consists of 12 sections and each section represents a different subject or theme. Coders had to find one suitable theme for each press release. If a press release did not fit at all, they had the choice to pick a thirteenth undefined category.\(^7\) We list the coding categories below. If coders did not agree, we computed mode frequencies to determine which category suits best.

[Table 1 about here]

**Results**

1. The first general question we want to address is whether we can actually find traces of the extreme right fascist ideology in the discourse of *Vlaams Blok/Vlaams Belang*. (VB) Table 2 shows us important information on the themes VB discusses in the press releases and on their metaphor indices. For now, we don’t distinguish between *Vlaams Blok*’s discourse and *Vlaams Belang*’s discourse, as we will deal with these changes later on.

[Table 2 about here]

Regarding the themes of VB’s discourse, we can confirm earlier findings. (Ignazi, 2003; Walgrave and De Swert, 2004; Erk, 2005) The typical fascist themes - namely nationalism (~ theme 1), anti-politics (~ theme 2), immigration problems (~ theme 5) and crime (~ theme 6) - are most prominent in the discourse. Somewhat surprising economic topics (~ theme 7) too get a lot of attention. “Democracy” (164 press releases) and “A Flemish state” (128 press releases) make up for more than half of all press releases examined, while the other fascist themes get significantly less attention, and the presence of other themes is almost negligible.
Most of the prominent themes feature a very negative content in order to promote urgent change. Two examples illustrate this. Firstly, in “Time to punish VLD” (theme 2, 8-1-2003), *Vlaams Blok* converts the neutral announcing of the election date into an anti-establishment message aimed at harming the liberal party VLD: *Vlaams Blok* sees the elections as a good opportunity to get rid of “the untrustworthy liberals”. Secondly, a typical example of negative nationalist discourse is entitled “Di Rupo, return to your village” (theme 1, 8-5-2003). In this press release *Vlaams Blok* blames Elio Di Rupo, a Walloon socialist party leader and mayor of a big Walloon city, for disturbing Flemish politics. Summarizing, the topics discussed in the press releases are typically fascist topics and they feature a very negative content.

However, our goal is to complement this kind of content analysis with a style analysis of the metaphors that VB uses. Therefore, in table 2 we can also find the Metaphor Power Indices per (C) theme and the mean C-value for all press releases (8.487). This mean value is by the way very high, even higher than the 7.265 we found in an earlier study (De Landtsheer and Vertessen, 2005). This strengthens our idea that press releases can be a valuable and rich source for ideological persuasive discourse. As the mean metaphor index is so high, this indicates that traces of the extreme right ideology can be found at the style level of the discourse that complements the content level. Therefore, we have to accept the first hypothesis. We elaborate on this by presenting real examples from the press releases and by focussing in more detail on the relation between the themes and style.

Right-extremists need strong, emotive and persuasive language in order to make their radical policy proposals seem acceptable and even necessary. This especially becomes clear if we focus on the 10 press releases with the highest metaphor indices. Three of them are recent *Vlaams Belang* press releases, whereas the seven others belong to *Vlaams Blok*. Their
“lowest” C-value is 23.87 and the overall highest value is 35.36. In all of these press releases, VB demands radical change and uses strong emotional language to reinforce their claims. For example, the day before the National Day of Flanders (10-7-2003) VB issues a press release that blames the new federal government for damaging Flanders’s future. They explicitly call for the overthrown of the Belgian state. They do so by employing strong and emotive metaphors. A short list of some eye catching metaphors: “VB calls for opening front”, “the Flemish demands get a first class funeral”, “a three-star deep-freeze for problems”, “the Flemish capitulation” and “the empty hands of Flemish negotiators”. Especially the death and war metaphors can be very effective. The use of “front”, “capitulation” and “funeral” increases overall anxiety levels and evens at the same time the path for important changes: as people dislike “funerals” and the “war front” they are more willing to follow those who say they can make an end to all problems. The same applies to more or less all metaphors in the top 10 and especially to the press release with the highest metaphor index (19-7-2004) entitled “The Flemish coalition agreement is a faint copy of the federal one. No sign of a change-over!” The ideological need for change is explicitly mentioned in this title, indicating once more its prominence in extreme right thinking. In the same press release, we read “party leader Leterme suffers from political schizophrenia”, “the opposition has been buried”, “CD&V taken hostage by the government” and “the trench war between CD&V and VLD is about to start”. These word groups are all but neutral descriptions of an observable truth: they arouse strong negative emotions and direct attention towards their own solutions.

Turning to the metaphor indices per theme, what immediately stands out are the high metaphor indices of the two most prominent fascist themes: VB produces the strongest metaphorical messages when it tries to “attack” Wallonia (theme 1: C=10.137) and the political system (theme 2: C=8.476). For example, anti-separatist reforms are “a slap in the
face” (theme 1, 30-4-2002), most pro-Flanders measures are only “a palliative” (theme 1, 26-9-2002) and the royal family “excommunicates” the party by criticizing it (theme 2, 22-7-2002). These examples illustrate how metaphors can render messages more emotive and persuasive. “Extermination” is without any doubt more moving than just stating that the royal family “does not agree with Vlaams Blok’s ideas”. The party uses metaphors to reframe political events in such a way that they become stronger and ask for more radical change. The economical theme (7; A wealthy Flanders) too has high metaphor indices. Economical issues are not only more prominent than expected, they also are much more persuasive and emotive. Probably this is due to the nature of the messages coded as “theme 7”: these press releases are often a specific type of theme 2 messages as they signal important shortcomings of the economical policy. Just like the theme 2 messages, they have a very negative content aimed at harming those who are responsible for the bad policy.

Metaphor indices of theme 6 (crime: C=7.257) and mainly theme 5 (immigration: C=6.724) are somewhat surprisingly below the mean level. An analysis of variance shows by the way a significant difference (p<0.01) between the metaphor indices of the first content category (nationalism) and the fifth category (the immigration problem). This is rather surprising as these themes really are at the core of present-day fascism. Before addressing possible causes, we argue that these values are still quite high. The fact that they are lower than the C-values of other content categories does not undermine the initial idea that VB’s use of metaphors reflects their ideology. We only signal that VB uses less or less powerful metaphors when talking about immigration or related issues than when discuss the desirability of a Flemish nation or when they report the failures of the political system. However, we see two possible explanations that could account for these lower C-values. Firstly, as described above, scholars have reported a softening or moderation of VB’s rhetoric as it developed from its small but
extremely radical nationalist roots to a broad platform party that seeks to appeal to as much voters as possible. This way, softening their ideas on foreigners and immigration goes hand in hand with softening their rhetoric on these themes.

A second explanation could be the fact that lowering the explicit vividness and decreasing the emotive power of discourse is part of a deliberate rhetorical strategy of VB. We could describe this strategy as the shift from persuasion to argument, or, from the appeal to *logos* and *pathos* to a stronger appeal to *logos* without *pathos*. A mainly logical appeal that denies emotion can be advantageous in two cases: if the facts are crystal clear and if it’s dangerous to mix facts with emotion. We believe the latter explains the lower C-values on the immigration-theme. VB chooses to put its messages on this theme in a more straightforward, transparent way to counter their opponents that accuse them from blowing the immigration problem out of proportion and that even launched legal proceedings against the party for this reason. Therefore, they try to stick (probably more than in the early nineties) to what they perceive as “the facts” that determine a situation. Of course, this kind of logic can be as false as the traditional persuasion that contains more elements of pathos. The press release entitled “More than 16% of those applying for a Belgian passport known by the Intelligence Agency” (6-9-2002) is a nice example of this strategy. This press release has an extreme low metaphor index (0.83) and comprises a set of neutral statistics from which the author logically derives the need for more restrictive immigration laws. We can observe the same dynamic in a specific type of 5 press releases that all have been coded as theme 2 “Democracy”. They have in common that they report on crimes committed against VB’s party members and party leaders (for example, vandalism against cars of party leaders: 13-3-2002, 2-3-2005 or threats of death: 18-12-2002). A t-test shows the mean C-value of these messages (C=1.761) is significantly lower (p<0.01) than the mean value of the other press releases (C=8.555). This is an
illustration of facts that are more or less crystal clear (at least according to the writer) and that should be able to speak for themselves.

2. The second question is whether VB’s desire to become a broad platform party and the lawsuit against *Vlaams Blok* have had an observable influence at both the content and style of discourse. In order to answer this question, we need some data on both the content and style level.

On the content level, figure 2 shows the frequency of the themes for both *Vlaams Blok* and *Vlaams Belang*. As the *Vlaams Belang* period is much shorter than the *Vlaams Blok* period, we calculated relative scores and we show the expected frequencies per 500 press releases. Three observations attract our attention. Firstly, anti-politics is the most important theme for *Vlaams Blok*, whereas *Vlaams Belang* talks most about nationalist issues. It seems difficult to find an explanation for this shift. It proves nationalism is still a very imported theme for *Vlaams Belang*. However, the decreasing anti-politics frequency scores could mark the very preliminary beginning of the softening of the parties’ discourse. Perhaps *Vlaams Belang* prefers taking part in the system, rather than trying to destruct the system itself. Secondly, *Vlaams Belang* seems to grant attention to more diverse topics. Themes 8 (Social politics), 9 (Culture, youth policy and sports) and 11 (The environment, area planning and mobility) hardly received any attention from *Vlaams Blok*, but are more important for *Vlaams Belang*. Thirdly, theme 5 (Immigration problems) becomes less prominent. It’s not sure whether this has anything to do with *Vlaams Blok* being convicted for racism, though the shift is remarkable. All these findings seem to suggest that *Vlaams Belang* indeed is less extreme than *Vlaams Blok* and that the party tries to convert itself in an acceptable coalition partner.
Now let’s turn to the style differences between *Vlaams Blok* and *Vlaams Belang*. Figure 3 shows the evolution of the metaphor index over time. We see some fluctuation, but we can not distinguish a specific turning point that marks the ending of an old style and the beginning of something completely different. This is conformed by a t-test: the mean metaphor index after the conviction (*C* *Vlaams Belang*=8.73) is slightly higher than the mean metaphor index before the conviction (*C* *Vlaams Blok*=8.35), but, these differences are not significant. Therefore, we can not state that the transition from *Vlaams Blok* to *Vlaams Belang* marked a shift in style. The style remains militant and at an equally high persuasive and emotional level. Nor did we find any significant shifts in style for each of the specific content categories or themes.

These observations make us accept hypothesis 2: in line with other research we established changes in the manifest content of VB’s discourse. However, these changes were not complemented with any style changes. The softened content is presented in a militant style familiar to traditional right-extremists. As the ideology constituting discourse contains both a specific content and a specific discourse, it then becomes probably a bit careless to conclude from content shifts alone that the ideology has changed. The style analysis can prevent us from formulating this kind of premature conclusions.

3. Finally, the third hypothesis states that there are non-ideological factors too that influence the discourse, and mainly the style aspect. The first expectation was to see a trend in the
metaphor scores as society evolves. Figure 3 does not seem to confirm this expectation. It proves difficult to distinguish a specific pattern in our results. Probably, a study lasting less than 4 years is too short to be able to discern such more general patterns.

We also expect from earlier research that metaphor indices increase at election time. Politicians then make an extra persuasive and thus metaphorical effort to win as much votes as possible. Two elections were held in our period of study, namely federal elections (18-5-2003) and EU and Flemish elections (13-6-2004). We checked whether metaphor indices were significantly higher during the months preceding the elections, but we could not establish any differences. Probably, this is due to the fact that press releases are a different genre and format than the television interviews that were examined in our previous mentioned study (Vertessen and De Landtsheer, 2006). This is supported by the fact that we found only a few explicit references in press releases towards upcoming elections.

Thirdly, we expected to observe the influence of personal characteristics on the metaphor use as some people seem to have gift to pick at all times the best words, whereas others lack that kind of creativity. From now on, we only take into account the press releases written by strictly one author, as we don’t know which of multiple authors contributed most to a press release. Table 3 presents the mean C-values of all the VB politicians that have written at least 6 press releases.

[Table 3 about here]

The table shows clearly that personal variation exists. For example, we found a significant difference (p<0.05) between the party’s chair Frank Vanhecke (C=9.245) and the less known
Stijn Hiers (C=4.453). However, part of these differences could again at least partially be due to ideological influences: as strong leadership is a crucial characteristic of the ideologies of the extreme right, party leaders, like Frank Vanhecke, will use more and stronger metaphors than the other people in the party. In order to test this, we computed mean scores of the top 3 politicians of VB (Frank Vanhecke, Filip Dewinter and Gerolf Annemans) and then we compared their mean score (C=9.2) with the mean C-value of the other politicians in the party (C=6.8). This simple t-test revealed that the differences between the two groups are significant (p<0.000).

Summarizing our findings on the third hypothesis, it’s obviously clear that other than ideological influences determine discourse too. We were able to observe the influence of personal characteristics, though we couldn’t establish societal patterns or an increased use of metaphors prior to elections. However, we believe examining other more suited media and formats will yield valuable results.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, our main focus was on the relation between the extreme right ideology and extreme right discourse. We focused on the Belgian *Vlaams Blok* and *Vlaams Belang* as they proved to be very successful. Furthermore, their recent conviction for being a racist party, the smooth name and party transition and the ongoing discussion about whether the party is fundamentally different from the other parties in the political spectrum added even more significance to this research. Uncovering some characteristics of VB’s discourse can help in deciding whether the recent moderation and softening of their discourse, reported on by various scholars, is mainly due to a radical shift of their ideological groundings towards the acceptable centre, or, whether this is part of an accurately planned rhetorical strategy, aimed
at achieving at least some of their originally stated goals. This is part of the more general question whether “the genuine spirit of fascism lives on” or whether “fascist parties progressively abandon their traditional values and beliefs”. (Heywood, 1998: 237)

We tried to contribute to the answering of these questions by examining the ideological foundations of the discourse VB produces and by splitting up, somewhat artificially, discourse in content and style. We argued that VB may manage content and style differently in order to reach different goals or to cope with different situations. In general, we established strong links between the traditional characteristics of extreme right ideologies and the content and style of their discourse. Both content and style seem to complement each other: the discourse features the typical content for extreme right ideologies as it focus on nationalism, anti-establishment feelings, and on immigration problems. Almost all content is aimed at achieving a radical change that destructs the current system in someway. A militant style with strong metaphors has to persuade the people of the necessity of the change by evoking strong negative emotions like anxiety. This way, both content and style reinforce each other.

However, when we compare the *Vlaams Blok*’s discourse with the *Vlaams Belang*’s discourse, we observe a difference: the complementarities of content and style are more prominent in *Vlaams Blok*’s discourse than in *Vlaams Belang*’s discourse. *Vlaams Belang* seems to have altered, softened or broadened its content, while preserving the “old” negative, anxiety increasing style. Although it is still not clear whether this is a strategy to maximize voting, preserving its fascist core, or whether what we see now is only the beginning of an even more extensive shift towards the political centre, our findings suggest that it’s too early to claim whether *Vlaams Belang* has really left its conflict loaded past behind.
"Eigen volk eerst, Vlaams Blok, Reeds 20 jaar de stem van het volk”, 1997
"Vrij Vlaanderen, Sterk Europa”, december 1997
www.vlaamsblok.be and www.vlaamsbelang.be
This practice is sometimes referred to as the “cordon mediatique”, or the idea that in order to fight against the racist VB, media and journalists should not give the party a free podium.
Two press releases were written anonymously.
Each coder had to code 25 press releases. Computing intercoder reliability is rather difficult as we have a lot of coders and as they had to decide themselves whether words or word groups are metaphorical or not. Preliminary data analysis show that there are individual biases, but that trends seem to persist. As there is no absolute rule on whether something is metaphorical or not, our results have to be interpreted as the mean of several valuable opinions. Only when the coding instructions have been misapplied, coding can be formally wrong. Ideally however, it would be a better option to instruct all coders to code everything or to have a single coder code all press releases.
However, this happened only once.
References


**Figure 1** Metaphor indices (C) of Belgian political parties in newspaper and magazine interviews (January-March 2005) (De Landtsheer and Vertessen, 2005).

**Figure 2** Frequency of content categories in Vlaams Blok’s and Vlaams Belang’s press releases per 500 press releases.
Figure 3  Metaphor indices (C), February 2002 – October 2005

Table 1  Content coding categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nr.</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>A Flemish state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Flemish nationalism, federalism, the Flemish independence, …)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Democracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(the Parliament, politics, the political system, political parties, media and democracy, the “cordon sanitaire”, the “cordon mediatique”, the Vlaams Blok lawsuit, …)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(child care, combining job and family, elderly people, …)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Respect for life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(abortion, bio-ethics, euthanasia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Immigration policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(immigration problems, abuse, illegal immigrants, …)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Security and justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Prevention, zero tolerance policy, juvenile delinquency, crime statistics, …)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>A wealthy Flanders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(money transfers between Flanders and Wallonia, an independent Flemish economical policy, globalisation, unions, strikes, …)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Social politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(a Flemish social policy, health care, social housing, poverty, …)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Culture, youth policy and sports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(local cultural life, sports, radio and television, the Dutch language, …)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(reforms, being a teacher, …)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>The environment, area planning and mobility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Kyoto, mobility problems, agriculture, industry, …)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Flanders in the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(international politics, the European Union, development aid, …)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2  Themes, theme frequency and metaphor index (C) in 500 Vlaams Blok/Vlaams Belang press releases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Metaphor Index (C)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. A Flemish state</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>10.137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Democracy</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>8.476</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Family</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6.722</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Respect for life</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.074</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Immigration policy</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>6.724</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Security and justice</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>7.257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. A wealthy Flanders</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>9.844</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Social politics</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.829</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Culture, youth policy and sports</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6.363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Education</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. The environm., plan. and mobi.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6.246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Flanders in the world</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>6.968</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.828</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total - Mean</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>8.487</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3  Mean C-values of different VB politicians

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Politician</th>
<th>Mean C-value</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frank Vanhecke</td>
<td>9.246</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filip Dewinter</td>
<td>8.821</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bart Debie</td>
<td>8.517</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joris Van Hauthem</td>
<td>7.759</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominiek Lootens</td>
<td>6.127</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francis Wouters</td>
<td>2.332</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gerolf Annemans</td>
<td>10.089</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stijn Hiers</td>
<td>4.453</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bart Laeremans</td>
<td>7.147</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philip Claeys</td>
<td>8.048</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimitri Hoegaerts</td>
<td>3.893</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>8.392</td>
<td>365</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1  Metaphor indices (C) of Belgian political parties in newspaper and magazine interviews (January-March 2005) (De Landtsheer and Vertessen, 2005).

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