"Always avoid metaphors": the civil service style guide and public perceptions of non-literal language.

In July 2013, the British Civil Service issued a new style guide for its online documents, *Government Digital Service Content Principles*. In itself, this is nothing remarkable: all forms of publishing require style guides to ensure consistency across authors, text types and topics. What is remarkable, however, is the peculiarly prescriptive tone of the document, particularly evident in Section 1.5, "Plain English - mandatory for all of GOV.UK". Here, readers are told to simplify their language, and to avoid "government ' buzzwords' and jargon" because "these words are too general and vague and can lead to misinterpretation or empty, meaningless text" (ibid.). Introduced with the statement "We can do without these words" (ibid.) is a list of 37 words, followed by a further list of phrases under the separate subheading "Always avoid metaphors".

The word-lists generated a flurry of interest in the press at the time of the document's release, and are of interest to linguists for a number of reasons, not all of which will be discussed here (but see Author, in prep.). The tone is prescriptive; contemporary uses of language, together with Latinate vocabulary, are disdained and discouraged in favour of ostensibly simpler language. And figurative language, whether explicitly identified as such or otherwise, is deemed to be the worst culprit of them all.

It is the flagging up of only some of the metaphorical vocabulary as "metaphors" which is of particular interest to metaphor scholars. Indeed only two of the 37 words on the general list are *not* metaphorical (if we class as metaphorical any meanings which differ from the "basic" one), and none are any less metaphorical than those in the metaphor list: compare "pizzas, post and services are *delivered* - not abstract concepts like 'improvements' or 'priorities'" in the general list, with "you can only *drive* vehicles; not schemes or people", ibid), The only distinguishing feature which separates the vocabulary in the two lists is that the general list is composed of one-word items (with one exception), while the metaphor list features multi-word items (again, with one exception). In other words, it seems as if phrasal vocabulary is more easily identifiable as metaphorical (by non-specialists) than apparently stand-alone lexical items. This study investigates this notion further, using a specially-collected corpus of all the civil servant policy documents published online in the year 2013

References

Author (in prep.) Corpus Analysis of Gobbledygook.

Government Digital Service Content Principles. Available: https://www.gov.uk/design-principles/style-guide (accessed 30 July 2013).