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Tropes in The Women's Refugee Commission: A Stylistic Study

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Abstract: From a stylistic perspective, this study linguistically explores the use of tropes in the advocacy discourse of the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC). Drawing on the framework of stylistics developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), the study examines selected policy briefs and advocacy statements published by the WRC in 2026. The analysis focuses on the use of metaphor, metonymy, simile, and synecdoche to reveal how language functions as a persuasive tool in representing refugee women's experiences. It hypothesizes that the strategic use of tropes encodes ideological meanings and constructs gendered representations that foreground structural inequality while legitimizing policy intervention. The findings reveal that metaphor and metonymy are the dominant tropes used to frame unpaid care, childcare, and economic exclusion as systemic issues rather than individual responsibilities, whereas simile is largely absent, reflecting the institutional and policy-oriented nature of the discourse. Thus, the study demonstrates that tropes play a crucial role in shaping feminist advocacy by balancing emotional appeal with credibility, challenging the invisibility of women's labor, and promoting gender equity. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of feminist stylistics as an effective analytical tool for examining how advocacy discourse is linguistically constructed and ideologically motivated.

Keywords: Stylistics, Tropes, Women, Simile. Metaphor.

INTRODUCTION

The Women's Refugee Commission (and henceforth WRC) is a leading international advocacy organization dedicated to improving the lives and rights of women, children, and youth affected by forced displacement. Operating at the intersection of humanitarian response, gender advocacy, and policy influence, the WRC produces a wide range of texts, including policy briefs, research reports, advocacy statements, and campaign materials. These texts are not neutral descriptions of reality; rather, they are strategically designed to shape public understanding, influence policymakers, and mobilize international action. Language, therefore, functions as a central instrument through which the WRC

articulates injustice, assigns responsibility, and proposes solutions.

From a stylistic perspective, advocacy discourse is particularly rich in figurative language, especially tropes. Tropes such as metaphor, metonymy, simile, and synecdoche are not merely decorative rhetorical devices; they play a crucial role in structuring meaning and framing social reality (Simpson, 2004). In humanitarian discourse, where complex political, economic, and social crises must be communicated to diverse audiences, tropes enable the condensation of multifaceted experiences into emotionally and cognitively accessible representations. This is especially significant when representing refugee women, whose experiences are shaped by intersecting forms of vulnerability related to

gender, displacement, poverty, and legal marginalization.

This study argues that tropes in WRC texts perform important ideological and persuasive functions. They construct refugee women simultaneously as victims of structural injustice and as resilient agents deserving protection and empowerment. Such representations are never neutral. As feminist scholars have noted, humanitarian narratives often risk reproducing stereotypical images of women as passive sufferers unless carefully managed through linguistic choices (Mills, 1995; Ticktin, 2011). The WRC's discourse therefore provides a productive site for examining how feminist advocacy negotiates the tension between exposing suffering and affirming agency.

The analytical focus on tropes is informed by developments in both stylistics and critical discourse analysis. Stylistics emphasizes close textual analysis and the relationship between linguistic form and meaning, while feminist stylistics extends this concern to issues of gender, power, and ideology (Mills, 2008). Tropes are particularly valuable analytical tools because they reveal how abstract social processes—such as exclusion, violence, or institutional neglect—are conceptualized through familiar images and associations. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue, figurative language reflects underlying conceptual metaphors that shape how people think, reason, and act.

Within WRC texts, tropes are used to frame displacement as a crisis that disproportionately affects women, to highlight systemic failures rather than individual shortcomings, and to evoke moral urgency. For example, describing refugee women as "invisible" draws attention to their exclusion from decision-making processes, while references to "frontlines" position them at the center of humanitarian emergencies. Such tropes guide the reader toward particular interpretations and responses, reinforcing the organization's advocacy goals.

Accordingly, the aim of this study is to conduct a stylistic analysis of tropes in selected WRC texts in order to answer the following questions:

1. What types of tropes are most frequently employed in WRC discourse?
2. How do these tropes function rhetorically and ideologically?
3. In what ways do they contribute to feminist representations of refugee women?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to research on feminist advocacy discourse, humanitarian communication, and stylistics, demonstrating how tropes operate as powerful tools for meaning-making and persuasion in contemporary gender-focused advocacy.

Theoretical Framework

Stylistics and Feminist Discourse

Stylistics is traditionally defined as the linguistic analysis of texts with the aim of explaining how particular effects and meanings are produced (Verdonk, 2002; Simpson, 2004). Rather than treating language as transparent,

stylistics foregrounds the idea that meaning is shaped by choices at various linguistic levels, including lexis, grammar, figurative language, and discourse structure. These choices are socially and ideologically motivated, especially in institutional and advocacy texts.

Feminist stylistics, developed most prominently by Sara Mills (1995, 2008), extends stylistic analysis by focusing explicitly on gender, power relations, and representation. Mills argues that texts must be examined in terms of how they construct subjects, allocate agency, and position readers. This approach is particularly relevant to humanitarian and advocacy discourse, where women are often represented through recurring narrative patterns that may either challenge or reinforce patriarchal ideologies.

In feminist stylistics, attention is paid not only to what is said about women but also to how women are linguistically framed. For instance, the use of passive constructions may obscure responsibility for violence, while certain metaphors may naturalize women's suffering. Feminist stylistic analysis therefore seeks to uncover the ideological implications of linguistic patterns and to assess whether texts empower or marginalize female subjects.

Within the context of refugee advocacy, feminist stylistics allows for a critical examination of how displaced women are portrayed. Refugee women are frequently constructed as doubly marginalized—both as refugees and as women, yet they are also increasingly positioned as key agents of change in humanitarian narratives. The WRC's discourse exemplifies this tension, making it an ideal case study for feminist stylistic inquiry.

Tropes as Rhetorical–Stylistic Devices

Tropes occupy a central position in both classical rhetoric and modern stylistics. Harris (2008) defines tropes as figurative shifts in meaning that enable speakers and writers to express complex ideas through indirect or imaginative language. Unlike schemes, which involve patterns of form, tropes involve transformations of meaning. Common tropes include metaphor, metonymy, simile, and synecdoche.

Contemporary linguistic theory emphasizes that tropes are not merely ornamental but cognitive and ideological in nature. Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory demonstrates that metaphors structure how individuals conceptualize abstract domains, such as politics, morality, and social relations. Similarly, metonymy and synecdoche shape perception by highlighting certain aspects of reality while backgrounding others (Barcelona, 2003).

In advocacy discourse, tropes perform several key functions. First, they simplify complex realities, making them accessible to diverse audiences. Second, they evoke emotional responses, thereby strengthening persuasive impact. Third, they frame social issues in moral terms, encouraging particular interpretations and actions (Charteris-Black, 2011). From a feminist perspective, tropes also play a role in constructing gendered

meanings, potentially reinforcing or resisting dominant ideologies.

In WRC texts, tropes function as strategic tools that align with the organization's feminist mission. By framing refugee women's experiences through carefully selected figurative language, the WRC seeks to draw attention to systemic injustice, legitimize policy interventions, and mobilize empathy without resorting to sensationalism. Analyzing these tropes stylistically reveals how advocacy discourse balances emotional appeal with institutional credibility

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study uses the stylistics framework developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) as its principal model for analysis. This framework conceptualizes tropes, particularly metaphor and metonymy, not as ornamental devices but as fundamental cognitive mechanisms through which social experience and ideology are structured. Lakoff and Johnson's approach offers a systematic way to examine how abstract concepts related to refugee women's experiences, such as care, vulnerability, exclusion, and protection, are linguistically framed and ideologically motivated in advocacy discourse.

This study adapts and extends Lakoff and Johnson's model to the context of feminist policy advocacy by incorporating insights from stylistics and feminist discourse analysis. While the primary focus remains on conceptual metaphor and metonymy, the analysis also accounts for simile and synecdoche as supporting tropes that contribute to meaning construction at the textual and discourse levels. The modified framework thus examines how figurative language operates across lexical, clausal, and discourse levels to encode gendered representations and foreground structural inequality.

By applying this adapted stylistic model, the analysis proceeds through the following steps: first, close reading of selected Women's Refugee Commission texts to identify salient figurative expressions; second, manual identification and classification of tropes into metaphor, metonymy, simile, and synecdoche; third, analysis of how these tropes structure conceptual understanding of refugee women's issues; and finally, interpretation of the ideological and persuasive functions of these tropes within feminist advocacy discourse.

3.1 Data Analysis

Extract 1

"Childcare is essential for economic growth, gender equity, and child development. The lack of a national childcare infrastructure is a significant barrier that exacerbates racial, gender, and economic inequality, perpetuating cycles of poverty."

This extract relies primarily on metaphor and metonymy to frame childcare as a structural rather than individual issue. The expression *"a significant barrier"* functions as a conceptual metaphor, mapping the abstract failure of childcare policy onto the concrete image of a physical obstruction, thereby presenting inequality as something that actively blocks social and economic progress.

Similarly, the phrase *"cycles of poverty"* metaphorically conceptualizes poverty as a self-reproducing, circular process, reinforcing the idea that inequality persists unless structurally interrupted. Metonymically, *"national childcare infrastructure"* stands not merely for facilities but for state responsibility, funding systems, and institutional commitment, shifting blame away from families—particularly mothers—and onto governance structures. Notably, the extract avoids the use of simile, a stylistic choice that maintains an authoritative, policy-oriented tone and enhances the text's credibility by privileging structural explanation over illustrative comparison.

Extract 2

"Research indicates that women, particularly mothers, disproportionately bear unpaid care responsibilities at home."

In this extract, the central stylistic strategy is metaphor supported by metonymy, used to foreground gendered inequality while preserving academic neutrality. The verb *"bear"* functions as an embodied metaphor of burden, conceptualizing unpaid care as a physical weight carried by women, which challenges the naturalization of caregiving as effortless or biologically determined. Metonymically, the phrase *"unpaid care responsibilities"* compresses a wide range of domestic, emotional, and reproductive labor into a single abstract category, allowing institutional discourse to acknowledge women's work without individualized narration. Additionally, *"home"* operates as a metonym for the private sphere, historically excluded from economic valuation and policy consideration. The absence of simile reinforces the extract's reliance on empirical authority, aligning it with evidence-based feminist advocacy rather than emotive storytelling.

Extract 3

"The average annual cost of center-based care per child was \$13,128 in 2024, rising roughly 29% higher than inflation since 2020. These costs represent about 10% of a married couple's median household income, and 35% for single-parent households."

This extract is dominated by metonymy and implicit metaphor, using numerical language as a persuasive stylistic strategy. The phrase *"rising ... higher than inflation"* employs an orientation metaphor, conceptualizing childcare costs as upward physical movement, which signals escalation and loss of control (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Metonymically, the percentages *"10%"* and *"35%"* stand in for lived economic strain, allowing statistical figures to represent everyday financial pressure. The contrast between household types functions rhetorically to highlight inequality without explicit evaluative language. Moreover, *"single-parent households"* operates as a gendered metonym, implicitly referring to single mothers, who constitute the majority of this group, thus revealing gender disparity indirectly. The absence of simile maintains a rational, policy-focused tone,

reinforcing the dominance of logos in this extract (Fairclough, 1995).

Extract 4

"U.S. unpaid care is valued at over \$1 trillion annually, primarily driven by women's labor. Childcare-related workforce disruptions, particularly among mothers, are dragging down economic growth and labor force participation."

This extract combines metaphor and metonymy to reposition unpaid care as a macroeconomic issue. The valuation of unpaid care at *"over \$1 trillion"* functions metonymically, translating social and emotional labor into monetary terms in order to make women's work legible within dominant economic frameworks (Folbre, 2001). The phrase *"dragging down economic growth"* constitutes a powerful force-dynamics metaphor, conceptualizing economic progress as upward movement and unpaid care burdens as a weight pulling it downward, thereby challenging narratives that marginalize caregiving as economically irrelevant. The reference to *"women's labor"* also operates metonymically, standing for a complex system of unpaid, undervalued work rather than individual effort. As in the previous extracts, the absence of simile reinforces the text's authoritative and policy-driven style, ensuring persuasive impact among institutional audiences (Mills, 2008).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The stylistic analysis of the selected Women's Refugee Commission texts reveals that metaphor and metonymy are the most frequently used tropes, while simile is largely absent. This finding suggests that WRC discourse favors implicit and structural figurative strategies over explicit comparison. Metaphors such as *"barrier," "cycles of poverty," "bear responsibilities,"* and *"dragging down economic growth"* are repeatedly used to conceptualize social and economic inequality as systemic, persistent, and burdensome. These metaphors frame childcare failure and unpaid care not as personal or private issues but as obstacles that hinder national progress and gender equity.

Metonymy also plays a central role in the discourse. Abstract terms such as *"national childcare infrastructure," "unpaid care," "women's labor,"* and statistical figures like percentages and monetary values function as metonymic representations of broader social realities. Through this strategy, complex lived experiences of women—particularly mothers—are translated into policy-relevant language that is accessible to institutional audiences. This aligns with feminist advocacy goals by shifting responsibility from individuals to structures and institutions, while maintaining an objective and authoritative tone.

The absence of simile across all extracts is stylistically significant. Similes often rely on explicit emotional comparison, which may reduce perceived objectivity. By avoiding simile, the WRC maintains a professional, evidence-based discourse that strengthens its ethos and

logos, particularly when addressing policymakers and economic stakeholders. Instead of emotional illustration, the texts rely on metaphors embedded within formal language, allowing them to evoke urgency without appearing sensational.

Thus, the results indicate that tropes in WRC discourse function ideologically to expose gendered inequality as structural rather than individual, legitimize policy intervention, and balance emotional appeal with institutional credibility.

From a feminist perspective, these tropes help construct women not merely as victims, but as central figures whose labor sustains economies and societies, even when it remains unpaid or undervalued.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the use of tropes in selected texts produced by the Women's Refugee Commission through the lens of stylistics and feminist discourse analysis. The findings demonstrate that figurative language, particularly metaphor and metonymy, plays a crucial role in shaping how women's experiences of displacement, care work, and economic exclusion are represented. Tropes are shown to function not as decorative elements, but as powerful meaning-making devices that frame inequality as systemic, enduring, and socially produced. It highlights the strategic absence of simile, which reflects the WRC's commitment to maintaining an authoritative and policy-oriented style. By relying metaphors and metonymy, the discourse successfully combines moral urgency with analytical seriousness. This allows the WRC to advocate for gender equity and social justice while remaining credible within policy and economic debates.

From a feminist perspective, the study shows that WRC discourse carefully negotiates the tension between portraying women as affected by injustice and recognizing their economic and social contributions. By making unpaid care visible through metaphor and economic valuation, the texts challenge traditional boundaries between the private and public spheres and call for structural change. Finally, this study confirms that tropes are central to feminist advocacy discourse and that stylistic analysis offers valuable insights into how language is used to influence perception, policy, and action. Future research may extend this analysis by comparing WRC discourse with that of other humanitarian organizations or by examining additional stylistic features such as transitivity, modality, and evaluative language.

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