

RIDING THE BULL AND THE BEAR: A METAPHOR ANALYSIS OF TESLA'S STOCK VOLATILITY IN BUSINESS MEDIA DISCOURSE

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Summary

The main aim of the study is to explore the use of conceptual metaphors in the business media discourse surrounding the volatility of the Tesla stock. The theoretical framework of Lakoff and Johnson's conceptual metaphor theory serves as the foundation of the study, helping us to identify a variety of metaphorical constructs that journalists use to describe Tesla's stock movements. The analysis uncovers a diverse set of metaphorical narratives - "roller coaster," "rocket," "tidal wave," "bubble," "wild beast," "mountain range," "seesaw," and others. These metaphors are grouped into different categories that contribute unique shades of meaning to the discourse on Tesla's stock volatility. The metaphors collectively paint a vivid picture of high-risk, high-reward investing that is intertwined with themes of excitement, unpredictability, and the need for strategic decision-making. The means of verbalization for various metaphors are also explored as they provide a rich linguistic inventory for each metaphorical construct. This metaphorical analysis reveals not only the diverse narrative strategies employed by the business media but also offers insights into how these metaphors shape public perception and investor sentiment towards Tesla's stock volatility. The implications of these findings extend beyond Tesla. The findings contribute to the general understanding of business media discourse and the influential role of metaphor in shaping the coverage of complex economic phenomena.

Key words: Lakoff and Johnson's metaphor theory, means of verbalization, public perception, the coverage of economic phenomena, investor sentiment.

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1. Introduction

The narrative surrounding Tesla's stock has become a subject of immense interest among investors, economic analysts, journalists and even the general public. As a pioneer in the electric vehicle industry and clean energy technologies, Tesla has consistently been at the forefront of market shifts and public attention. Its highly volatile stock behavior has spurred a myriad of news reports that are colored with metaphoric language aimed at capturing its dynamism and unpredictability. This explains the interest in the subject from the perspective of linguists.

Conceptual metaphor theory, as initially proposed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, forms the backbone of our theoretical framework. According to their landmark work, "Metaphors We Live By", metaphors are not just ornamental rhetorical devices, but rather, they form the basis of thought and communication (Lakoff, Johnson, 1980). They argue that our conceptual system is fundamentally metaphorical in nature, suggesting that the way people think, act, and communicate is significantly influenced by the metaphors people unconsciously adopt.

This study sits at the intersection of metaphor theory and business discourse analysis. Extant literature in business media discourse often highlights the prevalence of metaphors in

describing economic activities (*Henderson, 1982; McCloskey, 1995*). This is particularly true in the context of stock market volatility, where abstract and complex financial phenomena need to be communicated in a relatable and understandable manner. Metaphors, thus, act as a bridging mechanism, allowing lay audiences (i.e. ordinary readers) to grasp complex financial concepts by relating them to more tangible and familiar experiences.

The significance of metaphor analysis extends beyond mere identification and interpretation. According to various linguists, metaphors in discourse not only reflect existing societal values and beliefs but can also shape and influence public opinion and behavior (*Charteris-Black, 2004; Cameron, 2003; Musolff, 2004; Semino, 2016*). This is particularly relevant in the context of business media's coverage of Tesla's stock volatility. The metaphors employed by journalists not only mirror prevailing market sentiment but can also potentially sway investor decisions and market trends.

Therefore, a two-pronged approach is employed in this analysis. Initially, the dominant metaphors used in the discourse surrounding Tesla's stock volatility are identified based on the means of verbalization. Means of verbalization in conceptual metaphors refer to the specific language, words, phrases, idioms, and expressions used to convey or articulate the metaphorical concept. This includes specific verbs, nouns, adjectives, and other linguistic elements that help communicate the metaphorical comparison.

Following this, these metaphors are analyzed within their broader narrative context to comprehend the narratives they weave about Tesla's stock, and to infer their possible impact on shaping investor sentiment and behavior.

This study aims to add to the current body of research on business media discourse analysis, with a particular emphasis on the portrayal of stock market volatility. The goal is to enhance the understanding of the role metaphors play within this specific context of business media discourse. By analyzing the metaphors used to describe Tesla's stock volatility, the study aims to unveil the intricate relationship between metaphorical language, public perception, and financial decision-making.

2. Metaphor grouping

As we dive into the metaphorical language used to describe the volatility of Tesla's stock in business media discourse, it is crucial to first touch upon some foundational concepts in this business news environment. Namely, the terms "bullish" and "bearish" and their metaphorical significance, which provide a robust scaffolding for understanding the various metaphors applied to Tesla's stock dynamics.

At their core, bullishness and bearishness are metaphorical in nature. The terms originate from the behavior of the two animals they represent: a bull and a bear. A bull attacks by thrusting its horns upward, representing rising prices. Hence the term "bullish" for positive market sentiment. Conversely, a bear attacks by swiping its paws downward, symbolizing falling prices, which led to the term "bearish" for negative market sentiment. Another theory suggests that terms "bull" and "bear" markets possibly originated from 18th-century London exchange markets, where brokers known as "bears" sold assets they did not yet own (akin to short selling), with the term "bull" being introduced later as an opposite term for investment strategies.

Our analysis of business media discourse revealed a diverse range of metaphorical expressions that vividly illustrate Tesla's stock volatility and investor sentiment. These metaphors can be broadly grouped into four categories, each offering unique insights into the cognitive process of perceiving and interpreting the stock's performance. The metaphor categories

used here reflect key cognitive and emotional aspects of the experience of trading Tesla's stock. The metaphors were grouped based on their cognitive and emotional implications into four broad categories: short-term trading metaphors, uncertainty perception/risk assessment metaphors, long-term potential/endurance metaphors, and investor confidence/fragility metaphors.

- **Short-term trading metaphors:** Metaphors in this group reflect the high-octane, immediate, and reactionary nature of short-term trading, particularly relevant for a highly reactive stock like Tesla's. They might portray the Tesla stock as a rocket or a seesaw with constant ups and downs.

- **Uncertainty perception/risk assessment metaphors:** These metaphors encapsulate the inherent unpredictability and risk involved in trading Tesla's stock, which is known for its drastic swings. They might conceptualize trading Tesla's stock as dealing with a wild animal, gambling in a casino or navigating stormy weather, underlining the perception of the stock market as a venture full of uncertainty and high stakes.

- **Long-term potential/endurance metaphors:** Metaphors in this group highlight the strategic, long-term aspect of investing in Tesla, a company seen by many as having significant potential for future growth. They might represent investing in Tesla as limbing a mountain, emphasizing the idea of patience, nurturing, and long-term vision for eventual growth.

- **Investor confidence/fragility metaphors:** These metaphors illuminate the psychological aspects of investing in Tesla, particularly how investor confidence can fluctuate with Tesla's erratic stock performance. They might depict investing in Tesla as a bubble or a walk on thin ice, capturing the sense of precariousness often experienced by Tesla's investors.

Each metaphor group offers unique insights into different facets of the experience of trading Tesla's stock. By categorizing the metaphors, it is possible to understand how these metaphorical expressions interact and contribute to the overall narrative surrounding Tesla's stock in business media outlets.

2.1. Short-term trading metaphors

Short-term trading metaphors capture the sentiment of traders looking to exploit the stock's short-term volatility. Metaphors like "TESLA'S STOCK IS A ROLLER COASTER" illustrate the frequent shifts in the stock price, which create buy-and-sell opportunities for short-term traders.

This specific metaphor is often employed to depict the thrilling highs and sudden lows in Tesla's stock price. The metaphor emphasises the stock's unpredictability and the emotional ride for investors.

Means of verbalization: *verbs: climb, plunge, drop, rise, fall, accelerate, decelerate; nouns: ride, thrill, peak, trough, track, loop; adjectives: fast, slow, thrilling, terrifying, steep, sudden; idioms or phrases: on a roller coaster ride, full of ups and downs, a wild ride*

Tesla Stock Went on a Wild Ride This Year (Barron's, December 2019)

Elon said what? See some of Tesla stock's biggest ups and downs over the past 5 years (MarketWatch, June 2022)

By likening Tesla's stock to a *roller coaster*, the metaphor implicitly frames the experience of investing in Tesla as thrilling yet potentially unsettling. This metaphor might therefore evoke feelings of exhilaration (but also anxiety) among potential investors. For those with a high risk tolerance, the metaphor could stimulate interest, portraying investing in Tesla as a captivating adventure. The roller coaster metaphor might prompt a short-term trading mindset, rather than a long-term investment perspective. Roller coasters, after all, are about quick, adrenaline-filled rides rather than long, steady journeys.

The roller coaster metaphor effectively communicates the idea of volatility, but it might inadvertently reduce the intricate factors influencing Tesla's stock movements to mere 'thrills and spills.' The emotional emphasis inherent in this metaphor could also distort rational decision-making. Investors might be swayed more by the fear of sudden 'drops' or the greed of immediate 'climbs.'

The **TESLA'S STOCK IS A ROCKET** metaphor also underscores the potential for rapid, stratospheric growth in Tesla's stock price. It also conveys the risk associated with such sudden ascents, hinting at the danger of equally fast declines.

Means of verbalization: *verbs:* launch, soar, ascend, descend, propel, explode, crash; *nouns:* liftoff, orbit, space, launchpad, fuel; *adjectives:* sky-high, fiery, explosive, rapid, powerful; *idioms or phrases:* sky's the limit, blast off, rocketing up, crash and burn

Tesla stock soars as analysts say latest results may quiet the bears for now (Market Watch, January 2023)

As of early January, Tesla's liftoff has made founder and CEO Elon Musk the world's richest person, boasting a net worth of \$195 billion (Fortune, January 2021)

Tesla Stock Has a Sky-High Valuation. Here's the Math That Makes It Work (Barron's, October 2021)

When Tesla's stock is compared to a rocket, it conveys a sense of impressive, fast-paced growth. This could foster an optimistic view of the stock's potential, painting a picture of high returns and encouraging investors to join what appears to be an unstoppable ascent. However, this metaphor also carries an implicit risk: the potential for a crash. Rockets, while powerful, carry with them the danger of catastrophic failure if something goes wrong. One negative implication of the *rocket* metaphor could be the potential for the creation of a speculative mania. If too many investors buy into the stock solely because of the *rocket* narrative without understanding the company's fundamentals, this could inflate the stock price beyond its intrinsic value.

The *seesaw* metaphor portrays the alternating up-and-down movement of Tesla's stock price. It emphasizes the constant state of balance and imbalance in the stock's valuation.

Means of verbalization: *verbs:* tilt, sway, balance, teeter, wobble, flip; *nouns:* balance, pivot, fulcrum, upswing, downswing; *adjectives:* unstable, balanced, unbalanced, tipping, swaying; *idioms or phrases:* seesaw battle, in a state of flux, back and forth.

Tesla stock teeters near under-\$150 mark as Elon Musk promises 'benefit' from Twitter ownership (Market Watch, December 2022)

Tesla Stock Wobbles After Musk Comments (Investors.com, December 2022)

The seesaw, a common playground fixture, signifies a simple, repetitive pattern of up and down movements. By equating Tesla's stock with a seesaw, the metaphor paints the stock's volatility as a predictable pattern of rises and falls, emphasizing the cyclical nature of its movements. This could instill in potential investors a sense that the stock's movements, while volatile, are recurrent and hence, somewhat predictable.

At the same time, a seesaw is a game usually played by two opposing sides, possibly implying that the stock's movements are largely driven by competing forces in the market. This can be interpreted as the continual tussle between bullish and bearish investors.

2.2. Uncertainty perception/risk assessment metaphors

Uncertainty perception/risk assessment metaphors encapsulate the ambiguity and unpredictability inherent in stock market participation. For example, the "TESLA'S STOCK IS A WILD BEAST" metaphor utilizes various means of verbalization to express the nature of the stock's performance. Here are some examples:

Means of verbalization: verbs: roar, pounce, rampage, hibernate; nouns: beast, prey; adjectives: wild, fierce, untamed.

Tesla Inc (TSLA) Stock Roars Higher on Revenue Beat (Yahoo News, August 2018)

One could even say, in an homage to Oakland Raiders running back Marshawn Lynch, who plays not far from Tesla's Palo Alto headquarters, that the stock has gone "beast mode". (CNN Business, September 2018)

The "wild beast" metaphor emphasizes the element of raw, untamed power and unpredictability. While a rollercoaster also represents unpredictability, it is fundamentally a human-made, controlled thrill ride with safety mechanisms. A wild beast, on the other hand, represents a force of nature, uncontrolled and potentially dangerous.

Such metaphors emphasize the perception of the stock's volatility as a source of potential risk. They illustrate the dangers that could be lurking in a volatile market, such as "TESLA'S STOCK IS A TIDAL WAVE", which suggests the unpredictability and potential for sudden significant losses. highlights the potential risks associated with the stock's powerful and sudden price movements, much like the potential destruction a tidal wave can bring.

This metaphor highlights the immense force and potential impact of changes in Tesla's stock price. It implies both the potential for growth and the risks of sharp declines.

Means of verbalization: verbs: surge, crash, recede, swell, crest, flood; nouns: tide, ocean, sea, surf, current, undertow; adjectives: powerful, tidal, surging, receding, crashing; idioms or phrases: caught in the undertow, riding the wave, make waves, undercurrent of change

Tidal waves, or tsunamis, are massive sea waves caused by underwater disturbances. They represent powerful, irresistible forces of nature that are often associated with overwhelming impact and profound change. However, tidal waves also carry connotations of unpredictability and destructive potential. While they can be awe-inspiring, they are often feared for their capacity to cause devastation.

'Ride the wave' in Tesla as stock climbs on \$780 price target from Goldman Sachs, trader says (CNBC, December 2020)

Tesla 'green tidal wave' to send stock to \$1000 (Fox Business, April 2021)

In the context of risk assessment, the metaphor underscores the need for caution due to the stock's volatility and the potential for drastic changes in price. This can serve as a reminder for investors to consider the potential risks involved and prepare for multiple possible outcomes.

Other examples of metaphors from that category might include TESLA'S STOCK IS A WILD CARD, TESLA'S STOCK IS A ROLL OF THE DICE, and TESLA'S STOCK IS A CRYSTAL BALL. These metaphors depict Tesla's stock as an entity full of chance and ambiguity, echoing the volatile nature of its market performance. In the case of a *wild card*, unpredictability is paramount, just like Tesla's stock value, which can sway in any direction, disrupting market expectations. The *roll of the dice* metaphor further underscores the element of chance, emphasizing that investing in Tesla's stock can be like a gamble, where outcomes are unsure, and massive gains or losses can occur unexpectedly. Lastly, the *crystal ball* metaphor underlines the speculative nature of forecasting Tesla's stock performance. Much like looking into a crystal ball for uncertain future predictions, assessing Tesla's stock involves making speculative guesses based on available but often complex and changing data. Collectively, these metaphors paint a picture of Tesla's stock as an inherently risky venture that requires careful risk-assessment and is subject to change and fluctuation in ways that can be challenging to predict with certainty.

2.3. Long-term potential/ endurance metaphors

This group of metaphors represents the perspective of investors who are committed for the long haul, regardless of interim price fluctuations. An example is "TESLA'S STOCK IS A MOUNTAIN CLIMB", symbolizing the endurance and patience required for long-term investing amid high volatility.

The metaphor "TESLA'S STOCK IS A SERIES OF CLIMBING EXPEDITIONS" conveys a unique perspective on the stock's volatility and behavior. A mountain range provides a powerful visual representation of the stock's performance, illustrating the peaks (highs) and valleys (lows) in its price over time. A mountain range metaphor also conveys a sense of permanence and a long-term perspective. Mountains have been around for millions of years and will continue to exist long into the future. Similarly, this metaphor might encourage investors to adopt a long-term perspective when investing in Tesla's stock, focusing less on short-term volatility and more on the company's long-term prospects. Just like climbing a mountain, the journey of investing in Tesla's stock is marked by both progress (growth) and setbacks (price drops). This metaphor might influence investors to expect and accept these fluctuations as a natural part of their investment journey.

Means of verbalization: *verbs: ascend, climb, descend, reach, soar, tumble, plateau; nouns: peak, valley, summit, base, elevation, slope; idioms or phrases: reach the summit, a steep climb, scaling new heights, hitting rock bottom.*

'Greater fool' theory powers Tesla shares' ascent (The Nikkei, July 2020)

Tesla Stock Climbs After Musk Hints at New Models (The Wall Street Journal, May 2023)

While the prospect of reaching the mountain's summit (or a high stock price) can be exciting, the act of climbing (or investing in a rising stock) is fraught with risk. The use of 'ascent' subtly introduces this element of risk and uncertainty in the stock's performance, potentially influencing investor sentiment. If a stock is ascending like a climber up a mountain, then investors might infer there's a summit or peak, i.e., a point where the stock might stop climbing and potentially begin to descend. This could shape expectations about the stock's future performance and potentially foster speculation about when the stock will reach its peak and what will happen thereafter.

There are also other examples of metaphors that focus on the long-term trading strategy such as TESLA'S STOCK IS A MARATHON and TESLA'S STOCK IS A JOURNEY.

2.4. Investor confidence/fragility metaphors

These metaphors capture the level of investor confidence or scepticism in the stock's potential and performance.

In business media discourse, a "bubble" refers to a situation where the price of an asset inflates rapidly, exceeding its true value, only to burst eventually, causing a significant price drop. When Tesla's stock is portrayed as a bubble, it suggests an inflated value, potentially based more on speculative trading and investor hype rather than on the company's fundamental financial performance.

Means of verbalization: *verbs: inflate, burst, expand, pop, grow; nouns: bubble, burst, inflation, pop, surface tension; adjectives: inflated, fragile; idioms or phrases: on the verge of bursting, growing a bubble, bubble has popped, inflated beyond its worth.*

This metaphor can trigger caution among potential investors, who might worry about the risk of being caught in the burst of the bubble. It could dissuade them from investing due to the perceived high risk of significant financial loss.

*Tesla Stock: The Asset **Bubble Is Bursting*** (Seeking Alpha, January 2023)

This metaphor conveys the idea that the stock's price is inflated beyond its intrinsic value, similar to a bubble, and is now bursting. The use of "bursting" suggests that a significant drop in Tesla's stock price is either occurring or imminent. Bubbles, by their nature, don't deflate slowly. When they burst, the downfall is abrupt and significant. Therefore, this metaphor indicates a rapid and severe correction of Tesla's stock price.

The "bubble" metaphor can also impact market behavior by increasing the scrutiny on Tesla's financial health and market performance. Investors, financial analysts, and regulators might demand greater transparency and more rigorous financial reporting from the company, seeking assurance that the company's stock value is justified.

The "bubble" metaphor could potentially tarnish Tesla's reputation over the long term. The implication that the company's stock value is inflated and not backed by solid financial performance could harm public trust in the company and its management.

Lastly, this metaphor simplifies a complex market scenario into a single, linear narrative: rapid inflation followed by an inevitable crash. This oversimplification might overshadow the multifaceted factors that influence Tesla's stock value.

The bursting of a bubble often signals a shift in market sentiment. What was once overly optimistic or even euphoric investor sentiment might now be turning more pessimistic or cautious.

The TESLA STOCK IS A HOUSE OF CARDS could also be used to depict the fragility of the Tesla stock. In this metaphor, Tesla's stock is described as a "house of cards", suggesting it's built on a weak foundation or it's vulnerable to sudden collapse. This metaphor might be used to convey a negative investor sentiment, implying that the stock's high value is unsustainable, potentially overvalued, and could significantly drop with even a small shift in market dynamics. It characterizes the stock as fraught with risk, mirroring the precariousness of a literal house of cards, which can easily fall with the slightest disturbance.

The TESLA STOCK IS THIN ICE metaphor in the headline below compares the risky behavior of investing in Tesla to the dangerous act of skating on ice that is too thin to hold one's weight, suggesting a potential sudden collapse or crash.

*Tesla Investors Are **Skating On Thin Ice*** (Seeking Alpha, October 2022)

The TESLA STOCK IS A TIGHTROPE metaphor likens the uncertainty and potential volatility of Tesla's stock to the perilous act of walking a tightrope. Just as a tightrope walker must carefully balance every step to avoid a fatal fall, the metaphor implies that those investing in or managing Tesla's stock must tread with utmost care, as any misstep could lead to substantial financial losses.

Means of verbalization: **verbs:** *balance, wobble, fall;* **nouns:** *tightrope, walker, fall;* **adjectives:** *precarious, unstable;* **idioms or phrases:** *walking a tightrope, a fall waiting to happen, teetering on the edge.*

*Deal-Hungry Investment Bankers **Walk Tesla Tightrope*** (Business Insider, August 2018)

The metaphor creates an imagery of the precarious situation investment bankers find themselves in with respect to dealing with Tesla. The metaphor conflates the high-risk environment of deal-making with Tesla to the dangerous act of walking a tightrope. In this metaphor, the 'tightrope' represents the thin line between success (making a beneficial deal with Tesla) and failure (making a poor deal or no deal at all), emphasizing the fragility of the investment bankers' situation.

3. Conclusions

This study has revealed how metaphors powerfully shape people's understanding of financial volatility in the case of Tesla's stock. The analysis shows that these metaphors, together, weave a dynamic and multifaceted narrative that both reflects and shapes the public perception and investor behavior surrounding Tesla.

Through the metaphors of the 'roller coaster,' 'wild beast,' 'seesaw,' and 'tidal wave,' the stock is portrayed as erratic and unpredictable, signaling a risky investment. Yet, it's this very volatility that the 'rocket' metaphor capitalizes on, communicating the potential for extraordinary returns for those with a high-risk tolerance. The 'bubble' metaphor provides a cautionary tale, reminding investors of the perils of a hype-driven market and overvaluation. Lastly, the 'mountain range' metaphor invites a broader, long-term view, suggesting that fluctuations are part of the investment journey, with peaks following valleys and vice versa.

These metaphors not only reflect but also construct the narrative of Tesla's stock. They play a vital role in shaping investor sentiment, informing investment decisions, and potentially influencing market dynamics. The metaphors also color the public's perception of Tesla as a company, associating it with a mix of risk, innovation, unpredictability, and aggressive growth.

In conclusion, our metaphoric analysis underscores the powerful role of language in shaping perceptions and behaviors in the financial market. The study demonstrates that metaphorical narratives in business discourse are not merely descriptive but also prescriptive, framing our understanding of financial volatility and guiding our responses to it. As such, these findings underscore the need for a nuanced understanding of metaphorical language in business media discourse, given its potential impact on investor behavior and market dynamics.

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