Valence distribution and valence alignment in the metaphor *być na świeczniku* in the Polish language

Tomasz Dyrmo
Adam Mickiewicz University

This study investigates the valence distribution and alignment of the Polish metaphor *być na świeczniku* (literally 'to be on a candlestick'), which represents public visibility and attention. While conventionally considered positive, corpus analysis of the Polish Web Corpus 2019 reveals that the meaning of the metaphor is more nuanced. The study shows that neutral valence is the most frequent, followed by negative and positive valence. Negative valence often highlights scrutiny, criticism, and forced exposure, whereas positive valence emphasizes prestige and recognition. The study introduces the concept of valence alignment, referring to how emotional valence is reinforced within a passage, either sustaining or shifting the connotation of the metaphor. The findings indicate that in political discourse, the metaphor is more likely to carry negative connotations, often in terms of surveillance and judgment. This aligns with broader trends in political communication, where metaphors are strategically used to shape public perception. The study contributes to research on metaphor, emotional valence, and corpus-based discourse analysis, demonstrating how conventional metaphors undergo contextual shifts in meaning.

Keywords: valence, valence distribution, metaphor, Polish, context, valence alignment

1. Introduction

The idea that human communication is inherently emotional and the meanings are valenced is a long-standing assumption in linguistic and psycholinguistic literature (e.g., Cowen & Keltner 2021; Dyrmo et al. 2025; Ortony et al., 1987; Osgood et al., 1957). In other words, emotional valence, i.e., whether a particular lexical item is judged as positive, negative, or neutral, is an inherent part of the

human conceptual system, sometimes called the affective lexicon (Ortony et al., 1987). Certain groups of words have been shown to be clearly negative and positive, revealing a degree of prototypicality in this affective component of meaning. Warriner et al. (2013) show, for instance, that such words as *happiness, fantastic, lovable, relaxing* or *sunshine* are routinely judged as highly positive, whereas such words as *rapist, AIDS, leukemia* or *molester* systematically receive a negative judgement. There are also ambiguous cases, in which it is difficult to clearly establish how positive or negative a given word or phrase is. Research shows that both linguistic context and co-text modulate valence ratings (e.g., Snefjella & Kuperman, 2016), with the level of emotional arousal, and the rater's induced mood influencing the valence judgement (e.g., Delatorre et al., 2018; Naranowicz, 2022).

Given the various factors influencing emotional valence, the present study seeks to check the distribution of valence of *być na świeczniku* in the Polish language, as presented in the selected subcorpus. The objective is therefore to see what kind of valence — positive, negative, or neutral — predominates in the analyzed linguistic items. The structure of the paper is as follows. First, I explore the metaphorical underpinnings of the Polish metaphor *być na świeczniku* in terms of a more general KNOWING IS SEEING metaphor, pointing to its cross-linguistic relevance. Then, I offer a short explanation of the phrase itself, focusing on its dictionary meaning and use. Following, I review the definitions of valence, and elaborate on the annotation procedure for the subcorpus. Both qualitative and quantitative insights follow, with the conclusions and directions for further research suggested in the final part of the article.

In short, this paper offers contribution to research on metaphor and emotional valence by focusing on the Polish metaphorical expression *być na świeczniku* ('to be on a candlestick'). The study demonstrates that evaluative meaning of this phrase is not stable but shifts across different contexts, ranging from recognition and prestige to scrutiny and forced visibility. To capture this shift, the study introduces and relies on the concept of valence alignment, which refers to the way valence is either sustained or changed across a given passage. In combining corpus-based methods and discourse-sensitive qualitative insights, the study focuses on meaning through usage, with a particular emphasis on political communication and public discourse.

1.1   KNOWING IS SEEING metaphor

The metaphor of KNOWING IS SEEING has been used to explain a wide variety of different conventionalized ways of talking about knowledge. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) first examined the systematic character of this metaphorical mapping in

such expressions as "*I see what you're saying, It looks different from my point of view, What is your outlook on that*", and many more (p. 197). The mechanism behind these metaphorical mappings is said to come from experiential basis, the way the human conceptual system is modulated by the embodied experience with the physical world (e.g., Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 2012). Sweetser (1990) has pointed out, for example, that there is a systematic correspondence between the sense of sight and knowledge attributed to the fact that a clear presentation equals mental vision, attested throughout the history of the English language (Sweetser 1990). Similar observations have been made by Grady (2005) in his analysis of complex image schematic structures: seeing something, Grady says, means "taking in visual information" (2005, p. 1602), making the role of direct sensory experience explicit. Interestingly, the universality of this metaphor has been cast into question quite early on, as Kövecses (2005) points out, because not all cultures encode linguistically the "active and focused functioning of the visual system" (p. 99). Although KNOWING IS SEEING is by no means a universal metaphorical mapping, it is informative to see its workings. Deignan (2005), for example, mentions in the analysis of metonymy-based metaphors that vision metaphors, arguing that dark- and light-based metaphorical expressions have a metonymic grounding, with their inherent relation to "things which are known and (…) things which are secret" (p. 183). This observation provides a fruitful starting point for the analysis of the Polish phrase *być na świeczniku* as it directly pertains to the source of light, and metaphorically suggests that someone occupies a central position, becoming visible and widely recognised.

1.2   *Być na świeczniku* in Polish

The phrase *być na świeczniku* (lit. *to be on a candlestick*) is used to express that someone is placed in the center of attention, similarly to English *to be in the spotlight* or German *im Rampenlicht stehen*, both borrowing its meaning from the domain of theatre. Doroszewski (n.d.) explains the meaning of this idiomatic expression by saying that it refers to "being one of the most prominent people in society", without pointing to any axiologically loaded meaning of the phrase. A different and more recent definition of the word *świecznik* is given by The Great Polish Dictionary (WSJP), saying that it refers to "a group of very famous people occupying the highest position in a certain community", explicitly employing the metaphorical reading of the word and pointing towards somebody who resides at the very top of the hierarchy in a given community, and hence providing a rather positively-valenced interpretation. From the prescriptive, dictionary perspective the meaning of the phrase seems to be unambiguously positive. A closer look at the actual usage of the phrase reveals, however, that the meaning can be either

negative or positive, depending on the local context of the phrase. This point is elaborated upon in the later part of this article.

2.   Emotional valence

Emotional valence can be understood as a straightforward distinction between pleasant and unpleasant stimuli, which can manifest at various levels of language structure, including phonemes (Adelman et al., 2018), words (e.g., Ho et al., 2015) or narratives (e.g., Altmann et al., 2012). In psycholinguistic studies, valence is often treated as a binary category: a stimulus is rated either as positive or negative (e.g., Jackson & Crosson, 2006). Briesemeister et al. (2012) highlight two competing approaches to valence: emotional valence can be treated either as dimensional, where valence and arousal are seen as the most important dimensions of emotional experience, or as discrete, whereby specific categories of emotions are singled out, either as prototypically negative or positive. A similar operationalization is offered by Citron et al. (2014), where emotional experience is judged as either positive or negative, alongside arousal, indicating the intensity of valence. They suggest that lexical items can be categorized into several distinct subcategories, where positive-low arousal words, such as "*flowers*", are processed faster in comparison to positive, high-arousal words, such as "*rollercoaster*", which may be judged as positive with high arousal (p. 87).

Positive valence is usually understood as bringing out a positive hedonic tone of mood (e.g., Gilet &Jallais, 2011), frequently associated with happiness, serenity (Gilet & Jallais, 2011) or nature (Citron et al., 2014). Hauser and Schwarz (2016) notice, for instance, that such words as *attain or restore* exhibit more positive valence than their synonyms *get* and bring *back*. Some studies suggest, contrary to the well-attested negativity bias, that positive words are recognized and responded to faster than neutral words (e.g., Kuperman et al., 2014), manifest at the level of semantic prosody (Snefjella & Kuperman, 2016). El-Dakhs and Altarriba (2019) have found a similar effect of valence on recall: positive words are recalled more often as compared to neutral words, but negative words are recalled more often than positive words, showing a certain level of continuity in the valence paradigm. In Souter et al. (2023) it has been found that negatively valenced stimuli exert a more direct and taxing influence on semantic processing, whereas positively valenced stimuli facilitate word retrieval. Interestingly, research also indicates that emotional valence can change over time. For example, Xu et al. (2022) have found that certain words had undergone a change in valence, going from a fear-related — such as *awe*, initially meaning fearful reverence — to a more positive one, recognized and used today.

Danesi (1990) makes an informative and valence-oriented note about the way vision metaphors are based on the embodied, psychobiological foundations. Although valence is mentioned only implicitly, Danesi's examples show how it can operate in the metaphorical conceptualization of vision. He provides the following examples (Danesi, 1990, p. 223):

(1)   That was a *brilliant* idea.

(2)   What you are saying is *not clear*.

(3)   This is a *transparent* argument.

(4)   I take a *dim* view of that whole affair.

We can see that Example (1) and (3) would probably be judged as reflective of positively-valenced meanings. In (1) the idea is good and should be followed, and in (3) we are able to follow the argument. In contrast, Examples (2) and (4) present negatively valenced meanings: if something is not *clear*, we are not able to make sense of it; taking a *dim* view of something means not approving of somebody's actions. A similar analysis can be derived from Fernandez-Duque and Johnson (2002, p. 155), where "*spotlight*" is offered as a metaphor for the orienting system of attention. Fernandez-Duque and Johnson (2002) suggest that light works in the spotlight metaphor as attention, and the agent who controls the spotlight is the executive attentional system, with the area illuminated by the spotlight representing attended representations. In this sense, light can be associated with positive qualities such as clarity and control, leading to improved cognitive processing. These stable metaphorical mappings can be understood in terms of what Itkes and Kron (2019, p. 284) dub semantic valence, "a feature of general conceptual knowledge about the valence of an event", being more stable and representative of what cognitive linguistic literature sees as "encyclopedic knowledge" (Langacker, 2013, p. 49). This, in turn, strongly suggests that meanings are not fixed but rather loosely connected "repositories of knowledge relating to a particular concept or conceptual domain" (Evans, 2019, p. 351).

Metaphorical cognition has also been researched in valenced contexts. Crawford (2009) says, for example, that the concept of dark and light can function as metaphors for affect. Specifically, light is systematically associated with positive qualities, such as knowledge, happiness and morality, whereas darkness is often paired with ignorance, secrecy and sadness. This has been shown to be true in Zhang et al. (2022), where participants were asked to judge the brightness of a recalled event depending on whether it was moral or not. It has been found, in accordance with the prevailing metaphorical mapping, that moral (positive) memories prompted memories to be brighter as compared to immoral (negative) memories. Meier et al. (2004) have drawn similar conclusions from their study

on affective metaphors involving brightness. When asked to judge the color of a square after reading negative stimuli, participants have shown a systematic tendency to judge it as darker than those who were exposed to positive stimuli. The reviewed studies show persuasive character of affective metaphorical mappings not only in language, but in cognition in general.

3.   Metaphoricity and valence annotation

Metaphoricity of each phrase was determined by closely reading the whole fragment. Eliminated from the analysis were those items that pertained to a literal placement of a candle on a candlestick (most often found in religious contexts) as well as quotes taken directly from the Bible. Only those items that were marked as metaphorical were analyzed later.

Each phrase, once marked as metaphorical, was also annotated for valence. Immediate sentence context has been taken into account in the annotation procedure. Positive valence was assigned to a given fragment when it suggested prestige, admiration and favorable attention, such as when somebody's achievements were celebrated, and when the phrase directly associated visibility with power. Negative valence was assigned to a fragment when it pertained to scrutiny, criticism and unwanted exposure, such as when visibility is forced, implying surveillance and judgement. Neutral valence was assigned to a fragment when it neither expressed admiration/power, nor unwanted exposure, such as when it is used in more informative contexts, without subjective judgement. Inter-rater reliability was assessed on 278 items annotated for valence (neutral, negative, positive). The raters showed 57.6% raw agreement. To correct for chance agreement, Cohen's kappa was computed, yielding $\kappa = 0.30$, which according to Landis and Koch's (1977) benchmarks corresponds to *fair agreement*. The criteria for valence annotation are summed up in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Criteria for valence coding

Valence	Criteria	Contextual Cues	Examples from dataset
POS (Positive)	The context expresses approval or a beneficial outcome	– Positive evaluation words (*success, recognition, appreciated*) – Beneficial consequences (*"na świeczniku" as a sign of prestige or achievement*) – Polarity reversal (*"not bad"*) – Metaphorical scenario linked to desirable states	"...On... (...) odnosił wielkie sukcesy, był **na świeczniku**..."
NEG (Negative)	The context expresses disapproval or a harmful outcome	– Negative evaluation words (*mocked, exposed, pressured*) – Harmful consequences (*"na świeczniku" as pressure, humiliation*) – Negative stance markers (*nie podobało się, w popłochu*) – Metaphorical scenario linked to unpleasant states	"... Poczuła się nagle jak **na świeczniku**. Nie podobało się jej to..."
NEU (Neutral)	The context is descriptive or ambivalent	– Lack of evaluative words – Objective, factual description – Metaphorical scenario without clear emotional loading	"...Sprawa po raz pierwszy pojawiła się **na świeczniku** jeszcze przed świętami..."

4. Corpus

The Polish Web Corpus 2019 was used for the study, which is a general, static web-based corpus of the Polish language. It consists of 4.86 billion tokens, 3.99 billion words, 267 million sentences, and 83 million paragraphs from 12.39 million documents. All distinct word forms accumulate to 22.65 million, with 1109 tags, with the POS tagging system, including adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions, nouns, numeral, prepositions, pronouns and verbs. It covers a wide range of different topics, including culture and entertainment, sports, technology, information technology, economy, finance, health, politics, arts, home and family, religion, beauty, fashion, travel and tourism, science, education and history. The corpus was accessed via Sketch Engine. A sample of concordances are shown below (see Table 2).

Table 2. A sample of the corpus

Left	KWIC	Right
, a także wysoki na 4,2 metra srebrny krzyż i 6 srebrnych	**świeczników**	wysokich na 2,1 metra, wykonanych przez warsztat Johanna pod Paschał. </s><s> Ceremonii poświęcenia i uroczystej
), pulpity, tron na Relikwie Drzewa Krzyża Świętego oraz	**świecznik**	dla Paschału to dar od naszych dobrodziejów i przyjaciół. </s><s> W
.</s><s> Nowe sedilia, pulpity, tron pod Relikwie oraz	**świecznik**	za bardzo przyzwyczaili się do myśli, że im wszystko wolno,
reguł postępowania, bo zdaje się, że ludzie ze	**świecznikiem**	na spodzie. </s><s> Bardzo ładny, ale czy zda egzamin? </s><s> Podobno, tak
.</s><s> No nie! </s><s> Spławik patynowany stylizowany na retro z mini	**świecznikiem**	na kole garncarskim. </s><s> Wszystkie wykonane prace pozostały w
kominki. </s><s> Jedna z uczestniczek pokusiła się o wykonanie	**świecznika**	, podstawy pod kadzidełka i inne artykuły z ceramiki. </s>
w Mediolanie....</s><s> Wytwarzamy figurki ceramiczne,	**świecznika**	6 PP </s><s> Pierwsza wędka na rozgrzewkę i prowadzenie, typowo
z ładniejszych dróg DT na Kadzielni. </s><s> Diretissima lewego	**świecznika**	6/6+ RP </s><s> znów z cyklu Herman obija dla dra — tym razem linia nr
rocznikien;</s><s> Diretka LŚ 6 FLASH </s><s> Diretissima lewego	**świeczniki**	, które z powodzeniem mogą stanowić ozdobę niejednego
młodych twórców zmieniły się w barwne wazony, karafki czy	**świeczniki**	, a z gwiazdy betlejemskiej i bombek nieodzianą ozdobę
odrobinie wyobraźni z wiosennych kwiatów możemy stworzyć	**świecznik**	? </s><s> 22 [Vt-4,11] Nie ma bowiem nic ukrytego, co by nie miało
pod korcem lub pod łóżkiem?</s><s> Czy nie po to, aby je postawić na	**świecznik**	procesyjnym (!) w kościele św. Jana Chrzciciela, z około
.</s><s> Drewniana figura Jana N. rezydująca na drzewcowym	**świecznik**	, ale ma znacznie większe zasługi. </s><s> To strajkujący w 1980

5.   Results

The following sections provide both quantitative and qualitative results of the analysis. First, quantitative results are presented, with observed and expected frequencies of valence parameters, together with the pairwise *z*-tests converted to Chi-square values.

5.1   Quantitative results

Table 3. Observed and expected frequency of valence categories

Category	Observed Frequency	Expected Frequency	Proportion (%)
NEU	654	387.33	56.28
NEG	351	387.33	30.21
POS	157	387.33	13.51
Total	1,162	1,162	100.00

Table 3 shows the observed and expected frequencies of three valence categories. The observed frequency represents the actual count of each of the valence categories, whereas the expected frequency assumes an even distribution of counts within the categories. An even distribution of counts has been assumed following a standard chi-square goodness-of-fit, with an equiprobable baseline. The table shows that neutral valence is the most frequent, followed by negative valence, with positive valence with the lowest count. A Chi-square test of independence was conducted to check whether the observed frequencies deviate from the expected distribution of valence. The results have shown a statistically significant difference, $\chi^2(2) = 323.85$, $p < .0001$, indicating that the distribution of valence in the dataset is not random. A series of pairwise tests of significance yielded statistically significant results. Pairwise chi-square tests showed NEU vs NEG, $\chi^2(1, N = 1005) = 91.35$, $p < .001$; NEU vs. POS: $\chi^2(1, N = 811) = 304.57$, $p < .001$; NEG vs. POS: $\chi^2(1, N = 508) = 74.09$, $p < .001$. These results indicate an ordering of valence categories of NEU > NEG > POS. Additional pairwise Chi-square tests were performed to compare frequency of valence categories within the politics subcorpus. All the sentences were annotated for whether they came from a politically associated source or not. The results, with NEU ($N = 228$), NEG ($N = 111$), and POS ($N = 46$), show a statistically significant trend in the distribution of valence in the annotated subcorpus, with $\chi^2(2, N = 385) = 132.57$, $p < .001$. Pairwise comparisons yielded statistically significant results, with $\chi^2(1, N = 339) = 40.38$, $p < .001$, for NEU vs. NEG valence; $\chi^2(1, N = 274) = 120.89$, $p < .001$, for NEU vs. POS; and $\chi^2(1, N = 157) = 26.91$, $p < .001$, for NEG vs POS valence, indicating a corresponding pattern of valence distribution in a political subcorpus. The results are plotted in Figure 1.
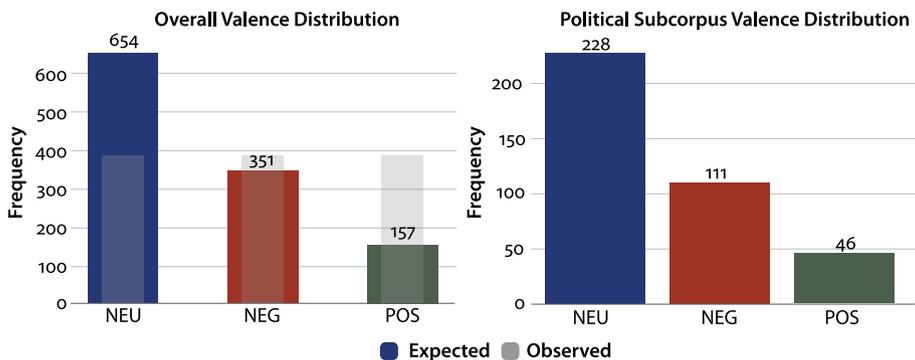
Figure 1. Overall valence distribution and political subcorpus valence distribution

5.2   Qualitative results

The qualitative analysis of the dataset is provided to illustrate how metaphorical meaning interacts with valence. To this end, several examples from positive, negative, and neutral valence were chosen.

5.2.1   Positive valence

No.	Polish segment	Morphological gloss	Literal English	English Translation
(5.1)	Choć nie jest już	although not is already.anymore	Although not is already	Although he/she is no longer… / Although they are no longer…
(5.2)	na świeczniku, nadal świeci	on candlestick.LOC still shines	on the candlestick still shines	in the spotlight, he/she still shines / in the spotlight, they still shine
(5.3)	przykładem.	example.INST.	as an example	as an example

In Example (5) we can see that the metaphorical meaning of the phrase is positively valenced through the elaboration of the metaphor with the phrase "still shines", put immediately after the metaphorical expression in question. This positioning of two metaphorical phrases suggests that being in the spotlight receives a positive reading in the first place, and the positive sentiment remains active with the next phrase. This valence distribution across one sentence which not only elaborates on the initial metaphorical meaning but also keeps its emotional valence will be called *valence alignment*. The valence in the metaphor BEING IN THE SPOTLIGHT IS BEING IN THE CENTER OF ATTENTION is thus further supported

by "shines by example", equating light with positive traits of character worth emulating, congruently with the metaphor GOOD IS LIGHT.

No.	Polish segment	Morphological gloss	Literal English	English Translation
(6.1)	Wysiłków badawczych Hunta i Danchekkera	efforts.GEN.PL research.ADJ Hunt.GEN and Danchekker.GEN	The efforts research-related of Hunt and Danchekker	The research efforts of Hunt and Danchekker
(6.2)	zyskały uznanie opinii światowej	gained.3PL recognition.ACC opinion.GEN global.ADJ	gained recognition of opinion worldwide	gained recognition worldwide
(6.3)	i sprawiły, że obaj uczeni	and caused.3PL that both scholars.NOM	and caused that both scholars	and led to both scholars
(6.4)	znaleźli się na świeczniku.	found.themselves.3PL on candlestick.LOC	found themselves on the candlestick	finding themselves in the spotlight

In the above example the positive valence is achieved contextually by the phrase "gain recognition", related to the scientific efforts. Interestingly, "gaining recognition" operates on the metaphor of vision, similarly to "to be in the spotlight": both draw from the domain of visibility to construe a positive message of being worthy of attention and praise. In this example, like in (5) above, valence alignment starts with the metaphor of recognizing somebody's efforts and is sustained by the spotlight metaphor. Of note is the fact that the whole fragment puts Hunt and Danchekker in a passive position, as receivers of attention rather than active agents who pursue it, likely suggesting that both the recognition and spotlight were somewhat accidental, a result of external circumstances.

No.	Polish segment	Morphological gloss	Literal English	English Translation
(7.1)	To byłoby piękne, bo	this would.be beautiful, because	That would be beautiful, because	That would be wonderful, because
(7.2)	obrońcy bardzo rzadko są	defenders.NOM very rarely are	defenders very rarely are	defenders are very rarely
(7.3)	na świeczniku,	on candlestick.LOC	in the spotlight	in the spotlight,

No.	Polish segment	Morphological gloss	Literal English	English Translation
(7.4)	a ta nagroda byłaby	and this award.NOM would.be	and this award would be	and this award would also be
(7.5)	też motywacją dla pozostałych	also motivation.INST for remaining.GEN	also a motivation for the others	a motivation for the others
(7.6)	"z branży".	"from industry.GEN"	"from the industry"	in the industry.

In Example (7), expressing positive valence, it is explicitly stated that defenders (in the football context) are placed in the spotlight and that it will motivate them, as they are rarely put in such positions. The positive valence comes here from the contextually motivated metaphor of visibility, and enhanced by an award, either referred to metonymically as being put in the center of attention, or suggesting a physical object that the defenders received for their achievements. In either case, however, the positive valence of the phrase is contextually maintained by the sense of motivation felt by the rest of the industry.

No.	Polish segment	Morphological gloss	Literal English	English Translation
(8.1)	Na pewno to cieszy, że	for sure this pleases, that	For sure this is pleasing, that	It's certainly pleasing that
(8.2)	jesteśmy teraz na świeczniku,	are.1PL now on candlestick.LOC	we are now in the spotlight,	we're now in the spotlight,
(8.3)	że każdy na nas liczy.	that everyone on us counts.3SG	that everyone counts on us.	that everyone is counting on us.

The following fragment likewise points to a positively-valenced reading of the metaphorical expression as well as its context. The context of the phrase remains positive, and is first established by the word *pleasing*, referring to being put in the spotlight. This valence alignment is further supported at the end of the sentence, which says "everyone counts on us", a possible effect of being placed in the center of attention. The added layer of meaning suggests that being put in the spotlight is not only connected with visibility, but also with trust and responsibility, and these aspects are embraced by the agents.

No.	Polish segment	Morphological gloss	Literal English	English Translation
(9.1)	Ludzie docenią twoje zalety,	people.NOM appreciate.3PL your.ACC advantages.ACC	People will appreciate your advantages	People will appreciate your strengths,
(9.2)	znajdziesz się w centrum zainteresowania,	find.yourself.2SG in center interest.GEN	you will find yourself in the centre of interest	you'll find yourself at the centre of attention,
(9.3)	na świeczniku,	on candlestick.LOC	in the spotlight	in the spotlight,
(9.4)	będziesz miała swoje pięć minut,	will.be.2SG have.FUT your.own.ACC five minutes.ACC	you will have your five minutes	you'll have your own five minutes of fame,
(9.5)	a inni będą Ci zazdrościć powodzenia.	and others.NOM will.be.3PL you.DAT envy.INF success.GEN	and others will envy your success	and others will envy your success.

The last example from the positive valence category shows a progressive accumulation of metaphoricity. First, positive valence is introduced with the verb "appreciate", which in the Polish language derives from the word *cena* (ENG price), suggesting a metaphorical meaning that equates appreciation with added value. Further positive valence is maintained by a direct reference to the visual metaphorical meaning of being in the center of attention, only to be followed by the target metaphorical expression of the spotlight. Immediately after the target metaphorical expression, positive valence is sustained by the metonymic phrase "you will have you own five minutes", which reinforced the idea of being in the centre of public attention. Notably, the positive valence alignment is preserved throughout the whole passage. This may indicate a high level of activation of the vision-based metaphorical mapping, in accordance with Deliberate Metaphor Theory (Steen, 2007; 2017) which postulates that deliberate metaphors are "used as metaphors" (2017, pp. 2), and "meant to draw the recipient's attention to the source domain" (2017, pp. 13). In this sense, valence alignment which is sustained across the sentence may be indicative of deliberate metaphor use.

5.2.2 Negative valence

No.	Polish segment	Morphological gloss	Literal English	English Translation
(10.1)	Źle oczyszczone ścieki zatrują okolicę.	badly purified.NOM.PL sewage.NOM.PL poison.3PL area.ACC	Badly purified sewage will poison the area.	Badly treated sewage will poison the surrounding area.
(10.2)	Natomiast postawiony na świeczniku	whereas placed.NOM on candlestick.LOC	Whereas placed on the candlestick	By contrast, a politician put in the spotlight
(10.3)	polityk jest jak kopcąca świeca.	politician.NOM is like smoking.NOM candle.NOM	is like a smoking candle.	is like a smoking candle.
(10.4)	Miał oświetlać drogę,	was.supposed.to illuminate.INF road.ACC	He was supposed to illuminate the road,	He was supposed to light the way,
(10.5)	a nie tylko tego	but not only this.ACC	but not only this	but not only does he fail to do that
(10.6)	nie robi i stwarza zagrożenie.	not does.3SG and creates.3SG danger.ACC	does he not do this, and he creates danger.	he doesn't do it and instead creates a hazard.

This quite complex passage taken from the corpus shows the emergence and sustained presence of negative valence. The very first sentence from the passage sets the context for the main message. Just as badly purified sewers contaminate the environment, politicians put in the spotlight (or literally on a candlestick) produce smoldering smoke instead of illuminating the path ahead. This metaphorical message is elaborated even further in the last part: because a smoking candle is not entirely out, it may pose danger to those around. As we can see, the positive valence of the message is completely subverted, with the negative message being demonstrably more elaborated upon. This elaboration seems deliberate, again, to direct attention to the negative effects of putting unfitting people in the position of power. Van Poppel and Pilgram (2023, p. 311) suggest that the rhetorical function of metaphor, especially in the domain of politics, is often highlighted in con-

texts whereby a particular metaphorical mapping is deliberately resisted: "people might object to or even attack the metaphor" because they do not align with their political or moral standing (Gibbs & Siman 2021).

No.	Polish segment	Morphological gloss	Literal English	English Translation
(11.1)	Stojąc na świeczniku	standing on candlestick.LOC	Standing in the spotlight	When you're standing in the spotlight
(11.2)	można się przede wszystkim sparzyć	one.can oneself above all get.burned	one can above all get burned	the main thing that can happen is that you get burned.

Example (11) shows that not much surrounding context is needed to evoke negative valence. Here, the metaphorical meaning of the phrase is commented upon and elaborated by pointing to the literal effect of fire on the human body: when somebody is close to fire, they can get burned, which highlights the negativity of the phrase. In this interpretation, the closeness to fire implies not (only) visibility of the person but rather danger and exposure. It is likely that the phrase is cautionary than strictly dismissive in nature, implying that apart from the positive aspects one can enjoy while in the center of attention, there are potentially serious drawbacks, and these drawbacks received pronounced attention with the phrase "above all".

No.	Polish segment	Morphological gloss	Literal English	English Translation
(12.1)	Półgłówki w garniturach,	halfwits.NOM in suits.LOC	Halfwits in suits,	Halfwits in suits,
(12.2)	ciemnota na świeczniku	darkness.NOM on candlestick.LOC	ignorance in the spotlight	ignorance in the spotlight,
(12.3)	im mocniej przypalać,	the.more strongly burn.INF	the more strongly one burns (it)	the more you scorch it,
(12.4)	tym mniej światła daje.	the.less less light.GEN gives.3SG	the less light it gives	the less light it gives.

In Example (12) negative valence is signaled from the very beginning, with the word "halfwits", which denotes lack of intelligence, to be later sustained by the phrase "ignorance" (lit. darkness), put in the spotlight. This whole negative sequence goes on to culminate in the novel use of the idiomatic expression "to

be on candlestick": the candlestick is used to express negative valence by modifying its meaning with "it gives less light", which directly negates the prototypical reading related to light and vision. The elaboration on the original meaning of the phrase highlights the intention to put the agents in the phrase (*halfwits*) in an unfavorable position by suggesting that their actions do more harm than good. This use of the metaphorical expression again suggests deliberateness and reframing, evoking negative connotations and overriding the otherwise neutral meaning of the phrase.

No.	Polish segment	Morphological gloss	Literal English	English Translation
(13.1)	Zło zawsze sieje nieszczęście.	evil.NOM always sows.3SG misfortune.ACC	Evil always sows misfortune.	Evil always spreads misfortune.
(13.2)	Zło stawiane na świeczniku,	evil.NOM placed.NOM on candlestick.LOC	Evil placed on a candlestick,	Evil put on a pedestal,
(13.3)	fałszywym blaskiem oślepia swoich czcicieli.	false.INS radiance.INS blinds.3SG its.ACC worshippers.ACC	with false radiance blinds its worshippers.	blinds its worshippers with a false radiance.

Example (13) starts with the noun "evil", immediately establishing a negatively-valenced reading, followed closely by the word "misfortune", also denoting a negative valence. The impact of the evil mentioned in the first part of the sentence is further repeated and reinforced by incorporating it into the conventional metaphor of light. The candlestick metaphor gets elaborated even further, with negative valence being expressed by "radiance" which "blinds its worshippers", evoking a religious context for the whole fragment. In this example, (negative) valence alignment is initiated and sustained throughout the whole passage, reinforced by the presence of negatively-valenced personification in (13.1), and the reassessment of the light metaphor, exposing its blinding force in (13.3).

No.	Polish segment	Morphological gloss	Literal English	English Translation
(14.1)	Każdy, który usiłuje stanąć na świeczniku	everyone.NOM who.NOM tries stand.INF on candlestick.LOC	Everyone who tries to stand on a candlestick / pedestal	Everyone who tries to put themselves in the spotlight

No.	Polish segment	Morphological gloss	Literal English	English Translation
(14.2)	musi się liczyć z krytyką	must REFL take.into.account.INF with criticism.INS	must take criticism into account	must be prepared for criticism
(14.3)	czy chcąc świecić światłem przypadkiem nie kopci.	whether wanting shine.INF light.INS accidentally not smokes.3SG	whether, wanting to shine with light, they do not accidentally smoke	and consider whether, in trying to shine, they aren't in fact just giving off smoke.

The last example of negative valence, Example (14) does not immediately start with setting a negative context for the candlestick metaphor. It rather focuses on the fact that being in the center of attention requires effort (*tries*). Only later is the phrase commented on negatively, especially in the sense of being exposed to scrutiny and criticism, possibly from the general public or a community. The metaphorical mapping operating on the notion of light and visibility is creatively negated and elaborated upon: since the candlestick metaphor presupposes fire being in the center, it can also produce smoke if not lit or put out correctly. In this way, the metaphorical smoke is likened to the incompetence and/or lack of knowledge, resulting in adverse consequences, despite being well-meaning by default. Negative valence is thus initiated with the candlestick metaphor itself, and later sustained by the creative use of smoke a candle can produce.

5.2.3 Neutral valence

All the examples of neutral valence are meant to convey the prototypical, dictionary meaning of the candlestick metaphor. As such, they are grouped below and analyzed together.

No.	Polish segment	Morphological gloss	Literal English	English Translation
(15.1)	Z początkiem września szkolnictwo znów	with beginning.INS September.GEN education.NOM again	With the beginning of September, education again	With the start of September, the education system is again
(15.2)	na świeczniku	on candlestick.LOC	in the spotlight	in the spotlight.

No.	Polish segment	Morphological gloss	Literal English	English Translation
(16.1)	Na świeczniku w najbliższych dniach będą	on candlestick.LOC in nearest.DAT days.LOC will.be.3PL	In the spotlight in the coming days will be	In the coming days, the spotlight will be on
(16.2)	spotkania na arenie politycznej w Europie.	meetings.NOM on arena.LOC political.LOC in Europe.LOC	meetings on the political arena in Europe	meetings on the political stage in Europe.

No.	Polish segment	Morphological gloss	Literal English	English Translation
(17.1)	Pasieki, ze względu	apiaries.NOM due to	Apiaries, due to	Apiaries, because of…
(17.2)	na świeczniku	on candlestick.LOC	in the spotlight	are in the spotlight
(17.3)	i opiekujący się nimi	and caring.NOM REFL them.INST	and (those) caring for them	and those who look after them
(17.4)	o zdrowotność pszczół.	about health.ACC bees.GEN	about the bees' health	focus on / are concerned with the bees' health.

All above examples demonstrate neutral valence as they do not elaborate on the candlestick metaphor in any creative way. In (15) the message only pertains to the fact that education receives attention at the start of the school year, which is expected of a recurring event. Example (16) comments on the spotlight put on politicians and their daily meetings, with no explicit positive or negative assessment. In (17), the neutrality of the passage stems from the location of the apiaries, describing the beekeeper's responsibility for the bees' well-being. As such, these examples focus on the usual order of things, their script-like character, not on the emotional assessment of the agents or actions. It is likely that the neutral character of these passages stems from the conventionalized, contextual factors.

6.   Conclusions and discussion

We have seen that metaphorical meanings can be creatively extended, often exploring unexpected, and valence-divergent mappings, asking for a more holistic approach to metaphor identification (e.g., Barnden, 2016). The prototypical, largely positive meaning of vision and light can be either reinforced by incorporating parallel positive mappings, resulting in an overall positive valence of the whole passage, or subverted with the use of negatively valenced mappings. In such cases, the negative meaning operates as a resistance mechanism: the metaphorical mapping working on positive associations between knowledge and vision is overridden by the reinforced negative message of the whole passage. Hart (2021) makes a note of the rhetorical function of metaphor, especially in politically-oriented, emotion-heavy discourses. Extreme metaphors, used to make manifestly offensive comments, become easily noticeable because they often trigger emotional reactions. Hart notices in this context that extreme metaphors can backfire, and their intended triggering meaning can actually decrease with long enough exposure. A related phenomenon can be observed in the analyzed sample: a conventionally positive meaning has been stripped of the positive connotations by means of overly negative elaborations, turning the image of prestige and wanted attention into dangerous, fire-related emergencies.

The quantitative results of the study indicate that neutral valence predominates in the dataset, with negative valence being more frequent than positive valence. This shows that the phrase in question is not unambiguously positive: in fact, a more usage-based perspective reveals significant nuances in meaning that tend to diverge from the dictionary definition of the phrase. This dictionary, prototypical definition is primarily associated with recognition and power, and the negative valence in this context derives from the sense of scrutiny and forced visibility.

The notion of valence alignment comes as a useful conceptual tool for assessing the distribution of valence in the analysis of the corpus. The reinforcement of an initially activated valence, whether positive or negative, adds to the general valence expressed by the phrase, overriding the prototypical metaphorical meaning. Moreover, valence alignment seems to be directional — once the tone is set, it is sustained to the end of the meaning unit, hence creating predictable emotional meanings. While it shares some similarities with semantic prosody (e.g., Stubbs, 1995; Partington, 2004), there are notable differences. Valence alignment as understood in this paper does not presuppose that valence within a given lexical string is set but rather responsive to contextual factors. This understanding of valence alignment is more akin to Hunston's (2007) formulation whereby context conditions the valence effect. Moreover, the sustained valence can also be interpreted

in the context of Deliberate Metaphor Theory (Steen, 2015; 2017). Because the metaphorical mapping within the prototypically positive (or at least neutral) metaphor is negated and the valence shifts, it is also likely that the elaboration that frequently follows is a deliberate attempt at shifting the meaning. In fact, recent research on deliberate metaphor use indicates that creative use of metaphorical mappings is most often deliberate, especially when these mappings are actively resisted and/or negotiated (Steen, 2024). It also goes in line with an established definition of framing provided by Entman (1993), whereby framing is the result of selection and salience that shape interpretation of a given passage (1993, pp. 52). This is seen, for instance, in Examples (5)–(9) that keep the same — positive — valence throughout the whole passage, providing a framing effect.

Moreover, the prevalence of negative valence in the political subcorpus may be taken as indicative of a larger and more persistent trend of negative bias in political communication and campaigning, visible predominantly in online discourses (e.g., Külz et al., 2023). Especially important in political communication, the role of "subliminal resources" (Charteris-Black, 2005, p. 2) may also be relevant here, with the intention of politicians to "use metaphor to tell the right story" (Charteris-Black, 2005, pp. 28). Browse (2018) notes that the act of resisting metaphorical mapping may be a rhetorical move to reject a particular metaphorical construal put forward by a politician, in order to impose a different, more favored one.

Lastly, the present study offers a new way of looking at fire-related metaphors. An extensive analysis of such metaphors offered by Charteris-Black (2017) finds many valence-dependent mappings, yet the findings are mostly limited to religious discourse, where the metaphor of light is meant to represent faith and spiritual knowledge, with no direct relation to political or otherwise non-religious discourses. As has been shown, the metaphor of light, taken from religious discourse, can assume an entirely different function, and be extended to either be overly positive, where it reinforces the positive qualities, or fully negative, emphasizing the dangerous nature of fire.

The study has some limitations, including a possible bias in text sources, the fixed character of the corpus, and the treatment of valence as a fixed category. Firstly, because the corpus is based on the texts published online and restricted to one year, it cannot account for long-term changes in the use of the candlestick metaphor in other types of texts. This can be remedied in future studies focusing on the question of whether the candlestick metaphor is sensitive to contextual factors in different types of corpora, both time- and type-wise. Secondly, valence is treated here as a categorical variable, reflecting the basic and prototypical character of neutral, negative, and positive valence. This approach invites further refinements in terms of the operationalization of valence along different dimensions,

both in terms of its continuous rather than categorical character (Lebrecht et al., 2012), as well as its relation to metaphor more generally (e.g., Dyrmo et al., 2025; Juszczyk et al., 2025).

Funding

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the author(s) used ChatGPT 4-o in order to prepare the statistics and the graphs for the article. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the published article.

References

doi Adelman, J. S., Estes, Z., & Cossu, M. (2018). Emotional sound symbolism: Languages rapidly signal valence via phonemes. *Cognition*, *175*, 122–130.

doi Allison Cato Jackson, M., & Crosson, B. (2006). Emotional connotation of words: Role of emotion in distributed semantic systems. *Progress in Brain Research*, *156*, 205–216.

doi Barnden, J. A. (2016). Communicating flexibly with metaphor: A complex of strengthening, elaboration, replacement, compounding and unrealism. *Review of Cognitive Linguistics*, *14*(2), 442–473.

doi Briesemeister, B. B., Kuchinke, L., & Jacobs, A. M. (2012). Emotional valence: A bipolar continuum or two independent dimensions? *SAGE Open*, *2*(4), 2158244012466558.

doi Browse, S. (2018). *Cognitive rhetoric: The cognitive poetics of political discourse*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.

doi Charteris-Black, J. (2005). *Politicians and rhetoric*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Charteris-Black, J. (2017). *Fire metaphors: Discourses of awe and authority*. Bloomsbury.

doi Citron, F. M. M., Gray, M. A., Critchley, H. D., Weekes, B. S., & Ferstl, E. C. (2014). Emotional valence and arousal affect reading in an interactive way: Neuroimaging evidence for an approach — withdrawal framework. *Neuropsychologia*, *56*, 79–89.

doi Cowen, A. S., & Keltner, D. (2021). Semantic space theory: A computational approach to emotion. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, *25*(2), 124–136.

doi Crawford, L. E. (2009). Conceptual metaphors of affect. *Emotion Review*, *1*(2), 129–139.

doi Danesi, M. (1990). Thinking is seeing: Visual metaphors and the nature of abstract thought. *Semiotica*, *80*(3–4), 221–237.

doi Deignan, A. (2005). *Metaphor and corpus linguistics*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.

doi Delatorre, P., León, C., Salguero, A., Palomo-Duarte, M., & Gervás, P. (2018). Confronting a paradox: A new perspective of the impact of uncertainty in suspense. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *9*, 1392.

Doroszewski, W. (n.d.). *Słownik języka polskiego*. PWN. Retrieved February 24, 2025, from https://doroszewski.pwn.pl/

doi El-Dakhs, D. A. S., & Altarriba, J. (2019). How do emotion word type and valence influence language processing? The case of Arabic—English bilinguals. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*, *48*(5), 1063–1085.

doi Dyrmo, T., Jankowiak, K., & Kakuba, P. (2025). On the role of space — valence congruency in bilingual orientational metaphor processing. *Language and Cognition*, *17*, e4.

doi Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, *43*(4), 51–58.

doi Evans, V. (2019). *Cognitive linguistics: A complete guide*. Edinburgh University Press.

doi Fernandez-Duque, D., & Johnson, M. L. (2002). Cause and effect theories of attention: The role of conceptual metaphors. *Review of General Psychology*, *6*(2), 153–165.

doi Gibbs, R. W., Jr., & Siman, J. (2021). How we resist metaphors. *Language and Cognition*, *13*(4), 670–692.

doi Gilet, A.-L., & Jallais, C. (2011). Valence, arousal and word associations. *Cognition and Emotion*, *25*(4), 740–746.

doi Grady, J. (2005). Primary metaphors as inputs to conceptual integration. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *37*(10), 1595–1614.

doi Hart, C. (2021). Animals vs. armies: Resistance to extreme metaphors in anti-immigration discourse. *Journal of Language and Politics*, *20*(2), 226–253.

doi Hauser, D. J., & Schwarz, N. (2016). Semantic prosody and judgment. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, *145*(7), 882–896.

doi Ho, S. M. Y., Mak, C. W. Y., Yeung, D., Duan, W., Tang, S., Yeung, J. C., & Ching, R. (2015). Emotional valence, arousal, and threat ratings of 160 Chinese words among adolescents. *PLOS ONE*, *10*(7), e0132294.

doi Hunston, S. (2007). Semantic prosody revisited. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, *12*(2), 249–268.

doi Itkes, O., & Kron, A. (2019). Affective and semantic representations of valence: A conceptual framework. *Emotion Review*, *11*(4), 283–293.

doi Juszczyk, K., Konat, B., & Fabiszak, M. (2025). The heart attack of the Polish health service: Metaphors, arguments, and emotional appeals in political debates. *Language and Cognition*, *17*, e12.

doi Kövecses, Z. (2005). *Metaphor in culture: Universality and variation*. Cambridge University Press.

doi Külz, J., Spitz, A., Abu-Akel, A., et al. (2023). United States politicians' tone became more negative with 2016 primary campaigns. *Scientific Reports*, *13*, 10495.

doi Kuperman, V., Estes, Z., Brysbaert, M., & Warriner, A. B. (2014). Emotion and language: Valence and arousal affect word recognition. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, *143*(3), 1065–1081.

doi Lakoff, G. (2012). Explaining embodied cognition results. *Topics in Cognitive Science*, *4*(4), 773–785.

doi Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). The metaphorical structure of the human conceptual system. *Cognitive Science*, *4*(2), 195–208.

doi Landis, J. R., & Koch, G. G. (1977). The measurement of observer agreement for categorical data. *Biometrics*, *33*(1), 159–174.

Langacker, R. W. (2013). *Essentials of cognitive grammar*. Oxford University Press.

doi Lebrecht, S., Bar, M., Barrett, L. F., & Tarr, M. J. (2012). Micro-valences: Perceiving affective valence in everyday objects. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *3*, 107.

doi Meier, B. P., Robinson, M. D., & Clore, G. L. (2004). Why good guys wear white: Automatic inferences about stimulus valence based on brightness. *Psychological Science*, *15*(2), 82–87.

doi Naranowicz, M. (2022). Mood effects on semantic processes: Behavioural and electrophysiological evidence. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *13*, 1014706.

doi Ortony, A., Clore, G. L., & Foss, M. A. (1987). The referential structure of the affective lexicon. *Cognitive Science*, *11*(3), 341–364.

Osgood, C. E., Suci, G. J., & Tannenbaum, P. H. (1957). *The measurement of meaning*. University of Illinois Press.

doi Partington, A. (2004). "Utterly content in each other's company": Semantic prosody and semantic preference. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, *9*(1), 131–156.

doi Snefjella, B., & Kuperman, V. (2016). It's all in the delivery: Effects of context valence, arousal, and concreteness on visual word processing. *Cognition*, *156*, 135–146.

Souter, N. E., Reddy, A., Walker, J., Marino Dávolos, J., & Jefferies, E. (2023). How do valence and meaning interact? The contribution of semantic control. *Journal of Neuropsychology*, *17*(3), 521–539.

doi Steen, G. (2015). Developing, testing and interpreting deliberate metaphor theory. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *90*, 67–72.

doi Steen, G. (2017). Deliberate metaphor theory: Basic assumptions, main tenets, urgent issues. *Intercultural Pragmatics*, *14*(1), 1–24.

doi Steen, G. (2024). The ambiguity of metaphor: How polysemy affords multivalent metaphor use and explains the paradox of metaphor. *Metaphor and Symbol*, *39*(4), 242–259.

doi Steen, G. J. (2007). *Finding metaphor in grammar and usage: A methodological analysis of theory and research* (Vol. *10*). John Benjamins Publishing Company.

doi Stubbs, M. (1995). Collocations and semantic profiles: On the cause of the trouble with quantitative studies. *Functions of Language*, *2*(1), 23–55.

doi Sweetser, E. (1990). *From etymology to pragmatics: Metaphorical and cultural aspects of semantic structure*. Cambridge University Press.

doi Van Poppel, L., & Pilgram, R. (2023). Types of resistance to metaphor. *Metaphor and Symbol*, *38*(4), 311–328.

doi Warriner, A. B., Kuperman, V., & Brysbaert, M. (2013). Norms of valence, arousal, and dominance for 13,915 English lemmas. *Behavior Research Methods*, *45*, 1191–1207.

WsJP. (n.d.). *Wielki słownik języka polskiego*. Instytut Języka Polskiego PAN. Retrieved February 24, 2025, from https://wsjp.pl/

doi Xu, X., Li, J., & Chen, H. (2022). Valence and arousal ratings for 11,310 simplified Chinese words. *Behavior Research Methods*, *54*, 26–41.

doi Zhang, S., Zheng, J., & Mo, L. (2022). The effect of the brightness metaphor on memory. *Psychological Research*, *86*(6), 1751–1762.

Address for correspondence

Tomasz Dyrmo
Faculty of English
Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan
Grunwaldzka 6
60-780 Poznan
Poland

tomdyr1@amu.edu.pl

Biographical notes

Tomasz Dyrmo is assistant professor at the Faculty of English, Department of Cognitive Linguistics at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan. His interests include conceptual metaphor theory, multimodal cognition as well as affective approaches to meaning making processes in discourse.

Publication history