1. Introduction: A Watershed Moment

As I am writing these lines, we are, yet again, confronted daily with scenes of protests and revolts, this time reaching us from the United States of America. The images seem like a chilling reminder of what happened almost a decade ago now in the Arab world. Following the murder of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis on 25 May 2020, we have seen streets literally on fire, teargas thrown at peaceful protesters and civilians and journalists objected to unjustified police brutality supported by the country’s president. Citizens worldwide have joined protests against systemic racism and police violence. How could the world’s greatest democracy come this close to descending into such mayhem usually known from dictatorships and totalitarian regimes? It appears that the world has spent the past ten years in constant upheaval. The year 2010 was defined by Amnesty International as an important “watershed” moment in the sense that this particular period of time saw the beginning of a series of movements no one before thought possible:

The year 2010 may well be remembered as a watershed year when activists and journalists used new technology to speak truth to power and, in so doing, pushed for greater respect for human rights. It is also the year when repressive governments faced the real possibility that their days were numbered. (Amnesty International 2011, xi)

What began in North Africa in late 2010 and early 2011 as peaceful civil protests asking for the granting and improvement of basic human rights, freedoms and living standards has morphed into violent confrontations between government and opposition forces in many North African and Middle Eastern countries, with one of the most brutal and lethal wars still gripping Syria. On 17 December 2010, Tarek el-Tayeb Mohamed Bouazizi, a young vegetable seller in the small Tunisian town Sidi Bouzid set himself on fire because he saw no prospects for himself to get a well-paid job and be able to sufficiently provide for his family.
He later died of his severe burns in a hospital on 4 January 2011. His tragic public suicide changed the Arab world and has ever since been treated and defined as the key catalyst that triggered the so-called ‘Arab Spring’, which eventually brought uprisings and civil unrest to large parts of the Middle East and North Africa. From Egypt’s first “Day of Revolt” on 25 January 2011 to initial protests in Libya on 15 February 2011 and the beginning of a series of protests and revolts in Syria on 18 March 2011 as well as notable acts of civil unrest in Yemen, Morocco, Lebanon, Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, Western Sahara, Mauritania, Sudan, Saudi Arabia and Algeria; all of a sudden it appeared as if the entire Arab world were in upheaval or, as Al Jazeera described it on 27 January 2011, “the Arab world is on fire” (Cassel 2011). In a number of countries, such as Tunisia and Egypt, the protests resulted in the ousting of totalitarian leaders as well as first approaches to public elections. In others, like Libya and Syria, the events caused civil wars of unprecedented violence and brutality. As these lines are being written, people are still dying in Syria, the official death toll is estimated to have exceeded 560,000 (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights 2018) and large parts of the country lie in ruins. At the same time, as more than 5 million people have been displaced (UNHCR 2019), neighbouring countries as well as great parts of Europe have been faced with one of the biggest and most severe refugee crises since the end of the Second World War.

It is debatable whether or not the Arab Spring has, in fact, brought positive change and democracy to the Middle East and North Africa. But no matter what the answer to this question may be, “the Arab Spring has inspired people around the globe to take matters into their own hands” (Al-Amin 2013, 327). In October 2011, the United States of America bore witness to a civil movement that would soon cross borders and eventually reach countries all over the globe, i.e. ‘Occupy’. Similarly, what followed from 2011 onwards were large-scale protests against austerity measures in Greece, student protests in Great Britain, civil protests
in Moscow, demonstrations by frustrated youth facing unemployment in Spain, protests in Brazil and Venezuela, the Ukrainian revolution, the Ferguson unrest following the shooting of Michael Brown as well as the so-called ‘umbrella movement’ in Hong Kong. Most recently, the protests in Hong Kong reached a new climax and global demonstrations to raise awareness about climate change are unprecedented. Last but not least, the current events all over the United States surrounding the murder of George Floyd are a gruesome reminder of what is at stake when democracy breaks down and people’s freedom and rights are threatened. To quote Mason (2013), “[w]e’re in the middle of a revolution caused by the near collapse of free-market capitalism combined with an upswing in technical innovation, a surge in desire for individual freedom and a change in human consciousness about what freedom means” (p. 3). Still, no revolution or rebellion in recent years has been as uprooting and momentous as the events of the Arab Spring. Even today, almost ten years after the beginning of the Arab revolutions, the great significance and urgency of these events are still apparent.

Equally memorable as the events as such has been the coverage the protests in the Arab world have received by both the media and politics, which strikingly teems with metaphors. Even known linguist and political activist Noam Chomsky seemingly cannot avoid resorting to the use of metaphor, when describing and explaining what occurred in Tunisia and Egypt:

The shock wave was set in motion by the dramatic uprising in Tunisia that drove out a Western-backed dictator, with reverberations especially in Egypt, where demonstrators overwhelmed a dictator’s brutal police. (Chomsky 2012, 253)

Chomsky speaks of shock waves, driving out dictators and reverberations. Likewise, the short news excerpt below, taken from the British newspaper The Guardian, is full of metaphorical expressions: Syria being in flames, Egypt deadlocked, Libya enfeebled, the gloom and growing shadow of the events, and even the idea of a welcomed revolution.
With Syria in flames, Egypt deadlocked, and Libya enfeebled, a Tunisian failure would complete the gloom casting a growing shadow over a revolution once so widely welcomed in the region and outside. (Guardian, 26 July 2013)

Without going further into detail at this point, the sheer amount of metaphors in these altogether only sixty-three words is striking. One can easily identify at least nine instances of metaphorisation (ranging from simple personification to driving vehicles and disastrous natural forces), already adverting to the large amount of metaphors that can be found in various types of discourse regarding the Arab Spring. And we must also bear in mind that all of these metaphors carry evaluative notions relevant for the question of how we perceive the events.

1.1. Why metaphor?

According to Geary (2011), “research [into metaphor] has shown that people not only remember metaphors better than the actual wording of texts but they also continue to use those metaphors when thinking further about the same topic” (p. 124). It follows that metaphors in discourse are powerful rhetorical tools. In politics and media, in particular, metaphors represent an accessible linguistic device that decreases complexity and eases comprehension. Moreover, metaphors invoke more than just semantic meanings, but possess pragmatic functions often specifically deployed in public discourse to influence and sway people’s opinions. In doing so, however, their influential and manipulative nature often remains hidden and affects us subconsciously. Metaphors not only carry weight on the linguistic level, they also resonate strongly on a conceptual basis (Barcelona and Valenzuela 2011, 27). Deployed accordingly, they can become lastingly entrenched in long-term memory and eventually turn into a new construal of reality. Moreover, metaphors encode important political positions and, by analogical reference to basic and relatable human experiences, they can have strong emotional resonance. The recognition of the relevance of the present study
rests on the knowledge and awareness that metaphors may have crucial effects on the way we perceive and think about different topics and events. They denote important aspects of world knowledge and the way events and states of affairs are processed. Eventually, metaphors may even change peoples’ perceptions of events as much as representations of socio-political structure. After all, language is never arbitrary and wording is assumed to be ideological (see, e.g., Stubbs 1996, 107). Thus, a critical discourse analysis of metaphors – and their evaluative prosodies – used to describe and conceptualise the Arab revolutions shall enrich and further our understanding of these major political events (see also van Dijk 1997, 38). On a socio-political basis, it follows that a critical investigation of discourse shall raise awareness and call into question the language that has been used to depict these notable events.

1.2. The language of the Arab Spring as a research area

But why study the language of the Arab revolutions in the first place? Much has been written and published about the Arab Spring ever since the beginning of the revolts and uprisings in late 2010 and early 2011. Especially during the years 2012 to 2014 we saw a large number of new publications enter the market and academic world. Most of these publications, however, deal with socio-political, geopolitical, historical, cultural, legal or religious issues connected with the events. Scholars in the field have been trying to understand and explain why these revolutions happened when and the way they did (see, for instance, Rand 2013; Dabashi 2012). They have, furthermore, intensively studied (local and global) geo-political and economic factors that have played a role in the uprisings as well as the transitional, democratic changes most of the Arab Spring countries have been and are still going through (Peters 2012; Davis 2013; Inbar 2013; Fosshagen 2014; Mason 2014; Saikal 2014; Talani 2014; van Hüllen 2015; Lacroix and Filiu 2018; Mohamed and Fahmy 2019; Martinez 2020). Besides various facets of a post-revolutionary future in the Middle East and North Africa
(e.g., Amīn 2012; Noueihed and Warren 2012; Ğamšīdī 2014), the following aspects have been investigated: the role of women (Khalil 2015; Olimat 2014; Schneider 2014; Guercio 2019; Stephan and Charrad 2020), religion (Awad 2012; Israeli 2013; Noi 2013; Tibi 2013; Muedini 2014), the military (Hansen 2014; Burns 2019), international law (Panara and Wilson 2013), human rights (El-Halabi 2019), and multiculturalism (Ennaji 2014).

Moreover, personal stories have been told and shared with the world, contributing immensely to the outside’s understanding of people’s unique experiences (see, for instance, Al-Saleh 2015, di Giovanni 2016, or Lina Ben Mhenni’s (2011) retelling of her experiences in the early days of the Tunisian revolution). The role of, particularly new, media has likely been dealt with most extensively, which hardly comes as a surprise considering that never before have modern technologies and communication tools played such important parts in the organisation of civil protests (Howard et al. 2011; Khondker 2011; Benkirane 2012; Comunello and Anzera 2012; Carvin 2013; Howard and Hussain 2013; Karolak 2013; Adi 2014; Bebawi and Bossio 2014; Hudson, Iskandar and Kirk 2014; Müller and Hübner 2014; Jamali 2015; Cherribi 2017; Smidi and Shahin 2017).

Regarding the use and role of language in the Arab Spring more specifically, studies have looked at translation (Morgner and Aldreabi 2020), the development of language attitudes and dialects of Arabic (Harb Michel 2013; Neggaz 2013; Gabsi 2020a), language communities and the roles different languages have played in the revolutions (Bruns, Highfield and Burgess 2013), the role of slogans, graffiti and satirical graphics (Al-Sowaidi, Banda and Mansour 2015; Lennon 2014; Abaza 2016; El-Farahaty 2019), the language of regional hip hop and rap (Gabsi 2019, 2020b), and story and visual frames in news coverage (Bruce 2014; Haigh and Bruce 2017; Afzal and Harun 2020).  

There do also exist a few studies investigating the use of metaphors in media or political discourse surrounding the Arab Spring, though this list of studies is still considerably short.
While Bhatia (2015), for instance, does consider the Arab Spring in her qualitative discourse analytic studies of discursive strategies (‘discursive illusions’), she focuses on a number of different public discourses on a variety of topics equally including the ‘War on Terror’ and debates on climate change. Studies by Torlakova (2014), Maalej (2012), Möller (2014) and Núñez (2014) look at the discourses surrounding the Arab revolutions in more detail and therefore demonstrate the greatest relevance in regard to the present study.

Torlakova (2014) and Maalej (2012) both provide research on cognitive-linguistic phenomena in Arabic. Torlakova (2014) focuses on Arabic metaphors in political discourse. Her data set comprises 270,000 words in the form of news articles published online by *Al Jazeera* between 17 December 2010 and 1 August 2011. Torlakova’s methodological approach is based on Charteris-Black’s ‘Critical Metaphor Analysis’, which will also be outlined in chapters 3 and 6. Maalej (2012) presents a combinational approach of CDA and cognitive pragmatics. More specifically, he investigates elements of deixis in the last three speeches by former Tunisian president Ben Ali. Möller (2014) did a comparative study of cognitive metaphors in German and English news articles. Altogether, Möller’s investigation is restricted to a corpus consisting of four media sources and twenty-three reports. In her analysis, she primarily introduces a variety of different instantiations of the source domain FORCES OF NATURE, specifically WATER, FIRE, EARTHQUAKE, VOLCANIC ERUPTION and WIND. Furthermore she investigates and discusses country-specific metaphors in the coverage of Tunisia and Egypt. Finally, Núñez (2014) examined the role of embodiment in the political context of the Arab Spring by looking at realisations of the image schema PATH in German media discourse. Her corpus comprises altogether 300 texts collected from five German newspapers and magazines (p. 155). For her analysis, she searched the corpus for various syntactic construction types in German using AntConc (Anthony 2014). Núñez bases her analysis on the EVENT STRUCTURE metaphor and, specifically, the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL
schema (see, e.g., Johnson 1987; Lakoff 1990[1987]). These studies are of great importance and offered vital starting points for the pursuit of my own research and I will refer to their findings wherever appropriate during the course of the book.

Overall, the amount of studies looking specifically at the use of linguistic tools in international discourse on the Arab Spring is comparatively small. With this book, I seek to contribute to a closing of this apparent gap in linguistic academic research on the Arab revolutions and provide a representative analysis of how the events have been dealt with in politics and the media from a purely linguistic perspective. On the basis of a tailor-made corpus of more than eleven million words, the present study investigates the use of cognitive-linguistic metaphors in both political and mass media discourse surrounding the events of the Arab Spring. In doing so, it unites multiple research areas from the field of linguistics, i.e. ‘corpus linguistics’, ‘cognitive linguistics’ and ‘critical discourse studies’. Methodologically, the present work presents an innovative approach to the interpretation and evaluation of metaphors by strengthening the value of contextual information. In order to provide detailed qualitative insights into a multi-million-word data set, I particularly relied on the inclusion of semantic prosodies and collocational analyses. In doing so, I was able to not only offer a frequency-based evaluation of more than 70,000 metaphors, but also create nuanced profiles of how different media sources and political representatives investigated have portrayed the Arab revolutions using these metaphors. Precisely, I compared liberal and conservative media sources from the US and the UK as well as independent and state-owned news coverage from the Middle East and North Africa. Political speeches were equally chosen to represent these three geopolitical regions. The research questions underlying this study are inspired by Charteris-Black (2004, 88-89) and are as follows (for more details, see chapter 6):

1. What linguistic metaphors can be identified in international political and media discourse about the Arab revolutions?
2. What are potential conceptual metaphors underlying the ones identified in 1) and what evidence is there to suggest the existence of said metaphors?

3. How can the use of the metaphors identified in 1) and 2) be explained given the political context?

4. What similarities and differences can be observed when comparing the use of metaphors in
   a. British, American and MENA political discourse?
   b. British, American and MENA media discourse?
   c. Conservative versus liberal and independent versus state-owned media discourse?
   d. Media reportage and political discourse, i.e. is political language, for instance, more euphemistic than the media or vice versa?
   e. Western political discourse in reference to the different Arab nations, i.e. are important political partners such as Egypt treated differently than, for instance, Syria?

5. What are possible explanations for those similarities and differences?

All in all and to my knowledge, such a detailed and in-depth study has not yet been done. Most of all, however, I hope that the results of the present thesis may expand our knowledge of the Arab revolutions, if not add to our understanding of human language and the role and functions of metaphor as well as their effects on perception.

I deeply believe that language is a powerful tool and that, by studying it more closely, we can learn so much more about human thinking and behaviour. This book will not resolve the socio-political problems addressed here, neither will it provide answers to why these events happened. But I hope that it will allow us to understand more profoundly why these events
were represented and processed in a certain way and how this has affected how we think about them. Ideally, it will make us more sensible to future events and the discourse constructed around them.

1.3. Structure of the book

The book follows a logical structure in that it represents the process from the onset of the events to setting up a research framework and eventually achieving a reflection of the metaphorical images portrayed though the lens of the media and politics via the results of my analysis.

Following the present introduction, chapter 2, “Unhinging the Old Order: the ‘Arab Spring’ Protests and Revolutions”, offers an overview of the events and provides essential background information on the demonstrations and revolutions, focusing on Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria. Knowledge of these events may, at a later point, be required for a better understanding of the reactions by both politicians and the media.

Chapter 3, “Performing a Critical Metaphor Analysis in a Conceptual Integration Framework”, has at its centre the study of metaphor and its position or role in the different academic disciplines critical discourse studies and cognitive linguistics. The second half of this chapter then focuses on the investigation of metaphor in Fauconnier and Turner’s so-called ‘conceptual integration’ framework and how metaphors are used to frame discourse.

Following this discussion of metaphor from critical and cognitive perspectives, chapter 4, “Corpus Approaches to Critical Cognitive Metaphor Analysis”, deals with approaches to metaphor within the field of corpus linguistics. This chapter chiefly summarises continuous developments in the research area towards more automated procedures for the identification and classification of metaphor.
A full presentation of the corpus and its set-up follows in chapter 5, “The ‘Arab Spring’ Corpus: Set-up and Design”. After a brief discussion of the variables that were considered for the compilation and design of the corpus, the data and content of the media and political sub-corpora are outlined. This will be followed by a few notes on the compilation process. Chapter 5 ends with a reflection on how the phrase ‘Arab Spring’ has evolved since the beginning of the events in 2011 and how it manifested itself as a fixed label of how we have conceptualised these momentous revolutions.

In chapter 6, “Using Contextual Information in a Large-Scale Study of Metaphor”, the main methodological steps that underpin the present study are outlined. Following the discussion of quantitative and qualitative approaches, the chapter ends with a section on the notions ‘collocation’ and ‘semantic prosody’. Both play a special role in the process of metaphor evaluation as developed for this piece of work.

In chapter 7, “The Metaphors of the Arab Revolutions”, the main cognitive metaphors identified in the corpus are presented. Focus of this chapter are the following nine conceptual domains, which are discussed in more detail and illustrated with examples: SEASONS, PLANTS AND FRUIT; BIRTH, PREGNANCY AND FAMILY; NATURAL FORCES AND DISASTERS; CONTAGIOUS DISEASES, HEALTHY AND UNHEALTHY BODIES; BUILDINGS AND FOUNDATIONS; JOURNEYS; POSSESSIONS, PRODUCTS AND GOODS; BOUNDED SPACES AND (HOT) SUBSTANCES IN CONTAINERS and, finally, concepts of MORALITY AND IMMORALITY.

Chapters 8, “Of Journeys and Natural Forces”, and 9, “Of Journeys and Diseases”, focus on the framing of the Arab revolutions in mass media and politics respectively. While chapter 8 will chiefly discuss the metaphorical images that were deployed in the media to represent the events, chapter 9 will follow the same agenda for the political data. Specifically, the question ‘Which representations of reality have the media and politics constructed in their discourse in
relation to the Arab Spring protests?’ will be answered for the distinct sources. Finally, chapter 10, “Conclusion”, summarises the main points and findings presented in this book.

1 Please note that this is not an exhaustive list, but a snapshot of the vast amount of studies on the Arab Spring.