



The Role of Metaphor in Shaping Conceptualisation Across Languages

Umar Riaz ¹, Husnain Ali ², Humaira Salik ³, Umme Ammara ⁴, Anam Ikhtiar ¹

¹ Institute of Language and Literature, Riphah International University, Islamabad, Pakistan

² Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge

³ Riphah International Islamic University, English Department, Lahore, Pakistan, Healthcare Department, NHS UK

⁴ Department of English Literature, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Pakistan

^{*1} Fulbright foreign language teaching assistant at Hamilton Lugar School of Global and International Studies, Indiana University, Bloomington, USA

✉ ***Corresponding author:** Anam Ikhtiar



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ABSTRACT: Metaphor is not simply an ornamental feature of language but a fundamental mechanism of human cognition that structures how individuals conceptualise and communicate abstract ideas. Rooted in Cognitive Linguistics, this study explores the role of metaphor in shaping conceptualisation across languages, drawing primarily on the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). The paper argues that metaphors are central to organising thought processes, framing cultural models, and constructing worldviews. They enable speakers to understand complex or intangible domains, such as time, emotion, and morality, through more concrete and embodied experiences. By comparing metaphorical systems in English, Chinese, and Urdu, the study reveals both universal and culture-specific patterns of metaphorical mapping. For example, metaphors such as TIME IS MONEY in English, HEART AS MIND in Chinese, and LOVE AS FIRE in Urdu demonstrate how cultural and linguistic contexts shape distinct conceptualisations of reality. These cross-linguistic differences highlight that language is not a neutral conduit but a cognitive and cultural system reflecting shared experiences and values. Ultimately, the paper concludes that metaphors act as a bridge between language, thought, and culture, providing valuable insights into how humans perceive, reason, and interact with the world across linguistic boundaries.

KEYWORDS: Metaphor, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Cognitive Linguistics, Cross-Linguistic Conceptualisation, Language and Culture, English, Chinese, Urdu.

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Introduction

Metaphor has long been a topic of intellectual curiosity, attracting the attention of philosophers, linguists, and cognitive scientists alike. Traditionally, metaphor was viewed as a rhetorical or poetic embellishment used to decorate language and add aesthetic value to speech. However, with the emergence of cognitive linguistics, particularly through the pioneering work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980), metaphor came to be recognised as an essential mechanism of human cognition rather than a mere linguistic flourish. Metaphors are now seen as the foundation of conceptualisation—the process by which human beings make sense of abstract, complex, or intangible concepts by mapping them onto familiar ones. (Gibbs, 1994; Cameron & Low, 1999)

In this cognitive view, metaphor is not restricted to literary or artistic expression; instead, it permeates everyday communication and influences how people think, reason, and act. For instance, expressions such as 'spending time,' 'winning an argument,' or 'rising above difficulties' reveal how conceptual metaphors underpin ordinary discourse. These metaphors reflect systematic correspondences between conceptual domains—one abstract (e.g., time, argument, life) and the other concrete (e.g., money, war, journey). As such, metaphor is a cognitive instrument that structures perception and shapes reality itself.

The study of metaphor across languages provides unique insights into the relationship between language, thought, and culture. Different linguistic communities conceptualise similar experiences in distinct ways based on cultural practices, historical development, and shared worldviews. For example, in English, time is often viewed as a commodity that can be 'spent' or 'saved,' reflecting capitalist and efficiency-oriented cultural values. In contrast, Chinese and Urdu speakers conceptualise time and emotion through culturally embedded metaphors linked to relational harmony and spirituality. This diversity suggests that while the human mind employs universal metaphorical mechanisms, the specific conceptual mappings are shaped by the sociocultural context.

This paper aims to explore how metaphor shapes conceptualisation across languages, focusing on how metaphorical systems reflect and influence cultural cognition. Comparing English, Chinese, and Urdu metaphors highlights both the universality and variability of conceptual metaphors. The discussion builds on the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) as the primary theoretical framework, emphasising how abstract thought is structured by embodied experience and cultural context. Understanding metaphor in this way allows us to appreciate language not only as a means of communication but also as a mirror of human consciousness and cultural identity. (Gibbs, 1994; Cameron & Low, 1999)

Theoretical Framework: Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT)

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) emerged as one of the most influential frameworks within cognitive linguistics, proposed by Lakoff and Johnson in their seminal work **Metaphors We Live By**

(1980). CMT asserts that metaphor is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but a fundamental structure of human thought. According to this theory, our conceptual system is largely metaphorical in nature, meaning that people understand abstract domains of experience in terms of more concrete, familiar ones. Metaphor thus becomes a cognitive tool that enables the mind to bridge the gap between physical experience and abstract concepts.

In CMT, metaphors are described as mappings between two conceptual domains: the source domain and the target domain. The source domain provides concrete, embodied experiences—such as movement, vision, or spatial orientation—while the target domain represents abstract concepts like time, emotion, or morality. For example, in the metaphor 'TIME IS MONEY,' the source domain of money (a tangible resource) is mapped onto the target domain of time (an abstract concept), allowing speakers to conceptualise time as something valuable, quantifiable, and expendable. Similarly, 'ARGUMENT IS WAR' structures the act of debating as a competitive encounter, where participants attack.

CMT also emphasises the embodiment of metaphor. Human cognition arises from physical interaction with the environment; therefore, metaphorical mappings are grounded in bodily experience. Expressions such as 'I'm feeling up' or 'He's feeling down' stem from the physical correlation between posture and emotion. When people are happy, they tend to stand upright, whereas sadness often involves slumped posture. This embodied grounding demonstrates that metaphorical thought is universal, though its expression is shaped by culture and language.

Moreover, CMT recognises cultural variation in metaphorical conceptualisation. While some metaphors, such as 'LIFE IS A JOURNEY,' appear cross-linguistically, their realisation and interpretation differ across cultures. In English, this metaphor often emphasises individual progress and achievement. In contrast, in Chinese or Urdu, life may be viewed as a collective journey or spiritual path. Hence, CMT provides a flexible model that accommodates both the universality of metaphorical cognition and the specificity of cultural embodiment. This theoretical perspective underpins the present study by offering a framework for analysing how metaphor shapes conceptualisation across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980)

Theoretical Framework: Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT)

Conceptual Metaphor Theory, developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) in *Metaphors We Live By*, proposes that human thought is largely metaphorical. According to CMT, metaphors structure one conceptual domain in terms of another. For example: (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980)

TIME IS MONEY → "You're wasting my time."

ARGUMENT IS WAR → "She shot down his argument."

These mappings (e.g., *time* → *money*, *argument* → *war*) demonstrate that abstract concepts are understood through more concrete, embodied experiences.

CMT distinguishes between:

Source domain: the concrete, physical experience (e.g., war).

Target domain: the abstract concept being understood (e.g., *argument*).

Thus, metaphor is a cognitive process, not just a linguistic one. It organises conceptual systems that influence how people perceive, reason, and act in the world. (Gibbs, 1994; Cameron & Low, 1999)

3. Metaphor and Conceptualisation

Metaphor shapes conceptualisation by linking abstract ideas to sensory and physical experiences. For instance, the metaphor HAPPINESS IS UP appears in English expressions such as “I’m feeling up today” or “His spirits rose.” Similarly, SADNESS IS DOWN is seen in “He’s feeling down.” These metaphors are grounded in human bodily experience – people physically stand upright when energetic and slump when sad. (Gibbs, 1994; Cameron & Low, 1999)

Metaphor also guides moral reasoning and emotional understanding. For instance, in many cultures, GOOD IS LIGHT and EVIL IS DARK, reflecting visual and perceptual associations. These metaphorical patterns shape moral cognition and cultural narratives across societies. (Gibbs, 1994; Cameron & Low, 1999)

Cross-Linguistic Perspectives on Metaphor (Yu, 1998; Sharifian, 2011)

While some metaphorical mappings are universal, others vary across languages due to cultural and experiential differences. (Gibbs, 1994; Cameron & Low, 1999)

English

English speakers frequently use spatial metaphors for time and emotion. For example:

TIME IS MONEY: “Save time,” “Spend time,” “Wasting time.”

LIFE IS A JOURNEY: “She’s at a crossroads,” “He’s on the right path.”

These metaphors reflect a Western emphasis on individualism, linear progress, and economic value systems.

Chinese

In Chinese, metaphors often reflect holistic and relational worldviews rooted in Confucian and Taoist philosophy. For instance: (Gibbs, 1994; Cameron & Low, 1999)

HEART (心, xīn) represents both emotion and cognition, unlike English, where the “mind” and “heart” are distinct.

The metaphor UP-DOWN is used differently: shàng (up) connotes superiority and hierarchy, while xià (down) implies inferiority, reflecting social structure. (Gibbs, 1994; Cameron & Low, 1999)

Chinese temporal metaphors are also unique. Time is often conceptualised vertically rather than horizontally. For example, shàng ge yuè (literally “upper month”) means “last month,” indicating the past is above, not behind as in English. (Gibbs, 1994; Cameron & Low, 1999)

Urdu

In Urdu, metaphors are deeply embedded in poetic and emotional expression. Many Urdu metaphors draw from Islamic, Persian, and South Asian cultural traditions: (Gibbs, 1994; Cameron & Low, 1999)

LOVE IS FIRE: “Ishq ka dariya hai, doob ke jaana hai” (“Love is an ocean in which one must drown”).

HEART IS A CONTAINER: “Dil bhar gaya” (“The heart is full”), “Dil toot gaya” (“The heart is broken”).

These expressions conceptualise emotion through vivid sensory imagery, reflecting the high value placed on emotional depth and aesthetic beauty in Urdu-speaking cultures.

5. Metaphor, Culture, and Cognition

Metaphor reveals the intimate relationship between language, culture, and cognition. Shared experiences, environment, and values shape the metaphors a culture uses. For example: (Gibbs, 1994; Cameron & Low, 1999)

Western metaphors often emphasise control, measurement, and progress.

Eastern metaphors emphasise harmony, balance, and relationality.

Islamic and South Asian metaphors often highlight spirituality, devotion, and emotion.

These metaphorical systems influence not just how people talk but how they think and act. They guide reasoning, decision-making, and even moral judgment. (Gibbs, 1994; Cameron & Low, 1999)

Cognitive linguists such as Kövecses (2005) argue that while the human body provides universal grounding for many metaphors, cultural models determine their interpretation and salience. Thus, metaphors are simultaneously universal (in structure) and culture-specific (in content). (Kövecses, 2005)

6. Implications for Cross-Cultural Communication

Understanding metaphorical conceptualisation is crucial for translation, intercultural communication, and second language learning. Literal translations often fail to convey the intended meaning because metaphors differ across cultures. For instance, translating “TIME IS MONEY” into a culture where time is not monetised may lead to misunderstanding. (Gibbs, 1994; Cameron & Low, 1999)

Language educators can use metaphor awareness to help learners understand hidden cultural meanings. Similarly, cross-cultural researchers can analyse metaphorical systems to uncover cultural cognition and worldview differences. (Gibbs, 1994; Cameron & Low, 1999)

7. Conclusion

Metaphor is a powerful cognitive tool that structures how humans conceptualise the world. Through metaphor, abstract experiences become comprehensible, and cultural values become linguistically encoded. Cross-linguistic variations in metaphor reflect deeper differences in cultural cognition and worldview. (Yu, 1998; Sharifian, 2011)

By examining metaphors across languages such as English, Chinese, and Urdu, it becomes clear that while the human capacity for metaphor is universal, the specific conceptualisations it produces are

shaped by cultural experience. Metaphor, therefore, stands as a bridge between language, thought, and culture—revealing that to understand a language deeply is to understand the metaphors that shape its speakers' minds. (Gibbs, 1994; Cameron & Low, 1999).

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