

THE ROLE OF METAPHORS IN COGNITIVE PROCESSES: METAPHOR AND ABSTRACT THOUGHT

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Abstract: This paper investigates the role of metaphor in cognitive processes, tracing its conceptualization from traditional linguistic views of secondary nomination to contemporary cognitive linguistic theories that consider it fundamental to human thought. Examining lexicological perspectives on metaphor as a semantic recategorization, the study highlights the shift towards understanding metaphor as an integral aspect of cognition, influencing the generation, reception, processing, and communication of information. Ultimately, the paper underscores the cognitive theory's perspective on metaphor as a basic mental operation that bridges conceptual domains, facilitating the conceptualization of reality and providing a framework for analyzing metaphorical models that structure our understanding across diverse conceptual areas.

Key words: Metaphor, Cognitive processes, Cognitive linguistics, Linguistic phenomenon, Conceptual metaphor theory, Human thought, Everyday communication, Conceptual domains

Introduction: The seminal work of the ancient Greek philosopher and scientist Aristotle defined metaphor as a specific linguistic phenomenon involving the semantic re-categorization of a term. He posited that metaphor operates through a process of transferring a lexical item from its primary referent to a secondary object based on perceived analogical relationships. In Aristotle's view, this linguistic mechanism plays a crucial role in the construction of a unique artistic representation of reality within artistic discourse, thereby illuminating the distinctive creative agency of the author.

Drawing upon contemporary linguistic scholarship, several principal theoretical frameworks have been developed to conceptualize metaphor as a form of secondary nomination. The initial perspective characterizes metaphor as a fundamentally lexicological phenomenon. Proponents of this view contend that the instantiation of metaphor resides within the inherent semantic architecture of lexical items. This approach focuses on the identification and categorization of the linguistic attributes of metaphor, encompassing its morphological, derivational, and syntactic dimensions. Within this framework, the interpretation of metaphor centers on elucidating the semantic processes involved in the transposition of a linguistic unit's form or a linguistic category's structure from one object of designation to another, predicated on perceived similarities. Consequently, the resultant meaning of the linguistic unit is understood as being derived from this named semantic operation.

Metaphor and Cognition: The publication of Lakoff and Johnson's influential work, "Metaphors We Live By," in 1980 marked a turning point in the understanding of metaphor. In this work, the linguists challenged traditional perspectives, asserting that metaphor is not merely a rhetorical device but a foundational element of human thought and everyday communication. They argued that metaphors function as conceptual frameworks through which individuals perceive and comprehend the world. Lakoff and Johnson's findings initiated

a new epoch in the study of this secondary naming mechanism, shifting its conceptualization to that of a profound aspect of human consciousness that shapes one's perception of reality. Indeed the relationship between metaphor and cognition is being a central topic in contemporary linguistics, psychology, and philosophy. Contrary to earlier views that considered metaphor a mere rhetorical flourish, modern cognitive theories posit that metaphor is fundamental to human thought and understanding.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory: Basic Principle: Proposed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their seminal work "Metaphors We Live By" (1980), this theory argues that metaphor is not just a linguistic phenomenon but a cognitive process. It suggests that we understand abstract concepts and experiences in terms of more concrete ones. Conceptual Domains: Metaphor works by mapping elements from a source domain (typically concrete and familiar) onto a target domain (typically abstract). For example, in the metaphor "love is a journey," the concrete domain of "journey" (with elements like travelers, paths, obstacles, destinations) is used to understand the abstract domain of "love." Pervasiveness: Conceptual metaphors are not isolated linguistic expressions but rather underlying systems that shape how we think, reason, and act. They are deeply embedded in our everyday language and thought processes, often operating unconsciously. Understanding and Reasoning: Metaphors allow us to make sense of complex or abstract ideas by relating them to our embodied experiences and knowledge of the physical world. They provide inferential structures that enable us to reason about the target domain in terms of the source domain. For instance, if "arguments are war," we might think about strategies for "winning" or "losing" an argument.

Cognitive Functions of Metaphor: Conceptualization: Metaphors are crucial for forming new concepts and understanding existing ones in novel ways. They allow us to categorize abstract entities and delineate their boundaries.

Reasoning and Inference: By mapping the structure of a source domain onto a target domain, metaphors enable us to draw inferences and make predictions about the target based on our knowledge of the source.

Communication: Metaphors facilitate communication by providing shared conceptual frameworks that allow individuals to understand abstract or complex ideas more readily. They can create vivid imagery and enhance understanding.

Problem-Solving and Decision-Making: The metaphors we use can influence how we frame problems and the solutions we consider. Different metaphors can lead to different approaches to a situation.

Emotional Understanding: Metaphors help us to understand and express complex emotions by relating them to more tangible experiences. For example, "anger is a hot fluid in a container" helps us conceptualize the feeling of rising anger.

Learning: Metaphors can serve as powerful tools for learning by linking new information to existing knowledge in a meaningful way.

Challenges to the Theory: While Cognitive Metaphor Theory has been highly influential, it has also faced some critiques. Some researchers argue that not all thought is fundamentally metaphorical and that literal language plays a more significant role than the theory suggests. Others focus on the processing of metaphors, suggesting that novel and conventional metaphors might be understood through different cognitive mechanisms. In conclusion, the relationship between metaphor and cognition is understood as deep and

integral. Metaphor is not merely a linguistic tool for ornamentation but a fundamental cognitive mechanism that shapes how we perceive, understand, and interact with the world around us. It provides us with essential frameworks for conceptualizing abstract ideas, reasoning, communicating, and solving problems.

Moreover, Thomas Hobbes states that the primary role of speech is to transmit thoughts and knowledge efficiently through the straightforward use of literal language. He viewed metaphorical and figurative language as a nonsensical and directionless deviation from this core function. Conversely, thinkers and scientists of the Romantic era argued that metaphor is not merely a communicative tool but a fundamental mode of understanding. Nietzsche further proposed that the relationship between subject and object is inherently aesthetic and mediated by metaphor, leading him to conclude that cognition itself is metaphorical. Cassirer, in a similar vein, considered metaphor to be the bedrock of mythological conceptualizations of existence. He distinguished between metaphorical (mythical and poetic) and discursive-logical modes of thought, suggesting that metaphorical cognition reveals unique qualitative aspects of understanding compared to its discursive-logical counterpart.

Illustrative Examples of Metaphorical Conceptualization

The pervasive role of metaphor in imagining abstract notions is evident across various domains, from everyday human experiences to complex scientific and philosophical discourse, and even in the framing of societal challenges.

Everyday Abstract Concepts (e.g., Time, Love, Life) Abstract concepts that are central to human experience are routinely conceptualized through metaphor.

- **Time:** Time is frequently understood in terms of money or a resource, leading to expressions like "I spent time at work today," "I saved time by taking a shortcut," or "Don't waste my time". This metaphor influences behaviour, encouraging efficient time management. Time is also conceptualized as a path into physical space, as seen in "the days ahead".
- **Love:** Love is commonly understood as a journey, leading to phrases such as "We've come a long way together" or "Our relationship is at a crossroads". This metaphor highlights progression, shared experiences, and potential obstacles.
- **Life:** The abstract notion of life is frequently discussed using a variety of metaphors across cultures and historical contexts, reflecting a cognitive strategy to understand its continuity, purpose, and value.
 - **Life as a physical journey:** Expressions like "come a long way" or "on the right path" map goal-directed motion onto life's progression, with individuals seen as "travelers" and goals as "destinations".
 - **Life as a story:** Phrases such as "I'm *writing* a new *chapter*" structure life around a narrative template, reinforcing continuity and purpose, often casting the self as a hero.
 - **Life as a war or struggle:** "Every day is a *battle*" or "life is a constant *struggle*" are common framings, especially in some cultures like Hungarian.
 - **Life as a stage play:** This theatrical metaphor casts life as a performance where "actors" adopt "roles" on different "stages," potentially allowing individuals to discount social roles when facing failure.
 - **Life as a precious possession:** Americans often describe life as a "valuable commodity to be cherished".

These metaphors are not limited to linguistic expressions; they are also communicated through non-linguistic forms such as images, ceremonies, and gestures.

Conclusion: Based on the core principles of cognitive metaphor theory, it is evident that the rise of cognitive linguistics has placed metaphor at the forefront of its research agenda. This emphasis is justified by the demonstrable involvement of metaphor in cognitive processes, including the generation, reception, processing, and communication of information. Metaphor is inherently connected to the shared experiences of a specific community or culture, embodying their historical understandings of the world. As a tool for naming, metaphor forms the basis of analogical thought. Consequently, an analysis of the metaphors within a particular language provides a means to comprehend the foundational aspects of that culture, tracing its historical development.

Cognitive theory examines metaphor as a fundamental mental operation that integrates diverse conceptual spheres to clarify, characterize, and comprehend one sphere through another, thus serving as a means of conceptualizing reality. To study metaphors, this theoretical framework proposes an analysis of a language's conceptual metaphors, considering their structure, or metaphorical models. These models consist of sets of metaphors originating from a unified conceptual area that contribute to a more comprehensive depiction and explanation of a specific phenomenon within a different conceptual area.

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