

METAPHOR IN EVERYDAY LANGUAGE: HOW FIGURATIVE EXPRESSIONS SHAPE THOUGHT AND COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

Metaphor is a central feature of everyday language and is not limited to poetry, literature, or deliberate rhetorical expression. People routinely use metaphorical expressions to describe time, emotions, relationships, knowledge, argument, and social experience. This article examines metaphor from a linguistic and cognitive perspective, focusing on how recurring figurative patterns influence everyday communication. Drawing primarily on conceptual metaphor theory and subsequent pragmatic and discourse-oriented approaches, the discussion considers the relationship between metaphorical language, conceptualization, context, and culture. Expressions such as describing an argument as a journey, time as a resource, or emotional states as locations demonstrate that speakers often understand abstract experiences through more concrete domains. The article also examines metaphor in education, media, and interpersonal communication, emphasizing that interpretation depends on shared knowledge and context. Understanding metaphor as a systematic component of language provides insight into how speakers organize experience and communicate complex ideas.

Keywords:

metaphor, conceptual metaphor, cognitive linguistics, figurative language, pragmatics, discourse

Introduction

Metaphor is commonly associated with literary language, but figurative expression is deeply embedded in ordinary communication. Speakers describe ideas as clear or unclear, relationships as close or distant, time as something that can be spent or saved, and arguments as positions that can be defended or attacked. These expressions are so familiar that speakers may not experience them as particularly creative. Nevertheless, they reveal important relationships between language, thought, and experience.

Traditional approaches often treated metaphor primarily as a rhetorical device. In modern linguistics, however, metaphor has increasingly been examined as a conceptual phenomenon. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argued that metaphor is not merely a matter

of unusual wording; conceptual metaphor structures the way people understand one domain in terms of another. This perspective has influenced cognitive linguistics, discourse analysis, pragmatics, and studies of language education.

The study of metaphor is important because abstract concepts are difficult to describe without relying on familiar experiences. Speakers need ways to communicate emotions, social relationships, intellectual activities, and temporal processes. Metaphorical mappings provide such resources. They allow people to make unfamiliar or abstract experiences more accessible by relating them to physical movement, space, objects, conflict, or other concrete domains.

This article examines how metaphor operates in everyday language, how metaphorical expressions contribute to meaning, and why context and culture are important for interpretation. The discussion also considers the role of metaphor in education and communication.

Conceptual Metaphor and Everyday Thought

Conceptual metaphor theory distinguishes between a conceptual mapping and the individual linguistic expressions through which that mapping becomes visible. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) proposed that many ordinary expressions reflect broader conceptual structures. For example, expressions concerning an argument may draw on a conflict or war domain: participants can defend a position, attack an argument, or win a debate.

The importance of this approach is that metaphorical language is systematic. Individual expressions are not necessarily isolated inventions. They can belong to larger patterns that organize related meanings. Similarly, people frequently conceptualize time through spatial or economic relationships. A person can look forward to an event, leave something behind, spend time, save time, or waste time. These expressions connect an abstract domain with more concrete experiences.

Such patterns do not mean that speakers are consciously constructing metaphors whenever they speak. Many metaphorical expressions have become conventionalized and function as ordinary vocabulary. The linguistic form may therefore appear literal in everyday use even though its historical or conceptual structure is figurative.

Cognitive linguistic research has consequently emphasized the relationship between language and conceptualization. Kövecses (2010) notes that metaphor can reflect embodied experience while also being shaped by cultural models. This combination explains why some metaphorical patterns appear widely across languages while others are strongly associated with particular cultural environments.

Metaphor, Meaning, and Context

Metaphorical interpretation is not determined solely by the words in an expression. Context influences which aspects of a metaphor are relevant. Consider a statement such as “the discussion went nowhere.” In one context, it may refer to a conversation that produced no conclusion; in another, it could be humorous or ironic. The underlying

journey metaphor provides a conceptual resource, but the communicative situation determines its precise interpretation.

Pragmatics is therefore important for metaphor analysis. Speakers use metaphor to communicate more than literal propositional content. A metaphor can evaluate, persuade, soften criticism, create humor, or establish a particular perspective. The listener must use contextual information and shared knowledge to infer the intended meaning.

Metaphor can also create different interpretations among audiences. A comparison that is familiar to one cultural group may be less accessible to another. Specialized professional communities may use metaphors that become conventional within their field. Scientific discourse, for example, frequently describes models as tools, systems as structures, or processes as pathways. Such expressions can help communicate complex ideas, but they also guide how readers conceptualize the subject.

This demonstrates that metaphor is both linguistic and social. It is not simply a decorative addition to a message. It can influence which aspects of an experience become prominent and how a speaker invites others to understand it.

Metaphor and Emotion

Emotions provide a particularly rich domain for metaphorical expression because emotional states are often difficult to observe directly. English speakers describe people as being deeply hurt, emotionally distant, overwhelmed, full of joy, under pressure, or consumed by anger. These expressions connect internal experience with physical space, force, temperature, movement, or containment.

Conceptual metaphor theory provides one explanation for this pattern. Abstract emotional experiences can be structured through more concrete domains that speakers encounter physically. For example, the expression “under pressure” conceptualizes emotional or social difficulty as a force acting upon a person. “Overwhelmed” suggests an experience in which a person is covered or overcome by something larger than the individual's capacity.

Metaphors can also influence interpersonal communication. Saying that someone is “carrying a burden” frames a problem as something that can be supported, shared, or eventually removed. Such language can communicate empathy because it provides a recognizable structure for an otherwise internal experience.

However, metaphorical meaning is not universal in every detail. Cultural expectations affect which images are conventional and emotionally appropriate. Kövecses (2005) emphasizes the interaction between universal embodied experience and culturally specific metaphorical patterns. This makes emotion metaphor an important area for comparative linguistic research.

Metaphor in Education and Academic Communication

Metaphor plays a major role in education because teachers and writers frequently need to explain abstract or complex concepts. A teacher may describe memory as a storage system, an argument as a structure, or learning as a journey. Such expressions can make unfamiliar concepts more accessible by connecting them with experiences that learners already understand.

At the same time, metaphors can influence interpretation. If a learner understands education primarily through the metaphor of a journey, progress may be associated with movement toward a destination. If education is described as construction, attention may instead focus on building knowledge step by step. The metaphor therefore does not merely simplify information; it can foreground certain relationships and background others.

Academic disciplines also develop conventional metaphors. Linguistics itself uses expressions such as language families, linguistic landscapes, speech communities, and branches of a theory. These terms organize complex information through recognizable conceptual structures.

For language learners, awareness of metaphor can improve both comprehension and vocabulary development. Learners who recognize common conceptual patterns may infer the meanings of unfamiliar expressions more effectively. However, teachers should also distinguish conventional metaphor from literal meaning and explain when an expression is restricted to particular registers or fields.

Metaphor, Culture, and Cross-Linguistic Communication

Metaphor provides an important perspective on the relationship between language and culture. Some conceptual patterns are based on bodily experiences that are broadly shared, such as movement, containment, physical force, or spatial orientation. Other metaphorical expressions depend strongly on cultural practices, historical experiences, and local knowledge.

Cross-linguistic comparison demonstrates both similarities and differences. Speakers of different languages may use related conceptual domains while employing different lexical expressions. In other cases, a metaphor that is conventional in one language may have no direct equivalent in another. Translators and language learners must therefore interpret not only vocabulary but also the cultural and pragmatic assumptions behind figurative language.

Metaphorical expressions can also change over time. A phrase may begin as a relatively creative comparison and become conventional through repeated use. Once conventionalized, speakers may no longer perceive its figurative origin. This process demonstrates how metaphor contributes to lexical and semantic change.

For multilingual communication, these observations have practical consequences. Literal translation of an idiomatic metaphor can produce an expression that is grammatically correct but pragmatically unusual. Effective communication may require

finding an equivalent conceptual expression or explaining the intended meaning. Metaphor awareness is therefore part of broader communicative competence.

Metaphor in Media and Public Discourse

Metaphor is particularly prominent in media and public discourse because it provides compact ways to frame complex events. Social, economic, technological, and institutional processes are frequently described through metaphors of movement, conflict, construction, health, or natural forces. These patterns allow speakers to present complicated information in familiar terms.

From a discourse-analytic perspective, the choice of metaphor can influence which aspects of an issue receive attention. Describing change as a journey foregrounds stages and direction, while describing it as a battle foregrounds conflict and opposition. The same subject can therefore be interpreted through different metaphorical frames.

This does not mean that a metaphor automatically determines an audience's interpretation. Readers and listeners bring their own knowledge and may reject or reinterpret a metaphorical framing. Nevertheless, metaphor provides a linguistic resource for organizing discourse and guiding attention.

For linguists, media metaphor is consequently valuable for studying the relationship between language, cognition, and social communication. Corpus-based analysis can identify recurring metaphorical patterns, while qualitative analysis can examine how particular expressions function in context. Combining these approaches can provide a more complete understanding of figurative language.

Conclusion

Metaphor is a fundamental part of everyday language rather than a feature restricted to literary style. Ordinary expressions about time, emotion, argument, knowledge, and relationships frequently rely on conceptual structures that connect abstract experience with more concrete domains. Cognitive linguistic approaches have demonstrated that these patterns can be systematic and meaningful.

At the same time, metaphor cannot be understood independently of context and culture. Speakers use metaphor for interpersonal, pragmatic, educational, and discourse purposes, and audiences interpret metaphor through shared knowledge and situational expectations. Some metaphors become conventional, while others remain creative or context-specific.

The study of metaphor therefore contributes to a broader understanding of language as a system that both communicates and organizes experience. For linguistics and language education, metaphor awareness can improve interpretation, vocabulary learning, translation, and discourse analysis. Future research can continue to examine how metaphor changes across languages, communities, media environments, and historical periods, providing further evidence of the close relationship between linguistic form, conceptualization, and social practice.

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