

# A Cognitive Semantics Study of Metaphor<sup>(1)</sup>

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## Abstract

This article deals with metaphor from a linguistic perspective. A question arises here as to whether to which field of language study metaphor belongs. How to answer the question is subject to our understanding of metaphorical expressions. When one encounters a situation in which a metaphorical expression is used, they have a kind of construal to conceptualize the expression. Thus, the field of linguistics which is concerned with studying metaphors is cognitive linguistics since people use their cognitive abilities to conceptualize and understand the metaphorical expressions. With respect to this, George Lakoff adopted a theory under the title *Conceptual Metaphor Theory* (CMT). Here I try to shed light on some aspects of this theory. What is taken into consideration in the paper is a detailed account of metaphor as a cognitive device, the three basic types of conceptual metaphor proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), namely orientational, ontological, and structural. Also, the characteristic features of conceptual metaphors like asymmetry, systematicity, and conventionality. Additionally, the relationship between conceptual metaphor and image schemas is shown in the last section. One of the conclusions of the article is that conceptual metaphor is an integral part of our everyday lives; we cannot interact normally without using conceptual metaphors.

*Keywords: metaphor, conceptual, mapping, image schema*

(1) This paper was presented in *the third international conference of language and its role in developing the intellect* in University of Raparin/Iraq (24<sup>th</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> of April, 2017). I would like to express my gratitude to two of the attendees of the conference, associate professors Salah Muhammad and Harith Al-Darweesh, who proposed modifying the title to the one in the current form.

According to the latter, no distinction can be found between figurative and non-figurative use of language since metaphor is an integral part of language and thought. To support this view of metaphor, Gibbs (2007a) claims that “conceptual metaphors are part of ordinary speakers’ conceptual systems” (p. 8). People every day encounter a countless number of situations in which certain terms are used metaphorically, but at first sight they are not felt to be metaphorical expressions. Let’s consider the following:

(1) Jane was *overcome* by grief.

## 1. Introduction

Metaphor, traditionally regarded as a literary expression, nowadays covers almost all aspects of our interaction with others in the fields of education, politics, economy, marketing, etc., though many are not aware of this! With respect to this, we have to bear in mind that metaphor is not only a field of study in literary terms. Rather, it has to do with language in general. According to Finch (2005) and Saeed (2003), there exist two views of metaphor: a classical view and a romantic one. The former treats metaphor as decoration added to the normal use of language. On this basis, it is not a part of language.

The word ‘overcome’ above means ‘be overwhelmed emotionally’. It belongs to the domain of fighting (defeat somebody). Since many negative emotions are seen as concrete entities and people struggle with them, the italicized expression in (1) is seen as a metaphorical expression. Thus, this can be described as EMOTIONS ARE OPPONENTS conceptually (Radden & Dirven, 2007). Now one can easily see that metaphor is the process of concretization of abstract things by analogy.

Goddard (2006) claims that conceptual metaphor, as a fertile notion, represents a propositional style. This means that metaphorical expressions, which are abstract, carry propositions needed to be transferred into concrete domains. As mentioned in Dirven (2005), conceptual metaphor has a universal state because “human bodily experience is basically the same all over the world” (p. 27). This point is controversial among those who work in the field of cognitive semantics. Simply put, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) themselves state that orientational (spatial) metaphors, being a basic type of conceptual metaphors, are culture-specific. On this account, the researcher sees metaphor as a contextualized notion since its interpretation heavily depends on context. Being tied to context, certain metaphors may not be identically understood universally. However, many of them can have a universal construal.

## 2. Conceptual Metaphor as a Cognitive Device

Central to the notion of conceptual metaphor is the issue of mapping. This mapping is a correspondence between two domains: a source domain and a target domain. The former usually tends to be more concrete and may include humans, animals, plants, or foods. The latter is more abstract and may include emotion, morality, thought, human relations, or time. Sometimes, there is more than one-to-one correspondence, i.e., a multiple correspondence is found. For instance, the metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY is very broad because life contains so many aspects and it is something comprehensive. On the contrary, the metaphor LOVE IS A JOURNEY is very specific because love is only one aspect of life. Therefore, we see that metaphors are hierarchically organized in which more specific patterns inherit their structures from more general ones (Evans & Green, 2006 ; Grady, 2007).

Alternative to the terms ‘broad’ and ‘specific’ in the hierarchical structure of metaphor, Lakoff (2006) has employed the terms ‘higher’ (equivalent to broad) and ‘lower’ (equivalent to specific). He presents three levels: the first level is an event structure metaphor, the second level is a higher (broad) metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY, and the third one is a lower (specific) metaphor LOVE / CAREER IS A JOURNEY. To him, level three inherits the structure from level two, and level two from level one.

Level 1: The event structure metaphor

Level 2: LIFE IS A JOURNEY

Level 3: LOVE / CAREER IS A JOURNEY

Whatever the case is, there is a vertical relationship among metaphors and they do not randomly occur; they are systematically organized.

Akin to conceptual metaphors are idioms. It is doubtless that the meanings of idioms have to be stored in the lexicon as individual linguistic expressions because their senses do not depend on the meaning of their individual components. Concerning this, Lakoff (2006) rejects the classical idea that the meaning of idioms is something arbitrary. To him, idioms are cognitively motivated. This is because they are arranged in the conceptual system in the form of patterns. A statement by Gibbs (2007b, p. 717) supports Lakoff's claim "the figurative meanings of idioms might very well be motivated by *people's conceptual knowledge that is constituted by metaphor*" (emphasis added). This indicates that our understanding of idioms originates from our ability to conceptualize them. Depending on this, we can unreservedly claim that idioms are identical to metaphorical expressions in that both share the need of conceptualization to construe their meanings. It must also be noted that both are different in that no mapping can be found in the case of idioms, i.e., we do not have source and target domains as it is the case in conceptual metaphors. The example sentence (2), containing an idiom,

(2) Kate let the cat out of the bag.

does not convey the idea of someone having a bag and putting a cat inside, then letting the cat coming out from the bag. Rather, it is about revealing some secret. Sentence (2) is known by people because they have conceptualized the meaning of 'let the cat out of the bag', meaning that they understand it experientially, not objectively.

The last point in this section is the issue of hiding and highlighting. Conceptual metaphors usually provide additional information which is not explicitly pronounced: It has to be inferred. The part of information which is publicly said is highlighted by the metaphor, while the implicit part is hidden by the metaphor. For example, in the metaphor AN ARGUMENT IS WAR, the adversarial nature of war is highlighted while the other aspect of argument, which is the organized development of a particular topic, is hidden. Thus, metaphorical concepts can have a sort of entailment (Evans & Green, 2006).

### 3. Basic Types of Conceptual Metaphors

Following the second view mentioned in the previous section to deal with metaphor, there are three basic types of metaphors which have originally been presented by Lakoff and Johnson (1980).

#### 3.1 Orientational Metaphors

These metaphors include a productive set of metaphors, which are derived from spatial relations like up-down, or back-front. These relations are known as 'image schemas' which are developed from our bodily and spatial experience in the world around us. For example, when saying *rain comes down* or *smoke goes up*, they provide us, as image schemas, with rich sources of conceptual metaphor (Radden & Dirven, 2007).

Owing to orientational metaphors, a special orientation can be given to concepts. Orientational metaphors are culture specific, i.e., they vary from culture to culture although the oppositions up-down, front-back, and the like are physical in nature. Being so, they may convey various conceptual messages throughout the world. For instance, the matter of future is variable: it is in front in some cultures, and in back in some others (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Conceptually speaking, according to Finch (2005), *up* and *down* are closely related to our awareness of the reflection of our senses with the physical environment. Having said that, *up* is reflected in good and pleasant things, and *down* in the reverse as can be seen in the examples below taken from Saeed (2003).

VIRTUE IS UP; DEPRAVITY IS DOWN

- (3) a. She has high standards.  
b. That was a low-down thing to do.

GOOD IS UP; BAD IS DOWN

- (4) a. Things are looking up.  
b. Sales are down.

### 3.2 Ontological Metaphors

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), ontological metaphors are richer than orientational ones as they provide us with deeper understanding on the basis of our experience of physical entities and substances. In doing so, our experience of the environment around us can be identified as objects and substances, and ontological metaphors result from our experience of concrete objects. This can be explained through examples like the following:

INFLATION IS AN ENTITY

- (5) We need to combat *inflation*.

In the example above, *inflation* is conceived of as a physical object (an enemy, for example). The word 'inflation' is an abstract entity, but it can be concretized and construed in the form of an ontological metaphor.

Related to image schemas, as indicated by Saeed (2003), containment schema is regarded as a kind of ontological metaphor in which physical objects such as substances and containers are used to conceptualize abstract phenomena. With respect to this, fields like vision, activities, and states are conceived of as containers (one of the components of containment image schema). The examples below illustrate the situation:

- (6) The convoy is coming into *view*. (vision)  
(7) I put a lot of energy into *repairing the car*. (activity)  
(8) They stood in *silence*. (state)

The italicized abstract expressions in the example sentences above are felt, depending on the imagistic schema in our minds, as physical containers which contain *the convoy*, *energy*, and *they*, respectively.

### 3.3 Structural Metaphors

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) downgrade the former two types of metaphor as they cannot give us sufficient information to conceptualize and elaborate the world around us. Therefore, they think that structural metaphors can be regarded as the richest source to depend on as they can highlight or hide some aspects of conceptualization. Structural metaphors, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) claim, are "cases where one concept is metaphorically structured in terms of another" (p. 15). Here the expression *metaphorically structured* is construed as "experienced and understood" (Finch, 2005, p. 163).

Structural metaphors, like the other two types, are grounded in correlation with our experience. For example, the metaphor LABOUR IS A RESOURCE is culturally understood as: the more labour is performed actively, the more product will be achieved. Here, the term 'labour', according to the definition of structural metaphors, is experienced and understood as a raw material. The raw material can be quantified or valued, the same is true of 'labour'.

#### 4. Characteristic Features of Conceptual Metaphors

Like any other notion in language study, conceptual metaphor has its own features which together identify the status of the metaphorical expression. In the literature, three basic characteristics have been noticed that conceptual metaphors possess: asymmetry, systematicity, and conventionality.

##### 4.1 Asymmetry

As for the first feature, *asymmetry* (also known as *unidirectionality*), the term is self-explanatory: transferring *only* from one direction 'A' to the other 'B'. When this mapping is meaningful, the opposite transformation (from B to A) will certainly be meaningless or illogical. In relation to this, Saeed (2003) puts that the mapping between the two domains, source and target, is not a matter of showing similarity between them. Rather, it is about feature transformation from the source to the target after stimulating the listener. Furthermore, Grady (2007) affirms that unidirectionality, being a characteristic feature of conceptual metaphor, is also evidence against the traditional understanding of metaphor which is seeing metaphor as a reflection of similarity between two ideas. This can be proved true when we use a term like 'weather', functioning as a source domain to describe metaphorically economic or political conditions. It is obvious that the other way round, using economic or political terms to describe weather conditions, is not plausible.

Evans and Green (2006, p. 297), following Lakoff and Turner (1989), confirm that "unidirectionality holds even when two different metaphors share the same domains". It posits that sharing identical domains does not follow that different metaphors can have the same direction of mapping; they still obey to unidirectionality. This can be exemplified as in the two metaphors below:

PEOPLE ARE MACHINES

(9) He's had a mind breakdown.

MACHINES ARE PEOPLE

(10) I think my computer hates me, it doesn't work properly.

In (9) above, a feature related to computers is mapped onto people. Inversely, in (10), a feeling related to people is mapped onto the machine.

##### 4.2 Systematicity

Grady (2007) indicates that the process of mapping from the source domain onto the target domain, in addition to objects and properties, includes "the relations, events, and scenarios that characterize the domain" (p. 191). He also adds that, depending on this, inferences can be mapped from source to target. This inference mapping shows the richness of conceptual metaphors which is more than a figurative use of a single term. Somewhat contrary to Grady's view, Goddard (2006, p. 198) puts that "the correspondences between source and target domains are not comprehensive". The researcher supports Goddard's claim as can be seen in the personification of DEATH (to be explained in the coming section) in which certain aspects are blocked and cannot have the correspondence. Another example is establishing a city is not exactly the same as establishing a company or an organization: in the city, we have streets, roads, buildings, etc. that is not the case in the company or in the organization.

Systematicity is not simply setting up a transformation of a single feature. Features of both domains are combined for the purpose of extending the metaphor. This extension can be seen in the metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY as mentioned in Saeed (2003, p. 349), following Lakoff and Turner (1989).

LIFE IS A JOURNEY

- The person leading a life is a traveller.
- His purposes are destinations.
- The means for achieving purposes are routes.
- Difficulties in life are impediments to travel.
- Counsellors are guides.
- Progress is the distance travelled.
- Things you gauge your progress by are landmarks.
- Material resources and talents are provisions.

#### 4.3 Conventionality

The third and the last feature to be discussed now is the *conventionality* of conceptual metaphors. The term ‘conventionality’ suggests some process through which an expression has developed and become known to anyone as a normal expression. On such grounds, Saeed (2003) confirms that certain metaphors are no longer recognized as metaphors as they are dead metaphors. It implies that due to a widespread usage of those metaphors, they have been conventionalized and have become part of everyday interaction. Typical examples, taken from Saeed (2003), to prove this claim true are conventionalized metaphors of body parts: head (of department, of state, etc.), face (of a mountain, of a building, etc.), shoulder (of a road, of a jacket, etc.), etc. Another example that is quite conventional is ‘computer virus’ which is the result of analogical mapping between a health schema and a computer domain.

#### 5. Conceptual Metaphor and Image Schemas

One of the remarkable theories in cognitive semantics related to conceptual metaphor is the image schema theory. Croft and Cruse (2004, p. 44) indicate that “image schemas are not specific images but are **schematic**”. Here the word ‘schematic’, being focused on, tells us that image schemas are generalizations of imagistic concepts in the mind. For instance, the containment schema is not limited to one entity or a specific set of entities. It applies to any container regardless of its size, shape, state, etc. There exist several image schemas such as containment, path, force, etc. which are inevitable when dealing with CMT.

What closely connects conceptual metaphor to image schemas is the metaphorical nature of ‘containment’ and ‘path’ image schemas as can be seen in (11) and (12) below, respectively:

(11) The two neighbours are now living *in* peace. (containment: state)

(12) Unfortunately, I got *sidetracked* by the audience’s questions. (path)

In the sentence (11), the preposition ‘in’ implies the idea of something inside something else ‘X is in Y’. But here the container (peace) is not a concrete entity. Still it is quite meaningful and understood because it is an image schema, and this schema is metaphorically construed as a state in which the two neighbours are living peacefully. In (12), the –ed participle verb form ‘sidetracked’ conveys the idea of being on the road, but its imagistic usage makes it possible to conceptualize it metaphorically in terms of the context in which it occurs.

As suggested by Evans and Green (2006), metaphorical mapping (correspondence between the source and the target domains) largely depends on image schemas as they represent the source domain for the mapping. According to them, metaphor facilitates abstract thought and reasoning that are image schematic in nature.

As mentioned above, image schemas provide metaphors with source domains. Most importantly, we have to know whether any restriction exists when mapping occurs or not. Concerning this, Evans and Green (2006) and Lakoff (2006) affirm that there is a principle,

namely invariance principle, which licenses testified mappings and restricts those that violate the target domain state. For example, in the personification of DEATH, certain aspects which are common between humans and death are allowed like ‘devour’, ‘destroy’, or ‘reap’. But we cannot apply the activities such as teaching or filling a form within the same mapping.

## **6. Conclusion**

The general idea which the paper gives us is that conceptual metaphors are observed as an integral part of our everyday lives, we cannot interact normally without utilizing them. Also, we that conceptual metaphor is much richer than literary metaphor because the latter is restricted only in literary works while the former has no boundary among various fields. Finally, the term ‘conceptual metaphor’ can be extended to include idioms as well since they both need the process of conceptualization to understand their meanings.

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