

Conceptual Metaphor and Metonymy in Cognitive Linguistics: Theoretical Foundations, Interactions, and Cross-Domain Mappings

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Abstract

Since the publication of Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* in 1980, conceptual metaphor theory has fundamentally transformed the linguistic and cognitive understanding of figurative language. Rather than treating metaphor and metonymy as rhetorical ornaments confined to literary or poetic discourse, cognitive linguistics reconceptualizes them as basic mechanisms of human thought and conceptual organization that permeate everyday language, reasoning, and communication. This article examines the theoretical foundations of conceptual metaphor theory and conceptual metonymy, analyzes their structural properties and cognitive functions, and investigates the nature of their interaction in actual linguistic data. Drawing on corpus-based and discourse-analytical approaches, the study identifies the primary types of conceptual metaphor and metonymy, discusses the principles governing cross-domain mapping, and examines the relationship between metaphor and metonymy as partially overlapping cognitive mechanisms. The analysis demonstrates that conceptual metaphor and metonymy are not merely linguistic phenomena but reflect deep-seated patterns of human embodied cognition, cultural knowledge, and experiential grounding. The article argues that their systematic study contributes not only to theoretical linguistics but also to applied fields including discourse analysis, cognitive semantics, and language pedagogy.

Keywords: *conceptual metaphor, metonymy, cognitive linguistics, cross-domain mapping, embodied cognition, Lakoff and Johnson, figurative language*

1. Introduction

Prior to the cognitive revolution in linguistics, metaphor was treated primarily as a rhetorical device — an ornamental feature of poetic or literary language that served to embellish expression but played no fundamental role in ordinary thought or communication. The classical Aristotelian view, elaborated through centuries of rhetorical tradition, held that metaphor involved the

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substitution of a figurative expression for a literal one, implying that all metaphorical meanings could in principle be replaced by their literal equivalents without loss of propositional content (Aristotle, trans. 1984; Richards, 1936). Metonymy, similarly, was treated as a figure of speech — a rhetorical device involving the substitution of a related or contiguous term — rather than as a cognitive mechanism with systematic properties.

The publication of Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* in 1980 marked a fundamental reorientation of this understanding. Lakoff and Johnson argued that metaphor is not primarily a feature of language but of thought: that the human conceptual system is fundamentally metaphorical in nature, and that most abstract concepts are understood and reasoned about in terms of more concrete or experientially grounded domains (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). This proposal — the theory of conceptual metaphor — initiated a research programme that has continued to develop and diversify over four decades, generating substantial empirical evidence from linguistics, cognitive science, psychology, and neuroscience (Steen et al., 2010; Kövecses, 2002).

Metonymy received parallel theoretical reconceptualization. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) recognized metonymy as a distinct cognitive mechanism involving reference within a single domain rather than mapping across domains. Subsequent work by Radden and Kövecses (1999), Barcelona (2003), and others developed a systematic theoretical account of conceptual metonymy, identifying the cognitive principles governing metonymic mappings and distinguishing metonymy from metaphor as partially overlapping but theoretically distinct phenomena. The relationship between metaphor and metonymy — and the possibility of their interaction and integration in single linguistic expressions — has been a productive area of research that continues to generate theoretical debate (Goossens, 1990; Barcelona, 2011). Studies of figurative language in adjacent domains, including idiomatic expressions and their impact on lexical competence, further underscore the practical relevance of these cognitive mechanisms for language learning and use (Sadiqzade, 2025).

This article provides a comprehensive examination of conceptual metaphor theory and conceptual metonymy within the framework of cognitive linguistics. It examines the theoretical foundations and structural properties of each phenomenon, analyzes their cognitive functions and experiential grounding, investigates their interaction and combination, and considers the implications of the cognitive linguistic approach for the broader study of figurative language in discourse. The article aims to contribute to the ongoing theoretical consolidation of the cognitive linguistic approach to metaphor and metonymy while also highlighting areas of continuing debate and future research potential.

2. Theoretical Framework: Cognitive Linguistics and Embodied Cognition

Conceptual metaphor theory is situated within the broader framework of cognitive linguistics, which shares a set of core theoretical commitments that distinguish it from formal and



generative approaches to language. These commitments include the rejection of the modularity thesis — the claim that language constitutes an autonomous cognitive module separate from general cognition — in favor of the view that language reflects and is structured by general cognitive mechanisms including categorization, image schemas, mental spaces, and conceptual integration (Langacker, 1987; Fauconnier & Turner, 2002).

Central to the cognitive linguistic framework is the thesis of embodied cognition: the claim that the structure of the human conceptual system is grounded in and shaped by the nature of the human body and its sensorimotor interactions with the physical and social environment (Johnson, 1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). On this view, abstract concepts are not arbitrary symbols that stand in purely conventional relations to their meanings but are structured by patterns of embodied experience — by the experience of physical force, of spatial orientation, of containment and boundedness, of motion and trajectory — that are projected onto abstract domains through metaphorical and metonymic mappings.

The concept of the image schema, introduced by Johnson (1987) and elaborated in subsequent cognitive linguistic research, is particularly important in this context. Image schemas are pre-conceptual, recurring patterns of sensorimotor experience — such as the CONTAINER schema, the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schema, the FORCE schema, and the VERTICALITY schema — that provide the experiential basis for abstract conceptualization through metaphorical projection (Hampe, 2005). The ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor, for example, draws on the physical experience of force, resistance, and territorial conflict; the MORE IS UP metaphor is grounded in the correlation between adding physical substance and increase in vertical height (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

The experiential basis of conceptual metaphor is further supported by work in neural linguistics and embodied simulation theory, which proposes that understanding metaphorical language involves partial activation of the sensorimotor systems associated with the source domain (Gallese & Lakoff, 2005). Neuroimaging studies have provided empirical support for the view that processing metaphorical expressions activates brain regions associated with the literal meanings of the source domain, though the precise neural mechanisms of metaphor processing remain an active area of investigation (Steen et al., 2010).

3. Conceptual Metaphor: Structure and Types

3.1. *The Structure of Conceptual Metaphor*

A conceptual metaphor, in Lakoff and Johnson's framework, is a systematic mapping between a source domain and a target domain, whereby the structure, inferential patterns, and experiential correlates of the source domain are projected onto the target domain (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1993). The standard notation for conceptual metaphors uses the format



TARGET DOMAIN IS SOURCE DOMAIN: thus ARGUMENT IS WAR, LIFE IS A JOURNEY, TIME IS MONEY, and THEORIES ARE BUILDINGS are all conceptual metaphors in which an abstract or less clearly structured target domain is understood in terms of a more concrete or experientially familiar source domain.

The mapping between source and target domain is not total but partial: only certain aspects of the source domain are projected onto the target. In the ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor, for example, the aspects of warfare that are projected include attack and defense, winning and losing, strategy, and the use of force; the aspects that are not projected include actual physical violence, military hierarchy, and territorial conquest. This partiality of mapping is what Lakoff (1993) calls the Invariance Principle: metaphorical mappings preserve the image-schematic structure of the source domain in a way that is consistent with the inherent structure of the target domain.

Kövecses (2000, 2002) distinguishes several types of conceptual metaphor on the basis of their generality and their relationship to other metaphors. Generic-level metaphors, such as EVENTS ARE ACTIONS and STATES ARE LOCATIONS, operate at a high level of abstraction and govern a wide range of more specific metaphors. Specific-level metaphors, such as ANGER IS A HOT FLUID IN A CONTAINER, instantiate more general schemas at a lower level of abstraction. The relationship between generic and specific metaphors reveals the hierarchical organization of the metaphorical system, in which more specific mappings inherit the structural properties of more generic ones.

3.2. Primary and Complex Metaphors

Grady (1997) introduced an important distinction between primary metaphors and complex metaphors that has significantly refined the cognitive linguistic account of metaphorical motivation. Primary metaphors are grounded in recurring correlations in embodied experience between subjective judgments or assessments (the target) and sensorimotor experiences (the source). The primary metaphor MORE IS UP, for example, is motivated by the recurring experiential correlation between adding physical substance to a pile and the simultaneous upward movement of the pile's height. Similarly, AFFECTION IS WARMTH is motivated by the correlation between the warmth of physical contact and the emotional states associated with caring relationships in early childhood (Grady, 1997).

Complex metaphors, by contrast, are built from combinations of primary metaphors and are not directly motivated by a single experiential correlation. The complex metaphor A PURPOSEFUL LIFE IS A JOURNEY, for example, combines several primary metaphors including PURPOSES ARE DESTINATIONS, ACTIONS ARE MOTIONS, and DIFFICULTIES ARE IMPEDIMENTS TO MOTION. The systematic compositionality of complex metaphors from primary building blocks provides a principled account of how the vast range of metaphorical



expressions in natural language relates to a more limited inventory of experientially grounded primary mappings (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999).

4. Conceptual Metonymy: Principles and Types

4.1. *Metonymy as a Cognitive Mechanism*

Conceptual metonymy, like conceptual metaphor, is reconceptualized in cognitive linguistics as a cognitive mechanism rather than a merely rhetorical device. Where metaphor involves a mapping across two distinct conceptual domains, metonymy involves a mapping within a single domain or conceptual structure, whereby one entity — the vehicle — provides mental access to another entity — the target — within the same domain or Idealized Cognitive Model (ICM) (Lakoff, 1987; Radden & Kövecses, 1999). The standard notation for metonymy uses the format VEHICLE FOR TARGET: thus THE CROWN FOR THE MONARCH (a part of the royal insignia standing for the institution of monarchy), THE AUTHOR FOR THE WORK (as in ‘I am reading Dostoyevsky’), and THE CAUSE FOR THE EFFECT are all instances of conceptual metonymy.

Radden and Kövecses (1999) provide the most systematic typology of conceptual metonymy within the cognitive linguistic framework, distinguishing metonymies on the basis of the ICM within which the mapping operates. Within the WHOLE-PART ICM, metonymies may involve a whole standing for a part (synecdoche downward) or a part standing for a whole (synecdoche upward). Within the SCALE ICM, metonymies may involve the extreme standing for the scale as a whole, as in ‘She is the best cook in the world’ meaning simply that she is a very good cook. Within the ACTION ICM, metonymies may involve the instrument standing for the action, as in ‘The pen is mightier than the sword’, or the result standing for the action, as in ‘Give me your ear’ meaning ‘Listen to me’.

4.2. *The Contiguity Principle and ICM Structure*

The cognitive principle governing metonymic mappings is what Radden and Kövecses (1999) call the Contiguity Principle: metonymy involves a mapping between two entities that stand in a relation of contiguity or proximity within a shared conceptual structure or ICM. This contiguity may be physical (spatial or temporal proximity), causal (cause-effect relations), institutional (part-whole relations within a social institution), or representational (the relation between a category and its prototypical member or typical instance).

The notion of the Idealized Cognitive Model, developed by Lakoff (1987), provides the theoretical framework for specifying the conceptual structures within which metonymic mappings operate. ICMs are structured wholes — idealized, schematic representations of domains of experience — that organize conceptual knowledge into coherent frames. Metonymic mappings exploit the internal structure of ICMs by allowing one element to stand for another element within the same ICM, or for the ICM as a whole. Barcelona (2003) has extended the ICM-based account



to include a broader range of metonymic types and to clarify the distinction between metonymy and related phenomena such as semantic broadening and narrowing.

5. The Interaction of Metaphor and Metonymy

One of the most productive areas of research in cognitive figurative language studies has been the investigation of the interaction between metaphor and metonymy in actual linguistic expressions and in the construction of complex figurative meanings. Goossens (1990) coined the term ‘metaphtonymy’ to describe cases in which metaphor and metonymy interact within a single expression, identifying four types of interaction: metaphor from metonymy (a metonymic expression is further extended metaphorically), metonymy within metaphor (a metonymic mapping operates within the scope of a metaphorical mapping), metaphor within metonymy (a metaphorical mapping operates within the scope of a metonymic mapping), and metonymy within metonymy (two metonymic mappings are combined).

A frequently cited example of metaphor from metonymy is the expression ‘to lend someone an ear’ (meaning to listen attentively), in which the metonymic use of EAR FOR THE ACTIVITY OF LISTENING has been extended metaphorically into a compound expression involving fictive transfer. Barcelona (2011) has argued that metonymy is in fact more fundamental than metaphor in the cognitive linguistic system, proposing the Metonymy-Based Theory of Metaphor, which holds that the source domains of conceptual metaphors are always accessed through metonymic mappings within the source domain ICM. On this view, the ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor is activated not through direct access to a WAR schema but through metonymic highlighting of particular aspects of the WAR ICM — particularly its confrontational, force-dynamic, and strategic dimensions.

Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez and Díez Velasco (2002) further distinguish between high-level metonymy and low-level metonymy in the context of metaphor-metonymy interaction, arguing that the two phenomena operate at different levels of conceptual generality and that their interaction is governed by cognitive economy principles. High-level metonymies, such as INSTRUMENT FOR ACTION and PRODUCER FOR PRODUCT, operate at the level of generic ICMs and may interact with generic-level metaphors; low-level metonymies operate within more specific conceptual frames and interact with specific-level metaphors. This distinction provides a more fine-grained account of the range of metaphtonymic combinations attested in natural language.

6. Cross-Domain Mappings and Conceptual Blending

The theory of conceptual blending, developed by Fauconnier and Turner (2002), offers an important extension and partial revision of conceptual metaphor theory that is particularly relevant to the analysis of complex figurative expressions. Where conceptual metaphor theory posits a



unidirectional mapping from source to target domain, conceptual blending theory proposes a more flexible integration network in which two or more input mental spaces are selectively projected into a blended space that develops emergent structure not present in either input (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002).

Conceptual blending is particularly useful for analyzing creative, novel, and culturally specific metaphors that cannot be straightforwardly derived from conventional conceptual metaphors through the Lakoffian mapping framework. Novel metaphors in advertising, political discourse, and literary language frequently exploit blending operations to create emergent meanings that draw on multiple source domains simultaneously and generate inferences that would not be available from either source domain alone (Forceville & Urios-Aparisi, 2009). The relationship between conceptual metaphor theory and blending theory has been a source of ongoing theoretical discussion, with some researchers viewing blending as a more general cognitive operation that subsumes metaphor as a special case, and others maintaining that the two frameworks address different aspects of figurative cognition (Grady, Oakley, & Coulson, 1999). The relevance of such figurative structures also extends to literary analysis, where metaphorical and metonymic patterns have been shown to play a constitutive role in shaping thematic meaning in poetic and narrative texts (Mammadova, 2023).

The Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) and its extended version MIPVU, developed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007) and Steen et al. (2010) respectively, provide systematic, reproducible methods for identifying metaphorically used words in naturally occurring discourse. These corpus-based approaches have generated substantial empirical data on the frequency, distribution, and contextual patterns of metaphor use in a range of genres and registers, providing an empirical complement to the introspective and constructed-example methodology that characterized much earlier work in conceptual metaphor theory (Steen et al., 2010).

7. Discussion

The cognitive linguistic reconceptualization of metaphor and metonymy has produced a theoretical framework of considerable explanatory power and empirical productivity. The central claim of conceptual metaphor theory — that abstract conceptual domains are systematically understood in terms of more concrete or experientially grounded domains through cross-domain mappings — has been supported by evidence from linguistic analysis, psychological experiments, corpus studies, and neuroimaging research (Gallese & Lakoff, 2005; Steen et al., 2010). The parallel reconceptualization of metonymy as a cognitive mechanism involving mappings within conceptual domains or ICMs has clarified the cognitive principles governing a wide range of linguistic and inferential phenomena that were previously treated as unrelated (Radden & Kövecses, 1999).



At the same time, conceptual metaphor theory has been subjected to significant critical scrutiny. Glucksberg (2001) has questioned the psychological reality of conceptual metaphors as stored cognitive structures, arguing that metaphorical language is understood online through property attribution processes rather than through access to pre-stored cross-domain mappings. Steen (2011) has introduced the distinction between deliberate and non-deliberate metaphor, arguing that only deliberately used metaphors involve the kind of dual-domain processing that conceptual metaphor theory describes, while conventionalized metaphors are processed as direct category attributions. These debates highlight the importance of distinguishing between the cognitive mechanisms involved in metaphor production and comprehension and the abstract structural properties of conceptual metaphors as linguistic conventions.

The cultural dimension of conceptual metaphor presents a further area of theoretical complexity. While Lakoff and Johnson (1980) emphasized the universality of primary metaphors as grounded in shared embodied experience, subsequent cross-cultural research has documented significant variation in conceptual metaphor systems across languages and cultures (Kövecses, 2005; Yu, 1995). The metaphorical conceptualization of emotions, time, and social relationships shows both universal tendencies — reflecting the shared embodied basis of primary metaphors — and culture-specific patterns reflecting the particular experiential and cultural knowledge of different communities. This finding supports a nuanced position that acknowledges both universal and culturally specific dimensions of the metaphorical organization of conceptual systems.

8. Conclusion

This article has examined the theoretical foundations, structural properties, and cognitive functions of conceptual metaphor and metonymy within the framework of cognitive linguistics. The analysis has demonstrated that both phenomena represent fundamental mechanisms of human conceptual organization that permeate everyday language and thought, extending far beyond the literary and poetic contexts in which they were traditionally studied. Conceptual metaphor theory, developed by Lakoff and Johnson and extended by subsequent researchers, provides a systematic account of how abstract domains are structured through cross-domain mappings from more experientially grounded source domains. Conceptual metonymy, as theorized by Radden, Kövecses, and Barcelona, accounts for a complementary set of cognitive mappings within shared conceptual domains or ICMs.

The interaction between metaphor and metonymy — through the various types of metaphonymy identified by Goossens and elaborated by subsequent researchers — reveals a rich and complex system of figurative cognition in which the two mechanisms combine to produce meanings that neither could generate independently. The extension of conceptual metaphor theory through conceptual blending provides additional resources for analyzing creative and complex figurative expressions. And the development of systematic corpus-based methods for metaphor



identification — particularly MIPVU — has opened the empirical study of metaphor in naturally occurring discourse to rigorous quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Several directions for future research emerge from this overview. The neural basis of metaphor and metonymy processing requires further investigation through controlled neuroimaging and psycholinguistic experiments. The cross-cultural variation in conceptual metaphor systems deserves more systematic comparative analysis across typologically diverse language families. The role of metonymy in grammatical construction and morphological productivity — areas that have received less attention than lexical metonymy — represents an important area for further development. And the implications of cognitive linguistic approaches to metaphor and metonymy for language pedagogy, translation studies, and discourse analysis in specialized domains such as political, scientific, and medical communication offer productive avenues for applied research.

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