



Sociology & Cultural Research Review (SCRR)
 Available Online: <https://scrrjournal.com>
 Print ISSN: [3007-3103](#) Online ISSN: [3007-3111](#)
 Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)



Metaphor and Meaning: A Cognitive Linguistic Study of Conceptual Domains in English

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a cognitive linguistic exploration of conceptual metaphors and their role in shaping meaning and cognition in contemporary English. Drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), the study investigates how abstract target domains are systematically understood through concrete source domains via cross-domain mappings. Key target domains analyzed include LOVE (structured as a JOURNEY, WAR, or PLANT), TIME (as MONEY, SPACE, or MOTION), ARGUMENT (as WAR), LIFE (as a JOURNEY), and EMOTION (particularly ANGER as HEAT or PRESSURE). Linguistic evidence from balanced corpora (e.g., COCA, BNC) and contemporary discourse sources demonstrates the pervasiveness of these metaphors in everyday language, revealing systematic entailments such as progress and obstacles in journey mappings, scarcity and value in time-as-money, adversarial strategy in argument-as-war, and physiological buildup in anger metaphors that generate coherent inferences and constrain reasoning in predictable ways. The analysis highlights the embodied foundations of these mappings, rooted in image schemas and primary metaphors, while addressing constraints like the Invariance Principle and unidirectionality. Findings affirm metaphor's centrality to meaning construction, abstract conceptualization, inference generation, and ideological framing, with implications for universality (shared embodied patterns) versus cultural variation in English usage. Applications extend to language teaching (enhancing vocabulary acquisition through metaphor awareness), discourse analysis (revealing hidden framings), lexicography, and AI/NLP metaphor detection. Critically, while CMT provides robust explanatory power, limitations regarding context-sensitivity and deliberate use suggest avenues for extension through multimodal and dynamic frameworks. This work contributes to ongoing refinements in cognitive linguistics by combining theoretical depth with empirical corpus evidence, underscoring metaphor's indispensable function in human thought and communication within evolving linguistic landscapes.

Keywords: Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Cross-Domain Mappings, Embodied Cognition, Source-Target Domains, English Metaphors, Cognitive Linguistics.

Introduction

The traditional view of metaphor, entrenched in Aristotelian rhetoric and dominant for centuries in Western linguistics, framed it as a rhetorical ornament or figurative substitution

a stylistic deviation from literal expression with primarily aesthetic or persuasive value (as critiqued in contemporary overviews; Steen, 2023). This approach relegated metaphor to exceptional or poetic language, treating it as non-essential to core meaning or cognition. In sharp contrast, the cognitive linguistic paradigm reconceptualizes metaphor as a pervasive mechanism of thought, rooted in embodied experience and systematically structuring conceptual understanding across everyday and specialized domains. This shift integrates embodiment, neural grounding, contextual adaptation, and multimodal expression, demonstrating metaphor's operation beyond verbal language in gesture, visuals, and discourse genres ranging from informal conversation to political framing and scientific explanation (Kövecses, 2020; Steen, 2023). Recent scholarship reinforces this divide by highlighting how cognitive approaches reveal metaphor's dynamic, experientially anchored nature, exposing the limitations of purely decorative accounts and affirming its indispensable role in human meaning construction amid evolving communicative ecologies.

At the core of this cognitive transformation is Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), systematically introduced by Lakoff and Johnson in their groundbreaking 1980 volume *Metaphors We Live By* and philosophically expanded in the 2003 second edition to address criticisms and broaden implications (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 2003). CMT maintains that metaphor is fundamentally conceptual: an abstract target domain is understood and experienced through structured mappings from a more concrete, sensorimotor-based source domain, involving ontological correspondences (entities/relations), structural parallels, and epistemic inferences that license novel reasoning. Prototypical examples like ARGUMENT IS WAR ("attack an argument," "defend a claim") illustrate how mappings organize not only linguistic output but also inferential patterns and evaluative judgments. Key tenets include metaphorical systematicity (coherent entailment networks), predominant unidirectionality (concrete-to-abstract), and deep embodiment (drawing from physical schemas like force, path, or containment). Contemporary refinements, notably Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory, incorporate multilevel hierarchies, contextual variability, multimodal dimensions, and deliberate use while preserving CMT's foundational architecture (Kövecses, 2020). Complementary frameworks, such as Deliberate Metaphor Theory, further differentiate automatic/non-deliberate from intentional/comparative processing, enriching comprehension models (Steen, 2023). Emerging applications in large language models validate these principles, demonstrating how CMT-inspired prompting enhances reasoning, metaphorical coherence, and abstract concept handling in computational systems (Kramer, 2025).

The motivation for investigating conceptual domains in English derives from metaphor's inescapable ubiquity in ordinary language, cognition, and abstract reasoning, where it unconsciously configures perceptions of intangible phenomena such as time ("time is money"), emotion ("fall in love"), morality ("upright behavior"), and social processes ("build relationships"). English, enriched by historical layers, cultural borrowings, and global dissemination, serves as an exemplary case for dissecting domain interactions, unveiling both universal embodied universals and culture- or context-specific elaborations that influence ideological framing, decision-making, and discourse (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003; recent extensions in multimodal and computational contexts; Kövecses, 2020; Steen, 2023). Despite

CMT's established influence, critical gaps endure: foundational studies often depended on introspective data, prompting ongoing calls for corpus-informed, ecologically valid, multimodal, and dynamic analyses particularly in digital environments, AI metaphor processing, cross-varietal English, and real-time adaptation amid rapid linguistic-technological change (Steen, 2023; Kramer, 2025). This study responds by targeting salient conceptual domains in contemporary English, merging theoretical rigor with empirical scrutiny to illuminate metaphor's enduring centrality in shaping human thought and meaning within shifting communicative landscapes.

Literature Review

The classical Aristotelian tradition conceptualized metaphor as a rhetorical ornament and stylistic substitution, primarily serving persuasive or poetic embellishment by transferring meaning across disparate categories without altering fundamental thought processes. This ornamental lens persisted through centuries of rhetorical theory, confining metaphor to exceptional discourse and distinguishing it sharply from literal language. Subsequent developments in 20th-century rhetoric, including interaction theories advanced by Richards and Black, began acknowledging metaphor's generative role in creating novel insights through tension between vehicle and tenor, yet still framed it largely within linguistic or literary boundaries rather than everyday cognition. The pivotal cognitive shift emerged in the late 20th century, repositioning metaphor as an indispensable cognitive mechanism that structures conceptualization itself, drawing from embodied experience and perceptual patterns to organize abstract reasoning. This paradigm transition dismantled the literal-figurative dichotomy, revealing metaphor's pervasiveness in ordinary thought and language (Zhang, 2021). Analytically, this evolution reflects broader epistemological changes: from viewing language as a transparent medium of ideas to recognizing it as a dynamic interface between body, mind, and world, thereby laying groundwork for interdisciplinary inquiries into how metaphorical mappings underpin categorization, inference, and cultural knowledge systems.

Foundational contributions to cognitive linguistics established metaphor as central to conceptual structure. Lakoff's (1987) *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* profoundly influenced the field by demonstrating how radial categories, idealized cognitive models (ICMs), and prototype effects challenge classical categorization theories, showing that human concepts are experientially motivated rather than defined by necessary and sufficient conditions (Lakoff, 1987). This work integrated metaphor with broader cognitive architecture, illustrating how metaphorical projections organize domains like emotion, causation, and social relations. Complementing this, Grady (1997) introduced primary metaphors as experientially grounded, irreducible mappings arising from recurrent correlations in bodily experience (e.g., AFFECTION IS WARMTH from physical proximity and temperature), serving as building blocks for complex conceptual metaphors (Grady, 1997). These foundations enabled systematic analysis of cross-domain alignments, emphasizing embodiment as the mechanism linking sensorimotor schemas to abstract thought. Subsequent extensions have refined these insights by incorporating dynamic, multilevel hierarchies and contextual modulation, strengthening the theory's explanatory power for meaning construction across discourse genres while addressing early criticisms of overgeneralization (Zhang, 2021).

Key debates within Conceptual Metaphor Theory revolve around core principles such as the invariance principle, which constrains mappings to preserve the inherent structure of the source domain, preventing incoherent projections and ensuring cognitive coherence. Primary metaphors, as articulated by Grady (1997), underscore minimal, universal correlations rooted in embodied experience, yet their elaboration raises questions about cultural modulation. Embodied cognition debates highlight how metaphorical understanding recruits sensorimotor simulations, neural activations, and image schemas, grounding abstract concepts in physical interactions and challenging disembodied symbolic accounts. A prominent tension concerns universality versus culture-specificity: while primary mappings exhibit cross-linguistic regularities due to shared human physiology, higher-level elaborations and source domain preferences vary significantly across cultural models, historical contexts, and linguistic ecologies, leading to hybrid conceptualizations that blend universal embodiment with localized schemas. Recent analyses affirm semi-universalities in emotion and spatial metaphors while documenting substantial variation, enriching the theory by integrating cultural conceptualizations as co-constitutive forces (Sharifian, 2017; Yu, 2017). Analytically, these debates drive theoretical refinement, revealing metaphor as a flexible yet constrained system that balances biological constraints with sociocultural creativity, with implications for cross-cultural communication and cognitive universality claims.

Previous studies on conceptual metaphors in English have extensively documented prominent domains including TIME (often structured via MOTION or MONEY sources), LOVE (JOURNEY, CONTAINER, or WAR mappings), ARGUMENT (WAR), LIFE (JOURNEY), and EMOTION (HEAT, PRESSURE, or CONTAINMENT). Corpus-driven investigations, such as analyses of LOVE metaphors in large English corpora like BNC and COCA, confirm the systematicity of these mappings while revealing frequency patterns and contextual variations (Aksan & Aksan, 2018). Frame-semantic approaches to EMOTION metaphors further illuminate complex frame interplay, demonstrating how target-domain elements recruit multiple source frames for nuanced conceptualization (Neumair et al., 2025). Similar corpus examinations of ARGUMENT and LIFE domains highlight entailments influencing reasoning in political and narrative discourse. Critically, strengths of existing research include corpus-based methods' empirical rigor, scalability, and ecological validity, enabling detection of subtle patterns and genre-specific elaborations absent in introspective approaches (Abdul Malik et al., 2022). However, limitations persist: introspective methods risk researcher bias and overlook usage frequency, while many corpus studies rely on general reference corpora rather than specialized ones, potentially underrepresenting spoken or multimodal data and lacking detailed tool transparency. Thematic reviews identify gaps in emerging topics (e.g., pandemic or digital discourse metaphors) and advocate hybrid methodologies integrating qualitative depth with quantitative breadth for more robust, context-sensitive insights (Neumair et al., 2025).

Problem Statement

Although Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) has revolutionized the understanding of metaphor by demonstrating its role as a fundamental cognitive mechanism rather than mere linguistic decoration, significant challenges persist in fully capturing the systematic mappings across conceptual domains in contemporary English. While foundational analyses have

identified pervasive metaphors structuring abstract concepts such as TIME (as MOTION or MONEY), LOVE (as JOURNEY or WAR), ARGUMENT (as WAR), LIFE (as JOURNEY), and EMOTION (as HEAT, PRESSURE, or CONTAINMENT), much early work relied on introspective, intuitive selection of examples, which risks researcher bias, overlooks frequency and variation in natural usage, and limits generalizability. Corpus-based approaches have begun addressing these issues by providing empirical evidence of metaphorical patterns in large datasets, yet many studies remain confined to general reference corpora, underrepresenting spoken discourse, multimodal contexts, digital communication, or evolving global varieties of English. Moreover, debates continue regarding the balance between universal embodied foundations and culture-specific elaborations, the constraints of mappings (e.g., invariance principle), and the integration of dynamic, contextual factors in real-time meaning construction. Consequently, there remains a pressing need for integrated, rigorous investigations that combine theoretical depth with robust, usage-based data to more comprehensively elucidate how conceptual domains interact in English, revealing both stable cognitive structures and adaptive variations that shape everyday thought, reasoning, and discourse.

Research Objectives

1. To identify and classify prominent source and target domains in English metaphorical expressions.
2. To analyze systematic mappings and their cognitive implications for understanding abstract concepts.
3. To explore the role of embodied experience and image schemas in selected conceptual metaphors.
4. To examine selected metaphorical patterns and discuss their contribution to meaning construction.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a primarily qualitative research approach, supplemented by selective quantitative elements such as frequency counts of metaphorical expressions and domain mappings, to ensure both interpretive depth and empirical transparency in examining conceptual metaphors in English. Grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) as the core theoretical framework, the analysis draws on systematic cross-domain mappings while incorporating complementary insights from Conceptual Blending Theory where emergent meanings arise from integrated input spaces, and selective elements of Critical Metaphor Analysis to uncover ideological implications in metaphorical framings. Data collection relies on a corpus-based methodology, utilizing large, balanced corpora such as the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) for contemporary American usage and the British National Corpus (BNC) for British English, augmented by a targeted self-compiled sub-corpus of examples from everyday discourse (e.g., news articles, social media snippets, literature excerpts, and public speeches) spanning 2015-2025 to capture recent linguistic patterns and contextual relevance. This hybrid sourcing balances representativeness with recency, avoiding over-reliance on outdated introspective examples while retaining the value of researcher-elicited instances for initial hypothesis generation. The data analysis follows a rigorous, multi-stage procedure: first, metaphorical expressions are identified through manual annotation guided by the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP or MIPVU variants)

combined with keyword-in-context searches for potential metaphorical lexemes; second, these are classified into underlying conceptual metaphors by grouping linguistic patterns under shared source-target alignments; third, detailed mapping analysis examines ontological correspondences (entities and roles), structural alignments, and epistemic entailments that generate inferences; finally, interpretations explore the cognitive effects (e.g., how metaphors constrain or enable abstract reasoning) and semantic consequences (e.g., framing biases in discourse). This stepwise process ensures methodological replicability, mitigates subjectivity through iterative cross-checking, and integrates qualitative nuance with quantitative validation to illuminate the pervasive role of conceptual domains in shaping English meaning and thought.

Theoretical Foundations of Conceptual Domains and Mappings

Conceptual domains constitute coherent, experientially organized knowledge structures that bundle related concepts, schemas, and scenarios into unified mental representations of aspects of human experience. In cognitive linguistics, a domain functions as a gestalt-like assembly encompassing entities, properties, relations, processes, and cultural models, enabling systematic understanding and inference. Rather than isolated elements, domains emerge from embodied interactions, perceptual patterns, and sociocultural practices, providing the foundational substrate for metaphorical projection. Recent multilevel extensions emphasize that domains operate hierarchically from basic image-schematic levels (e.g., containment, path, force) through primary scenes to complex cultural models facilitating nuanced meaning construction across modalities and contexts. This coherence ensures that metaphorical understanding draws not from fragmented features but from richly structured experiential wholes, allowing speakers to project inferences coherently while adapting to situational and cultural variability. Analytically, this view underscores domains' dynamic nature: they are neither static nor purely individual but co-constructed through shared cognition, with recent diachronic corpus analyses confirming their endurance as stable cognitive-linguistic patterns over time, even as surface expressions evolve (Teich et al., 2025). Such coherence grounds metaphor's explanatory power, transforming abstract or intangible experiences into graspable, experientially anchored knowledge.

In conceptual metaphors, the distinction between source and target domains structures the asymmetrical projection characteristic of metaphorical thought. Source domains typically draw from concrete, sensorimotor-rich, and perceptually salient experiences such as physical objects, spatial orientations, bodily actions, or force dynamics offering readily accessible structures for inference and imagery. Target domains, by contrast, involve more abstract, subjective, or complex notions like emotions, time, morality, relationships, or social institutions that resist direct conceptualization and thus recruit source-domain structure to become intelligible. This predominant concrete-to-abstract directionality reflects embodied cognition's priority: metaphors exploit well-understood physical experiences to scaffold reasoning about intangible realms, generating systematic inferences unavailable in literal terms. Contemporary refinements highlight exceptions and nuances, such as bidirectional or culture-specific mappings in multimodal contexts, yet affirm unidirectionality as a statistical norm rooted in neural and experiential asymmetries. Frame-semantic approaches further enrich this by showing how target-domain frames (e.g., emotion scripts) selectively integrate

source-domain elements, producing hybrid conceptualizations that blend universal embodiment with localized elaborations (Neumair et al., 2025). This directional bias not only constrains metaphorical creativity but also reveals metaphor's role in bridging embodied immediacy with higher-order abstraction, shaping cognition in predictable yet flexible ways. The mechanism of metaphorical mapping operates through structured correspondences that align elements across domains, comprising ontological (entities and attributes), structural (relations and sequences), and epistemic (inferential entailments) layers. Ontological correspondences establish entity-to-entity links (e.g., traveler in the source corresponds to person in the target for LIFE IS A JOURNEY), while structural alignments preserve relational configurations (e.g., obstacles as difficulties). Epistemic mappings transfer knowledge, enabling novel inferences (e.g., reaching a destination licenses conclusions about goal achievement). These mappings are constrained by the Invariance Principle, which mandates preservation of the target domain's image-schematic structure to avoid incoherent projections, and by unidirectionality, which generally prevents abstract-to-concrete reversals. Image schemas fundamental embodied patterns like SOURCE-PATH-GOAL or CONTAINER serve as primary building blocks, while primary metaphors (e.g., MORE IS UP, AFFECTION IS WARMTH) provide irreducible, experientially grounded links that compose complex metaphors. Embodiment anchors these processes: mappings recruit sensorimotor simulations, ensuring metaphorical understanding feels intuitive and inferentially rich. Recent advances validate these mechanisms through large-scale empirical and computational lenses, including diachronic data confirming mapping stability and prompting paradigms demonstrating enhanced reasoning when models simulate CMT mappings (Kramer, 2025; Teich et al., 2025). Collectively, these elements illustrate metaphor's constrained yet generative architecture, linking bodily experience to abstract thought while accommodating contextual and cultural modulation.

Prominent Conceptual Metaphors and Domains in English

LOVE Metaphors: Prominent target domains in English conceptual metaphors prominently include LOVE, conceptualized through multiple source domains that reveal its multifaceted experiential structure. The LOVE IS A JOURNEY mapping draws on motion and path schemas, with linguistic evidence such as “Our relationship hit a dead end,” “We’re at a crossroads,” or “This marriage is going nowhere,” mapping travelers to lovers, obstacles to difficulties, and destinations to shared goals. LOVE IS A WAR introduces adversarial dynamics (“She attacked my feelings,” “Their romance is a battlefield,” “He surrendered to her charm”), while LOVE IS A PLANT emphasizes organic growth (“Their love is blossoming,” “The relationship needs nurturing,” “It withered after neglect”). These mappings exhibit high systematicity, with entailments generating coherent inferences about progress, conflict resolution, or cultivation, as corpus-assisted analyses of English media and subtitling data confirm frequent co-occurrence of journey, war, and growth lexemes in romantic discourse (Abu Rumman et al., 2023). Analytically, such multiplicity underscores LOVE’s conceptual richness, allowing speakers to flexibly foreground different aspects trajectory, contest, or vitality while maintaining internal coherence through embodied correlations of effort, endurance, and transformation.

TIME Metaphors: The abstract target domain TIME is richly structured via concrete sources including MONEY, SPACE, and MOTION, with pervasive linguistic realizations in everyday English. TIME IS MONEY yields expressions like “You’re wasting my time,” “This meeting cost us two hours,” and “Invest your time wisely,” entailing scarcity, value, and transactional accountability. TIME IS SPACE employs orientation and extent (“The deadline is approaching,” “We’re far behind schedule,” “Looking forward to the future”), while TIME IS MOTION foregrounds movement (“Time flies,” “The years rushed by,” “Events are moving quickly”). Corpus-based semantic tagging of British English corpora reveals systematic entailments e.g., time as a valuable resource licenses budgeting inferences, while motion mappings enable trajectory predictions producing coherent systems that shape temporal reasoning around scarcity, directionality, and velocity (Cao & Graham, 2025). These mappings demonstrate robust coherence, as cross-domain alignments preserve image-schematic integrity (e.g., linear progression), facilitating analogical inference and ideological framing in economic or planning discourses.

ARGUMENT and LIFE: ARGUMENT IS WAR stands as a canonical mapping with extensive linguistic evidence (“He demolished my argument,” “She defended her position aggressively,” “Their debate ended in total defeat”), systematically aligning attack/defense roles, weapons to reasons, and victory to persuasion, generating entailments of strategy, casualties (e.g., lost face), and territorial gains that coherently frame contention as combative. Complementarily, LIFE IS A JOURNEY maps paths to personal trajectories (“She’s on the right path in life,” “His career hit a roadblock,” “We’ve come a long way together”), entailing choices at crossroads, obstacles as challenges, and destinations as achievements. Recent large-scale lexical metaphor studies across English corpora highlight these mappings’ persistence in political and narrative texts, where war lexemes intensify adversarial framing and journey metaphors underscore resilience and progress (Huang et al., 2025). The systems achieve coherence through shared motion/force schemas, enabling consistent inferential chains that influence decision-making and identity construction in public discourse.

EMOTION/ANGER: Emotion target domains, particularly ANGER, recruit forceful, physiological sources such as HEAT and PRESSURE, yielding vivid expressions like “She was boiling with rage,” “His temper flared up,” “I’m about to explode,” or “He bottled up his anger until it burst.” ANGER IS HEAT maps intensity to temperature rise and release to cooling, while ANGER IS PRESSURE emphasizes containment and eruption (“The pressure was building,” “She blew her top”). These exhibit strong systematicity: entailments include physiological correlates (reddening, steam), uncontrollability under excess, and cathartic release, producing coherent scenarios of buildup-danger-resolution grounded in embodied thermal and hydraulic experiences. Cross-cultural corpus investigations of English literary and narrative texts validate high frequency and contextual elaboration of these mappings, demonstrating their role in dramatizing internal states while constraining inferences toward volatility or management strategies (Dao & Ngo, 2024). Analytically, the mappings’ coherence arises from primary correlations between emotional arousal and physical sensations, enabling nuanced semantic extensions across genres.

Synthesis: Across these metaphor systems, systematicity emerges from clustered entailments and structural coherence that link disparate target domains to overlapping

source schemas (motion, force, growth, containment), fostering unified cognitive architectures for abstract reasoning (Abu Rumman et al., 2023). Corpus-derived examples from news media (“time is running out” in financial reports), political speeches (“attacking opponents’ policies”), romantic fiction (“nurturing our bond”), and narratives (“anger simmering”) illustrate real-time usage patterns, where frequency counts reveal domain dominance (journey/motion > war > heat) and contextual modulation enhances ideological effects. Entailments propagate coherently within systems (e.g., journey obstacles → problem-solving; heat buildup → risk of outburst), yet permit creative blending, underscoring metaphor’s generative yet constrained nature (Cao & Graham, 2025). Recent corpus-driven research affirms these patterns’ stability in contemporary English while highlighting genre-specific elaborations, offering robust evidence for metaphor’s pervasive structuring of meaning and thought (; Dao & Ngo, 2024; Huang et al., 2025). This analytical lens reveals how prominent conceptual domains collectively scaffold English speakers’ experiential understanding of love, time, conflict, life, and emotion.

Cognitive and Semantic Implications

Conceptual metaphors profoundly shape meaning construction by providing structured templates that render abstract concepts experientially accessible and inferentially rich. By projecting concrete source-domain elements onto target domains, metaphors enable speakers to comprehend intangible phenomena such as justice, success, or uncertainty through embodied simulations of motion, containment, force, or growth. This process transforms vague abstractions into coherent, manipulable mental models, licensing specific inferences that guide comprehension and evaluation. For instance, mapping progress to forward motion generates entailments of obstacles as barriers and destinations as achievements, facilitating predictive reasoning in planning discourse. Recent diachronic analyses confirm that such mappings constitute enduring cognitive-linguistic structures, not fleeting rhetorical devices, with large-scale empirical data demonstrating their stability across centuries and their capacity to scaffold complex inference chains in contemporary English usage (Teich et al., 2025). Analytically, these mechanisms reveal metaphor’s dual semantic-cognitive role: semantically, they enrich lexical networks with layered connotations; cognitively, they recruit sensorimotor activation to ground abstract thought in bodily experience. Consequently, conceptual metaphors not only facilitate understanding but actively constrain and expand inferential possibilities, shaping how individuals reason about causality, morality, and social relations in real-time communication.

Metaphors exert significant influence on ideological framing by selectively highlighting certain entailments while suppressing others, thereby naturalizing particular worldviews in political and media discourse. Expressions like “the economy is a patient needing treatment” frame policy interventions as curative actions, embedding ideological assumptions about agency and responsibility. This framing power intersects with debates on universality versus cultural variation: while primary metaphors rooted in shared embodiment (e.g., MORE IS UP, STATES ARE LOCATIONS) exhibit cross-linguistic regularities, higher-level elaborations display notable variation. In English, LOVE IS A JOURNEY predominates with individualistic progress emphases, contrasting with more collectivist or familial elaborations in other languages, as evidenced in comparative corpus studies. Recent investigations affirm semi-universality in

basic spatial-emotional mappings alongside substantial culture-specific extensions shaped by historical and societal models (Kövecses, 2024). Cross-cultural comparisons, including English-Chinese or English-Arabic political metaphors, illustrate how English favors war and journey sources in argumentation, reflecting individualistic and linear cultural orientations. Such variation underscores metaphor's adaptability, enabling ideological flexibility while maintaining core embodied coherence.

Applications of Conceptual Metaphor Theory span language teaching (where explicit mapping awareness accelerates abstract vocabulary acquisition and retention), discourse analysis (uncovering hidden ideological biases in news or policy texts), lexicography (structuring dictionary entries around systematic domains rather than isolated senses), and AI/NLP metaphor detection (improving model performance in identifying and interpreting mappings for sentiment analysis or machine translation). In EFL contexts, CMT-guided instruction has yielded substantial gains in vocabulary depth and learner motivation among college students by linking new terms to familiar experiential schemas (Chen, 2025). Critical reflection, however, highlights CMT's limitations: overemphasis on conventional mappings risks underplaying context-sensitivity, online meaning construction, and deliberate metaphor use; introspective data can introduce researcher bias; and strict unidirectionality may not fully capture multimodal or creative instances (Teich et al., 2025). Extensions such as deliteralization (tracking how metaphors lose original sensorimotor vividness yet retain inferential force) and integration with frame semantics or dynamic contextual models address these gaps, enhancing ecological validity and accommodating cultural modulation. Future refinements, informed by large-scale computational validation, promise a more nuanced, context-aware theory that better accounts for metaphor's generative potential amid evolving digital discourses (Kövecses, 2024).

Conclusion

This study has illuminated the pervasive and systematic role of conceptual metaphors in structuring meaning and cognition within contemporary English. By examining prominent target domains such as LOVE, TIME, ARGUMENT, LIFE, and EMOTION through their dominant source domains journey, war, plant, money, space, motion, heat, and pressure the analysis has demonstrated how cross-domain mappings generate coherent networks of entailments that shape everyday reasoning and abstract conceptualization. These metaphors are far from ornamental; they constitute foundational cognitive architecture, enabling speakers to grasp intangible phenomena through embodied, experientially grounded projections while simultaneously constraining inference in predictable yet flexible ways. The investigation revealed robust systematicity across metaphor systems: journey mappings consistently license progress-oriented inferences, war metaphors naturalize adversarial dynamics, and heat/pressure schemas dramatize emotional intensity with physiological fidelity. Corpus-derived evidence from diverse contemporary sources news, literature, political discourse, and social media further confirmed the frequency, contextual adaptability, and ideological potency of these patterns in real-world English usage. Ultimately, the findings reaffirm that metaphor is not a peripheral feature of language but a central mechanism through which humans organize experience, construct meaning, and navigate complex social and psychological realities.

The broader implications of this work extend to both theoretical advancement and practical application in cognitive linguistics. By bridging foundational Conceptual Metaphor Theory with contemporary empirical rigor, the study highlights the enduring stability of core mappings alongside their capacity for contextual and cultural modulation, offering a nuanced perspective on universality versus variation in English metaphorical thought. These insights carry significant value for language pedagogy, where explicit awareness of metaphorical systems can enhance learners' mastery of abstract vocabulary and idiomatic fluency; for discourse analysis, where uncovering hidden framings reveals ideological underpinnings in media and politics; for lexicography, by suggesting domain-based sense organization; and for emerging AI and NLP technologies, where improved metaphor detection promises more human-like reasoning in language models. While limitations inherent in CMT such as potential overemphasis on conventional patterns and under-attention to deliberate or highly context-sensitive uses remain, the analysis points toward fruitful extensions through integration with dynamic, multimodal, and frame-semantic approaches. In an era of rapid linguistic and technological change, recognizing metaphor's foundational role in cognition equips scholars, educators, and technologists to better understand and harness the imaginative yet structured ways English speakers continue to make sense of an increasingly complex world.

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