

## THE DYNAMICS OF CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR IN MULTICULTURAL SPACES THROUGH THE THESES OF GEORGE LAKOFF AND MARK JOHNSON

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### Abstract:

This research paper explores the emergence of conceptual metaphors from the underlying structures of human knowledge, ideas, and perception, emphasizing the crucial role of culture in shaping these metaphors. It investigates the complex interplay of conceptual metaphors within multicultural contexts, examining the cognitive and cultural mechanisms through which metaphorical frameworks both unify and challenge human understanding across diverse societies. Central to this study is the question: What constitutes conceptual metaphor theory? From this, several related inquiries arise: How do metaphors facilitate the negotiation of shared meaning across cultural boundaries? In what ways did Lakoff and Johnson demonstrate that metaphors possess intellectual foundations beyond traditional rhetorical devices, rooted instead in innate patterns of human perception that are both flexible and culturally variable? Building on Lakoff and Johnson's foundational theory of metaphor as a cognitive structure shaping perception and reasoning, this study adopts a critical applied approach to analyze how metaphors act as dynamic mediators of meaning. It highlights their transformative power to reframe realities and their adaptability to cultural contexts, positioning metaphors as vital forces in constructing diverse conceptual worldviews.

**Keywords:** conceptual metaphor, culture, Lakoff and Johnson, cognition, language

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### 1.Introduction:

The study of conceptual metaphors has fundamentally transformed our understanding of human cognition, language, and meaning-making processes. The groundbreaking work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, particularly through their seminal publication "Metaphors We Live By," revolutionized our perspective on metaphors, establishing them not merely as linguistic devices but as fundamental cognitive

structures that shape human thought and action, this paradigm shift has profound implications for our understanding of how meaning is constructed and interpreted across different cultural spaces. Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) posits that our conceptual system is inherently metaphorical, with metaphors serving as cognitive tools that enable us to understand abstract concepts through more concrete experiential domains

This theoretical framework has opened new avenues for exploring how human cognition operates across cultural boundaries, raising fundamental questions about the universality versus cultural specificity of metaphorical thinking.

The central insight of Lakoff and Johnson's work lies in the assertion that human cognition is, at its core, embodied and metaphorical. Our ability to comprehend abstract phenomena such as time, justice, or morality depends on metaphorical mappings of these intangible domains onto more familiar, tangible experiences, like money, motion, or physical balance. Conceptual metaphors structure not just our thought but, by extension, our cultures, politics, and communication, forming the underpinnings of social meaning (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, p. 7).

## **2. Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT)**

### **2.1. The Cognitive Basis of Metaphor**

Lakoff and Johnson assert, "reason is not disembodied... it arises from the nature of our bodies" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, P. 4). This claim disrupts the Enlightenment ideal of detached, pure reason, suggesting instead that cognition is inevitably perspectival, imaginative, and culturally mediated. Metaphor, therefore, is not a secondary feature of human life but a constitutive force that structures knowledge, ethics, politics, and art. In redefining metaphor as an essential dimension of human existence, Lakoff and Johnson profoundly expand the philosophical stakes of metaphor theory, inviting ongoing critical inquiry into how language, thought, and reality intertwine.

The definition of conceptual metaphor, presented in their seminal work *Metaphors We Live By*, fundamentally redefined the understanding of metaphor beyond its traditional literary and rhetorical confines. They argue that metaphors are not merely ornamental figures of speech; rather, they are essential cognitive structures that shape the way individuals perceive and interact with the world. According to Lakoff and Johnson, a conceptual metaphor consists of a mapping from a more concrete source domain to a more abstract target domain, allowing individuals to grasp complex concepts through familiar experiences (Lakoff and Johnson 5)

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), as articulated by Lakoff and Johnson, rests on a radical premise: human thought is inherently metaphorical. Unlike traditional views that confined metaphor to poetic or rhetorical flourish, CMT asserts that metaphor is a cognitive mechanism through which we comprehend abstract concepts by mapping them onto more concrete, often bodily-based experiences (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p 5-7). This process, termed "cross-domain mapping," involves a "source domain"—a familiar, tangible concept—and a "target domain"—a more abstract or complex idea. For instance, in the metaphor "Time is Money," the source domain (money) provides a framework of value, expenditure, and investment to structure our understanding of the target domain (time), yielding expressions like "wasting time" or "spending time wisely" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p 9).

From this, Lakoff and Galici see those higher-level linguistic processes “are shaped by our ongoing encounters and interactions with the world through our bodies and brains” (Galici and Lakoff, 2005, p. 456). According to this theory, metaphors are part and parcel of everyday thought and linguistic activity: They ground the abstract and intangible in concrete concepts accessible to the senses (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980;) A conceptual metaphor is a mental mapping between different conceptual domains (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, )And from it, there are many different types of metaphors that have been posited within the body of work that characterizes conceptual metaphor theory. In *Where mathematics comes from*, (Lakoff and Núñez, 2000, p. 53) distinguish between “grounding metaphors” and “linking metaphors.” Grounding metaphors project directly from physical experiences to fundamental mathematical concepts. An example of this is the ARITHMETIC IS OBJECT COLLECTION metaphor (Ch. 3), where arithmetical operations such as addition and subtraction are understood in terms of the manipulation of physical objects, such as adding things to a pile or taking things away from a pile.

The revolutionary impact of CMT lies in its redefinition of language as a mirror of cognition. Rather than a neutral conduit for ideas, language emerges as a repository of conceptual structures, revealing how we think through metaphors embedded in everyday discourse (Lakoff and Johnson 10-12). This insight has profound implications for cross-cultural studies, as it suggests that while human cognition may share universal roots—grounded in shared bodily experiences—the expression and elaboration of metaphors are shaped by cultural, historical, and environmental factors. CMT thus provides a framework to explore how meaning is constructed and negotiated across cultures, challenging earlier linguistic paradigms that prioritized syntax and semantics over embodied cognition.

Moreover, CMT bridges the gap between individual cognition and collective cultural systems, proposing that metaphors are not merely personal but are shared frameworks that underpin social realities. As Lakoff later elaborated in *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, metaphor's structure entire conceptual categories, influencing everything from moral reasoning to political ideologies (Lakoff 1987, p. 5-10). This dual focus on individual minds and cultural systems positions CMT as a powerful tool for dissecting the dynamics of metaphor in multicultural spaces, where shared and divergent conceptual mappings collide and coalesce.

## **2.2.CMT Implications for Meaning**

CMT revolutionized our understanding of language and meaning construction on several fronts:

- A. **Meaning as Mapped from Experience:** Abstract concepts, such as time or morality, acquire meaning through their metaphorical mappings to physical or spatial concepts. For instance, mapping time onto space is evident in expressions such as "looking forward to the future" or "putting the past behind us."
- B. **Language Reflecting Cognition:** Metaphors are not accidental linguistic artifacts but windows into shared cognitive processes that structure societies, underscore ideologies, and reveal social priorities.
- C. **Culture as a Mediator:** While metaphors may originate from universal bodily experience, their elaboration and usage are mediated by cultural, linguistic, and historical contexts.

Thus, CMT was not merely a theoretical framework for linguistics but a cognitive, cultural, and epistemological paradigm that expanded how scholars understood the interrelationship between mind, language, and culture.

## **3.Cultural Dynamics of Conceptual Metaphors**

Lakoff and Johnson placed metaphor at the center of human cognition, revealing its pervasive influence on thought processes, decision-making, and social structures. According to *Metaphors We Live By*, metaphor is not just about language but operates at the level of conceptual systems—ways in which humans mentally organize their realities (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p .12)

For example, the metaphor "time is money" illustrates how the concrete experience of managing money can inform our understanding of time, leading to expressions such as "spending time" or "saving time." This mapping process reveals how deeply ingrained metaphors influence thought patterns and perceptions, underscoring their

role as fundamental cognitive mechanisms that guide human reasoning and behavior (Lakoff and Johnson 10).

Moreover, Lakoff and Johnson emphasize that these conceptual metaphors are not static; they are dynamic and culturally situated, reflecting the values, practices, and experiences of different communities. This perspective opens up a critical dialogue around the cultural variability of metaphors, suggesting that while certain metaphors may appear universal, their specific applications and interpretations can differ across cultural landscapes (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, p.15)

For instance, in Western cultures, metaphors related to competition, such as "the race for success," may dominate, whereas collectivist cultures might employ metaphors that emphasize community and harmony, such as "the web of life" (Lakoff and Johnson 25). By highlighting the interplay between metaphor, culture, and cognition, Lakoff and Johnson invite scholars to consider how metaphors shape not only individual thought but also collective cultural identities, thus broadening the scope of metaphor studies and its implications for understanding human cognition in diverse contexts. Johnson stated that the way we understand a particular situation is based on our use of regular conceptual metaphors that form the common understanding of individuals belonging to our culture. (Johnson, 1993, p.02)

#### **4. Metaphorical Structure and cultural Contexts**

Empirical research within CMT suggests that certain conceptual metaphors exhibit near-universal prevalence, likely due to shared human embodiment. Metaphors like "Life is a Journey," with mappings of paths, obstacles, and destinations, appear across linguistic and cultural boundaries, reflecting the universal experience of physical movement as a metaphor for progress or purpose (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, p. 60-62). Such metaphors suggest a common cognitive substrate, where bodily experiences—walking, falling, rising—anchor abstract thought in tangible realities.

##### **4.1. Cultural Variations**

Despite these universal underpinnings, the instantiation and interpretation of metaphors vary significantly across cultural contexts. To illustrate this dynamic, let us examine the metaphor of "Nation" in three distinct cultural spaces:

- A. Arab Cultural Context:** In Arabic discourse, the nation is frequently conceptualized as "Mother," a nurturing, protective entity tied to familial bonds and emotional attachment. Expressions like "hudan al-watan" (the embrace of the homeland) evoke a visceral connection, mapping the source domain of maternal care onto the target domain of national identity. This

reflects cultural values of collectivism and historical narratives of communal struggle, where the nation embodies a shared lineage and protective warmth (Charteris-Black,2005, p. 120-123).

- B. American Cultural Context:** In contrast, American discourse often frames the nation as "Land of Opportunity," emphasizing individual achievement and mobility. The source domain here is economic or spatial opportunity, mapped onto the target domain of national identity through phrases like "the American Dream" or "melting pot." This metaphor aligns with cultural narratives of individualism and immigration, prioritizing personal success over collective bonding (Charteris-Black,2005,p 112-115)
- C. Japanese Cultural Context:** In Japanese culture, the nation is often metaphorized as a "Harmonious Family," reflecting Confucian ideals of hierarchy and interdependence. The source domain of family—with roles, duties, and unity—maps onto the target domain of national identity, evident in expressions that liken societal roles to familial obligations. This metaphor underscores cultural values of group cohesion and order, contrasting with both Arab emotionality and American individualism (Kövecses,2005, p. 215-220).

These examples reveal that while the underlying mechanism of metaphor—mapping source to target—remains consistent, the selection of source domains and the entailments of these mappings are deeply cultural. Metaphors thus serve as both mirrors and shapers of cultural values, dynamically adapting to local histories and social structures while retaining a core cognitive logic.

#### **4.2. Mapping Source and Target Domains in Multicultural Contexts**

To further elucidate the transformative role of metaphors, let us apply Lakoff and Johnson's framework of source and target domain mappings to the metaphor "Conflict is War" across three cultural contexts, analyzing how cultural nuances influence metaphorical entailments:

- A. Western Context (United States):** In American political discourse, "Conflict is War" structures debates and disagreements as battles, with the source domain (war) entailing strategies, attacks, and defenses. The target domain (conflict) is thus expressed through terms like "attacking a policy" or "defending a position," reflecting a competitive cultural ethos where winning is paramount. This mapping reinforces adversarial framing in politics, often overshadowing collaborative possibilities (Lakoff,1987; p. 156-160).
- B. Arab Context:** In Arabic discourse, the same metaphor operates but with different entailments. The source domain of war often includes notions of "honor" and "dignity," mapping onto political or social conflict with expressions like "ma'arakat al-haqq" (battle for truth) or "difā' 'an al-karāma"

(defense of dignity). This reflects a cultural emphasis on moral integrity and collective identity, transforming conflict into a noble struggle rather than a mere contest (Charteris-Black,2005, p. 125-130).

- C. Indian Context: In Indian discourse, "Conflict is War" may draw on philosophical traditions like the Bhagavad Gita, where the source domain of war includes concepts of "dharma" (duty) and cosmic balance. The target domain of conflict thus acquires a moral and spiritual dimension, as seen in references to struggle as a necessary path to righteousness. This mapping situates conflict within a broader ethical framework, distinct from Western competitiveness or Arab honor (Kövecses2005, p. 230-235).

This applied analysis demonstrates the dynamic adaptability of conceptual metaphors. While the core mapping of "Conflict is War" persists across cultures, the specific entailments and cultural resonances transform the metaphor's implications, highlighting its role as a cognitive tool that both reflects and shapes cultural worldviews. Lakoff and Johnson's framework thus proves invaluable for unpacking these nuances, offering a lens to trace how metaphors mediate between universal cognition and cultural specificity.

## **5.Criticism of Conceptual Metaphor Theory**

The interaction between universal embodiment and cultural specificity in conceptual metaphor raises epistemological questions: Are metaphors universal cognitive structures or culturally relative constructs?

While CMT offers a robust framework, it is not without critique. Zoltán Kövecses, a prominent scholar of metaphor, argues that Lakoff and Johnson overemphasize universal patterns at the expense of cultural granularity. Kövecses contends that metaphors are often embedded in "cultural models"—shared schemas of belief and value—that shape their interpretation beyond simple source-target mappings (Kövecses,2005, p. 183-190). For instance, the metaphor "Anger is Heat" may be universal in its bodily basis, but cultural models determine whether it manifests as "boiling over" (Western) or "burning inwardly" (some East Asian contexts).

Raymond Gibbs challenges CMT's static view of metaphor as pre-existing cognitive structures, proposing instead that metaphors are dynamic, context-dependent processes emergent in discourse. Gibbs emphasizes the role of situational and pragmatic factors in metaphor comprehension, suggesting that meaning is co-constructed rather than predetermined by fixed mappings (Gibbs, 1994; p. 42-48). This critique highlights a potential blind spot in CMT: its relative neglect of real-time interaction and contextual fluidity.

These alternative perspectives do not undermine CMT but enrich it, urging a more integrative approach that accounts for cultural depth and discursive dynamism. By synthesizing Kövecses's cultural focus and Gibbs's contextual lens with Lakoff and Johnson's cognitive emphasis, metaphor studies can better capture the multifaceted nature of metaphorical thought in multicultural spaces, and metaphors might best be understood as liminal phenomena—anchored in universal embodiment but continually negotiated and reconstructed through language, history, and social interaction.

## **6. Conclusion**

Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) offers a robust framework for understanding how metaphors operate across cultures, revealing how they adapt to diverse cultural contexts while maintaining core cognitive foundations. Cross-cultural examples from Arab, American, and Japanese settings highlight the transformative power of metaphors to both reflect and shape societal values. Philosophical reflection further positions metaphors at the intersection of universal embodied experience and culturally specific realities. Conceptual metaphors function as dynamic mediators of understanding—rooted in human embodiment yet continuously shaped by cultural, historical, and social forces. While CMT provides invaluable insights into the cognitive mechanisms underlying metaphor, contemporary critiques emphasize the importance of integrating cultural variability and pragmatic context. The hybridization of metaphors in multicultural environments opens fertile ground for future research, inviting deeper philosophical inquiry into how meaning is constructed, shared, and contested across diverse societies. Far from merely bridging cultural divides, metaphors may serve as a universal language of human connection, simultaneously revealing the shared cognitive architecture and rich diversity of human experience. The future of metaphor studies lies in developing more nuanced theoretical models that account for both the universality of metaphorical thought and its culturally specific expressions. Understanding these dynamics is essential for advancing cross-cultural communication and cognitive research in an increasingly interconnected world. The ongoing evolution of CMT and related theories promises to yield profound insights into the nature of human cognition and the cultural processes that shape meaning.

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