



Metaphor as Cultural Mirror: A Cross-Cultural Study of Conceptual Metaphors in English

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Abstract

Metaphors are not just a stylistic trick, they are a reflection of how people and societies think about the world in terms of language. The purpose of the present study is to examine the role of conceptual metaphor in English in terms of a cross-cultural approach by analyzing the role of metaphoric expressions in revealing and shaping cultural values, beliefs and patterns of thought. Based on the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), the research aims at investigating the interaction between language, cognition and culture by examining metaphorical constructs in different settings of the English language and selected examples of non-native English discourse. The research design is qualitative comparative research where data is obtained from literary texts, media discourse, public speeches and everyday communication. The study examines common conceptual domains in terms of the universal patterns of metaphor and culturally distinct patterns of variation, including emotion, time, power, journey, nature and human body. The results show that there are conceptual metaphors that are common across human experiences but that are also affected by the historical tradition, social norms, and cultural worldviews of the interpretants and users of the metaphor. The study also underscores the importance of the use of metaphors in the formation of identity, in intercultural communication and in the transmission of collective cultural knowledge. The study demonstrates the relationship between cognition and culture, and reflects the current research in cognitive linguistics, semantics, discourse analysis and intercultural communication. The findings give valuable insights for language educators, translators, researchers and communication professionals to understand the cultural dimension of metaphorical language. Overall, the study confirms that conceptual metaphors serve as cultural mirrors, and that they give a glimpse into the various ways societies view, understand and express their human experiences, while also enriching the understanding of the cross-cultural in the modern globalized world.

Keywords: Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Cognitive Linguistics, Cross-Cultural Communication, English Language, Metaphorical Expressions, Cultural Cognition, Discourse Analysis, Semantics.

1. Introduction

Language is not just a means of communication but also a storehouse of cultural knowledge, social values, and collective human experience. Metaphor is one of the most important of the linguistic tools that helps to capture people's perceptions and interpretations of the world. Today, people consider metaphor to be a basic cognitive process by which they think abstractly about something they know through the use of a familiar experience, and originally it was only seen as a stylistic device used in literature and rhetoric. Since the rise of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), the fascination with metaphor has been extended from its status as a linguistic or cognitive phenomenon to its systematic nature as a pattern of thinking. Therefore, metaphors can be useful in understanding how societies around the world think and make meaning, how they organize knowledge, and how they define cultural identities.

English is a language of the world, and it has evolved from the interactions with different cultures and historical traditions which have left behind an abundance of conceptual metaphors. While many of the metaphors in English seem to belong to the universal class because they are based on experiences shared by all human beings like movement, vision, emotion, body, etc., there are many others that are deeply rooted in cultural beliefs, historical developments, religious traditions, and social practices. For example, time, success, family, emotions, morality etc. are things that are frequently metaphorized and can indicate cultural assumptions that vary by language. The differences indicate that it is possible to identify some common features in human thinking but that the cultural context plays an important role in the way in which reality is perceived through the use of metaphors. The cross-cultural study of conceptual metaphors has grown in significance in the fields of linguistics, intercultural communication, translation studies, language education and cognitive science. Since English is an international language that brings together people from various cultural backgrounds, one has to understand the cultural aspects of the English metaphors used for communicating effectively with others. Literal translation of a metaphorical phrase often leads to a lack of meaning because the same concepts or ideas may not have the same translation in other languages or may have other cultural connotations. Thus, the study of the conceptual metaphors from a cross-cultural perspective, not only helps to improve the translation practices but also promotes the development of intercultural competence and the second language acquisition. The interconnection between language and culture is clearly manifested in the metaphorical expression of abstract notions like love, life, education, power, health, and emotions. Some conceptual metaphors, like LIFE IS A JOURNEY or TIME IS MONEY, are ubiquitous in English, but their interpretations and salience differ in different cultures, depending on social values, economic systems and past experiences. The differences indicate that metaphor is a cultural mirror, that is, it reflects the worldview, priorities, and life experiences of a speech community. Therefore, studying conceptual metaphors is a way of gaining deeper insight into the language and culture to be found in it. Comparative studies that systematically analyze the relationship between English metaphors and various cultural backgrounds are not yet a large number, though there have been some studies of conceptual metaphor. Although numerous studies on metaphor as a cognitive phenomenon and on individual instances of metaphor in the language have been conducted, studies that combine analyses of language, cognition, and culture are still largely available. This type of research is especially pertinent today in a globalized world, where there are numerous instances of multilingual communication, education across cultures, digital media and collaboration with the rest of the world, which require greater awareness of the various cultural contexts in which language is used. This study investigates conceptual metaphors in English in a cross-cultural context and how metaphorical patterns have been shaped by and reflect in the understanding of the culture. It examines the degree to which the English conceptual metaphors reflect universal cognitive tendencies, as well as culturally-specific meanings. The study aims to understand the similarities, differences, and conceptual structures that exist between metaphors in various cultural contexts and which are relevant to their interpretation and communication. In sum the research adds to the understanding of metaphor as a cognitive instrument and as a cultural artifact, showing that metaphorical language is a "mirror" in which societies reflect their beliefs and values as well as their world perception.

2. Background of the study

Language is not just the rules of grammar and words, it is the perception, understanding and communication of its experiences by individuals and communities. Metaphor is one of the many tools of language that is used to facilitate human communication; it is used to help the speaker comprehend an abstract concept in terms of a familiar one. The results of contemporary linguistic studies have proved the importance of metaphors not only as an ornament of literary style, but as a basic cognitive tool which is able to condition the process of reasoning, decision-making and cultural interpretation. Conceptual Metaphor Theory has been a game changer in the study of metaphor, as it states that the study of abstract thinking is organized in a systematic manner using metaphorical mapping, which is based on everyday human experience.

While many conceptual metaphors seem to be based on universal bodily experiences, the language that constitutes them and the interpretation of them in different cultures and societies is quite different. All cultures create unique beliefs, traditions, social norms, and historical experiences that drive the way that people understand emotions, relationships, morality, time, success, and other abstract areas. Metaphors are therefore important markers of cultural identity as they represent the collective worldview that is present in a language. Phrases like "time is money", "life is a journey", "knowledge is light" are well known in English, but similar meanings are found in other linguistic and cultural contexts in ways that may be different in terms of cultural priorities or thinking patterns.

The world has become one of the most influential languages of globalisation, international education, digital communication and cross-cultural interaction due to English. English is used worldwide as a common language, making it easier for people to understand each other, regardless of their native tongue. The over-spreading use of English, however, does emphasize the need to be aware of the cultural ideas that are contained in the metaphors of English. Conceptual metaphors are not always literally translatable and are common across all learners, translators, educators and intercultural communicators. If these metaphors are misunderstood, misunderstandings, inaccurate translations and

communication barriers can occur, particularly in multicultural settings.

The cross-cultural analysis of conceptual metaphor sheds light on both universal tendencies of mind and culture-specific conceptualizations. Comparing metaphorical patterns across languages and cultures can help to determine common human experiences and to understand how historical traditions, religious beliefs, environment, and social practices have influenced metaphorical formation. This kind of research helps further the study of cognitive linguistics, intercultural communication, translation studies, language teaching and discourse analysis for understanding the role of metaphor as a cognitive process and as a cultural phenomenon.

In the past decade, the growing mobility of people and the advancement of digital communication have enhanced the interaction between speakers of different language groups. The developments have led to an increasing need to understand the cultural meaning of words in metaphoric expressions. Metaphors are commonly used in English-language media, literature, education, advertising, and social networking sites, which often have underlying cultural values, and the ability to understand and use metaphors is a key element of communicative competence. The study of conceptual metaphors from a cross-cultural perspective, therefore, serves to raise awareness of cultural diversity and to facilitate and improve communication across cultures.

In this light, the present study "Metaphor as Cultural Mirror: A Cross-Cultural Study of Conceptual Metaphors in English" aims to investigate the cultural aspects of conceptual metaphors in English and their reflection on cultural beliefs, values and patterns of thought. The study is designed to look at metaphorical expressions in various cultural settings, in order to uncover universal conceptual structures and culturally specific variations. The results will help build up a better understanding of the complex interplay between language, thought, and culture and will have implications for language teaching, intercultural communication, translation, and language research.

3. Justification

In an increasingly inter-connected world, it is important to better understand how language mirrors the values, beliefs and patterns of thinking of their culture, and this study "Metaphor as Cultural Mirror: A Cross-Cultural Study of Conceptual Metaphors in English" is justified. Conceptual metaphors are not just linguistic expressions, but ways that people perceive, interpret and communicate experiences. Conceptual metaphor is a linguistic phenomenon that is closely linked to the concept of culture, and studying conceptual metaphors in English in various cultural contexts can shed light on the influence of cultural backgrounds on their construct of meaning and cognitive processes.

English is the universal language used by people from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Hence, metaphoric language in English may have a culturally encoded meaning that could be viewed differently by people from different cultures. Therefore, a cross-cultural investigation is necessary to find out the similarities and differences between the use, interpretation, and conceptualization of Metaphors. This type of analysis can be useful to better understand intercultural communication and to minimize misunderstandings caused by metaphorical meanings that are culture-specific.

Moreover, the study has been able to fill a major void in the fields of language and cognition studies, as it brought together the perspectives of cultural studies, cognitive linguistics and discourse analysis. In previous research, metaphors have been studied in one culture at a time, but not many researchers have systematically compared conceptual metaphors across various cultures through the common medium of English. This research can offer useful information for understanding the differences in conceptualisation of universal human experiences in the light of cultural norms and worldviews.

The results of this research will be applicable in the field of language sciences, translation studies, intercultural communication, and business communication in the global world. This is because, when culturally embedded metaphors are made visible, educators, translators and communication professionals can become more effective in their ability to convey meaning across cultural differences. Thus, the study is of academic and societal value, and adds to the general knowledge of language as a manifestation of culture and human cognition.

4. Objectives of the Study

1. To explore conceptual metaphor as a tool for understanding the cultural values, beliefs and worldviews in the English language.
2. To detect and categorize the major conceptual metaphors in English in various cultural and social settings.
3. To examine differences in the ways in which conceptual metaphors are interpreted and used among English speakers from different cultures.
4. In order to study the impact of culture on the formation, adaptation and comprehension of the metaphoric expressions in English.
5. To explore the linguistic similarities and differences between the patterns of conceptual metaphor in selected cultures of English.

5. Literature Review

That metaphor is not just a stylistic tool, but an integral process of human perception and organization of reality has been investigated in the field of conceptual metaphor. The cognitive linguistic approach has made it known that metaphors have been shown to reflect culture, social values and history. Hence, cross-cultural studies are crucial to the comprehension of the same experience in different ways, using different metaphorical structures.

Conceptual metaphor theory was founded by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) who championed the view that metaphor is not only a literary element, but is also a part of everyday thinking. They put forth the idea that conceptual metaphors like TIME IS MONEY and ARGUMENT IS WAR organize human thinking by bringing abstract ideas into concrete terms. Their work has revolutionized the study of metaphor, by focusing on the role of metaphoric expressions as representations of underlying conceptual systems that are shared within cultural groups.

Later, Lakoff (1993) expanded the view and depicted that conceptual metaphors originate from a system of correspondences between the source domain and the target domain. From his cognitive perspective, these mappings are driven by embodied human experiences and are shaped by cultural knowledge. This theoretical framework served as a basis for cross-cultural analyses, which focused on similarities and differences in the metaphoric thinking of languages.

While many conceptual metaphors are related to universal human bodily experiences, there is no universal way to interpret and realize them, as Kövecses (2005) claimed. His comparative studies showed that his emotions of anger, love and happiness were represented metaphorically in different ways across the societies, with some universal cognitive patterns. He found that metaphor is an interaction of universal cognition and culture-specific experience.

Elaborating further on cultural variation, Kövecses (2010) proposed the term context-sensitive metaphor, which is the claim that metaphorical expression is influenced by the cultural, historical, environmental and ideological context. He argued that conceptual metaphors are different in different communities because people understand experiences in the frameworks of concepts that have been in place in the culture. His research contributions to the fields of metaphor and intercultural communication are still central to the field today.

Yu (1998) compared the conceptual metaphors of Chinese and English and found great disparity in the metaphoric representation of emotions and experiences related to the body. The study revealed that many Chinese metaphors are based on traditional Chinese philosophical views and the Chinese holistic cultural values, while many English metaphors are based on individualistic cognitive concepts. Yu's findings suggested the significance of cultural background in the interpretation of metaphors.

In a similar manner, Yu (2009) also pointed out that conceptual metaphors are very much rooted in cultural cognition and collective knowledge. He compared the systems of metaphors in Chinese and in English, and found that the metaphors in a given language are not simply metaphors of the universal ones, but rather metaphors that reflect the conceptualization that is culturally specific to the language. His research confirmed the importance of taking culture into account in metaphor analysis.

Charteris-Black (2004) has developed Critical Metaphor Analysis, which is a hybrid of cognitive linguistics and discourse studies, in order to investigate metaphor in discourse. He stated that metaphor is not only a cognitive phenomenon but also a persuasive rhetorical technique in political, religious and media talk. His work was an illustration of the manner in which metaphor is the reflection of ideology in specific cultural contexts.

Musolff (2004) analysed metaphors in political discourse in Europe from a discourse perspective. His analysis revealed that metaphors affect the perception of political facts and historical events because they reflect culturally shared narratives and social beliefs. The study found that metaphor is a cultural tool that is used to create collective identities and shape public opinion.

Sharifian (2011) presented the theory of Cultural Conceptualizations which states that metaphor is not an individual mental process, but the product of culturally shared cognition. Through his research he found that cultural schemas, categories and metaphors affect the communication process for speakers of different languages. This viewpoint has gained more ground in intercultural pragmatics.

In L2 field, Boers (2000) studied the didactic relevance of conceptual metaphors in the context of second-language acquisition. The study showed that the knowledge of metaphorical structures improves vocabulary learning, idiomatic competence and reading comprehension. Boers found that the awareness of metaphor helps the learner to comprehend culturally-laden expressions in English.

In exploring translation studies, Newmark (1988) emphasized the need of cultural adaptation for translation of metaphor instead of linguistic equivalence. Based on his research, it is concluded that the translator needs to comprehend both conceptual system and cultural association to retain the metaphorical meaning. This work provided an example of the difficulties of conceptual metaphor transfer from one language and culture to another.

Gibbs (1994) studied the psychological aspects of metaphor comprehension and concluded that metaphorical thinking is not an uncommon linguistic ability but rather a natural way of thinking. Results from experiments suggested that the rate of processing conventional metaphors was fast, as they are based on the concept they have acquired from cultural experience.

Deignan (2005) used a corpus-based approach to show that the patterns of metaphor usage showed that were found in the authentic language data varied according to genre, culture and communicative context. Her findings confirmed that metaphorical language was influenced by universal conceptual tendencies and the culturally specific discourse practices.

Wierzbicka (1997) put it that in intercultural communication research, cultural conceptual meanings are encoded in language, which cannot be translated into another language in every case. In her analysis of metaphorical expressions she demonstrated that sometimes they carry with them a different culture value that cannot be translated based on lexeme, but requires contextual interpretation.

Steen (2014) has recently conducted studies that divided conceptual metaphor and deliberate metaphor in communication. He suggested that people use metaphors deliberately to manipulate their listeners in the field of education, politics, and media communication. His work was an extension of conceptual metaphor theory, adding pragmatic and communicative aspects to the analysis of metaphor.

It is found that the existing literature shows that this conceptual metaphors are cognitive, linguistic and cultural phenomena. The linguistic realization of a metaphorical mapping depends on cultural beliefs, historical traditions, and social practices that inform how it is realized in universal bodily experiences. But there are relatively few studies which concentrate exclusively on conceptual metaphor in contemporary English in a variety of cultural contexts. The present study aims to fill this gap by exploring the cultural values of conceptual metaphors in English and the differences in conceptual metaphor structures between different cultural backgrounds, which will benefit the field of cognitive linguistics, intercultural communication and metaphor studies.

6. Material and Methodology

The study involved a comparative, qualitative, and descriptive research design with the aim of studying the conceptual metaphors as cultural representation in selected cross-cultural linguistic contexts in English and other languages. Primary data were gathered by questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with language teachers, linguists, translators, post-graduate students and bilingual speakers with knowledge of English and at least one other language. The participants had to recognize, decode and analyse the conceptual metaphors in daily speech, literature, media discourse and cultural products. They gave direct evidence of understanding metaphors, understanding them culturally, and differences in metaphoric meaning between linguistic communities. The secondary sources were published books, peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, dissertations, dictionaries of idioms, online linguistic corpora, and literary texts and authentic media sources related to conceptual metaphor theory, cognitive linguistics, cross-cultural communication, and intercultural pragmatics. The conceptual, theoretical and methodological framework was presented through the observation and analysis of influential theoretical models such as Conceptual Metaphor Theory and cognitive semantic approaches. The collected data were analyzed through thematic analysis and comparative content analysis, which allowed for the identification of recurring metaphoric patterns, culturally specific conceptualizations and similarities and differences in the use of metaphor in languages. The use of both primary and secondary data resulted in a more robust finding, as it was both empirical and based on existing scholarly research on the concepts of metaphor and culture.

7. Results and Discussion

Results:

The results show that conceptual metaphors in English have significant cultural values, historical experiences, and common cognitive patterns. While many metaphors have common cognitive characteristics, these are realized linguistically and conceptualized differently within different cultures. Selected literary texts, newspaper articles, speeches and expressions used in everyday conversations from native and non-native English contexts were analysed. The three dominant conceptual metaphors, cultural variation and communicative functions were explored.

Table 1. Frequency of Major Conceptual Metaphors Identified in English Texts (N = 250 Metaphorical Expressions)

Conceptual Metaphor	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Interpretation
Life is a Journey	62	24.8	Reflects progress, purpose, and personal growth.
Time is Money	48	19.2	Represents economic value attached to time.
Argument is War	40	16.0	Indicates competitive communication style.
Love is a Journey	34	13.6	Views relationships as shared experiences.
Knowledge is Light	29	11.6	Associates learning with enlightenment.
Success is Up	22	8.8	Connects achievement with vertical movement.
Emotion is Heat	15	6.0	Represents emotional intensity through physical warmth.
Total	250	100	

Discussion

The most common conceptual metaphor is the metaphor "Life is a Journey," which appeared in almost a quarter of the total number of metaphors identified. The discovery indicates that cultures all over the world using the English language tend to think that human life is about a process of making progress, facing challenges, reaching a destination, and achieving personal success. The second most frequent metaphor is 'Time is Money', which mirrors the industrialisation and capitalist values; being efficient and productive dictates the language used. Use of phrases like spend time, save time, waste time show how economic concepts shape a temporal sense. The constant mention of "Argument is War" suggests that arguments are usually presented as conflicts instead of collaboration. There was a great deal of talk about attacking an argument, defending a position, and winning a debate in the literary and media discourse. The results are consistent with the idea that conceptual metaphors are the products of dominant cultural ideologies that are embedded in language.

Table 2. Cross-Cultural Comparison of Selected Conceptual Metaphors

Conceptual Domain	English Culture	East Asian Cultures	Middle Eastern Cultures	Interpretation
Life	Journey toward goals	Harmonious cycle	Divine path	Cultural beliefs shape life perspectives.
Time	Economic resource	Natural rhythm	Spiritual responsibility	Different cultural priorities influence temporal metaphors.
Success	Climbing upward	Collective achievement	Honor and respect	Individualism versus collectivism affects metaphor selection.
Knowledge	Light	Cultivation	Wisdom from tradition	Learning reflects distinct philosophical traditions.
Family	Foundation	Tree or roots	Sacred bond	Social structure influences family metaphors.

Discussion

Cross-cultural comparison shows that the ability to develop metaphors is a universal mental ability, but the selection of the metaphors depends on cultural experiences. In English, personal success is often the focus and there are many metaphors related to movement, competition and advancement. Contrastively, the focus in East Asian contexts is on harmony, balance and growth as a whole. The use of religious symbols and collective values is commonplace in Middle Eastern metaphorical expressions. For instance, the notion of progressing in life is a different concept in English whereas many East Asian cultures focus on the balance in a cycle. Likewise, perceptions of family vary widely: In English, the word family is frequently associated with stability (family is a foundation), while other cultures are associated with ancestry and continuity (family is a tree). The differences here show that conceptual metaphors serve as cultural mirrors of people's beliefs and social priorities in a speech community.

Table 3. Communicative Functions of Conceptual Metaphors Across Different Discourse Contexts

Discourse Context	Dominant Metaphor	Percentage (%)	Primary Communicative Function
Literature	Life is a Journey	31	Character development and emotional expression
Political Speeches	Argument is War	26	Persuasion and ideological positioning
Business Communication	Time is Money	20	Productivity and organizational efficiency
Educational Discourse	Knowledge is Light	14	Teaching and conceptual understanding
Everyday Conversation	Emotion is Heat	9	Emotional expression and interpersonal communication
Total		100	

Discussion

Conceptual metaphors are found in a variety of discourse contexts, showing their functional adaptability. The central themes of the literary text were transformation, resilience and personal identity, all of which were represented mainly in 'Life is a Journey'. The discourse of politics was grounded in the image of "Argument is War" and persisted in emphasizing persuasive techniques and ideology warfare. Unquestionably, the time-management principle of "Time is Money" was used in business communication on a regular basis, highlighting the importance of productivity and resource management in the organization.

The language of education was metaphoric and emphasized illumination and discovery; learning was made concrete through meaningful physical experiences. Emotion-based metaphor devices were used in interlocutory conversations to describe psychological experiences which were difficult to express in complex terms, thus making communication more expressive and relatable.

In general, the results suggest that conceptual metaphors are not just stylistic adornments (Heine, 1991); they are cognitive structures that help the speaker to structure knowledge, provide interpretations of experience, and transmit cultural values. The inter-cultural differences seen do further support the view that metaphoric language is a product of universal cognitive mechanisms and culturally specific worldviews. Thus, conceptual metonymy plays a more than linguistic role in the fields of intercultural communication, language education, translation studies and cognitive semantics.

8. Conclusion

The present study shows the influence of conceptual metaphors as powerful cultural mirrors, which means the reflection of value, belief, experience and cognitive patterns of various societies through these metaphors. While English displays a number of common metaphorical structures with other languages, the analysis illustrates that the culture in which a language is used has a significant impact on how abstract concepts such as time, emotion, success, relationships, and morality are conceptualized and expressed. These metaphorical differences are influenced by collective worldviews, social practices, environment and historical traditions and can be considered a vital source in the understanding of cultural identity. The results also highlight that knowledge of the grammatical properties of a language is not enough for successful cross-cultural communication; it is essential to have knowledge of the metaphorical structures in which interpretation and meaning are formulated. This awareness can help in minimizing misunderstandings, enhance translation accuracy and foster intercultural sensitivity in education, international business, diplomacy and digital communication. This study builds upon the cognitive linguistic and cultural approach to bridge the gap between language, thought and culture, thus deepening our understanding of the complex link between language and thought. Studies of conceptual metaphor could be expanded in the future by investigating conceptual metaphor in other languages, multilingual communities, and digital discourse, providing more detailed and nuanced analyses of the changing nature of conceptual metaphor in a more globalized world.

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