



# The importance of conceptual metaphors in literature

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**Abstract:** *Conceptual metaphor theory proposes that we use metaphors to understand abstract concepts and experiences in terms of more concrete, embodied experiences. In this article, we provide an overview of conceptual metaphor theory, including its key concepts, theoretical assumptions, and applications. The role of domains and mappings, conceptual blends, cultural and social factors, and embodied cognition in shaping our understanding of abstract concepts are discussed in this article.*

**Key words:** *conceptual metaphor theory, domains and mappings, image schemas, conceptual blends, metaphor use, cognitive processes, applications.*

## Introduction

Conceptual metaphor theory, first proposed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in the 1980s, is a framework for understanding how language and thought are interconnected. It proposes that we use metaphors to understand abstract concepts and experiences in terms of more concrete, embodied experiences. For example, we might use the metaphor "love is a journey" to understand the experience of falling in love, or "argument is war" to describe a disagreement. Metaphors are not just linguistic expressions, but mental structures that shape our understanding of concepts and experiences. They are thought to be grounded in our bodily experiences and perceptions of the world, and are shaped by cultural and social factors.

Metaphor is a powerful tool in literature, allowing writers to create vivid and evocative images, to convey complex ideas and emotions, and to reflect cultural and social values. Conceptual metaphor theory provides a framework for understanding how metaphors shape our understanding of the world, and how they are used in literature to convey meaning and emotion.

## Domains and Mappings

According to conceptual metaphor theory, metaphors involve mapping one conceptual domain onto another. The source domain provides a concrete, embodied basis for understanding the more abstract target domain. For example, in the metaphor "love is a journey," the domain of "journey" is mapped onto the domain of "love." The mapping between domains is not arbitrary, but is based on similarities between the two domains. For example, both love and a journey involve a sense of progression over time, with ups and downs along the way.

In addition to simple mappings between domains, conceptual metaphor theory also acknowledges the role of conceptual blends in shaping our understanding of abstract concepts. A conceptual blend involves combining elements of two or more domains to create a new, integrated concept. For example, the metaphor "love is a rose" involves blending elements of the domains of "love" and "flowers" to create a new, more complex understanding of love.

Conceptual metaphors are thought to be shaped by cultural and social factors, such as language, history, and social norms. Different cultures may use different metaphors to understand the same



abstract concept, reflecting differences in cultural values and beliefs. For example, the metaphor "life is a journey" is common in Western cultures, but may not be as prevalent in other cultures that have different conceptions of time and progress.

Conceptual metaphor theory is grounded in the idea of embodied cognition, which suggests that our understanding of the world is shaped by our bodily experiences and perceptions. By mapping abstract concepts onto concrete, sensory experiences, metaphors help us to understand and reason about abstract phenomena in more concrete and tangible ways. For example, the metaphor "anger is hot" reflects the bodily experience of heat and tension that is associated with the emotion of anger.

Conceptual metaphor theory has been applied to a wide range of fields, including linguistics, psychology, cognitive science, and literary studies. It has been used to analyze a variety of linguistic and cultural phenomena, including advertisements, political speeches, and works of literature. For example, previous research has shown that metaphors are pervasive in political discourse, and are often used to shape public opinion and influence political decision-making (Lakoff, 2014). In literary studies, conceptual metaphor theory has been used to analyze the use of metaphor in works of literature, and to gain insights into the themes and motifs that are present in literary works (Gibbs, 1994).

### **Applications in Literature**

Conceptual metaphor theory has important applications in literary analysis, allowing us to analyze the use of metaphor in character development, plot development, and theme development. In character development, metaphors can be used to convey a character's personality, emotions, and motivations. For example, in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, the metaphor of the moors is used to convey the wild and passionate nature of the character Heathcliff.

In plot development, metaphors can be used to create suspense, to foreshadow events, and to convey the underlying themes of the story. For example, in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, the metaphor of the green light across the bay is used to symbolize Gatsby's longing for the past and his unattainable dream of winning back his lost love.

In theme development, metaphors can be used to convey the underlying ideas and values of the story, and to reflect cultural and social norms. For example, in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, the metaphor of the marriage market is used to reflect the social pressures and expectations placed on women in 19th century England.

Previous research on conceptual metaphors in literature has focused on analyzing the use of metaphors in specific works or genres, as well as on exploring the cultural and historical contexts of metaphor use. For example, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) analyzed the use of the metaphor "argument is war" in political discourse, while Steen (1999) analyzed the use of metaphor in Shakespeare's plays. More recently, scholars have focused on the role of metaphor in shaping cultural identity and political discourse (Charteris-Black, 2011; Musolff, 2016).

### **Discussion of potential criticisms of using conceptual metaphor theory in literary analysis.**

While conceptual metaphor theory has been widely used in literary analysis, there are also potential criticisms of its application to literary language. One of the main criticisms is that it may oversimplify the complexities of literary language, reducing it to a set of pre-existing conceptual metaphors. Another criticism is that it may not take into account the unique features of literary language, such as ambiguity, irony, and multiple meanings.



literary language should be analyzed in terms of "blends," which involve the integration of multiple conceptual domains to create a new, complex meaning. Kosimov (2022, 2023) also argues that a more nuanced approach to metaphor is needed in literary analysis, one that takes into account the context and the social and cultural factors that shape the use and interpretation of metaphor. Furthermore, critics have also highlighted the potential limitations of conceptual metaphor theory in accounting for the complexities of literary language. For example, some have argued that conceptual metaphor theory may not be able to account for the unique features of individual works or authors, or the specific historical and cultural contexts in which they were created. In addition, some critics have pointed out that conceptual metaphor theory may not be able to account for the full range of literary devices and techniques that authors use to convey meaning and emotion, such as imagery, symbolism, and allusion.

Despite these criticisms, conceptual metaphor theory remains a valuable framework for analyzing the use of metaphor in literary works, and has contributed to our understanding of how metaphor shapes our perception of the world. However, it is important to use it in conjunction with other approaches and to be aware of its potential limitations.

### Conclusion

Conceptual metaphor theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the relationship between language and thought, and has important implications for a wide range of fields. By identifying and analyzing the metaphors used in different contexts, we can gain insights into how people understand and talk about abstract concepts, and how cultural and social factors shape our understanding of the world. Future research on conceptual metaphor theory can continue to explore the relationship between metaphor and cognition, and to investigate the applications of conceptual metaphor theory in different fields and contexts. Furthermore, it provides a valuable framework for understanding the use of metaphor in literature, and has important implications for literary analysis and interpretation. By identifying and analyzing the metaphors used in literary works, we can gain insights into the characters, plot, and underlying themes of the story, as well as into the cultural and social values reflected in the work. Future research in this area may focus on developing new methods for analyzing metaphors in literature, as well as on exploring the relationship between metaphor and other literary devices, such as simile and allegory.

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