

We Communicate Metaphorically " A Study in Popular Proverbs"

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Abstract

Cognitivism is one of the linguistic approaches that concentrates on studying language through mental activities. Leading scholars in this field are; Lakoff and Johnson, who distinguished between two types of concepts: sensory concepts and abstract ones, which we can only identify when it is related to one another. This perspective led to the adoption of metaphor as a tool for understanding these concepts, shifting the view of metaphor from merely a linguistic phenomenon to a conceptual cognitive mechanism with a perceptual nature, represented in the expressions individuals use in their communications. One of the discourses that demonstrate the centrality of figurative metaphors is proverbs, which are founded on a conceptual metaphor that seeks to comprehend life events by establishing comparisons between an accepted conceptual domain and a new, unfamiliar one, relying on the level of conventionality. This leads us to question, what is the relationship between proverbs and figurative metaphors?

Keywords: Cognitive Linguistics; Conceptual Metaphor; Popular Proverbs; Domain.; Target.

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INTRODUCTION

Language is one of the most distinctive features of humans, setting them apart from other creatures and serving as the most sophisticated means of Interaction and communication. Ibn Jinni defines it as "a set of sounds through which people express their intentions."¹ Language reflects an Individual's perceptions and representations, shaped by their experiences and reality. It enables the exchange of Ideas and facilitates mutual understanding, ensuring continuity In communication. Due to its significance, many scholars from various fields—whether linguistic, psychological, or social—have devoted themselves to its study, with cognitive scientists being among the most prominent.

What is Meant by Cognitive Sciences? And What is Their Relation to Language?

I. COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS:

This approach relies on a range of disciplines that study language through mental activities occurring within the conceptual structure. This structure encompasses all human knowledge, which is received and generated in the mind². Azhar Al-Zanad defines it as "interdisciplinary sciences that combine efforts to delve into the structure of the brain and expand the scope of research and the environment in which the cognizing organism lives. These sciences study cognition in terms of its nature: What is cognition?, its operation: How does cognition work?, and its function: What does cognition do?"³

As a social being, humans build diverse knowledge through specific mental processes, including linguistic knowledge, which is considered "a part of cognitive perception that does not distinguish between linguistic and non-linguistic information, and is profoundly influenced by an individual's environment and experiences. The mental processes that govern human thought and the formation of knowledge, in general, are the same processes that govern linguistic knowledge. There is a unified level at which linguistic information and other forms of visual, auditory, and motor information are processed."⁴

Among the most prominent researchers in the field of cognitive sciences are Lakoff and Johnson, who distinguished between two types of concepts: direct and indirect. Indirect concepts arise from direct ones, with the latter emerging from our extensive spatial experiences, such as "above" and "below," as these are utilized in daily interactions. Indirect concepts, on the other hand, involve experiences that are not clearly defined, like emotional experiences, which we cannot fully grasp unless they are connected to sensory experiences. This connection drives the use of metaphor as a means of understanding these abstract concepts.⁵

From this perspective, the view of metaphor has shifted from being seen as a linguistic phenomenon that enhances the aesthetic structure of language to a conceptual, cognitive mechanism deeply embedded in the human mind.

What is meant by conceptual metaphor?

II. THE CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR

The concepts of conceptual metaphor are closely linked to the work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their book *Metaphors We Live By*, where they shifted the understanding of metaphor from an aesthetic, creative level to a cognitive, conceptual one. They moved the concept of metaphor from being solely associated with language to being deeply connected to thought and the mind.

They emphasized that the nature of metaphor is conceptual, tied to our way of thinking, rooted in our minds, and organizing our perceptions of reality and our interpretations of it according to our life experiences and cognitive levels. They state, "Metaphor is not associated with language or words; rather, it is the process of human thought itself that is largely metaphorical. Metaphors in language are possible only because there are metaphors in each person's conceptual system. So, whenever we talk in this book about metaphors, such as 'argument is war,' we must understand that metaphor refers to conceptual metaphor."⁶

It is a mental strategy that goes beyond being merely a linguistic feature; it shapes and builds our knowledge upon itself and "reflects the metaphorical nature of human behavior and the way we understand our experiences."⁷ In other words, metaphor reveals the strategy that the human mind adopts to comprehend and engage with the world around it, as the human mind is inherently connected to both the internal and external circumstances surrounding the individual, influencing and being influenced by them.

As for its importance, metaphor serves as a bridge between "the human mind and the surrounding world, both animate and inanimate. Through it, the ambiguous and obscure are clarified, and many communicative obstacles are overcome⁸." It enables us to understand our surroundings and convey them to others according to our levels of comprehension. Through metaphor, new concepts are formed, diverse interpretations of reality emerge, and understanding evolves.

Conceptual metaphors are fundamental to our daily activities and serve as tools across various interactive contexts, both in reception and production. They are used by young and old, male and female alike, each according to their cognitive level, communicative abilities, and conceptual representations. As stated, "They are present in all aspects of our daily lives, not limited to language alone, but also found in our thinking and in the actions we perform. The ordinary conceptual system that guides our thinking and behavior is inherently metaphorical in nature."⁹

Conceptual metaphor is the cornerstone of the communicative process. Through it, messages are received (by breaking them down and understanding them) and then produced (by reconstructing them). When an individual interacts with their external environment, they rely on their cognitive conceptual capacity to grasp meanings, ensure mutual understanding, and thus avoid communicative breakdown, fostering continuity. This continuity is contingent upon the extent to which people share common concepts and perceptions.

Achieving understanding is closely tied to how well each party in the communication process knows the other. When the sender considers the receiver's level of comprehension, they can produce acceptable conceptual metaphors. Conversely, the receiver's awareness of the sender's level of comprehension grants

them the ability to interpret and analyze these metaphors, and thus understand them accurately.

The conceptual metaphor lies hidden in the mind, manifesting through an individual's expressions during communication. In other words, "the expressions that arise from conceptual metaphor are referred to as linguistic metaphors; they are one of the manifestations of the former. We express these conceptual metaphors linguistically in various ways."¹⁰ Thus, language is merely a communicative tool through which the creator of discourse reveals their mental representations.

The conceptual metaphor generates new, unfamiliar concepts (often abstract ones, such as justice and equality) from more familiar concepts. This means understanding something obscure and unknown (which one seeks to comprehend) through something clear and familiar. Lakoff and Johnson state in *The Origin of Metaphor* that metaphor "enables one to understand and experience one thing in terms of another."¹¹

It is based on forming a concept of the "target domain" (hidden and unknown) using terms from another concept, the "source domain" (perceived and known), where a connection is made between them through certain correspondences and points of similarity. Bouamrani describes this as "a process of understanding one conceptual domain through another conceptual domain. It can be summarized as follows: conceptual domain (A) and conceptual domain (B), where the first domain is called the target domain and the second domain is called the source domain."¹²

Thus, the function of the conceptual metaphor lies in engaging the mind to understand our reality, and it is connected to the human mind in general, not limited to a particular group. This means that it "is not the domain of a select few gifted individuals; people of varying intellectual abilities use the familiar to understand the unfamiliar, allowing it to fit within their human experience. Consequently, there are common metaphors that form part of the collective mind, passed down through generations to enable a degree of mutual understanding. These metaphors offer an imaginative structure of reality, and over time, they lose their figurative quality and become automatic in our thinking."¹³

It is clear from the above that metaphor is based on two concepts: the "target domain" and the "source domain." The process of projection (conceptual metaphor projection) involves transferring certain selected features from the source domain to their counterparts in the target domain. This process of projection is linked to the cultural component, which shapes our understanding of our reality. This highlights the difference between what classical rhetoricians proposed, focusing on the concept of similarity, and what cognitive theorists suggest. The former views the connection between two words: the metaphorical term and the term from which it is borrowed, whereas the latter occurs between two concepts or representations. In

other words, it is based on a network of conceptual connections between two events that are related in some way within human experience.¹⁴

Among the discourses that demonstrate the centrality and significance of conceptual metaphors, we find proverbs.

III. PROVERBS AND CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS

Proverbs are among the daily communicative activities relied upon to achieve specific communicative goals. They serve as a reflective mirror, revealing the level of individuals' thinking, the essence of their experiences, emotions, and inner thoughts. They are "a complete world: wisdom, dreams, enthusiasm, descriptions, politics and economics, health and social rules; they are a reflection of Arabic rhetoric, and, moreover, life itself, with all its concerns and sorrows."¹⁵

A proverb is a concise, figurative linguistic formulation, based on a conceptual metaphor that involves understanding life events and absorbing human experiences. This understanding arises from establishing contrasts between an accepted conceptual domain and a new, unfamiliar one. It is "a widely circulated artistic expression, designed to illustrate a situation or event and extract a human experience, which can be applied in a similar context."¹⁶

For example, if we look at the proverb "Imitation is suicide," we find that its author, Emerson, linked two different concepts: a vague, hard-to-grasp concept (imitation: copying and mimicking others), which represented the "target domain," and a clear, understood concept (suicide), which embodied the "source domain." The relationship between these two concepts is called the projection relationship.

The creator of the conceptual metaphor "Imitation is suicide" occurs when the target domain (imitation: copying others), which is difficult to conceptualize and grasp, is represented by borrowing terms and constructs from the source domain (suicide: causes, motivations, and effects), such as: (despair, death, feelings of inadequacy, destruction, loss, disorientation, dissatisfaction...). These elements are projected onto the target concept (imitation: copying others), and through this projection, certain words and phrases associated with the source domain (suicide) appear when discussing the target domain (imitation) in our daily linguistic interactions. For example: (killing the self, feeling inadequate and unable to cope, destroying all attempts at innovation and creativity, suffering from lethal despair, losing our identity and losing ourselves, not being satisfied with oneself...).

The creator of the conceptual metaphor here, "Imitation is suicide," involves conceptualizing "imitation: copying others" in light of the source domain (suicide) and applying projections to clarify the ambiguity of "imitation," thus embodying its abstraction. This allows the recipient to understand it and to internalize the target concept (imitation) through a metaphorical representation.

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The important point to highlight is that a conceptual metaphor does not allow its elements to be reversed. It would not be correct to say "suicide is imitation," because this reversal disrupts the communicative continuity and hinders the accurate representation and optimal understanding of the metaphor. "Therefore, we find that conceptual metaphors operate by using concrete, tangible, and physical concepts to understand and construct more abstract and complex domains, not the other way around; in other words, they follow a unidirectional principle."¹⁷

The connection between the two domains (target and source) has its persuasive and influential dimension. The source domain (suicide: self-destruction) represents an unquestionable axiom, which forms a major premise. On the other hand, the target domain (imitation: copying others leads to self-destruction) represents the minor premise. From these premises, a conclusion is drawn, which is represented by the conceptual metaphor. This can be illustrated as follows:

- The major premise: Suicide Is self-destruction.
- The minor premise: Imitation and copying others lead to self-destruction.
- The conclusion (conceptual metaphor): Imitation is suicide.

The conceptual metaphor, which represents the conclusion, is an implicit analogy; in it, only the result is mentioned, without the major and minor premises.

Based on the degree of conventionality, Lakoff and Johnson distinguished between two types of metaphors, as follows:

IV. .TYPES OF CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS

According to Lakoff and Johnson, conceptual metaphors are divided into two types: positional and non-positional.

IV.1 Positional Metaphors

Lakoff and Johnson refer to these as conventional metaphors. These are metaphors that are commonly used in our everyday communication. This means they do not aim for creativity, and the degree of their conventionality is linked to their frequency of use. The more frequently they appear in communication, the higher their conventionality, and vice versa.¹⁸

IV.1.1 Directional Metaphors

These are known as metaphors of preference. Unlike other metaphors that represent a concept by relying on another concept (such as using "suicide" as a source domain to explain "imitation"), directional metaphors represent concepts using physical and spatial directions derived from our environment. These metaphors are based on our interactions with space and how our bodies engage with the physical world. As a result, they often use spatial or directional terms such as: (inside, outside, above, below, behind, ahead) to describe the positions occupied by another concept. Lakoff and Johnson state that "most of them are linked to spatial orientation: high, independent, inside, outside, ahead, behind, above, below, deep, shallow, central, marginal." These spatial directions arise from the way our bodies are shaped and function within our physical environment.¹⁹

Upon closer examination of this type of metaphor, we find that it consists of spatial oppositional binaries. Their presence is essential in our reality and daily life, as they represent the surrounding cosmic phenomena. Each side of these binary oppositions requires the existence of the other. For example, the concept of "inside" necessitates the existence of "outside," and "above" requires the concept of "below."

These spatial directional concepts, such as "above, below" and "higher, lower," are not arbitrary or random, devoid of meaning. On the contrary, they are purposeful and intentional, deeply rooted in our foundations, emerging from our physical and

cultural experiences. We communicate through directional conceptual metaphors that are structured according to the physical formation of our bodies.²⁰

It is worth noting here that directional metaphors vary across cultures. For example, in some cultures, the future is located in front, while in others, it is placed behind.²¹

The poet Ahmad Shawqi says in his poem about knowledge:

"Knowledge raises a house without a foundation,

While ignorance demolishes a house of dignity and honor."

At the linguistic level of this structure, two conceptual metaphors are observed:

- Knowledge raises a house without a foundation
- Ignorance demolishes a house of dignity and honor

In this case, the poet (Ahmad Shawqi), to depict the domains of knowledge and ignorance, relied on a conceptual metaphor of the directional type. This metaphor

is derived from his human experience, where a vertical upward direction (raising) is associated with the domain of knowledge, while a downward direction (demolition/falling) is linked to the domain of ignorance.

This means that the poetic verse here is built on two directional metaphors: upward and downward. Knowledge elevates its possessor's status and worth, even if they are poor or lacking in wealth; knowledge thus moves upward (above). On the other hand, ignorance leads to a degradation of its possessor, even if they are wealthy or of high social standing; ignorance moves downward (below).

It is noticeable here that the poet has linked two opposing concepts (knowledge and ignorance) through a dialectical contrast, reflecting a social reality that experiences the division between knowledge and ignorance. The poet positioned knowledge as the foundation of progress and development, while ignorance is portrayed as the basis of backwardness and regression. Therefore, the domain of knowledge occupies the upper space, while the domain of ignorance occupies the lower space. These directional concepts lead to expressions like:

- With knowledge, we rise.
- Knowledge is the foundation of development and progress.
- Your enemy is your ignorance.
- Ignorance is the foundation of decline and backwardness

These directional metaphors are fundamentally born from our interactions with the human experience. In our reality and experiences, the upward direction (raising) is associated with progress, advancement, and strength. On the other hand, the downward direction (destruction and falling) refers to backwardness, weakness, deterioration, humiliation, and despair.

IV.1.2.Ontological Metaphor

Ontology is considered one of the most important metaphysical philosophical directions, which works on representing and portraying abstract concepts through concrete ones, stemming from our experiences and practices. It is "a mental process where the unseen is understood through the seen; we borrow the visible (what we see

in nature) to understand what we have never seen before... these unseen things are transformed into entities with material existence, and we deal with them as if they were physical substances; that is, understanding the abstract as if it were material."²² It branches Into the following:

IV.1.2.1. Metaphors of Substance and Entity

These are metaphors through which we comprehend our reality and experiences by representing them in the form of objects and materials. In other words, they are linked to "our experience with physical things and materials, which provide us with an additional foundation for understanding. This foundation goes beyond simple directions. Understanding our experiences through things and materials allows us to select elements of our experience and process them as isolated entities or as materials of a certain type."²³

An example Is the Greek proverb "Truth has one face, while lies have a thousand faces." This proverb illustrates the status of both truth and lies, presenting them as abstract concepts in a material form. Truth is depicted as having one face, while lies are represented as having many faces. In this way, both truth and lies are treated as substances that belong to our reality and expe

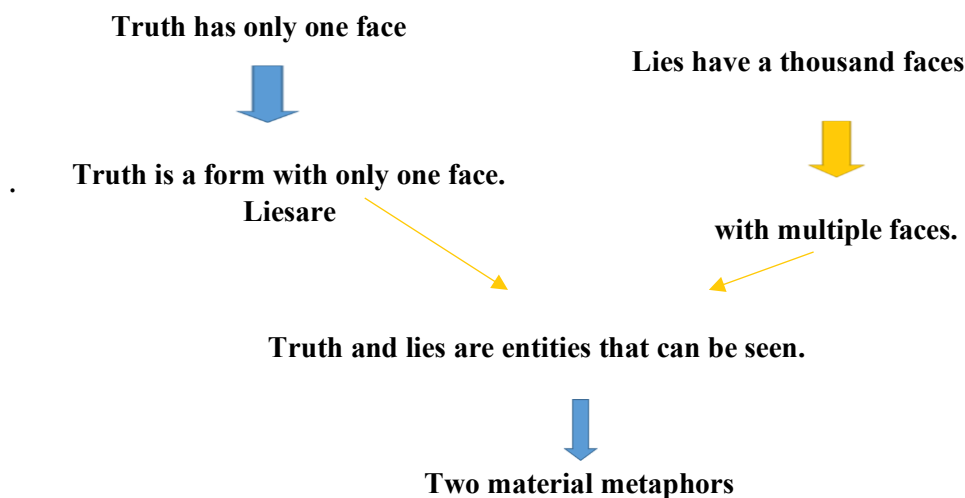
IV.1.2.2. Personification Metaphor

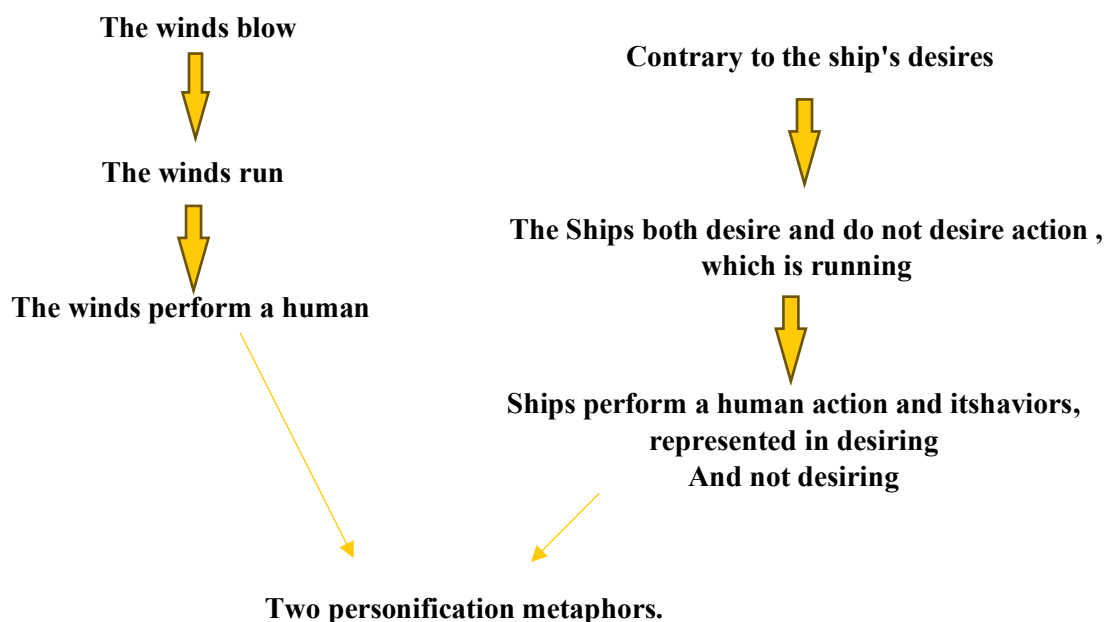
This type of metaphor involves personifying things and giving them human actions and qualities. It refers to the metaphors in which we attribute human characteristics to physical things, as if they were people. These metaphors allow us to understand a wide range of experiences related to non-human entities through motivations, traits, and activities.²⁴

An example of this Is found in the words of Al-Mutanabbi:

"Not everything a person wishes is attainable, the winds blow contrary to the ship's desires."The essence of this metaphor is that the circumstances and situations of life do not always align with what a person wishes or desires.

It is noticeable in this poetic line, which appears in the form of a proverb, that it includes two conceptual personification metaphors, as follows





Thus, we begin to view the winds as if they move like humans, and the ships as if they desire or do not desire, just like humans.

IV.1.2.3. Container Metaphors:

These metaphors view some of our representations and perceptions of life, reality, and experiences as containers with their own space and boundaries. In other words, these containers "hold activities and other processes that fit within them. They are also conceived as vessels for the energy and materials required for these activities and their byproducts, which may be considered part of or derived from them," such as: "I spent a lot of energy washing the windows," "I gained great happiness from washing the windows," or "I find great happiness in washing the windows."²⁵

An example is the popular saying: "A woman's heart is a large hotel, always full of comings and goings." This proverb portrays the nature of a woman's heart by relying on the container metaphor, which is represented in:

The woman's heart is filled with those coming and going _____ woman's heart

The woman's heart is a container that embraces those who come and go _____ a container metaphor.

- **Non-positional metaphors (creative, imaginative)**

refer to those mental constructs that serve an aesthetic or artistic function. They deviate from the commonly accepted or conventional conceptual patterns, inventing and creating new meanings. These metaphors "exist outside our conventional conceptual framework."²⁶

For example, if we look at the mathematical proverb: "The negative with the negative equals positive, so do not despair, for hardship after hardship means relief," it encourages patience, strength, and resilience in the face of challenges.

But how was this proverb created?

We can say that the mathematician, after hearing and dealing with commonly used conceptual metaphors in his environment, which talk about patience, such as:

- "Be patient with every calamity and endure, knowing that time is not everlasting."
- "Do not despair, no matter how severe the trials are, for they always start big and then fade away."

He interacted with them according to his specialization, environment, and culture, thus producing a new conceptual pattern that is unconventional and different from what is commonly used. He envisioned calamities as numbers with negative signs, and when negative numbers are sequentially added, they become positive.

This newly created metaphorical concept serves as a clear, logical proof presented by the speaker, aimed at convincing the audience of the proposed idea, which is: (the commitment to patience, adopting strength and resilience, and avoiding despair and anxiety).

CONCLUSION

- Cognitive linguistic studies have shifted metaphors from their aesthetic linguistic level to a conceptual, cognitive level.

- Through conceptual metaphors, abstract concepts (target domain) can be represented using tangible concepts (source domain).

- Conceptual metaphors highlight the cognitive abilities individuals possess in perceiving, interpreting, and mentally reshaping reality.

- The conceptual metaphor, with its new conceptual structures, serves as a persuasive tool, deriving the unfamiliar (target domain) from the familiar and accepted (source domain).

- Conceptual metaphors in popular proverbs represent a comprehensive conceptual strategy, enriching language by generating new, unfamiliar metaphors from well-known ones.

- Conceptual metaphors, at the level of proverbs, have generated new images based on advice and guidance, by projecting some features of the source domain onto the target domain.

- Popular proverbs are conceptual metaphors that explain events and address life issues.

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