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## METAPHOR: MAPPING THE CONCEPTUAL LANDSCAPE

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to sketch the current state of metaphor research, tracing its development from classical rhetoric to contemporary approaches including multimodal, cognitive, pragmatic, and critical perspectives. It outlines the theoretical foundations of metaphor and its conceptual, cultural, and communicative functions, emphasizing how metaphors, grounded in embodied experience and image schemas, both shape and reflect cognition, culture, and ideology. The discussion engages with Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), Conceptual Blending Theory (CBT), Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory (ECMT), and Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA), while highlighting its cross-cultural variation and use across multiple domains. Metaphor has become a central lens for exploring how we conceptualize, interpret, and relate to the world. In addition to this global overview, the paper enriches the field with a selective review of Vietnamese metaphor studies, showcasing how Vietnam-based research contributes to the overall conceptual landscape. It argues that metaphor research now stands at an interdisciplinary crossroads. Emerging directions include examining metaphors across new modalities such as speech, sign language, gesture, film, emoji, memes, and advertising, and exploring the growing role of digital and AI-mediated environments in meaning-making. At the same time, the paper underscores the growing importance of metaphor awareness in language education as a means of strengthening learners' interpretive and critical skills. We conclude that metaphor is a foundational cognitive and cultural resource - dynamic, adaptable, and central to meaning-making in diverse social interactions, and recommend future research on metaphors in digital and AI-mediated contexts, in language education, and in developing context-sensitive methodological frameworks.

**Keywords:** conceptual metaphor, embodiment, multimodality, conceptual blending, meaning-making, framing.

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# ẨN DỤ: BỨC TRANH Ý NIỆM

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**Tóm tắt:** Bài viết này phân tích tình hình nghiên cứu ẩn dụ hiện nay, theo dõi sự phát triển của nó từ tư tưởng cổ điển đến các phương pháp tiếp cận đa phương thức, tri nhận, dụng học và phê phán đương đại. Bài viết phân tích nền tảng lý thuyết của ẩn dụ và các chức năng ý niệm, văn hóa và giao tiếp của nó, nhấn mạnh cách ẩn dụ, dựa trên nghiệm thân và lược đồ hình ảnh, vừa định hình vừa phản ánh nhận thức, văn hóa và tư tưởng. Vấn đề thảo luận xoay quanh Lý thuyết ẩn dụ ý niệm (CMT), Lý thuyết hòa kết ý niệm (CBT), Lý thuyết ẩn dụ ý niệm mở rộng (ECMT) và Phân tích ẩn dụ phê phán (CMA), đồng thời làm nổi bật các biến thể và ứng dụng giao văn hóa của nó trên nhiều lĩnh vực. Ẩn dụ đã trở thành một lăng kính trung tâm để khám phá cách chúng ta ý niệm hóa, diễn giải và liên hệ về thế giới. Bên cạnh một tổng quan toàn cầu, bài viết còn làm phong phú thêm lĩnh vực này bằng một khảo luận chọn lọc về các nghiên cứu ẩn dụ của Việt Nam, chỉ ra những đóng góp vào bức tranh nghiên cứu ẩn dụ ý niệm tổng thể của các nghiên cứu tại Việt Nam. Bài viết lập luận rằng nghiên cứu ẩn dụ hiện đang đứng trước một giao lộ liên ngành. Các hướng nghiên cứu mới nổi bao gồm việc xem xét phép ẩn dụ trên các phương thức mới như lời nói, ngôn ngữ ký hiệu, cử chỉ, phim ảnh, biểu tượng cảm xúc, ảnh chế (meme) và quảng cáo, đồng thời khám phá vai trò ngày càng tăng của môi trường kỹ thuật số và môi trường trí tuệ nhân tạo trong việc kiến tạo nghĩa. Đồng thời, bài báo nhấn mạnh tầm quan trọng ngày càng tăng của nhận thức về phép ẩn dụ trong giáo dục ngôn ngữ như một phương tiện củng cố kỹ năng diễn giải và phản biện của người học. Bài báo kết luận rằng phép ẩn dụ là một nguồn lực nhận thức và văn hóa nền tảng - năng động, dễ thích ứng và đóng vai trò trung tâm trong việc tạo ra ý nghĩa trong các tương tác xã hội đa dạng, đồng thời khuyến nghị các nghiên cứu trong tương lai về phép ẩn dụ trong bối cảnh kỹ thuật số và trí tuệ nhân tạo, vai trò của chúng trong giáo dục, và việc phát triển các phương pháp nghiên cứu phù hợp với bối cảnh.

*Từ khóa:* ẩn dụ ý niệm, nghiệm thân, đa phương thức, hòa kết ý niệm, tạo nghĩa, định khung ý niệm

## 1. Introduction: From Rhetorical Ornament to Cognitive Mechanism

Metaphor has traditionally been viewed as a rhetorical figure, a linguistic flourish employed for stylistic effect. This classical perspective goes back to Aristotle, who described metaphor as “giving the thing a name that belongs to something else” (Aristotle’s *Poetics*, trans. Halliwell, 1995). That view remained dominant until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century when a paradigm shift occurred with the seminal publication of *Metaphors We Live By* (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). *Metaphors We Live By* is a concise, accessible book with thirty chapters, but its overall impact is profound: it fundamentally changes our conceptualization of metaphor. Metaphor is not just about language but about thought itself. At its heart, metaphor involves perceiving one concept through the lens of another. More than literary style, this perspective reveals how we fundamentally organize thought and meaning, marking a conceptual turn, now known as Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). CMT has since opened new avenues of inquiry across disciplines from linguistics and philosophy to psychology, anthropology, education, and neuroscience and artificial intelligence (AI).

Metaphor is viewed as a core part of cognition, shaping how we think, act, and navigate daily life. Our conceptual system - largely the invisible and culturally embedded framework we

use to interpret our experiences - is fundamentally metaphorical. Phrases like the Vietnamese “*xây dựng xã hội mới*” (build a new society), “*nền tảng xã hội*” (social foundation), or English ones such as “*political drama*” or “*he played his role well*”, illustrate how metaphors like SOCIETY IS A HOUSE or POLITICS IS THEATRE reveal deeper cognitive patterns. These are not rhetorical flourishes but windows into the structure of human understanding. Building on this foundation, Lakoff (1993) and Reddy (1979) have shown that even our models of communication are themselves metaphorical constructs. Reddy’s conduit metaphor, where language is treated as a container for ideas, further reveals the hidden assumptions behind everyday communication. Notably, metaphors are not neutral. As Fairclough (1992) remarks, using metaphor is not just a way of describing reality; rather, it shapes and constructs new versions of it. For example, describing CLIMATE CHANGE AS A TIME BOMB frames the issue as an urgent, ticking threat that demands immediate action before it is too late. This metaphorical framing can influence public sentiments and policy decisions in ways we may not be consciously aware of. This insight has led to a deeper, more critical look at metaphor (Critical Metaphor Analysis - CMA), bringing together cognitive linguistics with critical theory to uncover the ideological functions of metaphor. CMA seeks to address questions such as: who benefits and who may be marginalized by their use; what realities they help construct or conceal? Metaphor offers a rare and revealing lens into the deep connections between language, cognition, and culture.

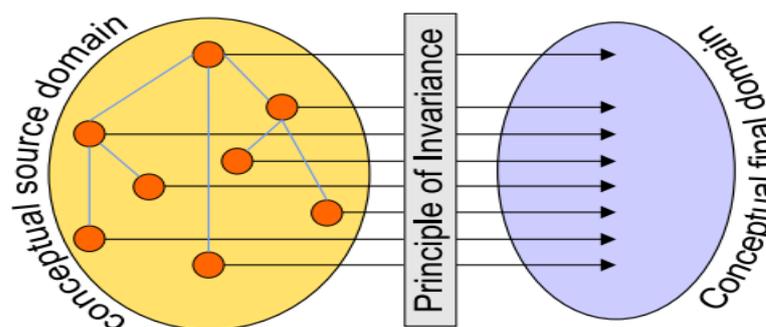
## 2. Conceptual Metaphor Theory: Principles and Foundations

### 2.1. Metaphor as Cross-Domain Mapping

A central idea in CMT is that our minds map elements from one area of experience (the source domain) onto another (the target domain). These mappings reveal how we actually think and reason. For example, the metaphor KNOWLEDGE IS LIGHT appears in expressions like “*illuminate an idea*” or “*shed light*”, linking mental clarity to visual perception. Such patterns show that metaphor is not decorative but foundational to how we understand truth, learning, and intellectual progress. These mappings are systematic rather than arbitrary. They follow a kind of internal logic that Lakoff (1993) describes as the *Invariance Principle*. This principle explains that when one domain is mapped onto another, the basic image-schema structure of the source must fit the structure of the target. “*He shed light on the topic*” works because light enables vision just as knowledge enables understanding. But “*light gives us the truth*” sounds odd because the action of “giving” does not align with how we conceptualize light. Leon’s (2022) figure below illustrates this principle.

**Figure 1**

*Illustration of the Principle of Invariance (Leon, 2022, p. 15)*



Central concepts are the principle of unidirectionality and partiality. Unidirectionality means that source domains typically structure target domains, not vice versa. The flow is usually from something concrete (source domain) to something abstract (target domain) (Lakoff, 1993). For example, we often understand CAREER IS A LADDER with expressions like “*Climbing the corporate ladder*” and “*He reached the top*”. But we rarely think of ladder in terms of career. This asymmetry reveals how our thinking leans on tangible, bodily experiences to grasp intangible concepts. Partiality as defined in the Invariance Principle suggests that only selected features of the source domain are mapped onto the target domain - those that are compatible with the target’s inherent structure. In Vietnamese culture, portraying a woman metaphorically as a BÀ LA SÁT - a LA SÁT WOMAN (“Bālāsā” in “Journey to the West” - a fierce, merciless woman), involves mapping the feature of “ferocity, mercilessness” on to the target domain.

It has been observed that these metaphors are so profoundly embedded that they can seem literal. We may hardly notice that “*Climbing the corporate ladder*” and “*He reached the top*” are metaphorical because they have become an integral part of our thinking. Lakoff (1993) underscores that conventional conceptual metaphors operate effortlessly and beneath our awareness, much like language and other cognitive processes. These metaphors enable us to think automatically, integrating seamlessly into our understanding of the world.

## **2.2. Metaphor as Cognitive Foundation**

While cross-domain mapping explains the mechanics of how conceptual metaphors function, it does not yet explain the full significance of metaphor as central mechanism of reasoning. We now turn our attention to examining its fundamental role in how we think and make sense of the world. A key point is that metaphor is not just what adults use deliberately or consciously. Research reveals that children start to use metaphors at a surprisingly early age, as they explore, interact, and make sense of the world around them through play, language, and imagination (Martín-González et al., 2024; Ellis & Ibrahim., 2021; Zhu et al., 2024). This makes metaphor a quiet but powerful developmental force helping young minds transition from concrete experience to abstract thinking. This realization leads us to believe that metaphor can permeate other domains which we often assume to be purely logical or objective. Take mathematics, for example. Lakoff and Núñez (2000) argue convincingly that even the most abstract mathematical concepts are grounded in metaphorical thought - thought that arises from our embodied experience. Concepts like sets, functions, and infinity do not just originate in the realm of pure reason: they are built on basic image schemas and primary metaphors. The NUMBER LINE, for example, comes from the simple idea of a PATH, and mathematical relationships are often understood as ACTIONS. This challenges the traditional view that math is a purely objective and universal truth. Instead, it suggests that even our most “hard” knowledge is shaped by our bodies, cultures, and the metaphors we live by.

All of this points to something profound: Metaphor is a foundational mechanism that influences the way we think, express ourselves, and make meaning. When we think through metaphor, we map meanings across domains, connect embodied experience to abstract ideas, and structure the very way we make sense of the world. Over time, CMT has evolved, refined, drawing on critical perspectives and enriched with cultural insights, but its central assumption remains unchanged: metaphor is the key to understanding how we think, reason, and act. When we study metaphor, we are doing more than simply analyzing language. We are engaged with uncovering the invisible threads that connect body and mind, perception and concept, individual experience and collective understanding.

### ***2.3. Embodied Cognition: Grounding Metaphor in the Body***

To fully grasp how metaphor grounds abstract thought, we need to consider where these mappings originate. This brings us to the role of the body, and the notion of embodied cognition, i.e., the idea that our thinking is rooted in bodily experience. Lakoff (1993) suggests that metaphors are motivated by the patterns of our physical interactions with the world around us. In other words, our bodies and our movements through space help form the very basis of our abstract thinking. Johnson's (1987) concept of image schemas as recurring conceptual patterns rooted in embodied experience illustrates how abstract thought is grounded in the body. Image schemas such as CONTAINER and PATH originate from everyday bodily interactions and are later repurposed to help us make sense of abstract ideas that go beyond the tangible world. For example, when we say "in trouble", "out of ideas", we are using the CONTAINER schema. When someone says, "The economy is on the path to recovery", that is the PATH schema at work.

No doubt, these schemas can be universal, cropping up across different cultures and languages and serving as cognitive building blocks. Lakoff and Johnson (1999) emphasize that the mind is fundamentally shaped by the body, with our conceptual frameworks deeply rooted in shared bodily experiences and the environments we experience and navigate. This embodied perspective emphasizes that cognition is not separate from physical existence, but emerges in close continuity with it (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). This makes metaphor a kind of bridge, connecting the physical sensations of being in the world to the abstract concepts we wrestle with every day. Recent neuroscientific research echoes this insight. Gallese and Lakoff (2005), for example, have suggested that when we think metaphorically, say, about *love* or *justice*, our brains might actually be simulating those concepts through the same neural circuits we use for sensing and moving in the physical world. So, metaphor is embodied in the very architecture of our brains as something vivid, dynamic, and human.

### ***2.4. Primary Metaphors: From Bodily Correlation to Conceptual Structure***

In thinking about embodiment, one particularly significant insight is Grady's (1997) notion of primary metaphors, those simple, almost invisible mappings that emerge from our earliest repeated bodily experiences. We come to realize how these metaphors emerge so early in life. They grow out of the everyday patterns we live through and experience as kids, becoming the subtle architecture underlying how we understand much more complex ideas later on. Consider, for example, the metaphor KNOWING IS SEEING. When we say, "I see what you mean", we are not just using a figure of speech - we are drawing from our physical experiences, of using our eyes to make sense of the world. Mappings like this operate beneath conscious awareness, shaping discourse and reasoning in subtle yet pervasive ways. They slip by unnoticed, quietly shaping the way we speak, learn, and relate to others. Primary metaphors (e.g., *I see*; *time is money*; or *in love*) work automatically and unconsciously under our cognitive radar, so we often perceive them as literal rather than metaphorical. What is truly remarkable, however, is how these small, embodied insights accumulate, and how, over time, they grow into rich metaphorical frameworks that guide our understanding of everything from our most intimate relationships and deepest values to politics, culture, and society.

### ***2.5. Conceptual Metaphors and Idealized Cognitive Models (ICMs)***

As has been observed, CMT connects with broader developments in cognitive linguistics, especially the work of Fillmore, Lakoff. The theory of Idealized Cognitive Models (Fillmore, 1982; Lakoff, 1987) illustrates how metaphors operate within culturally shared mental schemas. These are like mental frameworks we carry with us, containing a wealth of

background knowledge, assumptions, and expectations that construct our understanding, often without us even realizing it. For example, BUSINESS IS WAR activates conceptual associations involving competition, defense, and strategy, guiding not only how people talk about business but also how they approach it behaviorally. The Vietnamese THƯƠNG TRƯỜNG LÀ CHIẾN TRƯỜNG (BUSINESS IS WAR) provides a culturally resonant version of this metaphor. We see business as a battle, with sides to take and strategies to win, and a zero-sum game. Once that schema is in play, it does not just influence how we talk about disagreements, but it can subtly influence how we imagine they should unfold. Studies of large linguistic corpora show just how widespread and consistent these metaphorical patterns are even across genres and languages (Steen, 2007). Psycholinguistic experiments also show that metaphors can condition the way we reason. Thibodeau and Boroditsky (2011), for example, find that simply encountering a metaphor can shift the way someone approaches a social problem. It is remarkable that a single word or phrase can quietly guide our reasoning without us even noticing.

At the same time, cross-cultural research has reminded us that metaphor is culturally motivated and lived. According to Kövecses (2005, 2020a), metaphors are grounded in embodied and cultural experience. Some metaphors appear nearly universal, whereas others are constructed by local experience and worldview. This variation adds a layer of richness and grounds metaphor theory in everyday human experience.

## 2.6. Metaphors: Universal vs. Culture-Specific

A key question we ask in metaphor studies is whether metaphors are universal, rooted in shared human embodiment, or culturally specific. Kövecses (2020a) argues that because humans share broadly similar bodies and cognitive capacities, many metaphors grounded in basic physical experience tend to recur across cultures. For instance, SEEING IS BELIEVING appears in numerous languages, reflecting the simple fact that vision is a primary means of perceiving the world. Likewise, metaphors such as LIFE IS A JOURNEY emerge from universal experiences of movement, direction, and progression. Yet even when metaphors appear cross-linguistically, they are shaped by cultural context. The “journey” of life may involve different paths, values, and destinations across societies. Abstract domains such as LOVE or ANGER often draw on bodily experience, but how those emotions are conceptualized differs culturally.

Kimmel’s (2004) comparison of English and Chagga metaphors for LUST illustrates this clearly: English frequently uses SEXUALITY IS A PHYSICAL FORCE or SEX IS WAR metaphors which are entirely absent in Chagga<sup>1</sup> culture. Here, embodiment provides the raw material, but cultural narratives determine which metaphors flourish. Some metaphors are unmistakably culture-bound. The American MELTING POT reflects a specific national myth about assimilation. By contrast, metaphors for homeland in Vietnamese discourse often draw on water, boats, and rivers as core elements of local life. A line such as “*Quê hương là con đò nhỏ, êm đềm chèo nước ven sông*” evokes HOMELAND IS A SMALL BOAT, expressing a worldview shaped by locals’ strong connection to river and waterways<sup>2</sup>, and centered on the

<sup>1</sup> The Chagga (also spelled Chaga) are an ethnic group and culture in Tanzania, East Africa.

<sup>2</sup> Trịnh, S. (2025, p. 130, pp. 228-238) contends that Vietnamese people conceptualize “LIFE AS A RIVER,” as exemplified by expressions such as “nguồn sống” (lifeline/means of livelihood), “xuôi chèo mát mái” (smooth sailing), “suy nghĩ nông cạn” (shallow thinking), “bề nổi phong trào” (the superficial aspect of the movement), “vàng đang lướt sóng” (gold is riding the waves), etc.

cyclical nature of life, emphasizing the enduring value of remaining connected to one's origins, regardless of how far one may travel (Nguyễn H., 2025). Meanwhile, "homeland" in U.S. English tends to evoke security, identity, and patriotism - an entirely different cultural framing. These examples highlight a productive tension at the heart of metaphor: it reflects both our shared human nature and the rich diversity of our cultures.

Metaphors are shaped, filtered, and enriched by the histories, values, and environments of particular communities. They are simultaneously grounded in what humans share and expressive of what makes cultures distinct. This duality makes metaphor an especially compelling lens through which to study human meaning-making. It is where cognition meets culture, and where language reveals the subtle interplay between body, mind, and world. Metaphors are dynamic, evolving patterns of thought. They help us interpret experience, negotiate identity, and imagine possibilities. In doing so, they connect the deeply embodied with the richly cultural, reminding us that to study metaphor is to study how humans make sense of life itself.

## 2.7. Cultural Metaphors

In this section, we discuss the concept of "cultural metaphor," introduced by Gannon (1994). Cultural metaphors originate from culturally shared knowledge, practices, values, or symbols to structure understanding of something else. They are rooted in collective experiences and social traditions. A cultural metaphor is defined as "any activity, phenomenon, or institution with which members of a given culture emotionally and/or cognitively identify" (Gannon, 2011, p. 3). In other words, it is when a whole culture is understood through a single dominant image, activity, or symbol that represents its values and worldview. For example, Gannon (2011) cites *the American football game* as a cultural metaphor. It represents competition, strategy, teamwork, and a win-or-lose mentality in U.S. culture. So, we can infer that negotiating with Americans is like playing football: everyone has a role, rules are clear, and the aim is to win. Here, *football* works as a cultural metaphor for American approaches to business and communication. In contrast, in Vietnamese culture, what we suggest is "*Chess - cờ tướng*", which symbolizes strategic life decisions and collective wisdom, embodying the values of patience, resilience, sensitivity to timing, and tactical intelligence rooted in the country's historical and social experience. For example, in Vietnamese, we say, "*Ông ấy đi một nước cờ cao tay*" ("*He made a masterful move*", which metaphorically refers to "*a smart strategy in life or politics*"). Another expression is, "*Lỡ nước hai xe đành bỏ phí, gặp thời một tốt cũng thành công*" ("*One wrong move can render two chariots useless; when the time and tide are right, a lone pawn can triumph*"). This expression, comparable to the English "*every dog has his day*", suggests that missed opportunities can render even the strongest (the *chariot* in the game of chess) ineffective and useless, while the right moment can lift the weakest (the *pawn* in chess) to success. Conceptual metaphors and cultural metaphors are both conceptual, but they differ in focus: conceptual metaphors explain how we map abstract domains onto concrete ones (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), whereas cultural metaphors illustrate how a particular culture is represented through a symbolic image or practice (Gannon, 1994; Gannon & Pillai, 2013).

## 2.8. Critical Reflections on CMT

While CMT has proven influential, it has also drawn criticism. For example, Murphy (1996) challenges the strong deterministic claim that metaphors actually structure our thought, suggesting instead that they may simply represent pre-existing conceptual structures we already have rather than generate them. We may consider how deeply early socialization shapes the

way we think, often in ways we are not aware of. Many metaphors exist long before we are born, and we accept them as unquestioned realities. Those metaphors learned and experienced early seem so natural that we intuitively believe they shape our minds (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), even if that relationship might be more complex. We would say that metaphor both shapes and is shaped by thought. Similarly, Gibbs (2011) cautions us not to overstate the role of embodiment. We should keep in mind that culture, context, and the stories we experience all play essential roles in affecting how we create, use and understand metaphors. This perspective provides a helpful balance to the occasionally narrow focus on the body alone.

### 3. Metaphor in Practice

In this section, we aim to illustrate how conceptual metaphors function beyond theory, showing their uses across diverse domains such as media, health, politics and economics, education, and intercultural communication.

#### 3.1. *Metaphor and Social Cognition*

CMT began as a lens for understanding how our minds work, how we think by mapping one concept onto another. It has since grown into something much broader, reaching into fields like discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, and critical theory. One particularly influential dimension of metaphor is its power to influence perspective, not merely by simplifying ideas, but by subtly framing the narratives we construct, the interpretations we offer, and the responses we elicit from others. Metaphor can reinforce or challenge widely held social stereotypes and ideological worldviews. For example, familiar metaphors like THE ECONOMY IS A MACHINE can reduce human beings to cold, mechanical, or even threatening forces. Yet, there is also a hopeful side to metaphor: it can be used creatively and subversively. When we frame THE ECONOMY AS A LIVING ORGANISM (“*Economic growth*”, “*The bond market died*”, “*The industry is thriving*”), we humanize the economy, making it emotionally relatable and morally charged (e.g., we must “care for” the economy). But it can also be ideologically loaded, depending on how it is used - either to justify intervention (like a doctor treating illness) or inaction (letting the “natural” cycle play out). This shows us that metaphor can influence moral judgments and who or what we hold responsible, as well. Charteris-Black (2004) captures this dual nature well, pointing out that metaphors help us make sense of complex realities while also serving to influence and convince. Along the same lines, Hart suggests that metaphors embed ideology in language itself, influencing not only what we think, but how we relate to one another, how we construct social identities, and how we imagine change. As he puts it, “They enact ideology in discourse through the ideational, interpersonal and textual function of language” (Hart, 2016, p. 143).

#### 3.2. *Metaphor and Media Communication*

Mass media and institutional discourse often rely on metaphor to help make sense of complex social issues. The recent COVID-19 pandemic is a case in point. Faced with a global crisis that was difficult to comprehend, many of us turned often unconsciously to familiar metaphors. During the pandemic, war-related language gained widespread traction (*fighting the virus*, *healthcare workers on the “frontlines”*, in English, and *chống dịch là chống giặc – fighting the Epidemic is fighting the enemy*, *Mỗi phường xã là một pháo đài – each ward or village is a fort*, in Vietnamese), casting the virus as an enemy and healthcare workers as fighters. Such framings shaped emotional responses and perceptions of urgency. Amaireh’s (2022) analysis is significant, uncovering three dominant metaphorical frames in a local

newspaper: WAR, WATER, and PERSON. Each one tells a different story. WAR calls for mobilization and bravery, casting COVID-19 as an enemy to be defeated. WATER represents the uncontrollable, the idea of the virus *spread*. Meanwhile, PERSON frames the virus as an intruder, something with intention, making the threat more personal, more tangible. Amaireh's research reveals that metaphors do carry ideological weight. They shape not only how we understand a crisis, but how we feel about it, how we act, and even how policies are justified. That insight is especially important in hindsight, when we consider just how politicized the pandemic became in so many countries. However, Garzone (2021) cautions against relying too heavily on WAR metaphors, especially in English-language media. And honestly, we agree. The constant repetition of *battle*, *enemy*, and *sacrifice* created emotional fatigue. It made us anxious. It made us even more divided. That is the double edge of metaphor: it can inspire solidarity, but it can also exhaust us, or heighten fear when what we really need is care and connection. This said, we must pay attention to the metaphors we use, especially in times of crisis. They do not just describe reality, they shape it. And in shaping it, they can shape us.

### **3.3. Metaphors and Health Communication**

Health is a domain marked by complexity, uncertainty, and abstraction. When confronting illness, patients and families often struggle with unfamiliar concepts and overwhelming emotions. Metaphor becomes a critical communicative bridge. Forceville (2025) notes that metaphorical framings make difficult medical ideas more accessible and emotionally resonant, helping doctors and patients find common ground, navigate sensitive conversations, and support shared decision-making. Metaphors also shape how patients understand their conditions, offering language for both vulnerability and resilience (Semino et al., 2016). In cancer discourse, WAR metaphors are especially salient. They can empower, casting patients as fighters and giving a sense of courage and control. Yet, they also carry a quiet burden: if illness is a battle, those who do not "win" may feel they have somehow lost. This paradox shows how metaphors can both empower and harm, often simultaneously. Semino et al. therefore call for nuanced, multidimensional metaphor analysis, particularly in healthcare, where metaphors influence emotions, social realities, and practical decisions.

Reisfield and Wilson (2004) identify three dominant metaphors in medical discourse: WAR, JOURNEY, and MACHINE. WAR metaphors (*battle with cancer*, *frontline workers*) frame illness as an enemy, motivating some but risking blame or shame for others. JOURNEY metaphors (*my cancer journey*, *road to recovery*) emphasize progression and agency, yet can imply isolation or an inevitable path. MACHINE metaphors (*the body as a system*, *organ failure*, *the brain as a computer*) reflect a mechanistic frame that aids diagnosis and treatment while also shaping how responsibility and risk are understood. Notably, these metaphors influence how we talk about illness, how we experience it, and how decisions are made. In healthcare communication, metaphors do not simply describe reality but they actively shape it, guiding understanding, empathy, and the meanings people attach to wellness and disease.

### **3.4. Metaphor and Political and Economic Discourse**

Reflecting on the framing power of metaphor in shaping our worldviews especially in politics and economics, we come to realize how metaphors influence our perception of reality, what we accept as normal, and which solutions we consider feasible. Lakoff (2004) unpacks how language framings political realities, particularly from a progressive perspective. Lakoff shows that the political battle is won or lost not simply through facts or policies, but by who controls the frames that affect public understanding. As a saying goes in politics, "If you don't

frame your opponent first, you'll be framed by him.” Metaphors work through the contents of what is said, the relationships between speakers and listeners, and the very structure of the text or speech. In that sense, they are closely woven into the matrix of discourse and power. Metaphors are central to how political realities are framed and understood. A clear example is Donald Trump’s use of “*Drain the swamp*” in the 2016 U.S. election. This metaphor tapped into public frustration, depicting government as corrupt and stagnant - something to be cleaned out. It reveals how metaphor can activate strong emotions, reframe institutions, and justify particular responses (Nguyen, H., 2025). All this shows that metaphors are powerful instruments of meaning-making and persuasion, intricately embedded in the social and political dynamics that impact our lives. Another example is the phrase “tax relief” commonly used in contemporary political discourse, which illustrates how taxation is framed as an affliction and tax cuts are crafted as a welcome *relief* to influence voters’ perceptions and moral judgments. More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic creates economic metaphors in new directions. As Klein (2020) notes, metaphors of “*build back better*”<sup>3</sup> have been central to political and economic narratives. These metaphors frame the crisis as an opportunity to rethink and change our economic systems. Yet, these metaphors also carry ideological resonance as they can imply that recovery is primarily about “building”, rather than tackling systemic inequalities.

Semino et al. (2016) propose an integrated, multi-level framework, which sees metaphor not just at one level but across multiple dimensions. They talk about metaphor as a dynamic form of framing that operates cognitively, discursively, and practically. This multi-level approach, distinguishing between broad conceptual metaphors, culturally shaped metaphor scenarios, and the actual language people use serves as a way to capture the full richness of metaphor in action. This reveals the reality that metaphor is never just about words; it is about agency, emotion, and judgment.

### 3.5. Metaphor and Intercultural Communication

Metaphors generally reflect the worldviews, moral systems, practices, and histories of the communities that use them (Kimmel, 2004; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Kövecses, 2005, 2020a). They carry layers of meaning formed by local experience and cultural tradition. For example, in Vietnamese, metaphors for anger often draw on heat and fire, with expressions like “*Bốc lửa*” or “*Nóng mắt*” and its English parallel “*burning with rage*”, vividly capturing emotional intensity. Vietnamese speakers often use proverbial metaphors rooted in agrarian life and communal ethos, like the saying “*một cây làm chẳng nên non, ba cây chụm lại nên hòn núi cao* - a single tree cannot make a hill, three trees clustered together form a high mountain” which poignantly underscores the importance of cooperation and collective effort for achieving significant outcomes. Arabic offers yet another window into how culture defines metaphor. In Arabic, the metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY is infused with the religious and spiritual significance of Islamic pilgrimage, weaving fate and divine guidance into everyday understanding. The metaphor could imply that life is just a test; the real destination is the afterlife, reinforcing the value of submission (*to the will of Allah*).

However, this rich diversity can pose challenges, especially in *intercultural communication*. Metaphors, profoundly embedded in cultural frames, can become opaque or confusing to outsiders. We have seen how this can lead to misinterpretations, especially when

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<sup>3</sup> For example, President Biden is known to use the phrase “build back better” as a central slogan in his 2020 presidential campaign, and it became the name of a legislative framework proposed by him, which included plans like the American Rescue Plan, the American Jobs Plan, and the American Families Plan.

language learners encounter metaphorical expressions that do not translate neatly. As Littlemore and Low (2006a) suggest, it is quite rare for non-native speakers to naturally produce extended metaphors, complex and cognitively demanding expressions, especially when they stretch across several lines or ideas. This shows that metaphor is a subtle skill that may require explicit teaching and practice. The consequences of misunderstanding metaphor go beyond mere confusion because they can affect how ideas and evaluations are received. Research reveals that international students may misinterpret the evaluative language of lecturers because of unfamiliar metaphors, missing important rhetorical cues or critical stances (Littlemore & Low, 2006b). This can lead to breakdowns in academic communication and even affect learners' success. In this sense, we may say that metaphor is a powerful but delicate bridge between minds and cultures, one that can illuminate or obscure meaning depending on how well we understand the landscapes it spans.

### ***3.6. Metaphor Teaching and Learning***

While metaphor is widely recognized as central to human thought and culture (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2020a), metaphor pedagogy remains underdeveloped. Research increasingly shows that metaphorical competence (MC) enhances language learning (Littlemore & Low, 2006a; Boers & Lindstromberg, 2008; Chavoshan & Fernández, 2025). However, many teachers are largely unaware of the pedagogical value of conceptual metaphor theory (CMT), and others “just pay lip service to it” (Boussaid, 2023, p. 98). Though it is acknowledged that MC should be considered part of communicative language ability (Danesi, 1995; Littlemore & Low, 2006b), a component of fluency (Andreou & Galantomos, 2009), and a core cognitive-communicative skill (Niu & Ganapathy, 2025), metaphor-based teaching (MBT) remains an underutilized approach in world language pedagogy outside linguistics programs. CMT and MC are largely underrepresented in mainstream EFL syllabi and textbooks, and MC is not listed as a distinct competence in the CEFR (2001, 2020) or in widely used teacher-standards frameworks (MacArthur, 2016, as cited in Chavoshan & Fernández, 2025). Boussaid's (2024) survey of 255 EFL teachers across 35 countries including Vietnam shows that MC is still overlooked as teachers prioritize grammar and general communication. Even when metaphors appear in lessons, they are commonly treated as decorative, literary features rather than essential cognitive tools. Although scholars emphasize that EFL learners need strong metaphorical competence (Littlemore & Low, 2006a; Andreou & Galantomos, 2009), MBT faces persistent challenges like limited materials, time pressure, and perceptions that metaphor instruction does not match student needs. Many teachers remain skeptical, viewing MBT as potentially overwhelming. Nonetheless, Boussaid (2024) argues that teacher-education and professional-development programs should include foundational knowledge of CMT and MBT, along with flexible instructional strategies. Similarly, Chavoshan and Fernández (2025) contend that CMT must move beyond theory and be translated into classroom practice through curriculum design and explicit teacher preparation. Given the theoretical and pedagogical significance of metaphor, integrating CMT and MBT into language curricula is increasingly seen as essential.

Overall, the discussion in this section highlights a consistent theme: metaphor is a powerful, cross-domain resource for meaning-making. From early cognitive development to political, economic, media, health, and educational discourse, metaphors shape how we conceptualize, relate to, and engage with the world around us.

## 4. Extensions of Metaphor Research

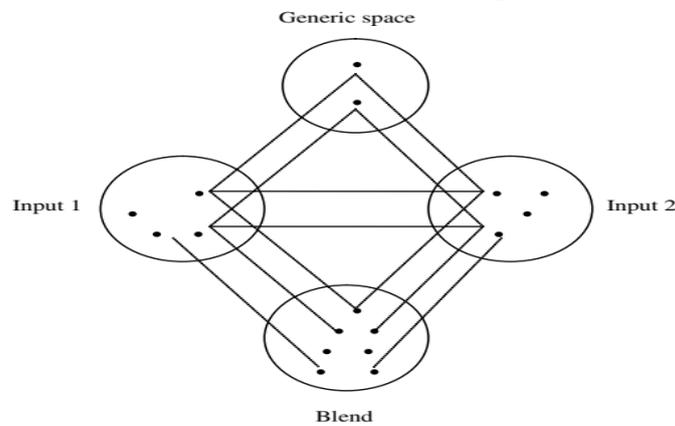
### 4.1. Conceptual Blending Theory (CBT)

Obviously, CMT represents a foundational framework for understanding how abstract concepts are systematically structured through conventional cross-domain mappings. However, while it offers valuable insights into entrenched metaphorical structures, CMT leaves open the question of how novel meanings emerge in real-time discourse. An example often cited to illustrate this point is “*This surgeon is a butcher*” (Kövecses, 2005; Evans & Green, 2006). The key question is: how does the meaning of incompetence on the part of the doctor arise? Fixed mappings in CMT (butcher → surgeon; cleaver → scalpel; animal carcasses → human patients; dismembering → operating) fail to fully explain this inference. CBT, proposed by Fauconnier and Turner (2002) in *The Way We Think*, addresses this gap by showing how new meaning emerges in the blend. Accounting for this example, Evans and Green (2006, p. 405) explain that a butcher is a skilled professional whose expertise lies in dismembering animal carcasses, whereas a surgeon’s role typically involves repair and reconstruction to save lives. Thus, when a surgeon is viewed as a butcher, what we see is a clash of skills and goals: the surgeon brings the wrong kind of skills to the task at hand and is therefore assessed incompetent.

CBT identifies four mental spaces: two input spaces (each containing elements from different conceptual frames), and a generic space that holds what is shared between them, and a blended space where the new meaning emerges through integration. At its core, CBT invites us to consider how meaning emerges through the blending. The blend, often subtle and context-sensitive, gives rise to emergent structure: new meanings that result from the *selective projection* and *integration* of elements from the input spaces. Such a perspective reframes metaphor not as a rigid formula, but as a living, evolving phenomenon, one that reflects cultural nuance, personal experience, and the creative interplay of language and thought. CBT, therefore, offers a lens through which we can better appreciate the flexibility and creativity of metaphor, especially as it unfolds in everyday language use. In this process, language plays a guiding role in the construction of meaning by prompting the hearer or reader to interpret messages based on background knowledge, experiences, and contextual cues, often in ways that are intuitive and deeply human (Evans, 2015). This process unfolds through three key processes: *composition*, *completion*, and *elaboration*. *Completion* refers to the process of drawing on background knowledge, or mental frameworks, to flesh out a new idea. *Composition* occurs when elements from two input spaces are selectively projected and integrated into what is known as a blended space. The most dynamic stage is *elaboration*, also known as the “run of the blend,” where our imagination plays a key role in exploring the possibilities within the newly formed concept. In other words, what happens here is the “blend” can be mentally “run”, producing emergent structure, i.e., novel meanings not present in either input alone (see Hart’s 2016 example below). While the terminology may sound complex, but at its heart, the theory is really about how our minds instinctively stitch together bits of seemingly unrelated information to create something meaningful and new. As a result, our common way of conceptualizing target domains as abstract and source domains as concrete has gone under change. Both target and source domains can be abstract and concrete (politics is religion, religion is politics, shoes are ties, surgeons are butchers, etc.)

**Figure 2**

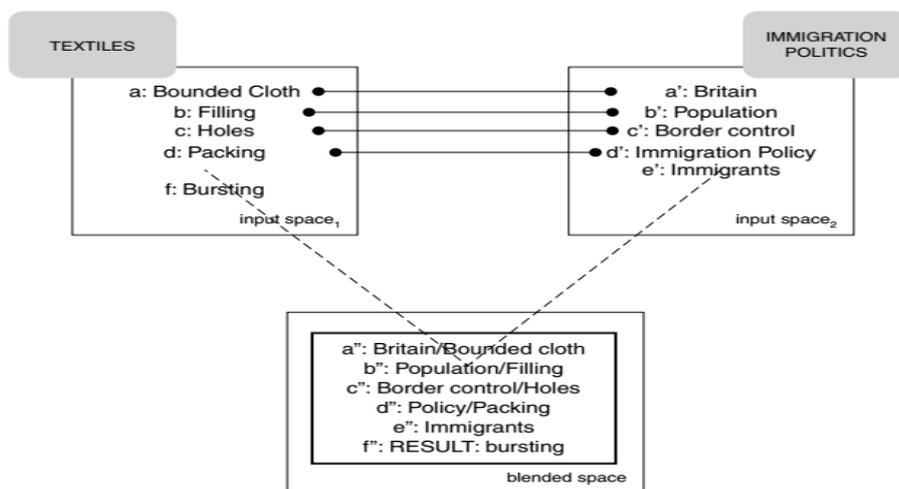
*A Basic Integration Network (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002, p. 46)*



Hart (2016) offers a simplified model made up of three spaces, excluding the Generic Space. In the example given, Hart describes a political cartoon on immigration in the UK. The phrase “bursting at the seams” is used, and when you think about it through CBT, it is as if Britain (Input Space 1) is imagined like a piece of cloth (Input Space 2). In the blend, the image suggests that immigration has reached a breaking point, too full, stretched thin (i.e., novel meaning). It is a vivid way of understanding how public anxiety can be influenced by metaphorical thinking. See Figure 3 below:

**Figure 3**

*Integration Network in “Bursting at the Seams” (Hart, 2016, p. 143)*



CBT can offer important implications for analyzing meaning-making in the media, advertising, and performance, where metaphors often work across verbal, visual, and spatial domains in imaginative and unexpected ways. However, it is important to recognize that CBT is not without certain limitations. Glebkin (2013) points out that the theory can at times be overly broad, and does not always account for cultural and historical context.

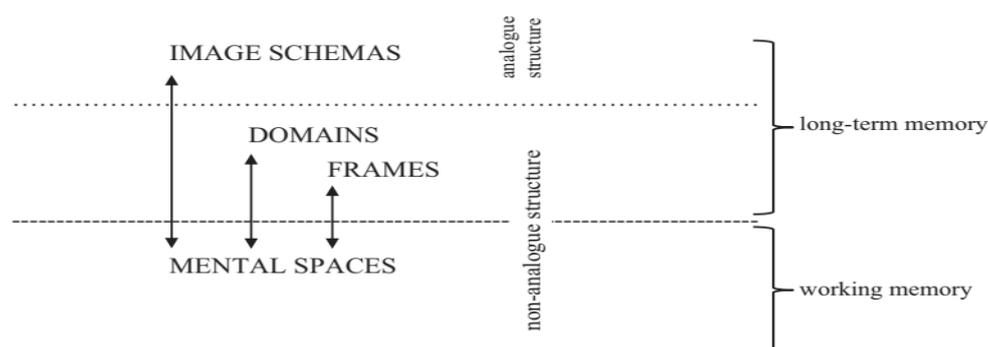
**4.2. Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory (ECMT)**

One thing that has always intrigued us about CMT is how it responds to the critiques, especially those pointing out its reliance on intuition, the ambiguity around conceptual levels,

and its somewhat narrow focus on isolated metaphors, often at the expense of the full richness of discourse and context. Kövecses (2020a) addresses those concerns by offering a significant refinement of the theory, aiming to deepen our understanding of how metaphors actually work in real-world interactions, thought processes, and cultural settings. One of the major shifts of focus of ECMT is the shift from viewing metaphors as fixed, one-level mappings to embracing a more flexible, layered model. Instead of seeing metaphors as tied to just one cognitive structure, Kövecses proposes thinking of them as spanning multiple interconnected levels of image schemas, domains, frames, and mental spaces, all organized in a sort of vertical hierarchy and schematicity. This hierarchical view resonates with us because it captures the complexity and nuance of metaphorical meaning far better than earlier models. It acknowledges that our minds do not work with isolated bits of information but with dynamic, overlapping structures, where mappings typically occur between corresponding levels. Importantly, a single conceptual metaphor may span all the four levels. Further, Kövecses makes a distinction between long-term memory, where more stable schemas, domains and frames are housed, and working memory, where mental spaces dynamically shift during conversation or discourse processing. This is insightful as it helps us see metaphor as something alive and unfolding, not merely a static mapping etched in the mind.

#### Figure 4

*Activation and Structuring between the Levels (Kövecses, 2020a, p. 70)*



Kövecses distinguishes two major conceptual boundaries in figure 4. The top line demarcates whether a structure operates through analogical resemblance or not, while the lower bold line separates elements housed in long-term memory from those temporarily engaged during cognitive processing. The bidirectional arrows indicate that abstract schematic patterns influence mental spaces, and reciprocally, mental spaces can activate or reshape those patterns.

ECMT presents valuable insights, but also faces some challenges. Its complexity and testability raise concerns about how empirically measurable such a layered framework can be. Integration with other cognitive theories is still a work in progress, particularly in clarifying how various contextual influences such as situational, bodily, and cultural interact within the model. ECMT's connection with blending theory still remains underdeveloped, leaving gaps in the explanation of metaphorical creativity. That said, ECMT reflects the fluid, multilayered nature of metaphor, reminding us that theories must remain flexible and nuanced to capture the complexity of the human experience. This makes ECMT's approach especially meaningful.

#### 4.3. Multimodal Metaphor

Perhaps, most intriguing is how our understanding of metaphor has grown far beyond just the written or spoken word. It is no longer something confined to poetry or clever phrasing

on a page. Over time, it has become clear to us that metaphors are alive in the images we see, the sounds we hear, the gestures we make, and even the digital symbols like emojis that we casually send every day (Forceville, 1996, 2005, 2006; Forceville & Urios-Aparisi, 2009; Jewitt, 2014; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, 2021; O'Halloran, 2004; Cienki & Müller, 2008; Urry and Larsen, 2011). Metaphor has become something we experience across multiple senses, not just something we read. A famous and widely discussed example is Salvador Dalí's *The Persistence of Memory*<sup>4</sup>, with its soft, melting clocks. It is a visual metaphor for the dissolution, and relativity of time, and the persistence of subjective experience (Ades, 1995). Another example that came back to our minds as we were writing this section is the Willie Horton ad<sup>5</sup> from the 1988 U.S. presidential election between Vice President George H. W. Bush (Republican) and Governor Michael Dukakis (Democrat), which illustrates how multimodality and framing function as both cognitive and critical resources. What stands out is that Horton's mugshot was multimodally represented through an interaction of different modes. The visual and auditory elements in the Willie Horton advertisement such as dim lighting, grave narration, and the chosen dark imagery worked together to activate the racialized criminal stereotype and subtly frame race as a silent metaphor for threat. According to numerous analysts, this multimodal representation may have diverted public discourse away from broader policy concerns toward themes of fear and insecurity, embedding metaphorical frames such as CRIME IS THREAT and POLITICS IS PROTECTION. As Mendelberg (2001) argues, the ad did more than persuade: it shaped how voters mentally framed the stakes of the election. Many people believe it played a significant role in Bush's electoral win. This case vividly exemplifies how multimodal metaphor and framing intersect with race, emotion, and ideology in political discourse, informing public perception and influencing voter behavior.

As communication has shifted into more multimedia formats like films, memes, interactive designs, and social media, the way we use and study metaphor has had to change too. We have come to realize that we do not just look at words as meaning is now seen as emerging from the interplay between texts, images, sounds, movements, and increasingly, touches. This "multimodal turn" has opened up new directions in research across so many fields including advertising and marketing; films, TV, and media; education; cognitive and developmental psychology; art and design; scientific visualization and communication; social and political discourse; digital and multimodal communication; rhetoric and argumentation theory; metonymy interaction (Zhong et al., 2023). Interestingly, we have observed that the interplay of semiotic modes in multimodal metaphor bears strong conceptual parallels to the meaning-making processes involved in translanguaging, conceptualized by Li Wei as a "... multisemiotic, multisensory, and multimodal resource" (Li Wei, 2018, p. 26) used for thinking and expressing our thoughts. This parallel suggests that both metaphorical framing and translanguaging rely on the dynamic orchestration of semiotic resources to make meaning in interactional contexts. More recently, research on multimodal metaphor has begun to engage with developments in AI and Natural Language Processing (NLP). Machines are now attempting to grasp metaphors too, but we have come to understand that it is no easy task, and

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<sup>4</sup> *The Persistence of Memory* (1931) was a painting created by the Spanish surrealist Dalí (1904–1989). Using melting clocks as a visual metaphor to represent the fluidity and subjectivity of time, the painting reflects dreamlike distortions of reality and suggests that time is malleable rather than fixed. It also evokes themes of decay and impermanence. Now housed at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, we can view the painting at <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79018>

<sup>5</sup> It is possible to access the ad at <https://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1988/willie-horton>

much remains to be done. One key reason is that metaphor is closely related to context, culture, and embodied experience – areas which AI is not yet equipped to handle.

Carey et al. (2025) make an apt point: most research in multimodality has focused on what we can see (the visual) and hear (the auditory). However, there is now a growing interest in how meaning is also made through taste, smell, and touch (Mondada, 2023; Jewitt & Price, 2024, as cited in Carey et al., 2025, p. 3). It serves as a reminder that metaphor, like meaning itself, can show up in unexpected places, and we are just beginning to explore the full range of its expressions.

#### **4.4. Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA)**

Critical approach to metaphor analysis combines insights from CMT and CDA. Through CMA, we have come to understand that metaphors are potent ideological tools that influence how we see the world - and, just as importantly, how we relate to others within it. Metaphors have the power to legitimize certain ways of thinking, to persuade us toward specific actions, and to draw sharp lines between “us” and “them.” And when we start looking more closely, we begin to see how the things can get really interesting, and often quite unsettling.

Just take legitimization, for example. Metaphors can make policies or practices appear natural like there is no alternative. One that stands out to us is the metaphor of the ECONOMY AS A MACHINE. It appears everywhere in political discourse. Markets are described as needing to be “fine-tuned” or “kept running”, and when they break down, it often blames on outside “interference”. This kind of framing helped pave the way for widespread support of deregulation, austerity, or bailouts especially after the 2008 crisis (Musolff, 2016). We saw something similar during the COVID-19 pandemic. The constant use of war metaphors such as “fighting the virus”, “frontline healthcare workers”, “the battle against COVID” gave authorities a narrative which made emergency measures urgent, heroic, even necessary. But it also had a side effect: it normalized drastic interventions into our everyday lives, even when they restricted freedoms in ways that would have seemed unthinkable just months before (Semino et al., 2021).

Then, consider persuasion, which is closely tied to legitimization. Metaphors can subtly shape how problems are framed, nudging us toward certain kinds of solutions. In climate discourse, for example, the term “carbon footprint” is ubiquitous. It focuses attention on individual choices - what we eat, how we travel. That is important, of course, but it also shifts the spotlight away from larger systemic forces, like corporate pollution or lack of policy reform, according to Nerlich & Jaspal (2012). In business, we often hear about “MARKET COMPETITION IS WAR,” a metaphor that encourages ruthless tactics and glorifies dominance, shaping entire corporate cultures (Boers, 1997).

One of the most emotionally charged uses of metaphor lies in othering, i.e., how we talk about people who are not “us.” This is where language can become dangerous. Immigrants, for instance, are often described in terms of “floods,” “waves,” “riots,” looters,” or even “invasions,” and “invaders.” Sometimes they are said to be “poisoning the blood” of a nation. These images are dramatic and inhumane. They make fear come across as justified. We have seen similar things in politics, where opponents are called “enemies” or “traitors,” language that intensifies division and stifles dialogue. As a result, real people are affected. Carney & Kelekay (2022) look at how the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in the US was framed in the media. Protestors were often described as “thugs” or “rioters” - words heavy with racialized criminality. But within the movement, people used metaphors like “a fight for justice” or “a great awakening.” The contrast could not be starker. Each metaphor told a

different story about what the protests were and why they mattered. Even beyond these examples, we can notice how metaphors like “war” are used across all kinds of contexts. And they are effective - war metaphors grab attention, spark emotion. But they can also be misleading, and even harmful. As Flusberg et al. (2018) summarize the common opinion, “... war metaphors are misleading at best, and harmful at worst, resulting not only in increased political and cultural polarization, but in risks to personal and social well-being as well” (p. 2).

A critical approach to metaphor, thus, challenges us to consider not only what is being communicated, but also ask the tough and often unsettling question: who benefits and who loses when metaphors are used? We must be more critical, more aware, and even more responsible with the metaphors we use and create.

#### ***4.5. Corpora and Cross-Linguistic Methodologies***

Recent developments in metaphor studies, particularly those employing corpus linguistics and computational tools, have opened up new possibilities for systematically comparing metaphors across languages. Charteris-Black’s (2004) methodological approach, which combines corpus linguistics with critical discourse analysis, offers a model for studying metaphor in real-world texts. What Charteris-Black has in mind is the use of large, electronically searchable collections of texts (corpora) to systematically identify, quantify, and interpret metaphors in authentic language use. Corpus tools assist in this process by locating metaphor-related keywords or patterns across genres (e.g., political speeches, media, religious texts), thereby making the analysis more replicable and transparent. Taylor and Kidgell’s (2021) corpus-based investigation into “Flu-like pandemics and metaphor pre-covid” reveals a notable persistence of certain conceptual metaphors across distinct sociohistorical contexts, like WAR and ENEMY. However, their study highlights the dynamic nature of metaphor, exhibiting creative extensions and elaborations. Over time, they observe a shift in framing, with later texts increasingly emphasizing societal responses and impacts (e.g., the WEIGHT metaphor, as lexicalized in the phrase “the better our chances of relieving the burden on the NHS”), while representations of the virus itself become less agentive.

A notable development is seen in the VU Amsterdam Metaphor Corpus project. Developed at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam<sup>6</sup>, this large, carefully annotated collection of English texts is designed specifically to help us understand how metaphor works in natural language. What matters is the painstaking effort that goes into manually identifying metaphors using the MIPVU method, a process developed by Steen et al. (2010), that brings a rigor and clarity to metaphor analysis that was often missing before. This hand-annotated corpus covers a fascinating range of genres including news articles, fiction, academic texts, and conversations, making it a rich resource not only for linguistic theory but also for practical computational metaphor research. Knowing that researchers can now track metaphor usage patterns and frequencies across different kinds of texts is a major step forward. It is like having a magnifying glass that reveals the often-overlooked workings of metaphor in everyday communication. Developed computational modeling can enable metaphor detection and alignment across multiple languages through parallel translation. This has uncovered not only shared conceptual metaphors but also unique, language-specific ways of framing ideas. This duality shows that language is both a universal human faculty and a cultural practice, reinforcing the importance of careful, contrastive analysis in applying metaphor research to real-world issues.

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<sup>6</sup> You can explore the corpus at [Resources | Metaphor Lab Amsterdam](#)

#### 4.6. *Metaphor and AI*

AI's engagement with metaphor has deepened significantly in recent years, largely because metaphor sits at the intersection of language and thought. As Barnden<sup>7</sup> (2008) argues, for AI to truly understand human communication, it has to do more than just decode literal meanings, and grapple with the conceptual leaps humans make effortlessly. Teaching machines to interpret meaning represents a huge challenge. However, progress has been remarkable.

In Natural Language Processing (NLP), researchers have developed systems that can detect, analyze, and even generate metaphors. Using neural networks, symbolic reasoning, and hybrid methods, they explore how metaphors function computationally (Barnden, 2008; Veale et al., 2018; Ge et al., 2023). Deep learning models, especially transformer-based architectures, now sift through vast corpora to identify metaphorical patterns. Algorithms inspired by conceptual metaphor theory attempt to mimic human-like mappings between source and target domains. A notable initiative is MetaNet<sup>8</sup> (Dodge et al., 2015), a large-scale repository of conceptual metaphors grounded in frame semantics. It supports automated detection, categorization, and analysis of metaphor across corpora. Transformer models such as BERT and RoBERTa have also become useful tools in metaphor research. By capturing deep contextual information, these models significantly improve automatic metaphor identification and other figurative-language tasks.

Still, these systems fall short of human understanding, resulting in dehumanization or homogeneity in generating and understanding some conceptual metaphors. They recognize linguistic patterns, but do not approximate the embodied, cultural, and experiential grounding that humans use to process metaphor. Subtle or novel metaphors, especially those tied to specific cultural assumptions, remain difficult for AI. A simple example illustrates the gap: when I asked ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2023) to translate the Vietnamese sentence “Trưa, anh ta đưa phở đi ăn cơm,” it produced a literal but nonsensical output: “At noon, he took phở to eat rice.” In Vietnamese colloquial speech, *phở* refers metaphorically to a girlfriend, and *cơm* metonymically to lunch. Only after I explained this cultural context, did the AI produce the correct meaning: “At noon, he took his girlfriend out for lunch.” This moment made it clear to me: understanding metaphor requires understanding people, culture, and shared assumptions, not just linguistic patterns. Shutova (2010) argues that true metaphor understanding requires models that approximate human meaning-making, grounded in bodily experience, culture, and conceptual blending. Veale et al. (2018) note that machines still struggle even to distinguish literal from metaphorical language - an intuition humans acquire early in life. That intuitive sensitivity to figurative intent remains beyond current systems.

What we note, however, is that the field is moving rapidly. As Mahowald et al. (2023)

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<sup>7</sup> Barnden (2008) presents a review of some the AI projects at understanding metaphor, including TACTITUS (Hobbs, 1990, 1992); MIDAS (Martin, 1990, 2000) for metaphor interpretation and generation; META5 (Fass, 1997) to discover analogies between source and target domains, with the process guided by relevance; ATT-Meta (Barnden, 1998, 2001), that focuses on reasoning in metaphor understanding rather than strict domain mappings; SAPPER (Veale, 1998; Veale & Keene, 1997) for finding structural analogies.

<sup>8</sup> The MetaNet project is a computational framework developed to identify, classify, and interpret metaphors across multiple languages. It maintains a repository of metaphors and structured conceptual frames, supporting automated metaphor detection in large text corpora in languages such as English, French, and Spanish. The current MetaNet data, available in RDF format, are hosted by the University of British Columbia and can be accessed at <https://metanet.arts.ubc.ca/metaphor-databases/>.

observe, advances across linguistics, cognitive science, computer science, and cultural studies are converging to create more holistic models of language. The next generation of AI, particularly generative and agentic systems, aims to move beyond surface-level pattern recognition toward deeper engagement with meaning, context, and creativity. Looking ahead, the prospect of machines that do not just talk, but that begin to understand - what Lake et al. (2017) call “human-like learning and thinking” - is becoming more plausible. The challenges are substantial, but so is the promise, that is, the path toward AI systems capable of engaging with human metaphor in nuanced, culturally aware, and creatively flexible ways. Understanding metaphor ultimately means understanding how humans make meaning, and AI’s progress in that direction marks one of the most fascinating developments at the intersection of language, cognition, and computation.

#### ***4.7. Vietnamese Scholarship in Conceptual Metaphor Research: Trends, Findings, and Global Alignment***

This section provides a selective overview of Vietnamese research on conceptual metaphor. The questions we ask here are: How is metaphor scholarship developing in Vietnam? What contributions can it make to the global project of metaphor studies? And how might Vietnamese perspectives enrich the broader scholarly conversations? Our aim was to foreground locally grounded insights that enrich the conceptual terrain of metaphor studies. Vietnamese linguists have not only adopted mainstream cognitive and critical approaches but also adapted them to culturally and historically specific contexts. These include politics, war memory, cultural identity, emotions, post-pandemic economic discourse, advertising, literature, and cross-linguistic translation among others. Moreover, current work increasingly reflects current social concerns, ranging from climate change and global warming to corruption and anti-corruption, as well as gender representation. Our review<sup>9</sup> focused on completed doctoral and MA dissertations published between 2012 and 2025 and ongoing research in Vietnam. We identified relevant works through a Google search using the Vietnamese key phrase “luận án tiến sĩ ảnh dụ ý niệm” (doctoral dissertation on conceptual metaphor), and assessing the website: <https://lic.vnu.edu.vn/>, restricting results to publications from Vietnam-based institutions. Search results were manually screened for relevance by reviewing titles, abstracts, and, when necessary, full retrievable texts.

Our findings suggested that Vietnamese metaphor study has in recent years expanded and shifted in scope, method, and thematic focus, noticeably from monomodal to multimodal research. Studies focus on everyday concepts such as sports, food and drinks, education, emotions, and on advertising & branding, often in cross-linguistic and cross-cultural comparison. Recent doctoral research has moved into high-stakes domains such as politics, war, business, media, and translation. Analyses are typically grounded in Lakoff and Johnson’s CMT, Kövecses’s Multi-Level View Analysis and Charteris-Black’s CMA, creating a cognitive-critical framework applied to diverse corpora from political reportage and economic news to literary translation. While most MA theses in conceptual metaphor confine their topics

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<sup>9</sup> This review is limited in scope and methodology. We examined 27 completed PhD dissertations, 14 completed MA theses, and 17 ongoing PhD studies. We did not review journal articles or conference proceedings. As such, our findings offer a selective snapshot rather than a comprehensive review of Vietnamese scholarship in the study of conceptual metaphor. However, given that many journal publications and books in this field derive from doctoral dissertations, we believe the sample still reflects a substantial portion of recent scholarly work.

to exploring the mapping between source and target domains, doctoral studies go beyond the linguistic boundary to investigate the socio-cultural and socio-political factors that have shaped the generation and understanding of metaphor, and how metaphor influences audiences' perceptions of those socio-cultural/socio-political/socio-economic issues.

Methodological hallmarks include the application of the Pragglejaz Group's (2007) MIP, corpus-based mapping, and contextual interpretation linking metaphor choice to ideology and cultural framing (Charteris-Black, 2004; Maalej, 2009). Across the studies, salient source domains such as WAR, JOURNEY, FAMILY, FIRE and GROWTH are shown to shift with socio-historical context. For example, war metaphors are known to dominate crises, while journey and growth metaphors emerge in recovery. Translation research further documents modulation strategies when conceptual mappings lack cross-cultural equivalence. Most of the studies are text-based, so there is growing potential for Vietnamese metaphor research to further explore multimodal, digital, affective dimensions of metaphor in public discourse, online communication, and language education. Overall, these studies reflect recent global trends emphasizing multimodality, criticality, and cross-cultural comparison, while offering culture-specific perspectives on how metaphor mediates thought, ideology, collective memory, and intercultural communication. We conclude that their explorations demonstrate how metaphor is dynamically shaped by local cultural contexts, and that adaptation of broadly shared cognitive metaphorical frameworks to Vietnamese cultural, political, and communicative settings offers novel insights into metaphor's role in shaping local meaning-making practices.

## **5. Some Final Thoughts**

Our discussion suggests that the study of conceptual metaphor offers an exciting journey into the human mind or the heart of how we construct meaning in social interactions. Metaphor is a dynamic process embedded in human culture, shared assumptions, contexts, and social norms. It remains central to semantics, serving as a powerful resource for meaning-making. At its core, it reveals how abstract reasoning is rooted in embodied experience, and how language shapes perspectives. CMT has changed our understanding of language, thought, and meaning. We maintain that across disciplines from linguistics and psychology to AI and cultural studies, metaphor has become a key lens for exploring how we conceptualize and make sense of the world. Today, metaphor research stands at an exciting interdisciplinary crossroads. Emerging directions include the integration of AI with metaphor analysis, and the mapping of metaphors across multi-modalities such as speech, sign language, gesture, film, emoji, memes, and advertising. Moving forward, metaphor theory is likely to become more pluralistic and AI-enhanced, reflecting the fluid and dynamic nature of conceptual mappings, the complex influence of social and cultural contexts. It highlights the creativity and variability of metaphor to shape perception, discourse and influence action. Future research could explore how metaphors work in digital and AI-mediated environments, where meaning-making is influenced or even generated by algorithms, raising critical issues about agency, homogeneity, dehumanization, authorship, and cultural framing. There is a growing need to integrate metaphor awareness in language education to enhance learners' interpretive and critical skills. Finally, the development of qualitative, context-sensitive frameworks embedded in AI tools will be essential to account for embodiment, ideology and cultural variation in metaphor use. Metaphor, in all its richness and complexity, will remain a vital object of study in understanding how we make meaning in an increasingly mediated world.

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