COGNITIVE

LINGUISTICS AND METAPHORICAL CONCEPTS: A CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARATIVE APPROACH

LINGÜÍSTICA COGNITIVA Y CONCEPTOS METAFÓRICOS: UN ENFOQUE COMPARATIVO TRANSCULTURAL

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, cognitive linguistics has emerged as a powerful framework for understanding how language reflects and shapes human thought. Central to this paradigm is the theory of conceptual metaphor, which suggests that metaphor is not merely a stylistic or decorative element of language, but rather a fundamental mechanism of cognition. This article explores metaphorical concepts through the lens of cognitive linguistics, emphasizing their embeddedness in cultural systems. By conducting a comparative analysis between English and Azerbaijani metaphorical structures, the study highlights both universal and culture-specific aspects of metaphor usage. For instance, while many languages conceptualize time as a path or journey, specific metaphors for emotional states, social roles, or moral values often differ significantly across cultures due to variations in historical experience, religious influence, and social norms. The article also discusses the implications of these metaphorical frameworks for intercultural communication, second language acquisition, and translation studies. Ultimately, the paper argues that metaphors serve not only as linguistic expressions but as cognitive tools that guide perception and interaction with the world, shaped by the unique worldview of each linguistic community.

Keywords: Cognitive linguistics, Metaphorical concepts, Conceptual metaphor, Cross-cultural comparison, Cultural linguistics.

RESUMEN

En las últimas décadas, la lingüística cognitiva se ha consolidado como un marco sólido para comprender cómo el lenguaje refleja y moldea el pensamiento humano. La teoría de la metáfora conceptual es central en este paradigma, ya que sugiere que la metáfora no es simplemente un elemento estilístico o decorativo del lenguaje, sino un mecanismo fundamental de la cognición. Este artículo explora los conceptos metafóricos desde la perspectiva de la lingüística cognitiva, enfatizando su arraigo en los sistemas culturales. Mediante un análisis comparativo entre las estructuras metafóricas del inglés y el azerbaiyano, el estudio destaca tanto los aspectos universales como los específicos de cada cultura en el uso de las metáforas. Por ejemplo, si bien muchas lenguas conceptualizan el tiempo como un camino o

un viaje, las metáforas específicas para estados emocionales, roles sociales o valores morales suelen diferir significativamente entre culturas debido a las variaciones en la experiencia histórica, la influencia religiosa y las normas sociales. El artículo también analiza las implicaciones de estos marcos metafóricos para la comunicación intercultural, la adquisición de segundas lenguas y los estudios de traducción. En definitiva, el artículo argumenta que las metáforas no solo sirven como expresiones lingüísticas, sino también como herramientas cognitivas que guían la percepción y la interacción con el mundo, moldeadas por la cosmovisión única de cada comunidad lingüística.

INTRODUCTION

Language is not only a medium of communication but also a reflection of human cognition and culture. Within the field of cognitive linguistics, it is increasingly acknowledged that the structure of language provides direct insight into the ways in which people conceptualize their experiences and navigate the world (Bialystok & Craik, 2022; Muratkhodjayeva, 2024). One of the most influential and widely studied areas within this discipline is conceptual metaphor theory (CMT), which posits that human thought is largely metaphorical in nature (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 3). According to this theory, metaphors are not confined to literary or rhetorical domains but are pervasive cognitive structures that influence both the form and content of everyday language (Lakoff, 1993, p. 207).

The essence of conceptual metaphor theory lies in the idea that abstract concepts are understood in terms of more concrete, physical experiences—so-called "embodied cognition" (Kövecses, 2024; Yasar, 2022). For example, concepts such as time, emotion, or morality are frequently expressed through metaphors drawn from physical space, motion, temperature, or weight (Kövecses, 2005, pp. 38–42). The metaphor "LIFE IS A JOURNEY" is one such structure, in which life events are seen as stages along a path, and goals are understood as destinations. These metaphors are not arbitrary; they are motivated by human sensory-motor experience and serve as cognitive shortcuts that structure reasoning, behavior, and communication (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, pp. 9–11; Littlemore & Low, 2006, pp. 21–23).

However, while many metaphors have universal cognitive grounding due to shared human embodiment, their linguistic realizations and conceptual elaborations often vary across cultures (Almaghlouth & Alotaibi, 2024). This variation arises because metaphorical systems are also shaped by culturally specific experiences, historical narratives, and dominant worldviews (Sharifian, 2017, pp. 47–50). For instance, while English speakers might say "He lost his temper", implying emotion as a possession, Azerbaijani speakers may say "özünü itirdi" ("he lost himself"), which subtly shifts the conceptual focus from property to identity (Ismayilova, 2021, pp. 58–59). These differences, though seemingly small, reflect profound distinctions in how cultures conceptualize the self, emotion, and social relations (Yu, 2011, pp. 122–125).

This interplay between universal cognition and cultural specificity makes metaphor a particularly rich site for cross-cultural linguistic analysis. By comparing metaphorical expressions across languages, we gain insight into not only the common cognitive architecture of the human mind, but also the diverse ways in which societies interpret and organize human experience (Kövecses, 2005, pp. 171–173).

The present article explores the conceptual metaphors used in English and Azerbaijani languages through a cross-cultural comparative approach, with the aim of identifying both shared and divergent metaphorical patterns. Special attention is paid to metaphors related to emotion, time, morality, and intellectual activity—domains that are both cognitively salient and culturally sensitive (Sharifova, 2017, pp. 62–65). The study further discusses the implications of these findings for translation, intercultural communication, and foreign language teaching, arguing that effective cross-linguistic and intercultural competence requires not only lexical equivalence but also conceptual awareness (Newmark, 1988, pp. 95–96).

By integrating insights from cognitive linguistics, cultural linguistics, and translation studies, this paper contributes to a growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship that seeks to understand language as both a cognitive and cultural phenomenon. In doing so, it affirms that metaphor is more than a linguistic curiosity—it is a key to understanding how different cultures think, feel, and communicate (Lakoff, 1993, p. 230; Sharifian, 2017, p. 116).

DEVELOPMENT

Cognitive linguistics redefines the study of language by positioning it as a reflection of human cognition rather than an autonomous system of abstract rules (Kövecses, 2005, pp. 1–3; Sharifian, 2017, pp. 3–4). One of the most influential contributions within this paradigm is Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), pioneered by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. Their seminal work Metaphors We Live By introduced the idea that metaphors are not merely figures

of speech but fundamental to how we think, act, and communicate (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 3). According to them, "the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 5). This conceptual mapping typically involves a source domain (concrete, familiar experiences) and a target domain (abstract concepts), a framework also elaborated in Lakoff's later writings (Lakoff, 1993, pp. 206–210). Thus, a phrase like "She won the argument" invokes the metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR, where discourse is structured through the conceptual framework of conflict (Littlemore & Low, 2006, pp. 32–33).

Such mappings are not arbitrary—they are often grounded in embodied experience, meaning that the human body and sensory-motor system provide the basis for how abstract concepts are structured (Kövecses, 2005, pp. 6–7; Yu, 2011, pp. 28–30). For instance, anger is experienced physiologically through heat and pressure, which gives rise to metaphors such as "He was boiling with anger" in English. Azerbaijani offers a parallel but culturally distinct expression: "başı od tutub yanır" ("his head is on fire"). Both languages encode the ANGER IS HEAT schema, but the localization of the heat (torso vs. head) reflects cultural differences in conceptualizing emotional intensity (Ismayilova, 2021, pp. 46–47; Yu, 2011, p. 32).

While many conceptual metaphors are universal due to shared bodily experience, their linguistic realizations and conceptual extensions often differ across cultures (Kövecses, 2005, pp. 163–165; Sharifian, 2017, pp. 46–50). This difference stems from historical, social, and religious factors that influence how metaphors are used and understood (Newmark, 1988, pp. 112–113). In Azerbaijani culture, for example, expressions like "ürəyi genişdir" (literally "his heart is wide") convey moral virtue, generosity, or tolerance, grounded in the metaphor MORAL VALUE IS SPATIAL EXPANSION (Ismayilova, 2021, pp. 59–60; Sharifova, 2017, p. 67). In English, comparable ideas may be expressed through warmth or magnitude— "warmhearted," "big-hearted." While the underlying affective domain is similar, the source domains (space vs. temperature/size) differ, illustrating culturally rooted metaphorical preferences (Kövecses, 2005, pp. 178–181).

Another striking cross-cultural contrast appears in metaphors for intellectual activity and thought. In English, metaphors like "I can't get that idea out of my head," "He's full of bright ideas," and "I'm trying to grasp the concept" suggest that the mind is a container or a space in which ideas are located and manipulated—THE MIND IS A CONTAINER, IDEAS ARE OBJECTS (Kövecses, 2005, pp. 100–102; Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, pp. 9–12). Azerbaijani, too, employs spatial metaphors—e.g., "fikir yığmaq"

("to gather thoughts") or "fikrə dalmaq" ("to dive into thought")—but with a more processual and poetic connotation, reflecting perhaps a more fluid conceptualization of mental activity (Ismayilova, 2021, pp. 65–66).

These metaphorical differences are not limited to isolated expressions; they influence entire conceptual systems and affect communication across languages (Sharifian, 2017, pp. 47–50; Yu, 2011, p. 88). For example, TIME IS MONEY is a dominant metaphor in English—"spend time," "waste time," "invest time"—reflecting capitalist ideologies that equate time with economic value (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, pp. 7–8). In Azerbaijani, time is also considered valuable, but expressions like "vaxtını boşuna keçirdi" ("he wasted his time") are more often moralized than economized, indicating a cultural model where time is linked to social responsibility rather than market productivity (Ismayilova, 2021, p. 94; Sharifova, 2017, pp. 68–69).

Understanding such metaphorical frameworks is critical in intercultural communication and translation studies (Littlemore & Low, 2006, p. 90; Newmark, 1988, pp. 105–106). Translators must navigate between conceptual systems that may not fully overlap. A literal translation of metaphors may fail to convey the intended meaning if the target language lacks a corresponding conceptual frame. For instance, translating "He invested his emotions in that relationship" into Azerbaijani requires cultural mediation, as the EMOTION IS CAPITAL metaphor may not be intuitive in Azerbaijani culture (Kövecses, 2005, p. 144; Newmark, 1988, p. 106).

Similarly, in second language education, ignoring the metaphorical dimension of language can hinder learners' comprehension and expressive capacity. Studies have shown that metaphor awareness boosts learners' ability to interpret idiomatic and abstract language. For example, Littlemore and Low (2006) demonstrated that teaching metaphor explicitly enhances both receptive and productive skills in foreign language learners (pp. 87–88). In Azerbaijani-English contexts, drawing learners' attention to the metaphorical structure of expressions—rather than presenting them as fixed idioms—promotes deeper cognitive engagement and reduces negative transfer (Ismayilova, 2021, pp. 99–100).

An integrated model of metaphor analysis that draws from cognitive linguistic and cultural linguistics allows for a more comprehensive understanding. Farzad Sharifian (2017, pp. 59–63) proposes that metaphors operate on three interacting levels:

embodied experience, which provides the universal substrate;

cultural cognition, which filters and elaborates metaphors through shared knowledge and values;

discourse practices, which reflect individual and contextual variation.

Applying this model to English and Azerbaijani reveals both convergence and divergence: while bodily-based metaphors (e.g., warmth, height, movement) appear in both languages, their extension into domains like morality, reasoning, or emotion reveals distinctive cognitive styles rooted in culture (Kövecses, 2005, pp. 173–177; Yu, 2011, pp. 120–123). Ultimately, metaphor is a mirror of cultural cognition. It shapes not only how we express ourselves but also how we frame reality, interpret social roles, and evaluate human behavior (Sharifian, 2017, pp. 83–85). Analyzing metaphors cross-culturally allows us to uncover the implicit values and mental models embedded in language. It also fosters empathy and communicative competence by making us aware that language is not just a vehicle for information but a culturally textured map of thought (Littlemore & Low, 2006, pp. 125–127).

In the framework of cognitive linguistics, metaphor is no longer seen as mere linguistic decoration or poetic flourish. Instead, it is regarded as a central mechanism through which human beings conceptualize abstract realities. This reconceptualization marks a paradigm shift in the understanding of language, cognition, and meaning-making. According to conceptual metaphor theory (CMT), metaphors are not simply features of discourse but form the very scaffolding of our thoughts. We speak, reason, and act metaphorically because much of what we experience—such as time, morality, emotions, and mental processes—cannot be understood directly without reference to more concrete, embodied experiences. Hence, expressions like "He is on the path to success" or "She carries emotional baggage" are not just phrases; they reflect deeply entrenched cognitive structures that guide how people make sense of their personal and social worlds (Kövecses, 2005, p. 31; Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 5).

However, while the embodied basis of metaphor ensures some degree of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural commonality, the ways in which these metaphors are realized, elaborated, and prioritized are shaped significantly by cultural models. This study, through a comparative analysis of English and Azerbaijani metaphorical systems, has demonstrated that although many metaphors share universal foundations—such as ANGER IS HEAT or LIFE IS A JOURNEY—their manifestations are mediated by culturally specific worldviews, historical narratives, and discursive traditions. For instance, the Azerbaijani metaphor "ürəyi genişdir" (his heart is wide) conveys generosity in

a spatialized moral frame, whereas English prefers terms like "warm-hearted" or "kind-hearted," grounded in temperature or emotional affect. These subtle differences, while cognitively accessible to bilingual speakers, may create interpretive gaps for those unacquainted with the respective cultural logic (Sharifova, 2017, p. 67).

These findings have broad implications beyond theoretical linguistics. In translation, metaphorical expressions pose one of the greatest challenges to semantic equivalence. Without awareness of the conceptual mappings underlying metaphorical language, translators risk producing mechanically correct yet semantically or culturally incongruous renderings. As demonstrated in examples involving TIME IS MONEY metaphors, direct translations may distort meaning unless the metaphor is re-contextualized within the conceptual framework of the target language. Similarly, in second language learning, metaphors are often neglected, leading to poor comprehension of figurative speech, proverbs, or idioms that are central to communicative fluency. As research shows, metaphor awareness improves learners' ability to grasp abstract and idiomatic content, facilitating deeper cultural and linguistic integration (Littlemore & Low, 2006, pp. 87–88; Newmark, 1988, p. 106).

Moreover, the cultural-cognitive approach to metaphor opens new perspectives for interdisciplinary research. By integrating insights from anthropology, cultural studies, education, and philosophy, scholars can trace how metaphor operates at multiple levels: physiological, psychological, and sociocultural. Farzad Sharifian's model, which distinguishes between universal embodiment, cultural conceptualizations, and individual discourse practices, offers a useful framework for analyzing how metaphor functions differently across societies while maintaining cognitive coherence (Sharifian, 2017, pp. 59–63). In this light, metaphor becomes both a lens for understanding cultural diversity and a bridge that links seemingly disparate languages through shared cognitive patterns.

Ultimately, the cross-cultural study of metaphor is not just a linguistic inquiry—it is an epistemological and ethical one. It urges us to reflect on how different communities make sense of the world, how they encode values, emotions, and knowledge into language, and how these encodings affect mutual understanding. As globalization intensifies and intercultural contact becomes a daily reality, the ability to navigate metaphorical meaning across cultural boundaries will become increasingly vital. Beyond communication, this competence fosters intellectual humility, tolerance, and a deeper appreciation of the richness embedded in the world's languages.

CONCLUSIONS

Cross-cultural comparative analysis of English and Azerbaijani metaphorical systems demonstrates that metaphor functions as a powerful cognitive tool that operates simultaneously at universal and culturally specific levels. In this study we revealed that while embodied experiences provide a shared foundation for metaphorical thinking—as evidenced in the universal presence of ANGER IS HEAT or LIFE IS A JOURNEY schema—the linguistic realizations and conceptual elaborations of these metaphors are profoundly shaped by cultural worldviews, historical narratives, and discursive traditions. However, comparative analysis has illuminated significant differences in metaphorical conceptualization across the two languages. For instance, while English speakers conceptualize generosity through temperature-based metaphors ("warm-hearted"), Azerbaijani speakers employ spatial metaphors ("ürəyi genişdir" - his heart is wide), reflecting distinct cultural models. Similarly, the English TIME IS MONEY metaphor reveals capitalist ideologies that commodify temporal experience, whereas Azerbaijani expressions like "vaxtını boşuna keçirdi" frame time within moral rather than economic paradigms, emphasizing social responsibility over market productivity.

These findings carry profound implications for multiple domains of human interaction. In translation studies, it is underscored that semantic equivalence requires more than lexical substitution—it demands deep understanding of the conceptual mappings underlying metaphorical expressions. In addition, in second language acquisition, we reinforce the necessity of metaphor awareness as a crucial component of communicative competence, particularly for achieving cultural and linguistic integration. Furthermore, in intercultural communication, recognition of metaphorical diversity becomes essential for avoiding interpretive gaps and fostering mutual understanding.

The application of Sharifian's three-level model—embodied experience, cultural cognition, and discourse practices—has proven particularly valuable in revealing how metaphors function as both universal cognitive mechanisms and culturally specific meaning-making tools. This framework demonstrates that metaphor is not merely a linguistic ornament but constitutes the very scaffolding through which communities organize their understanding of abstract domains such as emotion, morality, time, and intellectual activity. Ultimately, metaphor represents far more than a linguistic phenomenon—it constitutes an epistemological and ethical gateway to understanding cultural diversity. As globalization intensifies intercultural contact, the ability to navigate metaphorical meaning across cultural boundaries becomes increasingly vital for fostering intellectual humility, tolerance, and appreciation for the profound richness embedded in the world's linguistic communities. Therefore, metaphor merits recognition not only as a central concern in linguistic theory but as an essential component of educational curricula and intercultural dialogue in our increasingly interconnected world.

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