

## Cultural Metaphors: A Mosaic of Perspectives

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Although metaphors accompany us in all fields of activity, their pervasive presence can often make us overlook their significance. We may easily fail to recognize that metaphors presuppose a transfer of meaning and that they function as epistemological tools, assisting us in constructing, communicating, and expanding knowledge. According to Ștefan Avădanei (1994: 144-145), our endeavour to acquire knowledge implies creating bridges between the individual and the world, between the human and non-the human, between the known and the unknown, between the new and the old. Arising from our attempts to grasp and convey the essence of unfamiliar or complex ideas, metaphors take figurative, imaginative, representative, and discursive forms.

From a general perspective, metaphor can be understood as an act of indirect language. It is based on an analogy or a shared underlying implication that exists between the literal and the figurative term. Essentially, metaphor involves presenting an idea through the symbol of another idea, one that might be more unusual or striking, but which has nothing in common with the first one except a connection based on similarity.

Although *Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT)* acknowledges the role of similarity in the production of metaphorical expressions, it does not solely rely on it. The metaphoricity of the expression “the roses on her cheeks”, for example, relies not only on the visual similarity between roses and flushed skin, but also on the cultural associations of roses with beauty and tenderness. Moreover, there are also situations when the search for preexisting similarities fails: “What could possibly be the preexisting similarity between, say, “*digesting food*” and “*digesting ideas*”, or between “*We’re not going anywhere*”, taken literally, and “*This relationship is not going anywhere*”, taken metaphorically. Similarly, what possible preexisting similarity exists between the concept of a journey and that of love?” Kövecses (2010a: 79). The cognitive linguistic view maintains that conceptual metaphors are grounded in perceptual, biological or cultural experience. In other words, “the selection of source domains depends on human factors that reflect nonobjective, nonliteral and nonpreexisting similarities between a source and a target domain” (Kövecses 2010a: 88). Often referred to as the *experiential basis* or *motivation* of metaphor, this

groundedness in human experience manifests as correlations in experience, perceived structural similarities, perceived structural similarity induced by ontological metaphors, and situations “in which the source was the origin, or the “root”, of the target” (Kövecses 2010a: 84).

Conceptual metaphor remains central to Cultural Linguistics. This interdisciplinary field investigates the intricate relationships between language, culture, and cognition, and emphasizes the cultural construction of conceptualizations, employing analytical tools such as cultural schemas, cultural categories, and cultural-conceptual metaphors. It goes without saying that many words in human languages reflect cultural experiences. We categorize events like weddings and funerals based on cultural norms and expectations. These categories, with their associated procedures, roles, and norms, are culturally defined and differ across societies. Our understanding of these events is shaped by cognitive schemas (more general mental frameworks that organize our knowledge and assist us in understanding the world) which represent our cultural knowledge about how such events should unfold.

If we go beyond looking at metaphorically used linguistic expressions in different languages and focus more on conceptual metaphors, we are likely to identify near-universal or potentially universal conceptual metaphors because, as Kövecses (2010b: 200) suggested, there is some “universal bodily experience” that leads to their emergence (e.g. TIME IS SPACE, HAPPINESS IS UP, KNOWING IS SEEING). Interestingly, however, Kövecses was among the first scholars to look for a solution to counterbalance the impression that the founders of *CMT* “regard image schemas and embodiment as universal experiences that make things (including language) meaningful “in a natural way”, that is, in a way that suggests that the universality of embodiment mechanically produces universal meanings” (2010b: 203). In this respect, the Hungarian scholar amends the conception of the embodiment of meaning in the following terms: “we should not see “embodied” experience” as a homogenous, monolithic factor. This is made possible by the idea that embodiment (i.e. embodied experience relative to a domain) consists of several components and that any of these can be singled out and emphasized by different cultures (or, as a matter of fact, individuals within cultures)” (2010b: 203).

Kövecses’ refined position with reference to embodiment allowed him to discuss the variability of metaphors both cross-culturally and intra-culturally. Compelling examples of cross-cultural variation also come from scholars such as Ning Yu (1998), Sharifian Farzad (2014), Musolff (2016) and Zhou Pin, et al. (2022). For example, while the core concept of anger as a form of internal pressure in a container is present in both English and Chinese, the specific element used to represent that pressure differs. Specifically, English speakers conceptualize *anger* as ‘*a hot liquid in a container*’; it is evident that this choice evokes images of a contained viscous substance that can build up pressure and potentially erupt. On the other hand, Chinese speakers construe the same emotion in terms of the ‘*agitation of qi*’ (in a gas or air state), which emphasizes its expansive and potentially explosive nature. The distinct conceptualizations of anger in Chinese and Western cultures may be attributed to differing philosophical traditions, particularly with regard to fundamental assumptions

about the mind-body relationship. Intracultural variation of metaphors refers to the differences in how metaphors are used and understood within a single culture and can be influenced by a multitude of factors such as social class, gender, age, regional dialect, style, subculture and even linguistic idiosyncrasies.

The issue of the relationship between metaphor and culture usually require analysts to simultaneously account for both the universal and culture-specific aspects of metaphorical conceptualization. Moreover, the pressure of embodiment in metaphorical conceptualizations in natural situations is accompanied by the pressure of *context*. Context, encompassing physical, social, cultural, or discursive aspects, exerts a significant influence on metaphorical conceptualizations, while factors such as setting, topic, audience, and medium also contribute to the shaping of metaphorical expressions. An illustrative example for physical context is provided by Boers (1999) (cited in Kövecses 2010b: 205). After studying the ECONOMY IS HEALTH metaphor for a period of ten years, Boers noticed that the use of this metaphor was systematically more frequent in winter than in summer.

The title for the current thematic issue of the academic journal *Meridian Critic*, namely *Cultural Metaphors: A Mosaic of Perspectives*, was intended to allure contributors who show a particular interest in investigating the *metaphor-culture interface* as a dynamic and ongoing process. Culture itself is a multifaceted concept and the way we perceive it can be through numerous conceptual metaphors such as CULTURE IS AN ICEBERG, CULTURE IS A GARDEN, CULTURE IS A LAYERED STRUCTURE, A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY IS A MELTING POT/ A SALAD BOWL/ A MOSAIC/ A KALEIDOSCOPE.

In her 2012 TED Talk, Wendi Adair, a Canadian professor of psychology, proposed a new metaphor to better capture the dynamic and fluid nature of cultural interaction: MULTICULTURALISM IS AN IMPRESSIONIST PAINTING. This new proposal, which can be considered an instance of Steen's deliberate metaphor, was part of an intentional discursive act in which she aimed to challenge conventional thinking and encourage fresh understandings of concepts. Shifting our attention from the 'static' *melting pot* or the 'rigid' *mosaic* to the more 'fluid' *impressionist painting*, the Canadian scholar was aware of the implications of her choice and the message it would convey: the *impressionist painting* metaphor was to evoke images of blending, fluidity, and subjectivity, which aligned with her perspective on multiculturalism.

Metaphors can be double-edged swords in human communication. On the one hand, they are powerful tools for simplifying complex concepts and making them more relatable to a wider audience. On the other hand, they may equally propose dangerous oversimplifications, potentially exclude certain categories of audiences and even reinforce stereotypes. Their limitations arise from their inherent nature of mapping one domain onto another, leading to an inevitable loss of nuance. Furthermore, the dynamic nature of culture renders many metaphors quickly outdated as societies evolve. The cultural and political contexts within which metaphors are understood also influence their interpretation, making them susceptible to varying interpretations, potential misrepresentations and inaccuracies in most types of discourse. A more nuanced understanding requires the use of multiple metaphors, a critical

awareness of their limitations, and a continuous process of reevaluating their appropriateness in human communication.

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The current thematic issue comprises eight contributions:

**Rodica ILIE** examined various aspects pertaining to the aesthetics, poetics and ideological structures of André Breton's Surrealist Manifesto and noticed that the narrative of liberty incorporated *the metaphor of revolution*, a powerful tool for articulating the core tenets of Surrealism and its aspirations. With its emphasis on radical change, and the overthrow of established order, this metaphor is not decorative, but inherently dynamic and action-oriented, capturing the radical nature of the movement.

**Mariana BALOȘESCU** explored the biblical Jonah as a foundational cultural metaphor that has traversed various civilizations. She argued that the orientation of meaning within a cultural metaphor shifts depending on how it is understood and represented across different contexts and time periods. By juxtaposing the biblical Jonah with Marin Sorescu's Jonah, the author demonstrated that foundational metaphors can be deconstructed to generate new meanings and interpretations

**Andreea MAXINIUC** discussed the transformative power of complex cultural metaphors that underpin the identity, traditions, and social structures of the Transylvanian Saxons. Emerging against the historical background of German-speaking minorities in Romania, these metaphors were shaped by the linguistic influences of German, Hungarian, and Romanian. Symbols such as the *fortified church* (die Kirchenburg) and *the guild* (die Zunft) embody unity, stability, and the essence of a unique cultural heritage.

After acknowledging the existence of multiple, yet congruent perspectives in the study of metaphor, **Valerian Sergiu TOPALĂ** argued that creative arts function in a dynamic interplay with cultural metaphors. In other words, the arts both produce metaphors and are simultaneously shaped and informed by existing metaphors. Since Plato's *The Republic* raised important questions about the role of art and literature in shaping individual and collective consciousness, the implications of various forms of censorship were also revisited.

**Elena Gabriela LUNG** is drawn to Herta Müller's writing, which deeply explores and interrogates the complexities of identity within a broader context of historical and social realities. By referencing the inevitable intersections between metonymy, simile, and metaphor as tropes, the author of the article maps out unique identity features of Müller's characters. As expected, identity can never be a fixed thing, but a site of ongoing struggle and negotiations. *Insular identity*, *uprooted identity* and *wounded identity* are three metaphorical expressions that offer invaluable insights into how Herta

Müller conceptualizes identity: IDENTITY IS AN ISLAND (this conceptual metaphor points to isolation and restriction, to individuals' preoccupation with internal concerns and their resistance to external forces), IDENTITY IS A PLANT (this conceptual metaphor highlights the dynamic and evolving nature of identity, emphasizing its roots, growth, development, vulnerability, and resilience) and IDENTITY IS A LESION (this conceptual metaphor highlights the hidden and often unseen aspects of trauma, emphasizing its enduring and potentially debilitating effects).

Building upon Gannon & Pillai's 2015 exploration of national identity through thirty-four nations, **Simona BERCU** investigates the British Royal Family as a significant cultural metaphor in two contemporary British novels: Julian Barnes' *England, England* and Jonathan Coe's *Middle England*. Her research delves into how these novels depict the complexities of English identity amidst social and political transformations, ultimately reassessing the contemporary relevance of the monarchy within the context of rapid global change.

**Ana-Maria BORDEA**'s engagement with Ismail Kadare's *The Siege* and Orhan Pamuk's *The White Castle* led her to identify the fortress as a powerful symbol and cultural metaphor, invested with multiple meanings depending on users and contexts. The conceptual metaphor IDENTITY IS A FORTRESS provides a powerful framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of who *people* and *peoples* are; it also highlights the protective and limiting aspects of both individual and collective identities, emphasizing the importance of finding a balance between self-preservation and openness to the world.

**Simona ANTOFI**. While a universally accepted conceptual metaphor for humour remains elusive, exploring general metaphors can offer valuable insights into its underlying cognitive and emotional processes. These general metaphors, reflecting shared human experiences, can provide a framework for understanding humour. For instance, HUMOR IS PLAY captures the essence of humour as a playful and spontaneous activity, HUMOR IS SURPRISE emphasizes its unexpected nature, and HUMOR IS RELEASE highlights its cathartic and tension-relieving aspects. However, Simona Antofi probably felt that these (conventional) conceptualizations cannot fully capture the richness and complexity of Creangă's humour. So she chose to revisit the Romanian author's humour by simultaneously disarticulating and re-articulating its mechanisms and strategies. By juxtaposing the original text with critical interpretations, Antofi reinforced the idea of humour as a cultural asset and indirectly suggested that humour can be conceptualized as both *a structured entity* and *a complex system*.

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