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Conceptual Metaphor in Pashto: A Cognitive Linguistic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study introduces the theory of conceptual metaphor within the framework of Cognitive Linguistics and demonstrates its applicability to Pashto textual analysis. Conceptual metaphor, originally formulated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). It has become a central research domain in contemporary cognitive linguistics, emphasizing that metaphor functions not merely as a stylistic or literary device but as a fundamental mechanism of human conceptualization. Employing a descriptive, library-based methodology grounded in the analytical interpretation of foundational and recent scholarly sources, the study aims to present a systematic account of conceptual metaphor in Pashto and to examine its realizations in authentic Pashto texts examineto. The analysis proceeds through the core components of the theory-namely, the source domain and target domain-to reveal that conceptual metaphors are pervasive across both poetic and prose contexts in Pashto and play a significant role in structuring everyday

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linguistic and cognitive experience. The findings show that the cognitive-linguistic model provides a precise and effective framework for explaining metaphorical patterns in Pashto.

Keywords: Conceptual Metaphor, Cognitive Linguistics, Pashto Language, Source and Target Domains.

1. INTRODUCTION

الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ وَالصَّلَاةُ وَالسَّلَامُ عَلَى سَيِّدِ الْمُرْسَلِينَ وَعَلَى آلِهِ وَصَحْبِهِ أَجْمَعِينَ.

Chomsky brought about a profound revolution in the field of linguistics in the 1950s. His generative theory replaced structuralism and introduced the idea that language is an innate faculty of the human mind. He placed strong emphasis on syntax and syntactic rules, shifting the focus of linguistic inquiry from the social and empirical dimensions toward the mental and cognitive domain (Mitchell and Myles, (2004/2013). Second language learning theories. Routledge. George Lakoff, who initially supported Chomsky's theoretical framework, later critiqued it, arguing that language is not merely a system of syntactic structures but rather a reflection of human cognition, experience, and cultural thought. This critique laid the groundwork for the emergence of Cognitive Linguistics, within which Lakoff and Johnson jointly developed the theory of conceptual metaphor. While Chomsky emphasizes Universal Grammar, Cognitive Linguistics- and Lakoff in particular- maintains that language is grounded in cognition and embodied experience (Dabirmoghadam, 2021).

The term conceptual metaphor was first introduced in the United States by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. It gained prominence in their influential joint work *Metaphors We Live By*, published in 1980. The publication of this seminal book caused a major paradigm shift in cognitive sciences, especially within Cognitive Linguistics. Since then, hundreds of books and articles have been written on conceptual metaphor across various languages. A key notion within this field is the *cognitive metaphor*, which has been examined and analyzed in a wide range of linguistic traditions. Fortunately, Pashto has recently received attention in this domain as well, and a modest yet meaningful beginning has been made by researchers.

Conceptual metaphor, or cognitive metaphor, bears little relation to traditional rhetorical metaphor and is not associated with literary studies or phonology. Humans are the only beings endowed with a cognitive apparatus capable of comprehending and structuring the world through metaphor; it is through metaphorical conceptualization that individuals interpret their immediate environment and surrounding reality.

Cognitive Linguistics and Conceptual Metaphor

Like many other linguists, Lakoff initially began his linguistic research within the framework of Noam Chomsky's theoretical assumptions. During the 1970s, a divide emerged between those linguists who supported Chomsky's views and those who pursued semantic issues in greater depth. The source of these differences can be illustrated by the following sentences, in which a passive construction stands in contrast to an active one:

1. *The enemy destroyed the city.*
2. *The city was destroyed by the enemy.*
3. *The enemy's destruction of the city.*

All three sentences share a common conceptual layer. Generative Semantics attempted to show that the three sentences correspond to a single deep structure. At first glance, this seems reasonable; however, upon closer inspection, several issues become apparent, drawing linguists' attention to underlying problems (Littlemore & John, trans. Bamshadi, Parsa & Ansarian, Shadi, 2023, p. 75).

The first question is whether these sentences can truly be said to convey the same meaning. Although the lexical items differ, do they always possess a unified semantic structure? Proponents of Generative Semantics answer this in the affirmative. The second question concerns how this semantic content is mapped onto surface structure—what elements are involved and how they are organized. The third involves the mechanism by which one moves from a deep structure to a surface structure.

The first sentence is an active clause in which the subject (*the enemy*) is the agent and the object (*the city*) is the undergoer of the action. The second is a passive construction that shifts the focus of the surface structure from the agent to the patient. The third is a nominalized construction in which the verb is converted into a noun, producing a different syntactic configuration.

Chomsky argues that these three syntactic forms reflect a single semantic relation at the level of deep structure: "The enemy is the agent responsible for the destruction of the city." The surface differences arise through linguistic transformations (Chomsky, 1965, p. 125). In *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, he explains that deep and surface relations in syntax are accounted for through a systematic series of transformations. In his view, the active sentence represents the basic form at deep structure, while the passive structure emerges from the rule of *Passive Transformation* (Chomsky, 1965, p. 131). Nominalized forms arise from specific *Nominalization* rules. In *Remarks on Nominalization*, Chomsky (1970, pp.

189–191) maintains that nominalizations represent a type of syntactic transformation—not a change in meaning.

Chomsky's objective in this analysis is to demonstrate that, despite their surface differences, the three structures share a unified conceptual relation. Thus, syntax and semantics operate through distinct but related modules. Opponents of Chomsky argue that the three sentences do *not* share identical meanings. Halliday, for instance, states that the active construction emphasizes the role of the *agent*, whereas the passive construction shifts focus to the *theme* (*the city*) (Halliday, 1994, pp. 42–45). Halliday further maintains that syntactic form is tied to discourse topic, information structure, and stylistic choices.

What is Semantic–Discoursal Shifts in the Use of Passive Constructions Givón (1984, p. 62) demonstrates that passive clauses are selected on the basis of information structure, topicality, and the communicative intentions of the writer or speaker; thus, they are not merely syntactic alternations. Critics of Chomsky also argue that nominalization reflects style, formality, and ideology. Halliday and others contend that nominalized structures are used to formalize discourse and encode ideological meanings; hence, they represent semantic and stylistic transformations, not simply syntactic changes (Fowler, 1991, p. 70).

The aim of the above discussion is to show that opposition to Chomsky's theories paved the way for new linguistic frameworks. Cognitive Linguistics, in particular, emerged by addressing the limitations inherent in generative theory.

Cognitive Linguistics refers to a set of theories that examine language in relation to cognition and conceptual structure. The earliest traces of this approach can be found in the works of Fillmore (1976) and Talmy (1972); however, the field took shape as a distinct discipline in 1987 with the publication of Lakoff's *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind* and the first volume of Langacker's *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar*. The subsequent establishment of the International Cognitive Linguistics Association and the founding of Cognitive Linguistics journals helped solidify a new perspective in linguistic studies (Afrashi, 2021, p. 25).

Initially, Cognitive Linguistics was merely a perspective within linguistic inquiry, but it has since expanded to the point that its applications are significant across numerous scientific domains. In other words, although Cognitive Linguistics began as an approach to the study of language, its scope of research and application is now far broader than language alone. The emergence of Cognitive Linguistics in the 1980s was, in effect, a conscious response to Chomsky's claim that language is separate from other cognitive capacities. Later evidence demonstrated that language

learning and processing follow cognitive mechanisms similar to those involved in other domains of human learning and perception. For example, in everyday life we approach events from multiple perspectives—sometimes closely, sometimes distantly; sometimes focusing on parts, sometimes on the whole. We evaluate environmental features, determine what is important, and decide what can be ignored. When encountering new situations, we attempt to map previous patterns onto the new context. These same cognitive processes are present in language (Littlemore & Taylor, 2014, p. 16).

Cognitive Linguistics views language as a tool for organizing, processing, and transmitting information. Within this framework, the conceptual and experiential foundations of linguistic categories are of central importance. Language structure is not considered autonomous but is shaped by general cognitive principles and by interaction between experience and environment (Geeraerts & Cuyckens, 2007).

Conceptual metaphor is a highly significant topic in linguistics, particularly in Cognitive Linguistics. Metaphor is not merely a stylistic or rhetorical device; it constitutes a fundamental part of the cognitive, conceptual, and social functions of language. In the following sections, the importance and theoretical foundations of conceptual metaphor will be discussed in detail.

Conceptual Metaphor as a Foundational Principle of Language Comprehension

Conceptual metaphor illustrates how humans comprehend abstract concepts—such as time, life, emotions, and knowledge—through sensory and perceptual experiences. For example, when we say “*Life is a journey*”, it conveys that the complexities of life can be understood in terms of a journey, and this metaphorical mapping helps clarify these complexities. According to Lakoff and Johnson, conceptual metaphor constitutes a fundamental component of the basic cognitive structures underlying language (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, pp. 3–5).

Conceptual Metaphor and Meaning

conceptual metaphor constitutes a fundamental mechanism for the interpretation and construction of meaning in language. A significant portion of lexical and phrasal meanings is accessible primarily through metaphorical mapping. For example, the expression “*Time is gold*” metaphorically conveys the high value and preciousness of time.

Beyond individual cognition, conceptual metaphor functions as a medium for the transmission of social and cultural knowledge. It systematically encodes and reflects cultural norms, societal values, and political

ideologies. In political discourse, metaphorical expressions provide insight into issues such as national unity, social cohesion, and collective identity. Consequently, conceptual metaphor is recognized by linguists as not merely a rhetorical or stylistic device, but as an essential tool for exploring social cognition, cultural conceptualization, and the broader cognitive foundations of human thought (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2010).

Conceptual Metaphor as a Tool for Language Learning

Conceptual metaphor also plays a significant role in the process of learning. Both teachers and learners employ metaphorical language to understand abstract concepts, such as in the teaching of mathematics, science, and literature.

In linguistics, conceptual metaphor serves as a powerful analytical and research tool. It facilitates text analysis, reasoning, and the mapping of conceptual structures. Through metaphor, linguists can examine mental processes, the structural organization of language, and patterns of thought. Overall, conceptual metaphor holds considerable importance in linguistic studies. It constitutes a foundational component of cognitive structures, plays a crucial role in the interpretation and generation of meaning, reflects cultural, social, and political values, supports teaching and learning processes, and strengthens the analytical and research capabilities of language (Gibbs, 2017, p. 47).

2.Introduction to Conceptual Metaphor

In earlier perspectives, metaphor was primarily understood as a linguistic device based on similarity, employed to express conceptual relations through surface and semantic correspondences. Contemporary linguistics, however, has expanded the notion of metaphor beyond its traditional literary sense, integrating insights from both linguistic and psychological research. Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, characterized metaphor as the substitution of one word for another, emphasizing its aesthetic function in expression. By the late twentieth century, however, the conceptualization of metaphor shifted significantly, with metaphor being recognized as an instrumental cognitive mechanism within human thought systems.

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, in their seminal work *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), proposed a novel understanding of metaphor, presenting it as a fundamental cognitive process. They argue that humans comprehend the world through metaphorical structures, and that our cognitive architecture is fundamentally metaphorical. According to them, a *conceptual metaphor* is a mental mechanism whereby the properties of one conceptual domain (the source domain) are systematically mapped onto another conceptual domain (the target domain). For example, in the

metaphor "*Life is a journey*", the physical characteristics of a journey are employed to understand the complex processes of life (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, pp. 3–5).

Conceptual metaphor is considered a core principle within Cognitive Linguistics. It is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but a systematic mapping of conceptual domains that constitutes a crucial part of the human cognitive architecture. Contemporary researchers apply conceptual metaphors not only for understanding cognition but also for analyzing discourse, politics, economics, and culture. In discussions about war, politics, and migration, metaphors are often used as instruments for constructing social reality. According to Musolff (2016), metaphors have a profound influence on public understanding because they shape conceptualization and are guided by collective cognitive preferences (Musolff, 2016, pp. 23–25).

Despite widespread acceptance, conceptual metaphor has faced criticism. Some scholars argue that it does not fully account for cultural diversity and linguistic variation; metaphors must also be examined in the context of social and cultural conditions. While conceptual metaphor elucidates fundamental mechanisms of cognition, the roles of experience, culture, and interaction should not be overlooked (Gibbs, 2017, p. 13).

The theory of conceptual metaphor has significantly transformed the intersection of linguistics, psychology, and cultural studies. It demonstrates that metaphor is not merely a rhetorical device but a fundamental mechanism for thought, perception, and meaning construction. Through this theoretical lens, linguistic structures mirror the conceptual world of human beings, making metaphor a profound reflection of human knowledge, experience, and culture.

Dona Usmonova Satvoldiyevna and Jurayeva Shakhlo Ergashboyevna (2025) investigate the cognitive and discursive functions of conceptual metaphors in English social media discourse, with particular attention to pandemic- and finance-related communication. Grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and Critical Metaphor Analysis, the authors argue that metaphors operate as central cognitive tools that enable individuals to conceptualize abstract, emotionally charged phenomena such as COVID-19 and financial uncertainty. Drawing on comparative insights from mainstream media and social media platforms such as Twitter and Reddit, the study demonstrates that institutional media typically relies on conventionalized, stabilized metaphors (e.g., economic downturn, market correction), whereas social media discourse favors dynamic, embodied, and affect-laden metaphors (e.g., battling the virus, frontline heroes, the market is bleeding), reflecting participatory meaning-making and emotional coping strategies. The

authors further show that metaphor use in social media is highly individualized yet collectively reinforcing, allowing users to assert agency, construct ideological positions, and negotiate uncertainty (Xu, 2023; Martin et al., 2024). From an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) perspective, the article emphasizes the pedagogical value of integrating authentic social media texts into instruction, arguing that metaphor awareness enhances learners' linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic competence in both professional and informal discourse.

In his seminal work, Dona Usmonova Satvoldiyevna and Jurayeva Shakhlo Ergashboyevna (2025) investigate the cognitive and discursive functions of conceptual metaphors in English social media discourse, with particular attention to pandemic- and finance-related communication. Grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and Critical Metaphor Analysis, the authors argue that metaphors operate as central cognitive tools that enable individuals to conceptualize abstract, emotionally charged phenomena such as COVID-19 and financial uncertainty. Drawing on comparative insights from mainstream media and social media platforms such as Twitter and Reddit, the study demonstrates that institutional media typically relies on conventionalized, stabilized metaphors (e.g., economic downturn, market correction), whereas social media discourse favors dynamic, embodied, and affect-laden metaphors (e.g., battling the virus, frontline heroes, the market is bleeding), reflecting participatory meaning-making and emotional coping strategies. The authors further show that metaphor use in social media is highly individualized yet collectively reinforcing, allowing users to assert agency, construct ideological positions, and negotiate uncertainty (Xu, 2023; Martin et al., 2024). From an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) perspective, the article emphasizes the pedagogical value of integrating authentic social media texts into instruction, arguing that metaphor awareness enhances learners' linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic competence in both professional and informal discourse.

Moreover, Sagdatova Muborak Payzidinovna (2024) provides a theoretically grounded account of the linguistic features of conceptual metaphor, emphasizing that metaphors are not merely stylistic ornaments but fundamental cognitive mechanisms shaping human thought and communication. Drawing on the seminal work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999) and Gibbs (1994, 2008), the author explains how abstract concepts are systematically understood through mappings between concrete source domains and abstract target domains, reflecting embodied cognition. The article identifies three major types of conceptual metaphors—structural metaphors (e.g., argument is war), orientational metaphors (e.g., good is up, bad is down), and container metaphors (e.g.,

mind is a container)—and demonstrates how these mappings are realized linguistically through lexical choices, idiomatic expressions, and syntactic structures. The study further highlights the cultural variability of conceptual metaphors, noting that different societies conceptualize abstract domains such as time, emotion, and relationships in culturally specific ways (Lakoff, 1993). Finally, Sagdatova (2024) underscores the persuasive and ideological power of metaphor in public discourse, particularly in politics and media, where metaphorical framing shapes interpretation, emotional response, and social values.

Illustrative Examples of Conceptual Metaphors

The following examples, particularly highlighted in the works of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), illustrate key conceptual mappings:

Life is a Journey: Source Domain: Journey

Target Domain: Life is conceptualized as a journey, with humans as travelers, goals as destinations, and obstacles as challenges along the path. This metaphor conveys that life is a purposeful trajectory rather than a random occurrence. For example, saying “He has strayed from his path” does not indicate a literal location but metaphorically represents deviation from one’s goals. This metaphor underlies planning, effort, and progress in human life (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 11).

Time is Money: Source Domain: Economics / Money

Target Domain: Time

Time is conceptualized as a valuable economic resource. Characteristics of money, such as spending, saving, and wasting, are mapped onto the conceptualization of time, reflecting modern human cognition in which time is closely linked to productivity, labor, and value.

Argument is War: Source Domain: War

Target Domain: Argument/Debate

Expressions like “Defend your position”, “Attack the opponent’s claim”, or “I won the debate” derive from the conceptual domain of war. This metaphor demonstrates that reasoning is cognitively framed as competitive conflict rather than cooperative deliberation (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 11).

Emotion is Heat: Source Domain: Physical Heat Target Domain: Emotions (e.g., anger, love, frustration)

Physical experiences of heat are used to conceptualize emotional intensity: “He was boiling with anger”, “Her heart burned”, or “He went cold”. Here, heat signals the strength of emotion, while cold represents emotional detachment or indifference, linking physical experience with emotional cognition (Gibbs, 2017, p. 47).

Nation is a Body: Source Domain: Human Body

Target Domain: Nation / State

Political discourse often conceptualizes the nation as a body: “The heart of the nation”, “The body of the state must be healthy”. Body parts map onto societal or institutional components (heart = citizens, brain = leaders, hands = institutions), reflecting national unity, governance, and political legitimacy (Musolff, 2016, p. 25).

Knowledge is Light: Source Domain: Light / Vision

Target Domain: Knowledge / Understanding

Across many languages, knowledge is represented as light: “My mind was illuminated”, “He lives in darkness”, “The truth came to light”. Light enables perception, making knowledge perceptible, whereas darkness signifies ignorance.

Time Moves: Source Domain: Physical Movement

Target Domain: Time

Time is conceptualized as a moving entity: “Time passed”, “Next year”, “The coming week”. Sub-metaphors include: (1) Time moves past us, and (2) We move through time. This metaphor allows humans to perceive time as a spatially structured experience, providing a foundational cognitive frame (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 11).

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) laid the foundations of conceptual metaphor in Cognitive Linguistics, transforming the traditional understanding of metaphor. According to their framework, metaphors are integral to daily life, thought, language, and cognition. Through conceptual metaphors, humans comprehend abstract concepts via embodied experiences. Their work remains the most influential and internationally recognized study on conceptual metaphor, demonstrating that metaphors are not merely decorative linguistic devices but essential structures for thinking, understanding, and perceiving the world.

Fundamental Characteristics of Conceptual Metaphor

Metaphor is not merely literary: One of the defining characteristics of conceptual metaphor is that it is not used solely for aesthetic or rhetorical purposes; rather, it constitutes a fundamental tool for human thought and cognition. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metaphors structure our conceptual world, allowing us to understand highly abstract concepts through embodied experiences (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 3).

Source and Target Domains: Conceptual metaphors involve a source domain and a target domain, where characteristics from the source domain are systematically mapped onto the target domain. For instance, in the

metaphor “Time is money”, attributes of money such as value, expenditure, saving, and waste are projected onto the concept of time.

Integral to Human Cognition: Metaphor is a central component of human cognition. Conceptual metaphors are not merely tools for language use; they are essential to how humans perceive and understand the world. This principle demonstrates that humans comprehend complex phenomena through metaphoric structures, such as interpreting the challenges of life through the concepts of journeys or battles (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 11).

Cultural and Social Impact: Conceptual metaphors have significant cultural and social consequences. They are closely tied to social and cultural contexts, and, as Musolff (2016) notes, metaphors are not purely mental constructs but also shape understanding in political, social, and economic discourse.

Embodied Basis: Metaphors often originate from bodily experiences. For example, expressions such as “heated emotions” connect physical sensations of temperature with human emotional states, illustrating how metaphor grounds abstract experiences in bodily perception (Gibbs, 2017, p. 47).

Linking Language, Thought, and Action: Conceptual metaphors elucidate the connection between language, cognition, and daily behavior. They influence not only linguistic expression but also decision-making, learning processes, and practical actions. This characteristic demonstrates that metaphors operate across multiple dimensions of human experience, extending beyond language to thought and conduct (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 11).

Distinction Between Conceptual and Literary Metaphors

Conceptual metaphors are integral to human cognition and thought; they provide a systematic structure for understanding the world. They are not merely aesthetic devices but reveal the organized relationships among concepts in the mind.

In contrast, literary metaphors are primarily tools of artistic expression. They reflect the imagination, emotion, and stylistic choices of a poet, writer, or speaker, and serve to enhance beauty, imagery, and emotional effect in language. For example, the expression “My heart is on fire” is an artistic metaphor conveying emotional intensity, rather than representing a conceptual cognitive structure.

Conceptual metaphors are employed in cognitive linguistics, psychology, and philosophical linguistics, emphasizing their role as mechanisms of

thought. They are often embedded in everyday language, functioning subconsciously. Literary metaphors, on the other hand, are deliberately used in poetry, narrative, drama, and rhetoric to create aesthetic and imaginative effects.

Conceptual metaphors are systematic, forming organized relationships between concepts, whereas literary metaphors are specific, used to express particular effects or emotions. Conceptual metaphors have cognitive and conceptual roles in meaning construction, serving as a medium for structuring thought, whereas literary metaphors function as artistic forms of meaning production, transmitting imagination and emotional experience.

3. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the theory of conceptual metaphor provides an optimal framework for the metaphorical analysis of the Pashto language. When conducting metaphorical and linguistic analyses of Pashto poetry and prose, the conceptual metaphor framework proves to be the most effective tool. The findings reveal that, like other languages of the world, Pashto extensively employs conceptual metaphors to understand and conceptualize abstract notions, such as *“Life is a journey”*, *“Anger is fire”*, and *“Knowledge is light”*. These metaphors are not merely literary embellishments; rather, they constitute fundamental elements of thought, cognition, and cultural values. By analyzing the systematic relationships between source and target domains, it is evident that Pashto expresses its cultural, social, and cognitive experiences through tangible and everyday imagery.

The primary contribution of this study lies in being the first scholarly attempt to analyze Pashto metaphors in light of the global theory of conceptual metaphor. This research opens new avenues for identifying the distinctive features of Pashto, illuminating its cultural concepts, and uncovering its cognitive foundations. Future studies should aim to develop a systematic corpus of Pashto metaphors, conduct in-depth investigations of their cultural and historical contexts, and initiate efforts to construct conceptual mappings based on Pashto metaphors. Moreover, comparative studies with metaphors from other regional languages could provide insights into the shared cultural and cognitive patterns of the region.

Overall, Lakoff and Johnson’s theory of conceptual metaphor establishes a unified perspective on metaphor, demonstrating that metaphor is not merely a literary device but is deeply rooted in human cognition, perception, and action. Metaphors facilitate the understanding of abstract concepts and guide human beliefs and behaviors. Applying this theory is

particularly valuable in educational and cognitive linguistics research, as well as in the analysis of literary texts.

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