

SYSTEMATIZATION ISSUES IN METAPHORICAL CONCEPTS

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Abstract

The field of metaphor studies has grown substantially since the foundational work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, especially within cognitive linguistics, where metaphors are regarded not merely as linguistic ornamentation but as fundamental to human thought. Despite this progress, systematizing metaphorical concepts remains problematic. This article analyzes the core issues in organizing and classifying metaphorical concepts, starting with established theoretical frameworks, examining cognitive mechanisms, and evaluating challenges in structured categorization. We argue that existing systems often lack consensus on analytic criteria, face domain overlap, and struggle with cultural and linguistic variability. Proposed resolutions include integrated cognitive-linguistic typologies and refined operational methodology in metaphor identification.

Keywords

conceptual metaphor, metaphor systematization, cognitive linguistics, conceptual mapping, metaphor theory, Lakoff & Johnson, linguistic categorization

Metaphors are more than stylistic devices; they serve as mental mechanisms that structure human cognition by mapping abstract target domains onto concrete source domains. This idea, popularized by Lakoff and Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By*, triggered a paradigm shift in understanding metaphors as cognitive rather than purely rhetorical constructs. However, as metaphor research advanced into cognitive linguistics and related disciplines, scholars encountered a persistent issue of systematizing metaphorical concepts – that is, developing a coherent and widely accepted framework to categorize, compare, and analyze metaphors across languages and contexts. The difficulty arises due to multiple layers of complexity: metaphors can be deeply embedded in cultural cognition, vary in manifestation across linguistic systems, and resist simple typological classification.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) asserts that people use structured mappings between conceptual domains to interpret experience. These maps are systematic: a source domain (concrete experience) consistently shapes a target

domain (abstract idea). For instance, in the metaphor TIME IS MONEY, linguistic expressions such as “*spend time*” and “*save time*” reflect an underlying structural metaphor that influences how the concept of time is understood and evaluated.

Cognitive linguistics views metaphors as intertwined with mental categorization and conceptual organization – not simply surface-level language patterns but deep conceptual structures used in everyday reasoning and problem solving. This conceptual nature creates challenges when attempting to systematize metaphors: variations in cognitive models yield different classification schemes. One of the central issues is the absence of agreed formal criteria for classifying metaphorical concepts. While some researchers categorize metaphors by structural type (e.g., orientational, ontological), others propose semantic domain categories or cognitive source–target pairs, creating fragmentation in systematization attempts.

Metaphors often intersect across conceptual domains, making rigid taxonomies inadequate. For example, EMOTION IS TEMPERATURE and ANGER IS HEAT may overlap conceptually but resist categorization under a single consistent label. Metaphorical schemas are partly shaped by cultural cognition. Metaphors that are conventional in one language may not directly correspond to another, complicating universal classification. Comparative studies often reveal distinct metaphorical patterns across cultures and languages – such as in English vs. Uzbek phraseology – indicating that metaphor systematization must consider cultural specificity.

Several researchers propose structuring metaphorical concepts by type: structural, orientational, and ontological metaphors, each representing different cognitive mechanisms. While this adds clarity, it does not fully address overlaps or cultural differences. Integrative cognitive frameworks look at invariance principles and domain mapping coherence as criteria for classifying metaphorical constructs. These criteria emphasize consistent semantic transfer between domains.

Empirical identification procedures – such as the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) – provide structured steps to distinguish metaphorical from literal language. Such methodologies assist in systematic analysis, enabling reproducible research across corpora and languages. The systematization of metaphorical concepts has practical implications for linguistic research, language teaching, translation studies, and cognitive science. For example:

- In language education, recognizing structured metaphor categories can aid learners’ comprehension of complex abstract meanings.
- In translation, systematized metaphor frameworks can help preserve conceptual meaning across cultural boundaries.

N. D. Arutyunova's book *Teoriya metafory* (1990) represents a fundamental semantic and philosophical approach to the study of metaphor and plays a crucial role in understanding the difficulties of systematizing metaphorical concepts. Arutyunova views metaphor primarily as a mechanism of secondary nomination, through which existing lexical units acquire new meanings based on similarity, functional analogy, or associative links between objects and phenomena. In her interpretation, metaphor is not merely a stylistic device but a productive semantic process that enables language to conceptualize abstract, evaluative, and emotionally charged notions. She emphasizes that metaphorical meaning does not exist independently within a word but emerges in speech and discourse, shaped by context and the speaker's communicative intention. This dynamic nature of metaphor challenges traditional classification models, since metaphors cannot be fully explained through fixed lexical categories or purely formal criteria. As a result, Arutyunova argues that any attempt to systematize metaphors must take into account semantic variability, contextual interpretation, and the interaction between literal and figurative meaning.

In addition, Arutyunova distinguishes between conventional (lexicalized) metaphors and occasional (contextual or authorial) metaphors, a distinction that further complicates systematization. Conventional metaphors gradually lose their figurative vividness and become part of the language system, while occasional metaphors are created within specific communicative situations and rely heavily on interpretive inference. This dual nature demonstrates that metaphor operates simultaneously at the level of the language system and individual speech acts. Arutyunova also highlights the evaluative and axiological function of metaphor, showing how metaphorical expressions encode cultural values, subjective attitudes, and emotional assessments. From this perspective, metaphorical concepts cannot be organized into rigid, universal taxonomies, as they are influenced by cultural, pragmatic, and discursive factors. Her theory thus explains why the systematization of metaphorical concepts remains problematic: metaphors are semantically flexible, context-dependent, and deeply embedded in human cognition and cultural experience, resisting strict hierarchical classification.

One central systematization problem in metaphor studies stems from methodological and theoretical limitations in how conceptual metaphors are defined and identified. Since George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's foundational work *Metaphors We Live By*, conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) has treated metaphors as systematic mappings between a source domain (usually concrete) and a target domain (usually abstract) that shape thought and language. However, researchers such as Zoltán Kövecses and others have criticized the lack of clear, empirical

criteria for identifying and classifying these mappings. Critics point out that early CMT analyses often relied on researchers' intuitive judgments rather than reproducible procedures, making it difficult to aggregate, compare, and systematically categorize metaphorical concepts across studies. This methodological issue has led to concerns that conceptual metaphor lists and classifications remain inconsistent and subjective, particularly when distinguishing between structural, orientational, and ontological metaphors without precise operational definitions or empirical boundaries.

Another systemic challenge arises from the heterogeneity and dynamic nature of metaphorical meaning itself. Conceptual metaphors are not static – they vary with context, culture, and usage – and may shift from occasional, creative metaphors to conventionalized forms that become lexicalized in everyday language. This fluidity complicates efforts to build stable taxonomies or universal systems of metaphorical concepts because metaphors can change status and interpretation depending on discourse context or cultural norms. Additionally, extensions of CMT, such as conceptual blending theory, demonstrate that simple source-to-target mappings may not account for the complex integration of multiple domains in novel metaphorical constructions, meaning that metaphorical concepts often interact with each other and with conceptual frameworks beyond binary domain pairs. These structural and cognitive complexities – including overlapping mappings and multi-domain interactions – underscore why metaphorical concepts resist neat, hierarchical classification within a single unified system.

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