

Approaches to Metaphor: Cognitive-linguistic and Philosophical Perspectives

Ziying Jin^{1,a,*}

¹*Nanjing Foreign Language School, Nanjing, 210008, China*

a. 52015809@qq.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Metaphor has been a significant topic of discussion in several academic fields besides being extensively used in daily life. This article explores the interdisciplinary study of metaphor, a complex and connotative concept that has been the primary concern across various disciplines, including linguistics, philosophy, literature, and other humanities. The article presents multiperspective theories and metaphor analysis from the said disciplines to provide a more holistic understanding of metaphor. This includes analyzing metaphors in analytic philosophy and cognitive science, primarily focusing on the conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, complemented by analysis of the relevance theory, the blending theory, etc. While there are criticisms of CMT, it remains an influential theory in studying metaphor. The article also discusses the relevance theory, which suggests that using metaphors in speech can help achieve optimal relevancy, and the blending theory, which proposes that metaphors involve mapping elements from one mental space onto another to create a blended mental space that combines elements of both. This paper also addresses continental philosophers' usage or account of metaphor, from Kant to Derrida, in establishing their arguments. The essay then discusses and integrates ideas in metaphor studies from the perspectives of semantics and pragmatics. Finally, the article emphasizes the importance of bridging the gap between abstract conceptualizations and concrete linguistic expressions to gain a holistic understanding of metaphor.

Keywords: Metaphor, Metaphor Studies, Philosophy of language

1. Introduction

As one of the most complex and connotative concepts, metaphor has been the primary concern across various disciplines, including linguistics, philosophy, literature, and other humanities [1]. The study of metaphor, therefore, has always been interdisciplinary, with linguistic (especially cognitive linguistic) and philosophical perspectives dominating the narrative. Thus, this article aims to present multiperspective theories and metaphor analysis from the said disciplines despite the many overlapping approaches in practice. The synthesis would provide a more holistic understanding of metaphor by bridging the gap between abstract conceptualizations and concrete linguistic expressions.

2. Philosophical and Cognitive Theories of Metaphor

This section's primary focus is analyzing metaphors in analytic philosophy and cognitive science. It explores how metaphor is used in these fields and how it can shape our understanding of reality, cognition, and the structure of the mind. I will also mention the philosophical implications of using metaphor in these fields and the criticisms against it. The following paragraphs will introduce the critical theories and concepts and other sources.

2.1. Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT)

George Lakoff is a cognitive linguist who has written vastly on the role of metaphor in thought and language. Lakoff proposed the revolutionary conceptual metaphor theory with his contemporary philosopher, Mark Johnson. The main idea of the conceptual metaphor theory(CMT) suggests that metaphor is an essential part of human thought rather than just an aspect of language [1]. It proposes that most metaphorical phrasing originates from existing conceptual metaphors or metaphorical thought patterns. General cognitive principles structure these conceptual metaphors and occur regularly throughout the lexicon. The CMT further suggests that conceptual metaphors exist in virtually every language, with several hundred variations [2].

In Mácha's *Metaphor in Analytic Philosophy and Cognitive Science* [3], Conceptual Metaphor Theory, developed by Lakoff and Johnson in the 1980s, identifies metaphor in thinking. The conceptual system comprises cross-domain mappings, which are known as conceptual metaphors. These mappings facilitate the emergence of linguistic metaphors observable in everyday language. One such instance is LOVE IS A JOURNEY, where journeys and love are mapped onto entities. Our thinking is represented by a cognitive structure known as mapping, which is expressed through surface language., particularly in linguistic metaphors like "Our relationship has hit a dead-end street." The boundary between linguistic and conceptual metaphors is sometimes blurred, with some authors using the phrase "metaphor" without specifying its meaning. Lakoff's theory suggests that metaphor is best defined by conceptual metaphor.

As stated in another article by Michael Kimmel [4], cognitive metaphor theory reconstructs linguistic metaphors and connects seemingly disparate utterances to indicate common underlying logic. This enables analysts to extract connections that readers make sense of subconsciously. The emerging cognitive literary movement uses conceptual metaphor theory to describe recurring motifs and themes, correcting research bias towards innovative linguistic usage and questioning the premise that standard metaphors are "un-literary."

Nevertheless, scholars within and outside of cognitive linguistics have offered several critiques of CMT. One major criticism presented in *Evaluating Conceptual Metaphor* [2] is that the view needs to fare better theoretically or empirically. Another critique is that linguistic research favors a dearth of information regarding the procedures used to conduct these analyses in CMT. Still, it must be noted that various scholars have applied identical criteria in their assessments of systematicity and conceptual metaphors. However, their intuitive analyses of linguistic expressions may not necessarily reflect how ordinary speakers unconsciously use metaphoric language. This further clarification is necessary. Additionally, some scholars have criticized CMT for being too focused on language and not enough on the essence of human cognition [2].

2.2. The Relevance Theory and the Blending Theory

According to relevance theory by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, using metaphors in speech is considered "loose talk." Still, it can often be the most effective way to achieve optimal relevancy. Although metaphors may not accurately represent a situation, listeners can quickly understand their contextual meanings by creating temporary concepts that adhere to the principle of optimal relevance

[2]. At the same time, another paper by Costello discusses relevance theory in studying linguistically underdetermined utterances and how they are intended to communicate [5]. The text further argues that verbal comprehension is determined by the interaction between linguistic structure and background knowledge, guided by the principle of relevance.

Conceptual blending, or conceptual integration in cognitive linguistics, is a theory established by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner. It suggests that various scenarios are combined subconsciously, resulting in a universal process seen in everyday thinking and language. This approach, similar to memetics, aims to provide a comprehensive explanation of cultural idea transmission [6]. The blending theory emphasizes the role of mental blending in creating novel meanings. It suggests that metaphorical meaning arises from integrating mental spaces, which are mental representations of concepts and their relationships. The blend may include new features by simulating and running the blend, which allows the construction of creative blends because the linguistic form no longer governs elaboration. However, blending theory leaves several issues unresolved, such as how the input spaces are determined and the selection mechanisms for creating these spaces [1].

Recent literature has also suggested hybridity and integration between CMT, relevance, blending, and many other theories, either from cognitive linguistics or other fields of study [7]. For example, *Complementary Perspectives on Metaphor: Cognitive Linguistics and Relevance Theory* proposed that combining relevance theory and cognitive linguistic perspectives on metaphor could provide a more comprehensive understanding [8]. In addition, scholars who study metaphors should clearly state how their research aligns with or diverges from other theories. This approach can highlight the distinct features of their studies, predict similarities or differences to other perspectives, and explain why concepts from alternative viewpoints could or could not contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of metaphors. Additionally, in *Beyond Cognitive Theory: Perspectives on Literary Metaphor* [7], it is put forward that cultural grounding and variation can be regarded as pragmatic modifications of the original universalist principles of cognitive metaphor theory. Additionally, the book critiques the invariance hypothesis claimed in the cognitive metaphor theory and examines how relevance theory and cognitive metaphor theory can be compatible and not antithetical approaches.

2.3. Hermeneutic Theory of Metaphor

Ricoeur's hermeneutic theory of metaphor explains how similarity functions in metaphorical language, involving three cognitive processes: schematization, a pictorial dimension, and an epoch or suspension of ordinary reference. Ricoeur's hermeneutic theory is based on the idea that metaphor opens up new ways of describing the world or some aspect of it and plays a central role in redefining our reality [9].

According to Costello Ricoeur has put forward an extensive semantic-interaction perspective of metaphor that is based on a theory of imagination and emotion [5]. Ricoeur believes that imagination and emotion are authentic elements of the process involved in an interaction metaphor theory, and they both significantly impact the meaning conveyed by metaphor. The author discusses Ricoeur's theory of metaphor concerning their own pluralistic approach to studying metaphor. While the author acknowledges that Ricoeur's proposal for an expanded semantic-interaction view of metaphor is impressive for its breadth of insight, they note that it relies on a theory of imagination and emotion still in its early stages of development.

2.4. Literary Theories

Different literary theories have different stances on metaphor. Formalist theory, for example, focuses on the structure of relations between units of a text rather than the actual content, including metaphorical language. They see metaphor as a way of "making strange" and relativize its use of

language, seeing it as a matter of contrast between one type of speech and another. On the other hand, post-structuralist theory argues that all language is metaphorical and that literature is the realm in which this ambiguity is most evident. They see metaphor as a way of working by tropes and figures and that believing that any language is literal is a mistake. They believe that metaphors have no basis in reality and are just a way of replacing one set of symbols with another. Post-structuralists also argue that language often exposes its own fictional and random nature when attempting to be especially convincing. Structuralist theory, meanwhile, sees metaphor as a way of organizing and categorizing the world, arguing that in literature, metaphor can be used to create narrative categories such as comic, romantic, tragic, and ironic [10].

3. Metaphor and Continental Philosophy

According to Cazeaux, continental philosophers hold inconsistent opinions on metaphor but generally regard it as a significant tool for understanding abstract concepts by relating them to more concrete experiences [11]. He also argued that continental philosophy would better support and evidence the analysis of metaphor since analytical philosophy often operates within the realm of the philosophy of language.

In his *Metaphor and Continental Philosophy From Kant to Derrida* Chapter 2, Cazeaux suggests that Kant highly relied on metaphor for its systematic nature and role in the possibility of judgment [11]. Through nested analogies and metaphor's density, nature and freedom are held together while maintaining the object-directedness of experience. Thus, Kant contends that nature's supersensible basis with our freedom to act independently is reconciled through metaphor.

Cazeaux goes on to discuss metaphor as an ontological focus in Merleau-Ponty [11], Heidegger, and Nietzsche in Chapters 3,4 and 5, who see metaphor as a connection or procedure that shapes the organization of our experiences, essential to both the human subject and their interactions with the world. This viewpoint comes from a reevaluation of the senses and our physical embodiment. Specifically, the idea of metaphor has been expanded to encompass a process of interplay or transformation, creating a structured and comprehensible experience. Additionally, this concept is viewed as existing within the same cognitive realm as our senses, as they transmit sensory information from the world to our minds. In conclusion, the symbolic structure of transposition is examined in these three chapters to understand the role of metaphor in the ontologies of Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, and Nietzsche.

Though Heidegger may not have explicitly addressed metaphor, he perceives it as a tool for organizing the revelation of objects and creating a structure of likenesses and distinctions. This organization is essential for maintaining a steady and logical exposure of objects. Moreover, Heidegger opines that metaphor can aid in establishing a fresh ontology that contrasts with Cartesian metaphysics and allows for a realm of potentiality beyond the conventional metaphysical dichotomies. Nevertheless, in *The Principle of Reason*, Heidegger restricts the role of metaphor to within the boundaries of Cartesian metaphysics, as it only exists through its association with concepts that are molded by metaphysical frameworks.

Nietzsche's perspective is rooted in a metaphorical process that involves cognitive judgment and a series of transformations from nerve stimulus to retinal images and sounds that signify our perception. He posits that perception cannot correspond directly to things in themselves, as these transformations shape it. Nietzsche's metaphoricity defines human beings as competing perspectives or wills to power, shaping our experience of the external world. In Cazeaux's view, power in Nietzsche's ontology is asserted in opposition to a rival viewpoint, enabling individuals to see from multiple perspectives [11]. Rather than a structure of world disclosure, metaphor is a network of transpositions where individual items and identities arise from the tensional interactions between competing forces.

Chapters 6 and 7 explore metaphor in relation to epistemology and the science wars, a debate between realism and anti-realism. Realism advocates for a mind-independent reality, while anti-realism asserts that our concepts shape reality. The realism-anti-realism contest faces the danger of oscillating between these concepts due to the undecidable origin of knowledge. The author argues that metaphors in competing theories of knowledge, such as 'cutting nature at the joints' and the concept of 'world,' create ambiguity in describing the (noumenal) world as it is in itself or the (phenomenal) world as it is accessed and made available through perception.

The last chapter, as introduced, explores the interplay of metaphysics and metaphor in Heidegger, Ricoeur, and Derrida's work. The author argues that the metaphor is deliberate, as Ricoeur and Derrida's reactions to Heidegger's metaphysics reveal a network of agreement and disagreement on their relations. While Heidegger asserts that the metaphorical only exists within metaphysics, Ricoeur identifies a theoretical core common to both. Surprised by Ricoeur's accounting of his position in 'White Mythology,' Derrida finds that Ricoeur's criticisms are statements he supports and, surprisingly, views he believes are already evident in 'White Mythology.' To better demonstrate Derrida's perspective, according to *Modern Movements in European Philosophy* (Kearney, 1995), Derrida argues that metaphysics is a metaphorical cover-up and that its foundational concepts are metaphors. He also contends that there is no conceptual theory of metaphor and that metaphor is uncontrollable - a free play of figuration.

Following the discussion, Cazeaux argues that metaphors can create a conflict between different ideas of belonging [11]. It challenges the traditional concept of what belongs within a certain boundary and what does not. Metaphors connect two things, opening up a new space where an object can exist. This mingling of ideas can give the impression of circularity. However, this impression depends on an image that needs to be reconsidered. It symbolizes leaving and returning to a certain point or concept. Nevertheless, this interpretation assumes that we are moving through space, with a starting point and an external region where we complete our journey back to the starting place.

In addition to the figures introduced above, it is worth noting as well that Lacan's analysis of the language of the unconscious employs the literary terms of 'metonymy' and 'metaphor' to define the workings of our unconscious language. Lacan maintains that metonymy refers to the 'syntagmatic' rapport between one unconscious signifier and another. In comparison, metaphor establishes a metonymic relation between one signifier and another, which does not depend on likeness or any immediate semantic correspondence. Lacan views unconscious deviations of meaning as playful gestures of desire that should be celebrated as they are [12].

4. Semantics: Creation of Meaning

Semantics, broadly, is the study of linguistic meaning and a crucial aspect of language use [6]. The ability to link words with specific meanings or intentions allows language users to convey messages effectively. In the study of metaphor, semantics is used to analyze the meaning of words and phrases in relation to their context and the associations they evoke. The following paragraphs will explore different philosophical and linguistic perspectives on studying meaning.

In his *Explaining Metaphor: A Pluralistic Approach* [5], Costello explores the concept of semantics regarding metaphorical meaning. It suggests that such meaning is not simply created through property changes, predicates, or implications. Instead, what is conveyed through metaphor are the relationships that exist within one area of meaning and how they relate to a completely different content domain. His dissertation explains that Ricoeur proposes an expanded semantic-interaction view of metaphor, which relies upon a theory of imagination and feeling. Ricoeur argues that feeling and imagination are genuine components of the process described in an interaction theory of metaphor. They both achieve the semantic bearing of metaphor. Ricoeur's theory of metaphor is discussed in the context of the author's pluralistic approach to studying metaphor. The author notes that Ricoeur's proposal

for an expanded semantic-interaction view of metaphor is impressive for the range of insight it aims to assimilate. However, it relies upon a theory of imagination and feeling still in infancy.

It is also worth noting that in the Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor [1], Josef Stern advances a semantic theory of metaphor that elaborates how metaphor depends on the literal and how context has different roles in communicating metaphorical meaning. He argues that metaphors are not just substituting one word for another. Still, rather, they involve a complex interplay between the literal and the non-literal meanings of words.

Nevertheless, the semantic theories of metaphor, according to Mácha [3], have been somewhat out of fashion in recent years and have been superseded by pragmatic theories better equipped to deal with the context-dependence of metaphor. He also examines I.A. Richards' and Max Black's semantic theory of metaphor, which is based on the idea that if an utterance is intended and recognized as a metaphor, then the literal meaning of the subject interacts with the literal meaning of the predicate, resulting in a symbolic meaning of the predicate which is thereby predicated of the subject.

5. Pragmatics and Context

Pragmatics is an essential area of study in understanding how language is used in context to convey meaning [1,5]. It allows us to analyze how speakers use metaphors to achieve specific communicative goals and how listeners interpret them in context. By studying the pragmatic aspects of metaphor use, we can better understand how metaphors work and how they contribute to our understanding of the world. The relevance theory is a pragmatic approach to understanding communication, which can be used to explain how metaphors work [13].

According to Josef Stern's chapter in the Cambridge Handbook of Metaphors on metaphor, semantics, and context. The direct access viewpoint challenges the mainstream pragmatic model [14,15], which holds that literal meanings take precedence. This viewpoint, which assumes that literal meanings of both words and sentences should be accessed first, regardless of contextual information, admits that the results of initial input analyses are unintentional. While they may result in contextual fit, they may also result in a mismatch with earlier context, which must be corrected. In many circumstances, resolving such issues would result in the suppression of contextually unsuitable outputs.

The role of pragmatics has also been crucial in various metaphor theories and studies. The essay on truthfulness and relevance in telling time by van der Henst and Sperber explores the significance of pragmatics in understanding how individuals communicate about time [16]. They contend that the interpretation of temporal expressions is determined by the relevance of the information provided to the listener and that speakers employ a variety of pragmatic tactics to convey worldly information effectively.

In *Beyond Cognitive Theory: Perspectives on Literary Metaphor*, Fludernik examines how pragmatic patterning in deploying conceptual metaphors in a text can lead to the discovery of high-level meanings [7]. For example, the book references Freeman's studies, which show how pragmatic patterning can uncover the indirect meanings of metaphors. It also discusses how cultural grounding and variation can be regarded as pragmatic modifications of the original universalist principles of cognitive metaphor theory. Finally, the book argues that cognitive metaphor theory should be integrated with pragmatics to interpret communicative events comprehensively.

Still, as Hale points out, the semantic/pragmatic divide in the philosophy of language is a complex and contentious issue. Kittay [17,18], for example, frames her semantic field' theory of metaphor as moving between semantic and pragmatic descriptions. Nevertheless, scholars like Eco argue that pragmatics is a branch of semiotics and that it is necessary to define semiotic phenomena before speaking about pragmatics [19]. However, he also suggests that the term 'pragmatics' can be used in a broad sense to cover perceptive interaction. Therefore, the distinctions between the approaches

discussed in this article have yet to be fully defined and may remain ambiguous for a considerable time.

6. Conclusion

From cognitive theories to philosophical ideas, this paper summarizes and examines critical notions in the field of metaphor in relevant disciplines. Nonetheless, the field of metaphor study constantly evolves and features various theories and perspectives that contribute to a comprehensive understanding of how metaphors shape language, thought, and communication. Although each approach has its strengths and limitations, they provide a nuanced view of the intricate role metaphors play in our cognitive and linguistic processes. To progress in unraveling the complexities of metaphor, it's essential to conduct further research and engage in interdisciplinary collaboration.

References

- [1] Gibbs, R. W. (2008). *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought*. Cambridge University Press.
- [2] Gibbs, R. W. (2011). Evaluating Conceptual Metaphor Theory. *Discourse Processes*, 48(8), 529–562. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163853X.2011.606103>
- [3] Mácha, J. (2019). Metaphor in Analytic Philosophy and Cognitive Science. *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia*, 75(4), 2247–2286. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26869269>
- [4] Kimmel, M. (2010). Why we mix metaphors (and mix them well): Discourse coherence, conceptual metaphor, and beyond. *Journal of pragmatics*, 42(1), 97–115.
- [5] Costello, D. J. (1995). Explaining metaphor: A pluralistic approach. [University of Massachusetts Amherst]. <https://doi.org/10.7275/ZW38-5H55>
- [6] Ritchie, L. D. (2004). Lost in “Conceptual Space”: Metaphors of Conceptual Integration. *Metaphor and Symbol*, 19(1), 31–50. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327868ms1901_2
- [7] Fludernik, M. (2011). *Beyond cognitive metaphor theory: Perspectives on literary metaphor*. Routledge.
- [8] Tendahl, M., & Gibbs, R. W. (2008). Complementary perspectives on metaphor: Cognitive linguistics and relevance theory. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 40(11), 1823–1864. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2008.02.001>
- [9] Johnson, M. (Ed.). (1981). *Philosophical perspectives on metaphor*. Univ. of Minnesota Press.
- [10] Eagleton, T. (2011). *Literary Theory*. John Wiley & Sons.
- [11] Cazeaux, Clive. (2009). *Metaphor and Continental Philosophy From Kant to Derrida*. Routledge.
- [12] Kearney, R. (1995). *Modern Movements in European Philosophy*. Manchester University Press.
- [13] Fludernik, M., Freeman, D. C., & Freeman, M. H. (1999). Metaphor and Beyond: An Introduction. *Poetics Today*, 20(3), 383–396. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1773271>
- [14] Grice, H. P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In P. Cole & J. Morgan (Eds.), *Speech acts: Syntax and semantics* (Vol. 3, pp. 41–58). New York: Academic Press.
- [15] Searle, J. R. (1979). *Expression and Meaning*. Cambridge University Press.
- [16] van der Henst, J. B., Carles, L., & Sperber, D. (2002, November). Truthfulness and Relevance in Telling The Time. *Mind and Language*, 17(5), 457–466. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0017.00207>
- [17] Hale, B., Wright, C., & Miller, A. (Eds.). (2017). *A Companion to the Philosophy of Language* (1st ed.). Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118972090>
- [18] Krupa, V. (1991). Eva Feder Kittay: Metaphor. Its Cognitive Force and Linguistic Structure. *Human Affairs*, 1(2), 197–200. <https://doi.org/10.1515/humaff-1991-010213>
- [19] Eco, U. (1986). *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*. Indiana University Press. <https://books.google.com.hk/books?id=aqTkKHZsIMwC>