

Shaping perception through metaphor: a study of Churchill's political language

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Abstract

This article explores the central role of metaphor in political discourse through the lens of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), originally developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. It argues that metaphors are not merely ornamental devices, but fundamental cognitive tools that structure human thought, influence public perception, and shape socio-political ideologies. The study categorizes political metaphors into structural, ontological, and orientational types, each performing distinct cognitive and rhetorical functions. Using detailed analyses of Winston Churchill's speeches: "We Shall Fight on the Beaches" (1940) and "The Sinews of Peace" (1946), the article illustrates how metaphors frame war, peace, leadership, and crisis through familiar experiential domains. Structural metaphors transform abstract political events into comprehensible constructs like machines, journeys, or buildings, while ontological metaphors embody concepts such as war, peace, or responsibility, enhancing their emotional and persuasive power. Orientational metaphors organize political hierarchies and moral positions using spatial schemas. The findings demonstrate that metaphorical language in Churchill's speeches strategically shapes public understanding and emotional response, reflecting the ideological, cultural, and historical contexts of their time. Ultimately, the article affirms that metaphors are indispensable not only to rhetoric but to cognition, positioning them as essential instruments in political communication and collective meaning-making.

Keywords: Conceptual Metaphor Theory, political discourse, structural metaphors, ontological metaphors, orientational metaphors, cognitive linguistics, rhetoric, metaphor analysis, embodied cognition.

Формирование восприятия через метафору: исследование политического языка Черчилля

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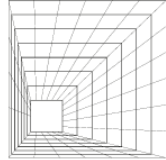
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Аннотация

В данной статье исследуется ключевая роль метафоры в политическом дискурсе сквозь призму теории концептуальной метафоры (Conceptual Metaphor Theory, CMT), разработанной Джорджем Лакоффом и Марком Джонсоном. Метафоры — это не просто средства выразительности, а фундаментальные когнитивные инструменты, структурирующие мышление, формирующие общественное восприятие и влияющие на социополитические идеологии. В исследовании политические метафоры классифицируются на структурные, онтологические и ориентационные, каждая из которых выполняет определённые когнитивные и риторические функции. На основе детального анализа речей Уинстона Черчилля: «Мы будем сражаться на пляжах» (1940) и «Сухожилия мира» (1946), где показывается, как метафоры формируют представления о войне, мире, лидерстве и кризисе через призму привычного жизненного опыта. Структурные метафоры превращают абстрактные политические явления в понятные образы, такие как машины, путешествия или здания.



Онтологические метафоры воплощают понятия войны, мира и ответственности, усиливая их эмоциональное и убеждающее воздействие. Ориентационные метафоры организуют политические иерархии и моральные установки через пространственные схемы. Полученные результаты демонстрируют, что метафорический язык в речах Черчилля стратегически формирует общественное понимание и эмоциональную реакцию, отражая идеологический, культурный и исторический контекст времени. В конечном итоге, статья утверждает, что метафоры незаменимы не только в риторике, но и в мышлении, занимая центральное место в политической коммуникации и формировании коллективного смысла.

Ключевые слова: концептуальная метафора, политический дискурс, когнитивная лингвистика, риторика, структурная метафора, онтологическая метафора, ориентационная метафора, концептуализация.

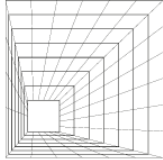
Introduction

Metaphor is not just a feature of poetic language, but it is central to how we think, speak, and make sense of the world around us. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue in their foundational work *Metaphors We Live By*, metaphor is not merely a decorative element of language but a core component of human cognition. They assert that “our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” [7; p. 3]. This perspective redefines metaphor as a cognitive mechanism that shapes not only how we speak, but also how we understand reality, make decisions, and relate to others in everyday life. According to CMT, we routinely understand abstract concepts, such as time, war, politics, and morality, through more familiar, concrete experiences, often drawn from the human body or the physical environment. These mental mappings, from what CMT terms a source domain to a target domain, form the basis of much of our everyday language.

In political discourse, metaphor takes on a particularly powerful role. Political leaders frequently use metaphor to simplify complex issues, appeal to shared values, and influence public perception. As Charteris-Black points out metaphors in political context are frequently used for ideological purposes since they activate unconscious emotional associations and thereby contribute to myth creation. [1; p. 28] When a politician describes immigration as a flood or national recovery as a journey, they are doing more than painting a picture, they are guiding how audiences conceptualize the issue itself. Two types of metaphor are especially prominent in political rhetoric: embodied metaphors, which are grounded in physical experience, such as shouldering responsibility or rising to power, and structural metaphors, which allow one complex concept to be understood in terms of another, such as argument is war or government is a machine. These metaphors are not accidental, they reflect deep-rooted cognitive structures and cultural models that shape how people interpret political events and social realities.

Main part

Metaphor, as conceptualized within Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, is not simply a linguistic device but a fundamental mechanism of thought that shapes how individuals perceive and act in the world. Many conceptual metaphors, along with other types of figurative expression, are believed to originate from foundational cognitive patterns known as image schemas. These are “relatively abstract conceptual representations that arise directly from our everyday interaction with and observation of the world around us” [4; p. 176]. These mental frameworks allow individuals to make sense of complex or abstract ideas by linking them to familiar physical and perceptual experiences. According to CMT, metaphors structure our cognitive processes and influence the way we understand abstract concepts by mapping them onto more concrete, familiar domains. In this framework, metaphors are classified into several categories, including ontological (embodied) metaphors, structural metaphors, and orientational metaphors. These categories provide insight into how metaphorical language operates on both a cognitive and rhetorical level in political discourse.



Ontological metaphors help us understand abstract ideas by presenting them as concrete, physical entities. Rooted in bodily experience, they allow people to conceptualize emotions, institutions, or social phenomena as objects or beings. For instance, ideas like “*carrying the burden of responsibility*” or “*the heart of the nation is wounded*” give emotional or political concepts a physical form. These metaphors enhance clarity and emotional resonance, making abstract issues feel real and relatable. **Structural metaphors** frame complex concepts through more familiar, structured experiences. By mapping one domain onto another, they help audiences make sense of political or social systems. Expressions such as “*the machinery of government*” or “*building a better future*” suggest that political processes function like machines or construction projects, organized, progressive, and fixable. This framing makes abstract systems seem more manageable and subject to control or repair. **Oriental metaphors** organize ideas using spatial direction - up/down, forward/backward, inward/outward, often reflecting cultural values. For example, “*rising to power*” implies success, while “*falling into corruption*” suggests moral or political failure. These metaphors convey movement and direction, shaping perceptions of progress, decline, or stability. In political rhetoric, they help express hope, urgency, or warning in simple, intuitive terms.

The cognitive function of metaphors lies in their ability to structure thought. Metaphors are not merely decorative elements of language but cognitive tools that shape the way individuals process complex ideas. By presenting abstract concepts in more familiar terms, metaphors help to simplify complex political issues, making them accessible and actionable. At the same time, they evoke emotional responses, reinforcing or challenging societal norms, and ideologies. Rhetorically, metaphors serve to persuade and motivate. In political discourse, they are deployed strategically to influence public opinion, align the audience with the speaker’s perspective, and strengthen collective identity. Metaphors like “*the iron curtain*” or “*the battle for freedom*” resonate deeply with the audience, evoking not just intellectual comprehension but also emotional conviction. By drawing on familiar experiences or universal cultural symbols, political leaders can align their message with the emotional fabric of the audience, encouraging collective mobilization. The study of figurative perception emphasizes that metaphor is a function of thought, not merely of language. However, because language is deeply embedded in cognitive activity, it may still influence how we process perceptual metaphors. As Gibbs points out, verbal mechanisms may be intimately involved in the ways that we decode, assess, formulate, and remember figures of thought, even when these are conveyed in perceptual rather than linguistic form. This suggests that language can shape even non-verbal aspects of metaphorical understanding. [5; p. 41]

As Krennmayr notes, metaphorical language can shape readers’ understanding and even influence their actions. This makes it important to identify the conditions under which readers mentally adopt metaphorical schemas, “If metaphorical language can potentially influence people’s views on topics, and consequently their actions, it is important to know under which conditions people are most likely to build representations of a text they read on a metaphorical schema” [6; p. 66]. This insight is especially relevant for journalists and media professionals, whose language can subtly shape public perception. Political leaders, through strategic metaphor use, shape national identity and frame crises in ways that appeal to collective emotions and shared values. Research has also emphasized the importance of understanding metaphors as cognitive tools that reflect the worldview of both the speaker and the audience, offering a lens through which the political reality is understood and acted upon.

Table 1 presents a detailed analysis of metaphorical expressions identified in Winston Churchill’s speech “We Shall Fight on the Beaches” (1940), classifying each metaphor by type and explaining its cognitive and rhetorical functions within the wartime context.

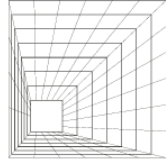
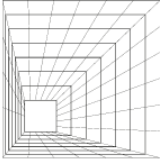


Table 1

Metaphorical Expressions in Winston Churchill's Speech "We Shall Fight on the Beaches" (1940)

№	Metaphor	Type of Metaphor	Cognitive Function	Rhetoric Function
1.	<i>The German eruption swept like a sharp scythe</i> [2]	Structural	Frames invasion as a natural disaster	Evokes fear, emphasizes overwhelming force
2.	<i>The jaws of death and shame</i> [2]	Ontological	Personifies death and shame as a predator	Emotional, visceral; creates a sense of threat
3.	<i>A miracle of deliverance</i> [2]	Ontological	Frames rescue as a miraculous event	Emotive, persuasive; appeals to hope
4.	<i>Strained every nerve</i> [2]	Ontological	Frames physical effort as body's strain	Conventional metaphor, conveys effort
5.	<i>The brute mass of the ordinary German Army</i> [2]	Ontological	Depicts military force as a mass/weight	Dehumanizes the enemy, emphasizes scale
6.	<i>Every morn brought forth a noble chance</i> [2]	Structural	Frames opportunity as a daily birth or renewal	Poetic; raises morale
7.	<i>The crash and thunder... has died away</i> [2]	Structural	Frames war/bombing as a storm or sound	Sensory, dramatic; conveys the end of destruction
8.	<i>The ever-narrowing, ever-contracting appendix</i> [2]	Ontological	Frames the British position as a constricting medical condition	Scientific metaphor, conveys urgency and limitation

The table 1 demonstrates the strategic use of both structural and ontological metaphors in Churchill's speech "We Shall Fight on the Beaches", highlighting their dual cognitive and rhetorical functions. Structural metaphors, such as "*The German eruption swept like a sharp scythe*" and "*Every morn brought forth a noble chance*", map abstract military and emotional realities onto familiar domains like natural disasters or birth. Cognitively, these metaphors help audiences conceptualize invasion as a sudden and violent event, or hope as something renewed daily, thereby simplifying complex wartime realities. Rhetorically, they are employed to evoke fear, instill optimism, and motivate public endurance. Ontological metaphors dominate the speech and play a central role in personifying, embodying, or reifying abstract ideas. For instance, metaphors like "*the jaws of death and shame*" and "*a miracle of deliverance*" assign physical and emotional dimensions to death and rescue, making them tangible and emotionally resonant. Others, such as "*strained every nerve*" or "*the brute mass of the ordinary German Army*", draw on bodily or material imagery to express exertion, scale, and dehumanization of the enemy. The metaphor "*the ever-narrowing appendix*",



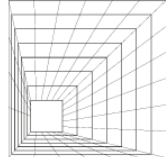
borrowing from medical discourse, introduces a scientific and almost clinical perspective on Britain's strategic position, amplifying urgency and communicating vulnerability. Overall, the metaphors in this speech serve not only as cognitive framing tools that aid comprehension but also as powerful rhetorical devices designed to shape public sentiment, frame the enemy, and promote national unity under existential threat.

Table 2 offers an analysis of metaphors used in Churchill's "The Sinews of Peace" (1946), focusing on how metaphor types and functions reflect post-war tensions and ideological positioning at the start of the Cold War.

Table 2

Metaphorical Expressions in Winston Churchill's Speech "The Sinews of Peace" (1946)

Nº	Metaphor	Type of Metaphor	Cognitive Function	Rhetoric Function
1.	<i>Workmen from all countries must build that temple</i> [3]	Structural	Frames international cooperation as a collective construction task	Implies unity and labor, promotes solidarity
2.	<i>The dark ages may return, the Stone Age may return on the gleaming wings of science</i> [3]	Structural	Frames historical regression through science misuse as a return to primitive times	Powerful juxtaposition, warns of potential dangers
3.	<i>A shadow has fallen upon the scenes so lately lighted by the Allied victory</i> [3]	Ontological	Personifies hope and threat through light and darkness	Creates contrast between triumph and looming danger
4.	<i>An iron curtain has descended across the Continent</i> [3]	Structural	Frames political division as a physical curtain	Evokes Cold War tensions, famous for its ideological significance
5.	<i>War can find any nation, wherever it may dwell between dusk and dawn</i> [3]	Orientalational	Frames war as an omnipresent force through time and space	Suggests perpetual danger, frames conflict as inescapable
6.	<i>We were all sucked into the awful whirlpool</i> [3]	Structural	Frames chaos of war as an inescapable whirlpool	Vivid, evocative imagery of entrapment
7.	<i>The Sinews of Peace</i> [3]	Ontological	Frames peace as a resilient, embodied structure	Embodies peace, frames it as the fundamental force for stability

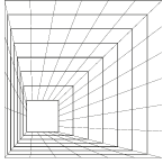


8.	<i>Amid his heavy burdens, duties, and responsibilities</i> [3]	Ontological	Frames stress and responsibility as weight	Common metaphor for stress, conveys duty and pressure
9.	<i>To dignify and magnify our meeting</i> [3]	Orientational	Frames importance as size or prominence	Adds formality and importance to the meeting
10.	<i>The pinnacle of world power</i> [3]	Orientational	Frames political dominance as a height	Implies superiority, symbolizes global power
11.	<i>The curse of war swoops down upon the breadwinner</i> [3]	Ontological	Frames war as a predator, directly attacking the family unit	Dramatic, tragic imagery, frames war as a threat to the home
12.	<i>Famine stalks the earth</i> [3]	Ontological	Frames famine as a predatory force	Biblical and evocative, emphasizes crisis and suffering
13.	<i>Built...upon the rock</i> [3]	Ontological	Frames stability and strength as a rock	Solid and unshakeable, references biblical imagery of stability

Thy table 2 expands the analysis of Churchill's rhetoric by presenting metaphors from his "Sinews of Peace" speech, revealing a complex interplay of structural, ontological, and orientational metaphors. These metaphors serve to conceptualize abstract geopolitical realities, moral imperatives, and existential threats through more familiar, embodied, and emotionally resonant imagery. Structural metaphors are especially prominent, often framing political cooperation or conflict in terms of physical construction - "*build that temple*", division - "*an iron curtain has descended*", or chaos - "*the awful whirlpool*". Cognitively, such metaphors simplify the abstract complexities of international relations and war into tangible spatial or mechanical concepts. Rhetorically, they promote unity, highlight peril, or reinforce ideological divides, as in the now-iconic metaphor of the iron curtain, which came to symbolize the Cold War itself. Ontological metaphors continue to personify abstract phenomena, particularly in relation to peace, war, and suffering. Examples like "*famine stalks the earth*", "*the curse of war swoops down*", or "*heavy burdens*" present intangible crises as physical or animate forces. This enhances emotional impact by visualizing abstract threats in human terms. Similarly, metaphors such as "*the sinews of peace*" and "*built upon the rock*" frame peace and stability as embodied or architectural, suggesting endurance and integrity. These metaphors bolster Churchill's appeals to moral responsibility and resilience. Orientational metaphors, while less frequent, still play a significant role in structuring ideas through vertical or spatial imagery. Expressions such as "*the pinnacle of world power*" or "*to magnify our meeting*" organize abstract hierarchies in terms of physical elevation or size, subtly reinforcing political prestige and importance. Hence, the metaphors in this speech operate on multiple cognitive levels while delivering a rhetorically cohesive vision: warning of the dangers of disunity and urging nations to pursue collective peace, responsibility, and vigilance in the face of looming global challenges.

Conclusion

The findings of this study confirm that Churchill's metaphors are not merely stylistic devices or rhetorical flourishes but serve as powerful cognitive instruments that shape perception, construct meaning, and direct emotional response. Drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT),



developed by Lakoff and Johnson, this paper has illustrated that metaphors are deeply rooted in human cognition. They function as mental schemas through which abstract and complex experiences, such as war, peace, leadership, and fear, are understood in terms of more concrete, familiar, and embodied experiences. In this sense, metaphor is not external to thought but fundamental to it.

From a cognitive linguistic perspective, metaphors are central to how individuals comprehend and navigate the world. The mind tends to organize abstract domains through experiential structures derived from the body, spatial orientation, and physical interaction with the environment. This embodied cognition underpins the use of ontological metaphors that attribute human or physical qualities to intangible concepts, such as “*burden of responsibility*” or “*jaws of death*”, enabling these ideas to become experientially accessible. Structural metaphors go further by mapping the logic, structure, and entailments of one domain onto another, thus imposing coherence and predictability. For example, understanding war as a storm, or political tension as an iron curtain, provides a framework that is both emotionally evocative and intellectually graspable.

The strategic use of metaphor in political rhetoric like Churchill’s is especially significant because it not only reflects how the speaker thinks but also shapes how the audience perceives and emotionally engages with the message. Metaphors function as cognitive frames: they highlight certain aspects of reality while downplaying others, subtly guiding interpretation and decision-making. In Churchill’s case, his metaphoric choices work to create unity, instill resilience, and reinforce ideological positions during times of crisis. These metaphors align speaker and listener within a shared conceptual space, strengthening collective identity and motivating collective action. Moreover, metaphors in political discourse are rarely neutral. As cognitive tools, they influence what is remembered, how events are evaluated, and which actions are seen as justified or necessary. By framing the Allied struggle as a noble battle against darkness, or peace as a structure requiring strength and sinew, Churchill’s metaphors do not merely describe events, they define their meaning and ethical significance. They transform political choices into moral imperatives, capable of mobilizing national consciousness and sustaining public morale.

This study affirms the theoretical claim that language is not a passive conduit for ideas but an active medium of thought formation. Understanding metaphor as a central cognitive and rhetorical process enhances our grasp of political communication and its effects on public perception. Future research might explore how different cultural or ideological contexts shape metaphorical frameworks, or how metaphor evolves across time and media. Ultimately, Churchill’s speeches exemplify how metaphor bridges the gap between cognition and communication, between abstract ideals and concrete realities. His metaphors do not simply reflect the world, they actively participate in constructing it.

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