

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF COGNITIVE METAPHORS IN RUSSIAN AND ENGLISH: LINGUOCULTURAL AND LINGUOCOGNITIVE ASPECTS

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Abstract

This work is a comparative analysis of cognitive metaphors in the Russian and English languages, with special attention to their cultural and cognitive features. Based on scholarly articles, dictionaries, and literary texts, the study uses the descriptive-comparative method to examine how metaphorical concepts are structured and interpreted in each language. The analysis shows that, despite the presence of universal metaphorical models based on common human experience, cultural characteristics play a key role in the formation of metaphorical thinking. Russian metaphors tend to emphasize internal, spiritual, and emotional experiences, reflecting a worldview focused on introspection and collective identity. Whereas English metaphors tend to emphasize clarity, functionality, and objectivity, which fits a more pragmatic and individualistic cultural attitude. These differences are viewed through the lens of conceptual mapping and cognitive theory, which contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between language, thought and culture.

Keywords: Cognitive metaphor, cultural differences, conceptual mapping, linguistic worldview, metaphorical models, language and thinking.

Introduction

Language is not just a means of communication but also a reflection of human cognition. As defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, a metaphor is “a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them.” [6] This definition highlights the key role metaphors play in drawing parallels between different concepts. Cognitive metaphors shape how people perceive and interpret the world. According to Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), metaphors are not just decorative but fundamental to human thought. Through metaphorical mappings, abstract concepts are interpreted via concrete experiences, shaping how we process reality. Our concepts structure our perceptions, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. [3; 4]

The study of cognitive metaphors reveals shared cognitive structures while highlighting language- and culture-specific differences. Metaphors influence thought patterns, social behavior, and decision-making, offering insight into the relationship between language, culture, and cognition. Comparing Russian and English metaphors is particularly valuable due to their distinct linguistic and cultural traditions. While both languages share universal metaphorical patterns, Russian metaphors often emphasize physical endurance and collectivism, while English metaphors highlight individual agency and pragmatism. By analyzing metaphorical models in Russian and English, this study enhances our understanding of cross-linguistic cognition and how metaphors reflect cultural worldviews. This research is particularly relevant in today’s globally interconnected world.

Main Part

Cognitive metaphors are mental and linguistic mechanisms through which abstract concepts are conceptualized using concrete experiences. Cognitive metaphor posits that individuals utilize more familiar concepts and images to describe and comprehend less familiar or abstract phenomena. In this context, categorizing or comprehending new information involves the use of metaphors to structure and integrate it into one’s existing knowledge. [2; 2] According to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) (1980), metaphors are not merely figures of speech but are fundamental to human

cognition. This theory emphasizes that metaphors structure thought processes and shape how individuals perceive, categorize, and describe the world. Lakoff and Johnson argue that abstract reasoning depends seriously on metaphorical mappings, where source domains (concrete, physical experiences) are projected onto target domains (abstract concepts). Naturally, the extraction of cognitive information from metaphors requires not only sheer knowledge, but also opinions, values and emotions required for the correct conceptualization of the metaphorical image. [1; 906] This projection is not random but reflects systematic patterns of human thought rooted in embodied experience. For instance, the conceptual metaphor “*social status is height*” structures how people understand power, prestige, and class hierarchy. In English, expressions such as “*he climbed the corporate ladder*,” “*she is at the top of her field*,” or “*they looked down on him*” reflect a vertical schema where high status corresponds with elevation and low status with descent, the similar metaphorical expressions are also common in Russian, such as “*подняться по служебной лестнице*” (to rise up the career ladder), “*стоять выше других*” (to stand above others), and “*опуститься на дно*” (to sink to the bottom), which encode social positioning through spatial orientation. These examples reveal not only a shared cognitive grounding but also cultural nuances in how success and failure are perceived. Such metaphors not only shape the language used to describe societal structures but also influence attitudes and behaviors, reinforcing hierarchical thinking and societal norms. The study of cognitive metaphors in Russian and English reveals both universal tendencies, due to shared bodily experiences, and culturally specific conceptualizations. Analyzing these metaphors provides valuable insight into the cognitive mechanisms that underlie language and the cultural ideologies embedded within metaphorical expressions. The study of cognitive metaphors in Russian and English reveals both universal patterns, due to shared bodily experiences, and culturally specific conceptualizations. Analyzing these metaphors provides insights into the cognitive mechanisms underlying language and the cultural ideologies embedded within metaphorical expressions.

According to CMT, cognitive metaphors are classified into structural, orientational, and ontological metaphors. This categorization is based on the nature of the conceptual mapping and how it frames human experience. **Structural metaphors** reveal how abstract experiences are understood through concrete frameworks. Both Russian and English employ similar metaphorical

models, but their linguistic forms and cultural associations highlight different conceptual frames. For instance, the Russian «Палка о двух концах» (“a stick with two ends”) and the English “a double-edged sword” both convey the dual nature of situations. However, Russian emphasizes the inevitability of consequences through a symmetrical image, suggesting a worldview where outcomes are unavoidable. In contrast, the English metaphor emphasizes danger and unpredictability, reflecting a risk-oriented perspective. Similarly, «ключ к решению проблемы» in Russian and “key to the problem” in English both conceptualize solutions as tools that “unlock” difficulties. This shared metaphor indicates a pragmatic worldview in both cultures, where problems are viewed as mechanical obstacles to be resolved with the right approach. **Ontological metaphors** project intangible concepts as physical entities, shaping how mental and emotional experiences are understood. These metaphors often reveal cultural attitudes toward human agency and emotional control. In Russian, «душа болит» (“the soul hurts”) reflects a spiritualized view of emotional suffering, where pain resides within an immaterial soul. English speakers, however, use “heartbroken,” suggesting that emotions are localized in the physical heart. This contrast reflects a dualistic Russian worldview that separates the body and soul, while English conveys a biological and physical interpretation of emotions. Moreover, the metaphor «железная воля» is equivalent to “iron will” in English. Both languages connect strength with durability, reflecting a universal valuation of emotional resilience. However, Russian often employs material metaphors for internal states, suggesting a mechanical and enduring view of human character. **Orientational metaphors** structure experiences through spatial relations, influencing how cultures conceptualize power, status, and emotion. Both Russian and English utilize vertical orientation to express positive and negative states. For example, «быть на высоте» (“to be on top”) corresponds to the English “to be on top of things.” Both languages associate height with competence and success, reflecting a hierarchical worldview where elevation implies control and authority. However, differences arise in emotional metaphors. The Russian «выйти из себя» (“to lose oneself”) describes anger as an external escape from one’s core, implying a loss of inner stability. In contrast, the English “lose your cool” frames anger as the dissipation of a controlled state, highlighting a regulatory approach to emotional experience. These metaphors suggest that Russian emphasizes

internal fragmentation, while English reflects a focus on external behavior and social composure.

According to Cassirer, language expresses both logical and mythological forms of thought. [5; 83] This statement reflects Ernst Cassirer's view that language is not merely a tool for rational communication but also a vessel for humanity's earliest, symbolic ways of understanding the world. In his philosophy, myth and metaphor are not irrational remnants of the past but foundational modes of thinking that co-exist with logical reasoning. This dual function of language reveals the layered structure of human consciousness, where mythical and logical perceptions shape our reality simultaneously. Hereby, to fully understand human knowledge, Cassirer argues, we must consider both symbolic and rational dimensions of expression.

One of the key theoretical frameworks that supports the analysis of cognitive metaphors in cross-linguistic and cross-cultural contexts is the Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis, also known as the theory of linguistic relativity. Developed in the early 20th century by American linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, this hypothesis suggests that the structure and vocabulary of a language influence the way its speakers perceive and conceptualize the world. In its strong form, linguistic determinism, it posits that language entirely determines thought, in its weaker and more widely accepted form, linguistic relativity, it argues that language shapes but does not rigidly limit thought processes and worldview. Sapir argued that “the forms of a person’s thoughts are controlled by inexorable laws of pattern of which he is unconscious.” [4; 252] It is emphasizing that language is not merely a tool for communication but a fundamental framework that shapes and channels human thought. According to him, each language carries its own culturally determined patterns and categories, which unconsciously guide how individuals perceive, interpret, and interact with the world around them. In the context of cognitive metaphor theory (CMT), the Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis provides a valuable lens through which to understand how metaphors function not merely as rhetorical devices, but as cognitive filters, shaping what speakers of a given language notice, value, and express. Metaphors are not universal in usage or meaning; they are culturally embedded and often reveal deep-seated assumptions about human experience. One of the most enduring and widespread conceptual metaphors across cultures is the notion that *society functions like a living organism*. This metaphor conceptualizes the collective. its people,



institutions, and structures, as interdependent components of a body, working in unison to ensure the health and survival of the whole. In English, this metaphor often appears in public discourse through expressions such as “*the heart of the nation*”, “*the backbone of society*”, “*a sick society*”, such metaphors reflect a common perception that society’s well-being is tied to the functionality and harmony of its parts. When breakdowns occur, they are framed as illnesses - “*a diseased body politic*” -suggesting that societal dysfunctions require diagnosis, treatment, or even radical intervention. While the overarching metaphor of society as an organism exists in both English and Russian, its expression in Russian carries a more visceral and often diagnostic tone, shaped by cultural, political, and historical factors. For instance, the phrase “*болезнь общества*” (the disease of society) is deeply embedded in Russian sociopolitical discourse, used to describe persistent problems such as corruption, alcoholism, or systemic inequality. Similarly, metaphors such as “*социальный гнойник*” (a social abscess) evoke powerful, bodily imagery to highlight issues perceived as festering or dangerously neglected. Another commonly used metaphor is “*государство хромает*” (the state is limping), which implies dysfunction and weakness without total collapse. In Russian, there is often a stronger focus on diagnosis and pathology, echoing the Soviet tradition of medicalized political language, where the state’s vitality was treated almost literally as a matter of public health. This differs from the relatively more structural or symbolic framing in English metaphors. Thus, while the conceptual metaphor “*society is a body*” may be shared, its realization is shaped by cultural frameworks. Russian metaphors tend to be more emotive, urgent, and corporeal, reflecting a historical preoccupation with the health of the state as a living, vulnerable entity. In contrast, English metaphors often emphasize social roles and interdependence in a more abstract, systemic way.

Another compelling and widely recognized conceptual metaphor is “*emotions are forces of nature*.” This metaphor frames emotional experiences as uncontrollable, powerful, and often unpredictable natural phenomena: storms, floods, fires, winds, that can overwhelm the individual or dramatically alter the surrounding environment. In English, this metaphor is common in both everyday speech and literary language. Phrases such as “*a storm of anger*,” “*a wave of sadness*,” or “*a whirlwind of emotions*” paint emotions as external agents that act upon the individual. These expressions suggest that people do not simply experience

emotions, but rather, are subject to them, as if emotions have agency and power. Anger is a “*volcano ready to erupt*,” joy can be “*radiant like sunshine*,” and anxiety may “*creep in like a fog*.” These mappings draw attention to the physical and psychological disruption caused by intense emotional states. In Russian, this metaphor also exists, but it is often expressed through more dramatic or poetic imagery, rooted in the country’s literary and folk traditions. Common expressions include “*накрыло волной отчаяния*” (“was covered by a wave of despair”), “*буря эмоций*” (“a storm of emotions”), “*сдерживать бурю внутри*” (“to hold a storm inside”), or “*кипеть от гнева*” (“to be boiled because of anger”), they reflect an emotional eruption or natural disaster, signaling not just intensity but also suddenness and a lack of warning. However, Russian also tends to personify emotions as mythic or elemental forces.

Unlike English, which often uses nature metaphors to suggest loss of control or temporary imbalance, Russian metaphors tend to highlight emotional depth and existential impact. While both languages treat emotions as external natural forces, Russian metaphorical expressions are frequently more fatalistic, viewing emotional states as inevitable or fated occurrences that “strike” the person, rather than conditions they can manage. This divergence reflects broader cultural patterns: English discourse, shaped by individualism and self-regulation, often presents emotions as personal and internal challenges to be managed. In contrast, Russian metaphorical language, influenced by collectivist values and stoic traditions, frames emotions as natural catastrophes that must be weathered with resilience.

Conclusion

Cognitive metaphors play a fundamental role in shaping how individuals perceive and interpret reality, as they serve as a lens through which we understand complex concepts. This analysis uncovers both similarities and significant differences between Russian and English metaphors, providing a deeper understanding of how these languages conceptualize the world. While both languages share universal metaphorical models, they diverge in terms of their cultural emphasis. Russian metaphors often place a stronger focus on spiritual, emotional, and existential experiences, reflecting the cultural importance of internal states, human relationships, and the metaphysical. In contrast, English metaphors are typically more grounded in pragmatism, objectivity, and material reality, aligning

with the cultural tendencies toward practicality and external action. These differences underscore the profound influence of cultural and cognitive frameworks on the formation and use of metaphors in each language. They reveal how language not only reflects thought but also shapes the ways individuals think about and interact with the world.

Furthermore, the insights gained from this research offer practical applications in several fields. In translation, recognizing the cultural nuances embedded in metaphors can enhance the accuracy and richness of cross-linguistic communication. In intercultural communication, an awareness of metaphorical differences can help foster mutual understanding and reduce misunderstandings between speakers of different languages. For language learners, understanding the cognitive and cultural dimensions of metaphors can improve both comprehension and production of language in a more nuanced and culturally sensitive way. Looking ahead, future research could further expand on the exploration of cognitive metaphors in other languages, particularly those with distinct cognitive and cultural structures. Additionally, examining the emergence of new metaphorical models in the context of digital communication, where language is constantly evolving, could offer valuable insights into how metaphors adapt in response to changing technological and social environments.

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