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A COGNITIVE ANALYSIS ON CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR IN ENGLISH SOCIAL MEDIA DISCOURSE

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Abstract

Conceptual metaphors play a crucial role in how individuals understand and communicate complex or abstract phenomena. Originating from the foundational work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) asserts that metaphors are not merely decorative elements of language but essential cognitive tools that shape human perception and reasoning. In contemporary discourse, especially in specialized domains such as financial communication and pandemic-related messaging, metaphors act as bridges between technical content and public understanding. This becomes especially relevant in environments shaped by mass communication and participatory platforms such as mainstream media and social media, where language shapes not only individual cognition but also collective behavior.

Introduction

The article under analysis explores the structural elements and cognitive-pragmatic functions of conceptual metaphors across distinct domains—particularly financial discourse and social media communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on studies by Martin, Abreu Salas, and Gutiérrez

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(2024), as well as Xu (2023), the article reveals how metaphorical expressions evolve in response to socio-economic and cultural pressures. It further highlights the pedagogical implications for English for Specific Purposes (ESP), particularly how the integration of both conventional and socially dynamic metaphor usage can better equip learners to engage with real-world professional and informal contexts.

Methodology

The author employed a qualitative analysis of existing literature available through open-source academic databases, focusing on peer-reviewed studies that apply cognitive and critical metaphor theory. The methodology involved synthesizing research from Martin et al. (2024) and Xu (2023), examining how metaphorical language is used in financial and pandemic-related discourse, respectively. The approach allows for a comparative understanding of metaphor structure, function, and pedagogical significance across different genres and social contexts.

Results

The study by Martin, Abreu Salas, and Gutiérrez (2024) provides a comprehensive cognitive analysis of conceptual metaphor types (CMTs) in financial markets reporting, with a unique focus on comparing mainstream and social media discourse. Rooted in the theory of conceptual metaphor by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), the study emphasizes that metaphors are not merely stylistic elements but cognitive tools that frame abstract financial phenomena in more concrete, experiential terms. This is particularly relevant for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) learners, as the ability to understand and appropriately use financial metaphors contributes to their linguistic inclusion in professional communities. As noted by Charteris-Black and Musolff (2003), metaphors operate through a meaning shift between source and target domains, and in ESP contexts, this shift is pedagogically significant for teaching specialized vocabulary (Martin et al., 2024, p. 350).

A central finding of the study is the stark difference in metaphor usage between mainstream financial media (MM) and social media (SM), particularly Reddit's r/WallStreetBets and Twitter profiles of retail investors. Whereas MM tends to use

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more conventional, structured metaphors reflective of institutional discourse, SM is rich in dynamic, unconventional metaphors that reflect the participatory, informal nature of retail investor communication (Martin et al., 2024, p. 351). This linguistic variation is critical for cognitive analysis, as it reveals how different communities conceptualize financial risk, success, and volatility. For instance, metaphors such as "stocks are rockets" or "the market is bleeding" commonly found in SM exemplify the embodied cognition and emotional intensity of amateur investors, contrasting with MM's more analytical metaphors like "market correction" or "economic downturn."

The study also highlights the importance of time-sensitive metaphor analysis, focusing on the COVID-19 pandemic period (January 2020 to March 2021), which coincided with a surge in retail investing and the democratization of trading via platforms like Robin Hood (Martin et al., 2024, p. 350). During this time, the volume of metaphor-rich discourse exploded on SM, driven by volatile market conditions and the rise of communities such as r/WallStreetBets, which reached 13 million members (Reddit, 2022). This context allowed for an unprecedented exploration of how metaphors reflect collective psychological states and economic sentiment. Metaphors acted as cognitive anchors in a time of uncertainty, allowing users to make sense of complex and chaotic market dynamics through embodied and often militarized or medical imagery (e.g., "bulls fighting bears," "market virus").

From an ESP pedagogical standpoint, the findings advocate for a shift in how metaphor instruction is approached. Traditional ESP materials often rely on mainstream news sources, overlooking the vibrant, evolving metaphorical landscape of SM. However, as shown in this study, learners need exposure to both genres to develop comprehensive metaphorical competence. The research supports previous calls by Danesi (1994) and O'Mara-Shimek et al. (2015) to raise awareness of metaphor use among non-native speakers to promote both linguistic fluency and cultural competence. As such, the integration of SM metaphors into ESP curricula could bridge the gap between textbook English and real-world discourse, enhancing learners' abilities to navigate both professional and informal financial communication.

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Martin et al.'s (2024) study contributes significantly to the field of cognitive linguistics and ESP by demonstrating how metaphor usage varies across platforms and time, reflecting deeper cognitive and social processes. In setting standard categories of metaphor and emphasising contextual, authentic language use, the study provides teachers and students with tools for interpreting and meaningfully engaging in financial discourse. The study aligns with recent ESP scholarship (Villares, 2023; García-Ostbye & Martínez-Sáez, 2023) that promotes authentic, real-world text integration, confirming the cognitive and pragmatic value of metaphor awareness in preparing learners for specialized communication in an increasingly decentralized and media-rich world.

A cognitive analysis of conceptual metaphors in English social media discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic reveals how metaphors function as powerful tools for understanding complex phenomena and shaping public perception. According to Xu (2023), social media users frequently utilized conceptual metaphors to articulate emotions, convey personal experiences, and express opinions on the pandemic. These metaphors, grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), enabled users to comprehend abstract concepts like infection rates, lockdowns, and vaccine policies through more concrete domains such as war, journey, and natural disaster. For example, metaphors like "battling the virus," "fighting an invisible enemy," and "frontline heroes" reflect the "COVID-19 IS WAR" metaphor, reinforcing the sense of urgency and solidarity. Such metaphorical framings, though varied, consistently relied on culturally and historically significant domains that resonate within English-speaking contexts (Xu, 2023, p. 2).

The cognitive dimension of these metaphors becomes more apparent through the lens of Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA), which explores their ideological and communicative functions. Social media discourse, as Xu (2023) emphasizes, is highly individualized, with each user metaphorically holding a "microphone" to construct personalized meanings (p. 2). In this decentralized, participatory space, metaphors not only express individual cognition but also collectively reinforce social narratives. CMA highlights how metaphors in English social media often legitimize certain ideologies—for instance, portraying lockdown opponents as "traitors" or vaccines as "shields" subtly embeds moral judgments and power

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dynamics in casual discourse. Such usage reflects what Charteris-Black (2019) and Semino (2021) identify as the persuasive and ideological nature of metaphor, where metaphor shapes thought patterns and societal consensus by framing complex realities in emotionally charged and morally loaded ways.

A comparative cognitive approach shows that English social media users favored metaphorical domains that emphasized combat, resilience, and control, which often contrasted with more collectivist or harmonizing metaphors observed in other cultural contexts such as Chinese platforms (Xu, 2023, p. 3). This divergence underscores the cognitive-cultural interface in metaphor usage: English-speaking users employed metaphors that supported individual agency and nationalistic rhetoric, aligning with cultural values of autonomy and resistance. The dominance of metaphors like COVID-19 as a war or pandemic as a storm to weather reveals how users cognitively navigated uncertainty and threat through narratives that empowered action, vigilance, and emotional coping. As such, analyzing these metaphors not only offers insights into linguistic creativity but also into how people make sense of global crises cognitively and culturally through shared linguistic tools.

Discussion

The research conducted by Martin et al. (2024) and Xu (2023) highlights a clear correlation between the communicative environment and metaphor choice, revealing distinct structural tendencies and cognitive functions in each setting. In financial discourse, mainstream media relies on structured, institutional metaphors that aim to simplify and rationalize complex economic events, such as "market correction" or "economic downturn." In contrast, social media platforms like Reddit and Twitter foster metaphorical creativity that mirrors the emotional volatility and informality of amateur investors. Phrases like "the market is bleeding" or "stocks are rockets" demonstrate an embodied, affect-driven approach to metaphor, which functions as both expression and cognition. This divergence underscores the contextual flexibility of metaphors and their role in community-specific meaning-making.

Xu's (2023) analysis complements this view by examining how social media metaphors during the COVID-19 pandemic reflect not only individual emotions

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but also broader ideological narratives. Metaphors such as "battling the virus" or "frontline heroes" belong to the war domain, reinforcing urgency, resistance, and collective identity. These metaphors resonate with similar themes found in the financial discourse of retail investors, particularly in the way users employ emotionally charged language to cope with uncertainty and assert control. Both studies confirm that metaphors serve dual roles: cognitive scaffolding for complex concepts and vehicles of cultural, emotional, and ideological expression.

The comparison reveals that social media discourse tends to favor more dynamic, participatory metaphorical structures. As Xu (2023) explains, social media users act as decentralized agents of meaning-making, using metaphor to create personalized narratives that align with individual experiences and cultural expectations. Similarly, Martin et al. (2024) show how metaphors on social media embody collective psychological states during financial turbulence, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. In both domains, metaphorical expressions provide cognitive structure and emotional relief, allowing users to conceptualize complexity through culturally resonant imagery, whether it be war, disease, or economic struggle.

Conclusion

The structural elements of conceptual metaphors analyzed across financial and pandemic-related discourse demonstrate the deep interconnection between metaphor, cognition, and social context. These metaphors not only facilitate comprehension of abstract phenomena but also encode ideological, emotional, and cultural meanings that reflect the values and cognitive preferences of their respective communities. The comparative lens shows how different genres— mainstream media versus social media—activate distinct metaphorical repertoires suited to their communicative functions and audiences.

From a pedagogical standpoint, especially within ESP frameworks, these findings advocate for a broadened approach to metaphor instruction. Traditional reliance on formal media sources should be supplemented with dynamic, real-world examples from social media to reflect the evolving nature of discourse and cognition. Having equipped students with tools to decode and use metaphors across multiple platforms, educators can increase both linguistic and cultural

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literacy, preparing students to navigate the intricacies of the language of professional and informal communication in an interconnected world.

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