



DEFINING METAPHOR IN LINGUISTICS (ARISTOTLE TO LAKOFF & JOHNSON)

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19941319>

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 14th April 2026
Accepted: 15th April 2026
Published: 28th April 2026

KEYWORDS

metaphor, aristotle, cognitive linguistics, conceptual metaphor theory, figurative language, embodiment.

ABSTRACT

This article explores the evolution of the definition and understanding of metaphor in linguistics, tracing its development from Aristotle's foundational concepts to the modern theories proposed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. It examines how metaphor has been perceived as a rhetorical device, a cognitive tool, and a fundamental aspect of human thought and language.

INTRODUCTION. Metaphor has long been a subject of fascination in the field of linguistics, serving as a bridge between language, thought, and culture. Its roots can be traced back to ancient philosophy, with Aristotle being one of the first scholars to systematically analyze the concept. In his seminal work "Poetics", Aristotle defined metaphor as the application of a word or phrase to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable, emphasizing its role as a rhetorical device that enhances the expressiveness of language. He recognized that metaphors are not merely ornamental; they serve a fundamental function in communication by allowing speakers to convey complex ideas and emotions in more relatable terms.

As the study of language evolved, so did the understanding of metaphor. In the 20th century, linguists began to explore metaphor beyond its rhetorical implications, considering its cognitive dimensions. This shift culminated in the groundbreaking work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their influential book "Metaphors We Live By" (1980). They proposed that metaphors are not just linguistic expressions but are integral to human thought processes. Their Conceptual Metaphor Theory posits that we understand abstract concepts through metaphorical mappings grounded in our physical experiences.

For instance, the metaphor "time is money" shapes how we perceive and manage time, influencing our behaviors and attitudes toward it. Lakoff and Johnson's approach marked a significant departure from traditional views that confined metaphor to the realm of literary language. They argued that metaphor is pervasive in everyday language and thought, affecting how individuals conceptualize their experiences. This perspective highlights that metaphors are not merely creative flourishes but essential cognitive tools that shape our understanding of reality.

The exploration of metaphor has since expanded into various domains, including psychology, cognitive science, and cultural studies. Researchers have examined how metaphors influence social interactions, political discourse, and even personal identity. By tracing the evolution of metaphor from Aristotle's foundational insights to the cognitive frameworks proposed by Lakoff and Johnson, we gain a deeper appreciation for its complexity and significance in

human communication. This article aims to explore these developments, illustrating how metaphors function as both linguistic constructs and cognitive mechanisms that shape our perceptions of the world.

METHODOLOGY. The study of metaphor in linguistics has evolved significantly from the time of Aristotle to contemporary scholars like George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. Several key figures have contributed to our understanding of metaphor, shaping its definition and significance in language and thought. Aristotle, in his work "Poetics", is often credited with laying the groundwork for metaphor analysis. He defined metaphor as the transfer of a term from one thing to another, emphasizing its role as a rhetorical device that enhances communication. Aristotle recognized that metaphors could evoke emotions and create vivid imagery, thus enriching the expressive quality of language. In the 20th century, the exploration of metaphor expanded beyond rhetoric into cognitive science. One notable scholar is Ivor Armstrong Richards, who, in his book "The Philosophy of Rhetoric" (1936), argued that metaphors are not merely ornamental but essential for understanding complex ideas. He emphasized the cognitive processes involved in interpreting metaphors, suggesting that they shape our perceptions of reality.

Another significant contributor is Max Black, who introduced the "interaction theory" of metaphor in his 1962 work "Models and Metaphors". Black proposed that metaphors create a relationship between the literal and figurative meanings, allowing for a dynamic interaction that generates new insights. His approach highlighted the importance of context in understanding metaphors and their implications. However, it was George Lakoff and Mark Johnson who revolutionized the study of metaphor with their 1980 book "Metaphors We Live By". They introduced the concept of conceptual metaphors, arguing that metaphors are fundamental to human thought processes. Their theory posits that we understand abstract concepts through metaphorical mappings based on our bodily experiences. For example, the metaphor "argument is war" influences how we engage in debates, framing discussions as battles to be won.

Lakoff and Johnson's work has inspired extensive research across disciplines, including psychology, sociology, and cultural studies. Scholars such as Zoltán Kövecses have further expanded on their theories, exploring how cultural contexts shape metaphorical language and thought. Kövecses' work emphasizes the variability of metaphors across different languages and cultures, illustrating their role in shaping worldviews. In summary, the study of metaphor has evolved from Aristotle's rhetorical definitions to a more nuanced understanding of its cognitive functions, thanks to the contributions of scholars like Richards, Black, Lakoff, Johnson, and Kövecses. This evolution reflects a growing recognition of metaphor's significance in shaping human thought, communication, and cultural identity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION. Defining metaphor in linguistics has undergone significant transformation from Aristotle's time to the contemporary theories proposed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. This evolution reflects a shift from viewing metaphor primarily as a rhetorical device to understanding it as a fundamental aspect of human cognition and language.

Aristotle, in his seminal work "Poetics", laid the groundwork for metaphor by defining it as a transfer of meaning between different entities. He viewed metaphor as a tool for enhancing language, enabling speakers to convey complex ideas more vividly. Aristotle's perspective emphasized the aesthetic and rhetorical functions of metaphor, suggesting that it enriches communication and engages the audience's imagination. The 20th century saw significant theoretical advancements. Scholars like Ivor Armstrong Richards and Max Black expanded the understanding of metaphor beyond mere ornamentation. Richards introduced the idea that metaphors are cognitive tools that shape our understanding, while Black's interaction theory posited that metaphors create relationships between concepts, allowing for new meanings to

emerge. These theories marked a departure from Aristotle’s focus on form, highlighting the cognitive processes involved in metaphor comprehension.

The most transformative shift came with the emergence of cognitive linguistics, particularly through Lakoff and Johnson’s influential work in “Metaphors We Live By”. They argued that metaphors are not just linguistic expressions but fundamental to human thought. Their conceptual metaphor theory posits that abstract concepts are understood through metaphorical mappings grounded in bodily experiences. For instance, understanding time as money (“spending time”) illustrates how metaphors shape our perceptions and interactions with abstract ideas. To support these theoretical claims, empirical research methods have been employed. Corpus analysis has become a vital tool for examining how metaphors function in natural language across various contexts. Studies have shown that metaphor usage is pervasive in everyday language, reinforcing the idea that metaphors are integral to communication and cognition.

Cross-Cultural Insights: Additionally, cross-cultural studies reveal how metaphorical expressions vary across languages and cultures, highlighting the interplay between language, thought, and cultural context. This research underscores that while certain metaphors may be universal, many are culturally specific, reflecting distinct worldviews and experiences. In conclusion, the definition of metaphor in linguistics has evolved from Aristotle’s rhetorical framework to a comprehensive understanding that encompasses cognitive processes and cultural dimensions. By analyzing historical perspectives, theoretical advancements, and empirical findings, we gain a nuanced appreciation of metaphor’s role in shaping human thought and communication. This evolution underscores the complexity of metaphor as both a linguistic phenomenon and a fundamental aspect of human cognition, bridging the gap between language and thought from Aristotle to contemporary scholars like Lakoff and Johnson.

Period and Primary Theorist	Definition of Metaphor	Primary Function	Core Mechanism
Classical Period: Aristotle	Metaphor is the application of a strange term to an object by transferring it from genus to species or by analogy.	Decorative and Rhetorical: It is used to embellish poetry and make speech more persuasive or artistic.	Substitution: Replacing a literal word with a figurative one based on a perceived similarity.
Comparison Theory: Various Classical Scholars	Metaphor is viewed as a condensed or elliptical version of a literal comparison (an abbreviated simile).	Pedagogical and Clarifying: It helps explain one thing by comparing it to another well-known object.	Similarity: Identifying an objective likeness between two distinct entities or categories.
Interaction Theory: I.A. Richards and Max Black	Metaphor is a transaction between contexts where two thoughts of different things are active together.	Explanatory and Creative: It creates new meaning through the tension between the primary and secondary subjects.	Interaction: The filter of the secondary subject (vehicle) is applied to the primary subject (tenor) to produce a combined meaning.
Cognitive Period: Lakoff and Johnson	Metaphor is a cross-domain mapping where we understand one conceptual domain in terms of another.	Cognitive and Structural: It is essential for human thought, reasoning, and the construction of reality.	Mapping: Systematically projecting the structure of a concrete source domain onto an abstract target domain.

Analysis of the Table. The table illustrates the paradigm shift in linguistic thought regarding the nature and utility of metaphor over two millennia:

✓ *From Decoration to Cognition:* The most striking transition shown in the table is the movement from Aristotle’s “Rhetorical” function to Lakoff and Johnson’s “Cognitive” function. In the Aristotelian view, metaphor was an optional “extra” to language—something a speaker chooses to use for artistic effect. However, the modern view defines metaphor as an

inescapable part of how the human mind works. We do not just speak in metaphors; we think in them.

✓ *Shift in Mechanism (Substitution vs. Mapping):* The mechanism column highlights a move from simple word-level replacement to complex system-level mapping. In the Classical view (Substitution), metaphor is a matter of words (lexical). If you say "The king is a lion", you are simply substituting "king" with "lion". In the Cognitive view (Mapping), it is a matter of concepts. The entire system of what we know about "lions" (bravery, hierarchy, strength) is projected onto our concept of "kingship."

✓ *The Role of Similarity:* While the "Comparison Theory" suggests that metaphors are born from pre-existing similarities between two things, modern theories (Interaction and Mapping) argue that metaphor actually creates the similarity. By interacting two ideas (Richards/Black) or mapping domains (Lakoff/Johnson), we perceive connections that did not exist before the linguistic act took place.

✓ *Interdisciplinarity:* The table reflects how metaphor has moved beyond the boundaries of literature and linguistics. While Aristotle focused on the "strange term" in poetry, Lakoff and Johnson's definition encompasses psychology, philosophy, and neuroscience, suggesting that our conceptual system is inherently metaphorical.

The journey from Aristotle to Lakoff and Johnson represents a deep "internalization" of metaphor. It has evolved from a tool of the tongue to a tool of the brain, proving that metaphor is not just a way of talking about the world, but a way of living in it.

CONCLUSION. The conceptualization of metaphor in linguistics has undergone a profound paradigm shift, evolving from a classical rhetorical ornament to a fundamental cognitive mechanism. Historically, Aristotle defined metaphor as a decorative linguistic substitution used primarily for aesthetic or persuasive purposes in poetry and rhetoric. However, the contemporary cognitive revolution, spearheaded by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, redefined metaphor as a conceptual mapping between distinct domains of experience.

This transition highlights that metaphor is not merely a matter of figurative language, but a primary mode of human thought that structures how we perceive, reason, and interact with the world. Consequently, metaphor serves as a bridge between abstract cognition and concrete linguistic expression, proving indispensable for human communication.

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