



Exploring the Role of Semantic Metaphors Trough Whatsapp Chat in Daily Communication

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Abstract

This study explores the presence and function of semantic metaphors in everyday WhatsApp conversations, drawing upon Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) developed by Lakoff and Johnson. It investigates how abstract domains such as emotions, relationships, identity, and social dynamics are expressed through metaphorical language in informal digital interactions. Utilizing a qualitative approach, the research analyzes chat data collected from real-life conversations, categorizing metaphors into structural, orientational, and ontological types. The findings reveal that metaphorical expressions are not only pervasive but serve significant cognitive and communicative functions. They help users express complex emotions, negotiate social relationships, simplify abstract concepts, and reflect cultural values. The analysis demonstrates that WhatsApp, as a platform for spontaneous digital discourse, offers rich insight into how metaphor shapes meaning in modern communication. The study also emphasizes that metaphors in digital language are not merely rhetorical flourishes but central tools of cognition, identity construction, and interpersonal expression in contemporary society.

Keywords: *Language, Metaphors; Digital; Communication; whatsapp*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi keberadaan dan fungsi metafora semantik dalam percakapan WhatsApp sehari-hari, dengan menggunakan Teori Metafora Konseptual (CMT) yang dikembangkan oleh Lakoff dan Johnson. Penelitian ini menyelidiki bagaimana domain abstrak seperti emosi, hubungan, identitas, dan dinamika sosial diekspresikan melalui bahasa metafora dalam interaksi digital informal. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, penelitian ini menganalisis data obrolan yang dikumpulkan dari percakapan kehidupan nyata, mengkategorikan metafora ke dalam jenis struktural, orientasional, dan ontologis. Temuan ini mengungkapkan bahwa ekspresi metafora tidak hanya meresap tetapi juga memiliki fungsi kognitif dan komunikatif yang signifikan. Mereka membantu pengguna mengekspresikan emosi yang kompleks, menegosiasikan hubungan sosial, menyederhanakan konsep-konsep abstrak, dan merefleksikan nilai-nilai budaya. Analisis ini menunjukkan bahwa WhatsApp, sebagai platform untuk wacana digital yang spontan, menawarkan wawasan yang kaya tentang bagaimana metafora membentuk makna dalam komunikasi modern. Penelitian ini juga menekankan bahwa metafora dalam bahasa digital tidak hanya sekedar retorika yang

berkembang, tetapi juga merupakan alat utama dalam kognisi, konstruksi identitas, dan ekspresi interpersonal dalam masyarakat kontemporer.

Kata Kunci: *Bahasa; Metafora; Digital; Komunikasi; whatsapp*

INTRODUCTION

Language functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a profound cognitive instrument through which human thought is expressed, reflected, and shaped. Among the many linguistic features that highlight this intricate relationship between language and cognition, semantic metaphor stands out as one of the most significant. (Bagha, 2011) Semantic metaphors enable individuals to understand abstract and intangible concepts such as emotions, social relationships, intentions, and time through mappings onto more concrete, physical, and familiar experiences. For instance, expressions such as “naik pitam” (to become enraged) or “meledak marahnya” (his anger exploded) demonstrate how emotional states are conceptualized as physical phenomena like movement or pressure, illustrating how everyday language encodes deep conceptual structures.

This metaphorical way of thinking and speaking has been theorized in depth by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their groundbreaking work (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), which introduced Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). According to this theory, metaphors are not just decorative figures of speech, but rather essential mechanisms of human cognition that shape perception, reasoning, and interaction. (George Lakoff & Mark Johnson, 1980) emphasize that metaphor is “not just a matter of language, but of thought and reason,” a view further supported by (Ortony, 1993) who argues that metaphors are not merely rhetorical devices but crucial tools in the organization of meaning and understanding.

In the field of semantics, which is concerned with how meaning is structured, interpreted, and communicated, metaphors play a key role in revealing how humans process language conceptually. (Bagha, 2011) defines semantics as the branch of linguistics that systematically studies meaning in language, offering insights into how meaning is constructed both lexically and contextually. Analyzing meaning involves exploring our cognitive abilities how we think, understand, and create meaning. According to (Bagha, 2011), semantics aims to systematically explain the nature of meaning. Despite the recognized importance of metaphor in traditional linguistic studies, its manifestation in informal, real-time digital communication remains relatively underexplored. In today’s fast-paced, digitally connected world, communication has undergone a significant transformation, with messaging platforms like WhatsApp becoming one of the most prominent tools for daily interpersonal interaction.

WhatsApp is an internet-based digital application that is developing along with advances in information technology. (Rahartri, 2019) This application is considered very efficient and practical for communication, because it allows users to interact in real-time without using credit, just with an internet connection. Apart from that, WhatsApp is also famous for its simple interface, complete features, and ability to support the exchange of text messages, voice, images and documents quickly and economically. (Koten et al., 2022), WhatsApp has proven to be a useful medium in the online learning process.

This application not only facilitates communication between students and teachers, but also encourages learning motivation, making the learning process more fun and flexible. Even though there are obstacles such as dependence on the internet network, in general WhatsApp is recommended as an effective information medium in teaching and learning activities. Although these platforms are often perceived as informal and spontaneous, the language used within them is rich with metaphorical expressions that reflect cognitive patterns, emotional responses, and social identities of the users. As (Crispin Thurlow & Kritine Mrozek, 2011) suggest, digital discourse is inherently creative, dynamic, and socially revealing, making it a fertile site for examining contemporary language use. In this context, semantic metaphors serve not only to convey meaning but also to navigate relationships, express identity, and reflect cultural values. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the role of semantic metaphors in daily WhatsApp conversations by identifying the types of metaphors commonly used, analyzing their communicative and interpersonal functions, and examining their cognitive and semantic implications.

This research is guided by several key questions: What are metaphors and how do they function semantically? What types of semantic metaphors are prevalent in WhatsApp chats? What communicative purposes do these metaphors serve? How do they shape digital interpersonal interaction? And what cognitive insights do they offer about human thought and emotion? The primary aim of this study is to contribute to a deeper understanding of how metaphor operates as both a linguistic and cognitive resource in the informal context of everyday digital interaction. By analyzing authentic chat data, the study intends to show that metaphors are not only expressive tools but also conceptual frameworks that help individuals articulate complex inner experiences in accessible, embodied terms.

Furthermore, the findings are expected to have theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, this study enriches semantic and cognitive linguistic research by extending metaphor analysis into the realm of digital communication. Practically, it provides useful perspectives for educators, linguists, and communication practitioners interested in how language functions in contemporary technological environments. Overall, this

study underscores the importance of examining metaphorical language not just in literature or formal discourse but also in the everyday digital expressions that shape modern human interaction.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the use and function of semantic metaphors in everyday digital communication, specifically in WhatsApp conversations. The qualitative method was chosen due to its effectiveness in capturing the depth, context, and meaning behind language use in naturalistic settings. Data were collected through non-participant observation of WhatsApp chat interactions involving several individuals. Participants voluntarily consented to the use of their anonymized chat excerpts for research purposes, ensuring ethical standards were maintained throughout the study.

The primary analytical framework for this research is Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), as introduced by (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). According to this theory, abstract concepts such as emotions, mental states, or social relationships are often understood through metaphorical mappings from more concrete, physical domains. For instance, emotional states like anger are commonly conceptualized as physical forces, pressure, or heat, as in the metaphor “he exploded with rage.” This study identifies metaphorical expressions by analyzing the source domain (concrete, physical experience) and target domain (abstract concept) in the selected chat data.

The observation focused on naturally occurring metaphorical language used in daily conversations. Examples drawn from the data include utterances such as “my brain is frozen,” which reflects the metaphor mind is a machine, and “I need to recharge my soul,” which aligns with the metaphor energy is a resource. These expressions demonstrate how participants metaphorically frame mental fatigue and emotional exhaustion using concepts drawn from technology and physical energy. By interpreting these metaphors within the context of actual conversation, this study aims to understand how individuals cognitively and semantically construct meaning in informal digital communication.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of naturally occurring WhatsApp conversations revealed that semantic metaphors are widely used in everyday digital interactions, serving critical roles in expressing emotions, simplifying complex internal states, and fostering social relationships. Guided by Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) as introduced by (George Lakoff & Mark Johnson, 1980) and expanded in recent works this study categorizes the metaphors found in WhatsApp chat data into three major types: structural, orientational, and ontological metaphors.

1. Structural Metaphors

Structural metaphors allow users to understand one concept in terms of another by transferring relational structures. In WhatsApp discourse, this was evident in expressions such as "I destroyed his argument in seconds" or "She kept attacking my opinion", reflecting the metaphor argument is war. This metaphor frames verbal disagreement using the language of combat attack, defend, win, strategy which influences not only the wording but also the behavior of users during digital debates. Similar observations were made by (Kamanda Sari, 2023), who found political discourse to be dominated by war-like metaphors that shape persuasive communication.

2. Orientational Metaphors

These metaphors structure abstract concepts using spatial orientation (e.g., up-down, in-out), rooted in physical and embodied experience. For instance, expressions such as "*I'm feeling down today*", "*He lifted her mood*", or "*I'm under pressure again*" illustrate metaphors like happy is up; sad is down and control is up; lack of control is down. These are not simply idioms but conceptual patterns that help users frame their emotions in relatable physical terms. As (Pokojná et al., 2024) highlight in the study of visual metaphors, orientational patterns grounded in human perception play a powerful role in how abstract information is processed and shared even in scientific communication.

3. Ontological Metaphors

Ontological metaphors were the most frequently occurring type in the data. These metaphors conceptualize abstract experiences (such as emotions, thoughts, or mental states) as entities, containers, or substances. For example, utterances like "*My brain is frozen*", "*I need to recharge my soul*", and "*She was filled with anger*" demonstrate metaphors such as the mind is a machine, energy is a resource, and emotions are substances in containers. These metaphors allow users to treat intangible experiences as concrete and manipulable, making them easier to discuss. Personification also appeared frequently, as in "*Fear crept in last night*", in which fear is given human-like agency. Such metaphors support emotional storytelling and relational bonding in digital communication. Recent research by (Tsitoura, 2023) emphasizes the role of metaphor awareness in improving students' emotional articulation and understanding, reinforcing the value of ontological metaphors in informal and educational contexts.

Examples from WhatsApp chat data include:

- a) "*My brain is frozen*" → MIND IS A MACHINE
- b) "*I need to recharge my soul*" → ENERGY IS A RESOURCE
- c) "*He bottled up all his anger*" → EMOTION IS A SUBSTANCE IN A CONTAINER
- d) "*She exploded in the group chat*" → ANGER IS HEAT/PRESSURE
- e) "*Fear crept in last night*" → PERSONIFICATION

These findings demonstrate that metaphorical expressions are not mere linguistic ornaments, but rather central elements of meaning-making, cognition, and social interaction. As (Ma et al., 2021) explain, conceptual metaphors are closely tied to dual coding combining verbal and nonverbal representations which enhances users' ability to mentally process abstract ideas. In digital communication, metaphors help users compress complex emotional or mental states into brief but powerful expressions that fit the fast-paced and often emotionally charged context of chat-based interaction. Moreover, the use of shared metaphorical structures fosters group cohesion, as users tap into culturally familiar metaphors to express solidarity, empathy, or critique.

Thus, the presence of structural, orientational, and ontological metaphors in WhatsApp conversations confirms that digital discourse, while informal in tone, remains deeply metaphorical in nature. These metaphorical expressions serve as cognitive tools that shape how users think, feel, and relate to one another making them indispensable elements of interpersonal communication in the digital age. Metaphor analysis is an approach used to explore individuals' conceptual understanding of abstract issues through the language they use. In the context of education and social interaction, this method can show how someone frames reality through metaphorical associations originating from everyday experiences. (Aliakbari & Khosravian, 2013) stated that this approach is effective for understanding the dynamics of thinking and communication in more depth.

The analysis explores how abstract concepts such as emotions, relationships, and social behaviors are represented through metaphorical language.

Metaphorical Expression	Source Domain	Target Domain	Conceptual Meaning
Kata-katanya setajam pisau	Knife	Words	WORDS ARE WEAPONS: Language can harm emotionally like a sharp object.
Ada udang di balik batu	Shrimp behind a rock	Hidden intention	ACTIONS ARE SURFACES; HIDDEN MOTIVES ARE OBJECTS BEHIND: Apparent actions may conceal ulterior motives.
Dia itu bunglon sejati	Chameleon	Personality	PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS: Someone who changes to fit their surroundings—adaptable or two-faced.

Bintang kampus	Star	Student	SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE ARE STARS: Projects brilliance, visibility, and admiration.
Buah bibir	Fruit	Topic of conversation	TOPICS ARE CONSUMABLE OBJECTS: Popular topics are metaphorically 'consumed' through discussion.
Hubunganku ujung jalan	End of the road	Relationship	LIFE/RELATIONSHIPS ARE JOURNEYS: A relationship reaching its conclusion.
Dia itu ular	Snake	Person	DECEITFUL PEOPLE ARE DANGEROUS ANIMALS: Suggests betrayal or backstabbing.
Naik daun	Rising leaf	Career/Popularity	SUCCESS IS UPWARD MOVEMENT: Growth or recognition is portrayed as vertical rise.
Pasir dalam genggaman	Sand	Love/Opportunity	VALUABLE EXPERIENCES ARE PHYSICAL SUBSTANCES: Precious yet slipping away, despite tight hold.
Hujan di Juni	Rain in June	Feelings/Love	UNEXPECTED EVENTS ARE NATURAL PHENOMENA: Rare or unpredictable emotional events.
Patung di sudut taman	Statue	Person	SILENCE OR INVISIBILITY IS STILLNESS: A person ignored or without social presence.
Di atas awan	Clouds	Mood/Success	HAPPINESS OR SUCCESS IS HEIGHT: Intense joy or achievement is depicted as elevation.
Hanya awan	Dark clouds	Feelings/Hope	NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

mendung			ARE WEATHER: Emotional gloom likened to dark skies.
Jalan buntu	Dead-end road	Problem/Situation	PROBLEMS ARE PATHS: No clear solution available—symbolizes entrapment.
Topeng	Mask	Identity/Person	FALSE IDENTITIES ARE MASKS: Suggests hidden motives or pretending in social interaction.
Kepala batu	Stone	Person	STUBBORNNESS IS HARDNESS: Rigid or unchanging attitude likened to the inflexibility of stone.

The results of this study confirm the centrality of metaphor in human communication, particularly in informal digital interactions such as WhatsApp. Based on Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory, metaphor is not merely a linguistic flourish but a fundamental structure of thought, enabling individuals to comprehend and convey abstract experiences through familiar, concrete concepts. In the WhatsApp data analyzed, three major types of metaphors structural, orientational, and ontological were identified. Structural metaphors, such as "argument is war," shaped the way individuals framed confrontational dialogue. Orientational metaphors like "happy is up" or "control is up" revealed how bodily and spatial orientations are mapped onto emotional and social experiences. Ontological metaphors, including "the mind is a container" or "emotions are substances," allowed users to objectify intangible states for easier discussion and reflection. Metaphorical expressions found in the chats, such as "*kata-katanya setajam pisau*" or "*hubunganku di ujung jalan*", illustrate how speakers use metaphor to communicate complex emotional realities. These expressions perform several functions: (1) conveying emotional nuance, (2) simplifying abstract ideas, and (3) reinforcing social and cultural meanings. For example, "*buah bibir*" conceptualizes popular topics as consumable items, reflecting shared cultural idioms, while "*di atas awan*" symbolizes joy or success using elevation as a metaphorical direction.

Moreover, metaphor usage facilitates identity construction and social bonding. Referring to someone as a "*bunglon sejati*" (true chameleon) not only conveys adaptability but also signals evaluative judgment rooted in social norms. These findings support (ortony, 1993) argument that metaphors are essential for meaning-making, allowing people to articulate

inner experiences through shared conceptual frameworks. Ultimately, this study highlights the cognitive, emotional, and social importance of metaphor in digital discourse. WhatsApp, though often overlooked in scholarly analysis, offers a dynamic context for metaphorical language that is spontaneous, context-rich, and highly revealing of users' thoughts and values.

Metaphorical Framing in Digital Communication

The findings of this study reinforce the central argument of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT): metaphors are not merely ornamental features of language, but fundamental tools of thought and communication. The presence of structural, orientational, and ontological metaphors in WhatsApp conversations illustrates how deeply metaphorical reasoning is embedded in everyday digital discourse. WhatsApp, as an informal and spontaneous platform, provides a natural setting in which users express emotional states, evaluate social relationships, and construct meaning through metaphorical language.

Structural metaphors such as *"argument is war"* or *"career is a journey"* demonstrate how abstract processes are structured using more concrete, familiar schemas. These metaphors not only frame the way individuals think about a topic but also influence the tone and direction of interactions. For example, when users describe disagreements as "attacks" or "defences," they are more likely to adopt competitive, confrontational communication strategies. Such metaphorical framing is not limited to formal debates but is also prevalent in casual exchanges, suggesting that metaphor guides not only expression but also behavior.

Oriental metaphors revealed in expressions like *"feeling down"*, *"mood lifted"*, or *"under pressure"* show how spatial orientation is used to map emotional or psychological states. These metaphors stem from embodied experiences, such as standing tall when feeling confident or slumping when feeling sad. By drawing on such physical experiences, speakers make their inner emotional states understandable to others in intuitive and relatable ways. In group chats, this often serves a social function, allowing others to empathize, respond, or provide support based on the emotional cues conveyed metaphorically.

Ontological metaphors the most frequently observed in this study highlight how people treat abstract experiences as entities or containers. Metaphors like *"my brain is frozen"*, *"I need to recharge"*, or *"she bottled up her anger"* transform intangible states such as mental fatigue or emotional stress into concrete, manipulable concepts. This allows users to talk about emotions, thoughts, or psychological strain more effectively, especially in limited-character environments like chat messages. These metaphors also allow for vivid storytelling, enhancing narrative coherence and emotional resonance in digital communication.

Culturally embedded metaphors such as *“ada udang di balik batu”* (there's a shrimp behind the rock), *“bunglon sejati”* (true chameleon), or *“ular”* (snake) further demonstrate how metaphor is used not just cognitively, but socially and culturally. These expressions carry evaluative meaning, allowing users to pass moral or social judgment subtly. The metaphor *“bunglon”* implies adaptability or hypocrisy depending on the context, while *“ular”* suggests betrayal or danger. Such metaphors serve as indirect but powerful tools for negotiating social identity, loyalty, and trust within a group.

Interestingly, metaphorical expressions in WhatsApp often reflect shared cultural knowledge and idiomatic familiarity. Phrases like *“buah bibir”* (fruit of the lips), *“jalan buntu”* (dead end), or *“topeng”* (mask) rely on communal understanding to be effective. This highlights the role of metaphor in maintaining group cohesion and cultural identity in digital communication. As users draw on culturally recognizable metaphors, they reinforce social belonging and create mutual understanding.

From a cognitive perspective, the use of metaphor helps users process and articulate complex internal experiences. As noted by (Ma et al., 2021), conceptual metaphors integrate verbal and non-verbal representation, enhancing comprehension and emotional expression. In WhatsApp conversations, this function is particularly relevant, as users must express nuanced thoughts and feelings in brief, often asynchronous messages. Metaphors allow for this compression without loss of meaning—sometimes even enhancing the emotional impact.

From a sociolinguistic standpoint, the study affirms (Crispin Thurlow & Kritine Mrozek, 2011) assertion that digital discourse is dynamic, creative, and socially revealing. WhatsApp conversations are not merely casual or trivial; they are sites of complex linguistic, cognitive, and cultural activity. The metaphorical language used within them reveals how individuals think, feel, and relate to others. Moreover, the spontaneity of WhatsApp chats suggests that metaphors are not consciously chosen but arise naturally from embodied experience and social practice.

In sum, this discussion underscores the multifaceted function of metaphor in digital communication. Metaphors serve cognitive purposes by structuring thought, communicative purposes by facilitating expression, and social purposes by shaping identity and relationships. The richness of metaphorical language in WhatsApp shows that even in the most informal digital environments, human communication remains profoundly metaphorical and meaning-laden.

CONCLUSIONS

This research highlights the crucial role of semantic metaphors in shaping how individuals communicate and interpret meaning in everyday

digital conversations, particularly on WhatsApp. Guided by Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the study identified structural, orientational, and ontological metaphors as dominant frameworks through which users articulate emotions, thoughts, and social relationships. The analysis demonstrates that metaphor is not a peripheral element of language but a core mechanism of thought and interaction. Expressions such as “*kata-katanya setajam pisau*”, “*ada udang di balik batu*”, or “*naik daun*” exemplify how users cognitively map concrete experiences onto abstract domains to simplify complex ideas and convey emotional nuance.

Furthermore, metaphorical language in WhatsApp serves as a tool for identity expression, social judgment, and cultural reflection. Metaphors like “*bunglon sejati*” or “*ular*” not only characterize personal traits but also embed social evaluations grounded in cultural narratives. These findings affirm that metaphor is central to how individuals navigate informal discourse, maintain relationships, and construct shared meanings in digital contexts.

Theoretically, the study contributes to semantic and cognitive linguistic research by extending metaphor analysis into informal digital communication. Practically, it offers insights for educators, linguists, and communication practitioners interested in the interplay between language, cognition, and culture in modern technology-driven interaction. Overall, the study confirms that metaphors are indispensable tools for expressing lived experience, especially in fast-paced, emotionally charged, and socially rich environments like WhatsApp conversations.

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