



How the Mind Understands Meaning: A Cognitive Semantic Approach

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Abstract

This study investigates how meaning is cognitively constructed through metaphor, image schemas, and semantic frames in English and Indonesian discourse. Employing a qualitative descriptive design, it analyzes 30 text samples from political, religious, educational, and digital communication contexts. Drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), Image Schema Theory, and Frame Semantics, the findings demonstrate that meaning-making is embodied, culturally embedded, and contextually situated. Metaphors like Life Is A Journey and Argument Is War dominate across domains, while image schemas such as Container and Path underlie the cognitive organization of abstract concepts. Semantic frames further enrich meaning by activating situational knowledge structures. The results highlight that linguistic meaning is not fixed but shaped by socio-cultural experiences and cognitive structures.

Keywords: *Cognitive Semantics; Metaphor; Semantic Frame*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji bagaimana makna dibentuk secara kognitif melalui penggunaan metafora konseptual, skema citra (image schemas), dan kerangka semantik (semantic frames) dalam wacana berbahasa Inggris dan Indonesia. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif, penelitian ini menganalisis 30 sampel teks dari konteks politik, keagamaan, pendidikan, dan komunikasi digital. Berdasarkan teori Metafora Konseptual, Skema Citra, dan Semantik Bingkai, hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa pemaknaan bersifat embodied, kontekstual, dan terikat budaya. Metafora seperti Hidup Adalah Perjalanan dan Argumen Adalah Perang mendominasi berbagai konteks, sementara skema citra seperti Kontainer dan Jalur menjadi dasar kognitif dalam memahami konsep abstrak. Selain itu, penggunaan kerangka semantik menunjukkan bahwa makna dipengaruhi oleh pengetahuan latar dan struktur sosial-budaya. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa makna dalam bahasa tidak bersifat tetap, tetapi dibentuk melalui pengalaman tubuh, interaksi sosial, dan struktur kognitif yang bersifat dinamis.

Kata Kunci: *Semantik Kognitif; Metafora; Bingkai Semantik,*

INTRODUCTION

One of the central tenets within cognitive semantics is Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), initially formulated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and later expanded through empirical research and contemporary scholarship (Salih et al., 2025; Hicke & Kristensen-McLachlan, 2024). CMT posits that abstract concepts are comprehended through systematic metaphorical mappings from more concrete, sensorimotor domains. These metaphorical correspondences are not simply stylistic devices or figures of speech but are fundamental cognitive mechanisms that structure thought and language. For example, people often understand time as a valuable resource, as reflected in expressions like “save time” or “waste time,” indicating a metaphorical mapping between the abstract concept of time and the concrete domain of money. Similarly, emotional experiences and interpersonal relationships are commonly described using journey metaphors, such as “we’re not going anywhere in this relationship,” which imply movement through space as a conceptual basis. Moreover, argumentation is frequently construed as a form of combat, with phrases like “defending a position” or “attacking an idea,” further supporting the cognitive pervasiveness of metaphor. Contemporary studies highlight the prevalence of these metaphors in political rhetoric, advertising, and digital communication, demonstrating their influential role in shaping public discourse and social attitudes (Kramer, 2025; Nugraha, 2023).

In addition to metaphor, cognitive semantics also emphasizes the role of image schemas recurring embodied patterns that arise from sensorimotor experience and underlie many of our abstract conceptualizations. Introduced by Johnson (1987), image schemas such as container, source path goal, balance, and force serve as foundational cognitive structures that organize both physical and abstract experiences. For instance, when someone says “she is in trouble,” the container schema is activated, wherein the abstract state of “trouble” is mentally visualized as a bounded space encompassing the individual. These schemas are acquired through everyday interactions with the physical world such as moving through space, manipulating objects, or maintaining bodily balance and subsequently inform the way we structure meaning in language. Because they are pre-conceptual and deeply tied to physical experience, image schemas illustrate how embodied cognition shapes semantic understanding at a fundamental level (Valenzuela & Ibarretxe-Antuñano, 2021). Through these embodied patterns, language users are able to make sense of abstract or non-physical phenomena by relying on cognitive templates grounded in bodily interaction.

Another influential framework within cognitive semantics is Frame Semantics, a theory originally developed by Fillmore (1982). This theory proposes that the meaning of a word or expression cannot be fully grasped without reference to a broader mental structure or “frame” that encapsulates

the associated participants, actions, and situational context. For example, understanding the verb “sell” entails activating a frame involving a seller, a buyer, a product, and an exchange of money. Without this background knowledge, the semantics of the word would remain incomplete. Frame Semantics underscores the idea that lexical items are not isolated symbols but rather cues that evoke rich encyclopedic knowledge and experiential context. This perspective has been particularly valuable in the study of discourse, where meaning often relies heavily on shared background frames among interlocutors. In today’s increasingly globalized and multicultural communication landscape, frame semantics becomes a powerful tool for analyzing how differing cultural backgrounds may shape the activation and interpretation of frames (Lopez-Cardona et al., 2025). Such analysis is especially critical in multilingual contexts, where misaligned frames may lead to misunderstandings or divergent interpretations.

Cognitive semantic theory also intersects closely with the broader paradigm of embodied cognition, which posits that all cognitive processes, including linguistic meaning-making, are grounded in the body’s perceptual and motor systems. Scholars such as Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991) argue that cognition does not occur in a vacuum, nor is it merely a matter of abstract symbol manipulation. Instead, cognition emerges from real-time interaction with the environment, shaped by our sensory apparatus and physical embodiment. Empirical studies from neuroscience and psycholinguistics support this view, showing that both literal and metaphorical language involving action or sensation such as “grasping an idea” or “running into a problem” activate similar brain regions associated with physical experience (Gibbs et al., 2022). These findings reinforce the idea that language comprehension is fundamentally tied to the same cognitive systems we use to navigate the physical world. As a result, meaning is not merely a product of linguistic structures or syntactic rules but arises from embodied conceptualization shaped by lived experience, cultural norms, and contextual factors.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design within the framework of cognitive semantics, aiming to explore how meaning is structured and interpreted through conceptual metaphors, image schemas, and semantic frames in English and Indonesian. Rather than quantifying linguistic features, this study focuses on interpreting language data through experiential and embodied perspectives. The qualitative approach is appropriate for capturing the richness and complexity of meaning making processes, especially when dealing with metaphorical and frame-based language, which requires contextual and cultural interpretation. Cognitive

linguistics principles guide the analysis, emphasizing the role of bodily experience, mental imagery, and socio-cultural grounding in language use.

The primary sources of data are naturally occurring texts from a variety of contexts, including religious sermons, political speeches, educational materials, and social media discourse in both English and Indonesian. These texts were selected purposively based on their density of metaphorical expressions, cultural relevance, and discursive variety. The English data set includes excerpts from online newspapers, TED talks, and YouTube political commentary, while the Indonesian corpus consists of church bulletins, local news articles, and public social media posts. A total of 30 text samples (15 English, 15 Indonesian) were collected and coded manually, focusing on metaphor-laden expressions, schematic patterns, and lexical items evoking specific semantic frames.

The data collection was followed by a multi-stage semantic analysis. First, metaphorical expressions were identified and categorized using Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), which involved mapping source and target domains. Then, image schemas embedded in these metaphors were classified following Johnson (1987), with particular attention to recurrent patterns such as container, path, and force. Finally, Frame Semantics was applied to identify underlying frames using Fillmore's (1982) model, supported by the FrameNet online database. Throughout the process, comparative analysis was conducted to observe cross-linguistic similarities and differences in meaning construction. Triangulation of theory (CMT, image schemas, and Frame Semantics), context (English and Indonesian discourse), and data type (religious, political, educational) ensured the validity and reliability of the interpretation. This methodology provides a comprehensive lens through which the embodied and cultural dimensions of meaning can be uncovered and discussed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Conceptual Mapping (Metaphor Use)

Conceptual metaphors, as proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), are not merely decorative features of language but serve as primary tools through which humans understand abstract domains. They allow speakers to map knowledge from a familiar *source domain* onto an unfamiliar or abstract *target domain*. This mapping facilitates comprehension, emotional connection, and cognitive framing. Our analysis revealed that metaphors permeate both English and Indonesian discourse, especially in political speeches, religious rhetoric, social media posts, and educational contexts. These metaphors are not randomly chosen but reflect shared embodied experiences and culturally informed worldviews.

Table 1. Conceptual Metaphors Across Contexts

Source	Target	English	Indonesia	Contextu	Interpret
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Domain	Domain	Exempl es	n Examples	al Domain	ation
War	Argument	"They attacked his weak claim", "She defended her beliefs strongly"	"Ia menyerang pendapat lawannya", "Saya mempertahankan posisi saya"	Political debate, Academic discourse	Arguments are combative; reasoning is conceptualized as tactical warfare.
Journey	Life	"We're on a difficult road", "He's going nowhere"	"Perjalanan hidupku tidak mudah", "Ia kembali ke jalan yang benar"	Motivational speech, Religious sermons	Life is a trajectory; direction implies purpose, morality, and progress.
Weather	Emotions	"Clouded with doubt", "Sunny disposition"	"Hatinya cerah kembali", "Mendung kesedihan menyelimuti"	Social media, Literature	Emotions are linked to atmospheric conditions volatile, visual, and sensory.
Light/Darkness	Knowledge/Ignorance	"Shed light on the issue", "Left in the dark"	"Membuka wawasan baru", "Kita berada dalam kegelapan informasi"	Education, Journalism	Understanding is illumination; ignorance is darkness.
Heat	Anger	"Boiling with rage", "He exploded"	"Hatinya mendidih", "Dia meledak karena"	Interpersonal communication	Anger is conceptualized as heat and pressure

Virus	Emotion/Social Trends	d” “Contagious laughter”, “Toxic positivity”	marah” “Rasa takut menular”, “Positivitas yang beracun”	Pandemic discourse, Psychology	buildup. Social emotions are like viruses spreading, infecting, escalating.
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The metaphor "life is a journey" appeared with striking regularity in both English and Indonesian. However, its elaboration reflects cultural values. In English motivational talks, it typically aligns with career and self-fulfillment ("He's on a fast track to success"), while in Indonesian sermons, it is often spiritual and moral ("Menempuh jalan Tuhan"). Metaphors also have persuasive power. In political rhetoric, the metaphor "argument is war" is used to delegitimize opponents and elevate one's stance. It frames the speaker as a warrior and the debate as a battlefield, appealing to pathos and ethos simultaneously. In contrast, metaphors of journey or growth may be used to construct a more collaborative or inspirational tone.

Image Schema Activation

Image schemas are pre-linguistic cognitive structures that arise from bodily interactions with the environment. According to Johnson (1987), these schemas shape how we think, speak, and understand the world. They are schematic, dynamic patterns such as container, path, balance, force, and link that serve as the deep grammar of cognition. Our study found that these schemas manifest consistently across languages and conceptual domains, highlighting their universality. However, the way they are metaphorically extended in discourse depends on cultural context and communicative purpose.

Table 2. Image Schemas in Use

Image Schema	Domain	English Expressions	Indonesian Expressions	Contextual Usage	Cognitive Implication
Container	Emotion, Thought	"In love", "Trapped in fear", "Out of ideas"	"Dalam kesedihan", "Terjebak dalam kecemasan", "Kehabisan ide"	Counseling, Poetry, Media	Mental states are spatial entities we are inside or outside them.
Path	Morality, Development	"Stay on track", "Move"	"Jalan yang benar", "Berbelok"	Education, Religion,	Actions are journeys; decisions

		forward”, “Lost his way”	arah”, “Meninggalk an jalan Tuhan”	Politics	involve direction and movement.
Balance	Emotion, Justice	“Balanced view”, “Weigh the options”, “Emotional stability”	“Menjaga keseimbang an hidup”, “Argumen yang seimbang”, “Emosi yang tidak stabil”	Legal discourse , Therapy, Debates	Justice, fairness, and logic are conceptualiz ed through equilibrium.
Force	Social Struggle	“Overcome pressure”, “Push back against injustice”	“Melawan tekanan sosial”, “Dorongan untuk berubah”	Activism, Psycholo gy	Social life is a field of physical forces pressure, resistance, impulse.
Link	Relationshi ps	“We’re deeply connected”, “She cut ties with him”	“Terikat batin”, “Memutus hubungan”, “Koneksi spiritual”	Family discourse , Friendshi p, Religion	Human bonds are physical links connection implies emotional depth.
Center- Periphe ry	Attention, Importanc e	“Central issue”, “Marginaliz ed voices”	“Pusat perhatian”, “Suara- suara pinggiran”	News, Academic texts	Social attention and value are spatially structured.

Frame-Based Interpretation

Frame Semantics, developed by Fillmore (1982), provides another layer of understanding by showing that meaning depends on activating structured, encyclopedic knowledge. Words are not self-contained but are cues that invoke entire scenes or "frames" comprising agents, actions, objects, and goals. The analysis demonstrated that both English and Indonesian discourse heavily depend on such frames. Moreover, *frame blending* and *cultural framing* add complexity to interpretation.

Table 3. Semantic Frames and Cross-Cultural Usage

Frame	Elements	English	Indonesian	Interpretatio
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		Examples	Examples	n
Commercial Transaction	Buyer, Seller, Goods, Price	"I sold my idea", "They're buying influence"	"Menjual suara", "Investasi dalam masa depan"	Even non-commercial domains (e.g., politics, ideas) use this frame metaphorically.
Service	Agent, Recipient, Duty	"Serve the people", "Public servant"	"Melayani umat", "Pelayan masyarakat"	In Indonesia, this often carries religious connotation devotion and humility.
Conflict	Opponent, Goal, Outcome	"Fighting corruption", "Battling inequality"	"Melawan ketidakadilan", "Bertarung untuk kebenaran"	Activist and political language heavily relies on this frame.
Education	Teacher, Learner, Content	"Deliver knowledge", "Struggle to grasp the concept"	"Menyerap pelajaran", "Menyampaikan materi"	Teaching is transfer; learning is internalization.
Journey	Agent, Path, Goal, Obstacles	"He's finding his path", "Strayed from the goal"	"Berjalan bersama Tuhan", "Menapaki kehidupan baru"	A common frame for personal transformation and spirituality.
War/Battlefield	Combatant, Weapon, Victory	"Online debate is a war zone", "He took a hit"	"Pertempuran politik", "Serangan verbal"	Intensifies discourse, often used for rhetorical effect.

Meaning Is Constructed Through Embodied Patterns

The prevalence of conceptual metaphors such as *argument is war*, *life is a journey*, and *emotions are weather* across both English and Indonesian data illustrates the universality of certain conceptual mappings grounded in bodily experience. These metaphorical expressions are not mere linguistic ornaments; they provide essential cognitive frameworks for reasoning about

abstract domains like morality, politics, education, and identity. This supports Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) foundational claim that metaphors structure thought, not just language. Furthermore, their presence in emotionally charged contexts like political protest or religious sermons demonstrates how metaphors are strategically used to influence interpretation, evoke empathy, and mobilize social action.

However, metaphor usage also reflects cultural specificity. For example, the metaphor "*hidup sebagai perjalanan spiritual*" in Indonesian religious discourse embeds moral obligations and divine directionality, which are less emphasized in secular English equivalents. This supports the view that while the *source domains* of metaphors may be universal (e.g., movement, war, light), the *target domains* and elaboration are culturally determined (Kövecses, 2015). Therefore, any semantic analysis must attend not only to cross-linguistic similarities but also to the socio-cultural grounding of metaphorical reasoning.

Image Schemas Reflect Pre-Linguistic Bodily Knowledge

The activation of image schemas such as *container*, *path*, *balance*, and *FORCE* confirms the hypothesis that language is rooted in sensorimotor experience. The way speakers talk about emotions, mental states, morality, and interpersonal relationships consistently draws on physical experiences of movement, containment, pressure, and spatial orientation. For instance, conceptualizing depression as "*falling into a dark hole*" or moral integrity as "*staying on the right path*" indicates that abstract psychological and ethical concepts are mapped onto concrete physical experiences of space and motion.

The consistency of these schemas across languages suggests their universality (Johnson, 1987). However, their expression and frequency are contextually modulated. The PATH schema, for example, was highly frequent in Indonesian religious contexts (e.g., "*menapaki jalan Tuhan*") where it reinforces notions of spiritual direction and destiny, whereas in English, it often appears in personal growth and career-related narratives (e.g., "*He's on a fast track to promotion*"). This aligns with the theory of *cultural embodiment*, where shared physical experiences are selectively emphasized or deemphasized by cultural narratives (Valenzuela & Ibarretxe-Antuñano, 2021).

Frames Mediate Cultural and Contextual Knowledge

The exploration of semantic frames reveals how language cues activate rich, culturally embedded mental scenarios involving roles, goals, and background assumptions. The meaning of words like "*serve*," "*fight*," or "*sell*" cannot be understood in isolation; they depend on the activation of background frames such as *service*, *conflict*, or *commercial transaction*. This

confirms Fillmore's (1982) assertion that meaning is encyclopedic and situated.

The use of the *service* frame in Indonesian ("melayani jemaat", "pelayan masyarakat") is deeply shaped by religious and communal values, implying humility, devotion, and moral obligation. In contrast, the same frame in English ("public servant") is more institutional and bureaucratic. Such divergence illustrates how frames are not merely cognitive but ideological they carry moral, social, and emotional weight.

Moreover, the phenomenon of frame blending such as combining the *journey* and *war* frames in expressions like "*navigating a political battlefield*" shows how speakers dynamically construct meaning for rhetorical impact. These blends enrich communication by layering multiple conceptual frames, increasing expressiveness and persuasive power. For educators and discourse analysts, recognizing these frames and blends is crucial in helping learners interpret meaning beyond the surface of language.

Implications for Education, Translation, and Discourse

The findings have significant implications for fields such as efl education, intercultural communication, and translation studies. in language teaching, understanding conceptual metaphors and image schemas can help learners grasp idiomatic and abstract expressions more intuitively. for example, explaining "emotional baggage" as a metaphor grounded in the container schema makes the phrase more relatable and memorable. In translation, awareness of culturally embedded frames can prevent semantic distortion. Translating "*serve the nation*" to "*melayani negara*" without understanding its differing connotations may lead to ideological misrepresentation. Similarly, translating metaphors without considering source-target domain mappings can strip the text of its emotional and conceptual power.

In discourse analysis, cognitive semantic tools can be employed to uncover hidden ideological structures, manipulative rhetoric, and cultural values embedded in language. Metaphor analysis, frame mapping, and schema identification provide systematic methods for unpacking meaning in political speeches, media narratives, advertisements, and religious texts.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that meaning construction in language is fundamentally shaped by embodied cognition, cultural context, and conceptual structures. the use of conceptual metaphors such as life is a journey and argument is war reveals how abstract ideas are understood through familiar physical experiences across languages. image schemas like container, path, and balance serve as deep cognitive patterns that underpin our conceptualizations of emotions, morality, and social relations. Frame Semantics further shows that linguistic expressions evoke broader

situational knowledge, requiring background context for full interpretation. These findings validate the cognitive semantic perspective, which views meaning not as fixed or universal but as contextually dynamic and experientially grounded.

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