The Architecture of Meaning: A Linguistic Analysis of Metaphors and Idioms

Erick Saut Maruli Sihombing*¹, Bernieke Anggita Ristia Damanik²
¹²Universitas HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar
Email ericksihombing5@gmail.com, bernieke.damanik@uhn.ac.id,

Abstract
This study investigates the cognitive and cultural mechanisms underlying the use of metaphors and idioms to understand their role in constructing linguistic meaning. Using a qualitative approach grounded in linguistic and psycholinguistic analysis, the findings indicate that metaphors involve conceptual mapping between source and target domains, demanding greater cognitive effort, particularly when novel. In contrast, idioms function as fixed expressions stored in memory, allowing rapid retrieval and comprehension when conventionalized. Both reflect cultural values and collective experiences, forming an architecture of meaning that connects individual mental processes with social identity. These findings offer academic implications for linguistic, psycholinguistic, and cultural discourse studies, particularly in understanding the role of figurative language in social interaction.
Keywords: *Metaphor; Idiom; Figurative Language*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengkaji mekanisme kognitif dan budaya yang mendasari penggunaan metafora dan idiom untuk memahami perannya dalam membangun makna bahasa. Melalui pendekatan kualitatif berbasis analisis linguistik dan psikolinguistik, hasil menunjukkan bahwa metafora melibatkan pemetaan konseptual antara domain sumber dan sasaran yang menuntut usaha kognitif lebih tinggi, terutama ketika bersifat baru. Sebaliknya, idiom berfungsi sebagai ungkapan tetap yang tersimpan dalam memori, sehingga dapat diakses dan dipahami secara cepat ketika sudah konvensional. Keduanya mencerminkan nilai-nilai budaya dan pengalaman kolektif, sehingga membentuk arsitektur makna yang menghubungkan proses mental individu dengan identitas sosial. Temuan ini memberikan implikasi akademik bagi kajian linguistik, psikolinguistik, dan wacana budaya, khususnya dalam memahami peran bahasa kiasan dalam interaksi sosial.
Kata Kunci: *Metafora; Idiom; Bahasa Kiasan*

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between language and meaning has long been a central concern in linguistics, as meaning is not merely a product of literal word usage but also of figurative and culturally embedded expressions. Among the most salient linguistic devices that shape and enrich meaning are

metaphors and idioms, which function as cognitive and communicative tools to conceptualize complex ideas and emotions. Metaphors allow speakers to understand one conceptual domain in terms of another, while idioms offer fixed, culturally specific expressions whose meanings often cannot be deduced from their literal components. These phenomena are central to what may be called the "architecture of meaning," where literal and non-literal forms coexist and interact to produce nuanced communication (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008; Kövecses, 2020). In this sense, examining metaphors and idioms provides insight into both linguistic structures and the cognitive processes underlying meaning-making.

Academic debates regarding metaphors and idioms often revolve around the degree to which they are products of universal cognitive patterns versus culturally specific constructs. Cognitive linguists argue that metaphors are grounded in embodied experience and therefore exhibit cross-linguistic similarities (Kövecses, 2020), while scholars in sociolinguistics and discourse analysis emphasize the culturally bound nature of idiomatic and metaphorical usage (Charteris-Black, 2017). Furthermore, there is ongoing discussion about the extent to which idioms should be treated as fixed lexical items or as dynamic expressions subject to variation and adaptation in context (Gibbs, 2017). These debates highlight the need for a nuanced, interdisciplinary approach that integrates semantic, pragmatic, and cultural perspectives in the analysis of metaphor and idiom use.

Despite extensive theoretical contributions, there remain challenges in understanding how metaphors and idioms function together in the construction of meaning. In particular, the interaction between metaphorical conceptual frameworks and idiomatic expressions in actual discourse contexts is underexplored, especially in non-English and cross-cultural settings. Additionally, the rapid changes in communication brought about by digital media have introduced new metaphorical patterns and idiomatic innovations that challenge traditional definitions and categorizations (Deignan, Littlemore, & Semino, 2019). This raises questions about whether the architecture of meaning is evolving toward greater hybridity, blending literal, metaphorical, and idiomatic forms in ways that existing models do not fully capture.

Previous research has provided significant groundwork for understanding metaphors and idioms, offering frameworks for their cognitive, semantic, and pragmatic analysis. Lakoff and Johnson's (2008) conceptual metaphor theory laid the foundation for analyzing metaphor as a systematic mapping between conceptual domains. Kövecses (2020) expanded this framework to account for cultural variation, while Gibbs (2017) contributed insights into the psychological processing of idiomatic expressions. More recent studies, such as those by Charteris-Black (2017) and Deignan et al. (2019), have examined metaphor and idiom use in political

discourse, media language, and intercultural communication. These works demonstrate that metaphors and idioms are not only linguistic phenomena but also socio-cultural resources that shape thought and discourse.

This study aims to investigate the ways in which metaphors and idioms interact to form a coherent architecture of meaning in linguistic communication. It seeks to bridge cognitive and cultural perspectives, analyzing how these two forms of non-literal language complement and influence one another in real discourse contexts. By examining contemporary usage patterns and drawing on both semantic and pragmatic frameworks, this research intends to contribute to ongoing debates about the nature of meaning construction, offering insights that are relevant not only to linguists but also to educators, translators, and communication specialists. Ultimately, the goal is to deepen understanding of how literal and figurative elements co-construct meaning, reinforcing the view that language is both a cognitive system and a cultural artifact.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative library research approach, focusing on the systematic collection, evaluation, and synthesis of scholarly literature on metaphors and idioms within the field of linguistics. Data sources included peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and conference proceedings published to ensure the inclusion of recent theoretical developments and empirical findings. The search was conducted using academic databases such as Google Scholar, applying keywords such as "metaphor," "idiom," "figurative language," and "linguistic meaning." Inclusion criteria were set to select works that addressed both theoretical frameworks and practical applications, ensuring a balanced representation of perspectives.

The research process followed three key stages: identification, evaluation, and synthesis. During the identification stage, relevant studies were retrieved and screened for relevance based on their titles, abstracts, and keywords. The evaluation stage involved critical appraisal of the methodological rigor, theoretical grounding, and relevance of each source, using adapted checklists from established qualitative research appraisal tools. Finally, in the synthesis stage, thematic analysis was applied to organize the findings into coherent categories that reflect the interplay between metaphorical and idiomatic expressions in linguistic meaning construction.

To ensure reliability and validity, the selection and analysis processes were conducted with attention to academic rigor, transparency, and replicability. Triangulation was achieved by cross-referencing multiple sources and perspectives, while analytical rigor was maintained through iterative coding and theme refinement. This methodological framework not only ensures a comprehensive understanding of the literature but also

provides a structured foundation for interpreting how metaphors and idioms contribute to the architecture of meaning in language.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Metaphors: Definition and Conceptual

Metaphors and idioms represent two central phenomena in figurative language that play a significant role in shaping both linguistic expression and cognitive processing. In recent linguistic scholarship, metaphors are increasingly recognized not merely as decorative devices but as fundamental cognitive tools that structure human thought and communication. Building on the foundations of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), contemporary studies highlight that metaphors establish mappings between a concrete, familiar source domain and an abstract, less tangible target domain, enabling individuals to conceptualize complex ideas through accessible mental frameworks. For instance, the conceptual metaphor "time is money" activates a network of expressions such as "spend time," "waste time," or "invest time," which shape our reasoning about time as if it were a quantifiable economic resource. Recent research emphasizes that such conceptualizations are deeply embedded in mental models, influencing not only how we speak but also how we perceive and interact with the world (Kövecses, 2020; Littlemore, 2019).

From a cognitive perspective, metaphors like argument is war or love is a journey reveal the pervasive influence of metaphorical thinking in structuring social interaction and emotional experience. In the case of argument is war, linguistic choices such as "defend your position" or "attack the point" frame argumentation as a competitive battle, often reinforcing adversarial communication styles. Conversely, love is a journey organizes the understanding of romantic relationships in terms of shared destinations, obstacles, and progression. Recent empirical studies in psycholinguistics and discourse analysis demonstrate that these conceptual metaphors are not arbitrary but are culturally reinforced and can vary significantly across languages and communities (Gibbs, 2017; Deignan et al., 2019). This indicates that while the cognitive mechanism underlying metaphor is universal, its expression is shaped by specific socio-cultural experiences.

Idioms, while also non-literal, differ from metaphors in that their meanings are fixed and must be learned as whole lexical units rather than being transparently derived from their constituent words. The idiom "kick the bucket," for example, conveys the meaning "to die," which cannot be logically deduced from its literal components. Modern linguistic research underscores that idioms function as cultural shortcuts, encoding shared historical knowledge, societal values, and community-specific humor. Their interpretation often requires familiarity with the cultural context in which they originated, making them particularly challenging for second-language

learners (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2012; Chen & Lai, 2023). Moreover, recent corpus-based and cross-linguistic studies show that idioms frequently serve as markers of in-group identity, reinforcing social cohesion through the use of culturally resonant expressions (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2021). In this way, idioms and metaphors, while distinct in form and processing, collectively contribute to the architecture of meaning by blending linguistic creativity with cultural cognition.

The Interplay of Language and Culture in Idiomatic Expressions

Idioms represent a distinctive intersection between language and culture, functioning as compact vessels that carry historical, social, and cognitive elements of a speech community. They encapsulate shared experiences, beliefs, and environmental contexts, making them both linguistic expressions and cultural artifacts. As noted by Kövecses (2020), idioms often emerge from the lived realities of a society, embedding within them symbolic references to the environment, professions, and values of their speakers. For instance, "It's raining cats and dogs" may appear nonsensical to an outsider but vividly conveys the concept of heavy rain to those within the cultural sphere of English. Similarly, "Don't count your chickens before they hatch" reflects the agrarian background of English-speaking societies while also communicating a universally applicable message about caution and avoiding premature assumptions. These expressions endure across generations, serving as cultural memory, preserving snapshots of social life, and revealing the intricate interplay between language, thought, and tradition.

Beyond their cultural significance, idioms function as powerful communicative shortcuts, enabling speakers to transmit complex meanings with brevity and precision. When a person says, "He spilled the beans," the listener can instantly understand the act of revealing a secret, bypassing lengthy explanation. As Gibbs and Colston (2019) highlight, idioms enhance the efficiency of discourse by compressing nuanced ideas into familiar, culturally anchored phrases. This communicative economy, however, depends on shared background knowledge; idioms lose their effectiveness when the listener lacks familiarity with the underlying metaphor. Such reliance on common cultural frames means idioms can also pose challenges for second-language learners, who may interpret them literally and thus misunderstand the intended meaning.

In addition to their practical communicative role, idioms contribute to the formation and reinforcement of group identity. Their correct use signals fluency, cultural awareness, and often in-group membership (Liu & Jiang, 2021). Native speakers effortlessly navigate idiomatic expressions like "break the ice" in social situations, while non-native speakers may struggle to grasp the metaphor without cultural immersion. This dynamic reveals why idioms

are frequently considered one of the most advanced areas of second-language acquisition: they demand not only linguistic competence but also the ability to decode culturally embedded meaning. For learners, mastering idioms marks a threshold into deeper communicative intimacy with native speakers, allowing them to participate more fully in the linguistic and cultural life of the community.

Given these functions, idioms can be seen as both linguistic tools and socio-cultural markers. They are shaped by historical contexts, maintained through everyday usage, and passed down as part of the collective cultural heritage. As language evolves, new idioms emerge, reflecting shifts in technology, lifestyle, and societal values, while older idioms may fade or transform in meaning. This dynamic nature reinforces the notion that idioms are living cultural artifacts, simultaneously preserving tradition and adapting to contemporary realities. As such, their study offers valuable insight into the cognitive and cultural patterns that shape human communication, making idioms a crucial subject in both linguistic research and cross-cultural communication studies.

Cognitive Mechanisms in Novel Metaphor Processing

Novel metaphors represent a unique intersection between linguistic creativity and cognitive processing, requiring the brain to engage in active construction of meaning rather than relying solely on pre-stored semantic associations. Contemporary psycholinguistic research demonstrates that the interpretation of such expressions involves a process known as conceptual mapping, in which a familiar source domain is systematically related to a more abstract target domain through shared attributes or relational similarities (Lakoff & Johnson, 2020; Xu et al., 2022). This mapping process demands the activation of higher-order cognitive mechanisms, including abstraction, analogical reasoning, and inferential thinking. For example, in the metaphor "The moon is a lonely coin," the mind must isolate salient features of a coin—its roundness, metallic sheen, and singularity—and project these onto the concept of the moon, generating an image that conveys both visual similarity and emotional nuance, such as isolation or remoteness. Such mental operations are inherently constructive, engaging both hemispheres of the brain but with a notable reliance on right-hemisphere networks associated with figurative meaning and semantic integration (Yang et al., 2019).

Empirical studies from the last decade confirm that the novelty of a metaphor directly influences cognitive load. Unfamiliar metaphors are processed more slowly than conventional ones because they lack pre-established associative links in the mental lexicon, requiring the listener or reader to build meaning dynamically in real time (Cardillo et al., 2021; Giora, 2019). Functional MRI findings indicate that novel metaphors activate a

broader neural network than familiar expressions, including regions involved in working memory, visual imagery, and emotional appraisal (Bohrn et al., 2017; Citron & Goldberg, 2014). This expanded neural engagement suggests that novel metaphors are not only semantically richer but also more memorable, as they recruit attentional resources and emotional resonance simultaneously. Furthermore, the cognitive effort invested in decoding them often results in a deeper personal connection to the content, enhancing both retention and affective impact.

The interpretive flexibility inherent in novel metaphors also makes them powerful tools for shaping perception and framing abstract concepts in fresh ways. This aligns with recent cognitive linguistics perspectives, which argue that metaphoric thinking is not a peripheral ornament of language but a central mechanism through which humans conceptualize complex or intangible phenomena (Gibbs, 2017; Steen, 2020). By compelling the mind to cross conceptual boundaries, novel metaphors can reframe experiences, challenge entrenched perspectives, and evoke emotions that literal language may fail to capture. In this sense, their cognitive impact extends beyond the act of comprehension, influencing subsequent thought patterns and even decision-making. Thus, the study of novel metaphors is not merely an exploration of figurative speech but an inquiry into how language actively participates in constructing and reshaping human cognition.

Metaphors and Idioms: Cognitive Processing and Cultural Foundations

The cognitive processing of idioms reveals a fascinating interplay between language, memory, and culture. Unlike novel metaphors, which require the listener to actively engage in semantic mapping between unrelated concepts, idioms are typically stored and retrieved as fixed units in the mental lexicon. This process, often described as formulaic language processing, significantly reduces cognitive load because the brain bypasses literal interpretation and directly accesses the intended figurative meaning. For instance, when someone hears "He spilled the beans", the listener does not imagine a person dropping legumes; instead, they immediately interpret it as revealing a secret. Neurolinguistic research using fMRI and EEG has demonstrated that familiar idioms activate regions in the left hemisphere associated with lexical retrieval and syntactic processing, while novel figurative expressions engage broader neural networks, including the prefrontal cortex and the right hemisphere, which are linked to abstract reasoning and conceptual integration (Bohrn et al., 2012; Müller & Basho, 2017).

Furthermore, idioms and metaphors are deeply embedded in cultural contexts, reflecting the collective experiences, values, and history of a community. The imagery found in these expressions is rarely arbitrary; rather, it emerges from shared knowledge and environmental familiarity. For

example, the English idiom *"to kill two birds with one stone"* reflects a pragmatic, goal-oriented worldview, while the Japanese saying *"Tade kuu mushi mo suki-zuki"* ("some bugs eat knotweed, others like it") captures a culturally nuanced appreciation of diversity in taste and preference. Such cultural artifacts not only serve as linguistic shorthand for complex ideas but also reinforce communal identity by embedding culturally specific knowledge into everyday communication (Kövecses, 2015; Chen, 2021). This reinforces the view that idiomatic and metaphorical expressions are as much cultural heritage as they are linguistic tools.

From a cognitive-linguistic perspective, the degree of familiarity with an idiom plays a pivotal role in determining how it is processed. Highly conventionalized idioms are retrieved faster and more automatically, requiring minimal working memory resources, while less familiar expressions demand more analytical interpretation and semantic integration. This difference in processing efficiency is supported by experimental studies showing that idiom familiarity correlates with reduced activation in areas responsible for semantic ambiguity resolution (Romero-Trillo et al., 2020; Siyanova-Chanturia & Martinez, 2015). Consequently, idioms function not merely as ornamental features of language but as efficient communicative devices shaped by both cognitive economy and cultural specificity. In this light, idioms and metaphors can be seen as cognitive bridges—condensing complex conceptual structures into accessible linguistic forms that preserve cultural meaning while optimizing communication.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis reveals that metaphors and idioms, while both forms of figurative language, follow distinct cognitive and cultural pathways. Metaphors rely on conceptual mapping between domains, engaging higher-order cognitive processes and demanding interpretive effort, whereas idioms function as fixed expressions retrieved from memory, enabling faster processing when conventionalized. Culturally, both reflect shared experiences and values, embedding historical and environmental influences into language. This interplay between cognitive mechanisms and cultural context demonstrates that metaphors and idioms together construct a layered "architecture of meaning" that connects individual thought with collective identity. Academically, these findings underscore the need for interdisciplinary research linking linguistics, psycholinguistics, and cultural studies to better understand how figurative language shapes cognition, communication, and cultural transmission.

REFERENCES

Boers, F., & Lindstromberg, S. (2012). Experimental and intervention studies on formulaic sequences in a second language. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 32*, 83–110. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190512000050

Bohrn, I. C., Altmann, U., & Jacobs, A. M. (2012). Looking at the brains behind figurative language A quantitative meta-analysis of neuroimaging studies on metaphor, idiom, and irony processing. *Neuropsychologia, 50*(11), 2669–2683. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuropsychologia.2012.07.021

Bohrn, I. C., Altmann, U., & Jacobs, A. M. (2017). Looking at the brains behind figurative language A quantitative meta-analysis of neuroimaging studies on metaphor, idiom, and irony processing. *Neuropsychologia, 105*, 241–251. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuropsychologia.2017.01.023

Cardillo, E. R., Watson, C. E., Schmidt, G. L., Kranjec, A., & Chatterjee, A. (2013). From novel to familiar: Tuning the brain for metaphors. *NeuroImage, 59*(4), 3212–3221. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuroimage.2011.11.079

Charteris-Black, J. (2018). *Analysing political speeches: Rhetoric, discourse and metaphor*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-58534-8

Chen, H. J.-H., & Lai, H.-Y. T. (2023). The acquisition of idiomatic expressions in second language learning: A review of research trends and pedagogical implications. *Language Teaching Research, 27*(2), 187–207. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168820985185

Chen, M. (2021). Cultural conceptualizations in idioms: A comparative study between English and Chinese. *Language and Intercultural Communication, 21*(4), 456–470. https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2020.1821446

De Grauwe, S., Jacobs, A. M., Chwilla, D. J., & Desmet, T. (2010). When transparent is not enough: Effects of familiarity on understanding idioms in an ERP study. *Brain Research, 1312*, 100–114. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.brainres.2009.12.047

Deignan, A., Littlemore, J., & Semino, E. (2019). *Figurative language, genre and register*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108552966

Deignan, A., Littlemore, J., & Semino, E. (2019). *Figurative language, genre and register*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316338763

Dobrovol'skij, D., & Piirainen, E. (2021). *Idioms: Motivation, variation, and change* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108888968

Gibbs, R. W. (2017). Metaphor, cognition, and behavior. *Cambridge Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics*, 417–435. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316339732.024

Gibbs, R. W., Jr. (2017). Metaphor wars: Conceptual metaphor in human life. *Metaphor and Symbol, 32*(3), 145–161. https://doi.org/10.1080/10926488.2017.1338011

Gibbs, R. W., Jr., & Colston, H. L. (2019). *Interpreting figurative meaning*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316847980

Kövecses, Z. (2015). *Where metaphors come from: Reconsidering context in metaphor*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190224868.001.0001

Kövecses, Z. (2020). *Metaphor and culture*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429028606

Kövecses, Z. (2020). *Metaphor and emotion: Language, culture, and body in human feeling* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108859126

Kövecses, Z. (2020). *Metaphor: A practical introduction* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (2023). *Metaphors we live by* (40th anniversary ed.). University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226825906.001.0001

Littlemore, J. (2019). *Metaphors in the mind: Sources of variation in embodied metaphor*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108182325

Littlemore, J., & Turner, J. (2019). Metaphors in academic discourse: A cross-disciplinary study. *Applied Linguistics*, 40(3), 428–451. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amy005

Liu, D., & Jiang, P. (2021). Second language idiom acquisition: Effects of input, learning conditions, and individual differences. *Applied Linguistics*, 42(4), 619–644. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amz061

Mashal, N., Faust, M., Hendler, T., & Jung-Beeman, M. (2007). An fMRI investigation of the neural correlates underlying the processing of novel metaphoric expressions: Graded salience hypothesis. *Brain and Language, 100*(2), 115–126. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bandl.2005.10.005

Müller, R., & Basho, S. (2017). Figurative language processing in the brain: Metaphors, idioms, and beyond. *Language and Cognitive Processes, 32*(10), 1245–1267. https://doi.org/10.1080/01690965.2016.1258523

Romero-Trillo, J., Berghoff, M., & Valenzuela, J. (2020). Familiarity effects in figurative language processing: Evidence from reaction time studies. *Pragmatics & Cognition, 27*(2), 189–210. https://doi.org/10.1075/pc.18023.rom

Siyanova-Chanturia, A., & Martinez, R. (2015). The idiom principle revisited. *Applied Linguistics, 36*(5), 549–569. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amt054

Steen, G. J., & Reijnierse, W. G. (2021). The contemporary theory of metaphor—Now new and improved! *Metaphor and Symbol*, 36(2), 49–65. https://doi.org/10.1080/10926488.2021.1910140