

Metaphorical Expressions in Internet Language

Zehua Li

Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Macau, Macau SAR, China

MC43326@um.edu.mo

Abstract. In the 1980s, American linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson proposed the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, arguing that metaphor is not only a major rhetorical strategy in language, but also a fundamental conceptual tool. Metaphorical expressions are widespread in internet language and can generally be categorized into ontological metaphors, orientational metaphors, and structural metaphors. These expressions not only simplify complex ideas, but also directly address pressing societal issues.

Keywords: Metaphor; internet language; conceptual metaphor.

1. Introduction

In contemporary internet discourse, the phrase “I love you” is often reduced to the meaning of “thank you”, while “baby” is frequently employed as a casual equivalent of “hello”. The overextension of such intimate terms has attracted considerable criticism from both scholars and the public, often being regarded as a form of linguistic “inflation” that results in the devaluation of language. This critique itself exemplifies a structural metaphor: originally, inflation belongs to the domain of economics, denoting the depreciation of currency; in this context, however, language is metaphorically conceptualized as currency. This phenomenon demonstrates the ubiquity of metaphor in everyday discourse and vividly illustrates the conceptual metaphor theory proposed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By*.

From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, metaphor is not merely a rhetorical device but an essential mechanism that shapes human thought and cognition. Since cognitive linguistics emphasizes that “language is thought” metaphorical phenomena in internet language should not be seen merely as superficial changes in expression, but rather as reflections of deeper cultural, psychological, and social cognitive structures.

2. Types of Metaphors in Internet Language

2.1 Ontological Metaphors

Ontological metaphors conceptualize abstract and intangible ideas, emotions, or events as concrete entities. This type of metaphor often relies on intuitive perceptions of real-world objects, thereby establishing associations between abstract states and tangible, visible entities.

2.1.1 Bodily Organ Metaphors

Metaphors based on bodily organs are among the most productive in internet discourse. The expression “glass heart” conceptualizes the heart as a fragile container, easily shattered by criticism, while “blocked heart” (xin sai) portrays the heart as a pipeline obstructed by negative emotions. Both metaphors emphasize the fragility and instability of modern emotional life. Similarly, the brain is metaphorized as a container that can be filled with specific contents. The phrase “love brain” describes individuals entirely preoccupied with romantic attachment, whereas the productive construction “XX head” (e.g. bread head, chocolate head, Disney head) illustrates how obsessive preoccupation with a particular object or idea dominates cognition. These metaphors highlight how embodied experience provides the basis for conceptualizing abstract psychological states.

2.1.2 Food Metaphors

Food metaphors in internet discourse rely on perceptual experience to conceptualize both physical and psychological states. The expression “egg tart” depicts individuals as emotionally fragile and physically vulnerable, drawing on the pastry’s rounded shape and its tendency to collapse under slight pressure. In a similar vein, the term “sausage personality” compares the human body and mind to processed meat—overly fatty, of uncertain composition, and passively lying on a grill. This metaphor conveys a sense of physical inertia, unhealthy lifestyle, and susceptibility to stress. Together, such food-based metaphors reveal how internet users employ humor and self-deprecation to address contemporary anxieties about mental health and body image, while simultaneously negotiating cultural pressures through playful linguistic creativity.

2.2 Orientational Metaphors

Orientational metaphors are based on humans’ basic perception of space, where directions such as “up–down,” “front–back,” and “inside–outside” are used to organize abstract concepts. In Chinese internet discourse, this spatial mapping is especially common. For example, *neijuan* (“involution”) describes endless competition that folds inward rather than moving forward, while *tangping* (“lying flat”) metaphorically represents withdrawing from such competition by adopting a passive stance. Similarly, *dingfeng xiangjian* (“see you at the peak”) conveys the ambition of striving for the top. Among these, the up–down schema is particularly prominent, with “up” associated with positive or valued states (such as excitement, growth, or moral nobility) and “down” linked to negative or devalued states (such as disappointment, decline, or corruption).

Orientational metaphors based on vertical spatial schemas—particularly the “up–down” axis—are widely used in Chinese internet discourse to structure abstract domains such as emotion, quantity, morality, and social hierarchy. In the emotional domain, expressions like *shangtóu* indicate heightened excitement or infatuation, often implying the loss of rational control, whereas *xiatou* and *emo* denote emotional decline, disinterest, or depressive states. These metaphors reflect the conceptual mapping of good is up and bad is down. In terms of quantity, increases are described metaphorically as upward movement (*zhangfen*), while decreases are framed as downward movement (*diaofen*), grounding abstract numerical shifts in embodied experience, such as rising or falling liquid levels. Moral evaluations are similarly verticalized: *gaoshang* implies moral elevation or nobility, whereas *duoluo* suggests moral decline or corruption. Metaphorical constructions like *renshe bengkuai* (“persona collapse”) conceptualize one’s social or ethical downfall as a physical drop, often merging orientational and structural metaphor domains. Finally, vertical metaphors are extensively used to express power asymmetries and social stratification. Terms like *shangweizhe* and *xiaweizhe* linguistically encode authority and subordination, respectively. Age-related expressions such as *nianshang* and *nianxia* carry implicit associations with maturity, control, or dominance on the one hand, and impulsivity or passivity on the other. Collectively, these orientational metaphors not only reflect embodied cognition but also reproduce sociocultural hierarchies through digital language practices.

2.3 Structural Metaphors

Structural metaphors involve mapping one concept onto another by means of structural correspondence, allowing an abstract or unfamiliar domain to be understood through a more concrete and familiar source. In Chinese internet discourse, a prominent example is the use of *diaoyu* (“fishing”) to metaphorically describe interpersonal or romantic strategies. Originally referring to the act of catching fish with tools and techniques, *diaoyu* is repurposed to represent a relational tactic where individuals manage emotional investment strategically—much like how an angler alternates between giving slack and pulling the line to tire the fish before securing the catch. Within this metaphor, emotional restraint and calculated ambiguity become tools of attraction, encapsulating a mindset of emotional game-playing.

Related terms such as yutang (“fishpond”) and yangyu (“raising fish”) extend this metaphorical framework. These expressions depict scenarios in which individuals maintain simultaneous contact with multiple potential partners, reflecting ambivalence toward monogamous commitment and a preference for emotional plurality. Such metaphors reveal underlying social attitudes toward intimacy in contemporary contexts—highlighting tendencies toward emotional commodification, short-term gratification, and consumption-driven relationship models. In an era characterized by fast-paced lifestyles and mounting social pressure, structural metaphors such as diaoyu capture a broader cultural shift: the prioritization of efficiency, flexibility, and strategic calculation over emotional depth and sustained connection.

3. Functions and Impacts of Metaphorical Expressions in Internet Language

Metaphorical expressions in Chinese internet language serve as cognitive tools to concretize abstract concepts, allowing complex emotions, social phenomena, and psychological states to be communicated in vivid and accessible ways. Such metaphors not only facilitate rapid dissemination and understanding but also reflect the principle of linguistic economy—conveying rich meaning through minimal expression. These mappings are often grounded in embodied experiences and everyday life, yet they are significantly shaped by the affordances and aesthetics of digital discourse, thus bearing strong temporal and cultural markers.

One major function of metaphor is the simplification of abstract or opaque ideas through the mapping of source and target domains. For example, the term pofang (“breaking defense”) metaphorically likens an emotional breakdown to the collapse of a physical barrier, vividly representing the moment of psychological vulnerability. Similarly, neijuan (“involution”) conceptualizes futile internal competition as a movement curling inward, capturing the sense of pressure, stagnation, and burnout. Tangping (“lying flat”), derived from a bodily posture, encapsulates passive resistance to societal expectations in a single, powerful image. These metaphors lower the cognitive threshold for interpretation and enhance the efficiency, relatability, and emotional impact of communication.

More importantly, internet metaphors function as symbolic responses to social realities and collective moods. The intensification of workplace stress, economic precarity, and life pressure has given rise to a metaphorical lexicon that evolves from ironic self-identification to existential resistance. Terms like dagongren (“working people”), shechu (“corporate livestock”), and niuma (“ox-horse”) form a metaphorical chain from laborer to domesticated animal to pure endurance, charting an emotional trajectory from mockery to despair. The recent viral phrase “the corpse feels warm” epitomizes this chain—suggesting that only in death can one feel faint warmth, metaphorically expressing the numbness and exhaustion of late-capitalist life.

Metaphors like “Kong Yiji’s long gown”, drawn from a classic Lu Xun character, now symbolize the disconnect between academic qualifications and job opportunities. This metaphor articulates the frustration of educated youth trapped in underemployment, while also critiquing structural inequalities in the labor market. In this sense, metaphor in internet language is not only rhetorical but also political: it enables a generation to articulate, negotiate, and resist its lived conditions through culturally resonant, emotionally charged, and socially reflective discourse.

References

- [1] Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (2015). *Metaphors we live by* (He, W. Z., Trans.). Zhejiang University Press.
- [2] Li, J., Qin, L., & Dong, J. Y. (2024). The generative logic, expressive types, and governance paths of metaphorical internet neologisms. *Journal of Xi'an Jiaotong University (Social Sciences Edition)*, 1–9.
- [3] Wang, H. D. (2002). The philosophical significance of cognitive metaphor theory. *Journal of Wuhan University (Humanities)*, 55(6), 678–682.

- [4] Lan, C. (1999). A cognitive perspective on spatial metaphors in Chinese. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, (4), 7–15.
- [5] Zhao, Y. F. (1995). The cognitive structure of metaphor in language: A review of *Metaphors We Live By*. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, (3), 67–72.
- [6] Lan, C., & Cai, Y. (2013). A cognitive linguistic study of multimodal metaphors in TV commercials: A case study of *Head & Shoulders*. *Foreign Language Research*, (5), 17–23.
- [7] Li, F. Y. (2007). Image schema theory. *Journal of Sichuan International Studies University*, (1), 80–85.
- [8] Zhang, H., & Zhan, W. W. (2011). Dynamic construction of multimodal metonymy and metaphor in advertising discourse. *Foreign Language Research*, (1), 16–23.
- [9] Li, Y., & Wen, X. (2006). A cognitive study of “head” in metonymy, metaphor and polysemy. *Foreign Language Teaching*, (3), 1–5.