

# Conceptual Metaphor Analysis in the American TV Series *Game of Thrones*

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**Abstract:** In *Game of Thrones*, language and conceptual metaphors not only shape the characters and plot but also mirror the socio-political structures, interpersonal relationships, and cultural values of the real world. This paper, based on Conceptual Metaphor Theory by Lakoff and Johnson, conducts a classification study of structural metaphors, spatial metaphors, and ontological metaphors in the dialogues from the first to the fifth season of *Game of Thrones*. The study finds that conceptual metaphors are prevalent throughout the series and play a significant role in shaping the characters. The multi-layered metaphors in the series construct deep reflections on concepts such as power, war, and death, offering insightful perspectives on the understanding of social structures and language in the real world.

**Keywords:** Conceptual Metaphor; *Game of Thrones*; Structural Metaphor; Spatial Metaphor; Ontological Metaphor

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Research Background

Conceptual metaphors are a means by which humans process abstract concepts and engage in higher-level thinking. The formation of metaphors is based on similarities and associations. Metaphors are not only present in thought but also in language. *Game of Thrones* (GOT) is an epic fantasy television drama, as an epic drama centered around power struggles, political maneuvering, and human conflicts, the series has drawn attention from both viewers and scholars, leading to a number of studies on its dialogues. These dialogues are rich in metaphors, which not only aid in narration but also reveal deeper cultural and social meanings. However, few studies have analyzed these metaphors from the perspective of Conceptual Metaphor Theory. Therefore, this study will examine the dialogues from the first to the fifth seasons of GOT, focusing on the metaphors embedded in the character dialogues.

### 1.2 Purpose and Significance of the Study

This paper aims to systematically analyze the conceptual metaphors in GOT and, through an in-depth interpretation of these metaphors, uncover the complex symbols related to politics, power, morality, and social structure within the series. By applying Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) to analyze these metaphors, this research seeks to explore the cultural and political significance of the series and provide profound reflections and insights for contemporary society. Specifically, this paper will focus on how metaphors reflect power, conflict, and cultural values. Additionally, analyzing the metaphors in GOT will help scholars gain a better understanding of real-world social issues, such as power structures, gender relations, war, and death. CMT provides a powerful tool for interpreting underlying thoughts in everyday discourse and reveals how metaphors shape social cognition and cultural values. These studies not only enrich analysis of film and television discourse but also open new research pathways in social, political, and cultural fields.

### 1.3 Related Research on GOT

Domestic and international studies have shown that metaphors in film and television metaphors convey profound cultural connotations through both dialogues and visual representations (Forceville, 2006). Since GOT's premiere in 2011, it received widespread acclaim, winning multiple Primetime Emmy Awards and other honors. Its global recognition has attracted attention from scholars worldwide, and many have studied the series from various perspectives. Studies abroad have largely focused on the cultural phenomena, plot, characters, and media influence within the series. For example, Ferreday analyzed sexual violence in the series to explore its social and cultural implications, while Arno Scharl introduced an intelligent portal that captures and collects media reports, analyzing viewers' diverse opinions on the characters and plot. There are also studies on the media influence of the series and its cross-media dissemination. Researches at home have mainly focused on subtitling translation strategies. Examples include *Application of Communicative Translation Strategies in Subtitling Translation: A Case Study of Game of Thrones* (Yin Li, 2022). Furthermore, some scholars have explored other aspects of the series, such as *A Song of Ice and Fire: A*

*Study on the Aesthetics of Translation in the Chinese Translation of Game of Thrones* (Hu Yanhong & Li Wenhui, 2022).

## 2. Literature Review

According to CMT, “the essence of metaphor is to understand and experience one thing through another,” and conceptual metaphors refer to cross-domain mappings from a source domain to a target domain. Human cognition, thought, and behavior are all constructed based on metaphors.

### 2.1 Overview of Conceptual Metaphor Theory

In 1980, with the publication of *Metaphors We Live By*, the systematic study of metaphor phenomena in the field of cognitive linguistics began. Lakoff and Johnson analyzed in-depth the close relationship between language and the cognitive structure of metaphors, proposing that “language is constructed metaphorically.” Lakoff (1987) further pointed out, “Metaphors are mappings of cognitive structures from one domain to another in the cognitive process.” Based on this, a large body of research on conceptual metaphors gradually emerged, some of which were included in *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought*, which had a profound impact on subsequent studies.

Compared to research abroad, studies on conceptual metaphors at home began later, roughly starting in the 1990s. With the increasing attention to cognitive linguistics, Shu Dingfang (1995) made the first systematic introduction of conceptual metaphor, laying the foundation for the domestic academic community to recognize and accept the theory. Hu Zhuanglin (1997) explained the nature of metaphors, pointing out, “Linguistic metaphors are essentially the manifestation of conceptual metaphors in language. We first establish a conceptual metaphor by mapping one category onto another, then we observe the phenomenon of mapping one word onto another in language.” Since then, relevant research has gradually expanded, and Chinese scholars have made significant progress in constructing theoretical frameworks, revising theories, and conducting empirical studies. Wang Yin (1999) provided a detailed review of Lakoff and Johnson’s Conceptual Metaphor Theory, further clarifying the cognitive nature of metaphors. He was the first in China to argue that metaphors are an important cognitive mechanism and opposed limiting metaphors to the rhetorical level. He suggested that metaphor theory could be applied to the analysis of a broader range of linguistic phenomena. Hu Zhuanglin (2004) empirically verified the universality and systematic nature of conceptual metaphors through corpus analysis. His study, combining Chinese and English corpora, identified cultural commonalities and idiosyncrasies behind metaphors, providing empirical evidence for cross-cultural metaphor research. Liu Haitao (2010), using large-scale corpora and quantitative methods, examined the distribution characteristics and semantic functions of metaphors. He emphasized the contextual constraints on metaphors, further validating their dynamic generation mechanism. Wang Jianqin (2012) studied the role of conceptual metaphors in English language teaching, discussing how metaphor theory facilitates language learners’ cognitive and cultural understanding, reflecting the practical value of theoretical research. Based on the introduction of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, domestic scholars have gradually improved the theoretical framework, conducted cross-linguistic and cross-cultural empirical research, and made significant breakthroughs in integrating theory and practice. These studies not only enrich the understanding of conceptual metaphors in China but also promote the development of cognitive linguistics, providing wide possibilities for the application of metaphor theory in multiple fields.

### 2.2 Classification of Conceptual Metaphors

Conceptual metaphors can be divided into three categories: Structural Metaphor, Spatial Metaphor, and Ontological Metaphor. Structural Metaphor refers to the use of one concept to metaphorically structure another concept. For example, “Time is money” is a structural metaphor. Spatial Metaphor uses a system of interconnected concepts to help people understand abstract ideas. Spatial metaphors utilize spatial orientations such as up-down, inside-outside, and front-back to explain non-spatial concepts. For instance, “Happiness is up, sadness is down” is an example of spatial metaphor. Ontological metaphor can be further subdivided into three types: Entity and Substance Metaphors refer to abstract concepts like events, activities, and emotions being conceptualized as concrete entities or substances. Container Metaphors view bounded objects, regions, views, events, activities, or states as containers. Personification involves attributing human qualities, motives, and characteristics to non-human entities in order to understand their experiences.

### 2.3 Research Questions

This study aims to explore the following research questions through an analysis of the language in *Game of Thrones*:

- 1) What are the main conceptual metaphors present in *Game of Thrones*?
- 2) How are the metaphors constructed in the dialogues of different characters, and how do their linguistic expressions reflect the real world?
- 3) Which metaphor is the most prevalent, and what does this indicate?

## 3. Research Design

### 3.1 Research Methodology

Based on the metaphor theory proposed by Lakoff and Johnson combined with word frequency analysis, this study aims to quantify the

frequency and distribution characteristics of metaphors and explore their specific usage and sociocultural significance in context.

### 3.2 Research Tools

A metaphor classification system is established, categorizing metaphors into structural, orientational, and ontological types for analysis. The software AntConc is used to count the frequency of metaphorical expressions in the corpus, focusing on extracting phrases and sentences with metaphorical characteristics (such as “king,” “lord”). These expressions are then analyzed within their context to identify metaphor types, semantic functions, and real-world implications.

### 3.3 Data Collection

This study selects the first five seasons of GOT as the primary corpus for analysis. English subtitles from the first five seasons (approximately 1.2 million words) were downloaded from an online database. The main dialogue scenes related to power struggles and character conflicts are selected as samples, focusing on key characters (such as Daenerys, Cersei, Jon, etc.).

### 3.4 Data Analysis

First of all, the high-frequency terms of S1-S5 based on Antconc analysis are as follows:

Type	Rank	Freq	NormFreq
king	1	449	4021.136
queen	2	446	4019.583
lord	3	397	3555.436
winter	4	362	3521.171
night	5	361	3233.029
sword	6	309	2767.329
castle	7	289	2588.214
father	8	261	2515.751
dragon	9	257	2513.627
Stark	10	280	2507.612
Lannister	11	271	2501.274
wall	12	251	2247.895
throne	13	194	1737.417
war	14	185	1656.815
battle	15	163	1643.449

Based on Lakoff and Johnson’s conceptual metaphor theory, metaphors in the first five seasons of GOT are classified into structural, orientational, and ontological metaphors. The distribution of these metaphor types is summarized in Table 1 below:

**Table 1. Distribution of Conceptual Metaphors in GOT (Seasons 1-5)**

Metaphor Type	Frequency	Frequency
Structural Metaphor	463	0.26%
Oriental Metaphor	114	0.11%
Ontological Metaphor	2079	1.12%
Total	2624	1.49%

As shown in Table 1, the occurrence of conceptual metaphors accounts for approximately 1.49% of the total dialogue in the first five seasons, meaning there are nearly 15 conceptual metaphors per thousand words. Among these, ontological metaphors appear significantly more frequently than the other two types. Therefore, the analysis will begin with ontological metaphors.

#### 3.4.1 Ontological Metaphor Case Analysis

Ontological metaphors can be divided into three types: Entity and Substance Metaphors, Container Metaphors, and Personification. The main ontological metaphors in *Game of Thrones* are summarized in Table 2:

**Table 2. Ontological Metaphors in GOT (Seasons 1-5)**

Metaphor Type	Metaphor Structure	Example
Entity and Substance Metaphor	Chaos is a thing	Chaos isn’t a pit. Chaos is a ladder.
Container Metaphor	The ice wall is a container	The Wall keeps the dark things out.
	The night is a container	The night is dark and full of terrors.
Personification	The ice wall is a human	The Wall protects us all.

This quote appears in a conversation between Littlefinger and Varys. At this time, Varys is trying to warn Littlefinger about the destructive nature of chaos, but Littlefinger responds as above. He believes that the chaotic political situation provides him with an opportunity to climb to greater power. This statement uses the entity and substance metaphor, treating the abstract concept of “chaos” as a tangible object, a ladder, which he sees not as a threat, but as an opportunity to break the established order and fulfill his ambitions.

### 3.4.2 Structural Metaphor Case Analysis

GOT is rich in structural metaphors. Apart from some of the typical structural metaphors mentioned by Lakoff and Johnson (such as “time is money” and “life is a journey”), there are also unique structural metaphors within the show, as illustrated in Table 3:

**Table 3. Structural Metaphors in *GOT* (Seasons 1-5)**

Structural Metaphor	Example
Lannister family are lions	The wolf and the lion will be at each other’s throats.
Power is a game	When you play the game of thrones, you win or you die. There is no middle ground.

An important metaphor is the title of the series itself—*Game of Thrones*. The competition for power is framed as a game. Participants need wit, strategy, luck, and even ruthlessness to succeed. The rules are constantly changing, with no fixed moral code. The victors can rewrite the rules, while the losers are eliminated, often with death.

### 3.4.3 Orientational Metaphors Case Analysis

Most of the orientational metaphors in GOT are vertical metaphors based on “up” and “down.” The common orientational metaphors and examples are shown in Table 4:

**Table 4. Orientational Metaphors in *GOT* (Seasons 1-5)**

Orientational Metaphor	Example
Morality is up; corruption is down	I pledged my life to the Night’s Watch. I can imagine no higher praise.
High status is up; low status is down	I rose him up from nothing...

Take the second example for instance. This is a line spoken by Queen Cersei to the High Sparrow. As a prominent member in a religious group, the High Sparrow eventually became the High Septon with Cersei’s encouragement. At this point in the show, the High Sparrow has gained control of King’s Landing. He orders that the royal family be punished, leading to Queen Cersei’s imprisonment. While she is held captive, the High Sparrow visits her and urges her to confess, prompting Cersei to angrily deliver this line. For example, Cersei emphasizes, “I rose him up from nothing,” showing that she believes she was the main force behind the High Sparrow’s rise. She metaphorically views power as an “act of giving and shaping,” highlighting that she is the creator of power, while the High Sparrow is merely the tool she used to grant him status. This dialogue profoundly reveals her understanding of power, status, and the power structure, as well as her pride, anger at the loss of power, and her stubborn belief in class distinctions.

## 4. Results and Discussion

Based on the analysis, ontological metaphors help viewers understand complex character psychology, power struggles, and plot twists by concretizing abstract concepts. This not only simplifies the complexity of power struggles but also enables viewers to perceive the abstract concept of power through concrete imagery. At the same time, these metaphors enhance the philosophical depth of the story, revealing the dynamic and non-absolute nature of power. Structural metaphors help to construct a whole set of power operation rules within the series, providing the audience with familiar cognitive frameworks, making complex themes such as power struggles and religious conflicts easier to accept and understand. Orientational metaphors reinforce the opposition between power, morality, and emotions within the show. Thus, in real life, metaphors are similarly used to understand complex social phenomena. Metaphors in language often reflect societal values. For example, the “game” metaphor in GOT illustrates the rules and ruthlessness of the struggle for power, while similar metaphors in real life are also used to describe competition (e.g., “corporate game”). Through metaphors, language can reshape people’s views of social issues. For instance, the metaphor of power as “climbing upward” may reinforce elitist values, while metaphors of religious judgment may influence people’s understanding of morality.

## 5. Conclusion

The study finds that conceptual metaphors in the TV series GOT not only construct the power rules of the fictional world but also provide the audience with cognitive frameworks to understand complex conflicts. The use of metaphors enriches the narrative depth and philosophical connotations of the series, making complex plotlines easier to understand while giving the characters and events a broader real-world relevance. This finding further confirms the idea that “metaphors are ubiquitous in everyday life,” and contributes to the field of conceptual metaphor research.

However, this study is limited to the analysis of metaphors in the dialogues of the first five seasons of GOT, and future seasons may contain more complex metaphorical patterns. Future research could extend the analysis to other literary works and TV series to investigate the universality and diversity of metaphors.

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