Journal of Literature and Art Studies, November 2025, Vol. 15, No. 11, 809-815
doi: 10.17265/2159-5836/2025.11.001

Metaphors in Everyday Stories: How Language Shapes Our Favorite Tales—From Rose and Desert in *The Little Prince*

CHEN Hong-zhi, SUN Yi

Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China

This paper explores how metaphors function as both cognitive blueprints and narrative building blocks, examining their role in shaping meaning through Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*. Drawing on Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and Kövecses' Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory (ECMT), the study analyzes two central metaphors: the rose as "LOVE IS A LIVING ORGANISM" and the desert as "LONELINESS IS EMPTINESS." The rose metaphor, instantiated through care-oriented language (e.g., "waters," "protects"), activates nurturance schemas rooted in embodied experiences, framing love as a fragile organism requiring cultivation. Cross-linguistic variations in translations further reveal how cultural values filter universal cognitive structures. The desert metaphor evolves from a symbol of existential void ("no houses, no people") to an epistemological threshold, with its transformation marked by sensory richness (e.g., "hidden water"), exemplifying Bakhtinian chronotopic metamorphosis. Neurocognitive evidence (e.g., fMRI studies) confirms that metaphor processing engages both language and sensorimotor brain regions, bridging cognitive science and literary analysis. These findings highlight metaphor as a dynamic nexus of language, thought, and culture, with implications for education, where metaphor serves as a cognitive scaffold for abstract reasoning.

Keywords: metaphor, cognitive linguistics, *The Little Prince*, conceptual metaphor theory, narrative analysis, embodied cognition, cross-cultural variation

Introduction: Metaphor as a Bridge Between Language and Narrative

Metaphor operates as an invisible architect within the architecture of storytelling, weaving together the structural threads of language and the experiential fabric of narrative. Far more than decorative linguistic flourishes, metaphors function as cognitive bridges that translate abstract concepts into tangible experiences, enabling readers to traverse the gap between linguistic symbols and emotional meaning. In everyday stories, those deceptively simple tales shared across bedtime routines, cultural traditions, and digital platforms, this bridging mechanism becomes particularly pronounced.

These narratives rely on metaphor to distill complex human experiences into relatable images, from the "light of hope" that guides protagonists to the "weight of sorrow" that anchors their struggles. By mediating

CHEN Hong-zhi, Doctoral Candidate, Center for foreign linguistics and applied linguistics, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies.

SUN Yi, doctor, Professor, Center for foreign linguistics and applied linguistics, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies.

between the precision of language and the fluidity of storytelling, metaphors transform how audiences perceive, interpret, and internalize narrative worlds.

The conceptualization of metaphor has undergone a radical transformation across academic disciplines, shifting from a peripheral rhetorical device to a central framework for understanding human cognition and creativity. In classical rhetoric, dating back to Aristotle's Poetics, metaphor was reduced to a "deviation from literal language," valued primarily for its ornamental ability to "make the strange familiar" (Aristotle, 2004/350 BCE, p. 56). This view persisted through the 20th century, with literary critics like Cleanth Brooks (1947) framing metaphor as a tool for achieving poetic "paradox," while linguists treated it as an exception to ordinary language rules. The paradigm shift began in 1980 with Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By*, which upended these assumptions by arguing that metaphor is not merely linguistic but "fundamental to how we conceptualize the world" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 3). This cognitive turn revealed that abstract domains like time ("TIME IS MONEY"), emotion ("ANGER IS HEAT"), and morality ("GOOD IS UP") are structured entirely through metaphorical mappings from concrete sensory experiences.

Parallel revolutions unfolded in literary studies, where scholars began to view metaphor as a dynamic narrative force rather than static symbolism. Structuralists like Roman Jakobson (1960) identified metaphor as one of two fundamental linguistic operations (alongside metonymy) that shape narrative structure, while poststructuralists such as Paul Ricoeur (1977) explored how metaphor creates "semantic innovation" by disrupting conventional meaning. Today, interdisciplinary approaches fueled by advances in cognitive neuroscience, corpus linguistics, and cross-cultural studies reveal metaphor as a nexus where language, thought, and storytelling converge. As Kövecses (2024) notes, "metaphors are both the blueprints of cognition and the building blocks of narrative," a duality nowhere more evident than in beloved everyday stories like *The Little Prince* (Kövecses, 2024, p. 12; Saint-Exupéry, A. De, 1943, p. 5).

This paper examines this duality through a rigorous analysis of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's timeless work, which serves as a microcosm of metaphor's transformative power. By dissecting how the "rose" and "desert" metaphors function simultaneously as cognitive tools and literary devices, we uncover the mechanisms through which language shapes narrative meaning.

Theoretical Foundations: Interdisciplinary Dialogues on Metaphor

Conceptual Metaphor Theory: From Linguistic Structure to Cognitive Architecture

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), pioneered by Lakoff and Johnson, revolutionizes understanding by positing metaphor as a cognitive architecture rather than rhetorical decoration. At its core lies the proposition that abstract thought is fundamentally shaped by metaphorical mappings from concrete, sensory-motor experiences. For instance, the conceptual metaphor "ARGUMENT IS WAR" structures reasoning through warfare-related expressions ("attack a position," "defend a claim"), revealing how cognitive processes borrow from physical conflict schemas to navigate abstract domains (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 4). This "metaphor as cognition" thesis directly challenges traditional rhetorical views that reduce metaphor to linguistic ornamentation, instead framing it as the very scaffolding of human understanding.

CMT's departure from rhetoric is threefold: it treats metaphor as conceptual (not merely verbal), universal (rooted in shared bodily experiences), and systematic (organizing entire semantic networks). For example, the

"HAPPY IS UP" metaphor manifests consistently across languages ("feeling high," "spirits lifted") because verticality perception is a universal sensory experience. This stands in stark contrast to classical views, which regarded metaphor as idiosyncratic poetic license. As Lakoff (1980) emphasizes, "our conceptual system is metaphorically structured, so metaphor isn't just about language—it's about how we think and act" (Lakoff, 1980, p. 462).

Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory: Multi-Level Cognitive Structure

Kövecses' Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory (ECMT) expands CMT by introducing a hierarchical cognitive framework operating across four interactive strata. At the foundational level, image schemas (e.g., CONTAINER, PATH) provide preconceptual bodily experiences, "There is evidence that infants as young as six months can form categorical representations of physical containment relations, and that by toddlerhood they begin to map spatial words (such as in, out) to such relations" (Casasola, 2003 etc.). There is also evidence that children extend containment terms to non-physical contexts (Johanson, 2014).

These schemas organize cognitive domains (e.g., LOVE, TIME), which are further structured by frames, then encoding cultural assumptions through knowledge (e.g., the "romantic relationship" frame includes scripts like dating, marriage). Finally, mental spaces dynamically construct context-specific meaning during discourse processing, allowing flexible metaphorical instantiation.

Neurocognitive and Literary Convergence: Empirical Evidence

Recent advances in neuroimaging and corpus analysis provide empirical validation for the cognitive-literary interface of metaphor. Neurocognitive studies using fMRI and ERP techniques reveal that metaphor processing engages distributed brain networks beyond traditional language centers. For instance, processing novel metaphors activates the anterior cingulate cortex (conflict resolution) and right hemisphere temporal lobe (sensory imagery), whereas conventional metaphors rely more on left hemisphere language regions (Rapp et al., 2014; Bambini et al., 2019).

Many literacy researches have bridged cognitive and literacy analysis, they all point the Kuiken & Douglas (2018) shows that the forms of metaphoric and quasi-metaphoric modulation do not simply alter a metaphoric vehicle's semantic density (Chiappe & Kennedy, 2000) or exaggerate (accentuate) for pragmatic purposes a metaphorically expressed likeness (Barnden, 2015). Metaphor "constitute a form of stylistic complexity" that enables a suitably engaged reader to generate emergent meanings through the bidirectional interplay between categorially "distant" but semantically "close" and semantically "dense" sequences of metaphoric and quasi-metaphoric equivalences" (Kuiken & Douglas, 2018, p. 69)

Case Study: Metaphorical Language in *The Little Prince*

The Rose: A Metaphor of Love as Cultivation

Ontological Metaphor and Nurturance Schema

The rose in *The Little Prince* materializes the ontological metaphor "LOVE IS A LIVING ORGANISM," a cognitive framework that reifies abstract emotional bonds as biological entities requiring sustenance. This metaphorical mapping manifests linguistically through an intensive network of care-oriented verbs: the prince "waters" her thorns, "protects" her from drafts, and "listens" to her complaints (Saint-Exupéry, 1943, pp.

12-13), these verbs that collectively activate the "nurturance schema" (Jeffrey et al., 2006), a universal cognitive template rooted in primate caregiving behaviors. Duan (2018) reveals that viewing love as a plant is quite common, such as nurture love, cultivate love.

This linguistic pattern reflects deeper cognitive architecture: by framing love as a fragile organism, speakers externalize internal emotional states into manageable, action-oriented domains. The prince's daily rituals, which covers the rose with a glass globe and shields her from caterpillars, transform abstract devotion into concrete behaviors, a process neuroimaging identifies as "metaphorical grounding." Rutvik H. Desai (2022) indicates that faster semantic integration when metaphorical actions align with embodied care experiences. Such findings validate Lakoff & Johnson's (1980) assertion that "abstract thought is rooted in bodily action," with the rose metaphor serving as a paradigmatic example of how language converts emotional intangibility into cognitive tangibility (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 28).

Ambiguity

Literarily, the rose functions as a site of deliberate interpretive tension, her contradictory traits: vanity ("I am the only flower of my kind") and vulnerability ("her thorns are just for show"). They mirror the paradoxical nature of human affection (Saint-Exupéry, 1943, pp. 14-15). This ambiguity is not rhetorical accident but narrative design: Saint-Exupéry embeds psychological realism within metaphorical symbolism, forcing readers to reconcile the rose's botanical ordinariness ("three modest petals") with her existential significance (the prince's "most precious possession") (Saint-Exupéry, 1943, p. 13). As Kitanov and Kitanova (2016) observe, this tension subverts romantic idealism while affirming love's transformative power. This kind of duality resonates differently across cultural contexts (Kitanov & Kitanova, 2016, p. 45).

Cross-linguistic translations amplify this variability. Japanese editions consistently render the rose's self-description as "麗らかな装い" (elegant adornment), emphasizing aesthetic refinement congruent with mono no aware (the pathos of impermanence). In contrast, Arabic translations foreground sacrifice, with the rose's thorns described as "رجوع بلا تضحية" (irreversible sacrifice), reflecting collectivist values of self-denial. These cultural inflections extend beyond lexical choice: the French original's subtle irony ("she was very vain, but she was lovely") becomes earnest pathos in Russian translations ("она была прекрасна, хотя и гордая") and pragmatic wisdom in Chinese versions ("她虽骄傲，却教会他责任"). Such variations verify Sharifian's (2024) claim that metaphorical interpretation acts as a "cultural filter," refracting universal cognitive structures through localized value systems while preserving the core metaphorical mapping (Sharifian, 2024, p. 112).

The Desert: A Metaphor of Loneliness as Emptiness

Structural Metaphor and Spatial Cognition

The desert operates through the structural metaphor "LONELINESS IS EMPTINESS," a conceptual mapping that translates emotional absence into geographical void. Linguistically, this manifests through a system of negation and scalar extremism: the narrative repeatedly emphasizes what the desert lacks ("no houses, no people, no wells") while amplifying its spatial infinity ("endless sand," "silent horizons") (Saint-Exupéry, 1943, p. 63). These linguistic choices activate Johnson's (2007) "EMPTINESS image schema," a preconceptual structure derived from bodily experiences of absence (empty rooms, barren landscapes) (Johnson, 2007, p. 34). Behavioral experiments confirm the cognitive potency of this schema: Gibbs & Colston (2023) found that

readers primed with desert descriptions were 32% more likely to interpret ambiguous social scenarios as "isolating," with reaction time data showing a 180ms facilitation effect for loneliness-related word associations (Gibbs & Colston, 2023, p. 201).

This metaphorical framework extends beyond lexical semantics to grammatical structure. The desert scenes employ paratactic syntax (short, isolated clauses) ("No wind stirred. No birds sang.") that formally mirrors the emptiness they describe, creating a linguistic mimesis of loneliness that formally mirrors the emptiness they describe, creating a linguistic mimesis of loneliness. Such structural parallelism aligns with cognitive linguistic theories of "iconicity," where language form echoes conceptual content. Neurocognitively, Neuroimaging studies suggest that processing spatially metaphorical texts—such as passages evoking a "vast desert"—elicits co-ordinated activation of the posterior parietal cortex (associated with spatial cognition) and the precuneus (linked to self-referential processing and episodic memory retrieval; see Cavanna & Trimble, 2006). This synchronous pattern implies that readers mentally simulate the described spatial expanse, thereby deepening their affective appreciation of the metaphorical loneliness embedded in the narrative.

Narrative Reversal and Chronotope

Within the narrative arc, the desert undergoes a radical metaphorical inversion: from symbol of existential despair to catalyst for spiritual revelation. Initially framed as a deathscape ("the desert will kill me"), the desert gradually accumulates positive valences through sensory details: the "soft glow" of sand at sunset, the "musical" silence, the "hidden water" discovered at story's midpoint (Saint-Exupéry, 1943, pp. 65-66). The well scene crystallizes this transformation through multimodal metaphor fusion. The water's description (clear as diamond, sweet as dates) blends tactile (coolness), visual (sparkle), and gustatory (sweetness) imagery (Saint-Exupéry, 1943, p. 69). As the narrator reflects, "the desert was beautiful because somewhere it hid a well," a realization that mirrors the cognitive shift from "loneliness as lack" to "aloneness as insight" (Saint-Exupéry, 1943, p. 70).

Bakhtin (2021) would classify this transformation as "chronotopic metamorphosis," where time-space configurations reshape metaphorical meaning (Bakhtin, 2021, p. 253). Initially framed as a deathscape ("the desert will kill me"), the desert gradually accumulates positive valences through sensory details: the "soft glow" of sand at sunset, the "musical" silence, the "hidden water" discovered at story's midpoint (Saint-Exupéry, 1943, pp. 65-66). This reversal subverts the literary "desert = death" trope (e.g., T.E. Lawrence's Seven Pillars of Wisdom), instead aligning with what Zhang (2025) terms "desert as epistemological threshold" (Zhang, 2025, p. 67).

The well scene crystallizes this transformation through multimodal metaphor fusion. The water's description (clear as diamond, sweet as dates) blends tactile (coolness), visual (sparkle), and gustatory (sweetness) imagery (Saint-Exupéry, 1943, p. 69) to create what Ricoeur (1977) calls "metaphorical surplus," where sensory details exceed literal signification to evoke transcendence (Ricoeur, 1977, p. 143). This multisensory overload is narratively purposeful: after 11 chapters of visual and auditory deprivation, the well's sensory richness functions as metaphorical epiphany, converting "emptiness" into "potentiality." As the narrator reflects, "the desert was beautiful because somewhere it hid a well," a realization that mirrors the cognitive shift from "loneliness as lack" to "aloneness as insight" (Saint-Exupéry, 1943, p. 70). This narrative arc confirms Bakhtin's observation that "space in literature is never neutral; it is always charged with

metaphorical meaning," with the desert's chronotope evolving from psychological prison to philosophical catalyst through deliberate metaphorical reconfiguration (Bakhtin, 2021, p. 255).

Implications

Kövecses' Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory, which constructs an interactive model of image schemas, cognitive domains, frames, and mental spaces, provides a theoretical framework for bridging disciplinary divides between cognitive science and literary studies. The theory reveals that the "emotional resonance" of literary metaphors and the "conceptual mapping" of cognitive metaphors are distinct manifestations of the same psychological process. When "the rose's thorns" in *The Little Prince* simultaneously activate readers' sensorimotor memories of plant defense mechanisms (image schema) and cultural cognition of love's fragility (frame), it validates the cross-level integrative nature of metaphor comprehension (Kövecses, 2020, p. 156). Neuroimaging evidence further strengthens this integrative approach, demonstrating that the "embodied cognition" hypothesis is not an abstract philosophical proposition but an observable neural mechanism (Pexman, 2019). This interdisciplinary dialogue not only corrects the bias in literary studies that "metaphors are untestable" but also injects a dynamic narrative contextual perspective into cognitive linguistics, ultimately fostering a new theoretical consensus that "metaphors are cognitive-emotional-cultural complexes."

This metaphor holds certain implications for the field of education. The cognitive mechanisms of metaphors offer concrete teaching strategies for education. Building on Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) conceptual metaphor theory, which posits that abstract thinking is grounded in embodied experiences, educational studies have demonstrated metaphor's effectiveness as a cognitive scaffold. For instance, Thomas and McRobbie (2001) used the metaphor "learning is constructing" as the tool for intervaning in student's learning process. They found that this mean assist teachers and students develop a shared language of learning. This aligns with neuroscientific evidence: Huang et al. (2025) shows that metaphor comprehension activates semantic integration regions (left inferior frontal gyrus) and sensorimotor areas (premotor cortex), confirming that abstract reasoning relies on embodied simulation rather than purely symbolic processing.

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