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A Figure of Thought: Conceptual Metaphor in Children’s Preschool Narrative Picture Books

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A Figure of Thought:
Conceptual Metaphor in Children’s Preschool Narrative Picture Books

By

Rebekah J. Beyer

An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for Graduation from the
Western Oregon University Honors Program

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Abstract

In the long tradition of literary studies, metaphor has continually resurfaced as the trademark of poets and rhetoricians, an indicator of sophisticated and complex language. In contrast to the traditional wisdom of metaphor, contemporary linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson suggest that metaphor is more than just a figure of speech or a rhetorical tool. According to Lakoff and Johnson, humans have a conceptual system that is largely – and fundamentally – structured by metaphor. Lakoff and Johnson refer to these metaphors as conceptual metaphors, and they are a fundamental part of common, everyday language.

This thesis will endeavor to explore the conceptual metaphors expressed in children’s literature using Lakoff and Johnson’s theoretical framework. I will begin with a detailed discussion of what conceptual metaphors are, how to identify them, and the important points of distinction between Lakoff and Johnson’s theory and the tradition of literary metaphor. I will also review the established findings that facilitate metaphor comprehension in children and offer justification for my chosen medium. I will conclude with an analysis of my selected literature and discussion of the results.
Acknowledgements

My deepest gratitude extends to the following individuals and their unwavering support and encouragement in this endeavor: Dr. David Hargreaves, for his expertise and guidance in the development of my thesis; Dr. Gavin Keulks, for his commitment to my success; and my husband Ryan, for his gentle encouragement and confidence in my accomplishment.
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Overview & personal connection

As a live-in nanny to two preschool girls for two years, I spent a lot of time reading children’s books. Books would capture their attention for hours. “Again! Again!” they would plead, reluctant to let a favorite story slip out of my hands. When one book became boring, they would reach for another, until every colorful, hardbound volume in sight had been opened, thoroughly exhausted, and returned to its resting place on the carpeted living room floor. Eventually, when a particularly enthralling book had been read enough times, one of them would plop down into my lap, carefully lay open the first page, and “read” the entire thing from memory, word for word.

A year after my nanny experience, I took a University linguistics class on poetics. A large chunk of our syllabus focused on metaphor. In high school, I learned that “metaphor” was a figure of speech in which one thing was used to describe a different thing. When used purposely, metaphor could embellish or add creative flair to speech or writing, especially poetry. I was taught that using metaphor was a sign of complex and sophisticated language – something to aspire to as a young budding writer.

Four years later in my poetics class, I learned a little more about metaphor. Guided by the text *Metaphors We Live By* by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, my class explored metaphor not only as a figure of speech, but as a figure of thought.
Lakoff and Johnson proposed that metaphor exists not only in the way we talk and write, but in the way we think and gather information about the world around us (Lakoff and Johnson, hereafter L&J, 3). As a consequence, much of the every-day, colloquial language we use to express our thoughts is also metaphorical, whether we can consciously acknowledge those metaphors or not.

I was elated to discover that I no longer had to labor over creating metaphor for my written school work: it was already there, in the way I spoke, in the way I wrote. And I didn’t even have to think about it. Metaphor is pervasive in our language, right down to the simplest children’s storybook – the same books I shared with those lovely little girls throughout the two years before.

This thesis will endeavor to explore the conceptual metaphors expressed in children’s literature using Lakoff and Johnson’s theoretical framework. I will begin with a detailed discussion of what conceptual metaphors are, how to identify them, and the important points of distinction between Lakoff and Johnson’s theory and the tradition of literary metaphor. I will also review the established findings that facilitate metaphor comprehension in children and offer justification for my chosen medium. I will conclude with an analysis of my selected literature and discussion of the results.

**Theoretical basis**

For the last two thousand-or-so years, metaphor has been touted as the brandishing iron of poets and rhetoricians, a tool used to impress, enchant,
manipulate, and persuade their audiences. Metaphor has traditionally been viewed as a figure of speech, an embellishment that can be added or removed from text as the author sees fit to suit his purposes. Young writers are taught to incorporate metaphor as a way to make their texts more sophisticated, more intellectually compelling, or more “colorful.”

In contrast with this long literary tradition of metaphor, Lakoff and Johnson suggest that metaphor is more than just a figure of speech or a rhetorical tool. According to Lakoff and Johnson, humans have a conceptual system that is largely – and fundamentally – structured by metaphor (L&J 3). We depend on metaphor to at least partially structure our thoughts and present them in an understandable manner.

Very generally, a metaphor is the expression of describing one thing (or target domain) in terms of a different thing (or source domain) (L&J 5, Cameron Discourse 51). Metaphors are easiest to identify when they utilize fancy or elaborate language, such as those found in poetry or other rhetorical texts. Consider, for example, the first stanza of Christina Rossetti’s poem “A Birthday”:

My heart is like a singing bird
Whose nest is in a water’d shoot;
My heart is like an apple-tree
Whose boughs are bent with thick-set fruit;
My heart is like a rainbow shell
That paddles in a halcyon sea;
My heart is gladder than all these,
Because my love is come to me.

The author uses the features of a song bird, an apple-tree, and a rainbow shell to describe the condition of her heart, and she elaborates the specific qualities she wants
her audience to acknowledge. This is often the context in which students learn to identify and develop metaphor. What are harder to identify, however, are the normal, even boring conceptual metaphors that govern our every-day interaction with one another. Consider, for example, the following list of statements from Lakoff and Johnson’s book (emphasis removed):

- Your claims are indefensible.
- He attacked every weak point in my argument.
- His criticisms were right on target.
- I demolished his argument.
- I’ve never won an argument with him.
- You disagree? Okay, shoot!
- If you use that strategy, he’ll wipe you out.
- He shot down all of my arguments.

For most of us, these are normal, every-day statements we use to refer to and talk about arguments. Nothing is particularly striking or poetic. Now consider the list again, this time with specific words or phrases emphasized:

- Your claims are *indefensible*.
- He *attacked every weak point* in my argument.
- His criticisms were *right on target*.
- I *demolished* his argument.
- I’ve never *won* an argument with him.
- You disagree? Okay, *shoot*!
- If you use that *strategy*, he’ll *wipe you out*.
- He shot down all of my arguments.

The words “indefensible,” “attacked every weak point,” “right on target,” “demolished,” “won,” “shoot,” “strategy,” “wipe you out,” and “shot down” are all normal ways of talking about an argument. However, the meanings of these words are experienced elsewhere. The experience of being “indefensible,” “demolished,” “shot
down,” etc., happens during war. Our normal, everyday language depends on what we know of war to shape how we think, act, and talk about arguments (L&J 5). The conceptual metaphor at work here, though not explicitly stated, is ARGUMENT IS WAR. We are defining the first domain, ARGUMENT, in terms of the second domain, WAR. In English, we depend on this structure to understand what we mean when we talk about and carry out the concept “argument.”

When studying conceptual metaphor, it is important to distinguish between the stated metaphor and the metaphoric expressions that derive from it. Metaphoric expressions are taken directly from written or spoken text. They are the actual words being used to express our thoughts. The underlying logic that allows a speaker to comprehend what is being said is the conceptual metaphor itself. To help distinguish between the two, a stated conceptual metaphor is always presented in all capital letters throughout this thesis. To demonstrate this difference, consider again the statements listed above regarding argument. These are metaphorical expressions used by English speakers to talk about argument. These expressions make sense because they derive from a conceptual framework that tells us ARGUMENT IS WAR.

It is important to acknowledge that when metaphors occur, the first domain is only partially structured by the second domain. If the first domain is structured entirely by the second domain, it would actually become the second domain (L&J 13). In the ARGUMENT IS WAR example, we typically wouldn’t hear a statement like “we marched for days over that point.” Though “marching” is a common enough
experience in war, it is not a characteristic that usually carries over to how we commonly structure the concept “argument.”

Of the two domains involved in a metaphor, the first domain is often the more abstract, while the second one is more tangible or grounded in personal experience. Abstract concepts like “argument,” “love,” or “time” often have little basis for tangible experience; we can’t touch, see, or physically feel them. By describing or “mapping” those concepts onto the characteristics of a less abstract concept, they become tangible. We can talk about them and think about them more easily, because they have been structured in a way that is more grounded in personal experience (Pramling & Samuelsson, hereafter P&S, 708). The personal experience that allows us to make the connections between the first domain and the second domain is called the “experiential bases” (L&J 19). All types of metaphors have some kind of experiential basis – they are all formed based on the way we interact with the world around us. However, it is not always possible to pinpoint or identify exactly what that experiential basis is (L&J 19).

Another important facet of experiential basis is that it is “built into the conceptual system of the culture in which you live”, because “every experience takes place within a vast background of cultural presuppositions” (L&J 57). In other words, “we experience our ‘world’ in such a way that our culture is already present in the very experience itself” (L&J 57). As a consequence, metaphors can only be fully comprehended within the culture they emerge from. While some metaphors may be
similar from culture to culture and language to language, we cannot expect that metaphors will be universally understood or acknowledged.

Identifying conceptual metaphor

One specific challenge to discussing conceptual metaphors is identifying them. As discussed above, conceptual metaphors are a part of our normal, every-day thought processes and subsequent language production. As a result, the language producer is often unaware that they are even utilizing metaphor. Pramling and Samuelsson explain:

“[over time] figurative expressions tend to become conventionalized or institutionalized, and hence cease to be perceived as figurative by speakers (Pramling, 2006). This means that for an experienced speaker it may be difficult to see the figurativeness of one’s own language; it is simply ‘how we say.’” (713)

Going back to the expressions for the ARGUMENT IS WAR example, no one statement explicitly makes the connection between “argument” and “war.” What we observe are only metaphoric expressions of the metaphor, not the metaphor itself. This means that conceptual metaphors must be inferred from the statements or expressions that derive from them, rather than be explicitly stated.

Another factor that affects metaphor identification – whether conceptual or traditional – is what Cameron refers to as “graded conditions”. Graded conditions refer to a metaphor’s “familiarity to the users, their conceptual complexity, their conventionality of use within the speech community (idiomaticity), and their
systematicity within and across discourse events” (Discourse 53). For example, metaphors that are marked with explicit identifiers such as “like,” “such as,” or “similar to” are more easily identified than those that are unmarked. In addition, metaphors that appear in nominal form, such as “the river is a snake,” are more easily identified than those that take on other forms.

As discussed above, text derived from conceptual metaphors is usually implicit and deeply embedded in linguistic expression, which can make them more difficult to identify. Here is an example of a metaphor that moves from linguistically explicit to linguistically implicit:

The river is like a snake, slithering through the trees.

The river is a snake, slithering through the trees.

The river slithers through the trees.

In the first sentence, the metaphor is explicit, and the relationship between “snake” and “river” is made clear by the marker “like.” In the second sentence, the metaphor is still explicit, but the connection between “river” and “snake” is implied. In the third sentence, the metaphor is not explicitly stated; the reader must infer what domain allows “river” to be characterized by the verb “slithers,” which, in this case, is “snake.”

To assist with the identification issue, Lakoff and Johnson pinpoint three specific types of metaphors that are widely encountered in colloquial language: structural metaphors, orientational metaphors, and ontological metaphors. I will
provide a brief description of each, followed by some examples offered by Lakoff and Johnson.

**Structural metaphors:** Structural metaphors are the most “stereotypical” metaphors, where one concept structures how we understand another concept.

Some examples:

- **TIME IS MONEY** – “I spent three hours at the bank this morning.”
- **ARGUMENT IS WAR** – “He’s losing this argument.”
- **THE MIND IS A MACHINE** – “I can’t turn my mind off.”

**Orientational metaphors:** Orientational metaphors describe spatial orientation, such as up-down, in-out, front-back, etc (L&J 14). The first domain is a concept; the second domain is the orientation it receives. Examples:

- **HAPPY IS UP; SAD IS DOWN** – “My spirits rose.”
- **CONSCIOUS IS UP; UNCONSCIOUS IS DOWN** – “Wake up.” “He fell asleep.”
- **HEALTH AND LIFE ARE UP; SICKNESS AND DEATH ARE DOWN** – “He dropped dead.”
- **HAVING CONTROL/FORCE ARE UP; BEING SUBJECT TO**
  **CONTROL/FORCE IS DOWN** – “He’s under my control.”
- **MORE IS UP; LESS IS DOWN** – “My income rose last year.”
- **HIGH STATUS IS UP; LOW STATUS IS DOWN** – “She’s at the peak of her career.”
GOOD IS UP; BAD IS DOWN – “He does high-quality work.”

VIRTUE IS UP; DEPRAVITY IS DOWN – “He has high standards.”

RATIONAL IS UP; EMOTIONAL IS DOWN – “He has high intellectual capabilities.”

Ontological metaphors: Ontological metaphors impose artificial boundaries on physical phenomena; they allow us to devise “ways of viewing events, activities, emotions, ideas, etc., as entities and substances” (L&J 25). These metaphors allow us to refer to, quantify, and identify aspects or causes of concepts that can’t otherwise be quantified, referred to, etc. They also allow us to talk about concepts as motivating actions and setting goals (L&J 27). Identifying these are tricky, because “merely viewing a nonphysical thing as an entity or substance does not allow us to comprehend very much about it” (L&J 27). A sub-category of ontological metaphors is container metaphors, where we impose physical barriers on otherwise boundless concepts (L&J 29). Some examples of container metaphors:

VISUAL FIELDS ARE CONTAINERS – “He’s out of sight now.”

ACTIVITIES ARE CONTAINERS – “I ran in a marathon last month.”

Another kind of ontological metaphor is personification. Personification “allows us to comprehend a wide variety of experiences with nonhuman entities in terms of human motivations, characteristics, and activities” (L&J 33). One example:

INFLATION IS AN ADVERSARY – “Inflation has robbed me of my savings.”
Differences in literary and conceptual theory

The primary distinction between Lakoff and Johnson’s theory of conceptual metaphor and the tradition of literary metaphor in poetic or persuasive language is a matter of conventionalization. Lakoff and Johnson argue that metaphor exists as a conventional part of language, which must then rely on the conventionalization of those same metaphors in the human conceptual system (Lakoff 223, also see P&S 713). Lakoff and Johnson’s theory emerges from an analysis of colloquial language, and the conventional metaphors from which it derives.

Alternatively, not all metaphor is conventionalized. New metaphors are developed all the time, often for rhetorical, poetical, or persuasive purposes. The metaphors are constructed consciously with specific attention and effort (Lakoff 223). As a consequence, “the most strikingly novel metaphors may slow down processing by requiring active and conscious deliberation of their meaning” (Cameron Science 674). These “new” or “fresh” metaphors have largely been the focus of traditional metaphoric study, rather than the conventional metaphors Lakoff and Johnson espouse.

One possible reason for the lack of interest in conventional metaphors is that they are rhetorically unimpressive. They are not particularly creative; they don’t cultivate a fresh perspective; they do not help elaborate a point in a particularly compelling manner. By nature of conventionalization, they have become common, routine, and boring. When Lakoff and Johnson proposed that metaphor might offer a
glimpse into the human conceptual system, however, “research effort has been expanded on extracting and analyzing the cognitive content of metaphor as the carrier of socio-culturally constructed representations” (Cameron *Discourse* 49).

**Purpose for study**

This thesis will focus specifically on how conceptual metaphors present themselves in colloquial language using the medium of children’s preschool narrative picture books. Demonstrating the presence and purpose of conceptual metaphors in children’s books will highlight Lakoff and Johnson’s theory that metaphors are an essential part of language. If Lakoff and Johnson’s theory is accurate, I expect to observe the following within my selected children’s books:

- The language used conveys underlying “conceptual metaphors”
- The conceptual metaphors are represented using conventional, every-day language; they are not linguistically complex or conceptually abstract
- The conceptual metaphors present in children’s books are already assumed to be *understood* by children – they are not merely for decorative, rhetorical, or poetic effect.

I will demonstrate these points by reading and recording instances of metaphor within my selected literature, with the intent to distinguish between those that are literary and those that are conventional/conceptual. Important factors I will make note of include:
What kinds of metaphor occur most often? Do they use the same expressions, or is one metaphor elaborated using many different kinds of expressions?

Is there contextual support? Is the metaphor elaborated within the text or “demonstrated” using pictures?

My decision to observe metaphor in children’s books serves several purposes. First, I enjoy children’s books. My experience as a nanny led to countless hours delving into classic and popular children’s books. While I thoroughly enjoyed most of what I read, I enjoyed the girls’ reactions even more. They loved books. They were enthralled with them. I loved how the books calmed and focused them, so all their energy was tied up in listening and watching the colorful pages.

Secondly, children’s books provide a wide variety of easily-accessible material to analyze. I can collect and record data as necessary, without securing the necessary permissions/funding needed to observe live interaction among children and/or adults.

Thirdly, children’s books – for the most part – use simple, every-day language. Because the purpose of my thesis is to demonstrate how conceptual metaphor presents itself in colloquial language, children’s books are ideal.

Another important feature of children’s books is illustrations. Epstein and Gamble established in their study that pictures have superiority over words when children attempt to establish metaphoric connections between domains (188). It
follows that pictures may provide important contextual information that can assist children with metaphoric comprehension.

On the other hand, children’s books have their limitations. One of the most fascinating parts of conceptual metaphors to me personally is their flexibility – they can be developed organically and spontaneously, even subconsciously on the part of the speaker. While children’s books may retain the subconscious aspect of the conceptual metaphors they portray, there is nothing organic or spontaneous about literature (see P&S for a similar study using a video recording of preschool children).

Peripherally, I propose that children’s books may also aid in the conventionalization that is at the heart of a metaphoric conceptual system. I would offer that children’s books are certainly among the “everyday ‘little’ or ordinary situations” that many children experience, and therefore they can facilitate the conventionalization of metaphor and other kinds of figurative speech (See also Ortony, Turner, and Larson-Shapiro, and Cameron *Science* 675).

**Metaphor and children**

At some point or another, a metaphoric conceptual system must be developed. Given Lakoff and Johnson’s premise of a metaphor, Pramling and Samuelsson suggest:

it is in the everyday ‘little’ or ordinary situations and speech that metaphors work and that we use and learn how to use language and what we mean with ways of speaking—what people to a large extent master without necessarily knowing that they do so. (P&S 709)
This process begins at a very young age, and as a result, a number of studies analyzing the connections between children, metaphor, and learning have cropped up in recent years. There is a general consensus that metaphoric competence is acquired “through participating in social practices and communication with others”, and “the child will eventually come to ‘take over’ the tools [such as metaphor] and become able to use them by herself” (P&S 710).

Though this process occurs subconsciously, metaphoric competence is aided by a few concrete factors. One of those factors is age. Many recent studies suggest that metaphoric competence starts at an early age, as early as three to four years old (Vosniadou et al 1594, Epstein and Gamlin 170). As a child grows and experiences more of the world, their metaphoric competence improves, continually developing into adolescence and early adulthood (Cameron Discourse 58, Johnson Development 470, Ortonty et al Influences 31, Siltanen 15).

In addition to age, a few specific factors have been shown to aid children as they try to make sense of metaphoric connections. Metaphoric expressions with explicit connections between domains (such as statements with the word “like”) are easier to understand than expressions with implicit connections (Reynolds and Ortony 1117, Epstein and Gamlin 189). Additionally, repetition and exposure to figurative language helps improve metaphoric competence (Reynolds and Ortony 1117, Ortony et al Influences 32), as does explicit knowledge of both the source domain and the
target domain (Cameron *Science* 676 and 677, Reynolds and Ortony 1112, Epstein and Gamlin 188).

Finally, another important tool to increasing metaphoric competence is context (Reynolds and Ortony 1111, Vosniadou et al 1595). Cameron asserts: “Capacity with metaphor as a linguistic and cognitive phenomenon depends on existing domain knowledge and on ability to make use of the support offered by the discourse context” (*Discourse* 61). When appropriate context supports the metaphor being developed, children are much more likely to understand the intended metaphoric connection than if the metaphor is presented in isolation.

Most of the studies I have read deal with children’s interpretation of literary metaphor, rather than Lakoff and Johnson’s conceptual metaphor. One feature of conceptual metaphor is that it is used subconsciously, without specific attention to the relationship between the domains in the metaphor being expressed. As a consequence, children (or any language speaker, for that matter) may not have a thorough knowledge of the domains in a conceptual metaphor, and there might not be any supporting contextual material. However, children may still learn to utilize the language built around it. For example, the statement “you’re in trouble” rests on the conceptual metaphor that TROUBLE IS A CONTAINER, but it’s unlikely we would find a child who doesn’t understand the consequences of such a statement, even if they can’t explicitly make the connection between TROUBLE and CONTAINER. This hypothesis is supported by Ortony et al: given an appropriate amount of exposure to
the figurative language “with a view to inculcating an understanding of their nature and effects” (29), a child (or person) need not fully experience all aspects of a source domain in order to textually map its characteristics onto a target domain. Through repetitive exposure to the various conventionalized statements derived from the TROUBLE IS A CONTAINER metaphor, that would simply be how a child comes to think – and talk – about trouble or other situations in general.

Given this observation, it is important to acknowledge that simply using conventional language does not necessarily translate to an effective understanding or interpretation of metaphor (Cameron Science 676). In fact, children who are unacquainted with one of the two domains used in metaphor may misinterpret the intended purpose of the metaphor. Therefore, it should not be assumed that children will always exhibit a correct interpretation of conceptual metaphors, even in colloquial language. However, Cameron observes:

> Children’s capacity with metaphor develops simultaneously with their developing knowledge base, and with their developing linguistic and socio-linguistic capacities. Children move from seeing all metaphorical language as ‘strange’ language to differentiating between conventional idiom and creative use of metaphor (Pollio & Pickens, 1980). (Discourse 50)

As a child gains more experience in the world around them, their knowledge refines, as does the repertoire of conventional metaphors available to them (Cameron Discourse 54).
Literature selection and analysis

I selected 13 preschool narrative picture books to analyze for my literature study. The books I compiled were selected based on my personal exposure to popular children’s books and suggested reading material from educational websites like teachersfirst.com and commonsensemedia.com. I incorporated both contemporary and classic selections, with an emphasis on popular/award-winning texts.

My literature analysis began with a thorough reading of each book. I then noted the specific expressions where I thought metaphor might be present. Guided by my study of Lakoff and Johnson and my own schooling as a student of language, I determined if the metaphoric expressions were more explicit and literary in function, or if they were implicit and possibly derived from a conceptual framework. Explicit/literary expressions were categorized as such, and implicit expressions were placed into one of three sub-categories, based on Lakoff and Johnson’s model: structural metaphor, orientational metaphor, or ontological metaphor. Any expression that was not clearly identified was marked as undetermined. Because context is important for determining metaphor, I also made a note of any textual/illustrated factors that might contribute to understanding the metaphor. The notes will be addressed in the results/discussion section of my thesis.
Results

The following table demonstrates my results:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explicit/Literary expressions</td>
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<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implicit expressions</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ontological expressions</td>
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<td>51%</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td><strong>138</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis and discussion

Explicit/literary expressions

The explicit/literary metaphors identified in my literature selection all fall under the traditional guise of metaphor: they link two different objects in ways that encourage a creative or imaginative perspective. Most of these metaphors were fairly simple; there was no significant elaboration within the text (as a lengthy poem might elaborate a single metaphor), and all of the metaphors had either explicit textual cues such as “like” or significant textual or visual context to aid the reader.

By far, personification of animals is one of the most common types of explicit metaphors in the children’s books I studied. Of the 13 books I read, 10 utilized personification of animals. The stories assume this is “normal” – it’s not shocking or surprising when animals talk together or even when a person talks to an animal. Don
Freeman’s story *Corduroy*, for example, relays a perfectly “normal” conversation between a young girl and her teddy bear near the end of the book. Likewise, Laura Joffe Numeroff’s *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* implies a lengthy conversation between a human-like mouse and a little boy. Personifying animals might be a good way to help introduce personification to children because animals share many common features with humans. It is easy to imagine an animal talking, for example, because they have mouths. These books demonstrate that those features can be elaborated to include more human-like qualities, such as the human-like emotions expressed by the pigeon in Mo Willem’s *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus*.

Occasionally, there were instances of personification that were a little more elaborate. In Pfister’s *The Rainbow Fish*, an octopus remarks, “the waves have told me your story” (14). Though certainly understandable, this specific personification is a little more creative, simply because waves do not have physical mouths. Likewise, the train engines in Piper’s *The Little Engine that Could* would not usually be thought of as having human-like qualities. The illustrations, however, help develop their personification by including facial features such as eyes, mouths, and noses on the engines. By adding these features, the illustrator has provided visual context that helps children comprehend the personification metaphor more easily.

Other explicit expressions usually functioned as descriptions of places or things. In *Corduroy*, a personified teddy bear approaches a department store escalator and thinks “could this be a mountain?” (Freeman 13). The little boy in *The Snowy Day*
makes a similar observation about a large pile of snow: “he pretended he was a
mountain-climber. He climbed up a great big tall mountain of snow” (22). In both
these cases, the characters are projecting what they know about mountains (big,
sloping, climbable) onto the structures before them, even though the structures they
encounter are not literally mountains.

Implicit expressions

Implicit metaphoric expressions within my selected literature accounted for
70% of the total expressions identified, demonstrating a strong metaphoric tendency
in the English language. Unlike the explicit/literary expressions, these expressions
were implicit, which assumes the reader has the necessary knowledge to deduce
meaningful connections for themselves. Because of this assumption, most of the
expressions have very little elaboration or contextual support, with a few exceptions.

Expressions regarding time were among the most common kinds of implicit
metaphor represented in my selected books. Lakoff and Johnson point out that in
English, TIME IS A MOVING OBJECT, conceptually-speaking (42). This
conceptualization is consistent with a number of different expressions I identified:
“day after day” (Freeman 5), “back over a year” (Sendak 30), “ten days passed quickly
by” (Bemelmans 28), and “the next morning” (30), just to name a few.

Occasionally, however, the TIME IS A MOVING OBJECT metaphor allowed for a
not-quite-conventional use of creative language, as Maurice Sendak demonstrates in
time using the expression “[the little boy sailed] in and out of weeks” (12, 30).

Conceptually, this expression is consistent with TIME IS AN OBJECT. Because we have this understanding, Sendak can get a little more creative, where “weeks” actually become containers, as demonstrated by the use of the prepositions “in” and “out”.

The primary difference between Sendak’s expression and our common conceptualization of time is that it is the little boy who is moving, and the weeks (or time) are stationary. Sendak deviates from our normal conceptualization of time just enough to spark our attention, but not enough to make it conceptually incoherent.

Another common textual feature I noticed was the use of verb + preposition constructions. In an effort to identify possible orientational metaphors, I recorded every instance of orientational markers such as “up”, “down”, “front”, “back”, etc. Here are a few of combinations I found, most of them occurring more than once:

“wake up”, “come on”, “be/go/come back”, “end up”, “fix up”, “eat up”, “hang up”, “gave up”, “sat down”, “pass by”, “come over”, “shut up”, “get out”, and “pick up”.

Sometimes, these seem to be literal, like “he’ll hang up his drawing [on the refrigerator]” (Numeroff), where the picture is literally up above the character’s head, as demonstrated by the accompanying illustration. Other literal expressions might be “sit down,” “stand up” etc., where the character is literally obligated to physically move in a manner consistent with those descriptions. But a phrase like “we picked up my dad at his office” (Viorst 22) doesn’t mean the dad was literally lifted up off the ground; in this instance, it means that he got a ride home from work. Other examples
are “give up,” “shut up” or “eat up”, where the orientational preposition “up” does not indicate a concrete physical movement in that direction. Even if every verb + preposition combination is not metaphorical, the sheer abundance of them reinforces a strong tendency to spatially organize our conceptual system in terms of up, down, forward, backward, etc. Clearly, the language used in these children’s books helps establish this premise, which then allows for the construction of ontological metaphors.

Often, orientational and ontological expressions appear to overlap. This may occur because we have difficulty orienting something until it has been bound by physical surface area, which implies an ontological relationship. Statements regarding time are especially prone to crossing both these domains simultaneously. For example, a statement like “the little blue fish was back” (Pfister 19) seems to entail two different metaphors working together. The word “back” automatically brings to mind an orientational relationship where something is either physically at your back or behind you. That “something”, in this instance, was a past event, where the little blue fish had encountered the Rainbow fish previously and is now having another similar encounter. According to Lakoff and Johnson, EVENTS ARE CONTAINERS, which allows us to conceive of the first encounter as an object. Because TIME IS A MOVING OBJECT, and the first encounter has “passed by”, that encounter is now conceptually “behind” us, allowing us to establish the orientational relationship “back” (or “behind”). This tendency to establish ontological relationships before orientational relationships might
help explain why ontological metaphors occurred more than three times as often as orientational metaphors in my analysis.

Ontological and structural metaphors also appear to overlap. I first noticed this when reading *Metaphors We Live By*, when Lakoff and Johnson discuss the ontological metaphor THE MIND IS AN ENTITY (27). They acknowledge that this conceptual framework can be elaborated to include THE MIND IS A MACHINE (27), at which point the initial ontological metaphor appears to have transformed into a structural metaphor. This may be why I identified fewer structural metaphors and an abundance of ontological metaphors. Saying something is a thing is much easier than specifying what kind of thing it is; where exactly that distinction comes is a little unclear. For example, in *The Mitten*, Jan Brett writes, “[the other animals] gave the fox lots of room”. “Room” in this context is being characterized two ways: once by the verb “gave,” which indicates a metaphorical understanding that ROOM IS AN OBJECT; and again by “lots of”, which indicates that “room” is also a quantifiable object – it has physical dimensions which can be compared spatially to other objects. In addition, as developed throughout the text and accompanying illustrations, “room” in this context is a highly desirable yet limited object, much the same way we would think of money. So, “room” as an object (an ontological metaphor) has become ROOM IS A LIMITED RESOURCE, which more closely resembles a structural metaphor.

Unlike literary metaphors, conceptual metaphoric expressions have very little textual/illustrated context to assist with understanding. This may be because
conceptual metaphors are assumed to be understood, rather than developed like literary metaphors. One exception to this might be demonstrated in Sam McBratney’s *Guess How Much I Love You*. This entire book is built on the conceptual metaphor that LOVE IS AN OBJECT, specifically an object that is bound by measurable surface area. This metaphor is “shown” using both text and pictures. In the story, Little Nutbrown Hare remarks “I love you *as high as I can hop*” (19), which is paired with an illustration of him frozen in mid air, both feet high off the ground. The idea being developed is that space between Little Nutbrown Hare’s feet and the ground could be measured, and that distance is correlated with the size of his love for his father. In addition, this picture perfectly illustrates the conceptual metaphor MORE IS UP, where Little Nutbrown Hare’s upward physical movement metaphorically corresponds with how much he loves his father – the higher he can hop, the greater his love. A back and forth banter is developed between father and son, where each hare thinks of greater and greater distances to describe their love. This book is an excellent illustration of how conceptual metaphors help us talk about more abstract concepts like emotions and love.

One of the most confusing subjects I encountered in my analysis was expressions regarding bed or bedtime. Nine of the 13 books had some instance of sleeping or “bed time” somewhere in the story. Some of the expressions I recorded are: “he’ll crawl *in* [the bed]” (Numeroff 13), “[he got] *into* his bed of leaves” (McBratney 28), “before he got *into* bed” (Keats 28), “he crawled *into* bed” (Rey 28), “I
got out of bed” (Viorst 3), and “I went to bed” (Viorst 28). Most of these expressions seem pretty straight-forward and literal. But prepositions like “into”, “in”, and “out” do not accurately convey our special relationship with a bed. As humans, we can be on a bed, but not literally inside of it. However, these prepositions are consistent with how we would talk about a container. One can literally go in and out of a container, as well as get into it. It makes more sense linguistically if “bed” in these instances were conceptualized as a container. Also notice how most of these expressions lack articles. This tendency seems to indicate that “bed” as a concept does not just refer to a physical object. The effect of “go to bed” versus “go to the bed” indicates “bed” is an occasion or event. Because EVENTS ARE CONTAINERS metaphorically-speaking, this reasoning is consistent with the language used to talk about beds and bedtime.

Conclusion
My results indicate a strong presence of metaphoric expressions in children’s literature, especially implicit expressions that derive from a metaphoric conceptual system. By nature of being children’s books and as evidenced through the text itself, the majority of these expressions use conventional, every-day language. They are not linguistically complex, and they are meant to be readily understood by the reader. These findings are consistent with the theory presented by Lakoff and Johnson in their book, Metaphors We Live By.

In consideration of these results, I have presented a few of the most common implicit and explicit metaphoric features of my selected literature, such as the
personification of animals, expressions regarding time, expressions regarding bed, verb + preposition constructions, and the overlap between ontological metaphors and structural or orientational metaphors. These results highlight the extent to which metaphor works its way into colloquial language, even language geared for young audiences.

Through this thesis, I have endeavored to bring to light an otherwise unconscious facet of our every-day interaction with one another. Metaphoric expressions – whether intentional or derived from a metaphoric conceptual system – are essential to the way we talk and act upon abstract concepts. Metaphor is so inherent, if fact, that one may have difficulty thinking and communicating clearly without it. Once realized, the subtlety of metaphor becomes a fascinating feature of language, and offers us a glimpse into how we think and organize thought.
Bibliography


