



Metaphor: A Historical Perspective

Balazs Huszka^{1*} & Indah Aini²

¹Assistant Professor, Language Centre, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Brunei Darussalam.

²Lecturer, Faculty of Languages and Arts, Universitas Negeri Medan, Indonesia.

Abstract

Metaphor has long occupied a central but contested position in the study of language, thought, and communication. Historically, metaphor has been interpreted in two contrasting ways: as a rhetorical ornament used primarily in literary discourse, and as a cognitive mechanism that structures human understanding. This paper examines the historical development of metaphor theory through a literature-based analysis representing different disciplinary and theoretical perspectives. Drawing on works from philosophy, linguistics, discourse studies, and Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the paper traces the evolution of metaphor from its classical formulation in ancient rhetoric through its reinterpretation in modern philosophy and contemporary cognitive linguistics. Particular attention is given to key turning points in the history of metaphor theory, including classical rhetorical accounts, early modern criticism of figurative language in scientific discourse, nineteenth-century philosophical reconsiderations, and the emergence of interaction and conceptual metaphor theories in the twentieth century. The analysis also explores recent developments in metaphor research, including discourse-oriented approaches, evolutionary perspectives on metaphor in language change, and cross-cultural studies of metaphorical conceptualisation. The findings suggest that the history of metaphor theory does not represent a simple linear progression from rhetoric to cognition; rather, it reflects an ongoing tension between viewing metaphor as a stylistic device and recognising its role in shaping conceptual structures and cultural meanings. By synthesising diverse scholarly perspectives, the study highlights the continuing relevance of historical reflection for understanding contemporary approaches to metaphor.

Keywords:

Cognitive linguistics, conceptual metaphor, history of metaphor, metaphor studies, metaphor theory, rhetoric.

1. Introduction

Metaphor has traditionally been regarded as one of the central phenomena in the study of language and meaning. From Antiquity onwards, scholars have attempted to define its nature, function, and epistemological status. The historical trajectory of metaphor theory reveals a

*Corresponding Author: Balazs Huszka

persistent tension between two principal interpretations: on the one hand, metaphor has been understood as a rhetorical or stylistic device employed primarily for ornamentation in literary and persuasive discourse; on the other hand, it has increasingly been interpreted as a fundamental mechanism of cognition that structures human conceptualisation and understanding. This dual perspective has shaped the development of metaphor theory across philosophy, rhetoric, linguistics, and literary studies.

The earliest systematic reflections on metaphor appear in classical rhetoric and philosophy, most prominently in the works of Aristotle. In the *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*, Aristotle described metaphor as a transfer of a name from one domain to another based on perceived similarity. This definition established metaphor as a linguistic operation involving semantic transference and analogy. Subsequent rhetorical traditions in Roman antiquity further consolidated this view. Authors such as Cicero and Quintilian largely treated metaphor as a stylistic figure closely related to comparison, often defining it as a condensed or implicit simile. Within this classical framework, metaphor was primarily associated with rhetorical effectiveness and aesthetic expression rather than with conceptual knowledge (de Lima, 2005; Makashova, 2022; Martinengo, 2024).

Despite the dominance of the rhetorical perspective, metaphor has never been entirely confined to the realm of stylistic ornament. Philosophical reflections have repeatedly raised questions concerning its cognitive and epistemological implications. Classical discussions already contain an implicit ambivalence regarding the epistemic value of figurative language. While Aristotle acknowledged metaphor as a linguistic transfer based on similarity, philosophical traditions influenced by Plato often expressed scepticism toward figurative language because of its potential to obscure conceptual clarity. This suspicion persisted in later intellectual traditions and became particularly influential during the early modern period, when philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke criticised metaphorical language for introducing ambiguity and imprecision into scientific reasoning (Makashova, 2022).

Nevertheless, the epistemological role of metaphor continued to be reconsidered throughout the history of philosophy. A significant early challenge to the purely rhetorical understanding of metaphor emerged in the work of Giambattista Vico, who emphasised the creative and cognitive capacity of metaphor in the formation of human knowledge. According to Vico, metaphor reflects a fundamental operation of human thought that enables the creation of conceptual categories and symbolic representations of the world. Later philosophical developments further reinforced the cognitive dimension of metaphor. In particular, the nineteenth-century reflections of Friedrich Nietzsche introduced a radical critique of the presumed opposition between literal and metaphorical language by suggesting that conceptual knowledge itself is ultimately grounded in metaphorical processes (Martinengo, 2024).

During the twentieth century, metaphor theory underwent significant conceptual transformation. Traditional substitution and comparison theories were increasingly challenged by approaches that emphasised the interaction between conceptual domains. One influential development emerged in the work of I. A. Richards, who introduced the distinction between tenor

and vehicle to describe the relational structure of metaphorical meaning. This approach was further elaborated by Max Black, whose interaction theory conceptualised metaphor as a dynamic process in which the semantic structure of one domain reshapes the interpretation of another. From this perspective, metaphor cannot be reduced to simple substitution or comparison but instead generates new meaning through the interaction of conceptual frameworks (Makashova, 2022; Alharbi, 2023).

A further theoretical shift occurred with the emergence of cognitive approaches to metaphor in the late twentieth century. In cognitive linguistics, metaphor came to be understood not merely as a linguistic phenomenon but as a fundamental mechanism of human thought. The Conceptual Metaphor Theory developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson proposed that abstract concepts are systematically structured through metaphorical mappings from more concrete experiential domains. This perspective significantly broadened the scope of metaphor research, extending it beyond literary and rhetorical analysis to fields such as discourse analysis, cultural studies, and cognitive science (Alharbi, 2023; Cavalcante et al., 2016).

Recent research has further expanded the study of metaphor by integrating historical, discursive, and cross-cultural perspectives. Scholars have examined the role of metaphor in political discourse, conceptual change, and the evolution of language, emphasising the dynamic and context-dependent nature of metaphorical meaning (Fabiszak et al., 2021; Musolff, 2004; Pleyer et al., 2024). At the same time, cross-linguistic and cultural studies have demonstrated that metaphorical conceptualisation reflects both universal embodied experiences and culturally specific patterns of interpretation (Huszka, 2020; Huszka et al., 2025c).

Against this background, the present paper aims to provide a historically oriented synthesis of major theoretical perspectives on metaphor. While numerous studies have examined metaphor from specific disciplinary viewpoints, fewer contributions attempt to situate these perspectives within a broader historical framework that connects philosophical, rhetorical, linguistic, and cognitive approaches. By analysing a selected body of scholarly literature representing these traditions, the study seeks to identify key turning points in the development of metaphor theory and to clarify the conceptual tensions that have shaped its evolution. In particular, the paper argues that the history of metaphor theory reflects an ongoing negotiation between rhetorical and cognitive interpretations of figurative language rather than a straightforward progression from one paradigm to another. By bringing together insights from different strands of scholarship, the study contributes to a historically informed understanding of how metaphor has been conceptualised across disciplines and why it continues to occupy a central position in contemporary research on language and cognition.

2. Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative literature-based approach in order to examine the historical development of metaphor theory. Rather than analysing linguistic data or conducting corpus-based research, the paper focuses on the interpretation and synthesis of existing scholarly work representing different theoretical perspectives on metaphor. The aim of the analysis is to

identify major conceptual developments in the understanding of metaphor and to situate these developments within their broader intellectual and historical contexts.

The literature examined in this study consists of sixteen scholarly publications addressing metaphor from various disciplinary perspectives, including philosophy, linguistics, discourse studies, literary studies, and cognitive linguistics. These works were selected because they represent diverse approaches to metaphor and collectively provide insight into the historical evolution of metaphor theory. The selected studies include theoretical discussions of metaphor in philosophy and rhetoric (Hart, 2022; Martinengo, 2024; de Lima, 2005), overviews of metaphor theory in linguistics and literary studies (Makashova, 2022; Alharbi, 2023; Cavalcante et al., 2016), as well as more recent research addressing metaphor in discourse, language change, and cross-cultural conceptualisation (Musolff, 2004; Fabiszak et al., 2021; Pleyer et al., 2024). In addition, several studies investigating metaphor in specific linguistic and cultural contexts are included in order to illustrate the contemporary expansion of metaphor research into applied and cross-cultural domains (Huszka, 2020; Huszka et al., 2024; Huszka et al., 2025a; Huszka et al., 2025b; Huszka et al., 2025c; Huszka et al., 2026).

The analysis proceeds through a thematic and historically oriented reading of these works. First, each publication was examined in order to identify its theoretical assumptions concerning the nature and function of metaphor. Particular attention was given to how individual authors conceptualise the relationship between metaphor, language, and cognition. Second, the studies were analysed in terms of their historical interpretation of metaphor theory, including the identification of key intellectual traditions, conceptual shifts, and influential theoretical frameworks. Finally, the findings from the selected works were synthesised in order to construct a coherent overview of the historical development of metaphor theory.

This analytical procedure allows for the comparison of different theoretical perspectives and facilitates the identification of recurring themes within the literature. In particular, the analysis focuses on the tension between rhetorical and cognitive interpretations of metaphor, the emergence of interaction-based and conceptual metaphor theories, and the increasing attention given to the role of metaphor in discourse, culture, and language evolution. By synthesising these perspectives, the study seeks to provide a historically informed understanding of how metaphor has been conceptualised within different scholarly traditions.

3. Historical Development of Metaphor Theory

A historical perspective on metaphor theory requires distinguishing between two related but different objects of inquiry: (i) metaphor as a linguistic and conceptual phenomenon, and (ii) the theoretical traditions that have attempted to explain it. Across the literature reviewed in this study, the historical development of metaphor theory is not presented as a uniform, linear narrative. Instead, authors repeatedly highlight discontinuities, shifts of emphasis, and recurring debates about the status of metaphor in relation to truth, knowledge, and rational discourse (Hart, 2022; Makashova, 2022; Martinengo, 2024).

The works included in this study converge on the observation that early theorising in classical rhetoric established metaphor as a form of semantic transfer or analogy and primarily evaluated it with respect to communicative effectiveness, stylistic value, and persuasive force (de Lima, 2005; Makashova, 2022; Alharbi, 2023). However, the literature also indicates that from its earliest philosophical reception, metaphor was associated with epistemic risk: figurative language was seen as capable of producing cognitive and ethical distortion, particularly in contexts where conceptual clarity or civic judgement was at stake (Hart, 2022). This tension between rhetorical functionality and epistemic suspicion becomes a defining feature of the historical record.

Subsequent periods reconfigured this tension in different ways. Medieval and theological traditions are described as developing metaphor as a necessary mode of expression for transcendent or abstract domains, thereby granting it a form of epistemic legitimacy within specific interpretive frameworks (Hart, 2022; Makashova, 2022). Early modern philosophy, by contrast, often treated metaphor as a source of ambiguity incompatible with scientific and rational standards of meaning, reinforcing a tendency to confine metaphor to non-scientific discourse (Makashova, 2022; Cavalcante et al., 2016). In later modern thought, metaphor increasingly reappears as an indispensable mechanism for conceptual innovation and knowledge formation, particularly in traditions that question the stability of literal meaning and the neutrality of language (Martinengo, 2024).

The twentieth century marks a major theoretical reorientation in the literature. Interaction-based accounts and discourse-level theories challenged the reduction of metaphor to substitution or abbreviated comparison, arguing that metaphor generates meaning through the structured relation between domains and through semantic innovation at the level of predication (de Lima, 2005; Hart, 2022; Makashova, 2022). Cognitive approaches further extended this shift by treating metaphor as a basic mechanism of conceptual organisation rather than a merely rhetorical device, thereby integrating metaphor into broader accounts of embodied experience, cultural patterning, and everyday reasoning (Alharbi, 2023; Cavalcante et al., 2016).

Contemporary work expands the scope of metaphor studies still further. The literature includes research on metaphor in political discourse and historical change, where metaphors are treated as dynamic cultural resources that evolve through competition, repetition, and contextual adaptation (Musolff, 2004; Fabiszak et al., 2021). It also includes integrative accounts that link metaphor to semantic change and the evolutionary dynamics of language, supported by computational and experimental methodologies (Pleyer et al., 2024). Finally, applied and cross-cultural studies demonstrate how metaphor theory is operationalised in education, emotion research, proverb interpretation, and literary analysis, and how metaphorical conceptualisation reflects both embodied regularities and culturally specific elaborations (Huszka, 2020; Huszka et al., 2024; Huszka et al., 2025a; Huszka et al., 2025b; Huszka et al., 2025c; Huszka et al., 2026).

Taken together, these studies support a historically informed thesis: metaphor theory develops through repeated renegotiations of metaphor's epistemic status. The "history" in this sense is not simply the accumulation of definitions, but a series of shifting attempts to manage

metaphor's dual capacity to illuminate and to mislead—an issue that remains central in contemporary research across disciplines (Hart, 2022; Martinengo, 2024).

3.1 Classical Foundations

The earliest systematic reflections on metaphor originate in the intellectual traditions of classical Greek philosophy and rhetoric. Within this context, metaphor was primarily conceptualised as a linguistic operation involving the transfer of meaning from one domain to another. The most influential early formulation appears in the work of Aristotle, who provided the first detailed theoretical account of metaphor in both the *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric*. Aristotle defined metaphor as the transfer of a name from its original referent to another entity based on perceived similarity or analogy. In his typology, this transfer could occur from genus to species, from species to genus, from one species to another, or through proportional analogy. This classification established the foundational framework for subsequent rhetorical theory and remained influential throughout later intellectual traditions (Makashova, 2022; Martinengo, 2024; Alharbi, 2023).

Within Aristotle's account, metaphor was closely associated with the cognitive capacity to perceive resemblance between otherwise distinct phenomena. Although metaphor was primarily treated as a stylistic and rhetorical device, Aristotle also suggested that the ability to produce effective metaphors reflects a particular form of intellectual insight. According to this view, recognising similarities between different conceptual domains requires a form of perceptive understanding that cannot easily be reduced to formal logical reasoning. Consequently, while metaphor was embedded within rhetorical practice, Aristotle's theory already contained the seeds of later interpretations that emphasise the cognitive dimensions of metaphor (Martinengo, 2024).

Classical philosophical discussions, however, also reveal a persistent ambivalence toward figurative language. In the works of Plato, figurative expression was frequently treated with suspicion because of its potential to distort rational judgement. Plato's critique of poetic language in the *Republic* reflects a broader concern that figurative and imaginative forms of discourse might mislead citizens and obscure philosophical truth. Although Plato himself employed metaphorical language in philosophical argumentation, his criticism contributed to a long-standing philosophical tendency to regard metaphor as epistemically problematic. This sceptical attitude toward figurative language later influenced traditions that sought to restrict metaphor to literary or rhetorical contexts (Hart, 2022).

The Roman rhetorical tradition further consolidated the classical understanding of metaphor as a stylistic figure. Writers such as Cicero and Quintilian incorporated Aristotle's insights into comprehensive rhetorical systems that emphasised persuasion, eloquence, and stylistic refinement. Within these frameworks, metaphor was typically described as a form of abbreviated comparison or implicit simile. This interpretation reinforced the view that metaphor functions primarily as a device for enhancing clarity, vividness, and rhetorical effectiveness in discourse. As a result, metaphor became firmly situated within the domain of rhetorical ornamentation rather than philosophical analysis of knowledge or cognition (de Lima, 2005; Makashova, 2022).

Despite this predominantly rhetorical orientation, classical discussions already indicated that metaphor performs more than a purely decorative function. Aristotle's emphasis on the ability to perceive similarities suggests that metaphor involves a form of conceptual association that may contribute to understanding. Nevertheless, within the broader classical tradition the epistemological implications of metaphor remained secondary to its rhetorical utility. Consequently, the dominant legacy of classical theory was the treatment of metaphor as a figure of speech grounded in analogy and semantic transfer. This conception shaped the subsequent development of metaphor theory for many centuries and provided the conceptual starting point for later debates concerning the cognitive and epistemological significance of metaphor (Martinengo, 2024; Makashova, 2022).

3.2 Medieval and Early Modern Perspectives

Following the classical period, discussions of metaphor continued within intellectual traditions shaped by theology, scholastic philosophy, and the gradual emergence of early modern scientific thought. While the classical rhetorical understanding of metaphor as semantic transfer remained influential, medieval and early modern thinkers reinterpreted metaphor in ways that reflected changing epistemological and cultural contexts.

In medieval intellectual traditions, metaphor acquired particular importance in theological discourse. Theological reflection frequently relied on figurative language in order to articulate concepts that exceeded the limits of direct human description. Discussions concerning the language used to describe divine attributes therefore addressed the relationship between literal, metaphorical, and analogical expressions. A prominent example appears in the work of Thomas Aquinas, whose scholastic philosophy examined the role of metaphor in religious language. Aquinas argued that human language necessarily employs metaphorical expressions when referring to God, because divine reality cannot be fully captured through literal terminology. Consequently, metaphor served as a linguistic and conceptual bridge that allowed theological discourse to express transcendent realities while acknowledging the limits of human understanding (Hart, 2022; Makashova, 2022).

Within this theological framework, metaphor was not merely a rhetorical ornament but a necessary interpretive instrument. Medieval scholars therefore distinguished between metaphorical language and analogy, emphasising that figurative expressions could convey meaningful insight when properly interpreted within a broader theological context. This perspective granted metaphor a form of epistemic legitimacy, although its use remained embedded within specific institutional and doctrinal frameworks. As a result, metaphor continued to function as an explanatory resource while still being carefully regulated within philosophical and theological reasoning (Hart, 2022).

During the transition to the early modern period, intellectual attitudes toward metaphor changed significantly. The rise of scientific inquiry and the increasing emphasis on empirical observation and rational analysis led many philosophers to adopt a more critical stance toward figurative language. Within emerging scientific discourse, precision and conceptual clarity became central methodological principles, and metaphor was often viewed as a potential source

of ambiguity or conceptual confusion. This sceptical attitude is particularly evident in the writings of early modern philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. Both thinkers argued that metaphorical expressions may obscure meaning by extending words beyond their proper or established definitions. For this reason, metaphor was frequently regarded as unsuitable for rigorous philosophical or scientific argumentation (Makashova, 2022; Cavalcante et al., 2016).

The critique of metaphor in early modern philosophy reflects a broader intellectual effort to establish clear distinctions between rhetorical persuasion and scientific reasoning. In this context, metaphor was often relegated to literary and rhetorical domains, while scientific language was expected to maintain terminological stability and conceptual precision. Such attitudes reinforced the view that figurative language belongs primarily to aesthetic or persuasive discourse rather than to the domain of knowledge production.

Nevertheless, the early modern critique did not eliminate metaphor from intellectual discourse. Instead, it intensified the debate concerning its epistemological status. By attempting to exclude metaphor from scientific reasoning, early modern philosophers implicitly highlighted the difficulty of maintaining strictly literal language in complex conceptual domains. As later developments in metaphor theory would demonstrate, metaphorical thinking continued to play an important role even within scientific and philosophical reasoning. Consequently, the early modern period can be understood as a phase in which metaphor was simultaneously criticised and indirectly reaffirmed as an unavoidable element of human language and thought (Makashova, 2022; Martinengo, 2024). Complementing these philosophical accounts, historical-semantic work shows how durable schematic metaphors (e.g., LIFE AS A PATH) can be anchored in diagrammatic forms whose semantic ‘occupations’ shift across periods, thereby linking metaphor to changing discursive and worldview constraints (Friedrich, 2025).

3.3 Nineteenth-Century Reconsiderations

During the nineteenth century, philosophical discussions of language and knowledge increasingly reconsidered the role of metaphor. Whereas earlier traditions had often treated metaphor primarily as a rhetorical ornament or as a potential source of conceptual ambiguity, several nineteenth-century thinkers began to explore its deeper relationship to cognition, imagination, and the formation of knowledge. This shift did not yet produce a unified theory of metaphor, but it significantly expanded the philosophical scope of the problem.

An important precursor to this development can be found in the work of Giambattista Vico. Although Vico’s ideas emerged earlier, they gained renewed relevance in later discussions of language and metaphor. Vico proposed that metaphor plays a central role in the formation of human knowledge, particularly in early stages of cultural and intellectual development. According to his view, metaphor arises from the human capacity to perceive similarities between different phenomena and to organise experience through imaginative associations. Rather than functioning merely as a stylistic embellishment, metaphor therefore participates in the construction of conceptual categories and symbolic representations of reality (Martinengo, 2024). This perspective challenged the dominant assumption that literal language provides the primary foundation for knowledge while metaphor remains secondary or decorative.

Another important contribution to nineteenth-century reflections on metaphor appears in the philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Within Hegel's aesthetics, metaphor is closely connected to the expressive function of poetic language. Hegel considered poetic imagination to be capable of revealing aspects of human experience that cannot easily be captured by strictly conceptual or analytical discourse. In this framework, metaphor becomes an instrument through which inner meanings are articulated and communicated through linguistic form. While Hegel did not develop a systematic theory of metaphor comparable to later linguistic models, his reflections emphasised the role of figurative language in mediating between subjective experience and conceptual thought (Hart, 2022).

A major nineteenth-century challenge to traditional views of metaphor emerged in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche questioned the conventional distinction between literal and metaphorical language by arguing that concepts themselves originate in metaphorical processes. In his early essay *On Truth and Lie in a Nonmoral Sense*, Nietzsche characterised truth as a "mobile army of metaphors," suggesting that what societies treat as stable knowledge is ultimately based on metaphorical constructions that have become conventionalised over time (Martinengo, 2024). From this perspective, metaphor is not merely an optional rhetorical device but a fundamental component of conceptual thinking.

Nietzsche's critique had far-reaching implications for later discussions of language and knowledge. By emphasising the metaphorical origins of conceptual categories, he challenged the assumption that language can provide direct and transparent access to reality. Instead, conceptual systems appear as historically contingent structures shaped by linguistic and cultural practices. This position opened the possibility of reinterpreting metaphor as an indispensable element of cognition rather than as a deviation from literal meaning.

Although nineteenth-century philosophy did not yet produce a unified theoretical framework for metaphor, these reconsiderations significantly altered the intellectual landscape in which later theories would develop. By questioning the rigid separation between literal and figurative language, thinkers such as Vico, Hegel, and Nietzsche contributed to a broader shift toward recognising the cognitive and epistemological significance of metaphor. This shift provided an important foundation for the theoretical developments that emerged in the twentieth century, when metaphor began to be studied more systematically within linguistics, philosophy of language, and cognitive science (Martinengo, 2024; Hart, 2022).

3.4 Twentieth-Century Theoretical Developments

The twentieth century witnessed a major transformation in the theoretical understanding of metaphor. Whereas earlier traditions had largely interpreted metaphor as a rhetorical device grounded in analogy or semantic substitution, modern linguistic and philosophical approaches increasingly treated metaphor as a dynamic process through which new meanings are generated. This shift was accompanied by the development of more systematic theoretical models that examined how metaphor operates within language, discourse, and cognition.

One of the earliest and most influential contributions to this transformation emerged in the work of I. A. Richards. Richards proposed a relational model of metaphor in which metaphorical meaning arises through the interaction between two conceptual components that he termed the *tenor* and the *vehicle*. The tenor refers to the underlying subject of the metaphor, while the vehicle provides the figurative framework through which the subject is interpreted. According to Richards, metaphor cannot be reduced to a simple substitution of one term for another; instead, meaning emerges from the interpretive relationship between these two elements. This approach shifted attention away from individual words toward the broader semantic interaction that occurs in metaphorical expressions (Makashova, 2022; Alharbi, 2023).

The interactional perspective was further developed by Max Black, whose interaction theory of metaphor emphasised the reciprocal influence between the conceptual domains involved in a metaphorical statement. Black argued that metaphor operates through what he described as a “system of associated commonplaces” connected with the metaphorical source domain. When a metaphor is used, these associated conceptual structures influence how the target domain is interpreted. As a result, metaphor produces new patterns of meaning rather than merely substituting one expression for another. Black’s theory therefore reinforced the view that metaphor plays an active role in shaping conceptual understanding (Makashova, 2022).

Another important contribution to twentieth-century metaphor theory is associated with the philosophical work of Paul Ricœur. Ricœur argued that metaphor operates primarily at the level of discourse rather than at the level of isolated words. In his view, metaphorical meaning arises when a statement produces a semantic tension between literal and figurative interpretations, thereby creating a new mode of understanding. Ricœur described this process as a form of semantic innovation, emphasising that metaphor has the capacity to redescribe reality by generating new interpretive perspectives. This hermeneutic approach highlighted the role of metaphor in both literary interpretation and philosophical reflection (Hart, 2022).

A further theoretical shift occurred with the emergence of cognitive linguistics in the late twentieth century. Within this framework, metaphor began to be understood not merely as a linguistic phenomenon but as a fundamental mechanism of human thought. The Conceptual Metaphor Theory developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson proposed that abstract concepts are systematically structured through metaphorical mappings from more concrete domains of experience. According to this theory, everyday reasoning relies extensively on metaphorical conceptualisations such as spatial orientation, bodily experience, and physical interaction with the environment. Metaphor therefore becomes a pervasive feature of human cognition rather than a specialised feature of literary language (Alharbi, 2023; Cavalcante et al., 2016).

The emergence of Conceptual Metaphor Theory significantly broadened the scope of metaphor research. Scholars began to examine metaphor not only in literary texts but also in everyday language, political discourse, and cultural practices. This expansion encouraged interdisciplinary collaboration between linguistics, psychology, philosophy, and communication studies. As a result, metaphor studies developed into a diverse research field addressing questions

related to conceptual structure, discourse analysis, and cultural interpretation (Cavalcante et al., 2016).

These twentieth-century developments fundamentally reshaped the theoretical landscape of metaphor research. Interaction theories challenged the traditional substitution model, while cognitive approaches reconceptualised metaphor as an essential component of conceptual organisation. Together, these perspectives established the foundation for contemporary research that investigates metaphor as a dynamic phenomenon operating across linguistic, cognitive, and cultural domains. The next section therefore examines how recent scholarship has further extended these approaches by analysing metaphor in discourse, language change, and cross-cultural contexts.

3.5 Contemporary Developments in Metaphor Research

In recent decades, metaphor research has expanded considerably in both its theoretical scope and methodological approaches. Building on the foundations established by interaction theories and cognitive linguistics, contemporary scholarship increasingly investigates metaphor as a dynamic phenomenon embedded in discourse, culture, and social interaction. Rather than focusing exclusively on literary language or philosophical reflection, current research examines how metaphors function in a wide range of communicative contexts, including political discourse, language change, cross-cultural conceptualisation, and educational practice.

One important area of contemporary research concerns the role of metaphor in public and political discourse. Scholars have demonstrated that metaphorical expressions play a significant role in shaping how complex social and political issues are framed and interpreted. For example, analyses of political communication have shown that recurring metaphorical models can structure public debate and influence collective understanding of political processes. Such studies emphasise that metaphors do not merely embellish discourse but actively participate in the construction of political meaning and argumentation. Research in this area highlights the persistence and adaptability of certain metaphorical patterns within political language, where metaphorical expressions are repeatedly reused and reinterpreted in response to changing socio-political contexts (Musolff, 2004).

Closely related to discourse-oriented approaches are studies examining the historical and evolutionary dynamics of metaphor. Some scholars have proposed that metaphorical patterns evolve through processes comparable to cultural or linguistic selection. From this perspective, metaphors can be viewed as conceptual structures that spread, compete, and change over time within particular communicative environments. Research adopting such approaches often combines insights from cognitive linguistics with corpus-based methods in order to investigate how metaphorical expressions emerge, stabilise, or decline within discourse. These studies suggest that metaphorical change is influenced by a combination of cognitive constraints, communicative effectiveness, and broader socio-cultural developments (Fabiszak et al., 2021; Pleyer et al., 2024).

Another significant development in contemporary metaphor studies is the increasing attention given to cross-linguistic and cross-cultural perspectives. While early cognitive theories often emphasised universal conceptual structures grounded in embodied experience, recent research has highlighted the importance of cultural variation in metaphorical conceptualisation. Comparative studies of metaphor across languages have demonstrated that although many metaphors are motivated by shared bodily experiences, different linguistic communities may elaborate or interpret these metaphors in culturally specific ways. Investigations of emotion metaphors, for instance, have shown that while certain embodied patterns appear across languages, their linguistic realisation and cultural interpretation can vary considerably (Huszka, 2020; Huszka et al., 2025c).

In addition to cross-cultural research, contemporary studies also explore metaphor within specific cultural traditions and communicative practices. Analyses of proverbial language, for example, illustrate how metaphor contributes to the transmission of cultural values and social norms. Within such contexts, metaphorical expressions often function as condensed forms of cultural knowledge, encapsulating shared moral and social insights in figurative language. These studies demonstrate that metaphorical patterns embedded in traditional expressions can provide valuable insight into the conceptual structures that organise cultural identity and social understanding (Huszka et al., 2025b).

Finally, recent work has emphasised the relevance of metaphor in educational and applied contexts. In language teaching and intercultural communication, metaphor can serve as an important tool for explaining culturally embedded meanings and conceptual frameworks. Research on metaphor in language education has shown that analysing metaphorical expressions can help learners understand how linguistic structures reflect cultural perspectives and patterns of thought. Consequently, metaphor analysis has become increasingly integrated into pedagogical approaches that seek to connect language learning with cultural competence (Huszka et al., 2024).

Taken together, these developments illustrate the growing interdisciplinary character of contemporary metaphor studies. Modern research integrates perspectives from linguistics, discourse analysis, cognitive science, and cultural studies in order to examine how metaphor operates across different domains of human communication. By situating metaphor within broader social, cultural, and cognitive processes, contemporary scholarship moves beyond earlier debates about whether metaphor is primarily rhetorical or cognitive. Instead, metaphor is increasingly understood as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that shapes language, thought, and social interaction in diverse ways (Cavalcante et al., 2016; Pleyer et al., 2024).

4. Discussion

The historical overview presented in the previous section demonstrates that metaphor theory has evolved through a series of conceptual reconfigurations rather than through a simple linear progression. Across the literature examined in this study, metaphor consistently appears at the intersection of rhetorical practice, philosophical reflection, and linguistic theory. Although the interpretation of metaphor has shifted considerably over time, a central tension persists

throughout the historical record: whether metaphor should be understood primarily as a stylistic device within discourse or as a fundamental mechanism of conceptual organisation.

The studies reviewed indicate that early theoretical traditions framed metaphor largely in rhetorical terms. Classical rhetoric conceptualised metaphor as a form of semantic transfer grounded in analogy, emphasising its communicative effectiveness and stylistic value. While this framework established the conceptual foundations of metaphor theory, it also positioned metaphor primarily within the domain of persuasive and literary discourse. As a result, metaphor was often treated as secondary to literal language in discussions of knowledge and reasoning (Makashova, 2022; Martinengo, 2024).

Subsequent intellectual developments gradually broadened the conceptual scope of metaphor. Medieval theological discourse demonstrated that metaphor could function as a necessary instrument for expressing abstract or transcendent ideas, thereby granting figurative language a limited epistemological role. In contrast, early modern philosophical approaches frequently regarded metaphor with suspicion, particularly in contexts where conceptual precision and empirical verification were considered essential. This ambivalence reflects a broader epistemological concern regarding the relationship between language and knowledge: figurative expressions can both illuminate and obscure conceptual understanding.

The literature reviewed in this study suggests that nineteenth-century philosophy played an important role in challenging the rigid distinction between literal and metaphorical language. Philosophical reflections during this period emphasised the creative and interpretive capacities of metaphor, thereby opening the possibility that figurative language contributes to the formation of conceptual frameworks rather than merely embellishing them. Although these ideas did not yet produce a systematic linguistic theory, they helped prepare the intellectual ground for later developments in metaphor research (Martinengo, 2024; Hart, 2022).

Twentieth-century theoretical developments significantly transformed the study of metaphor by introducing more structured explanatory models. Interaction theories demonstrated that metaphorical meaning arises from the relationship between conceptual domains rather than from simple substitution or comparison. Cognitive approaches further extended this insight by proposing that metaphor functions as a fundamental mechanism through which abstract concepts are structured in human thought. From this perspective, metaphor is not limited to poetic language but permeates everyday communication and reasoning (Alharbi, 2023; Cavalcante et al., 2016).

Contemporary research continues to expand these perspectives by situating metaphor within broader social and cultural processes. Studies of political discourse illustrate how metaphorical models structure public debates and shape collective interpretations of complex social phenomena (Musolff, 2004; Fabiszak et al., 2021). Research on language evolution highlights the dynamic nature of metaphorical patterns and their capacity to adapt to changing communicative contexts (Pleyer et al., 2024). In addition, cross-cultural investigations

demonstrate that metaphorical conceptualisation reflects both shared embodied experiences and culturally specific elaborations (Huszka, 2020; Huszka et al., 2025c).

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that metaphor should not be understood exclusively within rhetorical, linguistic, or cognitive frameworks. Instead, metaphor appears as a multidimensional phenomenon that operates simultaneously at several levels of human communication. It functions as a stylistic resource in discourse, a mechanism of conceptual organisation in cognition, and a cultural instrument through which communities interpret experience and transmit knowledge. Recognising this complexity helps explain why metaphor has remained a persistent object of inquiry across multiple disciplines.

The historical trajectory examined in this study therefore indicates that the study of metaphor benefits from integrative approaches that combine insights from rhetoric, philosophy, linguistics, and discourse analysis. Rather than replacing earlier interpretations, contemporary metaphor research tends to incorporate and reinterpret them within broader theoretical frameworks. This interdisciplinary orientation reflects the increasing recognition that metaphor plays a central role in shaping how language mediates between conceptual structures, cultural meanings, and communicative practices.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to examine the historical development of metaphor theory through a literature-based synthesis of selected philosophical, linguistic, and discourse-oriented studies. The analysis demonstrates that the interpretation of metaphor has undergone substantial transformation across intellectual history, reflecting broader changes in how scholars understand the relationship between language, knowledge, and conceptualisation.

The historical overview suggests that metaphor theory cannot be adequately described as a linear progression from rhetorical ornamentation to cognitive explanation. Classical rhetorical traditions established the foundational understanding of metaphor as semantic transfer based on analogy, primarily emphasising its stylistic and persuasive functions. Subsequent philosophical and linguistic developments, however, increasingly recognised that metaphor contributes to the formation of conceptual frameworks and interpretive models through which human experience is understood.

Twentieth-century interaction theories and cognitive approaches further expanded this perspective by proposing that metaphor plays an active role in the generation of meaning and in the organisation of conceptual structures. Contemporary research continues to build on these insights by examining metaphor within broader discursive, cultural, and communicative contexts. As a result, metaphor is now widely understood as a phenomenon that operates simultaneously at linguistic, cognitive, and socio-cultural levels.

Taken together, the literature examined in this study indicates that metaphor theory has developed through successive reinterpretations that reflect shifting intellectual priorities rather than through the replacement of earlier perspectives. A historically informed understanding of

metaphor therefore remains essential for situating contemporary research within its broader theoretical context and for appreciating the diversity of approaches that currently characterise metaphor studies.

The present analysis is limited to the selected body of literature and does not aim to provide an exhaustive survey of all historical approaches to metaphor.

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