

CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS OF EMOTION IN ADOLESCENT LANGUAGE: A COGNITIVE LINGUISTIC STUDY OF SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Abstract

This study addresses the limited empirical attention to how adolescents conceptualize emotions through metaphor in everyday language. While previous research in Cognitive Linguistics has established that emotions are structured through embodied metaphorical mappings, most studies focus on adult discourse or treat these mappings as relatively stable and domain-specific. Consequently, there remains a lack of evidence on how metaphor operates dynamically in adolescents' spontaneous emotional expressions. This study investigates how senior high school students conceptualize six emotion categories—anger, sadness, fear, anxiety, happiness, and relief—using a cognitive linguistic framework. Data were collected from students' natural expressions of emotional experience and analyzed using the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP), followed by classification into conceptual metaphors and image schemas. The findings reveal that students consistently rely on a limited set of embodied image schemas, particularly CONTAINER, UP-DOWN orientation, BALANCE, and PATH. These schemas are not confined to single emotional categories but are flexibly reused across different emotions, resulting in overlapping and context-sensitive mappings. For instance, CONTAINER schemas structure both anger and anxiety, while PATH schemas are used to conceptualize both fear and relief with contrasting directional meanings. These results suggest that metaphorical cognition operates as a dynamic and adaptive system rather than as fixed one-to-one mappings between source and target domains. The study contributes to Cognitive Linguistics by providing empirical evidence from adolescent everyday language use and by demonstrating that emotional meaning emerges from the interaction of embodied schemas, linguistic convention, and communicative context.

Keywords: *conceptual metaphor, emotion, embodiment, image schema, adolescent language*

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INTRODUCTION

Emotion is a fundamental aspect of human experience, yet it remains abstract and difficult to articulate through purely literal language. In everyday communication, speakers frequently rely on metaphorical expressions to make emotional experiences more tangible. Expressions such as *lagi down*, *kepala penuh*, or *keluar dari masalah*

indicate that emotions are commonly understood and communicated through references to bodily sensations, spatial orientation, movement, and physical containment. This suggests that emotional meaning is not merely expressed linguistically, but is cognitively structured. At the same time, language does not operate solely in a literal manner; meaning is often constructed through interpretive and figurative processes that extend beyond surface forms, highlighting the importance of non-literal mechanisms in communication (Gorobat, 2023).

Within Cognitive Linguistics, Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) explains that abstract concepts are systematically understood through mappings from more concrete and embodied source domains (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Metaphor, therefore, is not viewed as a stylistic ornament, but as a fundamental cognitive mechanism shaping thought and language. Emotions are particularly productive target domains for metaphor due to their close connection with bodily experience and physiological response (Lakoff, 1987; Kövecses, 2000). More recent developments in cognitive metaphor research further emphasize the role of context, discourse, and embodiment in shaping metaphorical meaning (Kövecses, 2015, 2020; Gibbs, 2017). This cognitive perspective is further supported by psycholinguistic research showing that metaphor facilitates cross-domain mapping and plays a central role in meaning construction and cognitive processing (Maretha & Wahyuningsih, 2023).

The embodied basis of emotional meaning is further elaborated through the concept of image schemas, which are recurring cognitive patterns derived from bodily interaction with the physical world, such as CONTAINER, UP–DOWN orientation, BALANCE, and PATH or MOTION (Johnson, 1987; Hampe, 2017). These schemas provide a structural foundation for how emotions are conceptualized and expressed across languages. Research in embodied cognition consistently demonstrates that emotional experiences are grounded in bodily states and spatial relations rather than abstract reasoning alone (Gibbs, 2017; Littlemore, 2019).

A substantial body of empirical research has documented systematic metaphorical patterns in the conceptualization of emotion. Cross-linguistic studies reveal that emotions such as anger, sadness, and happiness are frequently structured through metaphors of heat, pressure, vertical orientation, and containment, suggesting shared embodied foundations across languages (Yu, 1995; Soriano et al., 2015). Further

analyses show that emotions are often conceptualized as locations or spaces, where individuals may enter, remain in, or exit particular emotional states (Pérez Rull, 2001). Comparative studies of English and Chinese also confirm the dominance of embodied source domains, particularly UP–DOWN orientation and CONTAINER schemas, while allowing for culturally specific linguistic realizations (Liu & Zhao, 2013).

In Indonesian linguistic contexts, similar patterns have been identified. A study on emotion metaphors in the Karo language demonstrates that emotional states are systematically conceptualized through embodied domains such as the body, pressure, and spatial orientation, reflecting both universal tendencies and cultural specificity (Ginting & Mulyadi, 2020). Research on conceptual metaphors of anger among Javanese speakers in Lampung further reveals culturally grounded metaphorical structures that align with core assumptions of Cognitive Linguistics (Pangestuti, 2024). In addition, a comprehensive study of emotion metaphors in Indonesian shows that emotions are consistently structured through recurring image schemas such as CONTAINER, BALANCE, and PATH across a range of emotional categories (Rajeg, 2013).

However, despite these contributions, existing research on emotion metaphors largely focuses on adult speakers, literary texts, or generalized language use, often treating metaphor as a relatively stable and universal cognitive system. Such an approach tends to overlook how metaphor is dynamically constructed in everyday language practices, particularly among adolescents whose emotional expression and linguistic competence are still developing. Adolescence represents a critical developmental stage characterized by heightened emotional experience and evolving communicative strategies. Studies on adolescent language use indicate that young people actively employ expressive and non-literal language forms to negotiate meaning, identity, and emotion in social interaction (Iswatiningsih et al., 2021; Cameron, 2016). Research on adolescent communication further highlights the role of emotional expression in shaping communicative behavior and social norms, particularly in relation to politeness and expressive choices (Ramli, 2019; Maretha et al, 2021).

This limitation points to a significant gap: while metaphor has been extensively theorized as an embodied cognitive mechanism, there is still limited empirical evidence of how these metaphorical structures are realized in adolescents' everyday emotional

expressions, particularly in written contexts. Understanding this process is essential for capturing how cognitive, social, and developmental factors interact in shaping emotional meaning.

Accordingly, this study investigates how senior high school students conceptualize emotions through metaphorical expressions using a cognitive linguistic framework. Focusing on six emotion categories—anger, sadness, fear, anxiety, happiness, and relief—this study examines the dominant source domains and image schemas underlying adolescents' emotional language. Metaphorical expressions are identified using the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) (Pragglejaz Group, 2007). By mapping metaphorical patterns in students' everyday emotional expressions, this study aims to contribute empirical evidence to emotion–metaphor research while extending its scope to adolescent language use in educational settings.

METHOD

This study employs an exploratory qualitative research design within the framework of Cognitive Linguistics. Qualitative research is appropriate for investigating linguistic phenomena in natural language use and for exploring how individuals conceptualize abstract experiences through language (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In the context of metaphor research, qualitative approaches enable researchers to examine how metaphorical expressions reflect underlying conceptual structures in everyday discourse (Kövecses, 2015).

The study focuses on identifying metaphorical expressions of emotion and analyzing their conceptual mappings and underlying image schemas.

The participants of this study were 11 senior high school students from a public high school. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, which allows researchers to select individuals who are able to provide relevant linguistic data for the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The students were considered appropriate participants because adolescence represents a developmental stage in which emotional experience and linguistic expression continue to evolve. To protect participants' privacy, all responses were anonymized and coded using participant identifiers (e.g., S1, S2).

Data were collected through a written elicitation task designed to capture students' everyday emotional expressions. Written elicitation is commonly used in metaphor research to obtain spontaneous linguistic data while allowing participants to articulate their experiences using their own words (Littlemore, 2019).

Participants were asked to respond to prompts related to six emotion categories: anger, sadness, fear, anxiety, happiness, and relief. For each category, students described how they experienced or expressed the emotion in their own words. No explicit instruction was given to produce figurative language, allowing metaphorical expressions to emerge naturally from the data.

The analysis was conducted in several stages. First, all responses were compiled and segmented into clauses or phrases containing emotional expressions. Metaphorical expressions were then identified using the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) developed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007). This procedure involves comparing the contextual meaning of a lexical unit with its more basic meaning and identifying metaphorical use when a contrast between the two meanings is observed.

After metaphor identification, the expressions were analyzed in terms of conceptual mappings between the target domain (emotion) and the source domain (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The identified source domains were then categorized according to recurring image schemas, such as CONTAINER, UP-DOWN orientation, BALANCE, and PATH/MOTION (Johnson, 1987; Hampe, 2017).

Finally, patterns across the six emotion categories were compared to determine dominant metaphorical structures in adolescents' emotional expressions.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, the data were examined systematically using consistent analytical criteria. Ambiguous cases were revisited by comparing contextual and basic meanings to ensure accurate metaphor identification.

In qualitative research, maintaining analytic transparency and consistency is essential to ensure the credibility of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The analytical procedures applied in this study were grounded in established cognitive linguistic frameworks, which strengthens the theoretical validity of the interpretation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

This section presents the findings on how senior high school students conceptualize emotions through metaphorical expressions. The analysis demonstrates that students systematically rely on a limited set of embodied image schemas to structure emotional experience. Rather than producing isolated or creative metaphors, participants consistently draw on recurring conceptual patterns grounded in bodily sensation, spatial orientation, and movement.

Overall Distribution of Emotion Metaphors

A comprehensive analysis of the dataset reveals that emotional expressions are predominantly structured through four major image schemas: CONTAINER, UP–DOWN orientation, BALANCE, and PATH/MOTION. These schemas recur across multiple participants and emotional categories, indicating that metaphorical expressions are not random but follow systematic cognitive patterns.

Table 1 summarizes the dominant image schemas across the six emotion categories.

Table 1. Dominant Image Schemas in Students’ Emotion Metaphors

Emotion Category	Dominant Image Schema	Example Expressions
Anger	CONTAINER / PRESSURE	<i>emosinya dipendam, meledak</i>
Sadness	UP–DOWN / LOCATION	<i>lagi down, jatuh</i>
Fear	PATH / LOCATION	<i>takut melangkah, posisi terancam</i>
Anxiety	BALANCE / CONTAINER	<i>nggak tenang, kepala penuh</i>
Happiness	UP / LIGHTNESS	<i>mood naik, hati hangat</i>
Relief	EXIT / RELEASE	<i>keluar dari masalah, beban hilang</i>

Importantly, these schemas are not restricted to single emotional categories. For instance, the CONTAINER schema appears in both anger and anxiety, while PATH and LOCATION schemas are used in both fear and relief. This overlap suggests that adolescents rely on a shared set of embodied cognitive resources to structure different emotional experiences.

Emotion as CONTAINER and PRESSURE

Emotions such as anger and anxiety are predominantly conceptualized through the CONTAINER schema, where emotional states are understood as entities located within a bounded internal space. This is evident in expressions such as *emosinya dipendam*, *kepala penuh banget*, and *kepikiran terus*, which occur across multiple participants.

These expressions instantiate the conceptual metaphor EMOTION IS A SUBSTANCE IN A CONTAINER, in which the source domain involves a physical container (often associated with the body or mind), and the target domain is the internal emotional state. The expression *dipendam* ('suppressed') suggests deliberate containment, while *kepala penuh* ('head is full') reflects accumulation and limited capacity. Similarly, *kepikiran terus* indicates continuous circulation within the same internal space, reinforcing the idea of confinement.

This schema frequently extends into a PRESSURE component, particularly in expressions such as *meledak* and *jantung mau copot*. In these cases, emotional buildup exceeds the container's capacity, resulting in explosive release or physical disruption. The metaphorical mapping thus involves not only containment but also increasing intensity over time.

The recurrence of these expressions across different speakers suggests that adolescents conceptualize emotions as dynamic internal forces that accumulate, intensify, and eventually require release, rather than as static psychological states.

Emotion as Spatial Orientation: UP and DOWN

Sadness and happiness are predominantly structured through vertical orientation metaphors. Negative emotional states are consistently associated with downward movement, as seen in expressions such as *lagi down*, *jatuh*, and *mental turun*. In contrast, positive emotional states are associated with upward movement or elevation, as reflected in expressions such as *mood naik* and *perasaan naik*.

These expressions instantiate orientational metaphors such as SADNESS IS DOWN and HAPPINESS IS UP, where vertical spatial orientation serves as the source domain for emotional evaluation. The mapping reflects embodied experience, in which upward orientation is associated with vitality, energy, and control, while downward orientation corresponds to reduced energy and emotional burden.

The consistent use of these expressions across multiple participants indicates that UP–DOWN orientation functions as a highly conventionalized schema in adolescents' emotional language. Notably, the forms used by students closely resemble those found in broader everyday discourse, suggesting that these metaphorical structures are not individually constructed but socially shared and cognitively entrenched.

Emotion as BALANCE and INSTABILITY

Anxiety-related expressions frequently draw on the BALANCE schema, conceptualizing emotional experience as a state of equilibrium or disequilibrium. Expressions such as *nggak tenang*, *gelisah*, and *pikiran muter terus* reflect a loss of internal stability.

In these expressions, emotional discomfort is not represented as an object or entity, but as a condition of ongoing instability. The phrase *nggak tenang* indicates disruption of a stable resting state, while *pikiran muter terus* suggests uncontrolled movement within the cognitive domain. Similarly, *kepala penuh* can also be interpreted as exceeding cognitive balance, reinforcing the idea of overload.

The repeated use of these expressions across participants suggests that adolescents conceptualize anxiety as a dynamic imbalance rather than a discrete emotional state. Emotional regulation, therefore, is implicitly understood as the restoration of balance, indicating a strong embodied grounding in physical equilibrium.

Emotion as PATH, MOVEMENT, and EXIT

Fear and relief are often conceptualized through PATH and MOTION schemas, emphasizing movement through or between emotional states. Expressions such as *takut melangkah*, *keluar dari masalah*, *beban hilang*, and *akhirnya bisa napas* illustrate how emotional experience is structured as spatial transition.

In fear-related expressions, movement is often constrained or inhibited. For example, *takut melangkah* suggests hesitation or inability to move forward, indicating that fear is conceptualized as a barrier to progression. Similarly, expressions involving physical sensations such as *jantung deg-degan* reflect heightened bodily response associated with unstable positioning.

In contrast, relief-related expressions emphasize successful movement out of a negative state. Expressions such as *keluar dari masalah*, *beban hilang*, and *akhirnya*

selesai indicate transition toward resolution, release, and regained control. The metaphorical mapping reflects the conceptualization

EMOTIONAL STATES ARE LOCATIONS, where individuals can enter, remain in, or exit particular emotional conditions.

The contrast between fear and relief demonstrates that while both rely on PATH schemas, they differ in directionality and outcome: fear is associated with blocked or uncertain movement, whereas relief involves exit and resolution.

Cross-Category Patterns of Image Schemas

Across the dataset, image schemas are not confined to single emotional categories but are flexibly reused across different emotional experiences. The CONTAINER schema, for instance, appears in both anger and anxiety, suggesting a shared conceptualization of internal accumulation and containment. Similarly, PATH schemas are used to structure both fear and relief, although with contrasting meanings—fear involves hesitation or constraint, while relief involves successful transition and release.

Additionally, UP–DOWN orientation operates as a general evaluative mechanism across emotions, distinguishing positive and negative affect through vertical positioning. This indicates that emotional categories are not conceptualized through entirely distinct metaphorical systems, but through patterned variation within a shared embodied framework.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that adolescents' emotional expressions are systematically grounded in a limited set of embodied image schemas. Rather than relying on novel or idiosyncratic metaphors, students draw on conventionalized cognitive patterns that reflect shared bodily experience and spatial reasoning.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that adolescents systematically conceptualize emotions through a limited set of embodied image schemas, particularly CONTAINER, UP–DOWN orientation, BALANCE, and PATH. While these results are broadly consistent with the central claims of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, a closer examination reveals several important theoretical implications that extend beyond prior research.

First, the dominance of embodied schemas across all emotion categories reinforces the foundational assumption that abstract concepts are grounded in bodily experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2000). However, the present study provides further empirical support by showing that these mappings are not only cognitively plausible, but also consistently realized in adolescents' everyday language use. Unlike many previous studies that focus on literary texts or adult discourse, the data in this study demonstrate that adolescents rely on core schemas such as containment, verticality, and movement in spontaneous, informal expressions. This suggests that embodied metaphorical structures are not merely theoretical constructs, but are actively used as cognitive tools for emotional articulation from an early stage of development.

Second, the findings complicate the tendency in earlier research to treat metaphorical mappings as relatively stable and discrete across emotional categories. While previous studies often associate particular emotions with specific metaphors (e.g., SADNESS IS DOWN, ANGER IS HEAT), the present findings reveal a more dynamic and overlapping system of schemas. For instance, the CONTAINER schema appears not only in anger but also in anxiety-related expressions such as *kepala penuh* and *kepikiran terus*, indicating a shared conceptual basis of internal accumulation. Similarly, PATH schemas are employed in both fear and relief, but with contrasting meanings—fear is associated with hesitation or blocked movement, whereas relief involves successful exit and resolution.

These patterns suggest that emotional categories are not mapped onto entirely distinct conceptual structures, but rather emerge from the flexible reuse of a limited set of embodied schemas. In this sense, metaphorical cognition operates as a network of interrelated structures that are dynamically adapted to different emotional contexts, rather than as fixed one-to-one mappings. This finding contributes to ongoing developments in Cognitive Linguistics that emphasize variation, contextual influence, and dynamic meaning construction (Kövecses, 2015, 2020).

Third, the study highlights the role of conventionalization in adolescent metaphor use. The expressions identified in the data, such as *lagi down*, *mood naik*, *beban hilang*, and *plong banget*, are not novel or creative constructions, but highly conventionalized forms widely used in everyday communication. This indicates that adolescents draw on socially shared linguistic resources rather than generating

metaphors independently. Such findings support the view that metaphor is both cognitively grounded and socially distributed, reflecting the interaction between embodied experience and communal language practices (Gibbs, 2017; Cameron, 2016).

At the same time, the findings suggest that metaphor plays an important role in structuring emotional experience and regulation. Expressions such as *dipendam*, *meledak*, and *kepikiran terus* reflect not only how emotions are conceptualized, but also how they are experienced and managed. The use of containment and pressure metaphors, for instance, implies an understanding of emotional buildup and release, while PATH metaphors in expressions such as *keluar dari masalah* conceptualize emotional recovery as movement toward resolution. This indicates that metaphor functions not merely as a descriptive device, but as a cognitive mechanism that organizes emotional experience in meaningful ways.

Taken together, these findings point to a significant contribution of the study: the identification of systematic, recurrent, and embodied patterns in adolescents' emotional language within a naturalistic context. Unlike previous studies that tend to examine emotion metaphors in adult discourse or treat metaphorical mappings as relatively fixed and domain-specific, the present study demonstrates that adolescents' emotional expressions are structured through a systematic yet flexible network of embodied image schemas. Rather than assigning a single metaphor to each emotional category, the findings reveal that schemas such as CONTAINER, PATH, and UP-DOWN are recurrently reused and reconfigured across different emotional states, producing overlapping and context-sensitive mappings. This highlights a dynamic model of metaphorical cognition in which emotional meaning is not derived from isolated conceptual pairings, but emerges from the interaction of shared embodied schemas, linguistic convention, and communicative context. In this way, the study offers an empirical contribution by showing how metaphorical structures operate as a patterned but adaptive system in adolescents' everyday language, thereby extending existing accounts of emotion metaphor within Cognitive Linguistics.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated how senior high school students conceptualize emotions through metaphorical expressions within a cognitive linguistic framework. The findings reveal that adolescents consistently rely on a limited set of embodied image schemas—particularly CONTAINER, UP–DOWN orientation, BALANCE, and PATH—to structure emotional experience. These schemas recur across multiple emotion categories, indicating that metaphorical expressions are not random but systematically organized.

The results suggest that emotional meaning is grounded in bodily and spatial experience, supporting the view that metaphor is a fundamental cognitive mechanism rather than a purely linguistic ornament. More importantly, the findings show that these metaphorical structures operate in a dynamic and overlapping manner. Rather than assigning a single metaphor to each emotional category, adolescents flexibly reuse and adapt shared schemas across different emotional contexts. This indicates that emotional conceptualization is not based on fixed mappings, but emerges from the interaction between embodied experience, linguistic convention, and situational context.

This study contributes to Cognitive Linguistics by providing empirical evidence from adolescent everyday language use, a domain that remains relatively underexplored in metaphor research. It extends previous studies by demonstrating that metaphorical cognition operates as a patterned yet adaptive system, characterized by overlapping schemas and context-sensitive usage. In doing so, the study offers a more nuanced account of emotion metaphor that moves beyond static and domain-specific mappings.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the data are limited to a relatively small group of participants within a specific sociocultural and educational context, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Second, the analysis focuses primarily on linguistic expressions without incorporating multimodal or interactional data, such as gesture or prosody, which may also play a role in emotional meaning construction. Third, the study does not directly examine how these metaphorical expressions are interpreted by listeners, limiting insight into their communicative effectiveness.

Future research may address these limitations by expanding the dataset to include participants from diverse sociocultural backgrounds and age groups, allowing

for comparative analysis across developmental stages. Further studies could also incorporate multimodal approaches to explore how verbal and non-verbal elements interact in emotional expression. In addition, investigating how audiences interpret and respond to metaphorical expressions of emotion may provide deeper insight into the communicative and social functions of metaphor in everyday discourse.

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