

Governance in the Mirror of Metaphors: The Role of Language and Cognitive Mechanisms in Public Policy*



Fatemeh Shafiei 

Postdoctoral Researcher of Cognitive Science, Institute for Humanities and Social Studies, Academic Center for Education, Culture and Research, Tehran, Iran.
s.shafiee@ut.ac.ir

Abstract

Traditional paradigms of public administration often rely on rational-actor models, assuming that policy formulation is a purely objective, logical process. This paper challenges that assumption by examining governance through the lens of Cognitive Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Utilizing Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), this study argues that the foundational architecture of public policy is intrinsically metaphorical (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Metaphors are not mere rhetorical embellishments; rather, they constitute the cognitive infrastructure that dictates problem definition, constrains epistemological horizons, and limits the spectrum of viable policy solutions (Kövecses, 2010; Lakoff, 2004). By analyzing cross-cultural linguistic mappings, embodied cognition, and dominant policy frames, this paper explores how “Grand Metaphors” covertly structure macro-level political decision-

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making in domains such as environmental crisis management, macroeconomics, and international relations. Ultimately, the paper advocates for “metaphorical literacy” among policymakers, arguing that the deliberate reframing of governance paradigms—shifting from militaristic and control-based metaphors to ecological and systemic ones—is an essential prerequisite for sustainable public administration.

Keywords

Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Public Policy, Cognitive Linguistics, Critical Discourse Analysis, Metaphorical Literacy, Framing



1. Introduction

1.1. The Illusion of Objective Governance

The academic study of public policy, public administration, and political science has historically been dominated by institutional, legalistic, and rational-choice frameworks. Within these classical paradigms—heavily influenced by Weberian theories of bureaucracy and the neoclassical economic models of the mid-20th century—decision-making is conceptualized as a sterile, utility-maximizing process (Simon, 1957). Policymakers are presumed to act as “homo economicus,” gathering exhaustive empirical data, weighing costs and benefits with mathematical precision, and executing policies that objectively solve pre-defined societal problems. Within this positivist epistemology, language is typically viewed as a neutral medium through which objective realities are communicated. However, developments in cognitive science, linguistics, and behavioral decision theory have challenged this assumption. Research on bounded rationality demonstrates that human decision-making is constrained by cognitive limitations and heuristic processes rather than purely rational calculations (Simon, 1957; Kahneman & Tversky, 1984). Within this intellectual shift, Cognitive Linguistics has revealed that governance—before manifesting as a legal or institutional act—is fundamentally a cognitive and linguistic process. The mental frameworks through which policymakers interpret social problems are structured by conceptual schemas and metaphorical mappings embedded in language (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 2008).

1.2. The Cognitive Boundaries of the “Thinkable”

To illustrate the implications of this cognitive infrastructure, consider a government confronting a socio-economic or public health crisis. When political leaders frame such a situation as a “war” against a

threat—whether poverty, drugs, terrorism, or disease—they activate a conceptual mapping between the domain of conflict and the policy problem (Lakoff, 2004). Within this framework, the crisis becomes an enemy, victory becomes the desired outcome, and centralized authority becomes legitimate.

Conceptual metaphor theory explains that such mappings are not merely rhetorical strategies but cognitive structures that guide reasoning and decision-making (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Such effects may be partly related to how metaphorical meaning is organized and retained in memory in network-like ways (Ghassemzadeh, 2013, pp. 24–26). By activating the WAR frame, policymakers implicitly legitimize hierarchical command structures, emergency powers, and aggressive interventions. Related psycholinguistic work has also examined processing-time differences between metaphorical and literal meaning, often using semantic priming paradigms (Blasko & Connine, 1993; as discussed in Ghassemzadeh, 2019, pp. 53–57).

Conversely, if the same crisis is framed as a “journey” or “navigation through difficult terrain,” the activated cognitive schema emphasizes endurance, planning, cooperation, and long-term adaptation. Linguistic framing therefore shapes what policy options appear rational or legitimate (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974). These metaphorical frames define the cognitive boundaries of what is politically “thinkable” within bureaucratic and public discourse.

1.3. Research Objectives and Scope

This paper aims to analyze the role of conceptual metaphors in shaping public policy discourse and institutional decision-making. Drawing upon cognitive linguistics and critical discourse analysis, it demonstrates how metaphorical structures influence the construction of political reality and guide legislative responses (Charteris-Black, 2004;

Musolff, 2016). By examining multiple policy sectors—including economic governance, public health, immigration, and technology regulation—the study highlights how metaphorical frames shape policy outcomes across institutional contexts.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. The Philosophical Shift: From Aristotle to Cognitive Semantics

To fully grasp the profound impact of metaphors on governance, one must understand the epistemological shift that occurred in the study of language. The classical perspective, originating with Aristotle and Quintilian and persisting through Enlightenment thinkers such as Hobbes and Locke, viewed metaphors with considerable suspicion. Within this objectivist tradition, metaphors were often treated as deviations from literal truth—ornamental linguistic devices employed primarily for rhetorical embellishment or persuasive effect. From this standpoint, metaphor was primarily associated with rhetoric rather than with systematic knowledge production, and was therefore often viewed with suspicion in disciplines committed to rational inquiry, such as science, law, and governance (Aristotle, 2007; Hobbes, 1651/1996; Locke, 1690/1975; Quintilian, ca. 95 CE/1920).

This long-standing objectivist view was fundamentally challenged by developments in cognitive science and linguistics during the late twentieth century. The emergence of Cognitive Linguistics, particularly through the work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, introduced a radically different understanding of metaphor. In their seminal book *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argued that metaphor is not merely a stylistic feature of language but a central mechanism of human cognition. According to Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), abstract reasoning is largely structured through systematic metaphorical mappings that allow

individuals to understand complex domains of experience in terms of more concrete and familiar ones (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Kövecses, 2010).

Within this framework, a conceptual metaphor functions as a cognitive mapping between two conceptual domains. The abstract domain being understood is referred to as the *target domain*, while the concrete experiential domain used to structure that understanding is known as the *source domain*. Through repeated cognitive associations, structural elements from the source domain are projected onto the target domain, enabling individuals to reason about abstract phenomena using patterns derived from embodied experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2010; Gibbs, 2017).

This mapping is often expressed in cognitive linguistics through the formula TARGET = SOURCE. Because human beings cannot directly perceive abstract concepts such as inflation, justice, time, or national security through sensory experience, they rely on metaphorical projections grounded in physical objects, spatial relations, and bodily interactions with the environment. In this way, metaphor provides the conceptual architecture through which abstract political and social realities become cognitively intelligible (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Gibbs, 2017).

2.2. Neuropolitics and the Neural Theory of Metaphor

The assertions of CMT have since been validated by advancements in cognitive neuroscience, leading to the development of the Neural Theory of Metaphor (NTM) (Lakoff, 2008). According to this account, early embodied experiences play a crucial role in the formation of primary metaphors. When a child repeatedly experiences physical warmth in situations of parental affection, sensory and emotional systems are co-activated in a consistent pattern. Over time, this

repeated co-activation contributes to the establishment of neural associations between the experience of bodily warmth and the feeling of interpersonal affection. This process is broadly consistent with the principle of Hebbian learning, often summarized as “neurons that fire together wire together,” according to which repeated simultaneous activation strengthens neural connectivity (Hebb, 1949; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). On this basis, cognitive linguists have argued that primary metaphors such as AFFECTION IS WARMTH emerge from recurrent embodied correlations in experience (Grady, 1997; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999).

Later in life, these entrenched metaphorical associations continue to shape the interpretation of abstract social and political concepts. Expressions such as “a warm reception,” “cold diplomatic relations,” or “heated political debate” are not arbitrary linguistic figures; rather, they draw upon embodied conceptual mappings that enable individuals to comprehend social and political relations through sensory schemas of temperature and physical intensity (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2010; Gibbs, 2017). Experimental evidence has also provided support for such associations. For example, Williams and Bargh (2008) found that physical experiences of warmth can influence judgments of interpersonal warmth, suggesting that metaphor-consistent embodied effects operate in social cognition.

Accordingly, when policymakers employ metaphorical frames, they are not simply appealing to the public’s abstract reasoning; they are often activating deeply sedimented cognitive and neural associations. This helps explain why some political frames remain highly resilient even in the face of contradictory evidence. As research in political cognition and framing suggests, facts are rarely processed in a neutral vacuum; rather, they are interpreted through preexisting conceptual schemas that shape what appears coherent, plausible, or emotionally compelling (Lakoff, 2004, 2008; Thibodeau & Boroditsky, 2011).

In this sense, the durability of political metaphors is linked not only to rhetorical repetition but also to the embodied and cognitively entrenched structures through which individuals make sense of the political world.

2.3. Primary vs. Complex Metaphors in Institutional Thought

Grady (1997) significantly advanced Conceptual Metaphor Theory by distinguishing between *primary* and *complex* metaphors. Primary metaphors arise directly from recurring embodied experiences and are grounded in systematic correlations in everyday sensorimotor life. Because they are rooted in basic bodily interactions with the physical world, primary metaphors tend to display a high degree of cross-cultural stability (Grady, 1997; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Kövecses, 2010).

For example, the abstract concept of *quantity* is commonly structured through the embodied experience of *vertical elevation*. When liquid is poured into a glass, the level rises as the amount increases. Repeated exposure to such correlations contributes to the formation of the primary mappings MORE IS UP and LESS IS DOWN. These mappings are reflected in pervasive linguistic expressions such as “soaring inflation,” “plummeting approval ratings,” “rising unemployment,” or “lowering taxes” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Grady, 1997). In governance discourse, such verticality metaphors structure how policymakers conceptualize growth, decline, stability, and crisis, often framing policy goals in terms of upward movement and threats in terms of downward trajectories (Kövecses, 2010; Charteris-Black, 2011).

Complex metaphors, by contrast, are structured networks that integrate multiple primary metaphors with culturally specific narratives, historical experiences, and ideological assumptions. This may be consistent with evidence suggesting that metaphor can influence

offline cognitive processing, memory encoding, and semantic-network associations (Shafiei & Ghassemzadeh, 2021). They are not derived from a single embodied correlation but from layered conceptual integrations shaped by institutional discourse and collective memory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Kövecses, 2020).

An illustrative example is the complex metaphor THE STATE IS A BUILDING. This metaphor draws upon primary schemas of physical structure, balance, containment, and vertical stability. Governance is thus conceptualized in architectural terms: policymakers speak of “foundational principles,” “pillars of democracy,” “architects of reform,” “structural adjustments,” or “collapsing institutions.” Such language reflects the projection of construction and stability schemas onto political institutions (Musolff, 2016; Charteris-Black, 2011).

Because complex metaphors incorporate cultural narratives and ideological commitments, they are particularly significant in institutional thought. They provide coherent storylines through which governance is imagined and justified, and they often function as sites of ideological contestation. Competing political actors may struggle to redefine whether the “structure” of the state requires “renovation,” “reinforcement,” or complete “reconstruction.” In this sense, complex metaphors serve as central arenas for symbolic and ideological struggle within public administration and policy discourse (Lakoff, 2004; Musolff, 2016).

2.4. Cultural Dynamics and Extended CMT

Although the neural mechanisms underlying primary metaphors are generally considered universal across human cognition, the specific configurations of complex metaphors are highly sensitive to cultural, historical, and socioeconomic contexts. Zoltán Kövecses (2020), in his formulation of Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory, emphasizes

that metaphorical systems are shaped not only by embodied experience but also by contextual factors such as cultural narratives, political institutions, historical trajectories, and macroeconomic conditions. As a result, metaphorical frameworks exhibit both cross-cultural variation and dynamic transformation within societies over time (Kövecses, 2010, 2020).

In many Western democratic traditions, the state is frequently conceptualized through metaphors associated with contractual relations, engineering, or market transactions. Governance may therefore be framed in terms of agreements, negotiations, or institutional design, reflecting conceptual mappings such as GOVERNANCE IS A BUSINESS TRANSACTION or GOVERNANCE IS ARCHITECTURE. Such metaphors resonate with intellectual traditions rooted in social contract theory and liberal political philosophy, in which the legitimacy of political authority emerges from negotiated agreements between individuals and institutions (Lakoff, 1996; Charteris-Black, 2011; Kövecses, 2020).

By contrast, in a number of Eastern and traditional political philosophies, governance is more commonly conceptualized through organic or familial metaphors. Conceptual structures such as NATION IS FAMILY or SOCIETY IS A LIVING ORGANISM emphasize hierarchy, moral obligation, and collective harmony. Within such frameworks, political authority may be interpreted in terms of parental responsibility, social cohesion, and moral guidance rather than contractual exchange (Lakoff, 1996; Musolff, 2016; Kövecses, 2020).

Metaphorical systems also evolve within cultures as social and economic conditions change. For example, historical research in environmental discourse shows that earlier societies often conceptualized the natural environment through sacred or maternal metaphors, portraying nature as a nurturing entity deserving reverence

and protection. With the rise of industrial capitalism, however, alternative metaphors became dominant, framing nature as a resource repository, a machine, or a stock of raw materials available for extraction and economic exploitation. These metaphorical shifts were not merely linguistic but reflected broader transformations in economic organization, technological development, and regulatory policy (Merchant, 1980; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Nerlich, Koteyko, & Brown, 2010).

Such transformations illustrate the dynamic interaction between metaphor, culture, and governance. As metaphorical frames change, so too do the conceptual boundaries within which policymakers imagine possible interventions, regulatory strategies, and societal goals.

2.5. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA)

The application of Conceptual Metaphor Theory to political science and public administration has contributed to the development of Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA), an interdisciplinary approach that combines cognitive linguistics with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CMA seeks to identify how metaphorical language functions within political discourse to shape ideological narratives and legitimize particular policy choices. Charteris-Black (2004) was among the first scholars to systematically integrate cognitive semantic analysis with CDA, arguing that political actors frequently employ metaphors strategically in order to resonate with culturally embedded cognitive schemas and emotional associations. Through repeated use in speeches, policy documents, and media discourse, such metaphors can reinforce particular interpretations of political reality and help legitimize existing structures of authority.

Further developments in this field were advanced by Musolff (2016), who introduced the concept of “metaphor scenarios.” According to Musolff, political metaphors often operate not merely as isolated linguistic expressions but as condensed narrative structures that evoke culturally familiar storylines. These metaphor scenarios can frame political actors, institutions, and social groups within simplified narrative roles such as heroes, victims, threats, or parasites. One historically documented example is the “parasite” scenario, in which marginalized social groups are metaphorically represented as parasitic entities draining resources from the social body. Such mappings—**MARGINALIZED GROUPS ARE PARASITES**—have appeared in various political discourses and have historically been used by extremist or authoritarian regimes to dehumanize targeted populations and legitimize exclusionary or discriminatory policies (Musolff, 2016; Charteris-Black, 2004).

Perhaps the most influential application of Conceptual Metaphor Theory to modern political ideology is Lakoff’s (1996) analysis of American political discourse. Lakoff argued that competing political ideologies can be understood through alternative conceptualizations of the nation structured by the grand metaphor **NATION IS A FAMILY**. Within this framework, different ideological traditions correspond to different family models that structure moral reasoning and policy preferences.

Lakoff identifies the “Strict Father” model as a dominant metaphorical structure within conservative political thought. This model emphasizes discipline, moral authority, hierarchical order, and individual self-reliance. In policy terms, it often supports positions such as strong law enforcement, punitive criminal justice policies, limited government intervention in markets, and reduced welfare provision. In contrast, the “Nurturant Parent” model emphasizes

empathy, mutual responsibility, social protection, and fairness. Within this metaphorical framework, government is conceptualized as responsible for supporting citizens through social programs, protecting vulnerable populations, and regulating institutions to promote collective well-being (Lakoff, 1996; Lakoff, 2004).

Taken together, these perspectives illustrate how metaphorical structures do not merely shape language but influence ideological reasoning and policy development. By embedding political debates within emotionally resonant narratives and embodied conceptual schemas, metaphors can significantly affect how citizens interpret social problems and evaluate governmental responses.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Epistemological Orientation

This article adopts a theoretical–conceptual and interpretive research design. Its purpose is to synthesize key insights from Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and discourse-oriented approaches to public policy in order to clarify *how metaphor structures policy problem-definition, institutional reasoning, and the perceived space of legitimate solutions*. Rather than reporting an original corpus-based empirical study, the paper develops a portable analytical framework that can be used in subsequent empirical research on policy texts and institutional communication.

This positioning follows the foundational claim of cognitive semantics that metaphor is a central mechanism of cognition rather than a merely ornamental linguistic device (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1993). It also aligns with interpretive traditions in policy studies that treat policy meaning as constructed through language, symbols, and frames rather than discovered in a neutral informational environment (Yanow, 1996; Rein & Schön, 1996).

3.2. Materials and Illustrative Examples

To demonstrate the framework's analytical purchase across governance domains, the article draws on illustrative and representative examples commonly found in public policy discourse (e.g., legislative and executive rhetoric, strategic policy documents, and administrative communication). These examples are used heuristically: they are not presented as an exhaustive dataset, nor are they intended to support statistical generalization. The goal is to show, with conceptual clarity, how recurring metaphor families (e.g., WAR, JOURNEY/NAVIGATION, MECHANISM, CONTAINMENT, and FAMILY) can structure policy reasoning and institutional action.

3.3. Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeds through three stages:

- 1) Metaphor Candidate Identification. The paper identifies recurrent metaphorical expressions and metaphor families that frequently appear in governance and policy talk (e.g., crisis as “war,” reform as “a journey,” the state as “a ship” to be steered).
- 2) Mapping Specification. For each metaphor family, the paper specifies the conceptual mapping from source domain to target domain (e.g., GOVERNANCE IS STEERING; THE STATE IS A SHIP), consistent with standard CMT notation (TARGET = SOURCE) (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1993).
- 3) Entailment and Implication Analysis. The paper then examines metaphorical entailments—the downstream practical, ethical, and institutional implications that follow when one source domain is projected onto a policy target domain. This step is aligned with critical approaches to

political metaphor that emphasize how metaphor can naturalize assumptions, legitimize certain interventions, and marginalize alternative understandings (Charteris-Black, 2011; Musolff, 2016).

3.4. The Role of MIP in This Study

To reduce ad hoc selection of examples and to make the interpretive steps explicit, the study is informed by the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) developed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007). In the present article, MIP is used as a conceptual discipline and transparency device—a guide for distinguishing basic meanings from contextual meanings and for justifying why a given lexical unit is treated as metaphorical (Pragglejaz Group, 2007). Since the paper is not a corpus study, MIP is not applied here as a full coding protocol over a bounded dataset; instead, it structures the interpretive logic through which metaphor candidates are identified and discussed.

3.5. Scope Conditions and Limitations

Because the paper is theoretical–conceptual in nature, its claims are analytical and explanatory rather than statistical. The contribution is the articulation of a framework connecting metaphor, cognition, and policy reasoning, and the demonstration of this framework through multi-domain illustrations. Future work can operationalize the proposed framework in a fully empirical design—e.g., comparative corpus analysis across institutions, time periods, or policy sectors.

4. Deep Analysis and Case Studies: The Metaphorical Structuring of Governance

The etymological root of the term “governance” itself offers the first indication of its inherently metaphorical character. Derived from the

ancient Greek *kubernân* (to steer, pilot, or guide a ship), the concept relies upon the foundational mappings GOVERNANCE IS STEERING and THE STATE IS A SHIP (Charteris-Black, 2011). This cognitive mapping inherently implies a collective journey, the necessity of a designated and hierarchical authority (the captain), the presence of uncontrollable external hazards (storms, reefs), and the existence of a pre-determined destination. When this foundational cognitive frame is internalized by the bureaucracy, the entire nature of public administration—from resource allocation to crisis response—is structurally defined (Musolff, 2016; Semino, 2008).

The following section provides an illustrative interpretive analysis of selected policy domains in order to show how metaphorical framings shape the boundaries of what appears politically “rational,” legitimate, and actionable. These case-based discussions are intended not as a corpus-based empirical survey, but as analytically grounded illustrations of how conceptual metaphors structure governance across diverse domains.

4.1. Case Study 1: The Metaphorical Structuring of Crisis, Security, and Conflict

The following discussion uses well-known policy framings as illustrative examples of how the metaphor CRISIS IS WAR operates in public and administrative discourse. One of the most pervasive and consequential frames in contemporary governance is the militarization of civilian public policy. The grand metaphor CRISIS IS WAR has often been employed in policy discourse to mobilize public sentiment, justify the rapid centralization of authority, bypass lengthy democratic deliberation, and demand public compliance (Lakoff, 1996; Charteris-Black, 2011). In this cognitive scenario, complex social issues—such as inflation, poverty, illicit drug use, or public health emergencies—are

personified as active, hostile enemies. This is evident in historical policy initiatives such as the “War on Poverty,” the “War on Drugs,” and the “War on Terror” (Semino, 2008; Musolff, 2016). While effective for short-term political mobilization, this metaphorical frame carries significant administrative and ethical entailments that often obstruct long-term resolution.

These entailments include:

- **The Zero-Sum Entailment:** The war metaphor imposes a binary logic where total, unconditional “victory” is defined as the only acceptable outcome. This precludes nuanced management, harm-reduction strategies, or adaptive coexistence with endemic social phenomena (Charteris-Black, 2011; Musolff, 2016).
- **The Collateral Damage Entailment:** War metaphors inherently normalize the concept of “collateral damage.” Within this framework, adverse effects on marginalized communities—such as the social costs of draconian drug enforcement—are cognitively processed as unfortunate but necessary tactical sacrifices, rather than as systemic policy failures (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Beer & De Landtsheer, 2004).
- **The Authoritarian Entailment:** In the context of war, dissent is often equated with subversion or treason. Framing social challenges as military conflicts empowers administrators to stigmatize political opposition and justify the restriction of civil liberties under the urgent pretext of national security (Lakoff, 1996; Musolff, 2016).

Furthermore, in the domain of international relations, the NATION IS A PERSON metaphor serves to oversimplify complex geopolitical realities. By conflating an entire diverse population with

its head of state (e.g., “Russia decided to...” or “Washington is angry at...”), policymakers frame international disputes as interpersonal feuds or moral conflicts. This reductionist mapping minimizes public attention to the systemic causes of conflict, obscures the socio-economic drivers of international instability, and desensitizes the public to the human costs of broad economic sanctions, as the target is cognitively reduced to a single, easily vilified “bad actor” (Lakoff, 1996; Semino, 2008).

4.2. Case Study 2: Macroeconomic Governance and Systemic Metaphors

This subsection conceptually examines several dominant metaphorical models through which macroeconomic governance is commonly understood. Macroeconomic governance is profoundly shaped by the metaphors used to conceptualize the abstract construct known as “the market.” Because the economy constitutes an immensely complex and dynamic network of human interactions, institutions, expectations, and material constraints, it cannot be meaningfully understood without metaphorical structuring (McCloskey, 1998; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). The metaphors commonly used in economic discourse can exert substantial influence over how policymakers diagnose crises, assign responsibility, and design interventions.

• The Mechanistic Frame (ECONOMY IS A MACHINE)

This has long been the dominant metaphorical framework within classical and neoliberal economic traditions. The economy is conceptualized as a vast, intricate mechanical system that can be calibrated and optimized through technical adjustments. Recessions are described as “mechanical failures,” “overheating,” or “stalling engines.” Policy actors—central bankers and finance ministers—are

metaphorically cast as engineers or mechanics who “pull levers” (interest rates), “tighten belts” (austerity), “pump liquidity,” or “jump-start the engine” (stimulus packages).

The entailment of this frame is technocratic control and predictability: if the correct levers are pulled, equilibrium will be restored. However, critics argue that this metaphor marginalizes the role of human psychology, social norms, and institutional power relations. Unlike machines, markets are constituted by actors capable of panic, herding behavior, and strategic manipulation (McCloskey, 1998; Shiller, 2019). The mechanistic frame may therefore underestimate systemic fragility and the feedback loops generated by collective expectations.

• **The Natural Force Frame (ECONOMY IS A NATURAL FORCE)**

During periods of financial turbulence, economic discourse frequently shifts toward metaphors of uncontrollable natural phenomena. Policymakers and media commentators refer to “market forces,” “tsunamis of debt,” “waves of selling,” “contagion,” or “economic headwinds.” This frame suggests inevitability and diminished human agency. Natural disasters cannot be negotiated with or legislated against; they can only be endured or mitigated.

The principal entailment of this metaphor is depoliticization. By framing crises as quasi-natural events, responsibility is displaced from regulatory structures, financial institutions, or political decisions to abstract, impersonal forces (Charteris-Black, 2011; Musolff, 2016). Such framing can reduce democratic scrutiny and obscure the role of policy design in producing or exacerbating economic instability.

• **The Biological Frame (ECONOMY IS AN ECOSYSTEM/ ORGANISM)**

An alternative metaphor gaining prominence in behavioral, institutional,

and ecological economics conceptualizes the economy as a living, adaptive system. In this framework, markets resemble ecosystems composed of interdependent actors whose behaviors evolve in response to environmental pressures and policy interventions (Arthur, 2015). Rather than seeking to “tune” or “repair” a machine, policymakers are encouraged to cultivate systemic resilience, diversity, and sustainability.

The entailments of this frame differ markedly from the mechanistic model. Continuous, infinite growth—conceivable within abstract mathematical models—appears biologically implausible within a finite ecological system. Economic actors, like species within an ecosystem, adapt strategically to regulatory changes, sometimes in unpredictable ways. This perspective thus prioritizes long-term stability, feedback sensitivity, and adaptive governance over short-term optimization (Shiller, 2019; Arthur, 2015).

Together, these competing metaphorical frames suggest that macroeconomic governance is not merely a technical exercise but a cognitively structured practice. Each metaphor foregrounds particular causal mechanisms, moral assumptions, and policy tools, while simultaneously obscuring alternative interpretations and interventions.

4.3. Case Study 3: Public Health Administration and Viral Metaphors

The discussion below uses pandemic communication as an illustrative site for examining the policy consequences of competing metaphors. The governance of public health—particularly during global pandemics—provides a clear illustration of the life-and-death implications of metaphorical framing. Public health crises involve scientific uncertainty, behavioral compliance, and institutional trust; therefore, the metaphors used to communicate risk and policy profoundly influence collective action (Semino, 2021; Charteris-Black, 2011).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many governments adopted the PANDEMIC IS WAR metaphor as a widely used communicative frame. Expressions such as “we are at war with an invisible enemy,” “frontline workers,” and “the home front” became common in pandemic-era rhetoric. These formulations illustrate how the PANDEMIC IS WAR metaphor organized the crisis in terms of conflict, sacrifice, and obedience. While this frame can mobilize solidarity and justify urgent intervention, it may also marginalize alternative understandings centered on care, social inequality, and institutional trust. Political leaders described the virus as an “invisible enemy,” healthcare workers as “frontline troops,” and citizens as participants in a collective “war effort.” Populations were urged to make “sacrifices” on the “home front” (Semino, 2021; Wicke & Bolognesi, 2020). This framing initially facilitated rapid mobilization and public compliance with emergency measures such as lockdowns and travel restrictions. The war metaphor, with its emphasis on urgency, unity, and decisive action, can be effective in producing short-term behavioral alignment.

However, the entailments of the war metaphor also generated structural limitations. Wars are expected to culminate in victory, surrender, or peace treaties. A virus, by contrast, does not negotiate or capitulate. The expectation of a definitive “V-Day” fostered unrealistic temporal horizons and contributed to psychological fatigue, frustration, and declining institutional trust when the disease transitioned from an acute emergency to an endemic condition (Semino, 2021). Moreover, the war frame may inadvertently stigmatize infected individuals as potential “saboteurs” or “vectors” of the enemy, potentially hindering community cooperation and masking the nuanced socioeconomic determinants of viral spread.

In contrast, an alternative metaphor utilized by many public

health experts and epidemiologists is the PANDEMIC IS A WILDFIRE frame. In this cognitive model, the pandemic is conceptualized not as a sentient enemy, but as a dynamic environmental phenomenon that requires management rather than “conquest.” A wildfire requires fuel (susceptible populations), sparks (infected individuals), and wind (social mobility) to spread. The policy entailments of this metaphor differ significantly from the war model: it prioritizes the creation of “firebreaks” (vaccination campaigns, protective barriers), “starving the fire” (social distancing, targeted isolation), and acknowledges that embers can continue to smolder, requiring persistent monitoring rather than a single decisive victory (Semino, 2021; Wicke & Bolognesi, 2020).

The wildfire frame inherently aligns more closely with the biological and statistical reality of epidemiology. It encourages a policy approach grounded in risk management, structural resilience, and long-term adaptation. By shifting the focus from military aggression to systemic management, this metaphor fosters a mindset of “continuous vigilance” rather than “impending victory,” which may reduce public burnout and encourage more sustainable, evidence-based behavioral compliance over extended timeframes (Musolff, 2016; Semino, 2021).

Ultimately, these cases indicate that the metaphors chosen to represent public health crises are not neutral communication tools. They serve as cognitive scaffolding that determines whether a population prepares for a decisive battle or learns to manage an enduring ecological challenge. The failure to align policy metaphors with the actual biological dynamics of a disease can lead to significant gaps between governmental rhetoric and public reality, undermining trust in the very institutions tasked with safeguarding public health.

4.4. Case Study 4: Immigration, Border Policy, and the NATION= CONTAINERNATION = CONTAINERNATION= CONTAINER Frame

Immigration policy is deeply shaped by metaphorical frameworks that structure how political communities conceptualize territorial boundaries and membership. One of the most influential cognitive schemas in this domain is the NATION IS A CONTAINER metaphor. Cognitive linguistics has long observed that human beings rely heavily on the basic “container schema”—comprised of an inside, an outside, and a boundary—to understand spatial organization and social belonging (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Kövecses, 2010). When the nation is conceptualized as a bounded container, the physical border becomes the central symbol of sovereignty, identity, and security. Phrases such as “waves of migrants,” “floods of refugees,” and “stem the tide” illustrate the hydrological framing of immigration discourse. Under this metaphor, migration is represented as a force of nature requiring containment, while borders are imagined as barriers under pressure. This framing can make restrictive policy responses appear self-evident, even as it obscures the human, legal, and historical dimensions of migration (Charteris-Black, 2006; Musolff, 2015).

Within this framework, immigration is frequently described using metaphors derived from fluid dynamics. Political discourse often frames migration through expressions such as “waves of immigrants,” “floods of refugees,” “leaky borders,” or the need to “stem the tide.” This conceptual mapping—IMMIGRATION IS WATER or IMMIGRATION IS A FLOOD—depicts migrants not as individual human actors but as an impersonal natural force threatening to overwhelm the national container (Charteris-Black, 2006; Musolff, 2015). The rhetorical effect of such language is to evoke urgency and danger, reinforcing a perception of uncontrolled influx.

The policy entailments of this metaphor are largely defensive and infrastructural. If immigration is conceptualized as a flood, the logical response is to construct barriers analogous to dams or levees: fortified borders, detention systems, restrictive visa regimes, and emergency enforcement measures. The metaphor thus privileges containment strategies over social, humanitarian, or economic approaches to migration governance (Charteris-Black, 2006; Musolff, 2015).

Critics argue that these hydrological metaphors can contribute to the dehumanization of migrants by linguistically stripping them of individual agency and reducing them to an anonymous mass or environmental threat. This framing may weaken the salience of international human rights norms by shifting attention from the experiences of individuals to the perceived structural vulnerability of the national container (Santa Ana, 2002).

Alternative metaphors suggest different policy pathways. For instance, framing immigration as HUMAN CAPITAL foregrounds migrants' economic contributions, skills, and productive potential within host societies. Similarly, conceptualizing the nation as a NETWORK rather than a closed container emphasizes connectivity, mobility, and relational interdependence in an increasingly globalized world. These alternative frames encourage policies oriented toward integration, economic participation, and institutional adaptation rather than strict territorial exclusion (Kövecses, 2010; Musolff, 2016).

These examples illustrate how metaphorical framing can fundamentally influence immigration governance. By shaping whether migration is understood as a threatening influx, a resource, or a networked process of social exchange, metaphors help determine which policy responses appear reasonable, necessary, or legitimate.

4.5. Case Study 5: The Governance of Artificial Intelligence and Emerging Technology

As governments in the 2020s attempt to navigate the rapid proliferation of Artificial Intelligence (AI), the metaphorical frameworks employed in policy discourse are effectively drafting the initial parameters of technological regulation. Because AI represents a novel and opaque technological frontier, metaphors serve as the essential heuristic devices through which policymakers assess risks, assign liability, and define the scope of state intervention (Bender et al., 2021). Regulatory discourse often describes AI as a “tool,” while public debate frequently shifts toward personifying AI as an “autonomous agent” or “black box.” (Crawford, 2021; Bender et al., 2021). These contrasting metaphors matter because they allocate agency and responsibility differently. The former keeps accountability focused on human actors and institutions, whereas the latter risks treating technological systems as quasi-independent entities, thereby complicating questions of liability and governance.

- **AI IS A TOOL:** This is a common framing in early regulatory discussions, where AI is conceptualized as a sophisticated instrument, akin to a calculator, tractor, or industrial machine. The primary policy entailment of this model is the location of responsibility: if AI is merely a tool, then legal and ethical liability rests entirely with the human operator or the user. This framing often serves to minimize the responsibility of the corporate developers who build and deploy these systems, categorizing AI as a neutral entity rather than a complex sociotechnical system (Wachter et al., 2021).
- **AI IS AN AUTONOMOUS AGENT / BRAIN:** In contrast,

when AI is personified as a thinking, autonomous entity—a “digital brain”—the discourse shifts toward existential concerns. Policy debates are then occupied by questions of “algorithmic transparency,” the potential for “AI takeover,” and even the future granting of legal personhood to systems. This metaphorical shift can distract from immediate, systemic harms—such as bias in automated hiring or surveillance—by focusing on speculative or sensationalized future scenarios (Bender et al., 2021).

- **AI IS A UTILITY / INFRASTRUCTURE:** An emerging and potentially transformative framework treats AI like the electrical grid or the public water supply. The entailments of this metaphor are fundamentally different, driving policy toward the adoption of robust, public-interest regulatory models. This includes state-led anti-monopoly interventions, the enforcement of universal access guarantees, and the implementation of strict public safety and quality standards. By framing AI as an essential social utility, policymakers acknowledge that these technologies are now fundamental to the functioning of modern society, justifying high levels of public oversight.

The choice of metaphor is not an abstract academic exercise; it carries profound geopolitical and economic consequences. If AI is regulated as a “tool,” market consolidation and developer immunity are likely to persist. Conversely, if it is managed as a “public utility,” the governance structure will emphasize democratic accountability and collective welfare. As these metaphorical frames compete for dominance, they are setting the trajectory for the global technological landscape for the coming century (Wachter et al., 2021).

5. Implications for Administrative Science: The Imperative of Metaphorical Literacy

The interpretive insights drawn from the illustrative case discussions suggest a radical re-evaluation of the civil servant's role. Public administrators, legislators, and policymakers are not merely managers of physical resources, legal codes, and budgetary constraints; they are, fundamentally, architects of societal meaning and cognitive structures. Because metaphorical choices may shape or constrain the boundaries of legitimate and conceivable political action, they are not merely aesthetic choices—they are inherently ethical, moral, and structural choices.

5.1. Institutionalizing Metaphorical Literacy

This reality necessitates the formal cultivation and institutionalization of “metaphorical literacy” within the bureaucratic apparatus and schools of public policy. Metaphorical literacy involves the conscious, meta-cognitive awareness of the frames being utilized in legislative drafts, judicial rulings, public speeches, and institutional mandates.

It requires policymakers to pause and critically interrogate the entailments of their language:

- What is the Source Domain I am projecting onto this policy Target?
- What specific solutions does this metaphor hide or make unthinkable?
- Does this linguistic framework foster collaborative systemic thinking, or does it enforce division and zero-sum conflict?
- Am I accurately mapping the complexity of the issue, or am I reducing it to a simplistic scenario that will result in maladaptive policy?

5.2. The Process of Deliberate Reframing

Transforming governance often requires the courageous and deliberate deconstruction of exhausted, militaristic, and mechanistic frameworks that dominate 20th-century political thought. If a government continually finds itself failing to solve complex, “wicked problems” (such as climate change or systemic inequality) using its standard policy toolkit, the failure is likely not just operational; it is epistemological. The problem has been framed in a way that renders it unsolvable.

By consciously adopting care-based, ecological, networked, and interactive metaphors, policymakers can actively rewire the cognitive horizons of their institutions. Reframing is not political spin; it is a fundamental shift in the scientific and administrative paradigm.

6. Comprehensive Conclusion

This extensive analysis demonstrates that human language—particularly through the neurocognitive mechanism of conceptual metaphor—functions as a foundational infrastructure of public policy and political reasoning. The classical objectivist view that policy is a purely rational, data-driven, and emotionally detached enterprise has been widely challenged by research in cognitive linguistics and interpretive policy analysis. Rather than acting as neutral descriptive tools, metaphors actively structure how political actors conceptualize reality, define problems, and evaluate solutions (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 2004; Kövecses, 2020). By projecting the experiential architecture of familiar source domains onto abstract societal targets, metaphors may shape what counts as a legitimate policy problem, constrain the epistemological perspective of decision-makers, and implicitly delimit the range of acceptable legislative responses (Schön, 1979; Yanow, 1996).

The analysis of multiple policy sectors—including macroeconomic

regulation, environmental governance, public health administration, immigration policy, and emerging technological regulation—reveals a consistent pattern in contemporary governance discourse. Dominant state narratives frequently rely on grand metaphors rooted in warfare, mechanical engineering, and spatial containment. Although such frames provide a sense of decisiveness and managerial control, they often produce zero-sum policy logics, reactive administrative strategies, and occasionally dehumanizing representations of social groups or policy targets (Charteris-Black, 2011; Musolff, 2016). These metaphorical structures can obscure the structural and systemic origins of complex social problems, thereby limiting the capacity of institutions to design sustainable solutions.

Addressing the increasingly interconnected and multifaceted crises of the twenty-first century therefore requires a shift not only in policy instruments but also in the underlying cognitive frameworks through which governance is conceptualized. Recognizing governance as a fundamentally cognitive and interpretive activity enables institutions to engage in deliberate metaphorical reframing. Moving away from militaristic and mechanistic metaphors toward alternative conceptualizations—such as ecosystems, healing processes, adaptive networks, and shared journeys—may broaden the horizon of policy imagination and encourage more collaborative, resilient, and humane approaches to public administration (Kövecses, 2020; Lakoff, 2004).

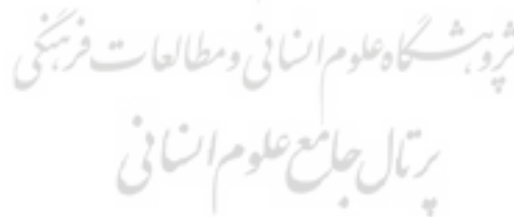
Such cognitive transformation is not merely a rhetorical or academic exercise. Rather, it represents a critical precondition for the development of governance models capable of responding effectively to complex global challenges, including climate change, technological disruption, and social inequality. By cultivating greater awareness of the metaphorical foundations of political reasoning, policymakers and administrators can construct more adaptive, ethically grounded, and

sustainable frameworks for collective decision-making in the decades ahead (Musolff, 2016; Yanow, 1996).

7. Declaration of AI Use and Prior Presentation

This article is based on a lecture delivered at the *Islamic School of Governance* conference on January 2026. The manuscript has been significantly developed and expanded for publication in this journal.

During the translation and linguistic refinement of this manuscript, artificial intelligence (AI) tools were utilized. Following the use of these tools, the author thoroughly reviewed and edited the content to ensure academic accuracy and take full responsibility for the final version of the text.



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