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Research article

N.A. Musayeva^{ORCID}

*Nasimi Institute of Linguistics, Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, Baku, Azerbaijan
(E-mail: nargiz1183@gmail.com)*

METAPHORICAL MODELS AND CONCEPTS EXPRESSING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NATURE AND HUMANS

Abstract. The article presents a linguistic analysis of metaphorical models and concepts used to express the relationship between nature and humans in different languages with different structural systems. The study aims to give a cognitive analysis of metaphors and notions related to ecological concepts and to find out their importance in the perception of ecological concept in human mind. It is inspired by the theory of conceptual metaphors in cognitive linguistics, which deals with the way the surrounding world is structured in human cognition in terms of concepts and metaphors. The research methods used are descriptive, comparative, and cognitive analysis. The analysis of the phraseological units, paremias, and metaphorical speech in modern Azerbaijani, Russian, and English reveals that ecological concepts have a certain weight in the linguistic picture of the world. The novelty of the study from the scientific point of view is to present a comparative scientific analysis of the models of nature-human relationship in the depictive metaphors in lexical-semantic systems of various languages. The results found reveal that ecological metaphors are not only linguistic tools suited for the artistic performance of language, but also fundamental cognitive mechanisms which have influenced the ancient strata of human thinking and the system of ecological thinking.

Keywords: nature, human, relation, metaphor, concept, model.

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Introduction

Metaphors are cognitive mechanisms that have a significant impact on the perception of language's picture of the world. Various metaphorical models in language help human life experiences to be cognitively comprehended and assimilated into the human mind. Explaining the cognitive aspect of metaphor in general linguistics, George Lakoff writes that "metaphor is one of our most important tools for trying to comprehend partially what cannot be comprehended totally: our feelings, aesthetic experiences, moral practices, and spiritual awareness. These imaginative activities are not devoid of reason; on the contrary, metaphorical expressions activate both intuitive and imagined rationality, extending the boundaries of conceptual analysis" (Lakoff, 2004: 215).

Problem Statement

In cognitive linguistics, the term metaphor refers to any figuratively structured unit. In other words, the notion of metaphor in cognitive language is not the same as the literary study of the purely artistic device of trope transfer. Ecological concepts are used in conceptual metaphors which deepen the human mind's grasp of environmental concepts. In this case, through language, the cognitive perception of ecological concepts creates some ideas and associations in the human consciousness about this field. Despite the presence of "specific weight" of ecological concepts in the language picture of the world, a systematic analysis of common and unique modeling elements of these concepts in the sublayer of structurally different languages is a pressing issue in the field of linguistics.

Article Purpose

The primary aim of the article is to do a cognitive-semantic analysis and comparison of the main metaphorical models and ecological concepts that describe the relationship between nature and human beings in the context of the material of structurally different languages (Azerbaijani, Russian, and English).

Literature Review

Ecological discourse and metaphorical modeling issues are widely investigated in modern linguistics. In particular, E.V. Ivanova notes that "the presentation of nature and natural disasters in the media in the form of ecological discourse is created through conceptual metaphors reflecting the human attitude toward the environment. Metaphor is a carrier of cultural information, a tool, and a means of culture. It shapes the human personality through the worldview, mentality, and attitudes toward people that are instilled into a person through language and exist in the language itself—that is, through the culture of the people for whom this language serves as a means of communication" (Ivanova, 2007: 7).

Recent research has introduced metaphorical aptness as a cognitively grounded criterion for evaluating the correspondence between source and target domains. Aptness refers to the degree to which a metaphor captures the central attributes of the target concept and establishes a semantically coherent cross-domain mapping. Yang et al. (2026) demonstrate that metaphor comprehension should be viewed as a continuum rather than a binary distinction between literal and figurative meanings. Their findings show that highly apt metaphors are processed and identified more accurately because their conceptual mappings are natural, contextually appropriate, and cognitively accessible. This approach is particularly relevant to ecological metaphors, since expressions such as Mother Nature, water is life, and forests are the lungs of the universe derive their communicative force from a clear transfer of essential properties between

nature and human experience. Thus, metaphorical aptness provides an additional framework for explaining the cognitive effectiveness of ecological concepts.

Recent studies confirm that concepts related to nature reflect culturally specific ways of perceiving and categorizing the surrounding world. Alkaya et al. (2023) demonstrate that the Kazakh concept *kök*, associated with colour, sky, vegetation, and the natural environment, constitutes an important component of the national linguistic worldview and is verbalized through phraseological expressions, poetry, and prose. Similarly, Smatova et al. (2025) show that natural and geographical concepts such as *dala* (steppe), *su* (water), and *atameken* (native land) function as cognitive structures preserving environmental experience, cultural memory, and ethnocultural values. These findings support the idea that ecological concepts and metaphors are not merely linguistic or stylistic units but cognitive mechanisms through which the relationship between humans and nature is conceptualized.

On the other hand, according to A.A. Lagutina, “ecological concepts correspond to the ideas of meanings that a person uses in speech activity and that reflect the content of the experience and knowledge they have gathered about the environment, as well as the results of all their activities in the process of reflecting ecological reality in the form of certain ‘quanta of knowledge.’” The author rightly emphasizes that “ecological concepts are components of the ecological picture of the world” (Lagutina, 2013: 9).

Methodology

During the research process, the methodological foundations of cognitive linguistics, linguaculturology, and the theory of conceptual metaphors were referred to. Descriptive method, comparative-typological method, and cognitive-semantic analysis were widely used during the analysis of the materials. The frames and associations of microconcepts forming the macroconcept of “Nature” were determined.

Results and Discussion

The ecological metaphors “Mother Nature”, “Green Economy”, “Mother Earth”, “Green World”, “Nature is a living organism” can be assigned various semantic-discursive and connotative roles in scientific, literary, and publicistic texts. Deep cognitive semantics is expressed in various texts using eco-concepts. Very often, both in the press language and in artistic style, the expression mother earth is used as an equivalent of motherland. In other cases, therefore, the concepts “Earth” and “Motherland” are taken in a metaphorical sense and are considered as neighboring concepts in the stylistic sense. Metaphors in the context of any discourse contain linguacultural information.

In language, there are occasions when natural objects are used to signify social relations and psychological situations. For instance, in Russian, the expression *солнечная улыбка* literally means “sun smile,” but this expression metaphorically denotes a sincere smile. Azerbaijani folklore often depicts the Moon and the Sun as opposites, as characters in love. You are my sunshine” is a modern English idiom that translates to “you are my source of inspiration. In the same way, in Azerbaijani poetry, phrases such as *sən mənim Ayımsan* (You are my Moon) or *Sən mənim Günəşimsən* (You are my Sun) have similar semiotic connotations. Overall, the symbol of the Sun in different linguistic cultures represents life energy and happiness. The existence of expressions and phraseologisms in the Azerbaijani language like *Günəş kimi parlaq* (bright as the sun), *Ay parçası* (a piece of the moon - beautiful), and *aya-günə dönmək* proves how nature images were perceived in the ethnic thinking of ancient ancestors in the lexical-semantic system.

The cognitive semantics of nature and human relations metaphor helps to understand the modelling and conceptualisation of different nature and human relation concepts in human thinking. For instance, in Azerbaijani, *meşələr* “agciyə” of the universe. The Russian word for forest is *леса* - which means “lightning” in English and the lungs of the universe. This metaphor gives forests a vital role and importance in the universe’s ecosystem. In this, the concept of forest semantics is represented cognitively as an oxygen source for human life, which means that the destruction of forests is not acceptable.

The metaphors green world and green universe, by their cognitive nature, call humanity to solve ecological problems. The lexeme green, acting as an attribute of the noun world, symbolically represents the global problem of providing the world with oxygen from a cognitive and metaphorical perspective. The metaphor water is life is based on the mechanism of perceiving water as the most crucial model of nature. It is known that a universe without water cannot exist. There is water in the biological structure of every living thing, and water is considered one of the main symbols of life. Therefore, this metaphor demonstrates the adequacy of life and water in its cognitive semantics, expressing human life experience related to water.

The metaphor living nature refers to the name of all living beings existing in nature. In Azerbaijani, the expression *təbiətin qoynu* (the bosom of nature) metaphorically expresses the existence of the environment. Thus, *təbiətin qoynunda olmaq* (being in the bosom of nature) symbolically means that a person rests and relaxes psychologically. Nature is a place of peace. This metaphorical expression characterizes nature as a place that calms the human mind. For comparison: in modern English, the expression *Lake Innisfree* belongs to the English poet William Butler Yeats. Used in a poem by that poet, this expression later became internationalized and turned into a symbol in world literature meaning “a place of peace, silence, return to nature” (Yeats, 2002).

Let us compare: there is an expression *insanın təbiəti* in Azerbaijani. Its equivalent in Russian is *природа человека*, and in English, it is human nature. In all three languages, the cognitive semantics of this expression shows the alignment of the concept of nature with human character. That is, in these expressions, the word nature generally denotes the essence, genetic characteristics, and character of a human metaphorically. The analogous use of this expression in languages of different systems is related to the perception of humans as an element of nature in human thought.

Nature is, first of all, a source of life for humans, and at the same time, a source of resources. That is, humans feed on nature, exist in nature, and use the resources of nature. All these relations are reflected in language because language is a means of expression of consciousness. Language encodes, symbolizes, and semiotically names the surrounding environment, nature, and society. Therefore, language helps humans perceive the world around them. It is with the help of language that various images of nature are modeled in the human mind and turn into a conceptual system. Concepts related to nature are among the oldest concepts formed in human cognition. These concepts preserve the relict of the ancient period of human and nature relations. If we treat the concept of “Nature” as a macroconcept, then we should treat the concepts of “Water,” “Air,” “Earth,” “Mountain,” “Forest,” “Sea,” and “Wind” as microconcepts that create this conceptual sphere. Each of these nature-related concepts has its own frames and associations.

Let us look at the metaphorical and conceptual analysis of various nature elements:

The concept of “Water”: Water expresses the concept of purification and cleansing in mythical thinking. Since human life is connected with water from creation, concepts related to water

create a general conceptual sphere. The metaphor water is life proves once again the sanctity of water and that water is a vital element in the cognition of all humanity. The equivalent of this metaphor in Russian is: где вода, там и жизнь (where there is water, there is life). Water is considered one of the primary elements of life deified in mythological thinking. In Russian, the phraseme живая вода means “water of life” (Hamidov et al., 2020: 80).

The concept of “Earth/Soil”: Until now, rich linguistic means of expression about earth have been formed in various linguistic cultures. In Azerbaijani, there are concepts like münbit torpaq (fertile soil) and ana torpaq (mother earth). It is no coincidence that the word vətən (motherland) used in our language is of Arabic origin, meaning “the place where a person was born, soil.” In the Azerbaijani language, sayings and proverbs about soil form a series. The metaphor torpaq adamı çəkir (the soil pulls the person) means “to send a person to their last home, to bury them” and symbolically verbalizes the return of the human being, who was created from soil, back to the soil in the end. In Turkish, there is a poem: “Bayrakları bayrak yapan topraktır, toprak uğrunda ölen varsa, vatandır”. Therefore, soil is also metaphorized in human thought as an equivalent of the concept of motherland.

The concept of “Mountain”: Rich forms of expression of the “mountain” concept exist in the paremiological system of the Azerbaijani language. “Uca dağın başı qarlı olar” (The top of a high mountain is always snowy) (Hamidov et al., 2020: 1370). In the Azerbaijani mentality, the expression dağlar oğlu (son of mountains) mentally symbolizes the concepts of “purity, honesty, bravery.” The phraseme Elə bil alçaq dağları o yaradıb (As if he created the low mountains) is a word said about an arrogant person who thinks very highly of himself (p. 520). In general, in phraseological discourse, natural phenomena metaphorically express human psychology, social relations, and rules of conduct.

The concept of “Star”: In mythology, a star mostly symbolizes souls (Hamidov et al., 2020: 206). There are phraseologisms related to stars in Azerbaijani: ulduzları barışmamaq (their stars do not reconcile—meaning they cannot get along with each other), ulduz xəstəliyi (star disease—celebrity sickness), and bəxt ulduzu (star of fortune) (p. 257).

The main associations and frames of the concept of “Wind” are represented by the word sayings, proverbs, and phraseologisms related to the concept of wind. An idiom in the English language is talking to the wind. In Russian it's equivalent is “govorits’ na vejter” literally “to speak into the wind. This is an expression for “to talk to someone in vain. That is, what you say doesn't matter. The metaphorical meaning of this phraseme in Russian is “it is impossible to find”: ищи как ветра в поле (p. 72), “look for it like wind in the field,” literally meaning “it is impossible to find.

Nature's proverbs and phrasemes may have a symbolic meaning. These are linguistic units that metaphorically interpret life experience to people in the context of phenomena occurring in nature. For instance, in English there is a proverb “A rainbow in the morning is the shepherd's warning” (Speake, 2007: 25). This proverb is a warning to the shepherd that the wind of the storm is blowing. It also symbolically means that sometimes minor events can avert major catastrophes.

For example, the expression fırtına kimi güçlü olmaq (strong as a storm) in Azerbaijani is a metaphor for the natural phenomenon fırtına. For example, fırtına kimi güçlü olmaq (strong as a storm) in Azerbaijani is a metaphor for the natural phenomenon fırtına. For comparison, the following metaphors related to nature are used in Russian: Ветер перемен – wind of change; Буря эмоций – storm of emotions; Река времени – river of time; Море жизни – sea of life; Океан чувства – ocean of feelings; Звезда надежды – star of hope. Similarly, modern-day En-

glish features a lot of such phrases: a seed of hope, a ray of hope, reach for the stars, to put down roots, on cloud nine, a breath of fresh air, and the winds of change.

The myth of the “Tree of Life” in world mythology reflects the relation between nature and human relations. That myth says that the tree links two worlds, the upper world and the underworld. Metaphors such as Mother Earth come from the Latin expression Terra Mater. This metaphor conveys the importance of the soil to human beings, human beings’ relationship with the soil, and its sanctity. In Russian, the metaphor is “родина-мать” and in English it is “Mother Earth”.

In Russian, the metaphor *политический лес* (political forest) is used to express the state of chaos in power. Since the forest is characterized in Russian culture mostly as a shelter, a dark environment, or a wild environment, this metaphor symbolizes the bureaucratic situation and the crisis within power in Russian political thought. In English, the metaphor *jungle of bureaucracy* is a metaphor that symbolizes red tape and bureaucratic obstacles in the government administration system in political and media texts.

The expressions sounds of nature in English, *təbiətın səsləri* in Azerbaijani, and *звуки природы* in Russian metaphorically express the harmony of humans with nature and the ecosystem. These expressions of analogous meaning in different language systems instill the idea that ecological thinking and ecological awareness are essential elements in modern life.

Conclusion

Metaphors depicting the relation between humans and nature are not only artistic parts of language, but also function cognitively. Concepts related to nature express how the notions of nature are assimilated in the human mind. They are mental representations of the way that the mind organises the natural world. Many such metaphors and concepts are employed in several discourses and impact the ecological thinking, culture and behavior of society. Thus, the study of such metaphors and ideas has significance in the fields of linguistics, psychology and ecology.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest related to this article.

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Н.Ә. Мусаева

Насими атындағы Тіл білімі институты, Баку, Әзірбайжан

ТАБИҒАТ ПЕН АДАМ АРАСЫНДАҒЫ ҚАТЫНАСТАРДЫ БІЛДІРЕТІН МЕТАФОРАЛЫҚ МОДЕЛЬДЕР МЕН КОНЦЕПТІЛЕР

Аңдатпа. Мақалада әртүрлі құрылымдық жүйелері бар тілдерде табиғат пен адам арасындағы қатынасты білдіретін метафоралық модельдер мен концептілерге лингвистикалық талдау жасалған. Зерттеудің негізгі мақсаты – экологиялық ұғымдарға қатысты метафоралар мен ұғымдарға когнитивтік талдау жасау және олардың адам санасындағы экологиялық концептілерді қабылдаудағы маңызын анықтау. Жұмыс қоршаған дүниенің адам танымында концептілер мен метафоралар арқылы қалай құрылымдалатынын қарастыратын когнитивті лингвистикадағы концептуалды метафора теориясына негізделген. Зерттеу барысында сипаттамалық, салыстырмалы және когнитивтік талдау әдістері қолданылды. Қазіргі әзербайжан, орыс және ағылшын тілдерінен алынған фразеологиялық бірліктерді, паремиялар мен метафоралық сөйлемдерді талдау экологиялық концептілердің әлемнің тілдік бейнесінде белгілі бір салмаққа ие екенін көрсетеді. Зерттеудің ғылыми жаңалығы әртүрлі тілдердің лексика-семантикалық жүйелеріндегі бейнелі метафоралардағы табиғат пен адам қатынасының модельдеріне салыстырмалы ғылыми талдау жасау болып табылады. Алынған нәтижелер экологиялық метафоралардың тілдің көркемдік көрінісіне арналған тек тілдік құрал ғана емес, сонымен бірге адам ойлауының көне қабаттарына және экологиялық ойлау жүйесіне әсер еткен түбегейлі когнитивті механизмдер екенін ашады.

Түйін сөздер: табиғат, адам, қатынас, метафора, концепт, модель.

Н.А. Мусаева

Институт языкознания имени Насими НАНА, Баку, Азербайджан

МЕТАФОРИЧЕСКИЕ МОДЕЛИ И КОНЦЕПТЫ, ВЫРАЖАЮЩИЕ ВЗАИМООТНОШЕНИЯ ПРИРОДЫ И ЧЕЛОВЕКА

Аннотация. В статье представлен лингвистический анализ метафорических моделей и концептов, выражающих взаимоотношения природы и человека в языках с различными структурными системами. Основная цель исследования заключается в проведении когнитивного анализа метафор и понятий, связанных с экологическим концептом, а также в выявлении их важности в восприятии экологического концепта человеческим сознанием. Работа вдохновлена теорией концептуальной метафоры в когнитивной лингвистике, которая рассматривает то, как окружающий мир структурируется в человеческом познании посредством концептов и метафор. В качестве методов исследования использовались описательный, сопоставительный и когнитивный анализ. Анализ фразеологических единиц, паремий и метафорической речи в современном азербайджанском, русском и английском языках показывает, что экологические концепты имеют определенный вес в языковой картине мира. Научная новизна исследования заключается в представлении сравнительного научного анализа моделей взаимоотношений природы и человека в образных метафорах в лексико-семантических системах различных языков. Полученные результаты показывают, что экологические метафоры являются не только

языковыми инструментами, приспособленными для художественного выражения языка, но и фундаментальными когнитивными механизмами, которые повлияли на древние пласты человеческого мышления и систему экологического мышления.

Ключевые слова: природа, человек, отношение, метафора, концепт, модель.

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Information about the author:

Nargiz A. Musayeva – Doctoral student, Nasimi Institute of Linguistics, Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, Baku, Azerbaijan. E-mail: nargiz1183@gmail.com.

Мусаева Наргиз Әликиші қызы – диссертант, ӘР ҰҒА Насими атындағы Тіл білімі институты, Баку, Әзірбайжан. E-mail: nargiz1183@gmail.com

Мусаева Наргиз Аликиши кызы – докторант, Институт языкознания имени Насими НАНА, Баку, Азербайджан. E-mail: nargiz1183@gmail.com



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