



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section: *Language, Linguistics & Criticism***Conceptual metaphors of morality in Indonesian language: A corpus-based cognitive semantic study**Nurainun Hasibuan¹, Mulyadi^{1*}, Mahriyuni¹, Khairina Nasution¹, Nurlela¹ & Rusdi Noor Rosa¹¹Department of Linguistics, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Sumatera Utara, Indonesia*Correspondence: mulyadi@usu.ac.id**ABSTRACT**

This study examines conceptual metaphors of morality in the Indonesian language using a corpus-based cognitive linguistic approach. Morality, as an abstract value system, is often understood through metaphors rooted in physical and cultural experiences. This study aims to identify and analyze conceptual metaphors of morality. The data consists of 650 sentence samples obtained from the Leipzig Corpora Collection (2020–2024) and analyzed using Sketch Engine through the Metaphoric Pattern Analysis method and Conceptual Metaphor Theory. The results identified 453 metaphorical expressions (69.69%) classified into 25 conceptual metaphors. The findings show that the dominant metaphor is MORALITY IS A BUILDING (26.49%), followed by MORALITY IS SPACE (11.70%) and MORALITY IS CLOTHING (9.71%). This pattern reflects the tendency of Indonesian society to understand morality as a solid yet fragile entity (a building), as a social environment or identity (space and clothing), and as something that can be measured vertically and is potentially vulnerable to damage. This study contributes to metaphor studies in cognitive linguistics by providing empirical data from Indonesia and offering insights into the construction of moral values in contemporary public discourse.

KEYWORDS: cognitive semantics, conceptual metaphor, corpus linguistics, Indonesian language, morality

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Introduction

In contemporary cognitive linguistics, metaphors are no longer viewed merely as rhetorical devices, but rather as fundamental cognitive mechanisms that shape the human conceptual system (Kövecses, 2019; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Metaphors enable the understanding of abstract concepts by systematically mapping a concrete source domain to an abstract target domain. Morality, as an abstract concept related to value systems, social norms, and behavioral evaluation, serves as a productive target domain in the study of conceptual metaphors due to its central role in social interaction and the construction of reality.

Metaphors play an important role in how humans think, serving as a basis for conceptualizing the world and its activities (Gibbs, 2008; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Lakoff and his colleagues argue that abstract and significant topics in human life, such as birth, love, and life, are often expressed and more easily understood through metaphors. Gibbs (2021) adds that metaphors originate from the interaction between the brain, body, language, and culture. Langlotz (2006) explains that cognitive metaphors provide easier cognitive access, structure, and ontologize more abstract target domains, such as morality, career, and time.

The study of meaning positions semantics as a branch of linguistics that examines how meaning is constructed, presented, and utilised in communicative interaction (Cristy et al., 2024; Kearns, 2011; Leech, 1981; Mulyadi et al., 2024, 2021; Yule, 1996). In line with this view, Hurford et al. (2007) state that semantics is a field of study that focuses specifically on the analysis of meaning in language. The Cognitive Linguistics perspective emphasises that language reflects the way humans think and construct reality, with metaphors playing a role in the systematic mapping of concrete source domains to abstract target domains, enabling the understanding of abstract concepts such as time, emotions, power, and morality (Gibbs, 2021; Kövecses, 2019; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Semino, 2008).

Metaphors have been studied globally in various domains, including politics, economics, health, media, religion, and morality. Morality is one of the most productive target domains for conceptual metaphors, as it is directly related to value systems, social norms, and evaluations of human behavior. Morality is not only an abstract ethical concept but also a social instrument used to establish legitimacy, authority, and collective identity. Therefore, an understanding of moral metaphors is not only relevant within the scope of linguistics, but also within social, cultural, and political studies.

Research on metaphors in the Indonesian language has so far focused primarily on the emotional domain, such as anger, happiness, and fear (Rajeg, 2019). Meanwhile, the domain of morality as a social value system has not yet been comprehensively studied. However, in Indonesia's pluralistic and religious context, understanding how morality is conceptualized through language is crucial, especially in the digital age where text production is growing exponentially. Phenomena such as the use of metaphors like "undermining the foundations of morality" or "an attack on morality" in political and media discourse highlight the urgency of systematically mapping these expressions.

Lexicons related to morality are often used in metaphors. This statement is in line with the opinion of Lakoff (1996) and (Kövecses, 2000, 2002) that metaphors can be used to reveal the lexicon of morality in communication to illustrate the ways in which language reflects and shapes our understanding of moral and ethical values in social contexts. Furthermore, it is stated that Kövecses examines how moral metaphors are connected to human emotions and bodily experiences. He explains that many moral metaphors that appear in everyday language are rooted in physical experiences, such as "anger is fire" or "kindness is light", which describe moral values based on feelings or bodily experiences that we experience (Kövecses, 2000).

The concept of morality in linguistics can be divided into good and bad morals (Yu, 2022). It is also said that in Indonesian moral ethics, good and bad are often determined by prevailing social norms. Moral metaphors are used to describe behaviors considered good or bad according to these norms. The high frequency of moral metaphors in media and politics demonstrates the urgency of systematically mapping these metaphorical expressions. Identifying the underlying conceptual metaphors is crucial for understanding the cognitive structures that shape how Indonesians view morality. Furthermore, analyzing metaphorical patterns is necessary to discern how certain source domains—for example, war, cleanliness, space, or health—are more dominant than others in representing morality. Furthermore, interpreting the conceptual meanings contained within these metaphors will help explain how language not only reflects but also shapes society's moral perspectives.

In this regard, research on conceptual metaphor (CM) in Indonesian has been conducted, with a primary

focus on the study of emotional lexicon. This means that the target domain in the study of MC in Indonesian is more directed towards exploring lexicons related to emotions. Lexicons such as anger, hatred, fear, and sadness depict negative emotions, while happiness and love represent positive emotions.

Furthermore, Yu (2022) compared moral metaphors in English and Mandarin, and updated findings from previous studies (e.g., Yu, 2012, 2016). In his work, moral metaphor is understood as part of a conceptual system that can be divided into three subsystems, based on the source concepts used in the metaphorical mapping. These three subsystems are the physical, visual, and spatial subsystems. The author explores the reasons why morality is often one of the most common target domains in conceptual metaphors (Kövecses, 2010) and why moral cognition is essentially metaphorical (Arcimavičienė, 2008; Johnson, 2014; Yu, 2016). This cross-linguistic analysis highlights the importance of conventional metaphors in the formation of concepts of morality across languages. Rajeg (2019) focused his research on analyzing metaphors used in Indonesian to describe emotions through written electronic corpus data comprising 5,317,433 words. He employed qualitative research methods supported by quantitative methods, Corpus Linguistics, and Metaphorical Pattern Analysis (MPA). This research adopted the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) developed by Lakoff (1990, 1993, 2006) and Lakoff & Kövecses (1987) as its theoretical basis. The results of the analysis are presented using formal and informal methods. This ML reflects 258 conceptual metaphors (CM), involving 88 types of metaphorical source domains to describe the target domain of emotions.

Previous studies on metaphorical meaning demonstrate that conceptual metaphor theory and cognitive semantics have been widely applied across educational, religious, political, advertising, and cultural contexts, highlighting the multifunctional role of metaphor in shaping human understanding and social perception. Pirmansyah & Nur (2021) revealed that metaphors in *Majalah Gontor* function as pedagogical and spiritual tools by conceptualizing life as a journey (*Rihlah*), thereby connecting abstract experiences with concrete human activities. Similarly, Pirmansyah & Nur (2021) showed that metaphors in *Surah Yasin* facilitate readers' comprehension of abstract religious concepts such as life, death, divine power, and the afterlife through concrete analogies, emphasizing the persuasive and didactic function of metaphor in religious discourse. In the political sphere, Surip (2021) identified war, journey, and spatial metaphors in the 2019 Indonesian presidential election discourse, demonstrating how metaphors operate strategically to frame political narratives, construct moral judgments, and influence voter perception. Meanwhile, Voskoboinyk & Sukhachova (2023) argued that metaphors in English advertising texts function not merely as stylistic devices but as persuasive instruments that shape consumer attitudes, reinforce brand identity, and reflect social and cultural values.

Expanding metaphor studies into local cultural contexts, Cristy et al. (2024) analyzed conceptual metaphors of love in the Batak Toba language and found diverse metaphorical categorizations, with "love as an object" emerging as the dominant conceptualization, indicating the close relationship between metaphor and cultural worldview. Collectively, these studies confirm that metaphor is not only a linguistic phenomenon but also a cognitive and socio-cultural mechanism that mediates ideology, morality, spirituality, emotion, and identity. However, most of the studies focus predominantly on identifying metaphor categories and meanings, while limited attention has been given to how metaphorical meanings are constructed within broader discourse structures and socio-contextual practices, leaving opportunities for further research integrating linguistic, cultural, and discourse-based perspectives.

This study aims to bridge that gap by examining metaphors of morality in the Indonesian language through a Cognitive Linguistics approach combined with Corpus Linguistics methods. The objectives of this study are: (1) to explore and analyze conceptual metaphors in moralistic metaphorical expressions, (2) to present the distribution patterns of these metaphors, and (3) to generate interpretations of the conceptual meanings contained within these metaphors.

Literature Review

Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Metaphor is a form of noun transfer needed to fill other lexical positions. However, Aristotle's definition of a noun is not just a substantive, but rather all words that can be nominalized, including verbs and adjectives. This understanding agrees with Lakoff & Johnson (1980), who explain that metaphor is not merely a figure of speech but also a way for humans to understand and conceptualize the world. These metaphors are often based

on physical and cultural experiences, known as conceptual metaphors.

One very common metaphor concept according to Lakoff & Johnson (1980) is “ARGUMENT IS WAR.” This metaphor demonstrates that we often view arguments as confrontational, like war. In this metaphor, arguments are likened to war. The arguing parties are likened to the warring parties. Ideas or points are likened to weapons.

This study employs Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), introduced by Lakoff & Johnson (1980) and further developed by Kövecses (2000, 2010, 2019). Conceptual metaphor in semantics is defined as a way of thinking that underlies our understanding of the world. It appears not only in language, but also in the way we behave and think (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In other words, conceptual metaphor is a mental structure that allows us to understand one concept in terms of another concept. This metaphor functions in various aspects of our lives, including language, culture, and behavior (Kövecses, Z. (2002). CMT posits that a metaphor is a systematic mapping from a concrete source domain to an abstract target domain. A conceptual metaphor has the structure Source of Domain (SD) is Target of Domain, for example, MORALITY IS A BUILDING. This mapping enables the understanding of abstract concepts through human physical and cultural experiences.

Key components of the CMT include: (1) the source domain and the target domain, (2) central mappings, (3) the main meaning focus, and (4) the scope of the metaphor. The main meaning focus, for example, explains that a source domain, such as BUILDING, highlights certain aspects of morality, such as solidity, structure, and the potential for collapse.

The Concept of Morality

Etymologically, the term “morality” derives from the Latin word *moralis*, meaning “custom” or “habit.” In this study, morality is understood as a system of values that distinguishes between good and bad, right and wrong (Yu, 2022). Yu (2022) classifies metaphors of morality into three conceptual subsystems: *physical* (strong-weak, healthy-sick), *visual* (light-dark, clean-dirty), and *spatial* (high-low, straight-crooked). This classification serves as a framework for analyzing the data.

Morality in linguistics is often associated with how language is used to convey ethical values, social norms, or moral considerations. One relevant area includes the study of how context influences the interpretation of meaning. For example, polite or impolite language use can reflect certain moral values, a concept known as linguistic pragmatics (Levinson, 1983).

Previous studies demonstrate that morality is widely conceptualized through metaphor across linguistic, cultural, political, and social contexts. Arcimavičienė (2010) showed that morality is represented through spatial, physical, and economic metaphors such as *moral compass* and *moral debt*, emphasizing the role of language and culture in shaping moral understanding. Similarly, Yu (2016), Wang et al. (2016), and Liu et al. (2020) highlighted the dominance of spatial and vertical metaphors, where morality is associated with “up,” “right,” and “forward,” while immorality is linked to “down,” “left,” and “backward.” Budd et al. (2019) and Chatterjee (2021) further demonstrated how metaphors construct moral panic and moral degradation in media and pandemic discourse. Meanwhile, Salman & Al- Azzawi (2021) confirmed that metaphorical representations of morality vary across languages and bilingual cognition, reflecting the close relationship between metaphor, culture, ideology, and social perception.

Metaphorical Pattern Analysis and Corpus Linguistics

Metaphoric Pattern Analysis (MPA), developed by Stefanowitsch (2006), is used to identify metaphoric patterns in a corpus. This method searches for specific lexical items from the target domain (e.g., “morality”) that co-occur with lexical items from the source domain. Corpus linguistics provides an empirical foundation by using large amounts of natural language data (McEnery & Hardie, 2012), enabling the identification of objective, measurable patterns.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach, supported by simple quantitative data (frequency counts). The primary data source for this study is the Indonesian language corpus found in the Leipzig Corpora Collection (LCC) (Biemann et al., 2012). This corpus includes data from 250 languages, including Indonesian. The

Indonesian corpus data can be downloaded from <https://wortschatz.uni-leipzig.de/en/download/Indonesian>. The qualitative data in this study are linguistic forms such as utterances, sentences, or phrases related to moral metaphors in Indonesian. This corpus is a raw corpus (Gries, 2009), whose data has not been annotated or linguistically marked up. Therefore, the researcher will manually annotate all necessary data.

The LCC corpus is organized by sentence source, year, and number. The sentence/utterance sources in this corpus come from various text genres, such as news and articles on websites. The grouping is based on the year the Indonesian language corpus was built with a time span between 2020 – 2024. The number of each corpus per year that can be downloaded varies between 10,000 utterances/sentences. The number of sentences in each file per thousand is abbreviated with the letter K in the LCC Corpus display, for example ten thousand sentences equals 10 K. This study uses the corpus of the last 5 years (2020 – 2024) with the largest number of files, namely 1K and 3K to be able to collect ± 1000 metaphorical expressions each (with the search word concept of morality).

The primary tool is the Sketch Engine software, which was used to perform concordance searches (KWIC), calculate frequencies, and export data. The data were analyzed in three stages: (1) identification of metaphorical expressions using the Metaphor Identification Procedure (Steen et al., 2010), (2) determination of metaphorical patterns using MPA, and (3) mapping into conceptual metaphors and semantic analysis using CM.

Results and Discussion

Identification and Distribution of Conceptual Metaphors of Morality

From 650 data samples, 453 metaphorical linguistic expressions (69.69%) were identified, indicating the dominance of metaphor use in discussing morality compared to literal expressions. These expressions were then classified into 25 conceptual metaphors. Table 1 presents the distribution of the ten metaphors with the highest frequency.

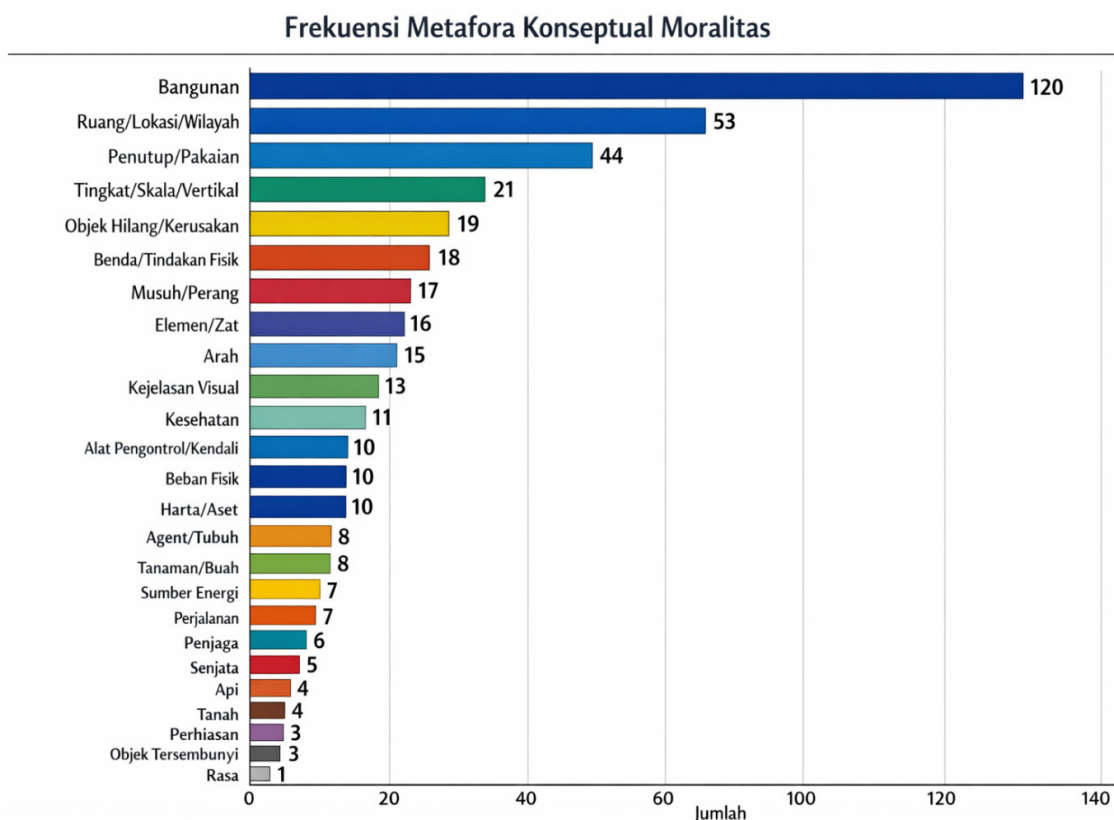


Table 1. Distribution of the Ten Conceptual Metaphors of the Highest Morality

The dominance of the “MORALITY IS A BUILDING” metaphor (26.49%) indicates that Indonesian society tends to understand morality as a solid, well-planned structure that requires a foundation. This aligns with Kövecses’s (2010) finding that abstract concepts are often understood through physical experiences with buildings.

Analysis of Dominant Metaphorical Patterns

1. MORALITY IS A BUILDING

The metaphorical patterns identified include: *the foundation of morality, the collapse of morality, building morality, a cracked moral structure, and the pillars of morality*. The conceptual mapping reveals that architectural elements (foundation, structure, collapse) are projected onto morality. The foundation represents basic values, the structure represents a complete value system, and collapse represents moral decadence. The main emphasis is on STRENGTH AND STABILITY, where morality is viewed as something that must be maintained so that it does not “collapse” or become “fragile.”

Data Examples:

- (1) Rampant corruption is believed to have **eroded public morality** and weakened social trust. (Tempo.com)
- (2) Character education is viewed as **the moral foundation** that determines whether national life is strong or fragile. (Kompas.com)

2. MORALITY IS SPACE

Metaphorical patterns: the space of morality, the gray area of morality, the zone of moral crisis, the place of morality, and the corridor of morality. Morality is understood as a spatial entity that can be entered, left, or used as a refuge. The primary focus is on BOUNDARIES AND LOCATION, where moral actions are understood as being within or outside the permitted “space.”

Data Examples:

- (3) Social media has now become a **moral gray area**, where the line between right and wrong is often blurred. (Tirto.id)
- (4) In political practice, morality is often sidelined from **the realm of public decision-making**. (CNN Indonesia)

3. MORALITY IS A COVER/GARMENT

Metaphorical patterns: wearing morality, morality as a cloak, the mask of morality, moral attire, and wrapping behavior in morality. These metaphors reflect the understanding of morality as a social identity that can be displayed or concealed. The key focus is on IDENTITY AND FALSITY (artificiality), where morality can become merely an external attribute that does not reflect substance.

Data Examples:

- (5) Some political elites don **the cloak** of morality to conceal their strategies... (suara.com)
- (6) On social media, morality is often used as a **costume of piety** to appear righteous in the public eye. (kompasiana.com)

Conceptual Meaning Analysis

Based on Yu's (2022) framework, the metaphors identified can be grouped into three subsystems:

1. Physical Subsystem: Metaphors such as BUILDING (strong/fragile), HEALTH (healthy/sick), PHYSICAL OBJECT (repaired/damaged), and PHYSICAL BURDEN (heavy/light) dominate. This indicates that morality is largely understood through bodily experiences with physical objects and conditions.
2. Visual Subsystem: Metaphors such as VISUAL/COLOR (light/dark, blurry/clear), FLAME (light), and CLARITY (blurred) indicate that moral understanding also involves visual sensory experience. The “blurriness” of morality signifies ethical ambiguity, while the “light” of morality signifies truth.
3. Spatial Subsystem: Metaphors such as SPACE (inside/outside, territory), DIRECTION (straight/curved), and LEVEL/SCALE (high/low) affirm that spatial orientation and movement form the basis for understanding a person's moral position. “High” refers to moral superiority, while “low” refers to degradation.

These findings reinforce the view that morality cannot be understood in isolation from human sensory and physical experiences (embodied cognition). Indonesian society perceives morality as something tangible and measurable, yet also vulnerable to corruption and deception.

Conclusion

This study successfully identified 25 conceptual metaphors of morality in the Indonesian language, with the three most dominant metaphors being MORALITY IS A BUILDING, MORALITY IS A SPACE, and MORALITY IS CLOTHING. This dominance reflects the Indonesian public's perspective, which understands morality as a sturdy structure that requires maintenance, as an environment or territory with boundaries, and as a social identity that can be worn. These metaphorical patterns confirm that morality, as an abstract concept, is understood through human imagery and physical experience—whether in physical, visual, or spatial dimensions. Theoretically, this study enriches the study of conceptual metaphors with empirical data from Indonesia. Practically, these findings can be used in character education, media discourse analysis, and the understanding of the dynamics of social values in contemporary Indonesia.

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