



Analysis of Conceptual Metaphors in the Movie *Darkest Hour*

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Abstract

Darkest Hour is a film that presents Winston Churchill's wartime speeches, and this article will focus on the use of conceptual metaphors in these speeches. The article first explores the definition and historical origins of this rhetorical device, while reviewing previous research on conceptual metaphor, laying a theoretical foundation for subsequent analysis. Next, a detailed analysis was conducted on the conceptual metaphors used in Churchill's speeches in the movie, especially those involving resistance and freedom. By citing movie clips, the symbolic meaning and effects of each metaphor were explained, and the underlying meaning of the speech was deeply explored. Subsequently, the role of these conceptual metaphors in the audience's psychology was explored, with a focus on how these metaphors emphasized the British people's determination to resist Nazi Germany and their desire for freedom. At the same time, the article also analyzed how the movie created Winston Churchill's leadership image through conceptual metaphors and highlighted the unity of the British people in adversity. Finally, the article summarizes the application and effects of conceptual metaphors in *Darkest Hour*, emphasizes the role of these metaphors, and looks forward to possible directions for future research.

Keywords

Conceptual Metaphors; *Darkest Hour*; Churchill; Multimodal discourse analysis

1. Introduction

Conceptual metaphor is a very important concept in linguistics. When introducing the movie *Darkest Hour* and Winston Churchill's wartime speech, we will delve into the cultural, historical, and artistic background of the theme of "conceptual metaphor", providing readers with a comprehensive perspective. The movie *Darkest Hour* embodies Winston Churchill's leadership and decision-making at critical moments in British history. Director Joe Wright uses this work to present Britain in 1940, a country facing the threat of Hitler's Nazism. The wartime speech "We Should Never Surrender" became a key element of the film. This speech is considered a crucial moment in history to inspire the British people, and it is precisely the conceptual metaphors in this speech that give the language deeper symbolic meaning. This rhetorical device provides the audience with a way of understanding that goes beyond the literal meaning, making them more deeply aware of the urgent atmosphere at that time.

The introduction of the theme of the paper, namely the application of conceptual metaphors in wartime speeches, will become the core of our research. This is a fascinating question, as metaphor is not only a rhetorical device but also a tool for reflecting culture and conveying ideas. In the context of emphasizing resistance and freedom, we will delve into how conceptual metaphors are used in speeches and how these metaphors influence audience understanding and emotional resonance. In the entire paper, we will reveal the deep connotations of conceptual metaphors contained in specific speech segments through in-depth analysis. Through this study, we will not only deepen our

understanding of the movie *Darkest Hour*, but also better understand the unique position of wartime speeches in history and cultural heritage.

2. Literature Review

Conceptual metaphor is a rhetorical device that conveys deeper meanings by mapping one concept to another. This expression often uses metaphorical metaphors to make abstract concepts more concrete and easier to understand. Conceptual metaphors have been widely studied in the fields of linguistics and rhetoric. In the literary tradition of history, many writers and speakers have cleverly utilized conceptual metaphors to enrich expression and evoke resonance.

Over time, scholars have conducted in-depth research on conceptual metaphors, revealing their complex roles in language and culture. Previous research has involved discussions on the definition, classification, and influencing factors of conceptual metaphors. These studies provide a theoretical basis for us to understand the application of conceptual metaphors in specific contexts. Lakoff and Johnson's "Cognitive Theory of Metaphors" is a classic work on the theoretical framework of conceptual metaphors. They believe that metaphor is not only a linguistic phenomenon, but also a part of cognitive processes. This cognitive orientation provides an important perspective for us to understand how conceptual metaphors play a role in thinking. In addition, previous studies have also focused on the similarities and differences of conceptual metaphors in different cultures and contexts, as well as their specific applications in fields such as literature, advertising, and political speeches. These research findings provide useful references for us to deeply analyze the application of conceptual metaphors in Winston Churchill's wartime speeches.

3. The Application of Conceptual Metaphors in Movies

The application of conceptual metaphors in the movie *Darkest Hour* also provides viewers with a profound thinking experience. Through the analysis of Winston Churchill's wartime speech in the movie, we can find that it contains multiple conceptual metaphors, which adds a lot of color to the film.

In the movie, Churchill compares war to the last resort of a country, depicting it as a difficult and arduous struggle. This metaphor regards war as a last resort and emphasizes the crisis and urgency faced by Britain at that time by placing it in the last place. The audience not only felt the cruelty of war in this metaphor, but also gained a deeper understanding of the political atmosphere at that time. Another impressive conceptual metaphor appears in the expression of freedom. Churchill compared freedom to a priceless treasure, which not only emphasized the importance of freedom in philosophy but also emotionally aroused the audience's appreciation for freedom. This metaphor concretizes abstract concepts, making the audience more emotionally engaged and resonating more strongly. Similar conceptual metaphors are also used in *Darkest Hour*, where symbolic objects are often used to depict power, such as tables, chairs, documents, etc., in cabinet rooms, conceptualizing power into concrete images and highlighting the power struggles between characters. This technique allows the audience to more intuitively feel the tense atmosphere of power struggle and enhances the expressive power of the film (Forceville, 2016).

In the film, Churchill is repeatedly portrayed in solitary walks, one notable instance being his visit to Buckingham Palace when the King summoned him to assume the position of Prime Minister. Their prior relationship had been strained, and the king's decision was more a matter of necessity than of trust. As Churchill advanced through the long corridor toward the king, the space visually resembled a symbolic bridge connecting two opposing sides. At the far end stood the king, silent and waiting. Churchill realized that this was not only about accepting the monarch's mandate but also about bearing the burden of leading Britain through peril. Confronted with such a grave task, he moved forward decisively, just as he did in choosing to confront fascism without hesitation. Through a combination of visual and auditory cues—lighting, sound, gaze, and movement—the film conveys the conceptual metaphor of "progress as challenge."

Similarly, when Halifax sought to pressure Churchill into seeking peace by threatening resignation, the narrative withheld Churchill's immediate reply. Instead, the camera followed him as he traversed an underground passage alone. Along the dim corridor, faint lights flickered, while the stirring background score, his unyielding gaze, and firm steps highlighted him as a warrior figure pressing toward the battlefield. These multimodal devices—music, movement, lighting, and expression—reinforce the metaphor that "struggle means moving forward." The final scenes return to this imagery: Churchill walking into darkness as the audience's cheers and triumphant music accompany him. Although the looming world war against fascism appeared daunting and bleak, he chose persistence and

advancement. Through orchestrated use of sound, light, shadow, and pace, the film underscores Churchill's determination and consistently constructs the metaphor of "challenge as progress."

Churchill's initial on-screen presence is marked by the striking image of a match being lit, its flame cutting through the surrounding darkness and casting light upon his face. This visual moment not only introduces Churchill himself but also symbolically projects a glimmer of hope for Britain. Against the backdrop of overwhelming crises—the fall of Calais, the evacuation of 330,000 troops from Dunkirk, the incomplete mobilization of civilian vessels, and the mounting pressure from his own cabinet—Churchill confronted a bleak outlook for the war effort. Within this narrative context, and prompted by the King, he sought to gauge public sentiment regarding war and peace. During his journey, an incidental detail—the absence of matches when he wished to smoke in his car—leads him to disembark and enter the London Underground, where he directly encounters ordinary citizens. His opening line, "Has anyone brought a match?", resonates beyond the literal request: it signifies a search for collective strength and optimism among the people. The interaction with the commuters rekindles Churchill's resolve, and upon returning to the cabinet meeting, the discovery of his own match symbolically reflects the restoration of hope within him. Through the cinematic motif of smoking, the film skillfully employs both narrative devices—such as seeking and borrowing fire—and multimodal resources, including gesture, gaze, and verbal expression, to construct the conceptual metaphor of "light as flame," thereby encoding Churchill's resilience and the revival of national hope (Forceville & Urios-Aparisi, 2009).

Hitler incited emotions among the German people through his words, while Churchill, in addition to actively responding militarily, also fought back with eloquent words. The movie successfully constructed the conceptual metaphor of "language is a blade". In the movie, Churchill made his first national broadcast. At 9 o'clock, the red light lit up, like a signal of battle. Churchill's speech resolved the tense atmosphere of the battlefield, and his outstanding speech enabled him to win the battle. Before Churchill began his speech, there was no background music. However, as the speech progressed, Churchill's speech became smoother and more passionate, and the background music gradually intensified, like the trumpet of victory blowing. Churchill's victory in this battle was due to his sharp words. Movies use multi-modal means such as "music, light, language" to construct the conceptual metaphor that "language is a blade". In addition, when Churchill successfully convinced members of various party parliaments to persist in the war of resistance, some people couldn't believe it and asked, "What happened?" Halifax replied, "He turned language into a weapon and successfully sent it to the battlefield." This further demonstrated Churchill's strong ability to organize and use language, as well as his ability to cleverly inspire the people's determination to resist the war. This further highlights the metaphorical concept that "words are the cutting edge" in movies (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

What's more, Churchill took the subway to search for the "flame of hope" among the people. In the process of communicating with the people, he asked what people would do if the German invading army set foot on British territory. "Battle!" is a unanimous answer from people. And when he asked what people's opinions would be if they were to compromise with fascism and seek reconciliation? "Never!" is the unanimous voice of the people. Among the respondents were men and women, white and black, adults and little girls. The movie portrays different groups of people through different camera transitions and expresses their inner voices through their words. The movie constructs the conceptual metaphor that "the human heart is a strong fortress" through multi-modal means such as camera images, language, gestures, and eye contact. It was precisely this that Churchill reignited the flame of hope. With the solid support of the people, Churchill successfully convinced all members of parliament and opened a new chapter in the nationwide anti fascist war (Musolff, 2004).

All in all, the use of conceptual metaphors in *Darkest Hour* has enabled the audience to have a deeper understanding of the historical environment and character traits of that time. This rhetorical device not only injects artistic inspiration into the film but also enables the audience to understand the information conveyed in the film in a more creative and profound way. Through in-depth research on conceptual metaphors in movies, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the application of this literary technique in film art, as well as its impact on audience thinking and perception. This unique and profound artistic expression enriches the layers of the film, making it more engaging (Sun & Chen, 2007).

4. The Effect of Conceptual Metaphors

The use of conceptual metaphors in the movie *Darkest Hour* has had a profound effect, directly affecting the audience's cognitive and emotional experience. Through in-depth analysis of conceptual metaphors, we can gain a more

comprehensive understanding of how these metaphors shape the audience's thinking and emotional resonance in the film.

Conceptual metaphors have a significant impact on the audience's cognition. In his wartime speech, Churchill compared war to the last resort of a country. The audience thus felt the seriousness of the war and gained a deeper understanding of the pressure of political decision-making at that time. Conceptual metaphors play a role in guiding the audience's thinking here, enabling them to have a clearer understanding of historical events.

These metaphors played a crucial role in emphasizing the British people's determination to resist Nazi Germany and their desire for freedom. By comparing freedom to priceless treasures, Churchill emphasized the preciousness of freedom, and the audience deeply experienced the desire for freedom emotionally. This emotional resonance creates a closer connection between the audience and the characters in the film, experiencing the pressure and determination of that historical moment together.

The effect of conceptual metaphor is also reflected in the audience's shaping of the image of political leaders. By metaphorically transforming abstract concepts such as war and freedom into concrete images, Churchill is presented as a steadfast and courageous leader. The audience can feel his leadership style in the movie, and the conceptual metaphor provides strong contextual support for this shaping.

To sum up, the conceptual metaphors in the movie *Darkest Hour* not only affect the audience's cognition but also deeply touch their emotions. Through these metaphors, the audience becomes more emotionally engaged and has a deeper understanding of historical events and character shaping (Dai, 2018).

5. Conclusion

In the film *Darkest Hour*, conceptual metaphors are employed with remarkable depth through Winston Churchill's wartime speeches, offering a vivid portrayal of war, freedom, and leadership. Analysis of these metaphors yields several key insights.

First, the film communicates its central themes effectively. By conceptualizing war as the nation's "last resort" and freedom as a "priceless treasure," it appeals to emotions while guiding audiences to reflect on historical urgency. Metaphors thus function as both rhetorical and cognitive tools, enabling viewers to grasp complex political and moral realities more tangibly.

Second, metaphors deeply influence cognition and emotion. War metaphors evoke determination and immediacy, while freedom metaphors cultivate appreciation for core values. These devices enhance historical understanding and generate emotional resonance, ensuring engagement at both intellectual and affective levels (Wei, 2019).

Third, metaphors help construct Churchill's leadership image. By portraying him as resolute and courageous, they reinforce his role as both a political figure and a symbolic guardian of national values. Through the interplay of language, visuals, and sound, the film demonstrates how metaphors can shape perceptions of leadership in times of crisis.

Beyond cinematic and historical dimensions, this study also highlights implications for education. Conceptual metaphor theory may serve as a pedagogical tool for teaching discourse analysis, rhetorical strategies, and critical thinking. By analyzing authentic texts such as films and speeches, students can learn to identify metaphorical structures, evaluate their persuasive effects, and connect linguistic theory with practical communication. Such an approach can enrich English language and literature courses by bridging theory with application (Zheng, 2018).

In conclusion, *Darkest Hour* exemplifies the powerful role of conceptual metaphors in shaping both historical memory and audience perception. The film conveys themes of war, freedom, and leadership while illustrating the enduring value of metaphor as a tool of persuasion. Future research may extend to other cultural texts, while educators may further explore its pedagogical potential.

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