

METAPHORICAL MODELING IN SPANISH SLANG: FROM COGNITIVE STRUCTURES TO LINGUISTIC REALIZATIONS

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Abstract. This study investigates cognitive mechanisms underlying metaphorical processes in Spanish slang through conceptual metaphor theory. Drawing on Lakoff and Johnson's framework, this research examines how abstract concepts in colloquial Spanish are systematically structured through metaphorical mappings from concrete experiential domains. The analysis reveals that Spanish slang demonstrates rich metaphorical productivity across several source domains, including anthropomorphic conceptualizations, zoomorphic projections, spatial orientations, and gastronomic metaphors reflecting cultural-linguistic patterns. Through corpus analysis of contemporary Spanish slang expressions, this study identifies recurrent metaphorical models demonstrating how embodied cognition principles manifest in informal language varieties. The findings indicate that metaphorical modeling serves multiple pragmatic functions including expressiveness, euphemism, group identification, and creative language play, while revealing culture-specific patterns that distinguish Spanish from other languages.

Keywords: conceptual metaphor, Spanish slang, cognitive linguistics, metaphorical mapping, source domain, target domain, embodied cognition, colloquial language.

Introduction. The investigation of metaphorical processes in language has undergone a fundamental paradigm shift since the emergence of cognitive linguistics. Traditional approaches viewing metaphor as ornamental have been supplanted by conceptualization recognizing metaphor as a fundamental cognitive mechanism through which humans understand abstract domains through concrete, embodied domains (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). While substantial research has explored metaphorical patterns in standard language varieties, the metaphorical underpinnings of slang remain relatively underexplored despite slang's creativity and rapid evolution representing a domain where metaphorical innovation is especially pronounced.

Spanish, with significant dialectal variation across multiple continents, presents a rich landscape for investigating metaphorical processes in informal speech. This study investigates metaphorical modeling in Spanish slang, systematically identifying and analyzing cognitive metaphorical models underlying Spanish slang formation and comprehension.

Theoretical framework: conceptual metaphor theory. Conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999) proposes that metaphor is a fundamental cognitive mechanism through which humans conceptualize abstract domains through concrete, experientially grounded domains (Lin, 2023). The basic architecture involves systematic mapping between source domains (concrete, well-structured domains) and target domains (more abstract domains). A canonical example is ARGUMENT IS WAR, where the source domain of WAR maps onto ARGUMENT, licensing expressions like attacking weak points and defending a position.

A fundamental principle is the unidirectionality of mapping from concrete to abstract domains, reflecting the embodiment of conceptual structures—the grounding of abstract concepts in bodily and sensorimotor experience (Lakoff, 2014). Our basic concepts derive from bodily interactions: spatial orientation, force dynamics, object manipulation, and sensory perception.

Materials and methods. The corpus was compiled through systematic collection of authentic contemporary Spanish slang expressions. Primary sources included specialized lexicographic works from Spain, Mexico, Argentina, Chile, and Colombia, plus online repositories and authentic language samples from social media, forums, and contemporary literature. The initial corpus yielded approximately 2,000 candidate expressions.

Metaphorical expressions were identified following the MIPVU method. For instance, *estar pedo* (to be drunk, literally “to be fart”) was classified as metaphorical because *pedo* has a basic concrete meaning contrasting with its slang meaning, understandable through metaphorical comparison. The analytical framework employed multi-stage metaphorical modeling: identifying target and source domains, articulating systematic correspondences, grouping expressions into models, and assessing frequency and productivity.

Results: metaphorical models in Spanish slang

Anthropomorphic and Somatic Metaphors. Spanish exhibits extensive somatic metaphors where body parts serve as source domains for understanding intelligence, personality, and emotional states (Soriano, 2003). The metaphor INTELLIGENCE IS A BODY PART appears in *tener mala cabeza* (to be foolish, literally “to have bad head”), *tener coco* (to be clever, “to have coconut”), and *estar de la olla* (to be crazy, “to be of the pot”).

The metaphor EMOTIONAL STATES ARE BODILY CONDITIONS includes *estar pedo* (to be drunk), *tener mala leche* (to be mean-spirited, “to have bad milk”), and *estar hasta los cojones* (to be fed up, “to be up to the testicles”).

Zoomorphic metaphors. Animal metaphors reflect PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS, allowing speakers to attribute animal characteristics to humans. Examples include *ser un burro* (to be stupid, “to be a donkey”), *ser un gallina* (to be cowardly, “to be a chicken”), and *estar como una cabra* (to be crazy, “to be like a goat”). Gender-specific patterns appear in *zorro/zorra* (fox), where the male form means clever while the female form is highly derogatory, revealing cultural gender bias.

Spatial and Orientational Metaphors. Spanish employs GOOD IS UP / BAD IS DOWN and MORE IS UP / LESS IS DOWN metaphors. *Estar por las nubes* (to be expensive, “to be through the clouds”) exemplifies MORE IS UP, while *estar por los suelos* (to be cheap, “to be through the floors”) illustrates LESS IS DOWN. Emotional states use vertical orientation: *estar de bajón* (to be depressed, “downward movement”) employs SAD IS DOWN, while *estar arriba* demonstrates HAPPY IS UP.

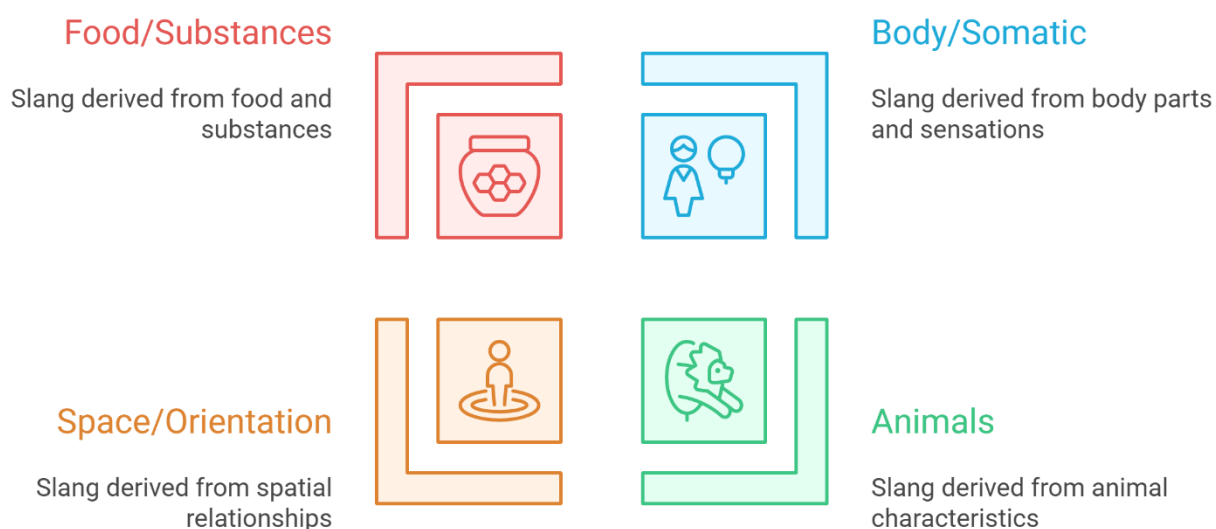


Fig. 1. Metaphorical mappings in Spanish slang

Containment appears in EMOTIONAL STATES ARE CONTAINED FLUIDS: *estar lleno de rabia* (to be full of rage) and *desbordar de alegría* (to overflow with joy).

Gastronomic and Substance Metaphors. Food domains feature prominently reflecting culinary culture's importance in Hispanic societies. MONEY IS FOOD appears in *pasta* (money, "dough/paste"). People are metaphorized through food: *ser un bombón* (to be attractive, "to be a bonbon") and *ser un melón* (to be stupid, "to be a melon"). Culinary processes provide metaphors: *estar cocido* (to be exhausted, "to be cooked") and *estar en su salsa* (to be in one's element, "to be in one's sauce").

Table 1: Primary metaphorical models in Spanish slang

Source Domain	Target Domain	Example
Body/Somatic	Intelligence, Personality	<i>tener mala cabeza</i>
Animals	Behavior, Character	<i>ser un burro</i>
Space/Orientation	Emotion, Status, Price	<i>estar por las nubes</i>
Food/Gastronomy	Money, People	<i>pasta</i> (money)

Discussion: cognitive mechanisms and cultural patterns. The findings strongly support conceptual metaphor theory's core claim that abstract domains are systematically structured through mappings from concrete, embodied experiential domains (Lakoff, 1993). The directionality flows consistently from concrete to abstract, reflecting embodied grounding of conceptual systems.

Extensive somatic metaphors exemplify embodied cognition principles (Lakoff, 2014). Specific patterns reveal culture-specific elaborations, including prominence of digestive metaphors reflecting cultural openness to bodily functions. The expression *tener mala leche* draws on Hispanic cultural beliefs about maternal nourishment.

Zoomorphic metaphors reveal universal tendencies and culture-specific patterns. Prominence of farm animals reflects agricultural history in Hispanic societies. Gender asymmetry in animal metaphors reveals how metaphorical systems reflect and perpetuate cultural gender ideologies. Spatial metaphors confirm cross-linguistic research on ubiquitous basic mappings (Kövecses, 2003). Gastronomic metaphors merit attention as culture-specific patterns, reflecting food's cultural centrality in Hispanic societies as focal point for family, social interaction, and cultural identity.

Metaphor in slang serves multiple communicative purposes: expressiveness, euphemism, in-group identification, and creativity. Cultural specificity has important implications for language teaching, translation, and cross-cultural communication.

Conclusion. This investigation revealed systematic cognitive structures underlying Spanish slang metaphorical patterns. The research demonstrated that conceptual metaphor theory provides a powerful framework for understanding how abstract concepts are structured through mappings from concrete, embodied experiential domains.

The study identified highly productive metaphorical models organized around somatic, zoomorphic, spatial, and gastronomic source domains. Findings support key claims of conceptual metaphor theory: consistent unidirectionality confirms abstract concepts are systematically grounded in physically experienced domains (Lin, 2023); extensive somatic source domains demonstrate embodied experience's fundamental role.

The research illuminated cultural specificity dimensions. While basic principles appear universal, instantiation reflects culturally specific knowledge and experiences. Gastronomic metaphor prominence reflects food's cultural centrality; particular animals employed reflect relevant fauna and agricultural practices.

Theoretically, the research extends conceptual metaphor theory into understudied linguistic variation domains. Practically, findings apply to Spanish pedagogy, translation practice, and cross-cultural communication. Future research could employ ethnographic methods, investigate discourse-level patterns, conduct fine-grained sociolinguistic analysis, and test cognitive processing experimentally.

Despite limitations, this investigation demonstrated that Spanish slang represents a rich domain for understanding cognitive structures underlying metaphorical language. The metaphorical models reveal how Spanish speakers creatively and systematically employ concrete experiential domains to conceptualize abstract concepts, producing expressions that are simultaneously cognitively grounded, culturally meaningful, and communicatively effective.

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