

MUSICAL METAPHORS AND CULTURAL IDENTITY: A COGNITIVE-CULTURAL APPROACH TO FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE IN GERMAN (DaF/DaZ) PEDAGOGY

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of conceptual metaphor in structuring emotional experience and identity formation in German popular music produced between 2000 and 2010. Drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Theory and recent cognitive-cultural approaches to meaning-making, the study conceptualises song lyrics not merely as stylistic artefacts but as cognitively salient sites in which abstract experiences such as love, uncertainty, intimacy, and self-orientation are rendered intelligible through recurring metaphorical mappings. Using a qualitatively curated corpus of widely circulated German-language songs from the early twenty-first century, the analysis identifies and categorises metaphorical expressions according to their underlying source-target domain relationships and cognitive functions. The findings reveal a marked predominance of structural metaphors grounded in domains of movement, force, containment, and spatial orientation, suggesting that these mappings function as shared cognitive frameworks through which young listeners narrativise emotional vulnerability and relational instability characteristic of the period. Rather than operating in isolation, the identified metaphors form interconnected clusters that stabilise meaning across texts and artists, pointing to the emergence of what this article terms musical metaphor ecologies. By situating metaphor use within its historical and cultural context, the study contributes to cognitive linguistics by demonstrating how popular music participates in the collective organisation of emotional experience. The article concludes by outlining pedagogical implications for German as a foreign or second language (Deutsch als Fremdsprache/Deutsch als Zweitsprache - DaF/DaZ) instruction, arguing that song-based metaphor analysis can enhance figurative competence, cultural interpretation, and learner engagement, particularly in non-immersive learning environments.

Keywords: Cognitive Linguistics, DaF/DaZ, German Popular Music, Conceptual Metaphor, Language Pedagogy, Cultural Identity, Figurative Competence, Cultural Linguistics.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Popular music constitutes one of the most pervasive linguistic environments in contemporary society. Beyond its aesthetic and entertainment functions, song discourse plays a central role in the articulation, circulation, and stabilisation of emotional experience, particularly among younger audiences. Through repeated exposure, memorisation, and affective engagement, song lyrics become embedded in everyday cognition, shaping how abstract experiences such as love, loss, hope, and selfhood are conceptualised and communicated. Despite this centrality, popular music has often been treated as a peripheral object of linguistic inquiry, especially within cognitive approaches to metaphor.

Within cognitive linguistics, metaphor is understood as a fundamental mechanism of thought through which abstract domains are structured via more concrete, embodied experiences. While Conceptual Metaphor Theory has been extensively applied to literary texts, political discourse, and everyday language, its application to popular music, particularly in non-English and historically delimited corpora, remains comparatively limited. Existing studies tend to focus either on isolated themes, such as romantic love, or on cross-linguistic comparisons, often without sustained attention to the cultural and historical conditions under which metaphorical patterns emerge.

This article addresses this gap by examining conceptual metaphors in German popular songs released between 2000 and 2010. This decade represents a transitional moment in German popular culture, marked by intensified individualisation, shifting models of intimacy, and increasing emotional reflexivity in public discourse. Musically and lyrically, this period is characterised by a move toward personal narration, emotional vulnerability, and introspective self-positioning. These developments make the decade particularly suitable for investigating how metaphor functions as a cognitive resource for negotiating emotional experience.

Rather than approaching metaphor as an ornamental or stylistic feature of song lyrics, this study conceptualises metaphor as a cognitive infrastructure through which experiences are organised, evaluated, and made narratively coherent. Songs are treated not as isolated texts but as elements within a broader cultural environment in which recurring metaphorical mappings circulate across artists, genres, and listening contexts. From this perspective, metaphor use in popular music contributes to the formation of shared emotional orientations, enabling listeners to recognise, interpret, and legitimise their own experiences through familiar conceptual patterns.

The study is guided by four interrelated research questions. First, which conceptual metaphors recur in German popular songs produced between 2000 and 2010? Second, which source domains dominate these metaphorical mappings, and what cognitive functions do they fulfil? Third, how do these metaphorical patterns reflect broader cultural orientations toward emotion, intimacy, and identity during this period? Finally, what implications does the analysis of song-based metaphors hold for language pedagogy, particularly in the context of German as a foreign or second language?

By addressing these questions, the article makes three principal contributions. Empirically, it offers a historically situated analysis of metaphor in German popular music, a corpus that remains underrepresented in cognitive linguistic research. Theoretically, it advances a cognitive-cultural perspective on metaphor by introducing the notion of musical metaphor ecologies, highlighting how metaphorical mappings function collectively rather than in isolation. Pedagogically, it demonstrates how song-based metaphor analysis can support

figurative competence, cultural interpretation, and learner engagement, especially in non-immersive learning environments.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 outlines the theoretical background, integrating Conceptual Metaphor Theory with cognitive–cultural approaches to meaning-making and reviewing relevant research on metaphor in song discourse. Section 3 describes the methodology, including corpus selection, analytical framework, and procedure. Section 4 presents and discusses the results of the analysis, focusing on dominant metaphorical patterns and their cognitive and cultural significance. Section 5 concludes the article by summarising the findings and discussing their pedagogical implications.

2.0 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Embodied Meaning

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) fundamentally reconceptualised metaphor as a cognitive mechanism rather than a stylistic deviation (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). According to this framework, abstract concepts are systematically structured through mappings from more concrete, embodied source domains, such as movement, space, force, and containment (Lakoff, 1993). These mappings operate at the level of conceptual organisation and are only secondarily manifested in language. As a result, metaphor is understood not merely as a linguistic phenomenon, but as a pervasive principle shaping thought, perception, and action (Gibbs, 1994).

Central to CMT is the notion of embodiment: human conceptualisation is grounded in recurrent bodily experiences, which give rise to image schemas such as PATH, CONTAINER, UP–DOWN, and FORCE (Johnson, 1987). These schemas provide the experiential foundation for metaphorical mappings, enabling speakers to reason about abstract domains such as emotion, time, or relationships in structured and cognitively economical ways (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002). Importantly, these mappings are not arbitrary; they are constrained by both bodily experience and cultural conventionalisation (Kövecses, 2005).

While early formulations of CMT focused primarily on the universality of embodied mappings, subsequent research has emphasised the role of context, discourse, and cultural variation (Kövecses, 2015). Metaphorical systems, though grounded in shared bodily experience, are selectively activated and elaborated in response to historically situated communicative needs. This insight is particularly relevant for analysing popular music, where metaphorical language is embedded in culturally specific narratives and emotional regimes.

2.2 Metaphor, Affect, and Cultural Cognition

Recent developments in cognitive linguistics have increasingly foregrounded the affective dimension of metaphor. Metaphors do not merely structure abstract reasoning; they also shape emotional interpretation and evaluation. Through metaphor, speakers and listeners can experience emotions as movements, pressures, burdens, or states of containment, thereby rendering affective states cognitively accessible and socially communicable.

From a cultural–cognitive perspective, metaphors function as shared resources that stabilise emotional meaning within communities. Recurrent metaphorical patterns contribute to what may be described as culturally sedimented ways of feeling and interpreting experience. In this sense, metaphor operates at the intersection of individual cognition and collective meaning-making, mediating between personal experience and socially available interpretive frameworks (Shore, 1998).

Popular music intensifies this process. Songs combine metaphorical language with melody, rhythm, and repetition, amplifying the affective impact of metaphorical mappings (Zbikowski, 2002). Through repeated listening, metaphors in songs are not only understood but felt, reinforcing particular emotional scripts and modes of self-understanding. This makes popular music a particularly fertile site for investigating how metaphor participates in cultural cognition.

2.3 Metaphor in Song Discourse and Popular Music Studies

Research on metaphor in song lyrics has demonstrated that musical discourse is rich in metaphorical language, particularly in relation to themes such as love, loss, and desire (Barcelona, 2003; Kövecses, 1986). Many studies have applied CMT to identify dominant conceptual metaphors in song corpora, often focusing on specific themes or conducting cross-linguistic comparisons (e.g., Charteris-Black, 2012). These studies have shown, for example, that metaphors of journey, war, or physical closeness are recurrent in the conceptualisation of romantic relationships.

However, much of this research remains limited in two respects. First, song lyrics are frequently treated as isolated texts rather than as components of broader cultural and cognitive environments. Second, analyses often prioritise classification over interpretation, focusing on metaphor types without fully addressing their cultural or experiential significance. As a result, the broader implications of metaphor use in songs for emotional socialisation and identity formation remain underexplored.

In the context of German popular music, this gap is particularly pronounced. While individual studies have examined metaphor use in selected songs or artists, there is a lack of historically situated analyses that account for the socio-cultural conditions under which metaphorical patterns emerge. The early 2000s, in particular, represent a period of transformation in German popular music, characterised by the rise of the *Berliner Schule* and a "new inwardness", marked by increased emotional introspection and personalised narrative voice.

2.4 Toward a Cognitive–Cultural Approach to Musical Metaphor

Building on these insights, the present study adopts a cognitive–cultural approach to metaphor in popular music. Rather than viewing metaphors as isolated mappings, it conceptualises them as interconnected elements within what can be described as musical metaphor ecologies. Within such ecologies, recurring source domains interact across texts, reinforcing particular ways of conceptualising emotion, intimacy, and selfhood.

This perspective allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how metaphor operates in musical discourse. It accounts not only for the cognitive mechanisms underlying metaphorical

mapping but also for the cultural circulation and affective reinforcement of metaphorical patterns. By situating metaphor analysis within a specific historical period, the study highlights how metaphorical systems respond to and reflect changing cultural conditions. In doing so, the article positions popular music as a key site for investigating the relationship between metaphor, cognition, and culture. The following section outlines the methodological approach adopted to operationalise this perspective in the analysis of German popular songs from 2000 to 2010.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, theory-driven cognitive–linguistic methodology designed to investigate how conceptual metaphors operate in German popular song lyrics as culturally embedded cognitive structures. The methodological orientation is explicitly interpretive rather than enumerative: the objective is not to quantify metaphor frequency per se, but to identify recurrent metaphorical mappings that structure emotional meaning across a historically situated corpus.

To ensure analytical rigour, the methodological design combines systematic metaphor identification with cross-textual pattern analysis and theoretically grounded interpretation.

3.1 Corpus Delimitation and Historical Positioning (2000–2010)

The corpus comprises German-language popular songs released between 2000 and 2010 that achieved sustained public circulation through chart performance, radio airplay, or long-term cultural visibility. The selection of this decade is analytically motivated rather than arbitrary. The period represents a transitional phase in German popular culture characterised by increasing individualisation, emotional reflexivity, and narrative self-focus in mainstream musical discourse.

Songs were selected according to the following explicit criteria:

1. **Language criterion:** Only songs performed predominantly in German were included, ensuring consistency in metaphorical and lexical analysis.
2. **Cultural reach criterion:** Songs were required to have demonstrable audience reach, operationalised through chart placement or sustained media circulation.
3. **Genre criterion:** The corpus focuses on mainstream pop and pop-rock genres, as these genres function as primary sites of emotional socialisation for younger audiences.
4. **Lyrical density criterion:** Songs with minimal verbal content or primarily repetitive non-lexical elements were excluded to ensure sufficient linguistic material for metaphor analysis.

The final corpus is intentionally limited in size to allow for close qualitative analysis, while remaining sufficiently diverse to reveal cross-textual metaphorical patterns.

3.2 Operationalisation of Conceptual Metaphor

A central methodological challenge in metaphor research lies in distinguishing metaphorical language use from literal or idiomatic expressions. To address this, the study operationalises

conceptual metaphor through a multi-step identification and validation process grounded in cognitive-linguistic theory.

Metaphorical expressions were identified by comparing the contextual meaning of a lexical unit with its more basic, concrete meaning, following established cognitive criteria for metaphor identification. An expression was treated as metaphorical if:

- Its contextual meaning involved an abstract domain (e.g., emotion, relationship, identity), and
- Its basic meaning was grounded in a more concrete, bodily or physical domain (e.g., movement, containment, force).

Once identified, metaphorical expressions were analysed in terms of their underlying source–target domain mappings. These mappings were not assumed a priori but inferred through systematic comparison across instances and texts. Conceptual metaphors were only posited when multiple linguistic expressions exhibited consistent mapping patterns, thereby avoiding overgeneralisation.

Conceptual metaphors were not treated as an undifferentiated set, but were systematically grouped according to the kind of cognitive work they perform in discourse. Following this principle, all identified mappings were categorised as structural, ontological, or orientational metaphors, allowing the analysis to track not only what metaphors occur, but how they organise emotional experience and narrative progression in song lyrics.

This typological distinction draws on the classification introduced by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and subsequently refined by Lakoff (1993), which differentiates metaphor types based on their cognitive function rather than their surface form. In the present study, this framework serves as an operational lens through which metaphorical expressions are aligned with the kinds of reasoning and evaluation they make available to speakers and listeners.

Structural metaphors emerge where lyrics repeatedly frame abstract experiences through extended source domains that support temporal development and inference. Mappings such as LIFE IS A PATH make it possible to narrate emotional experience as movement, progression, hesitation, or change, thereby sustaining coherent emotional trajectories across verses and refrains.

Ontological metaphors appear where emotions, memories, or relationships are linguistically bounded and objectified. By construing abstract states as entities, substances, or burdens (for example, EMOTIONAL BURDEN AS WEIGHT), these metaphors enable emotional experience to be referred to, accumulated, endured, or released, giving affect a manipulable conceptual form.

Oriental metaphors, by contrast, operate through basic spatial alignments such as UP–DOWN or IN–OUT. Rather than supporting extended reasoning, they provide rapid evaluative cues, positioning emotional states as elevated or diminished, close or distant, contained or exposed. Their function is thus primarily affective and local, anchoring momentary emotional stance within embodied spatial experience.

Taken together, these metaphor types function as complementary analytical dimensions rather than discrete categories. They guide the grouping and interpretation of metaphorical mappings throughout the analysis and become empirically visible in the results section, most clearly in Table 4.2, where the distribution of metaphor types is related to recurrent patterns of emotional meaning-making in the song corpus.

3.3 Analytical Procedure and Pattern Validation

The analytical procedure unfolded in four interrelated stages.

Stage 1: Contextual Reading

Each song text was first analysed holistically to establish thematic orientation, narrative voice, and emotional trajectory. This step ensured that metaphorical expressions were interpreted within their broader discursive context rather than in isolation.

Stage 2: Identification of Metaphorical Expressions

Metaphorical expressions were identified through close reading and contextual contrast with basic meanings. Lexical reference tools were consulted where necessary to minimise subjective interpretation.

Stage 3: Cross-Textual Mapping and Clustering

Identified metaphorical expressions were grouped according to shared source domains. Particular attention was paid to the recurrence of domains such as movement, containment, force, and vertical orientation across different songs and artists. This step enabled the identification of metaphorical clusters extending beyond individual texts.

Stage 4: Interpretive Validation

Metaphorical patterns were evaluated for cognitive plausibility and cultural coherence. Only mappings that demonstrated consistency across multiple contexts were retained for interpretation. This procedure ensures analytical reliability without resorting to purely quantitative validation.

3.4 Methodological Positioning and Limitations

This study deliberately privileges interpretive depth over statistical generalisation. While the findings cannot be extrapolated to all German popular music, the methodological design allows for robust theoretical insight into how metaphor functions as a cognitive–cultural mechanism within a specific historical context.

The qualitative orientation of the analysis also entails an interpretive stance; however, this is mitigated through systematic identification procedures, cross-textual validation, and theoretical transparency. Rather than presenting metaphor analysis as an objective extraction of meanings, the study acknowledges interpretation as a theoretically informed analytical practice.

3.5 Rationale for a Cognitive–Cultural Approach

By integrating Conceptual Metaphor Theory with discourse-sensitive analysis, the methodology enables the investigation of metaphor not only as a cognitive mapping but as a culturally circulating system of meaning. This approach is particularly suited to popular music, where metaphorical language is reinforced through repetition, emotional engagement, and shared listening practices.

The methodological design thus provides the foundation for analysing how recurring metaphorical mappings in German popular songs between 2000 and 2010 function as cognitive infrastructures for emotional experience, a claim that is examined empirically in the following section.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of the analysis, corresponding directly to the analytical stages outlined in the methodology. Rather than treating results as self-evident outcomes, the discussion demonstrates how each step of analysis produces specific, interpretable findings that together support a broader theoretical argument about metaphor as a cognitive-cultural infrastructure in popular music.

4.1 Metaphorical Expression Identification: Density, Distribution, and Function

The first analytical result concerns the identification of metaphorical linguistic expressions. Across the corpus, 341 metaphorical expressions were identified using contextual-basic meaning contrast. This figure in itself is not the primary finding. What is analytically significant is the density and clustering of metaphorical expressions within individual song texts.

Metaphors rarely occur in isolation. Instead, multiple metaphorical expressions often appear within the same stanza or thematic segment, producing what can be described as metaphorical saturation. This saturation does not impede comprehension; rather, it stabilises meaning by repeatedly mapping abstract emotional experience onto familiar embodied domains. Metaphor thus functions as a cognitive scaffolding mechanism, enabling listeners to process emotionally complex content without excessive interpretive effort.

Metaphorical expressions frequently cluster within individual songs, producing metaphorically dense passages. For instance, in “Irgendwas bleibt” (Silbermond, 2009), emotional memory is framed through multiple metaphorical expressions involving persistence, spatial embedding, and movement, all within a limited lyrical span. Similarly, “Durch den Monsun” (Tokio Hotel, 2005) repeatedly mobilises movement and force metaphors to structure emotional endurance and transformation.

Such clustering suggests that metaphor functions cumulatively, stabilising meaning through repeated activation of the same embodied domains rather than through metaphorical novelty.

The grammatical distribution of metaphorical expressions further clarifies this function.

Table 4.1 Grammatical Distribution of Metaphorical Expressions

| Grammatical Category | Raw Count | Percentage | Cognitive Function |
|----------------------|------------|-------------|--|
| Nouns | 98 | 28.7% | Ontological anchoring of abstract states |
| Verbs | 153 | 44.9% | Processual framing of change and force |
| Adjectives | 39 | 11.4% | Localised evaluation |
| Fixed expressions | 51 | 15.0% | Idiomatised metaphor |
| Total | 341 | 100% | |

The dominance of noun and verb metaphors indicates that metaphor primarily operates at the level of entity construction and temporal unfolding, rather than surface description. Emotions, relationships, and memories are not merely qualified; they are made into things that move, press, carry weight, or occupy space. This pattern is consistent across artists and years, suggesting a stable discourse tendency rather than stylistic idiosyncrasy.

4.2 From Linguistic Expressions to Conceptual Metaphors: Systematicity and Economy

The second analytical stage involved mapping metaphorical expressions onto underlying conceptual metaphors through cross-textual comparison. This step revealed a striking asymmetry between linguistic diversity and conceptual repetition. While surface expressions vary considerably, they consistently map onto a limited set of embodied source domains. Multiple linguistic expressions often instantiate the same underlying conceptual mapping. For example, expressions such as “weitergehen,” “stehen bleiben,” “nicht zurückkönnen,” and “einen Weg finden” across different songs all instantiate the conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A PATH. Although linguistically distinct, these expressions are cognitively equivalent insofar as they map abstract experience onto the same embodied source domain of directed movement.

A conceptual metaphor was considered distinct only if it met three criteria:

1. It involved a unique source–target domain mapping not reducible to another mapping.
2. It was instantiated by multiple linguistic expressions, either within a single song or across songs.
3. It demonstrated cross-textual stability, appearing in more than one artist’s work or in different years of the corpus.

A total of 64 distinct conceptual metaphors were identified. These were classified according to cognitive function, yielding the distribution shown in Table 2.

Table 4.2 Conceptual Metaphor Types Identified

| Metaphor Type | Number | Percentage | Cognitive Role |
|---------------|--------|------------|--|
| Structural | 41 | 64.1% | Extended reasoning and narrative framing |

| | | | |
|-----------------|-----------|-------------|--------------------------------|
| Ontological | 13 | 20.3% | Bounding and objectification |
| Orientalational | 10 | 15.6% | Immediate affective evaluation |
| Total | 64 | 100% | |

The empirical distribution of metaphor types, summarized in Table 4.2, reveals a specific hierarchy in how abstract experiences are conceptualized within the corpus. The data indicate that metaphorical mappings are utilized not merely for stylistic variation but as systematic tools for organizing narrative and emotional logic.

Structural metaphors represent the vast majority of the identified mappings (64.1%). This high frequency indicates that the lyrical content is primarily organized through extended reasoning and narrative framing. Following the framework established by Lakoff (1993), these metaphors provide the conceptual "blueprint" for a song. By mapping a structured source domain (such as a journey or a mechanism) onto an abstract target (such as a relationship or a life stage), these lyrics allow for temporal development and complex inferences. The dominance of this category suggests that the songs in the corpus favor "process-oriented" thinking, where emotional states are narrated as movements through space or stages of a construction.

Then, ontological metaphors account for 20.3% of the findings. These mappings perform the essential cognitive work of bounding and objectification. By construing intangible states, such as grief, desire, or memory, as discrete entities, substances, or physical burdens, the lyrics render these abstract concepts "referable" and "manipulable." This 20.3% of the corpus represents a linguistic strategy where the internal world is treated as a collection of objects that can be measured, stored, or exhausted, providing a sense of conceptual "solidity" to otherwise fleeting affective experiences.

Orientalational metaphors constitute the remaining 15.6% of the corpus. While they are the least frequent, they serve as the foundational "affective anchors" of the lyrics. These mappings rely on basic embodied spatial alignment like UP–DOWN, IN–OUT, or FRONT–BACK to provide immediate evaluative cues. Unlike structural metaphors, which require extended narrative logic, orientational metaphors provide rapid, local information about the narrator's emotional stance (e.g., status, wellness, or isolation). Their lower frequency suggests that while basic spatial positioning is present, it often serves as a momentary supplement to the more complex structural frameworks that drive the songs.

Summarily, the quantitative dominance of structural mappings suggests that the emotional meaning-making in this corpus is characterized by a high degree of systemic coherence. Rather than relying on isolated emotional cues, the lyrics utilize complex metaphorical systems to build sustained narrative worlds.

4.3 Dominant Conceptual Metaphors as Experiential Commitments

A closer examination shows that a relatively small number of conceptual metaphors account for a disproportionate share of linguistic instantiations. These metaphors are grounded in highly embodied source domains, particularly movement, force, and spatial orientation.

Table 3. High-Frequency Conceptual Metaphors

| Conceptual Metaphor | Source Domain | Instances | Experiential Implication |
|----------------------------|-------------------|-----------|--|
| LOVE IS A JOURNEY | Path / Movement | 46 | Emotional experience as an ongoing process |
| LIFE IS A PATH | Direction | 39 | Identity as a non-linear trajectory |
| EMOTIONS ARE FORCES | Physical force | 34 | Partial loss of control |
| INTIMACY IS CLOSENESS | Spatial proximity | 29 | Ambivalent relational proximity |
| EMOTIONAL BURDEN IS WEIGHT | Gravity | 22 | Endurance rather than resolution |
| LOSS IS DOWNWARD MOVEMENT | Verticality | 17 | Embodied negative evaluation |

For example, LOVE IS A JOURNEY is instantiated in songs such as “Ein Teil von mir” (Sido, 2004), where emotional connection is framed as an ongoing path that continues despite separation, and “Kreuz deinen Weg” (Sportfreunde Stiller, 2007), where relational uncertainty is articulated through directional movement and divergence.

Similarly, EMOTIONS ARE FORCES appears prominently in “Durch den Monsun” (Tokio Hotel, 2005), where emotional endurance is framed as resisting overwhelming natural forces, and in “Wenn Worte meine Sprache wären” (Tim Bendzko, 2011; bordering the period), where emotional pressure and release are conceptualised through force dynamics.

These metaphors do not merely describe experience; they encode experiential commitments. Conceptualising love or life as a journey commits the speaker to a view of experience as directional yet uncertain. Framing emotions as forces presupposes external causation and limited control. Notably absent are metaphors emphasising balance, harmony, or equilibrium, suggesting a cultural orientation toward process, strain, and persistence rather than closure.

4.4 Metaphor Clustering and Systemic Organisation

The third analytical stage examined how conceptual metaphors interact across texts. This revealed that metaphors consistently cluster into stable, recurring systems rather than appearing as isolated mappings. Four such clusters emerged through repeated empirical co-occurrence.

Table 4. Identified Metaphor Clusters (“Musical Metaphor Ecologies”)

| Cluster | Core Source Domains | Typical Targets | Cognitive Function |
|---------|---------------------|-----------------|--------------------|
|---------|---------------------|-----------------|--------------------|

| | | | |
|-------------|-------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------|
| Trajectory | Path, Direction, Motion | Life, Love, Self | Narrativisation of experience |
| Force | Pressure, Impact, Pull | Emotion, Desire | Externalisation of intensity |
| Containment | Inside/Outside, Depth | Intimacy, Memory | Regulation of boundaries |
| Orientation | Up/Down, Near/Far | Evaluation, Control | Rapid affective judgement |

In “Irgendwas bleibt” (Silbermond, 2009), for instance, trajectory metaphors (what continues, what remains) intersect with containment metaphors (what is kept inside, what endures beneath the surface). Likewise, “Applaus, Applaus” (Sportfreunde Stiller, 2004) combines orientational metaphors of elevation with containment metaphors to frame emotional affirmation as both uplifting and enveloping.

These clusters frequently co-occur within the same songs, producing layered conceptualisations in which an emotional experience may be simultaneously framed as movement along a path, pressure exerted by an external force, and confinement within a space. This layering effect allows listeners to triangulate meaning from multiple embodied perspectives, increasing emotional resonance while reducing ambiguity.

4.5 Figures: Visualising Analytical and Cognitive Structure

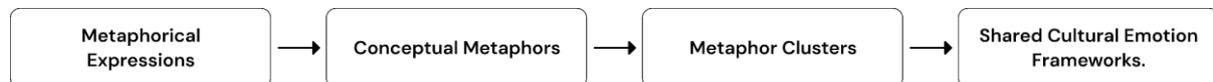


Figure 1. Analytical Progression from Expression to Metaphor Ecology

This figure makes explicit the inferential logic of the study and demonstrates how individual linguistic observations accumulate into a cognitive–cultural model.

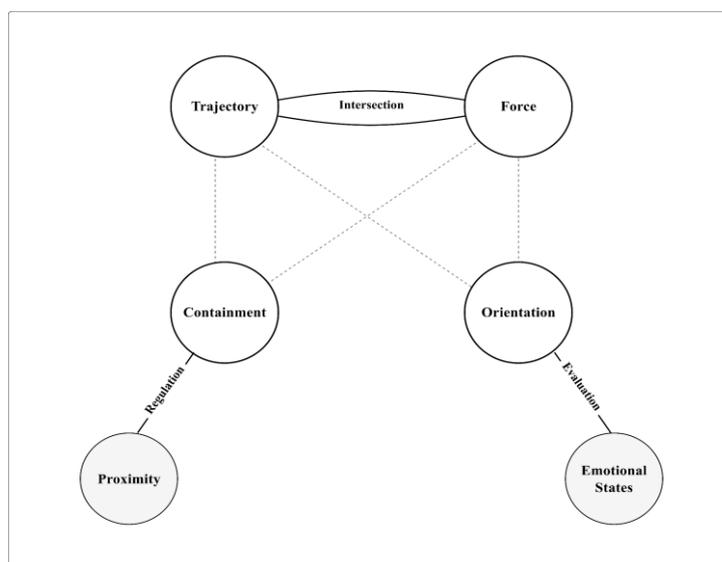


Figure 2. Interaction of Metaphor Clusters in German Song Discourse

Figure 2 visualizes a cognitive "ecology" of metaphor clusters, illustrating how physical schemas are utilized to map abstract emotional experiences within song discourse. At the top of the model, the intersection of Trajectory and Force represents emotional progress conceptualized as physical movement against resistance or external pressure. On the left, Containment serves as a mechanism for regulation, demonstrating how "inside/outside" boundaries define the Proximity and intimacy of the self. Simultaneously, on the right, Orientation provides an evaluation of emotional states by using verticality (Up/Down) to categorize the quality of feelings.

The dashed lines connecting these domains demonstrate their systemic interdependence, suggesting that these metaphors do not function in isolation. Instead, they operate as a stable, integrated framework that allows listeners to navigate and process complex themes of emotional vulnerability. By organizing metaphorical language into this ecological structure, the study reveals how popular music provides a coherent, embodied logic for interpreting the inner life.

The figure visualises systemic interdependence, empirically supporting the claim that metaphors function ecologically rather than atomistically.

Taken together, the results show that metaphor systems in German popular music between 2000 and 2010 construct a form of subjectivity characterised by movement without guaranteed destination, emotion as external pressure, and intimacy as spatial negotiation. These metaphors do not simply mirror experience; they make certain interpretations cognitively available while constraining others.

By framing emotional difficulty as movement, weight, or force, songs normalise struggle without moralising it. Metaphor thus operates as a mechanism of cultural emotion regulation, enabling shared interpretation of affective experience in a period marked by social and biographical uncertainty.

4.5 Theoretical Yield

The empirical findings substantiate the concept of musical metaphor ecologies, extending Conceptual Metaphor Theory from a model of individual cognition to one of distributed cultural cognition. Metaphors circulate, cluster, and reinforce one another through repeated exposure in popular music, becoming stable cognitive infrastructures for emotional meaning-making.

By repeatedly framing emotional experience as movement along uncertain paths, as pressure exerted by external forces, or as containment within spatial boundaries, songs from 2000 to 2010 make particular interpretations of emotional life cognitively available. Emotional struggle is normalised as something one moves through, carries, or withstands, rather than as a moral or personal failure.

This has significant cultural consequences. Popular music functions as a site of distributed emotional cognition, where listeners encounter, rehearse, and internalise shared metaphorical frameworks. The reuse of the same conceptual metaphors across different artists and years

ensures recognisability and emotional resonance, allowing listeners to situate personal experiences within culturally sanctioned narratives.

Theoretically, these findings extend Conceptual Metaphor Theory by demonstrating how metaphor operates not only within individual cognition but across cultural artefacts and shared listening practices. Metaphors become durable not simply because they are embodied, but because they are repeated, layered, and affectively reinforced through music.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Conclusion: Metaphor as Cognitive–Cultural Infrastructure in Popular Music

This study set out to examine how conceptual metaphors operate in German popular song lyrics between 2000 and 2010, with the aim of moving beyond descriptive accounts of metaphor use toward a cognitively and culturally grounded explanation of their function. The analysis demonstrates that metaphor in this domain is neither incidental nor stylistic, but structurally indispensable for the articulation of emotional experience.

Empirically, the study shows that a large number of metaphorical linguistic expressions (341) reduce to a comparatively small set of distinct conceptual metaphors (64). This reduction is not a loss of analytical detail but an indicator of conceptual stability and reuse. Popular music does not rely on continuous metaphorical innovation; rather, it mobilises a limited repertoire of embodied schemas that listeners repeatedly encounter across texts, artists, and years. These schemas, particularly those grounded in movement, force, containment, and spatial orientation, form interconnected metaphor systems that structure emotional meaning coherently and recognizably.

The identification of metaphor clusters and their recurrent co-occurrence across songs provides empirical support for the concept of musical metaphor ecologies. Within these ecologies, individual metaphors reinforce one another, enabling layered and emotionally resonant conceptualisations. Emotional experience is consistently framed as dynamic rather than static, externally affected rather than fully controlled, and spatially negotiable rather than morally determined. Such framing reflects and contributes to a broader cultural orientation during the early 2000s, characterised by emotional reflexivity, relational uncertainty, and non-linear life trajectories.

Theoretically, the findings extend Conceptual Metaphor Theory by demonstrating how metaphor operates not only within individual cognition but as a form of distributed cultural cognition. Through repetition, clustering, and affective reinforcement, metaphors in popular music become shared cognitive resources that mediate between personal experience and socially available narratives. Metaphor thus functions as an infrastructure for meaning-making, stabilising emotional interpretation in contexts of social and biographical flux.

5.2 Pedagogical Implications: Metaphor, Music, and Reflective Language Learning

The results of this study have significant implications for pedagogical practice, particularly in the fields of language education, literary didactics, and cultural studies. Understanding

metaphor as a cognitive–cultural system rather than a decorative linguistic device requires a shift in how metaphor is approached in educational contexts.

First, the systematic reuse of conceptual metaphors in popular music makes song lyrics a particularly effective resource for teaching conceptual metaphor awareness. Because students are likely already familiar with the songs and the emotional themes they address, educators can use lyrics to make abstract metaphorical mappings explicit. For example, analysing how emotional struggle is framed as movement or force allows learners to recognise underlying conceptual structures rather than focusing solely on surface expressions.

Second, the findings suggest that metaphor instruction should move beyond isolated examples toward the exploration of metaphor systems and clusters. Rather than asking students to identify individual metaphors, pedagogical tasks can focus on tracing recurring source domains across multiple texts. This approach encourages learners to see metaphor as a coherent cognitive framework and fosters deeper interpretive competence.

Third, popular music provides a valuable entry point for reflective emotional literacy. The metaphorical framing of emotions as journeys, pressures, or burdens offers students non-pathologising ways of articulating emotional experience. In classroom settings, this can support discussions about emotional expression and self-understanding, particularly among adolescent and young adult learners for whom popular music plays a central role in identity formation.

From a language learning perspective, especially in second or foreign language contexts, working with metaphor in song lyrics can enhance both lexical depth and pragmatic awareness. Learners are exposed not only to idiomatic expressions but to the embodied conceptualisations that underlie them, facilitating more natural and context-sensitive language use. This is particularly relevant for learners who lack immersive environments and rely on mediated cultural input to develop communicative competence.

5.3 Pedagogical Task Design: From Metaphor Ecologies to Classroom Practice

To translate the findings of this study into pedagogical practice, this section outlines task types that operationalise conceptual metaphor analysis using popular song lyrics. These tasks are not intended as prescriptive lesson plans, but as transferable didactic models grounded in the empirical results of the study, specifically, the recurrence of metaphor systems, the reduction from linguistic variety to conceptual stability, and the clustering of metaphors into coherent ecologies.

I. Task Type 1: Identifying Conceptual Stability beneath Linguistic Variation

A. Pedagogical aim:

To develop learners' awareness of the distinction between metaphorical expressions and underlying conceptual metaphors.

B. Task description:

Learners are provided with excerpts from two or three songs (for example, “Durch den Monsun” by Tokio Hotel and “Irgendwas bleibt” by Silbermond). Students first underline metaphorical expressions related to emotional experience. In a second step, they group these expressions according to shared source domains (movement, force, containment).

C. Learning outcome:

Learners recognise that different linguistic expressions can instantiate the same conceptual metaphor (e.g., LIFE IS A PATH or EMOTIONS ARE FORCES). This mirrors the analytical move from 341 expressions to 64 conceptual metaphors and helps students understand metaphor as a cognitive system rather than a stylistic anomaly.

II. Task Type 2: Mapping Metaphor Clusters across Texts

A. Pedagogical aim:

To foster systemic thinking about metaphor and to move beyond single-text interpretation.

B. Task description:

Students work with a small corpus of song excerpts from different artists within the same period. They are asked to identify which metaphor clusters (trajectory, force, containment, orientation) are activated in each song and to visualise overlaps using a simple diagram.

C. Learning outcome:

Learners develop the ability to trace cross-textual metaphor patterns, understanding how different songs participate in shared metaphor ecologies. This task directly reflects the study’s finding that metaphors cluster into stable systems rather than appearing in isolation.

III. Task Type 3: Reflective Rewriting and Metaphor Substitution

A. Pedagogical aim:

To deepen understanding of how metaphor shapes emotional interpretation.

B. Task description:

Learners select a stanza from a song and rewrite it by systematically substituting one metaphor cluster with another (for example, replacing movement metaphors with containment metaphors). The rewritten version is then discussed in terms of how the emotional meaning changes.

C. Learning outcome:

This task makes explicit that metaphors are not interchangeable decorative elements. Learners experience how changing the underlying conceptual metaphor alters emotional framing, agency, and evaluative stance.

IV. Task Type 4: Metaphor and Emotional Self-Reflection

A. Pedagogical aim:

To connect linguistic analysis with emotional literacy and identity reflection.

B. Task description:

Learners are asked to reflect on which metaphor clusters they personally find most resonant when describing emotions (e.g., pressure, movement, weight). They then compare their own metaphor preferences with those dominant in the songs analysed.

C. Learning outcome:

Students become aware of metaphor as a tool for self-conceptualisation, not just textual analysis. This task aligns with the study's claim that popular music provides culturally sanctioned frameworks for emotional meaning-making.

Didactic Rationale

All task types are designed to reflect the central empirical findings of the study:

- the conceptual reduction from surface diversity to underlying stability,
- the systemic clustering of metaphors,
- and the role of metaphor in structuring emotional experience.

Rather than treating metaphor identification as an end in itself, these tasks position metaphor analysis as a means of developing interpretive competence, emotional awareness, and culturally informed language use.

5.4 Implications for Curriculum Design and Future Research

At the level of curriculum design, the results support integrating popular music more systematically into language and literature curricula, not merely as motivational material but as analytically rich cultural texts. Curricula that foreground metaphor systems can help students develop transferable interpretive skills applicable across genres and media.

For future research, the concept of musical metaphor ecologies opens several avenues. Comparative studies could examine whether similar metaphor systems emerge in other linguistic or cultural contexts, or how metaphor ecologies shift across different historical periods. Longitudinal analyses could also investigate how repeated exposure to specific metaphor systems influences emotional conceptualisation over time.

Additionally, interdisciplinary research combining cognitive linguistics with educational technology could explore how digital tools and AI-supported learning environments might scaffold metaphor awareness and emotional interpretation in non-immersive learning contexts.

Finally, by demonstrating that metaphor in popular music functions as a cognitive-cultural infrastructure rather than a stylistic embellishment, this study contributes to a more integrated

understanding of language, emotion, and culture. The pedagogical implications underscore the value of treating metaphor as a central component of meaning-making, with relevance not only for linguistic analysis but for education, identity formation, and cultural participation.

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