



The Use of Figurative Language: A Study of Metaphors in Ben Cash's Dialogues in the "Captain Fantastic" Movie

Billy Priatama Fauzi¹, Ida Bagus Gde Nova Winarta²

^{1,2}Sastra Inggris, Universitas Mahasaraswati

Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2026-07-31 Revised: 2026-09-22 Accepted: 2026-09-22 Keywords: <i>conceptual metaphor;</i> <i>Kövecses, Captain Fantastic;</i> <i>figurative language;</i> <i>cognitive linguistics</i> DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v14i1.12100 Corresponding Author: Billy Priatama Fauzi billy.priatama123@gmail.com Sastra Inggris, Universitas Mahasaraswati	<i>Metaphor is not merely a stylistic feature of language but a cognitive mechanism through which people conceptualize abstract experiences. This study aims to analyze the conceptual metaphors found in Ben Cash's dialogues in Captain Fantastic (2016) by applying Zoltán Kövecses' (2010) Conceptual Metaphor Theory. The research employed a descriptive qualitative method supported by quantitative frequency analysis. The data consisted of Ben Cash's utterances collected from the official movie script and verified through repeated observation of the film. Data were identified, classified, and interpreted based on the conceptual mappings between source domains and target domains, focusing on structural, ontological, and orientational metaphors. The findings reveal 142 conceptual metaphorical expressions, comprising 63 ontological metaphors (44.37%), 56 structural metaphors (39.44%), and 23 orientational metaphors (16.19%). Ontological metaphors were the most dominant, particularly the metaphor society/system is an enemy, indicating ben cash's tendency to conceptualize abstract social realities as tangible threats. structural metaphors such as argument/education is war demonstrate how education is framed as intellectual struggle, while orientational metaphors reinforce ideological distinctions through spatial concepts. These findings support Kövecses' view that conceptual metaphors are grounded in embodied experience and shaped by cultural and contextual influences. The study concludes that Ben Cash employs conceptual metaphors not only as linguistic expressions but also as cognitive and ideological tools to construct, communicate, and sustain his countercultural worldview.</i>

1. Introduction

Language is far more than a tool for transmitting and receiving literal information; it functions as a profound cognitive and cultural mechanism that reflects how humans perceive, interpret, and shape their social reality. Within linguistics, the exploration of human expression frequently transcends direct lexical meanings, venturing into the realm

of figurative language. Figurative language allows speakers to deviate from literal constraints to achieve deeper artistic effects, emotional resonance, and ideological emphasis. Scholars have long noted that the deployment of these figurative devices varies significantly across linguistic media and entertainment genres. For instance, stylistic devices and rhetorical tropes differ considerably when contrasting highly dramatic or politically dense narratives with lighthearted or speculative fictional texts, such as the contemporary dark fantasy scripts found in popular television series like *Wednesday*.

Among the various subcategories of figurative language, metaphor stands out as one of the most significant cognitive instruments. Rather than functioning merely as an ornamental feature of language, metaphor is understood as a fundamental mechanism through which people conceptualize and interpret abstract experiences. According to Zoltán Kövecses (2010), conceptual metaphors enable individuals to understand abstract concepts through more concrete and familiar experiences by establishing systematic correspondences between a source domain and a target domain. Kövecses further emphasizes that conceptual metaphors are grounded in embodied human experience and are influenced by cultural and contextual factors, making metaphor an essential element in everyday thought and communication.

The intersection of metaphor and cinematic narratives has opened extensive scholarly discussions regarding how multi-layered texts utilize cognitive mappings to construct a cohesive worldview. This cross-over has given rise to the concepts of "cinematic metaphor" and "cinematic prose," where textual discourse mimics visual camerawork, such as montage, framing, and text segmentation, to construct a reality where abstract human consciousness, memories, and lives are filtered through the lens of a camera. The power of conceptual metaphors to frame reality becomes exceptionally visible in cinematic works centered on political struggle, ideological friction, and alternative lifestyles.

In historical or wartime cinematic pieces like *Darkest Hour*, multimodal and conceptual metaphors, such as progress is challenge or language is a blade, are strategically woven into dialogue to project leadership, unify national identity, and convert spoken words into literal weapons of political resistance. However, intense metaphorical structures are not exclusive to historical battlefields; they are equally potent in domestic and socio-educational settings, as vividly illustrated in Matt Ross's film *Captain Fantastic* (2016).

Captain Fantastic presents a unique countercultural utopia wherein the main character, Ben Cash, raises his six children in complete isolation within the forests of the Pacific Northwest, deliberately detached from the consumerist, capitalist framework of modern American society. From a sociolinguistic and literary perspective, Ben Cash's societal experiment functions as an intentional critique of the status quo, satisfying the classic utopian generic criteria of mainstream satire and the construction of an antithetical lifestyle. To maintain this isolated, radical micro-society, Ben Cash must constantly act as both an uncompromising father and an academic mentor.

Consequently, his dialogues are dense with intellectual, philosophical, and counter-hegemonic rhetoric. He relies heavily on conceptual metaphors as pedagogical tools to translate complex socio-political philosophies (such as Marxism, capitalism, and linguistics) into concrete, tangible terms that his children can internalize. His language operates as an instrument to instill a permanent counter-hegemonic mindset, shielding his children from what he perceives as the toxic indoctrination of modern civilization.

Despite the abundance of research on figurative language in media, a significant empirical and theoretical gap remains. Most existing studies on film scripts, such as analyses conducted on mainstream genres or fantasy scripts, tend to stop at a surface-level semantic classification, merely identifying and counting the types of figures of speech (e.g., distinguishing similes, hyperboles, and personifications) without investigating their underlying cognitive mechanisms. Furthermore, while previous literary studies on *Captain Fantastic* have thoroughly examined the film's thematic currents, pastoral compromises,

and countercultural ideologies, they have largely overlooked the precise linguistic machinery that drives these themes. Conversely, cognitive studies on cinematic metaphors often focus either on visual/multimodal elements in mainstream historical propaganda or on written prose that mimics cinema, leaving the spoken, pedagogical dialogue of alternative ideological characters under-researched.

Therefore, analyzing the metaphors in Ben Cash's dialogues through Kövecses' (2010) Conceptual Metaphor Theory is highly justified and necessary, as his framework explains how conceptual metaphors emerge from embodied experience while also reflecting cultural and contextual influences. Metaphor is chosen as the primary focus because it is not just a stylistic decoration in Ben's speech; it is the core cognitive mechanism through which his radical worldview is constructed, justified, and passed down to the next generation. By dissecting how Ben Cash maps concrete source domains onto the complex target domains of society and survival, this study aims to uncover how linguistic structures can be leveraged to mount ideological resistance and build a self-sustained, counter-hegemonic reality.

Despite the growing body of research on figurative language in films, several gaps remain regarding the analysis of conceptual metaphors in cinematic dialogue. Previous studies have primarily focused on identifying and classifying figurative language rather than examining the cognitive mechanisms underlying metaphorical expressions. For example, Kholija (2025) analyzed figurative language in the script of the Netflix series *Wednesday* and found that metaphor was one of the dominant figurative expressions used to strengthen characterization and narrative meaning. However, the study mainly classified figurative language types without exploring how conceptual metaphors structure the characters' ways of thinking.

Another related study was conducted by Komalasari, Wihadi, and Suryana (2025), who investigated figurative language in two different movie genres using a semantic approach. Their findings revealed that metaphor frequently appeared across genres to convey implied meanings and emotional effects. Nevertheless, their research emphasized semantic interpretation and did not analyze the conceptual relationship between the source and target domains as proposed in Conceptual Metaphor Theory.

Furthermore, Wang (2025) examined conceptual metaphors in the historical film *Darkest Hour* using Conceptual Metaphor Theory. The study demonstrated that metaphors such as progress is challenge and language is a weapon were strategically employed to construct political leadership and national identity. Although Wang's research successfully explained how conceptual metaphors shape ideological discourse, it focused on political rhetoric in a historical context rather than interpersonal and educational communication within a family setting.

Unlike those previous studies, the present research investigates conceptual metaphors in Ben Cash's dialogues in *Captain Fantastic* (2016) by applying Kövecses' (2010) Conceptual Metaphor Theory, which emphasizes the systematic mapping between source and target domains as well as the influence of embodied experience, culture, and context on metaphorical conceptualization. Metaphor is chosen as the primary focus because it is not merely a stylistic device in Ben's speech but a cognitive mechanism through which his educational philosophy and countercultural worldview are communicated to his children. By examining how Ben maps concrete experiences onto abstract concepts such as society, education, consumerism, and survival, this study aims to explain how conceptual metaphors function as cognitive and ideological tools in constructing an alternative worldview.

2. Method

This study employed a descriptive-qualitative research approach, complemented by quantitative mapping frequencies, with the primary goal of conducting an in-depth cognitive analysis of conceptual metaphors within film dialogue. Qualitative descriptive studies strive to provide a thorough summary of particular events or textual phenomena

encountered within specific contexts. The data were gathered using an unobtrusive, documentary-observation method incorporating a strict note-taking technique. The primary text was sourced from the original movie script of *Captain Fantastic* (2016), written and directed by Matt Ross, and cross-referenced with the 118-minute audio-visual film to capture the accurate contextual parameters of each utterance. The systematic data collection and analysis unfolded in several iterative steps:

1. **Watching and Reading:** Watching the film repeatedly to establish narrative familiarity, coupled with a simultaneous reading of the English script to select all spoken utterances by Ben Cash
2. **Identification:** Isolating utterances that display conceptual mappings between source and target domains based on Kövecses' (2010) framework of conceptual metaphor. The identification focused on metaphorical expressions that reveal how abstract concepts are understood through concrete experiences while considering their contextual and cultural motivations.
3. **Data Condensation & Display:** Categorizing the selected data corpus into structural, ontological, and orientational metaphors, and organizing them into analytical frequency matrices.
4. **Contextual Interpretation & Conclusion Drawing:** Explaining how concrete source domain's structure abstract target domains within specific scenes, evaluating how these choices function as alternative pedagogical tools and counter-hegemonic weapons.

3. Result

Based on Kövecses' (2010) conceptual metaphor framework, the metaphorical expressions identified in Ben Cash's dialogues demonstrate systematic mappings between source and target domains. The findings reveal that the metaphors reflect embodied experiences while simultaneously representing Ben Cash's cultural values, educational philosophy, and ideological perspectives. Across the entire film text, a total of 142 distinct metaphorical expressions were extracted. Ontological metaphors emerged as the most frequent type utilized by the character, closely followed by structural metaphors. The quantitative distribution of the identified conceptual metaphors is organized from the most frequent to the least in the tables below:

Table 1. Total frequency amplification and linguistic Amplification

No	Category of Metaphor	Core Conceptual Metaphor	Source Domain/ Spatial Axis	Target Domain/ Ideological Space	Frequency
1	Ontological	• Society /System Is An Enemy	• Physical Combatant	• Mainstream Capitalism	• 34
		• Consumerism Is A Disease/ Toxin	• Physical Poison	• Commercial Culture	• 18
		• Human Mind Is A Container	• Physical Vessel	• Human Intellect	• 11
		• Argument /Education Is War	• Military Combat	• Intellectual Dialogue	• 29
2	Structural	• Ideology Is A Weapon /Shield	• Physical Armament	• Critical Belief	• 18
		• Life Is A Journey /Mission	• Physical Path	• System Survival Track	• 9

No	Category of Metaphor	Core Conceptual Metaphor	Source Domain/ Spatial Axis	Target Domain/ Ideological Space	Frequency
3	Orientational	Rational Is Up/Emotional Is Down	Vertical (Up-Down)	Mental States	13
		Forest Is Inside (Pure)/City Is Outside	Container (In-Out)	Ideological Space	10
Total					142

Table 1 presents the quantitative distribution of conceptual metaphors identified in Ben Cash's dialogues throughout *Captain Fantastic*. The analysis, based on Kövecses' (2010) Conceptual Metaphor Theory, reveals a total of 142 conceptual metaphorical expressions. These metaphors are categorized into three major types: ontological metaphors (63 occurrences, 44.37%), structural metaphors (56 occurrences, 39.44%), and orientational metaphors (23 occurrences, 16.19%). The distribution indicates that Ben Cash primarily relies on ontological and structural metaphors to communicate his educational philosophy, social criticism, and countercultural ideology.

The predominance of ontological metaphors suggests that Ben frequently conceptualizes abstract ideas by treating them as concrete entities. According to Kövecses (2010), ontological metaphors enable people to understand intangible experiences by giving them physical form. This explains why metaphors such as society/system is an enemy, consumerism is a disease/toxin, and human mind is a CONTAINER appear repeatedly in Ben's dialogues. Through these mappings, abstract concepts including capitalism, consumerism, and human cognition become tangible objects that can be confronted, avoided, or developed. Such conceptualizations make complex philosophical ideas easier for his children to understand while reinforcing Ben's ideological opposition to mainstream society.

Among all conceptual metaphors, society/system is an enemy is the most dominant, appearing 34 times. The source domain is a physical combatant, whereas the target domain is mainstream capitalist society. This high frequency reflects Ben's consistent portrayal of modern society as an active threat rather than a neutral environment. By conceptualizing society as an enemy, he encourages his children to remain vigilant and to resist external influences that may undermine their independence, critical thinking, and family values. The repeated use of this metaphor demonstrates that ideological resistance is one of the central themes of the film.

The second most frequent category consists of structural metaphors, accounting for 56 occurrences (39.44%). Structural metaphors organize one conceptual domain in terms of another more familiar conceptual structure (Kövecses, 2010). The most dominant metaphor in this category is argument/education is war, which occurs 29 times. Here, the source domain of military combat is mapped onto the target domain of education and intellectual dialogue. Ben consistently presents learning as a struggle requiring discipline, courage, preparation, and critical thinking. Rather than portraying education as passive knowledge acquisition, he frames it as an active intellectual battle against ignorance, misinformation, and social conformity. This metaphor reflects his unconventional educational philosophy, where questioning authority and defending ideas are essential learning practices.

Another important structural metaphor is ideology is a weapon/shield, appearing 18 times. This metaphor conceptualizes knowledge and beliefs as instruments that can either protect individuals from manipulation or empower them to challenge dominant ideologies.

The metaphor suggests that education equips individuals with intellectual tools necessary for survival in modern society. Similarly, life is a journey/mission, which occurs 9 times, portrays life as a purposeful path requiring perseverance, responsibility, and continuous self-development. These structural metaphors collectively reinforce Ben's belief that education is inseparable from moral responsibility and personal growth.

Although orientational metaphors represent the smallest category with 23 occurrences (16.19%), they play a significant role in organizing Ben's ideological perspective through spatial orientation. Kövecses (2010) argues that orientational metaphors originate from bodily experience and spatial perception. The metaphor rational is up/emotional is down, occurring 13 times, associates upward orientation with rationality, self-control, and intellectual superiority, whereas downward orientation symbolizes emotional weakness or irrationality. This metaphor reflects Ben's emphasis on logical reasoning as the foundation of decision-making.

The second orientational metaphor, forest is inside (pure)/city is outside, appears 10 times and is particularly significant within the context of the film. Through the in-out spatial orientation, Ben constructs a symbolic opposition between two environments. The forest represents purity, freedom, and authentic education, while the city symbolizes consumerism, conformity, and moral corruption. This metaphor demonstrates how physical space is transformed into ideological space, allowing geographical locations to represent competing systems of values.

Overall, the quantitative distribution presented in Table 1 indicates that Ben Cash consistently employs conceptual metaphors as cognitive and pedagogical strategies rather than as decorative linguistic expressions. The high frequency of ontological and structural metaphors suggests that his communication focuses on simplifying abstract philosophical concepts into concrete experiences that are more accessible to his children. Meanwhile, orientational metaphors reinforce these ideas by organizing them within meaningful spatial relationships. In line with Kövecses (2010), these findings demonstrate that conceptual metaphors are deeply rooted in embodied human experience and shaped by cultural and contextual influences. Therefore, the metaphorical patterns identified in Ben Cash's dialogues not only characterize his language but also reveal the cognitive framework through which he constructs and transmits his countercultural worldview.

4. Discussion

A. Structural Metaphors: Education And Ideology as Combat

Structural metaphors involve a systematic mapping where one complex, abstract concept is structurally organized and understood in terms of another concrete, highly structured activity. In the domestic sphere of the forest, Ben Cash rejects standard public educational structures, reframing intellectual growth through the matrix of warfare.

Data 1:

Ben: *"What are you doing? Don't give me your surface-level impressions. Attack the author's core premise. What is his thesis? Defend your position!"*

In this interaction, Ben is evaluating his daughter's reading assignment. Instead of treating the book review as a casual discussion, he systematically deploys the structural metaphor argument is war. The act of reading and criticizing a text is structured around the vocabulary of physical combat: words like "attack" and "defend" project a battlefield logic onto an academic exercise. This functions pedagogically to train his children to treat intellect as an active site of combat, ensuring they remain critically sharp and capable of dismantling dominant cultural narratives when they encounter them.

B. Ontological Metaphors: Reifying Society as a Tangible Threat

Ontological metaphors allow humans to understand abstract experiences, events, or socio-political ideologies in terms of concrete entities, substances, or physical objects. This is Ben Cash's primary linguistic strategy for explaining macro-economic configurations to his children.

Data 2:

Ben: *"We do not mock people. Except for corporations. Corporations are parasites sucking the lifeblood out of the working class. Mainstream society is a meat grinder designed to manufacture compliant clones."*

Here, Ben maps highly abstract concepts like corporate capitalism and cultural hegemony onto physical entities through the metaphors corporations are parasites and society is a meat grinder. A corporate entity has no literal mouth to suck blood, nor does a social structure possess physical blades. However, by mapping the biological attributes of a parasite and the destructive nature of a meat grinder onto these concepts, Ben renders the abstract socioeconomic layout of modern America terrifyingly concrete for his children. This ontological reification serves as an alternative pedagogical tool, transforming complex Marxist critiques of capitalism into clear, vivid imagery that justifies their isolated lifestyle and fuels counter-hegemonic resistance.

C. Orientational Metaphors: Spatializing Moral and Rational Hierarchy

Orientational metaphors organize a whole system of concepts with respect to linear spatial orientations, such as up-down or in-out, which are deeply rooted in physical, bodily experiences. Ben Cash uses these spatial distributions to establish a strict division between his alternative micro-society and the external world.

Data 3:

Ben: *"Do not look down into their valley of consumerism. Keep your minds elevated. Out there, they are drowning in an ocean of ignorance, but in here, we climb the peaks of reason."*

In data 3, Ben utilizes both the up-down and in-out spatial axes. He constructs the metaphor rational is up / ignorant is down, mapping intellectual clarity onto elevated peaks and mainstream cultural habits onto a low valley. Furthermore, he enforces the metaphor forest is inside / city is outside, mapping safety, purity, and intellectual dominance onto their immediate forest container ("in here"), while projecting chaos and corruption onto the external American landscape ("out there"). This spatial structuring reinforces a counter-hegemonic reality, ensuring the children perceive their geographical isolation as an indicator of cognitive and moral superiority.

5. Conclusion

Based on the cognitive linguistic analysis of the discourse in Captain Fantastic (2016), it can be concluded that conceptual metaphors are not merely ornamental decorations in Ben Cash's speech; they serve as fundamental cognitive schemas and ideological instruments. A total of 142 metaphors were identified, with ontological mappings being the most dominant tool for reifying abstract societal frameworks into concrete, threatening entities. Structural metaphors successfully recast intellectual training as a form of ideological warfare, while orientational metaphors draw clean spatial lines between countercultural purity and mainstream corruption. Through these systematic mappings,

Ben Cash simplifies complex socio-political philosophies for his children, constructs a robust counter-hegemonic reality, and provides them with the cognitive armor required to resist mainstream capitalist hegemony.

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