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Conceptual Metaphor “THE EARTH IS MOTHER” in Vietnamese

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Abstract

This paper explores the conceptual metaphor “THE EARTH IS MOTHER” in Vietnamese, within the framework of cognitive linguistics. By applying the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) developed by the Pragglejaz Group, the study identifies metaphorical cues and expressions that conceptualize the Earth as a nurturing mother. The analysis demonstrates systematic mappings between the source domain (MOTHER) and the target domain (EARTH), highlighting attributes such as giving birth, nurturing, vulnerability, and the need for care. The metaphor not only reflects cultural perceptions of nature but also emphasizes environmental responsibility. Comparative discussion with the English metaphor “Mother Earth” reveals both universal and culture-specific aspects of environmental conceptualization.

Keywords: Conceptual metaphor; Cognitive linguistics; Mother Earth; Vietnamese language; Environmental communication.

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1. Introduction

Cognitive linguistics in general, and conceptual metaphor in particular, represent a relatively new direction in linguistic research, offering many insights into how people in different cultures perceive the world and familiar phenomena in everyday life. In Vietnam, linguists over the past few decades have paid special attention to this approach. Several pioneering works by scholars such as Ly Toan Thang [4,5] and Tran Van Co [1] laid the foundation for applying cognitive linguistic theory to Vietnamese studies. Subsequently, other researchers and graduate students have conducted specific projects on cognitive linguistics, especially on conceptual metaphors (CMs) in familiar domains of life, providing new and multidimensional perspectives.

Existing studies mainly focus on conceptual metaphors in specific fields such as political language, economics, advertising, love and marriage, financial markets, and literature. Notably, in Vietnam there is still a lack of in-depth research on ecological linguistics, environmental language in general, and conceptual metaphors in the environmental domain in particular. Meanwhile, metaphorical expressions about the environment are widely used in books, newspapers, and mass media every day. Expressions such as “the war against climate change,” “the Earth is heating up,” or “nature is angry” clearly demonstrate that conceptual metaphorical thinking has deeply penetrated the way Vietnamese people talk about the environment. The absence of systematic and specialized analyses of environmental metaphors in Vietnamese creates a research gap that deserves attention.

Within the scope of this paper, we focus on analyzing environmental conceptual metaphors with the target domain EARTH, specifically the conceptual metaphor THE EARTH IS MOTHER in Vietnamese.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative approach within the framework of cognitive linguistics to analyze the conceptual metaphor “THE EARTH IS MOTHER” in Vietnamese. The methodology consists of three main stages:

2.1. Data Collection

- Corpus sources: The data were collected from Vietnamese literary works, newspapers, online articles, educational materials, and song lyrics that explicitly or implicitly employ metaphorical expressions about the Earth.
- Selection criteria: Expressions were included if they contained metaphorical cues linking the Earth to maternal attributes (e.g., “Mother Earth is crying,” “The Earth nurtures us,” “Mother Earth gave birth to all species”).
- Scope: The corpus comprises both historical texts (e.g., early 20th-century poetry) and contemporary media (e.g., online news, educational websites, social networks).

2.2. Metaphor Identification

- The Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) developed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007) was applied.
- Key steps included:
 - + Identifying metaphorically-expressed words (cues).
 - + Determining metaphorical expressions formed by these cues and their collocations.
 - + Establishing systematic mappings between the source domain (MOTHER) and the target domain (EARTH).

2.3. Analytical Framework

- Source domain attributes (MOTHER): giving birth, nurturing, vulnerability, need for love.
- Target domain attributes (EARTH): generating species, sustaining life, susceptibility to harm, need for care.
- Mapping model: Attributes of the source domain were systematically mapped onto the target domain to construct the conceptual metaphor.
- Comparative dimension: The Vietnamese metaphor “Trái Đất là Mẹ” was compared with the English expression “Mother Earth” to highlight universal and culture-specific features.

2.4. Reliability and Validity

- Multiple sources were triangulated to ensure the reliability of metaphor identification.
- Interpretations were cross-checked against existing literature in cognitive linguistics and environmental communication to validate the analytical framework.

3. Analysis

3.1. Identification

A conceptual metaphor is the process of UNDERSTANDING one conceptual domain (the target domain) through another conceptual domain (the source domain) by means of systematic mappings, in which elements/attributes in the source domain are mapped onto elements/attributes in the target domain, thereby creating a cognitive model that helps us grasp the target domain more clearly [2, pp. 8–9].

The metaphor THE EARTH IS MOTHER belongs to the category of conceptual metaphors, in which an abstract concept (target domain – Earth) is understood through a familiar and intimate concept (source domain – Mother).

To establish the CM THE EARTH IS MOTHER, we apply the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) developed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007), which consists of four steps. Two important steps are identifying metaphorically-expressed words (often translated as “cues”) and identifying metaphorical expressions formed by these cues and other collocated words [3, p. 3].

Analyzing data from the corpus [7,8], we can identify cues and metaphorical expressions as follows:

3.2. Cues and metaphorical expressions

- Mother Expression: sharing one mother “Thiếu nhi thế giới / Dù khác màu da / Vàng hay đen trắng / Vẫn chung một mẹ / Là trái đất / vẫn chung một ông / là mặt trời” (Mẹ trái đất. Ông mặt trời, Trần Việt Bình, 2018). → “Children of the world / Though of different skin colors / Yellow or black or white / Still share one mother / which is the Earth / Still share one father / which is the Sun.”

- Mother Nature Expression: Mother Nature “Trái Đất – một hành tinh trong Hệ Mặt Trời là nơi sự sống đã được đánh thức. Người Mẹ Thiên Nhiên ấy đã kiến tạo và nuôi dưỡng sự sống trong hàng triệu triệu năm, trong đó có cả sự sống của loài người». (<https://loigiaihay.com/van-ban-trai-d>). → “The Earth – a planet in the Solar System – is where life was awakened. That Mother Nature created and nurtured life for millions of years, including human life.”

Pregnancy Expression: The Earth pregnant with water in its womb”Trái đất thai nghén nước trong lòng mình. Nước biển xuất hiện sớm nhất trên trái đất là nước được phun ra từ trong trái đất ra. Lượng nước biển đó dần dần tụ lại ra biển cả” (Phạm Văn Bình, Những điều lạ em biết, Nxb, Phụ nữ, tr. 152). → “The Earth was pregnant with water in its womb. The earliest seawater on Earth was expelled from within, gradually gathering into the vast oceans.”

Giving birth Expression: Mother Earth gave birth to all species “Mẹ trái đất đã sinh ra muôn loài, từ những sinh vật đơn bào - anh cả của sự tiến hóa, lớn tuổi hơn loài người 3,5 tỷ năm đến loài người - người em út trong ngôi nhà xanh nhỏ bé”. (<https://vnexpress.net/me-trai-dat-dang-khoc-2394621.html>) “Mother Earth gave birth to all species, from single-celled organisms – the elder of evolution, older than humankind by 3.5 billion years – to humans, the youngest sibling in the small green home.”

Child Expression: a spoiled child “... Hãy đặt câu hỏi rằng: Mẹ trái đất sẽ chịu đựng được bao lâu với đứa con hư này?”. (<https://vnexpress.net/me-trai-dat-dang-khoc-2394621.html>) → “Let us ask: How long can Mother Earth endure this spoiled child?”

Nurturing Expression: The Earth as mother nurtures us “Này bạn ơi hãy nhớ đất muôn đời nuôi dưỡng với nguồn suối nước là dòng sữa. Đất như mẹ nuôi ta có lẽ nào để trái đất sẽ cạn khô”. (<https://mncsaominh.haiphong.edu.vn/cac-bai-hat-cho-tre-mam-non/nhung-bai-hat-chu-de-moi-truong-cho-tre-mam-non/ctmb/25992/317866>). → “Dear friend, remember that the Earth has forever nurtured us, with springs as her milk. The Earth, like a mother, nourishes us – how could she ever be left to dry out?”

- Nourishing Expression: nourishing life “Trái Đất – một hành tinh trong Hệ Mặt Trời là nơi sự sống đã được đánh thức. Người Mẹ Thiên Nhiên ấy đã kiến tạo và nuôi dưỡng sự sống trong hàng triệu triệu năm, trong đó có cả sự sống của loài người”. (<https://loigiaihay.com/van-ban-trai-d>) → “The Earth – a planet in the Solar System – is where life was awakened. That Mother Nature created and nurtured life for millions of years, including human existence.”

- Life Expression: Mother gives us life “Vì sao chúng ta lại gọi thiên nhiên hay trái đất là mẹ? Bỗng dưng mình nảy ra câu hỏi này hôm qua: Tại sao chúng ta lại gọi thiên nhiên là mẹ? Tại sao không là bố? Hoặc tại sao không là bạn nhỉ? 1. Vì mẹ là người cho ta sự sống (...)” (<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1035925197923223>) → “Why do we call nature or the Earth ‘mother’? This question suddenly came to me yesterday: Why mother, not father? Why not friend? 1. Because mother is the one who gives us life (...)”

- Crying Expression: Mother Earth is crying. “Mẹ trái đất đang khóc. Mẹ trái đất đã sinh ra muôn loài, từ những sinh vật đơn bào - anh cả của sự tiến hóa, lớn tuổi hơn loài người 3,5 tỷ năm đến loài người - người em út trong ngôi nhà xanh nhỏ bé. ... Hãy đặt câu hỏi rằng: “Mẹ trái đất sẽ chịu đựng được bao lâu với đứa con hư này?”” (<https://vnexpress.net/me-trai-dat-dang-khoc-2394621.html>) → “Mother Earth is crying. She gave birth to all species, from single-celled organisms – the elder of evolution, older than humankind by 3.5 billion years – to humans, the youngest sibling in the small green home. ... Let us ask: ‘How long can Mother Earth endure this spoiled child?’”

- Care Expression: responsibility to care for Mother. “Trái Đất là ngôi nhà và là Mẹ của chúng ta. Chúng ta cần phải tôn trọng và có trách nhiệm chăm sóc Mẹ. (<https://vuonhoaphatgiao.com/phat-phap/giao-phap/nhan-cach-xa-hoi/hay-hanh-dong-de-bao-ve-me-trai-dat/>) → “The Earth is our home and our Mother. We must respect her and take responsibility for her care.”

- Living Expression: Mother Earth will live forever. “Đừng phá tan rừng xanh này / Đừng đốt đi đồng xanh đó / Đừng giết đi biển xanh kia / Mẹ Trái Đất sẽ sống mãi. (<https://mncsaominh.haiphong.edu.vn/cac-bai-hat-cho-tre-mam-non/nhung-bai-hat-chu-de-moi-truong-cho-tre-mam-non/ctmb/25992/317866>) → “Do not destroy this green forest / Do not burn that green field / Do not kill that blue sea / Mother Earth will live forever.”

3.3. Attributes of source and target domains

a- Source domain (MOTHER):

- + Gives birth to children
- + Nurtures children
- + Easily saddened
- + Needs love

b- Target domain (EARTH):

- + Gives birth to all species
- + Nurtures life
- + Easily vulnerable
- + Needs care

3.4. Mapping model from source (MOTHER) to target (EARTH)

Source domain (MOTHER)	→	Target domain (EARTH)
Gives birth to children	→	Gives birth to all species
Nurtures children	→	Nurtures life
Easily saddened	→	Easily vulnerable
Needs love	→	Needs care

This mapping model is the basis for establishing the conceptual metaphor **THE EARTH IS MOTHER**.

4. Implications

The metaphor “THE EARTH IS MOTHER” carries significant implications beyond linguistic analysis. It provides a powerful framework for environmental education, communication, and policy-making:

- Environmental Education: By presenting the Earth as a nurturing mother, educators can foster emotional engagement among students. This metaphor encourages learners to perceive environmental protection not merely as a technical issue but as a moral responsibility toward a family member.
- Public Communication: In media and social discourse, the metaphor offers a vivid and relatable image that resonates with diverse audiences. Campaigns that frame environmental degradation as “hurting Mother Earth” can mobilize empathy and collective action more effectively than abstract scientific data alone.
- Policy and Advocacy: Policymakers and activists can employ this metaphor to strengthen arguments for sustainable development. Conceptualizing the Earth as a mother highlights the ethical dimension of environmental stewardship, reinforcing the urgency of protecting ecosystems for future generations.

In sum, the metaphor “THE EARTH IS MOTHER” is not only a linguistic construct but also a cultural and communicative resource. It enriches environmental discourse by linking scientific awareness with emotional and ethical commitments, thereby contributing to sustainable practices at both local and global levels.

5. Conclusion

The conceptual metaphor THE EARTH IS MOTHER in Vietnamese is one of the most emotionally rich and culturally profound images. It is not merely a figurative expression but a cognitive system that helps humans understand, feel, and interact with the planet as with a mother – loving and in need of protection. This metaphor allows us to perceive the Earth not as an inanimate object but as a living entity. It evokes gratitude, responsibility, and a deep bond between humans and nature.

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