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CONTEPTUAL METAPHOR IN MANCHESTER UNITED CHANTS: A SEMANTICS STUDY

Fajar Indriyono*, Ervina CM Simatupang
Widyatama University, Indonesia
lrsfjr@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This research examines the use of conceptual metaphors in Manchester United football chants through a cognitive linguistics lens, analyzing how metaphorical language constructs fan identity and collective emotion. Understanding metaphor in sports discourse is crucial for comprehending the psychological and social dimensions of fandom. The study aims to identify the types and cognitive functions of conceptual metaphors in the club's chants. Using qualitative metaphor analysis, the research analyzes 32 chants from match recordings, fan forums, and official archives (2010–2023), applying Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) framework of conceptual metaphor theory. Data is categorized into structural, ontological, and orientational metaphors, with additional analysis of their frequency and contextual usage. Findings reveal a predominance of war metaphors, reflecting the conceptualization of football as conflict, alongside kinship and journey metaphors, which reinforce group identity and shared purpose. The study concludes that these metaphorical systems shape fan cognition, emotional engagement, and cultural memory. This analysis enhances our understanding of how language functions in sports communities, offering insights into the cognitive underpinnings of fan behavior and the role of metaphor in constructing collective identity.

Keywords: Conceptual metaphor, Football chants, Semantics, Manchester United, Discourse Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Analyzing the meaning of a word, phrase, and sentence is crucial since it can assist in making an idea simple for others to understand. Semantics, as defined by Yule (2006: 112) is the study of word, phrase, and sentence meaning. Semantic analysis is the study of purpose in action. The definition given above makes clear that the study of meaning falls under the purview of linguistics. For instance, a word or sentence may be used to describe happiness or despair, therefore a semantic analysis is necessary to have a deeper understanding. This study positions football chants as a rich subject of linguistic and semantic analysis within cultural contexts. Chants serve not only as entertainment but also as tools for constructing identity, fostering group solidarity, and expressing emotions. In the perspective of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), conceptual metaphors are key to understanding how supporters conceptualize the club, opponents, matches, and their collective experiences.

This study aims to investigate football chants in the English Premier League, as the origins of football chants may be traced back to EPL hooligans. A chant often conveys a positive emotion by, for instance, providing a stimulus that is encouraging and motivating. This investigation centers on the kind of supportive. "Glory, Glory, Man United," the chants of devoted fans echoing through the stadium, embody the passion, unity, and identity that characterize football culture. As a dedicated Manchester United fan, my personal connection to the club inspired this exploration into the metaphorical richness of football chants.

Football, transcending its role as a sport, unites people globally, evoking intense emotions and fostering enduring communities. The history of football dates back to 19th-century England, where the establishment of standardized rules by the Football Association in 1863 laid the foundation for modern football. This era saw the formation of clubs and the rise of passionate fan bases. Manchester United, originally founded as Newton Heath LYR Football Club in 1878, assumed its current name in 1902. The club's journey, marked by triumphs and tragedies, from the Munich air disaster in 1958 to the historic treble-winning season in 1999, has cemented a profound bond with its supporters. The steadfast loyalty of Manchester United fans, vividly expressed in their chants, has been a cornerstone of the club's enduring spirit.

Central to this study is the theory of conceptual metaphor, introduced by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in "Metaphors We Live By" (1980). This theory elucidates how we comprehend abstract concepts through more tangible experiences via metaphors. In football chants, metaphors of battle and warfare are prevalent, symbolizing the sport's intensity and competitive nature. For instance, chants like "We'll Keep the Red Flag Flying High" and "Glory, Glory, Man United" are more than mere words; they epitomize resilience, unity, and pride. The phrase "Red Flag Flying High" metaphorically elevates the club's spirit, representing unwavering support in the face of challenges. By analyzing Manchester United chants through the lens of conceptual metaphor theory, this study seeks to unravel the deeper semantic layers and symbolic meanings embedded within these expressions. Chants celebrating victories, legendary players like Eric Cantona, and the club's historical pride encapsulate the shared narratives and cultural values of the fan community. Metaphorical phrases like "theatre

of dreams" transform Old Trafford into a magical arena, shaping the collective imagination and aspirations of the fans.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Football chants serve as powerful expressions of collective identity and emotional connection within fan communities (King et al., 2019). These chants are not merely auditory displays of support but are rich in linguistic elements, particularly metaphors, that shape the cultural and emotional landscape of football fandom, especially within clubs like Manchester United. The conceptual metaphor theory, as elucidated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), posits that metaphors are a fundamental aspect of human cognition and communication. This theory is supported by various studies that have shown the importance of metaphors in shaping our understanding of the world and our place in it. The conceptual metaphor theory proposes that metaphors are not merely a matter of language, but rather a matter of thought. Metaphorical expressions in language are a manifestation of our thinking, which is fundamentally metaphorical. Metaphors are not a mere stylistic or rhetorical figure, but rather a major and indispensable part of our ordinary, conventional way of conceptualizing the world.

Kövecses (2002) further categorizes metaphors into structural and orientational types within the context of sports discourse. Structural metaphors in football chants may reflect hierarchical or systemic aspects of fan identity, while orientational metaphors shape spatial and directional perceptions, influencing how fans navigate emotional highs and lows during matches. Gibbs Jr. (1994) explores the cognitive processes underlying metaphorical reasoning, emphasizing how metaphors facilitate complex thought patterns and enhance interpersonal communication among fans. This perspective helps in understanding how metaphors in football chants contribute to the collective interpretation of team dynamics and fan interactions within stadium environments. Cameron (2003) discusses the socio-cultural functions of metaphors in constructing identities and narratives within fan communities. Her insights highlight how metaphors in football chants not only reflect but also reinforce social bonds and shared experiences among Manchester United supporters, contributing to the cohesive nature of fan culture. Recent studies (King et al., 2019) have underscored the sociolinguistic significance of football chants, showing how they foster a sense of belonging and solidarity among fans. These chants are integral to the ritualistic aspects of matchday experiences, providing fans with a shared language to express emotions and reinforce collective identity.

Semantics

Semantics studies focus on the meaning of language and how it is constructed, transmitted, and understood during communication. It focuses on comprehending how words, phrases, sentences, and discourse communicate information, ideas, and concepts. Semantic studies sometimes entail researching how words and their relationships generate meaning, delving into the intricacies of language use, and investigating how context affects interpretation. This field of research is critical to understanding how language influences cognition, communication, and cultural expression.

Metaphor

Metaphors are figures of speech that, unlike analogies, do not use the words "like" or "as" for contrasting two unlike objects. Instead, they state that one thing is another. It is employed to draw attention to connections between seemingly unrelated topics, produce vivid images, or elicit strong feelings. Language is full of metaphors, which are frequently employed to convey abstract ideas or give well-known subjects a fresh or noteworthy appearance. They enhance language and increase the depth of expression; they are important in poetry, literature, rhetoric, and daily conversation.

Types of Metaphor

1. Conceptual Metaphors

The most powerful type, these systematically restructure how we think about football. When fans chant "Red Army!", they don't just borrow military words - they fully reconceptualize the season as warfare (players = soldiers, matches = battles). This activates our tribal psychology, making every game feel like a survival conflict.

2. Container Metaphors

These transform intangible concepts into physical spaces we can "enter." "In United We Trust" doesn't just express faith - it imagines belief as a protective shelter fans inhabit together. This gives abstract loyalty concrete form, making it feel more real and permanent.

3. Journey Metaphors

By framing seasons as travels ("Marching On Together"), these provide cognitive maps for emotional experiences. Setbacks become mere detours rather than failures, while trophies transform into visible destinations - crucial for maintaining hope across months of competition.

4. Personification Metaphors

Giving human traits to clubs ("The Club Never Dies") exploits our innate tendency to anthropomorphize. This makes organizations feel like beloved family members rather than cold institutions, triggering deeper emotional attachment and sacrificial loyalty.

5. Hyperbolic Metaphors

Extreme exaggerations ("Greatest Team in History") aren't literal claims but emotional amplifiers. They override rational assessment to create shared mythologies that bind communities through collective overstatement.

METHODOLOGY

This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach to investigate the types and functions of conceptual metaphors within Manchester United football chants. The goal was to provide a detailed and comprehensive understanding of how supporters utilize metaphorical language to express loyalty, identity, rivalry, and emotional engagement within the culture of football fandom. The primary data source for this study consisted of chant lyrics associated with Manchester United, collected from official fan publications, online supporter forums, match recordings, and fan archives. The selection of chants was based on their popularity, frequency of use during matches, and richness in metaphorical expressions. Data collection involved compiling a corpus of selected chants through both online sources and direct observation of live or recorded match performances. This process included documenting not only the textual content of the chants but also contextual details such as the match situation, crowd participation, and accompanying non-verbal elements (e.g., gestures, banners, rhythm). This ensured that the analysis captured the broader communicative environment in which the chants occur. The data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Each chant was examined to identify instances of conceptual metaphors, which were then categorized according to Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) typology: structural, orientational, and ontological metaphors. Additional categorization was made by metaphorical domain (e.g., WAR, JOURNEY, FAMILY, LIVING ORGANISM). The analysis also considered the functions of these metaphors, such as fostering group solidarity, mocking opponents, celebrating victories, or reinforcing club identity.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The metaphorical analysis of 30 Manchester United chants reveals how fans construct identity, memory, rivalry, and emotion through rich figurative language. The findings indicate that three dominant metaphor types are consistently used: ontological, structural, and conceptual, often overlapping within chants to create layered meanings.

1. Ontological Metaphors – Personifying the Club and its Legacy

Many chants use ontological metaphors to treat abstract entities like loyalty, identity, and club legacy as physical or living beings. For instance, in “United Till I Die,” loyalty is treated as a lifelong, tangible bond. Similarly, “Busby Babes” and “My Old Man” evoke intergenerational memory and shared heritage by treating past teams and family figures as living components of fan identity. These metaphors contribute to a sense of personal belonging and historical continuity.

2. Structural Metaphors – Framing Unity and Rivalry

Chants such as “U-N-I-T-E-D,” “Red Army,” and “Build a Bonfire” reflect structural metaphors that depict the club or fans as organized units or combative forces. The club is framed not just as a football team but as a militant, cohesive structure, ready for conflict and collective action. Rivalry metaphors—e.g., “Kicking a Blue”—dehumanize opponents (notably Manchester City), reinforcing boundaries between “us” and “them.” These metaphors reinforce tribal identity and intensify competitive emotions.

3. Conceptual Metaphors – Quantifying Success and Celebrating Icons

Conceptual metaphors often appear in chants like “20 Times Man United” or “Pride of All Europe,” where achievements are framed as countable or tangible entities. Titles and pride are “owned” or “accumulated,” helping fans measure their club's greatness. Similarly, chants such as “Ooh Aah Cantona” and “Viva Ronaldo” elevate players to almost mythical or celebratory figures. These metaphors articulate hero-worship and allow fans to express emotional attachment to star players.

4. Poetic and Hybrid Metaphors – Humor, Rhythm, and Emotion

Chants like “Harry Maguire Has a Massive Head” and “Neville Neville” blend humor with poetic structure. These do not serve ideological functions as strongly as others, but demonstrate the playful creativity within fan culture. Meanwhile, emotional metaphors such

as “You Are My Solskjaer” treat players as intimate emotional anchors, reflecting the deep personal connection fans feel toward individuals on the pitch. These metaphorical patterns demonstrate that chanting is not merely about vocal support—it is a form of cultural storytelling. Through metaphor, fans shape how Manchester United is remembered, how rivals are opposed, and how emotional bonds are continually reinforced. The use of metaphor turns chanting into a ritualized act of identity performance, binding fans together through shared meanings that transcend the game itself.

Discussion

This chapter presents the findings of the metaphorical analysis of 30 selected chants associated with Manchester United Football Club. These chants were examined through the lens of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), as developed by Lakoff & Johnson (1980), with additional insights from Kövecses (2010) and Charteris-Black (2004). The analysis categorizes metaphorical expressions found in the chants into three main types: structural metaphors, ontological metaphors, and orientational metaphors. Each metaphor was then interpreted in its conceptual frame, revealing how figurative language contributes to fan identity, emotional expression, cultural memory, and rivalry construction.

Overview of Metaphorical Types

Out of the 30 chants analyzed:

1. Structural metaphors were the most dominant, appearing in 16 chants.
2. Ontological metaphors were present in 21 chants.
3. Conceptual metaphors (as umbrella categories) appeared throughout, often overlapping with structural or ontological types.
4. A small number displayed orientational metaphors (e.g., “Forever and Ever” – GOOD IS UP).

This prevalence shows that fans use metaphor not just for poetic effect, but to embody emotionally and cognitively resonant ideas—where the club becomes a family, a battlefield, a home, or a divine figure.

Themes and Conceptual Domains

- a. Club as Identity and Legacy (FAMILY / HOME / ENTITY metaphors)

Chants like “We’ll Keep the Red Flag Flying High,” “United Road,” and “Every Single One of Us” draw on metaphors that frame the club as a home, family, or living entity. The red flag, a recurring symbol in Manchester United culture, functions as a tangible embodiment of ideological loyalty and historical continuity. “Red Flag” as an ontological metaphor suggests that identity is something visible, defensible, and even sacred. Similarly, “United Road” evokes a shared journey, mapping emotional belonging onto a literal geographic space. In “United Till I Die,” the conceptual metaphor LOYALTY IS LIFELONG COMMITMENT is expressed structurally through the notion of mortality—suggesting eternal emotional investment.

b. Players as Icons and Symbols

Several chants construct key players as more than athletes. “Ooh Aah Cantona,” “Busby Babes,” “Keano’s Magic Hat,” and “Spirit in the Sky (George Best)” demonstrate ontological metaphors where players are personified as mythic, spiritual, or magical entities. These metaphors elevate individual players into symbols of emotional memory, historical continuity, and moral representation. For example, George Best is described as a “spirit in the sky,” a poetic metaphor suggesting PLAYER IS DEITY, echoing religious reverence. Cantona, similarly, is deified through mythic structure, while Roy Keane is metaphorically tied to magical power, infusing chants with playful yet reverent tones.

c. Glory and Victory (WAR / HEROISM / OBJECT metaphors)

Chants like “Glory Glory Man United,” “20 Times Man United,” and “Pride of All Europe” utilize metaphors that objectify victory or frame it in terms of military success. The chant “Build a Bonfire” vividly demonstrates RIVALRY IS WAR, using the metaphor of fire and destruction to represent emotional hostility toward opposing teams (e.g., Manchester City and Liverpool). This war-oriented metaphor frames football as a moral battle in which fans position themselves as soldiers or revolutionaries, often reflected in the term Red Army, itself a metaphor that mobilizes collective identity as a militant unit.

d. Supporter Role and Emotional Bonding

Songs like “Every Single One of Us,” “We Love United,” and “You Are My Solskjaer” demonstrate how chants construct the emotional landscape of being a supporter. The metaphor LOVE IS POSSESSION is visible in “We Love United,” where the emotion is not just felt but owned. In “You Are My Solskjaer,” the supporter is portrayed as

emotionally bound to a single player, echoing themes of BELONGING IS PERSONALIZATION—a chant that transforms fandom into personal identity. Similarly, the poetic metaphor in “Forever and Ever” imagines loyalty as eternal, playing into TIME IS A COMPANION metaphors.

e. Mockery and Humor in Rivalry

Not all metaphors are reverent. Chants like “Harry Maguire Has a Massive Head” and “Kicking a Blue” employ humor and satire, turning metaphor into a rhetorical weapon. The exaggeration of physical traits (massive head) or objectifying of rival teams (“Blue” as depersonalized target) reflects a different semantic function—dehumanizing the opponent to reinforce in-group superiority. These metaphors contribute to emotional catharsis and group cohesion while maintaining playful (yet sometimes aggressive) social boundaries.

Sociocultural Implications

The metaphorical patterns identified in Manchester United chants reflect larger sociocultural values:

- a. Unity and resistance (via flags, roads, or familial metaphors),
- b. Hero worship (players as symbols),
- c. Ritualistic memory (Busby Babes, George Best),
- d. Enemy construction (bonfire, blue, war),
- e. Cultural pride (Manchester as “wonderful,” Europe as a conquered space).

Metaphors serve as both linguistic and cultural tools that perform identity, preserve memory, and mobilize emotion. They transform football chanting from spontaneous expression into a form of ritualized discourse.

CONCLUSION

This research has explored the metaphorical language in 20 Manchester United chants by analyzing them through the frameworks of conceptual, structural, and ontological metaphors. These metaphors are not merely stylistic devices—they serve as powerful expressions of identity, emotion, and collective memory within fan culture. Conceptual metaphors help translate abstract ideas like pride, loyalty, or legacy into more relatable terms, as seen in chants like “Glory Glory Man United” or “United Till I Die.” Structural metaphors frame football experiences through more familiar domains, such as war (“Red Army”) or journey (“Coming Up the Hill”), helping fans conceptualize team performance, rivalry, or

support in concrete terms. Ontological metaphors turn intangible concepts like time, emotion, or identity into physical entities or characters—making chants deeply personal and symbolically powerful. Overall, the use of these metaphors enriches fan communication, fosters emotional connection, and reinforces a shared identity. The chants act not only as musical traditions but also as cultural narratives that capture the spirit of Manchester United. This linguistic creativity underpins the emotional and symbolic force of football support, showing how metaphor helps shape not only language but also loyalty, memory, and meaning in sport. Future studies could extend this framework by comparing metaphorical usage across different football cultures or exploring how such metaphors influence real-world fan identity and behavior.

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