

Fresher/Sophister Module Description Template 2025-26

Full Name: Not a waste of time: metaphor from medieval to modern

Short Name: Metaphor

Lecturer Name and Email Address: Claire Poynton-Smith, poyntonc@tcd.ie

ECTS Weighting: 10 ECTS

Semester Taught MT/HT: HT

Year JF/SF/JS/SS: JS

Introduction:

Although we might tend to think of metaphors as a deliberate literary device rather than a regular feature of our language, many phrases used in English today rely on metaphorical language. If we examine vocabularies on different themes, metaphors are often embedded into them from the very beginning of vernacular English writing; even if we have stopped consciously noticing them, they have always been a part of our language and our thinking. Texts that survive from the Old English and Middle English period demonstrate continuities with what we might have thought of as modern metaphorical concepts (with ANGER, PASSION, and LUST language linked to HEAT metaphors, for example). This module will examine some of the continuities and differences between medieval and modern vocabulary through the lens of metaphors that are operating within different semantic fields.

The material covered will provide students with an introduction to metaphor, including the shifting meanings and uses of metaphor across different disciplines from its origins in classical rhetoric, through the different approaches adopted in the twentieth century, to contemporary theory which debates whether metaphor is more literary and aesthetic or systematised and cognitive. We will consider how metaphor draws readers into dialogue with the text, and how it is used as a tool to structure modern discourse around volatile issues. It is a unique module in that it will draw both from examples of metaphor as far back as early medieval English, and as recent as the figurative language used to present the Covid-19 pandemic.

Module content:

This course introduces students to conceptual metaphors, using the pioneering scholarship of Lakoff and Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By* and *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* as well as the development of the field of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) as a starting point. These early works sought to demonstrate how to identify the metaphors that shape our perception, thinking, and actions and examine their linguistic expression. In this module we will explore existing scholarship focused on specific types of metaphor, engaging with selected examples of metaphor from medieval vocabulary and literature alongside modern parallels.

CMT in its earliest iterations emphasised how metaphor is used to understand abstract concepts (“target domains”, e. g. anger) through more concrete ones (“source domains”, e.g. heat). Some of the most famous examples include TIME IS MONEY and ARGUMENT IS WAR, and Lakoff and Johnson argued that most of our ordinary conceptual system is metaphorical in nature. In a world where established metaphors are sometimes not even registered as metaphorical (consider, for example, our ideas of ‘wasting’ time, ‘grasping’ a concept, or ‘winning’ an argument), interrogating where they came from is an exercise which is challenging and illuminating, helping us better understand the language we use today and the literature it produces.

Matters for discussion will include how cultural difference emerges when we analyse metaphorical vocabulary, how conceptual metaphors appear related to experiential factors (e.g. GOOD IS UP, BAD IS DOWN), and how authors adopt and adapt established metaphors for effect on the reader. Students will be equipped with the skills to investigate the development of a lexical or semantic field of their choice over time, analysing and evaluating the major shifts and offering their critical opinion as to what could have been behind some of the changes. Throughout, we will pay close attention to how we can use digital resources to aid our evaluation of vocabulary: these will include digital dictionaries such as the Oxford English Dictionary, the Historical Thesaurus with the OED, and the Mapping Metaphor project. These tools allow us to interrogate how semantic fields have developed across time in ways that would have previously been impossible. Students will also become familiar with dictionaries of Old and Middle English, and the process of examining historical vocabulary.

Ultimately, we will examine how we can apply the study of metaphor to English vocabulary from the early medieval period through to the present day, including considering the way cultural differences over the last 1000+ years are reflected in changes to conceptual vocabulary.

Learning Outcomes:

This module aims to:

- open students’ eyes to the complexity and prevalence of metaphor, even in our everyday modes of thinking and speaking
- introduce students to key scholarship on metaphor as it appears in facets of both literature and language, including Conceptual Metaphor Theory
- encourage students to apply their knowledge of metaphor to vocabulary from different periods of English (from the beginnings of the language to Present Day English)
- equip students with the tools and techniques to analyse and evaluate thematic vocabularies and lexical/semantic fields, including knowledge of the digital Historical Thesaurus of English
- enable students to design and implement a study of an area of vocabulary they are interested in, the metaphors it makes use of, and how it changes over time

Assessment Details:

- Number of Components: 2
- Portfolio of small weekly exercises (worth 40%) and a final 3000 word essay (worth 60%)

Provisional week outline below:

Week 1: What is metaphor, how do we use it, and why?

Key material: *Metaphor* (Punter); "Concepts We Live By" in *Metaphors We Live By* (Lakoff and Johnson); *Metaphor* (Donoghue).

Week 2: Conceptual metaphor theory and LIFE, DEATH and TIME metaphors

Key material: "Life, Death, and Time," in *More Than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Lakoff and Turner); "Because I could not stop for Death—" (Dickinson); "Sonnet 7" (Milton).

Week 3: The expressive power of poetic metaphors, personification, and metonymy

Key material: "That The Night Come" (Yeats); "To a Solitary Disciple" (Carlos Williams); "Ah! Sun-Flower" (Blake); *Theories Are Buildings: Metaphor and the Architecture of Knowledge* (Grady).

Week 4: Contemporary discourse and metaphors in politics: MEDICINE, SCIENCE and TECHNOLOGY

Key material: *Metaphor in Discourse* (Semino), "Figurative language in discourse," in *Figurative Language* (Dancygier and Sweetster).

Week 5: Metaphor and social and emotional dynamics: LOVE IS WAR, ANGER IS HEAT, GOOD IS UP

Key material: *Metaphors We Live By* (Lakoff and Johnson); *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* (Lakoff); *Metaphor In Culture* (Koevecses).

Week 6: Metaphors under capitalism: TIME IS MONEY/A VALUABLE COMMODITY

Key material: selected recent news reports on immigration, addiction. "The Systematicity of Metaphorical Concepts" in *Metaphors We Live By*.

Week 7: Digital technology and metaphor: language, the digital world, and new digital tools

Key material: *The Historical Thesaurus of English*, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and selected Old and Middle English dictionaries.

Week 8: Semantic and lexical change: narrowing and broadening meanings, and words falling out of fashion

Key material: case studies focused on MONEY and CHILDHOOD terms.

Week 9: DIRT and MORAL CONTAGION metaphors and how they have developed over time

Key material: *The Historical Thesaurus of English*, 2nd ed. (version 5.0), s.v., "01.03.01.04 (n.) A disease"; *The Historical Thesaurus of English*, 2nd ed. (version 5.0), s.v., "01.09.10.06 (n.) Dirtiness."

Week 10: How to conduct a lexical investigation using dictionary and thesaurus resources

Week 11: Presentations on different aspects of vocabulary (student led) and discussion of assessment and success criteria

Preliminary Reading List:

A number of texts will be provided on Blackboard and we will be focusing on individual chapters in many cases, so you do not need to purchase all of these texts. This list is provisional, but texts will likely include:

Attridge, Derek. *The Work of Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Davidson, Donald. "What Metaphors Mean." *Critical Inquiry* 5, no. 1 (1978): 31–47.

Dancygier, Barbara, and Eve Sweetser. *Figurative Language*. Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Deignan, Alice. "From Linguistic to Conceptual Metaphors." In *The Routledge Handbook of Metaphor and Language*, edited by Elena Semino and Zsófia Demjén, 102–116. London: Routledge, 2017.

Donoghue, Denis. *Metaphor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014.

Grady, Joseph. *Theories Are Buildings: Metaphor and the Architecture of Knowledge*. New York: Peter Lang, 2007.

Kövecses, Zoltán. "Conceptual Metaphor Theory." In *The Routledge Handbook of Metaphor and Language*, edited by Elena Semino and Zsófia Demjén, 11–27. London: Routledge, 2017.

Kövecses, Zoltán. *Metaphors of Anger, Pride and Love: A Lexical Approach to the Structure of Concepts*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1986.

Lakoff, George. *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

Lakoff, George, and Mark Turner. *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

Punter, David. *Metaphor*. The New Critical Idiom Series. London: Routledge, 2007.

Semino, Elena. *Metaphor in Discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Semino, Elena. "The Language of Immigration Metaphors: A Critical Discourse Analysis," *Discourse & Society* 19, no. 4 (2008): 453–481.

Sullivan, Karen. "Conceptual Metaphor." In *The Cambridge Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics*, edited by Barbara Dancygier, 385–406. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Please note:

- Curricular information is subject to change.
- Information is displayed only for guidance purposes, relates to the current academic year only and is subject to change.