



CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS IN ONLINE
FOOTBALL JOURNALISM: A MIPVU-BASED
ANALYSIS OF LIONEL MESSI'S CAREER NARRATIVEⁱ

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Abstract:

This study explores conceptual metaphors in online football journalism, focusing on how Lionel Messi's career is constructed in media discourse. Grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), the research analyzes a corpus of ten online news articles (approximately 10,500 words). Metaphorical expressions were identified using the Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije Universiteit (MIPVU). The analysis reveals that journalists frequently rely on metaphorical language to structure and interpret Messi's career development. Two prominent conceptual metaphors emerge from the data: *A Football Career Is a Journey* and a *Football Match Is a Theatrical Performance*, which both organize the narrative of Messi's career into stages of growth, challenge, and accomplishment, as well as portraying football matches as dramatic performances that highlight skills, spectacle, and public attention. In the end, the findings demonstrate the important role of metaphor in shaping how sports media narrate athletic success and construct the image of football legends.

Keywords: conceptual metaphor, football journalism, media discourse

Tóm tắt:

Nghiên cứu này tìm hiểu các ẩn dụ ý niệm trong bình luận báo chí bóng đá trực tuyến, tập trung vào cách sự nghiệp của Lionel Messi được xây dựng trong diễn ngôn truyền thông. Dựa trên lý thuyết Ẩn dụ Quan niệm (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), nghiên cứu phân tích một kho ngữ liệu gồm mười bài báo trực tuyến (khoảng 10.500 từ). Các biểu đạt ẩn dụ được nhận diện bằng Phương pháp Nhận diện Ẩn dụ MIPVU. Kết quả phân tích cho thấy các phóng viên thường xuyên dựa vào ngôn ngữ ẩn dụ để cấu trúc và diễn giải sự phát triển sự nghiệp của Messi. Hai ẩn dụ quan niệm nổi bật xuất hiện từ dữ liệu bao

ⁱ CÁC ẨN DỤ Ý NIỆM TRONG BÁO CHÍ BÓNG ĐÁ TRỰC TUYẾN: PHÂN TÍCH VỀ SỰ NGHIỆP CỦA LIONEL MESSI DỰA TRÊN PHƯƠNG PHÁP MIPVU

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gồm: **Sự nghiệp Bóng đá là một Hành trình** và **Trận đấu Bóng đá là một Buổi biểu diễn Sân khấu**. Cả hai ẩn dụ này vừa giúp tổ chức cốt truyện về sự nghiệp của Messi thành các giai đoạn: trưởng thành, thử thách và thành tựu, vừa khắc họa các trận đấu như những màn trình diễn đầy kịch tính, làm nổi bật kỹ năng, tính giải trí và sự chú ý của công chúng. Sau cùng, các phát hiện cho thấy vai trò quan trọng của ẩn dụ trong việc định hình cách truyền thông thể thao thuật lại sự thành công của vận động viên và xây dựng hình tượng của những huyền thoại bóng đá.

Từ khóa: ẩn dụ ý niệm, báo chí bóng đá, diễn ngôn truyền thông

1. Introduction

Football discourse is not only concerned with reporting matches and results but also plays an important role in constructing narratives about athletes' careers, which results in the frequent use of metaphor as a central cognitive and communicative mechanism to portray football players and to shape how sporting events, performances, and identities are conceptualized.

Within the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), abstract domains are commonly understood through more concrete embodied experiences. It is easily seen that media narratives often describe athletes' careers using expressions such as *steps forward*, *long road*, *turning point*, or *reaching the top*, suggesting an underlying conceptual metaphor in which a career is understood as a journey. Such metaphorical framing allows audiences to interpret success, failure, progress, and transition as stages along a meaningful path.

Among numerous prominent footballers, Messi has long been one of the most mediatized figures globally (Faedo, N. I., & Corrius, M., 2024). From his early years at FC Barcelona's La Masia academy to his World Cup triumph with Argentina and subsequent move to Major League Soccer, his career has been continuously narrated, evaluated, and reinterpreted by international sports media. These narratives do not merely document chronological events; rather, they actively construct a coherent storyline that frames his professional development as a meaningful progression. In many instances, media discourse presents Messi's trajectory as a movement toward a destination, punctuated by departures, breakthroughs, setbacks, and ultimate fulfilment.

While there have been studies which identified the prevalence of metaphors on sports discourse, relatively limited attention has been paid to the macro-structural role of metaphor in shaping the entire career narratives of any world-famous footballer. To address this gap, the present study investigates conceptual metaphors in online news articles about Lionel Messi, with a particular focus on how his career is constructed as a staged journey, as well as the related conceptual metaphors by adopting a rigorous identification procedure, such as the Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije Universiteit (MIPVU).

Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

- 1) What has Messi been through since he started playing football?
- 2) What lexical units are metaphorically used in online news articles about Lionel Messi?
- 3) What are the conceptual metaphors used, and which is dominant?

2. Theoretical Background

Cognitive linguistics is an approach to language study that views language as closely related to human cognition and experience. Early ideas related to cognitive linguistics can be traced back to scholars such as Sapir (1929) and Whorf (1956), who emphasized the relationship between language and human cognition. Later developments in prototype theory (Rosch, 1975), frame semantics (Fillmore, 1976), and cognitive grammar (Langacker, 1987) further contributed to the emergence of cognitive linguistics, within which Conceptual Metaphor Theory was later developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). This, accordingly, explains how abstract ideas are structured through metaphorical mappings between conceptual domains, which were always shaped by embodied experience, cultural knowledge, and conceptual organization.

2.1 Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), first proposed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their influential work *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), reconceptualized metaphor as a cognitive mechanism rather than a purely stylistic linguistic device. Within this framework, metaphor is understood as a systematic mapping between two conceptual domains: a more concrete *source domain* and a more abstract *target domain*. Through these mappings, individuals are able to structure and understand complex or abstract experiences in terms of more familiar and experiential knowledge, meaning that metaphor plays a central role in shaping perception, reasoning, and everyday communication.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) first clarified that there are three types of conceptual metaphors.

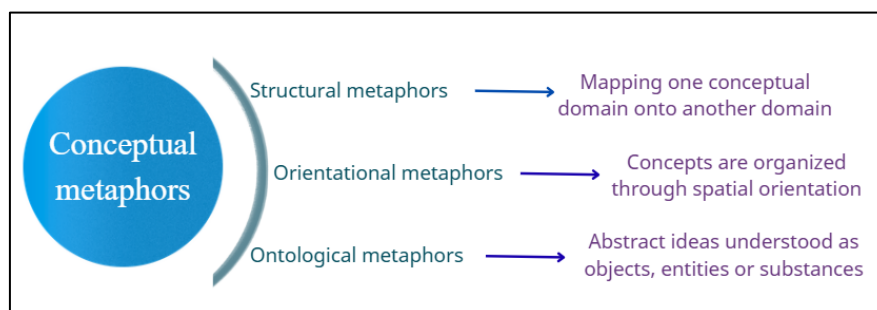


Figure 1: Three types of conceptual metaphors

The figure above illustrates the three major types of conceptual metaphors proposed in Conceptual Metaphor Theory, which include *structural metaphors*, *orientational metaphors*, and *ontological metaphors*.

First, it is discussed that structural metaphors involve the mapping of one conceptual domain onto another, allowing people to understand complex or abstract experiences through more familiar structures. In this type of metaphor, the source domain provides an organized framework for interpreting the target domain.

Second, orientational metaphors, on the other hand, structure concepts through spatial orientation, such as up-down, in-out, or front-back. These metaphors often arise from bodily experience and help organize abstract ideas through spatial relationships.

Last, ontological metaphors allow abstract concepts, events, or experiences to be understood as entities, objects, or substances. By conceptualizing abstract phenomena as concrete things, this type of metaphor enables people to refer to, categorize, and reason about complex experiences more easily.

Among those explanations, a metaphor involves a conceptual mapping between two different domains, where one (the source) is used to understand the other (the target), which is more abstract and from time to time is mistaken with metonymy. Later, Kövecses (2005, 2010) made clear that metonymy does not involve cross-domain mapping but rather a relationship within the same conceptual domain, where one element stands for another closely related element. For example, metaphor allows abstract concepts to be understood through more concrete experiences, whereas metonymy often relies on association, such as using a part to represent the whole or a symbol to represent an institution.

More recently, there have been subsequent studies which have further developed and expanded the theory of conceptual metaphors, mapping from one domain to another. While scholars such as Kövecses (2005), Gibbs (2008), and Steen et al. (2011) again emphasized the cognitive and experiential foundations of metaphor, highlighting how metaphor reflects patterns of embodied human experience, other researchers have extended the theoretical scope of CMT by examining related cognitive mechanisms. For example, Grady (1997) introduced the concept of primary metaphors, which are grounded in basic personal experiences, while Fauconnier and Turner (2003) proposed conceptual blending theory, explaining how elements from different mental spaces can combine to create new meanings.

Within the broader framework of cognitive linguistics, scholars such as Talmy (2000) and Langacker (2008) have also contributed to understanding how conceptual structures organize linguistic meaning. Additionally, corpus-based and discourse-oriented studies by Charteris-Black (2004), Deignan (2005), Semino (2008), and Kövecses (2015) demonstrate how metaphor systematically structures discourse in domains such as politics, media communication, and everyday language.

Conclusively, CMT provides an important theoretical framework for investigating how metaphor organizes human thought and language, particularly in domains where complex experiences need to be communicated through vivid and accessible expressions.

2.2 Metaphors in football discourse

It is obvious that metaphors are widely used in sports journalism to describe match events, evaluate performances, and create engaging narratives. According to Raymond W. & Gibbs Jr. (2008), metaphor enables speakers and writers to conceptualize complex experiences through more concrete domains. In sports reports, that helps journalists present fast-moving and highly dynamic events in ways that are vivid, understandable and meaningful for readers. For example, Charteris-Black in *Corpus Approaches to Critical Metaphor Analysis* (2004) demonstrated how metaphor shaped ideological framing through competition and performance. Similarly, Semino in *Metaphor in Discourse* (2008) highlighted how metaphor structures narrative representation in media texts, or Yusuf, A. Y. (2016) succeeded in identifying common metaphorical patterns such as *Football Is War*. They all later help describe matches as dramatic contests and progressive struggles toward victory.

Furthermore, there is currently a growing interest in football media narratives, which have also increasingly focused on prominent players whose performances frequently attract rich metaphorical descriptions. Among them, Lionel Messi has been a central figure - a global icon - who is famously the topic of a number of research studies. For instance, Naeem, W., Mewati, M. I. N., & Saeed, M. (2023) examined how journalists construct Messi's identity through evaluative and figurative language, often portraying him as a "magician," "genius," or "artist." Moreover, linguistically, Chaerunnisah, I. U. (2020) revealed all types of metaphors were found in the news articles in The Jakarta Post and confirmed the dominant use of structural metaphor when describing the athletes as a concrete object; or such elite players are often framed "through metaphors that emphasize exceptional ability and creativity" (Ali, A. K., & Alhuseini, H. A. M., 2025). These studies obviously demonstrate that metaphor not only structures the description of match events but also plays a key role in constructing the public image and symbolic status of iconic footballers like Messi.

Otherwise, it is recorded that there are few studies that have provided a systematic analysis of the conceptual metaphors which are used to structure the media representation of Messi's career. To fill this gap, a detailed analysis of conceptual metaphors in online news articles about Messi can provide further insight into how journalists linguistically construct the narrative of one of football's most influential players and the specific conceptual metaphors are used to describe one of the global football icons.

2.3 The MIPVU Method

As can be seen, while CMT provides a theoretical explanation of metaphorical cognition, empirical discourse analysis requires systematic procedures for identifying metaphor in authentic texts. To address this need, the Pragglejaz Group (2007) introduced the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP), later refined into the Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije Universiteit (MIPVU) by Steen et al. (2010).

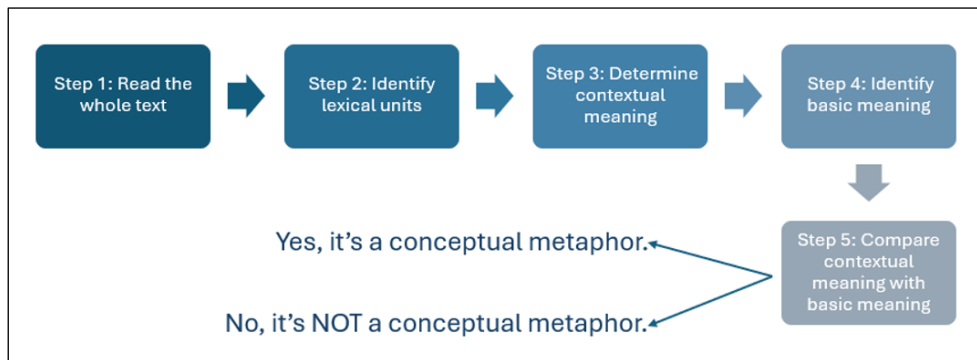


Figure 2: The MIPVU process

Looking at the above process, MIPVU obviously offers an explicit and replicable protocol for detecting metaphor-related words in discourse. Specifically, this procedure involves segmenting texts into lexical units, determining contextual meanings, comparing them with more basic meanings, and identifying metaphorical use when meaning contrast and cross-domain comparison are present. This methodological development marked an important shift toward empirical metaphor research, allowing metaphor analysis to be systematically verified rather than intuitively interpreted.

Explicitly looking through the procedure, the principal advantage of MIPVU is recognized to lie in its replicability and empirical validity, enabling consistent annotation across datasets and reducing researcher subjectivity. For this reason, MIPVU has become one of the most widely accepted methodologies in contemporary metaphor research and provides a rigorous analytical framework for examining how *journey-related* metaphors construct the media narrative of Lionel Messi's football career.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data collection

This study uses ten online sports news articles as the primary data source, purposively selected from reputable sports journalism websites, to examine how Lionel Messi is constructed in media discourse. The selection was designed to correspond to five key stages in Messi's professional career, ensuring that the dataset reflects the major developments in his football trajectory.

The final corpus contains approximately 10,500 words. All of the selected articles were carefully read in their entirety to maintain contextual coherence and preserve the narrative structure of the texts. Rather than treating the data as isolated lexical items, the corpus was analyzed as a discourse-level dataset. This approach allows the study to examine metaphor use at both the micro level (individual metaphorical expressions) and the macro level (broader narrative patterns that construct Messi's career story).

3.2 Data analysis

Within the scope of this paper, the identification of metaphorical expressions followed the MIPVU. Each article was thoroughly reviewed and segmented into lexical units. For

each lexical unit, its contextual meaning within the sentence was first determined. Subsequently, its more basic meaning was consulted using established English dictionaries, with attention to whether the basic meaning was more concrete, bodily related, precise, or historically older than the contextual meaning.

A lexical unit was marked as metaphor-related if its contextual meaning contrasted with its basic meaning. After identification, metaphorical expressions were categorized according to their underlying conceptual domains, and then grouped according to the five pre-established career stages of Messi's professional development. The five-stage model was used as an analytical framework rather than a coding template, and metaphor identification preceded stage classification.

Furthermore, by analysing the lexical units from the list of words or phrases which are considered conceptual metaphors, the researcher identifies the conceptual metaphors based on a list of lexical items and expressions found in the dataset.

Although the coding was conducted manually, particular care was taken to avoid imposing predetermined metaphor categories onto the data, and the focused selection allows for in-depth qualitative analysis of metaphorical patterning at the discourse level when the corpus size is limited.

4. Results

4.1 Messi's career journey

Having described the data collection and analytical procedures, the study now turns to the presentation of findings. After reviewing a comprehensive list of online news articles and the book by Buckley (2024), a clear structural framework of Messi's professional development is created chronologically, as illustrated in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3 shows an overview of Lionel Messi's career from his early years to the present. The timeline on the left presents the main periods of his professional life. It begins with his early formation (1987-2003), when he developed as a young talent. It then moves to his professional beginning (2004-2008), followed by his peak performance and global success (2009-2014). After that, the figure shows a period of pressure and setbacks (2015-2019), and finally his fulfilment stage (2021-2023), including winning the World Cup and moving to Inter Miami.

On the right side, the career is organized into five conceptual stages: pre-journey, departure, ascent, obstacles, and completion. This structure helps us see his career not just as separate events, but as a clear and meaningful progression. His early years are shown as preparation. His debut represents the start of his journey. His most successful years show strong progress and achievement. The difficult period with international defeats represents challenges. Finally, the World Cup victory marks a moment of fulfilment and recognition.

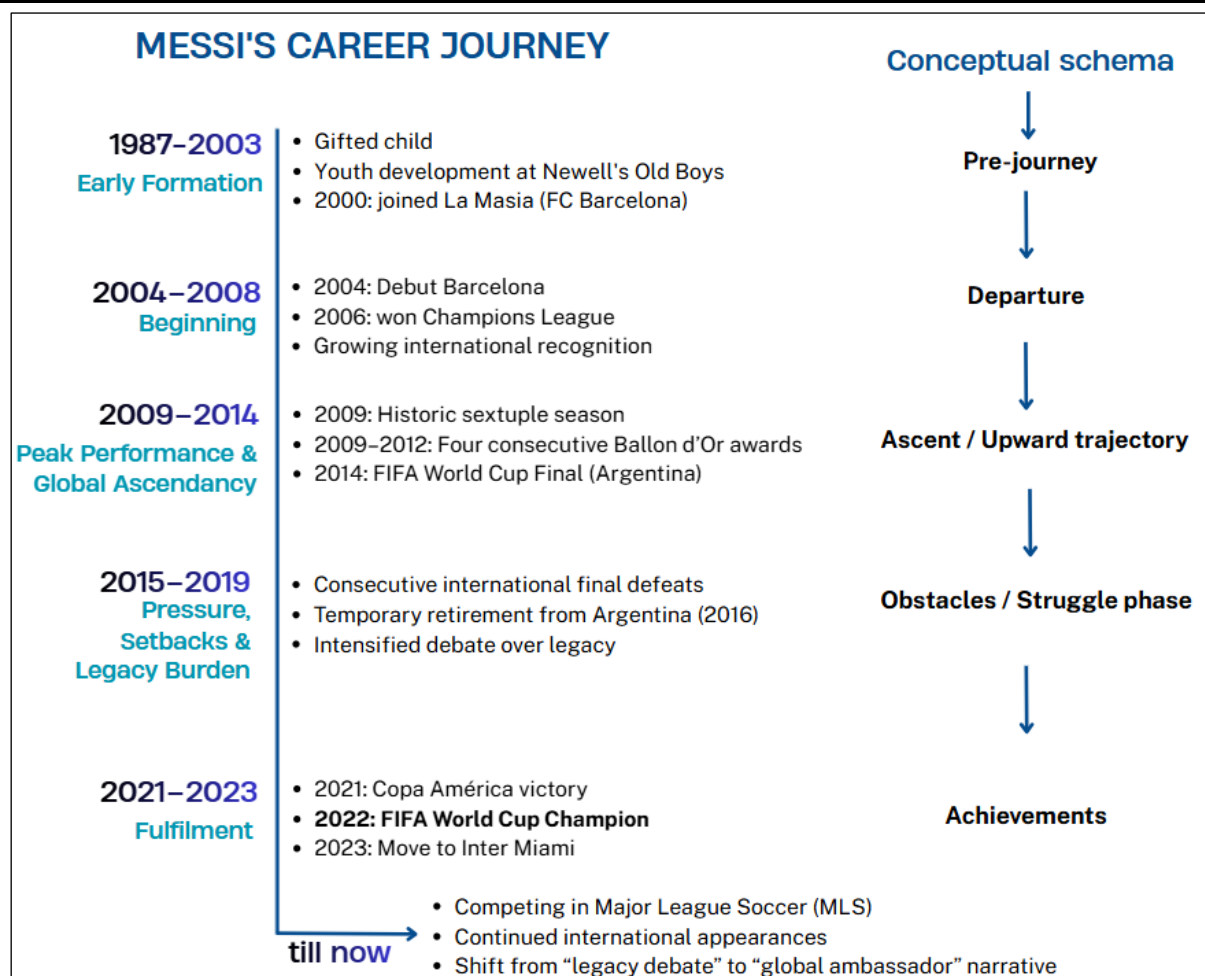


Figure 3: Messi's career journey

The arrows between the stages show that his career develops step-by-step. It is clearly presented as a continuous path rather than disconnected moments. The "till now" note suggests that his career is still ongoing, especially with his move to MLS and his growing global influence.

Finally, as a whole, all of the above figures present Messi's career as a structured life path with different phases of growth, success, struggle, and achievement.

4.2 Lexical Units Identified in Ten Online Articles

As presented above in Figure 3, the main stages and important events in Messi's professional career are described. They provide background information for understanding how Messi's development is described in media discourse. Based on this context and the dataset of ten online articles, the following two tables present the lexical units and collected expressions which are used by journalists to describe the world football icon's career journey.

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Table 1: Lexical Units Identified in Ten Online Articles about Messi (Words)

No	Art. No.	Lexical Units	Excerpts from Articles	Basic Meaning	Source Domain	Contextual Meaning	Target Domain	Type
1	2	Appearance	His first senior appearance for Barcelona	Appearing on stage or in public	Theatre	Official participation in a competitive or formal match for a team	Sport Participation	Struct.
2	8	Burden	The burden the national flag represents	Heavy physical weight	Weight	Pressure of national expectation	Responsibility	Onto.
3	1	Burns	The jersey burns as strongly as ever	Fire producing heat	Fire	Intense and lasting passion that drives the player throughout their journey	Passion	Onto.
4	3	Cap	To cap a fine season	To cover or finish something	Covering / Closure	To complete a season with success	Achievement	Struct.
5	2	Colours	Wearing Argentina's colours	Distinctive clothing	Clothing	Representing the national team	National Representation	Onto.
6	1	Coronation	The coronation of a brilliant year	Crowning a monarch	Monarchy	Achieving the highest recognition	Success	Struct.
7	7	Coronation	Following his coronation as the leading player	Enthronement of a king	Monarchy	Official recognition or confirmation as the best player	Individual Achievement	Struct.
8	5	Cruise	Would not cruise to their championship	Travelling smoothly	Travel	Winning easily without difficulty or strong resistance	Victory	Struct.
9	2	Derailed	Dangers that derailed careers	Train leaving tracks	Railway	Career disrupted by problems	Career	Struct.
10	10	Eliminated	They were eliminated from the Cup	Removed from a place	Removal	Being knocked out of a tournament	Competition	Struct.
11	4	Graduation	A glorious graduation from the La Masia youth system	Completing academic studies	Education	Completing a phase of training (youth academy) and moving to the professional level	Career Development	Struct.
12	3	Hampered	Still hampered by lack of success	Physically restricted	Physical Restraint	Difficulties slowing progress	Performance	Onto.
13	1	Hiatus	A baffling hiatus	Pause or break in activity	Interruption	A temporary stop in career progress or movement	Career	Struct.
14	5	Immortals	You will become immortals	Beings that never die	Divinity	Achieving eternal sporting fame after completing a historic achievement	Legacy	Onto.
15	2	Jewel	He's phenomenal, a jewel	Precious stone	Precious Object	Player of exceptional quality and value	Player	Onto.
16	6	Magic	Messi's magic	Supernatural power	Magic	Extraordinary football skill	Talent	Onto.

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17	1	Nemesis	Unforgiven nemesis of England	Mythological enemy	War/ Myth	Long-standing rival	Competition	Struct.
18	2	Nurtured	Barcelona nurtured the boy	Raising or caring for a child	Parenting	Carefully developing a young talent	Talent Development	Onto.
19	9	Odyssey	His career odyssey	Long adventurous journey	Journey	Long dramatic career	Career	Struct.
20	8	Provoked	Attempts have provoked a body of literature	Causing reaction	Physical Stimulus	Generating academic discussion	Intellectual Response	Onto.
21	9	Reached	Reached the conference finals	Arriving at destination	Journey	Advancing to final stage	Competition	Struct.
22	9	Reached	Reached the conference semi	Arriving somewhere	Journey	Progressing to semi-final	Tournament	Struct.
23	1	Renaissance	Maradona's renaissance	Rebirth	Rebirth	Revival of performance and career success after a period of decline	Career Success	Onto.
24	4	Rip Apart	Rip the champions apart	Tear something violently	Physical Violence	Completely dominate opponent	Competition	Struct.
25	1	Ripening	Talent is ripening	Fruit becoming mature	Plant Growth	Young talent developing becoming ready for high-level competition	Talent	Onto.
26	4	Sidekick	A talented sidekick	Assistant to a hero	Story / Hero Narrative	Supporting player in a team	Team Role	Struct.
27	4	Sidelined	Currently sidelined due to injury	Placed at the side	Spatial Position	Temporarily unable to play	Participation	Orient.
28	2	Silhouette	His signature is in his silhouette	Shadow outline	Visual Image	Identity defined by movement style	Identity	Onto.
29	2	Tradecraft	Possesses the tradecraft	Professional craft skill	Craft	Tactical football intelligence	Football Skill	Struct.
30	4	Wizard	Football wizard	Magical practitioner	Magic	Extraordinarily talented player	Talent	Onto.

Table 2: Lexical Units Identified in Ten Online Articles about Messi (Phrases)

No	Art. No.	Lexical Units	Excerpts from Articles	Basic Meaning	Source Domain	Contextual Meaning	Target Domain	Type
1	8	A body of literature	A non-negligible body of literature	Physical body	Body	A considerable amount of academic research.	Knowledge	Onto.
2	6	A clean sweep of trophies	A clean sweep of trophies	Sweeping something clean	Cleaning	Winning all titles	Victory	Struct.

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3	10	Another run	Looking for another run	Movement along a path	Movement	Another competitive attempt in an additional period of time	Career Phase	Struct.
4	1	Appear (theatrically)	Were suddenly to appear	Entering a stage performance	Theatre	Entering a new sporting situation	Sport Event	Struct.
5	7	Attacking machine	Ultimate attacking machine	Mechanical device	Machine	Highly efficient attacker	Player Performance	Onto.
6	9	Bask in that glory	Further bask in that World Cup glory	Enjoy warmth from sunlight	Sunlight	Continue enjoying fame	Fame	Onto.
7	6	Career capstone	A fitting career capstone	Top stone finishing a structure	Architecture	Final great achievement or crowning in the end	Career	Struct.
8	8	Constant backlash	Subjected to constant backlash	Strong physical reaction	Physical Force	Fierce reaction from the public	Public Reaction	Onto.
9	10	Destination of choice	Become the destination of choice	Place reached after travel	Journey	Preferred club/team where a player decides to go to continue their career	Career Decision	Struct.
10	5	Dying stages	Still leading as the game entered its dying stages	Final moments before death	Life/ Death	The very last moments of the game.	Game Time	Onto.
11	2	Fatal error	Turn a foul into a fatal error	Causing death	Death	Mistake that ends opponent's chance	Competition	Struct.
12	8	Fed off opposition	Fed off opposition	Feeding for survival	Eating	Gaining motivation from rivals	Motivation	Onto.
13	4	Front-page hero	A front-page hero	Person on newspaper front page	Media Space	Main football star constantly featured in media coverage	Fame	Orient.
14	5	Give a prayer	No one gave them a prayer	Religious prayer	Religion	Having even a small chance of success	Probability	Onto.
15	1	Hogs the light	Maradona hogs the light	Blocking light source	Light	Dominating attention or overshadowing others on the same path	Attention	Orient.
16	4	Household name	Become a household name	Known in every home	Home	Widely recognized celebrity	Fame	Onto.
17	7	Keep it at bay	Keep time at bay	Hold enemy away	War/ Defense	Delay the effects of aging	Aging	Struct.
18	9	Land its very own unicorn	Land its own unicorn	Capture something rare	Mythical Creature	Sign a rare superstar	Player Value	Onto.

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19	10	Last hope	The club's last hope	Final chance before failure	Journey	Remaining chance for success	Success	Struct.
20	10	Leading (to a title)	Leading Miami to the title	Guiding someone forward	Guidance	Guiding team to victory	Team Success	Orient.
21	1	Lust for life	A galvanised lust for life	Strong desire to live	Life Force	Renewed passion to continue experiencing and progressing in the career	Motivation	Onto.
22	15	Missed out	Missed out on the trophy	Fail to obtain something	Possession	Fail to reach a specific achievement	Victory	Struct.
23	4	New dimension	Add a new dimension to his game	Additional spatial dimension	Space	An additional skill or tactical layer.	Skill	Struct.
24	3	On the trot	Third title on the trot	Horse running continuously	Horse Racing	Winning repeatedly	Success	Struct.
25	10	Opens (the journey)	Opens the playoff journey	Begin travelling	Journey	Start tournament campaign	Tournament	Struct.
26	8	Poison of success	Poison of success	Toxic substance	Toxin	Negative effects of fame	Fame	Onto.
27	4	Rip apart	Rip the champions apart	Tear violently	Physical Violence	Completely dominate the opponent	Competition	Struct.
28	1	Stride (take in his stride)	Take the World Cup in his stride	Walk confidently	Movement	Handle challenge easily	Problem Solving	Struct.
29	8	Thrived (on conflict)	Thrived on conflict	Grow strongly in environment	Growth	Perform better under pressure	Performance	Onto.
30	8	Turned against	Utterances turned against him	Physical turning	Movement	Words used to attack him	Criticism	Struct.

As can be seen from the two tables, a total of sixty lexical units were identified and listed, together with the sentences and the corresponding article numbers. The lexical units and their contextual meanings discussed Messi's career and performances. This illustration helps provide a clear overview of the linguistic expressions used by journalists when describing Messi in media discourse, which later allows readers to understand how the expressions function within the original texts rather than as isolated words.

As a result, the variety of language used in this football journalism with the aim of reflecting evaluative or descriptive highlights about Messi's skills, achievements, influence, and role within his teams, as journalists believe it helps emphasize his exceptional talent and creativity, focusing on important moments, challenges, or turning points in his professional career.

In addition, the lexical units collected in the tables provide the linguistic foundation for the analytical stage of this study. Several of these expressions show meanings that go beyond their basic or literal sense when used in the context of football reporting. Instead, they convey more abstract ideas or evaluations through figurative language. For this reason, examining these lexical units in their contexts is an important step in identifying metaphorical expressions within the corpus.

Finally, the two tables serve as the primary dataset for the study. They organize the relevant linguistic materials in a systematic way and make it possible to observe recurring patterns in the language used to describe Messi's performances and achievements. Based on this dataset, the next stage of the analysis focuses on identifying and interpreting the conceptual metaphors that structure these expressions in football media discourse.

4.3 Distribution of the three conceptual metaphors

After presenting the lexical units and their contextual meanings, the next step is to classify the metaphorical expressions according to the types of conceptual metaphors proposed by Lakoff and Johnson. Based on the above classification, the identified metaphors were grouped into three main categories: structural metaphors, ontological metaphors, and orientational metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The distribution of these metaphor types in the corpus is illustrated in Figure 4 below.

First of all, as shown in the figure, structural metaphors account for the largest proportion, representing 51% of the total metaphors identified in the ten articles. This suggests that journalists frequently use structured conceptual mappings to explain or to describe Messi's performances and achievements in football discourse. Secondly, ontological metaphors make up 42% of the data, indicating that abstract ideas related to Messi's career, abilities, or influence are often conceptualized as entities, objects, or substances. Lastly, orientational metaphors appear less frequently, accounting for only 7% of the total. These metaphors typically involve spatial orientations such as up, down, forward, or backward to express evaluation or progress.

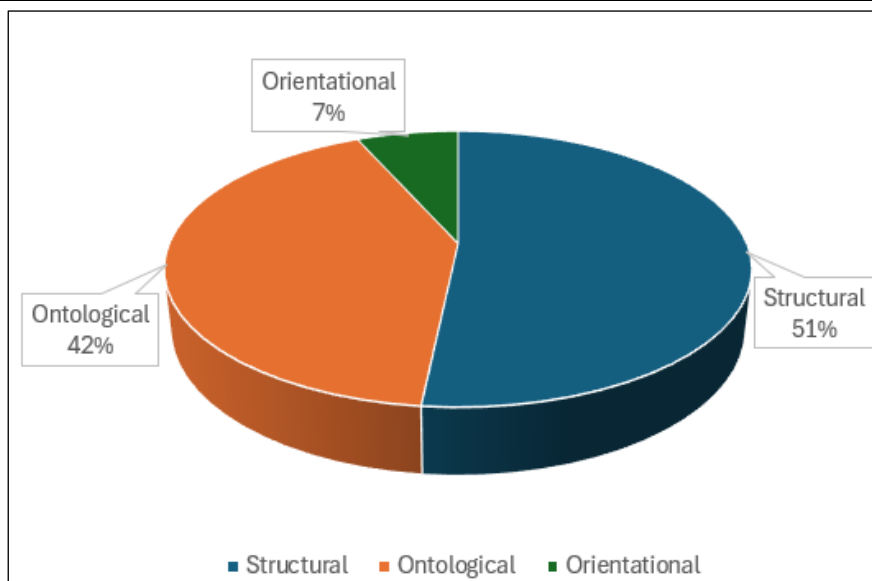


Figure 4: Distribution of the three main conceptual metaphors

To conclude, the distribution shown in the figure reveals that structural and ontological metaphors play a dominant role in shaping the linguistic representation of Messi in the selected online articles. This pattern highlights the importance of metaphorical language in football media discourse and provides a basis for further qualitative analysis of the conceptual metaphors identified in the corpus.

5. Discussion

5.1 Structural metaphors dominate football journalism

The analysis of the ten online articles shows that structural metaphor is the dominant type of conceptual metaphor, accounting for 51% of all metaphorical expressions identified in the corpus. This means that football journalists often explain football events and players' performances by mapping them onto other familiar domains with a clear structure to describe complex sporting actions in a way that readers can easily imagine and understand.

In the dataset, many lexical units illustrate this pattern. For example, the expressions such as *'rip apart'* -> *'a team decisively defeating an opponent'* and *'fatal error'* -> *'a critical mistake leading to defeat'* come from the domain of conflict and are used to describe some tense moments in a match. The expression *'attacking machine'* draws from the domain of machinery to emphasize *'Messi's highly efficient and consistent attacking ability'*. In this mapping, the player is described as a symbol of power in which the systematic and productive nature of machines is projected onto the player's performance, emphasizing reliability and continuous output, always positioned to defeat the opponent.

Similarly, the phrases such as *'career capstone'* and *'clean sweep of trophies'* highlight *'the final and most significant achievement of a career'* and *'winning all possible titles within a period'*, respectively. These examples show how journalists use structured conceptual

frameworks from other domains to interpret football performances and career milestones.

Most of the lexical units above are structured in the same way and play the dominant role in this mapping process. There are several reasons for this. First, football matches involve complex and fast-moving situations that can be difficult to describe in purely literal language. Structural metaphors provide a clear framework that helps journalists organize and present these events in a more vivid and understandable way. Second, sports journalism aims to create excitement and drama for readers. By using metaphors from domains such as conflict, machinery, or achievement, journalists can make match reports more vivid and engaging. In the end, the high frequency of structural metaphors allows readers to evaluate players' performances and highlight their strengths, as in the case of Messi, when his skills, influence, and achievements throughout his career are particularly described.

5.2 A football career is a journey

One of the most noticeable conceptual metaphors in the corpus is *A Football Career Is a Journey*. In this metaphor, Messi's professional development is conceptualized as movement along a path with different stages, challenges, and destinations. This metaphor helps journalists organize Messi's long and complex career into a clear narrative structure that readers can easily follow.

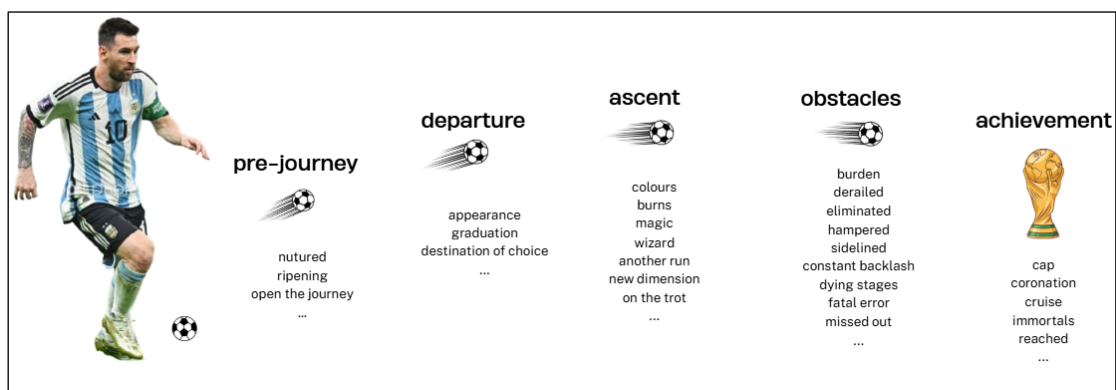


Figure 5: Metaphors through 5 stages of Messi's football journey

The metaphorical units identified in the corpus can be interpreted more clearly when organized according to the five stages of Messi's career, illustrated in Figure 5. These stages – *'pre-journey, departure, ascent, obstacles, and achievement'* - reflect how football journalism narratively structures a player's professional development. That does help transform Messi's career into a coherent and progressive story.

In the first place, in the pre-journey stage, lexical items such as *'nurtured, ripening'* and *'open the journey'* portray Messi as a young talent who is still developing before entering the professional stage. The verb *nurtured* suggests careful development and guidance, emphasizing how Barcelona's youth academy helped shape his early abilities. Similarly, *'ripening'* draws on a biological metaphor that describes gradual growth and

maturation. The phrase *'open the journey'* metaphorically signals the beginning of a future career path, suggesting that Messi's professional story is about to start as he soon debuted in the Barcelona football team.

Secondly, it is obviously seen that the departure stage marks Messi's transition into professional football through some expressions, such as *'appearance, graduation'* and *'destination of choice'*, which highlight this turning. *'Appearance'* refers to Messi's first official match at the senior level, symbolizing his entry onto the professional stage, *'graduation'* frames his progress from the youth academy to the first team as the completion of an educational process, while *'destination of choice'* presents a football club - Barcelona as a place where a player chooses to continue his career path.

Furthermore, in the ascent stage, there are a number of units which emphasize Messi's rapid rise and dominance in world football. Words such as *'magic, wizard'*, and *'burns'* describe his extraordinary skills and creative style of play. For instance, while *'wizard'* metaphorically portrays Messi as someone capable of producing almost supernatural football actions, *magic* highlights the spectacular and unpredictable quality of his performances. Other expressions, such as *'another run, new dimension'* and *'on the trot'* reflect sustained success and continuous progress, reinforcing the image of a player reaching higher levels of achievement.

Next, the obstacles stage reflects the difficulties which cannot be missed throughout any player's career. The lexical items such as *'derailed, hampered'* and *'sidelined'* underline challenges such as pressure, criticism, and injuries. At the same time, the word *'burden'* suggests the heavy expectations placed on Messi by the public, especially when representing the national team; meanwhile, *'derailed'* and *'hampered'* metaphorically describe situations in which progress is interrupted or slowed down, or expressions like *'constant backlash'* and *'fatal error'* highlight moments of public criticism or disappointment. Altogether, these metaphors illustrate that even a later highly successful career involves setbacks and challenges.

Finally, the achievement stage represents the culmination of Messi's long professional journey. The cluster of words such as *'cap, coronation, cruise, immortals'* and *'reached'* frame success as the final reward after years of effort. *'Coronation'* metaphorically portrays victory as a moment of being crowned as the best player, and *'immortals'* suggests that Messi and his team achieved a legendary status through their accomplishments. The verb *'reached'* presents success as arriving at an important destination, reinforcing the narrative of a long journey that ultimately leads to fulfilment.

After all, the distribution of these lexical units across the five stages demonstrates how football journalism constructs Messi's career as a dynamic and progressive narrative. Through metaphorical language, journalists transform sporting events into a structured story that highlights growth, struggle, and ultimate achievement.

5.3 A football match is a theatrical performance

Another conceptual metaphor emerging from the corpus is *A Football Match Is a Theatrical Performance*, where football competition is framed through the conceptual

structure of dramatic performance. In this metaphor, the football field corresponds to a stage, the players are conceptualized as actors, and matches unfold as dramatic narratives observed by an audience. Several lexical units illustrate this mapping. For example, *'hogs the light'* evokes the theatrical expression, which refers to a performer dominating audience attention on stage. When applied to the case of Messi, the phrase metaphorically portrays him as the central performer whose skills attract the focus of spectators and media coverage. Likewise, the expression *'silhouette'* constructs a visual image typical of stage lighting, where the outline of a performer becomes recognizable and iconic. In this context, Messi's figure is once portrayed as a symbolic image within the dramatic spectacle of football.

Other lexical items further reinforce the theatrical framing by emphasizing the extraordinary or magical quality of Messi's performance, such as *'wizard, magic'* and *'jewel'*. Their function as evaluative metaphors elevates Messi's abilities beyond ordinary athletic skill. The term *'wizard'* once implied supernatural mastery, suggesting that Messi performs seemingly impossible actions on the field, much like a magician captivating an audience. In the same way, *'magic'* frames his technical ability as enchanting and mysterious, reinforcing the perception of football as an artistic spectacle. Along the same line, *'jewel'* metaphorically portrays Messi as a precious and rare asset within the football *'show'* later emphasizing both value and brilliance.

This metaphor of *'a theatrical performance'* is also evident in expressions describing Messi's public recognition. The phrase *'household name'* signals a level of fame comparable to that of celebrated performers whose reputations extend far beyond the stadium. Through such expressions, media discourse constructs Messi not only as an athlete but also as a globally recognized figure within a highly dramatized sporting spectacle.

On the whole, within this narrative structure, Messi is depicted as the leading performer whose skill, charisma, and creativity transform matches into dramatic events. This metaphor frames football as a form of public entertainment where players perform roles for an audience and therefore contributes to the media construction of Messi's football career by emphasizing spectacle, artistry, and star power.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined the use of conceptual metaphors in online football journalism through the analysis of media narratives about Lionel Messi, a global football icon. Drawing on the framework of CMT and applying the procedure of MIPVU, the research systematically identified the ten online articles and came to the findings that demonstrate how metaphorical language is used to represent football events and athletes' careers.

Two major conceptual metaphors emerged from the analysis. The metaphor *A Football Career Is a Journey* organizes Messi's career into stages of development, including preparation, progress, challenges, and achievement. This metaphor allows journalists to narrate the player's long and complex professional trajectory in a coherent and meaningful way. Meanwhile, the metaphor *A Football Match Is a Theatrical*

Performance highlights the dramatic and spectacular aspects of football, portraying players as performers whose actions attract the attention of audiences and media.

All in all, these findings suggest that metaphor is a powerful linguistic and cognitive tool in sports journalism. By mapping football experiences onto familiar conceptual domains, journalists are seen to be able to present sporting events in a vivid and engaging narrative form. In the end, this study contributes to research on metaphor in media discourse and provides further evidence of the role of conceptual metaphor in shaping the public representation of sports and athletic achievement.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. This research was conducted independently, and no financial or personal relationships exist that could inappropriately influence or bias the findings presented in this study.

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