

A Cognitive Study on the Meaning Construction Process of Novel Metaphors in *Fortress Besieged* from the Perspective of Conceptual Integration Theory

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Abstract

As an important literary device, metaphor plays a central role in the construction of novel meaning and aesthetic expression. *Fortress Besieged* is renowned for its concise metaphorical language and profound satirical style. However, existing research mostly focuses on the rhetorical and symbolic aspects, with insufficient exploration of the cognitive mechanisms behind it. This study, based on the integrated framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and Conceptual Fusion Theory (CBT), analyzes the dynamic generation process of innovative metaphors in *Fortress Besieged*. The study employed the Metaphor Identification Program (MIP) to identify 37 metaphorical expressions and selected 12 representative cases for analysis. The focus was on examining cognitive mechanisms such as input space construction, cross-domain mapping, selective projection, and structural compression. The results show that the innovative metaphor in *Fortress Besieged* is not a static rhetoric, but a dynamically generated cognitive structure in the interaction of multiple psychological Spaces. Its satire and thematic significance gradually emerge through structural compression, character integration and narrative advancement. Based on this, this study proposes the concept of "dynamic integration network" to explain the expansion and reconfiguration mechanism of metaphorical meanings in the narrative. This study extends CBT to the field of literary metaphor analysis, providing a new interpretive approach for the interdisciplinary research of cognitive linguistics and literary criticism.

Keywords

Conceptual Blending Theory; novel metaphor; *Fortress Besieged*; dynamic blending network.

1. Introduction

As an important work of modern Chinese literature, *Fortress Besieged* is renowned for its witty, detached and highly satirical language style. The extensive use of novel metaphors not only constitutes an important source of the aesthetic charm of this novel, but also serves as the core means for depicting characters and expressing themes. By constructing metaphors that transcend conventional cognitive patterns, Qian Zhongshu enabled daily experiences to acquire a new structured understanding, thereby revealing the survival predicament of modern intellectuals at the linguistic level.

Previous studies have mainly focused on the satirical art of novels, cultural critical interpretation, and symbolic interpretation of the "fortress besieged" image, often regarding

this metaphor as a single symbolic model. However, systematic research on the novel's metaphors is relatively limited. In particular, few studies have explored the dynamic mechanism of metaphor meaning construction from a comprehensive perspective that combines the theory of conceptual metaphor and the theory of conceptual integration [1, 2]. In fact, novel metaphors are not merely rhetorical embellishments; instead, they are reconstructed meanings through cross-domain mapping and cognitive integration processes. Therefore, this study aims to address the issue of insufficient attention to the dynamic integration mechanism in current literary metaphor research. By constructing a comprehensive analytical framework that combines the theory of conceptual metaphor and the theory of conceptual integration to overcome the limitations of single theoretical methods. Through the analysis of representative novel metaphors in *Fortress Besieged*, this study has developed a dynamic cognitive analysis model to reveal the cognitive mechanisms and narrative functions behind the construction of metaphorical meanings, aiming to deepen the cognitive interpretation of the language art of novels.

2. Theoretical Foundations and Analytical Framework

2.1. Conceptual Metaphor Theory: The Basis of Cross-Domain Mapping

Since the emergence of cognitive linguistics in the 1980s, the traditional understanding of metaphor has undergone a fundamental transformation. In the book "The Metaphor We Live By", George Lakoff and Mark Johnson [3] proposed that metaphor is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but a systematic cognitive mechanism for understanding abstract concepts through specific experiential domains. George Lakoff [4] further elaborated on the cognitive structure of metaphor from the perspective of "cross-domain mapping", emphasizing the systematic correspondence between the source domain and the target domain. However, this theory has limited explanatory power for the online and dynamic generation of meaning [5].

Within this framework, metaphor is regarded as a relatively stable conceptual mapping structure, such as "an argument is a war" and "life is a journey". This theory provides important methodological support for literary language research [6] and has been widely applied in literary discourse analysis. However, it mainly explains conventional structural metaphors and has a poor explanatory effect on highly innovative and novel metaphors in literary texts.

2.2. Development of Conceptual Blending Theory

Although Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) has been highly influential in explaining conventional metaphorical mappings, it has certain limitations in accounting for the highly creative and context-dependent nature of novel metaphors in literary discourse. As Fauconnier and Turner argue in *How We Think* [7], meaning construction is not simply the result of source-target mappings between two conceptual domains. Rather, meaning emerges dynamically through selective projection and the compression of vital relations across multiple mental spaces within a blended space. Conceptual Blending Theory (CBT) emphasizes online meaning construction, contextual integration, and emergent structure, making it particularly well suited to explaining the complex, multilayered, and cross-domain metaphorical patterns found in literary texts. More importantly, CBT provides a more powerful account of how multiple mental spaces interact dynamically during the process of meaning construction [7, 8]. In recent years, Chinese scholars have increasingly applied Conceptual Blending Theory to literary analysis. For example, Wang Yin [9] argues that CBT offers significant advantages in explaining creative literary expressions, while Fang Shudin [10] emphasizes that literary metaphors often involve complex blending networks composed of multiple input spaces rather than simple source-target mappings.

Therefore, CMT alone is insufficient to fully explain the cognitive mechanisms underlying the creation of novel metaphors. Integrating the stable cross-domain correspondences emphasized by CMT with the dynamic blending networks proposed by CBT provides a more comprehensive cognitive framework for explaining the creativity and meaning construction of literary metaphors.

2.3. Current Research on Literary Metaphor

In the international academic community, research on literary metaphor has gradually shifted from rhetorical description to the exploration of cognitive mechanisms. Semino [6] argues that literary metaphor achieves its aesthetic effects by reconfiguring and transforming conventional conceptual patterns. From the perspective of cognitive poetics, Stockwell [11] emphasizes that literary language activates readers' interpretive processes by disrupting habitual cognitive patterns. The function of metaphor in narrative is not limited to image construction but also involves processes of cognitive and narrative meaning construction [12, 13]. Recent studies further highlight the role of Conceptual Blending Theory (CBT) in literary innovation, suggesting that novel metaphors often create defamiliarization effects by violating conventional mapping constraints and generating emergent structure within the blended space. In China, extensive research has been conducted on *Fortress Besieged*, which can generally be categorized into three approaches: studies of satirical style and linguistic features, analyses of character representation and cultural criticism, and symbolic interpretations of the "besieged fortress" image. Existing studies typically interpret the "fortress" as a symbolic structure representing marital or existential. However, most of this research remains at the level of symbolic interpretation and lacks a systematic account of its cognitive generative mechanisms. Even in metaphor studies, rhetorical and traditional symbolic approaches still dominate, while the application of Conceptual Blending Theory remains relatively limited.

More importantly, existing research often treats the "besieged fortress" metaphor as a single, fixed symbolic model, overlooking its dynamic processes of expansion, restructuring, and reintegration across different narrative contexts. In other words, the academic community has not yet fully explored the "dynamic blending network" underlying the novel metaphors in *Fortress Besieged*.

In this study, the term "dynamic blending network" refers to the process in which metaphorical meaning is not produced instantaneously but is continuously reconstructed and expanded through interactions among multiple mental spaces during narrative progression, thereby forming a hierarchical and evolving blended structure. This mechanism constitutes an important source of the novel's linguistic creativity.

Therefore, from an integrated perspective combining Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and Conceptual Blending Theory (CBT), a systematic analysis of the dynamic blending network of novel metaphors in *Fortress Besieged* can not only address a gap in existing research but also further promote the interdisciplinary integration of cognitive linguistics and literary studies at a theoretical level.

2.4. Theoretical Integration and the "Dynamic Blending Network" Model

Although both Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and Conceptual Blending Theory (CBT) have made significant contributions to metaphor research, each exhibits limitations when applied independently to literary discourse analysis. CMT primarily accounts for stable cross-domain correspondences between source and target domains, thereby revealing the conceptual foundations of metaphorical cognition. However, it is relatively limited in explaining contextual emergence, semantic creativity, and the dynamic extension of highly innovative literary metaphors. In contrast, CBT emphasizes online meaning construction through the interaction of multiple mental spaces, selective projection, and vital relations compression. Nevertheless,

when applied in isolation, it may underemphasize the relatively stable conceptual structures that support metaphor comprehension.

To address these limitations, this study integrates CMT and CBT within a unified analytical framework. Within this framework, CMT accounts for the relatively stable conceptual mappings underlying metaphorical structures, while CBT explains the dynamic construction of meaning in specific narrative contexts. The analytical focus therefore shifts from static conceptual mapping to dynamic conceptual integration.

More specifically, the analytical procedure consists of three interrelated stages. First, Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) is employed to identify source–target mappings and underlying conceptual correspondences in metaphorical expressions. Second, Conceptual Blending Theory (CBT) is applied to examine interactions among multiple mental spaces, including selective projection, role integration, and structural compression. Finally, the study explores how metaphorical meaning is progressively extended within narrative contexts, thereby forming what is termed a “dynamic blending network.”

The term “dynamic blending network” refers to a hierarchical and evolving conceptual integration structure in which metaphorical meaning is continuously reconstructed through recursive interactions among mental spaces, contextual reinforcement, and semantic compression. Rather than emerging instantaneously, metaphorical meaning develops progressively through narrative unfolding, enabling the accumulation of additional thematic, psychological, and satirical layers in *Fortress Besieged*.

In this model (see Figure 1), the metaphor “the besieged fortress” functions as a recursive cognitive node rather than a fixed symbolic structure. Different narrative contexts repeatedly activate and reconfigure this blending network, allowing the metaphor to evolve from a representation of marital confinement into a broader conceptualization of human entrapment and existential survival.

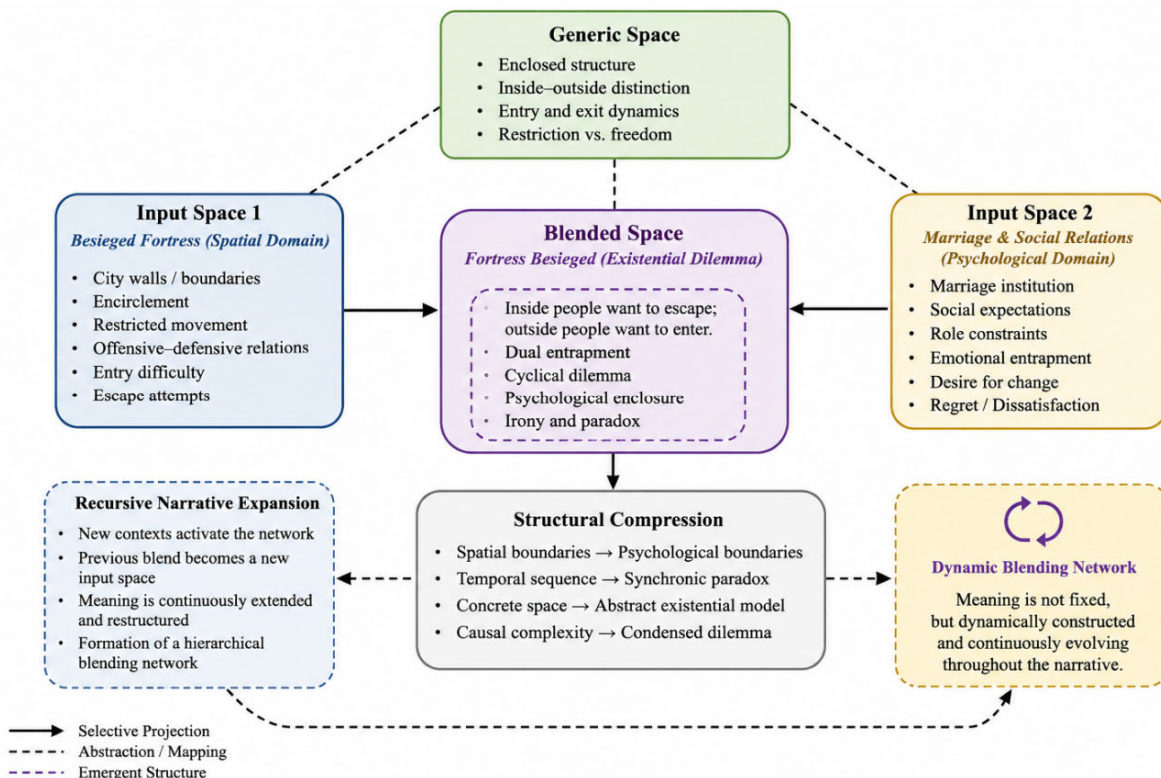


Figure 1. Dynamic Blending Network Model

3. Research Design and Analytical Procedure

Based on the theory of cognitive linguistics, this study explores the meaning construction mechanism of the newly emerged metaphors in *Fortress Besieged* through meticulous text interpretation and concept integration analysis. This study adopted a qualitative cognitive poetics approach, supplemented by a metaphor recognition program.

3.1. Data Selection

The corpus of this study is taken from Qian Zhongshu's *Fortress Besieged*. Through repeated and meticulous reading of this novel, a total of 37 metaphorical expressions were initially identified. Among them, 12 representative novel metaphors were selected for a detailed cognitive analysis. The selection of metaphorical expressions was based on the following three criteria: the expression clearly demonstrates cross-domain conceptual mapping; the metaphor has unconventional semantics or creative context; the metaphor plays an important narrative, psychological or satirical function in the text. These criteria ensure that the selected data is both representative and relevant to the research goal of exploring the construction of metaphorical meanings in the novel, in terms of the analysis.

3.2. Operational Definition of Metaphor Identification Procedure

This study adopted the metaphor identification procedure (MIP) proposed by the Pragglejaz Group as the main method for metaphor identification.

The identification process consists of four stages: Firstly, the text is divided into lexical units according to their direct narrative context. The contextual meaning of each lexical unit is examined based on its specific narrative and argumentative functions. By consulting dictionaries and comparing their basic meanings with the contextual meanings, the basic meaning of each lexical item is verified. If there is a difference between the contextual meaning and the basic meaning, and this difference can be understood through cross-domain mapping, then the expression is identified as a metaphor.

3.3. Analytical Procedure

After the metaphor identification is completed, this study analyzes the selected new metaphors within the comprehensive CMT-CBT framework. The overall analysis consists of four stages: identifying the source domain and target domain concept mapping; constructing the input space and the general space; analyzing selective projection and structural compression; and examining the recursive expansion process of metaphors in the narrative context, with a focus on the dynamic evolution of metaphorical meanings in the narrative process rather than regarding them as isolated symbolic structures. Under the guidance of cognitive linguistics theory, this study conducts a systematic analysis of the new metaphors in *Fortress Besieged* by closely reading the text and combining it with the concept fusion analysis framework. The aim is to reveal the cognitive mechanism of the generation of new metaphors in literary discourse, with a particular focus on how the metaphorical meanings are dynamically constructed through concept integration in specific contexts. The corpus is mainly selected from Qian Zhongshu's *Fortress Besieged*. The screening of metaphorical expressions is based on three criteria: having the feature of cross-domain concept mapping, having semantic innovation or non-idiomatic nature, and having an important function in narrative development or character portrayal, thereby reflecting the author's satirical style and cognitive expression characteristics, to ensure the representativeness of the corpus and the creative features of literary metaphors. In terms of metaphor identification, this study uses the metaphor identification program (MIP) proposed by the Pragglejaz Group [14] for preliminary analysis: first, determine the contextual meaning of the words; then, determine their basic meaning through the dictionary; and compare the differences between the two. If the difference can be explained through cross-

domain mapping, it is determined as a metaphor; on this basis, the most creative metaphor expressions are defined as "novel metaphors" and serve as the core object of subsequent cognitive analysis.

4. Meaning Construction Mechanisms of Novel Metaphors in Fortress Besieged

Based on the comprehensive theoretical framework of "Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT)" and "Conceptual Blending Theory (CBT)" established in the previous section, this chapter selects representative metaphorical expressions from "The Siege" and examines their meaning construction process in different cognitive spaces through detailed textual analysis.

4.1. The Core Image: The Dynamic Blending Mechanism of "Fortress Besieged" Metaphor

The *Fortress Besieged* constitutes the core metaphorical structure of "Fortress Besieged" and reflects its basic cognitive mapping: Life's predicament = besieged fortress. The classic expression "Those outside the city want to rush in, while those inside the city want to escape" establishes a stable spatial contrast relationship within the CMT framework. Here, "fortress" activates the imagery of boundaries, restrictions and closure, the "inside/outside" opposition constitutes the conceptual tension of desire and escape, and "enter/leave" highlights the dynamic nature of the cross-border movement.

In the CBT framework, Input Space 1 represents the military siege scenario (with a closed structure and offensive-defensive relationship), while Input Space 2 represents marital and social relationship experiences (with restrictive and psychological frustration experiences). The General Space abstracts structural relationships such as boundaries, limitations, and unfulfilled desires. In the Fusion Space, the physical "fortress" is compressed into an existential dilemma structure, and through the time dimension, the coexistence of expectations and disappointments is compressed to generate a sense of irony.

This metaphor is not a static mapping, but is continuously activated and restructured throughout the narrative process; its meaning can recursively expand in different contexts such as marriage, career, and existential anxiety, reflecting the continuous generation and reconfiguration mechanism of meaning in the "dynamic integration network".

4.2. Critical Novel Metaphors: The Cognitive Construction of "Finding Bones in an Egg"

This novel contains numerous satirical expressions, which reveal potential social critical dimensions through metaphorical mechanisms. In various contexts, the descriptions of evaluation and critical actions are presented in a metaphorical way, thereby reflecting the ironic structure of social criticism itself. Among them, "finding a bone in an egg" is a representative analytical case.

From the perspective of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), this expression involves cross-domain mapping relationships. This case demonstrates that the key mechanism of the new metaphor lies in re-encoding the originally neutral behavior as irrational or absurd behavior through structural reorganization and evaluation compression, thereby enhancing the satirical effect of the text. This process reflects the cognitive transformation mechanism from behavioral analogy to evaluation structure reconstruction.

4.3. Psychological Metaphors: The Spatial Construction of Anxiety

From the perspective of the Conceptual Blending Theory (CBT), the construction of the meaning of the new metaphor involves four stages: the construction of the input space, the cross-space mapping, the selective projection, and the structural compression. The context first activates

multiple input spaces, such as the "fortress space" and the space of marriage/social relationships, and establishes cross-domain connections through structural correspondence. For example, images like "internal and external distinction" and "restricted entry and exit" are projected into social experience.

In the integrated space, the context determines the content of the selective projection, such as key semantic features like "closure" and "constraint"; subsequently, through time, causality and role compression, a unified conceptual structure is formed. The new metaphor continuously expands the integration network in the narrative context, evolving from a single mapping to a multi-layered structure, thereby constituting the source of its cognitive and aesthetic tension.

5. The Literary Functions of the Dynamic Blending Network

The novel metaphor in *Fortress Besieged* not only involves the construction of meaning, but also plays an important role in narrative and literature. Firstly, these metaphors enhance the depiction of characters' psychology by integrating abstract emotions into specific cognitive patterns, thereby increasing the readers' cognitive engagement. Secondly, the structure of these metaphors deepens the expression of the theme, presenting the survival dilemma between advancement and retreat through the core image of "the besieged fortress", forming a cognitive theme that runs through the entire work. Moreover, these metaphors in the novels enhance the irony of the narrative through semantic substitution and conceptual conflicts, creating cognitive dissonance in the comprehensive space and triggering humor and critical reflection.

From an aesthetic perspective, these metaphors achieve a sense of estrangement by breaking the conventional cognitive path, prompting readers to actively reconstruct meaning. Cognitive engagement itself constitutes an important source of aesthetic experience. Therefore, their literary value lies not only in the richness of semantics but also in the ability to stimulate readers to reorganize concepts.

Based on the analysis of core metaphors and psychological metaphors, this study constructs an interpretive framework based on the concept integration network. The results show that the metaphors in *Fortress Besieged* are not static symbols, but a dynamic meaning generation system formed by the interaction of multiple psychological Spaces.

Theoretically, CMT provides a stable cross-domain mapping foundation, while CBT explains the online meaning generation process in the context. The combination of the two can reveal the cognitive generation mechanism of metaphors, thus transcending traditional symbol interpretation methods. This study further validates the explanatory power of this comprehensive framework and provides an analytical path that balances structural stability and dynamic generation for the study of literary metaphors.

6. Conclusion

Under the comprehensive framework of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and the Conceptual Fusion Theory (CBT), the new metaphor in *Fortress Besieged* should be understood as a dynamic cognitive process driven by the interaction and structural compression of multiple conceptual Spaces, rather than a static rhetorical correspondence. The metaphorical meaning continuously generates, expands and reorganizes during the narrative progression, ultimately forming a hierarchical dynamic integration network.

This study verified the cognitive model by carefully analyzing the text, and integrated the stable cross-domain mapping of CMT with the online meaning generation mechanism of CBT, thereby transcending the single mapping analysis approach. At the same time, the concept of "dynamic fusion network" was proposed to explain the recursive expansion and structural reconfiguration mechanism of metaphorical meaning in narrative contexts.

Theoretically, this study expands the applicable scope of CBT in literary text analysis and enhances its explanatory power for complex metaphorical structures; methodologically, it demonstrates an analytical approach that combines close reading of the text with cognitive modeling. Although this study is mainly based on qualitative analysis and has a limited sample size, its explanatory framework is scalable.

Overall, the metaphorical meanings in *Fortress Besieged* are not fixed symbol mappings but continuously generated in the integration of dynamic concepts, revealing the complex cognitive structure and mechanism-based creativity deep in Qian Zhongshu's literary language.

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