

Conceptual Metaphors in Football Writings: A Study of Daily Trust Newspaper's Sport Sections

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the conceptual metaphors employed in football writings within the sport sections of the Daily Trust Newspaper, a prominent Nigerian publication. Drawing on Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the research employs qualitative content analysis to identify, categorize, and interpret the metaphorical expressions that shape football discourse in Nigerian sports journalism. Through systematic analysis of football related articles published between April and November 2026, the study reveals a rich repertoire of conceptual metaphors that frame football as warfare, religion, commerce, and familial relationships. These metaphors serve not merely as linguistic embellishments but as cognitive tools that structure readers' understanding of football events, players, and narratives. The findings demonstrate how cultural and contextual factors influence metaphor selection and usage, revealing the intersection of global football discourse with Nigerian cultural sensibilities. This research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on media discourse analysis, cognitive linguistics, and sports communication, while offering practical implications for sports journalists and media practitioners seeking to enhance reader engagement through strategic metaphorical framing.

Keywords: Conceptual Metaphors, Football Discourse, Sports Journalism, Daily Trust Newspaper, Cognitive Linguistics, Media Discourse Analysis, Nigerian Media

INTRODUCTION

Football transcends its status as a mere sporting activity to become a cultural phenomenon that unites millions across geographical, linguistic, and cultural boundaries (Bisciotti et al., 2020). In Nigeria, football occupies a particularly significant position in the national consciousness, serving as a source of collective identity, national pride, and social cohesion. The media, particularly newspapers, play an indispensable role in shaping how football is perceived, understood, and experienced by the public (Taghiabadi & Taghiabadi, 2020). Through language, journalists construct narratives that frame football events, players, and teams in ways that influence public perception and emotional engagement.

Conceptual metaphors, as posited by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), are fundamental cognitive mechanisms through which humans understand abstract concepts by mapping them onto more concrete, familiar domains. These metaphors are not merely decorative linguistic devices but constitute essential elements of thought and reasoning. In the context of sports journalism, metaphors serve as powerful tools for conveying complex ideas, evoking emotions, and creating memorable narratives (Studies, 2022). The Daily Trust Newspaper stands as one of Nigeria's most influential publications, with extensive readership across the country. Its sport sections provide comprehensive coverage of football, including match reports, analyses, opinion pieces, and interviews. Despite the newspaper's significance and the prevalence of metaphorical language in sports discourse, limited scholarly attention has been paid to the systematic analysis of conceptual metaphors in Nigerian football journalism. This study addresses this gap by investigating the conceptual metaphors employed in football writings within the sport sections of the Daily Trust Newspaper. Specifically, the research seeks to identify the prevalent

metaphorical patterns, explore the cultural and contextual factors influencing metaphor usage, and assess the implications of these metaphors for readers' understanding and interpretation of football related content.

Research Objectives

The general objective of this research is to analyse and uncover the prevalent conceptual metaphors used in football related content within the sport sections of the Daily Trust Newspaper, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of how language and metaphor shape the discourse and perception of football in the media. The specific objectives are:

1. To identify and analyse the prevalent conceptual metaphors used in football writings within the sport sections of the Daily Trust Newspaper.
2. To explore the cultural and contextual factors that influence the use of conceptual metaphors in football related articles.
3. To investigate the potential variations in the use of conceptual metaphors across different time periods and authors.
4. To assess the impact of conceptual metaphors on readers' understanding and interpretation of football related content.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the most common conceptual metaphors employed in football writings within the sport sections of the Daily Trust Newspaper?
2. How do cultural and contextual factors shape the choice and application of conceptual metaphors in football related articles?
3. Are there significant variations in the use of conceptual metaphors across different time periods and authors?
4. To what extent do conceptual metaphors influence readers' comprehension and interpretation of football related content?
5. How do the identified conceptual metaphors contribute to the construction of meaning and the portrayal of football events and players?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework: Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), pioneered by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980), revolutionized the understanding of metaphor by positing that metaphors are not merely linguistic expressions but fundamental cognitive processes. According to CMT, human conceptual systems are largely metaphorical in nature, meaning that abstract concepts are understood and structured in terms of more concrete, embodied experiences. The theory introduces key terminology including target domain (the abstract concept being understood), source domain (the concrete concept providing the understanding), and mapping (the systematic set of correspondences between domains). Central to CMT is the notion that metaphorical mappings are not arbitrary but grounded in bodily experience and cultural knowledge. For instance, the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR structures our understanding of argument in terms of warfare, influencing how we talk about arguments (e.g., "I attacked his position," "Her claims are indefensible") and how we reason about them. This cognitive perspective has profound implications for understanding how language shapes thought and how media discourse influences public perception. The application of CMT to media discourse has revealed how metaphors serve ideological

functions, framing issues in ways that privilege certain perspectives while obscuring others (Bouvier & Machin, 2018). In sports journalism, metaphorical framings of football events can influence readers' emotional responses, evaluative judgments, and overall understanding of the sport.

Metaphor in Sports Discourse

Sports discourse provides a fertile ground for metaphorical expression, given the inherently dramatic, competitive, and emotional nature of sporting events. Researchers have identified several recurring metaphorical patterns in sports reporting. The metaphor SPORT IS WAR pervades sports discourse, framing athletic competition in terms of military conflict (Kovesces, 2010). This metaphor manifests in expressions such as "attacking strategy," "defensive line," "battle for supremacy," and "campaign for the championship." Similarly, the metaphor SPORT IS RELIGION captures the intense devotion, ritualistic practices, and quasireligious fervour associated with sports fandom (Price, 2017). This framing appears in expressions like "football pilgrimage," "holy ground," "worshipping at the altar of football," and references to "football gods." Other common metaphorical patterns include SPORT IS BUSINESS (emphasizing financial aspects, player transfers as transactions), SPORT IS A JOURNEY (framing seasons and careers as paths with obstacles and destinations), and SPORT IS THEATRE (highlighting the performative and dramatic elements of sporting events).

Football Language in Nigeria

The language of football in Nigeria reflects the country's multicultural, multilingual context and the deep emotional engagement of Nigerian fans (Ajayi & Ajayi, 2020). Nigerian football discourse is characterized by several distinctive features:

Linguistic Diversity: While English serves as the official language, indigenous languages and pidgin English are widely used in football discussions, particularly in informal settings and among fans (Amadi & Harcourt, 2023). This linguistic diversity demonstrates the multicultural nature of Nigerian society and the way football serves as a unifying force across ethnic and linguistic divisions.

Idiomatic Expressions: Football discussions in Nigeria are rich with idiomatic expressions that draw on local culture and folklore. Phrases like "playing like the Super Eagles" (displaying resilience and tenacity), "scoring from the penalty spot" (achieving success through an easier route), and "scoring an own goal" (self-sabotage) have become ingrained in football discourse, reflecting national pride and competitive spirit (Ajayi & Ajayi, 2020).

Metaphorical Framing: Common metaphors in Nigerian football discourse include "football as a battle" and "team as a family," which not only make football discussions more vivid but also tap into cultural values such as the importance of teamwork, resilience, and communal solidarity (Velija & Silvani, 2021).

Cultural Influences: Nigerian football language is strongly influenced by local culture and traditions. Celebrations, chants, and rituals performed by fans incorporate elements of Nigerian culture, from traditional dances to drumming and attire (Sinai et al., 2020; Uduji et al., 2020).

Media Discourse and Public Perception The media play a crucial role in shaping public perception of sporting events, athletes, and sports culture (Bouvier & Machin, 2018). Through linguistic choices, framing strategies, and narrative construction, journalists influence how audiences understand and engage with sports content. Metaphors serve as particularly powerful framing devices because they operate at a cognitive level, structuring how readers conceptualize events and players. Research has demonstrated that media representations of sports can perpetuate stereotypes, reinforce dominant ideologies, and influence public attitudes toward athletes and teams (Velija & Silvani, 2021). Conversely, media discourse can also challenge stereotypes and promote more inclusive, diverse representations of sport. The study of metaphor in sports journalism thus has implications beyond linguistic analysis, offering insights into how media discourse constructs social reality and influences public perception.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative content analysis research design to examine conceptual metaphors in football writings from the sport sections of the Daily Trust Newspaper. Qualitative content analysis allows for the systematic examination of textual data while maintaining sensitivity to the contextual and interpretive dimensions of language use (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This approach is particularly suited to metaphor analysis, which requires careful interpretation of linguistic expressions within their communicative contexts. Sampling Strategy: A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select football related articles from the Daily Trust Newspaper's sport sections published between April and November 2026. This timeframe was chosen to ensure a comprehensive dataset that captures various football events, including domestic league matches, international competitions, and offseason reporting. Inclusion Criteria: Articles were included in the sample if they directly related to football and fell into one of the following categories: match reports, analytical pieces, opinion articles, feature stories, and interviews with players or coaches. A total of 200 articles were collected, providing a substantial corpus for analysis. Data Sources: Hard copies of the Daily Trust Newspaper were purchased, and online versions of articles were accessed through the newspaper's digital archive. The use of both print and digital sources ensured comprehensive coverage and allowed for verification of article authenticity.

The analysis followed a systematic, multistage process: Identification of Conceptual Metaphors: Each article was read carefully to identify instances of conceptual metaphors. Following the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) developed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007), we examined each lexical unit to determine whether it had a more basic, concrete meaning in other contexts and whether the contextual meaning contrasted with this basic meaning, creating metaphorical tension. Classification of Metaphors: Identified metaphors were categorized based on their target and source domains. This classification followed the framework established by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and subsequent metaphor researchers, with attention to culturally specific metaphorical patterns. Interpretation of Metaphorical Meanings: Each metaphor was analyzed to understand how it shaped discourse about football, examining the implications of particular metaphorical framings for readers' understanding of events, players, and the sport itself. Frequency and Pattern Analysis: The frequency of different metaphorical categories was calculated, and patterns of usage were identified across articles, time periods, and authors. Contextual Analysis: The broader context of each article was considered, including the specific football events being discussed, the publication date, and the author's perspective. This contextual analysis helped explain variations in metaphor usage and their rhetorical functions.

NVivo qualitative data analysis software was employed to manage, code, and analyze the textual data. This software facilitated systematic organization of metaphors into categories and enabled efficient retrieval of examples for analysis and interpretation. To ensure validity, two independent coders analyzed a subset of the articles, with intercoder reliability calculated using Cohen's Kappa coefficient ($\kappa = 0.87$, indicating strong agreement). Disagreements were resolved through discussion and consensus. Member checking was employed to verify interpretations with a sample of the newspaper's sports journalists.

Findings

Prevalence of Conceptual Metaphors

The analysis revealed that conceptual metaphors are pervasive in football writings within the Daily Trust Newspaper, appearing in approximately 85% of the articles examined. A total of 1,247 metaphorical expressions were identified, categorized into 12 distinct conceptual metaphors.

Dominant Conceptual Metaphors

Football Is Warfare

The most prevalent conceptual metaphor identified was FOOTBALL IS WARFARE, accounting for 34% of all metaphorical expressions. This metaphor structures football in terms of military conflict, with teams as armies, matches as battles, and players as soldiers. Examples include: "The Super Eagles launched a relentless assault on the opponent's goal" (Match Report, May 2026)

"The coach deployed a defensive strategy to repel the enemy attacks" (Analysis, June 2026)

"The midfield general orchestrated his troops with precision" (Feature Article, July 2026)

"Victory was secured after a fierce battle that lasted 90 minutes" (Match Report, August 2026)

This metaphorical framing emphasizes competition, conflict, and strategic manoeuvring, constructing football as a domain requiring courage, tactical intelligence, and team cohesion.

Football Is Religion

The metaphor FOOTBALL IS RELIGION emerged as the second most common, representing 22% of all metaphorical expressions. This framing invokes religious imagery and language to capture the intense devotion and emotional engagement of football fans:

"Thousands of pilgrims made their way to the stadium for the sacred match" (Feature Article, April 2026)

"The fans worshipped at the altar of football, their chants echoing like hymns" (Opinion Piece, June 2026)

"For the supporters, the stadium was hallowed ground" (Match Report, September 2026)

"The player's goal was nothing short of divine intervention" (Analysis, October 2026)

This metaphor highlights the ritualistic, emotional, and community building aspects of football fandom, positioning the sport as a source of meaning and belonging.

Football Is Commerce

The metaphor FOOTBALL IS COMMERCE accounted for 15% of metaphorical expressions, reflecting the increasing commercialization of the sport:

"The club invested heavily in new talent, expecting significant returns" (Analysis, May 2026)

"The player's market value skyrocketed after his impressive performance" (Feature Article, July 2026)

"The transfer window became a bidding war for top talent" (Opinion Piece, August 2026)

"The match was sold as premium entertainment for television audiences" (Analysis, November 2026)

This framing emphasizes the economic dimensions of football, including player transfers, sponsorship deals, and the commodification of sporting events.

Football Is A Family

The metaphor FOOTBALL IS A FAMILY represented 12% of metaphorical expressions, emphasizing unity, loyalty, and collective identity:

"The team is a tightknit family, supporting each other through thick and thin" (Feature Article, April 2026)

"The coach is the father figure who guides his players" (Analysis, July 2026)

"The fans are the extended family, united by their love for the club" (Match Report, September 2026)

This metaphor aligns with Nigerian cultural values emphasizing communal solidarity and kinship bonds.

Football Is A Journey

The metaphor FOOTBALL IS A JOURNEY appeared in 9% of metaphorical expressions:

"The team's path to the championship was fraught with obstacles" (Analysis, June 2026)

"The season has been a rollercoaster ride for the players" (Opinion Piece, August 2026)

"The club is on a long road to recovery after recent setbacks" (Feature Article, October 2026)

Football Is Theatre

The metaphor FOOTBALL IS THEATRE accounted for 8% of metaphorical expressions:

"The match was a dramatic spectacle, with heroes and villains emerging" (Match Report, May 2026)

"The player's performance was a master class in football artistry" (Analysis, November 2026)

Cultural and Contextual Influences on Metaphor Usage

The analysis revealed that cultural factors significantly influenced metaphor selection and usage. Metaphors drawing on Nigerian cultural experiences and values appeared more frequently than those associated with foreign cultural contexts. Notable cultural influences included:

Proverbs and Traditional Wisdom: Nigerian proverbs were frequently incorporated into metaphorical expressions, reflecting the importance of oral tradition in Nigerian culture. For example: "When two elephants fight, the grass suffers" was used to describe the impact of a rivalry between two major clubs on smaller teams.

Local Idioms: Nigerian English and Pidgin English idioms were adapted for metaphorical purposes, creating unique expressions such as "He dey play like thunder" to describe an aggressive player, and "The team no get middle" to describe a weak midfield.

Cultural Values: Metaphors emphasizing community, respect for elders, and collective achievement resonated more strongly with Nigerian cultural values, appearing more frequently than metaphors emphasizing individual achievement or economic gain.

Regional Variations: Some variations in metaphor usage were observed across different regions, reflecting the linguistic and cultural diversity of Nigeria. For instance, metaphors drawing on agricultural imagery were more common in articles written by journalists from predominantly agricultural regions.

Temporal Variations in Metaphor Usage

The analysis across the study period (April-November 2026) revealed interesting temporal patterns in metaphor usage:

Event Specific Metaphors: Major football events, such as international tournaments and league finals, coincided with increased usage of warfare and religious metaphors, reflecting the heightened emotional intensity of these occasions.

Author Variations: Individual authors demonstrated distinct metaphorical preferences, suggesting personal style and rhetorical strategies. One journalist consistently employed religious metaphors, while another favored warfare metaphors.

Seasonal Patterns: Metaphors emphasizing "harvest" and "planting" were more common during the football season's early stages, while metaphors emphasizing "battle" and "war" increased during the peak competition period.

Impact on Reader Understanding and Interpretation

The analysis suggests that conceptual metaphors significantly influence how readers understand and interpret football related content:

Enhanced Comprehension: Metaphors facilitate comprehension of complex football concepts by mapping them onto more familiar domains. For example, the metaphor FOOTBALL IS WARFARE helps readers understand strategic aspects of the game by relating them to military tactics.

Emotional Engagement: Metaphors evoke emotional responses, creating a more engaging and immersive reading experience. Religious metaphors, in particular, tap into readers' spiritual sensibilities, intensifying their emotional connection to football narratives.

Evaluative Framing: Metaphors influence readers' evaluative judgments, constructing particular events, players, or teams in positive or negative terms. For example, describing a player as a "warrior" constructs them positively, while labelling them a "mercenary" (FOOTBALL IS COMMERCE) carries negative connotations.

Narrative Construction: Metaphors contribute to the construction of compelling narratives, transforming football events into stories with heroes, villains, and dramatic arcs.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study support and extend Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) in several ways. First, they confirm the prevalence and systematicity of conceptual metaphors in domain specific discourse, demonstrating that sports journalism is characterized by coherent metaphorical systems rather than isolated metaphorical expressions. The identification of six dominant conceptual metaphors and their consistent mapping patterns aligns with predictions from CMT. Second, the study reveals how cultural context influences metaphor selection and usage, suggesting that conceptual metaphors are not purely universal but incorporate culturally specific elements. This finding extends CMT by demonstrating how cultural knowledge and values shape metaphorical conceptualizations. Third, the research highlights the dynamic nature of metaphorical systems, with variations in usage across time periods and authors. This suggests that metaphorical systems are flexible and responsive to contextual factors, rather than fixed and static.

Comparative Analysis

The study's findings align with international research on sports discourse while also revealing culturally specific patterns. The prevalence of the metaphor SPORT IS WARFARE is consistent with findings from studies of sports discourse in Western contexts (Kovesces, 2010; Price, 2017). However, the prominence of religious metaphors in the Daily Trust's football writings is distinctive and may reflect the significant role of religion in Nigerian society. Similarly, the metaphor FOOTBALL IS FAMILY appeared more frequently in this study than in comparable international studies, reflecting Nigerian cultural values emphasizing communal solidarity and kinship bonds.

Implications for Sports Journalism

The findings have practical implications for sports journalism and media communication. The research suggests that journalists can enhance reader engagement by strategically employing metaphors that resonate with readers' cultural experiences and values. Metaphors that tap into familiar domains and culturally salient concepts are likely to be more effective in capturing readers' attention and facilitating comprehension. Additionally, the study suggests that journalists should be aware of the evaluative and ideological implications of metaphorical framings. By selecting particular metaphors, journalists can subtly influence readers' attitudes toward football events, players, and teams. This framing power carries ethical responsibilities, as it can shape public opinion in ways that may not be immediately evident.

Contribution to Nigerian Media Studies

This research contributes to the growing body of scholarship on Nigerian media discourse, addressing a gap in the literature regarding systematic analysis of metaphor in sports journalism. By examining a prominent Nigerian newspaper, the study provides insights into how Nigerian media contribute to the construction of football narratives and the shaping of public perception of the sport. The findings also contribute to understanding the intersection of global and local discourses in Nigerian media. While the football writings analyzed draw on international metaphorical conventions (e.g., FOOTBALL IS WARFARE), they also incorporate culturally specific elements, reflecting the dynamic interaction between global football culture and Nigerian cultural traditions.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. The research focused on a single newspaper, which limits the generalizability of findings. Future studies could examine multiple Nigerian newspapers to provide a more comprehensive picture of metaphorical discourse in Nigerian football journalism. Additionally, the study focused on written discourse, examining only newspaper articles. Future research could explore metaphor in other media, including television, radio, and social media, to understand how metaphorical framing operates across different media platforms. The research did not examine readers' actual responses to metaphorical language. Future research employing reader response methodologies could provide more direct evidence of how metaphors influence readers' understanding and interpretation.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the conceptual metaphors employed in football writings within the sport sections of the Daily Trust Newspaper, revealing a rich repertoire of metaphorical expressions that shape the discourse surrounding Nigerian football. The research has demonstrated that metaphors are not merely linguistic decorations but powerful cognitive tools that structure how journalists and readers understand and engage with football content. The identification of six dominant conceptual metaphors FOOTBALL IS WARFARE, FOOTBALL IS RELIGION, FOOTBALL IS COMMERCE, FOOTBALL IS FAMILY, FOOTBALL IS A JOURNEY, and FOOTBALL IS THEATRE reveals the systematic metaphorical framing that characterizes football discourse in the Daily Trust. These metaphors serve multiple functions: facilitating comprehension of complex concepts, evoking emotional engagement, framing evaluative judgments, and constructing compelling narratives. The study has highlighted how cultural and contextual factors influence metaphor usage, with metaphors drawing on Nigerian cultural experiences and values appearing more frequently than culturally neutral metaphors. This finding underscores the importance of considering cultural context in metaphor analysis and the ways in which global discourse conventions interact with local cultural traditions. The research contributes to theoretical understanding of conceptual metaphors, extending CMT by demonstrating the influence of cultural context on metaphorical conceptualization. It also has practical implications for sports journalism, suggesting how journalists can enhance reader engagement through culturally resonant metaphorical framings while remaining aware of the evaluative and ideological implications of their language choices.

In conclusion, this study illuminates the linguistic and cognitive dimensions of sports reporting, revealing how conceptual metaphors shape the discourse surrounding football in one of Nigeria's most influential newspapers. By doing so, it contributes to our understanding of media discourse, cognitive linguistics, and the cultural significance of football in Nigerian society.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest in conducting this research.

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