

## How Interpretation of Metaphors Change People's Understanding of Others

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### Abstract

Metaphors are implicit comparisons that are widely used in everyday language all over the world. Metaphors can be defined as applying the speech to another action and they are figures of speech that are used to refer to something but mean another. The aim of this study is to show how people interpret metaphors differently from each other. Expecting people to understand a metaphor, in the same manner, may cause misunderstandings in real life. This applies to the therapist-patient relationship as well, because if a therapist misunderstands their client, the therapy cannot benefit the patient. Therefore, measuring whether the interpretation of metaphors changes from person to person will be beneficial for having mutual understanding in the communication, which will be a significant topic for therapists to consider while they are doing therapy. To measure whether people interpret metaphors differently, an online self-report questionnaire with 10 questions was created by using the Zayed et al. (2020) article and data was gathered from 132 participants. According to the results, the hypothesis of this study has been supported, which is that every individual interprets metaphors in a unique way and their understanding of metaphors is different from each other.

*Keywords:* Metaphors, Interpretation of Metaphors, Language

### Introduction

Metaphors are a widely used part of language by all of the people in the world. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (*n.d.*), a metaphor is defined as "applying a speech to another action or an object in a nonliteral way." At the same time, they are implicit comparisons according to Tourangeau and Rips (1991).

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The reason that metaphors are implicit is that a metaphor leaves the interpretation of the other concept to the person (Tourangeau & Rips, 1991). This feature of metaphors enables people to understand what they have been through or what others have experienced in another way (Young, 2001). In this way, people can understand some important parts of an event they would normally not understand because metaphors have the ability to draw one's attention to somewhere else. This also enables people to construct their perception of reality in a different way (Young, 2001). Another point of view about metaphors is that a metaphor tells us that something is something else in a nonliteral way while people are comparing or symbolically thinking about something (Underwood, 2021). To use a metaphor, the words he said cut deeper than a knife, can be an example of how talking in a nonliteral way can change reality. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980; 1999), metaphors give people the ability to see others' abstract ways of thinking.

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According to Schon (Cohen, 2018), these metaphors allow people to view experiences differently. Moreover, people use metaphors every day in their lives because thinking is metaphorical, as Robert Frost said (Cohen, 2018). This is supported by the claim that everything can be a metaphor, from poetry to literature (Underwood, 2021). Writers use metaphors in their stories to convey their message through the characters or events they have written. Metaphors even have the ability to show how writers perceive themselves according to the research that has been done by Yang and Peng (2021). Moreover, metaphors can help people to get through the misfortunes they have been experienced, such as the death of an infant. Understanding and capturing the moments of sadness and pain of being a parent through metaphors make people able to communicate what they feel with others, according to Norwood (2021). People use metaphors in their daily life consciously, however, metaphors can exist in the unconscious mind as the act of dreaming as well. Dreams are a way to show people's unfulfilled wishes, according to Freud (2013). He claims that if dreams are interpreted, they have a meaningful structure and significance behind them (Freud, 2013). For example, flying above a dog can be a metaphor for the client's dream when he or she tells it in therapy (Sparrow, 2020). As Davidson has said, a metaphor can be a dream, and the interpretation of dreams requires the person to dream and wake up (1978). It is not important that both the dreamer and the interpreter of the dream are the same person, because the interpretation of the dream can only occur from the point of view of the dreamer. Taking that into consideration, interpreting a person's metaphor from the point of view of anyone but that person would be a failed attempt because the usage of metaphors and their meanings are subjective.

There are two types of verbal metaphors, which can be divided into common and uncommon metaphors. A common metaphor means that the metaphor can be used in a language by a lot of people. For example, the "Life is a journey" metaphor is used by most people around the world. Under these circumstances, it can be said that this metaphor is universal. On the other hand, interpreting what the person says by using that metaphor would be a failed attempt. The only way to understand the person is to ask them, because the meaning behind the metaphor changes from person to person. Taking that into consideration, while using the metaphor of life as a journey, the person might mean that life is hard, long, or fun. The only way to learn what she or he really meant is to ask that person. The reason that they are called universal metaphors is that they reflect things happening all across the world, such as human needs (Nirmala, 2016). To illustrate the point

of the article, in the modern world, money is a necessity that every human needs in order to survive. Therefore, the metaphors that include money are universal. Having a debt can be considered as a universal metaphor according to this definition by Nirmala (2016). Reflecting on this, the metaphors that include having a debt would be used by all of the people in the world. Another evidence of the universality of metaphors is the article written by Neumann (2001). The researchers investigated whether common metaphors can be found in two unrelated languages, such as Japanese and German, in this study. From one hundred and six examples of similar metaphors in both of the languages, the researchers have concluded that this cannot be a coincidence because the number of similar metaphors is really high, even considering the cross-cultural differences between these countries. The reason that they considered cultural differences is that cross-cultural differences would make the similarity between metaphors harder to occur. Under these circumstances, there must be an underlying cognitive mechanism that makes these languages have similar metaphors even when their cultures and languages are completely different from each other (Neumann, 2001). Another example of universal metaphors is seeing affection as warmth, which is accepted by most people in the world (Kövecses, 2005). This is because the metaphors that are universally used personify human experiences (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). Therefore, considering affection as warmth comes from the people's childhood, their parents hugging them, and the embrace of this act is warm as a bodily sensations. This conceptual metaphor has also evolved into having a warm relationship between two people, which means they feel affectionate towards each other (Kövecses, 2005). These primary experiences in human life provide universal metaphors that everyone in the world uses because the experiences and feelings of people from similar events are the same. From this point of view, the feelings and events that every human has experienced create universal and common metaphors. However, these metaphors still hold the weight of subjectivity, hence the importance of further dissection of meaning becomes important.

Uncommon metaphors are the other part of verbal metaphors. These are also called creative metaphors, because they are used and created by people for a particular subject to express themselves (Yaseen, 2013). Dreams, poetry, or literature sometimes use uncommon metaphors that may be ambiguous, yet, these ambiguous metaphors sometimes hold subjective meaning. Torneke (2017) explains how this difference occurs in the article by describing an event in the workplace. Consider the metaphor of "captain

of the ship" in this example. One colleague in this workplace says that they can never say anything about the job and only share their own ideas because Mark is the captain of the ship. In this context, it appears that these colleagues' ideas are not important to Mark. He gives them no freedom or choice, which means that he acts as the boss of the company, not as the leader. However, in the context of a good leader who can order things and save the people under him from a chaotic workplace, this interpretation of the metaphor would be incorrect. If the colleague in this workplace is happy to have Mark as their leader and refers to him as the captain of the ship, the meaning behind the metaphor is very different from the first context. Taking this into account, asking the person what he means by this metaphor is always better than interpreting it from somebody else's point of view. At the end of this conversation, the colleague might have used this metaphor in another context as well. In this article, Musolff (2020) explains why the interpretation of one's metaphor can be wrong. The interpreter of the metaphor may think of something that has never even come to the mind of the original creator of the metaphor, and they may simply interpret the metaphor completely differently from what it was actually meant to be. Another example that shows how people interpret metaphors is from Gibbs Jr. (2010). There is a metaphor, "Fortaleza is the blonde bride of the sun." that is used in the article. The researcher of the study asked some university students about this metaphor to learn what they think "Fortaleza" means. One of the students said, "Fortaleza is a youthful and adored place." Another student suggested that this location be similar to a wedding reception venue. Another interpretation of Fortaleza by another student was that it is a feminine and welcoming place for people, while another student said that it is like a sun-husband that is warm but not hot (Gibbs Jr., 2010). These different interpretations show that every person interprets the metaphor according to their past experiences, ethnicity, religion, culture, perspective, etc. (Gibbs Jr., 2010). If they had to interpret one another's metaphor, their comments would be so different from each other. Under these circumstances, interpreting a metaphor without asking the person what they actually mean would be an unsuccessful attempt, especially in terms of uncommon metaphors. Another example of this is given by Sperber and Wilson (1995). To give an instance, Tom uses the metaphor "lawyers are also sharks" while talking with his friend. He might have meant that lawyers only care about the money they get from their clients by saying they are sharks, or that lawyers may actually really care about their clients and do their jobs with great care in this metaphor. Understanding what Tom meant in that context is only possible with no interpretation of what he said and by

asking him about what this metaphor means. Because no one can know the metaphorical meaning of what Tom said by interpreting it from their own perspective and experiences. As it has been indicated before, these uncommon metaphors can be found in literature, especially in poems. A poem may be ambiguous and everyone who reads it understands it differently because the poem itself is full of uncommon metaphors. As Kövesces said, the interpretation of these uncommon metaphors changes from person to person (2005). For example, a poem "The Sick Rose," written by the poet William Blake, has a line that says "bed of crimson joy," which enables all readers to interpret it as they think (1794). One reader may think of this metaphor in a sexual way, while the other reader may interpret it from the point of view of a killer, as in a criminal way. As a consequence of that, it can be said that there are different types of metaphors people use every day, but the interpretation of each one is different from the other. The reason behind this is that every person interprets the metaphor differently from the other due to making use of their past experiences and perspectives.

In conjunction with the verbal metaphors, there are also symbolic metaphors. Symbolic metaphors are similar to dreams, yet they differ from linguistic metaphors that people use in their speech in terms of conveying implicit comparisons, as mentioned before. At the same time, there are also nonverbal metaphors. Van Camp indicates that if a metaphor is nonverbal, it means its meaning is obtained from anything other than words, such as dancing (1996). Another example of nonverbal metaphors is, children use nonverbal metaphors all the time while playing games (Chesley et al., 2008). The reason they use nonverbal metaphors is that their language skills are not good enough to express themselves through verbal metaphors because of their age and the fact that they have limited cognitive skills (Evans, 1988). Under these circumstances, children show how they feel and think through the act of playing. This is their way of communicating with metaphors (Bowman, 1995). While playing, they are able to show how they feel and their internal thoughts by using nonverbal metaphors (which is the play itself), according to Chesley et al. (2008). Winnicott and Rodman indicates that while playing, a child controls and changes external experience and replaces it with a different meaning (2005). In addition to that, understanding metaphors in literal and nonliteral ways starts at the age of four, according to the article written by Vosniadou (1986). This means the usage of metaphors starts at the age of four and continues throughout life; only the type of metaphors that are used changes and their variety increases in the process.

Like the language, the metaphors are able to change and differ over cultures, time, location, etc., as Kövecses mentioned in the article (2005). For example, Hungarian and English-language users say that love is kind of a journey, while the Chinese language uses the metaphor of a kite that is flying when they want to talk about love (Yang, 2002). Taylor and Mbense (1998) mentions in the article that people who speak the Zulu language think anger metaphors are like objects, meanwhile people who are from other cultures think it as liquid or gas. In the same manner, people who speak the Hmong language see life as a string, whereas people who are from other cultures view it more like a struggle than a string (Riddle, 2000). Another cultural difference between countries and languages is that there are some metaphors in one language that cannot be used meaningfully in another language. For example, the metaphor of "flowers in the heart" is seen as happiness in the Chinese language, but people who speak English do not use this metaphor in their daily lives (Kövecses, 2005). According to Yu (1995, 1998), the difference in the metaphors between Chinese and English is because Chinese people are more introverted compared to Americans. Another illustration of this is from the Hungarian language. On the other hand, the phrase "time flies with wings" is used by people who speak Hungarian. In American English, however, such a phrase does not exist (Mathe, 2021). This cultural difference between metaphors is also significant for students who go to universities abroad and listen to lectures from professors who use the local language's metaphors (Littlemore, 2001). It has been found that international students often understand the metaphor that is used by the professor in the wrong way, because they interpret the metaphor differently compared to national students who know the meaning better than they. This results in misunderstandings in the lesson, and the international students experience difficulties with the topic. In addition to that, the reason why different languages' metaphors differ from each other is that different cultures value different events, according to Deignan (2003). To give an instance, horses are used in different events in Spain and England, so metaphors about horses differ from each other in these languages. These examples demonstrate that metaphors can be used differently in different languages, or that one metaphor may exist in one language but not in the other.

As it has been mentioned above, people should not interpret another person's metaphors, and this is also applicable to therapists while they are talking with their patients in a therapeutic context. Normally, metaphors are devices that both help the patient and the therapist because they allow exploration of the

inner thoughts and access to the patient (Kopp and Crow, 1998). It also enables the therapist to take into consideration the things the patient will say and accept them in a therapeutic manner. Similarly, it allows the therapist to comprehend the patient's distinctive features, creativity, and language usage (Clarke, 2014). As a patient said in the article, while he was telling stories to his therapist, he was actually speaking about his life to the therapist (Aleksandrowicz, 1962). However, metaphors should be elaborated carefully in the therapeutic context. The reason is that the metaphors that the client has used should not be interpreted by the therapist in such a way as to cause any misunderstandings. The therapist should be able to meet the patient on his own level and provide symbolic metaphors (Aleksandrowicz, 1962). However, they should not interpret the patient's metaphors. To illustrate how misunderstandings from the interpretation of metaphors can occur, consider the example of a mother and her son who came to family therapy. The mother says that her son is "two-faced" in the therapy. This may mean that he has a borderline disorder from the therapist's point of view, because the therapist tends to interpret events from their point of view. However, when the son describes his behaviors using his mother's metaphor, he says that this is his way of coping both at home and in school (Clarke, 2014). In that case, he is unlikely to have borderline personality disorder. At the same time, it is probably not what the mother meant to say either. Under these circumstances, whenever a patient uses a metaphor, the meaning behind it should be understood by the therapist in order to understand the patient in the correct way. This can only happen through therapy and the interpretation of the metaphor in the correct way by the therapist (Sparrow, 2020). To give another example, when a person says that they saw a dark room in her dream, the therapist should not interpret this dream from their point of view. The therapist should ask their patient what the possible explanations and interpretations of this dream could be, and what the implication of this dream would be in her life. The only way to understand what this dream actually means is to ask the patient, because the important thing is how she thinks and feels about her life, such as whether she is lonely, afraid of the dark, or believes she will die, which shows that there are many things that the therapist can infer on his own, but he should not do so because it would not reflect reality and he would not be able to understand the patient. As it has been indicated by Winnicott and Rodman, therapists who think that they know what is going on, are likely to inhibit patient's creativity and what they actually want to say through their metaphors (Winnicott & Rodman, 2005). Therefore, understanding a person who uses a metaphor would only be successful if the

other person asks him or her what one actually means by using this metaphor, because interpreting metaphors from another person's point of view would probably result in misunderstanding the person.

Taking everything into account, metaphors have a significant part in people's lives because of the way that people think in metaphorical ways all the time. Metaphors can show reality from a different perspective to other people; they have the ability to demonstrate something as the other. Metaphors also have a wide range of types, such as verbal (which includes both common and uncommon metaphors), symbolical, and nonverbal metaphors. Moreover, these metaphors can change over time, location, and culture in the same manner that they change from person to person. The crucial factor to note regarding metaphors is that no one should interpret another person's metaphor because the metaphor's meaning is subjective, even though the metaphor is considered as a universal metaphor. When someone interprets another person's metaphor, they rob that person of the opportunity to discover themselves and the meaning behind what they have said. This is especially true in the relationship between the therapist and the patient. The therapist should listen to the metaphors the patient uses, but they should ask what that metaphor means to the patient, otherwise the interpretation would not be correct.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

In this study, the data was gathered from 132 participants from different countries to have both a reliable and valid sample. 76 of the participants are female, 52 of the participants are male, and 4 of them preferred not to disclose their gender. The age range of participants is between 18 and 65, and the mean age is 38.8. Participants are from various countries, such as India, Turkey, and Japan.

### Measures

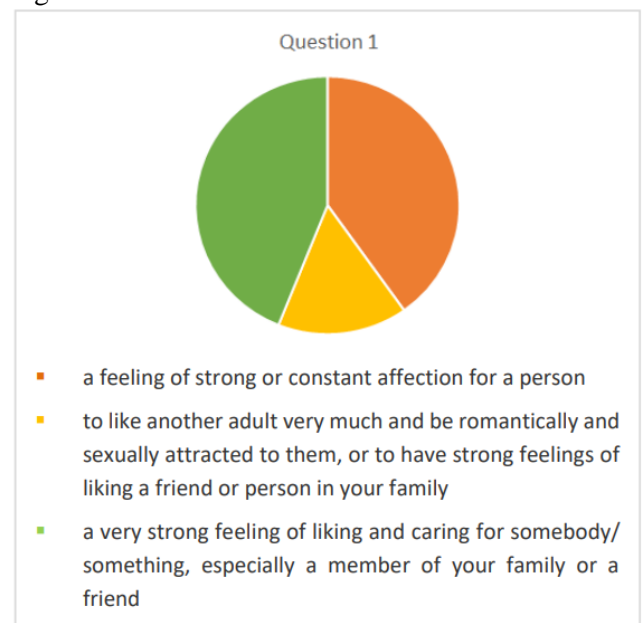
To measure the interpretation of metaphors, the article by Zayed et al. (2020) is used. The questionnaire by Zayed et al. (2020) was created by using external vocabulary resources and word embeddings to generate metaphors that are easier to identify and interpret. They have created a gold standard for metaphor interpretation in this way, however, this research focused more on the aspect of how the meaning of metaphors changes from person to person. Furthermore, this research has generated a questionnaire with new metaphors and their meanings using a similar method they have been used to create the standardised data set by taking meanings of metaphors from three different dictionaries (Oxford,

Cambridge, and Merriam-Webster) to make the questionnaire reliable and valid. The metaphors that were chosen were abstract, and their meanings were gathered from three different dictionaries. The questionnaire consists of 10 questions; five of them are multiple-choice and five of them are short-answer questions. This self-report questionnaire has been sent to participants, which is an online questionnaire created in Google Forms. The consent form was given at the beginning of the form that says the study is voluntary, the data will be collected for academic purposes only and the information will remain confidential.

## Results

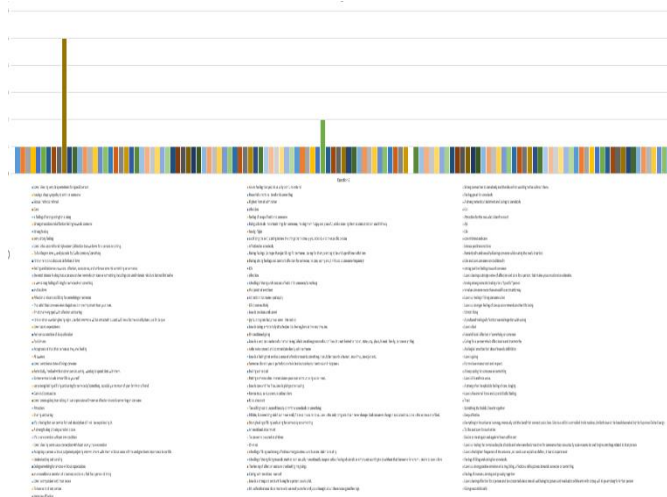
In the analysis of data, Google forms and Excel have been used. It has been analyzed whether the interpretation of metaphors differs from person to person or not. Each of the ten questions has been analyzed separately.

Figure 1



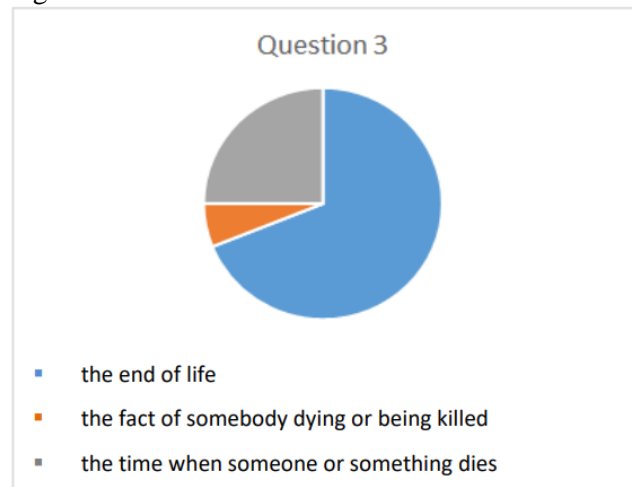
The first question in the questionnaire was "Select the most probable definition of "love" from the list". 44% of people (n = 58) said that it is a very strong feeling of liking and caring for somebody or something, especially a member of your family or a friend. 40% of people (n = 53) said that it is a feeling of strong or constant affection for a person. 16% of people (n = 21) said "to like another adult very much and be romantically and sexually attracted to them, or to have strong feelings of liking a friend or person in your family". These results are also shown in Figure 1.

Figure 2



The second question in the questionnaire was, "Provide a definition for the word "love". 3.78% of participants (n = 5) said that love is care. 1.51% of participants (n = 2) said that love is God. All of the other participants (94.69%, n = 125) had different answers to the definition of the word "love" as shown in Figure 2.

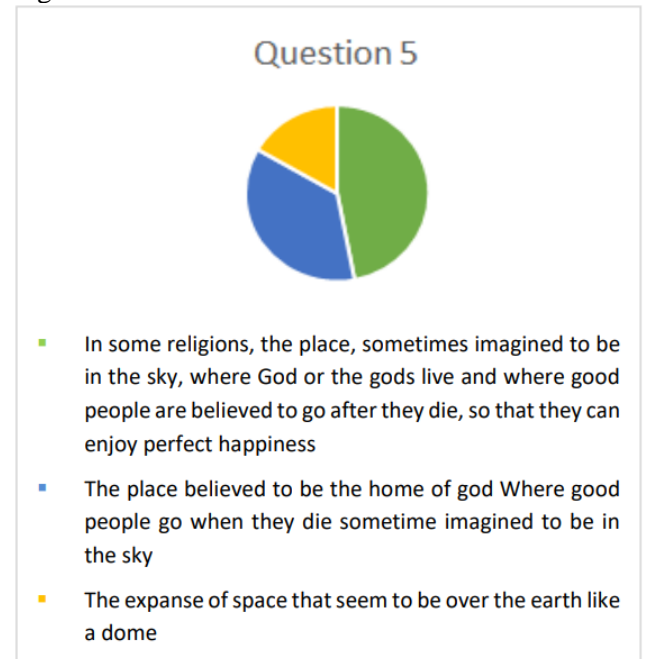
Figure 3



The third question in the questionnaire was "Select the most probable definition of "death" from the list," as Figure 3 indicates. 69% of people (n = 91) said that it was the end of life. 25% of people (n = 33) said that it is the time when someone or something dies. Lastly, 16% of people (n = 8) said that the fact of somebody dying or being killed is important.

The fourth question in the questionnaire was "Provide a definition for the word "death". 9.84% of participants (n = 13) said that death is the end of life. 3.03% of participants (n = 4) said that death is the end. All of the other participants (87.12%, n = 115) had different answers to the definition of the word "death".

Figure 4

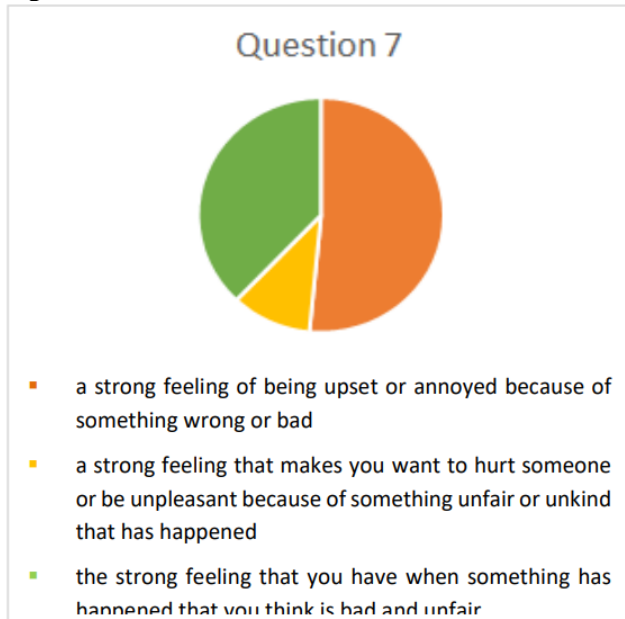


The fifth question in the questionnaire was "Select the most probable definition of "heaven" from the list," as Figure 4 indicates. 36% of people (n = 48) said that it is the place believed to be the home of God where good people go when they die, sometimes imagined to be in the sky. 17% of people (n = 22) said that it is the expanse of space that seems to be over the earth like a dome. Moreover, 47% of people (n = 62) said "in some religions, the place, sometimes imagined to be in the sky, where God or the gods live and where good people are believed to go after they die, so that they can enjoy perfect happiness."

The sixth question in the questionnaire was "Provide a definition for the word "heaven". 1.51% of participants (n = 2) said that heaven is peace. 3.03% of participants (n = 4) said that heaven is God's home. All of the other participants (95.45%, n = 126) had different answers to the definition of the word "heaven".



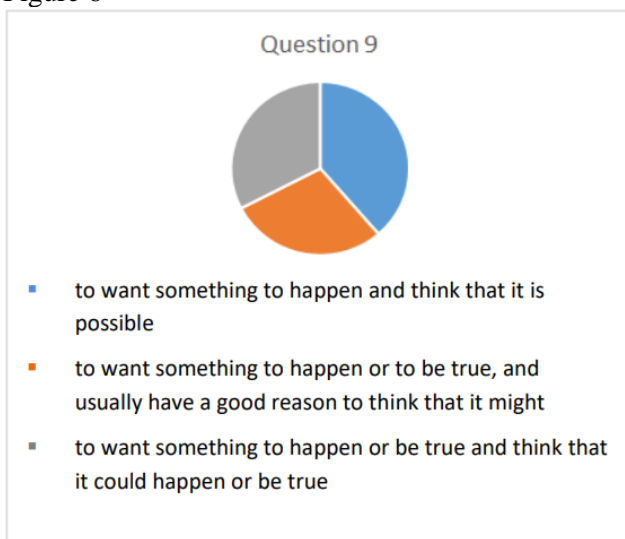
Figure 5



The seventh question in the questionnaire was "Select the most probable definition of "anger" from the list," as Figure 5 indicates. 52% of people (n = 86) said that it is a strong feeling of being upset or annoyed because of something wrong or bad. 38% of people (n = 50) said that it is the strong feeling that you have when something has happened that you think is bad and unfair. Moreover, 11% of people (n = 14) said that it is a strong feeling that makes you want to hurt someone or be unpleasant because of something unfair or unkind that has happened.

The eighth question in the questionnaire was "Provide a definition for the word "anger". All of the participants (100%, n = 132) had different answers to the definition of the word "heaven".

Figure 6



The ninth question in the questionnaire was "Select the most probable definition of "hope" from the list" as Figure 6 demonstrates 39% of people (n = 51) said that it is to want something to happen and think that it is possible. 33% of people (n = 43) said that it is to want something to happen or to be true, and usually have a good reason to think that it might. Furthermore, 29% of people (n = 38) said that it is to want something to happen or be true and think that it could happen or be true.

The tenth question in the questionnaire was "Provide a definition for the word "hope". 2.27% of participants (n = 3) said that hope is optimism. All of the other participants (97.72%, n = 129) had different answers to the definition of the word "heaven".

### Discussion

In this study, we have analysed the usage of metaphors and how people interpret metaphors. This study used Google forms to analyse the data that had been obtained from participants. The number of participants that answered the questionnaire was 132 adults from various countries, such as India, Turkey, and Japan.

Metaphors are widely used in daily life and literature, one of the examples is the metaphors used in sonnets. Using creative metaphors and recognizing them are subjective, according to Dienstbach (2018). Another study that has investigated the cultural differences of metaphors has found significant differences between Thai, Bulgarian, English and Swedish language users in which they have compared 115 different metaphors in these languages (Zlatev et al., 2012). Moreover, metaphor interpretation was subjective for the patients who suffer from depression as well (Roystonn, 2021). Some of the words patients described their illnesses were darkness, a weight, or a bubble (Charteris-Black, 2012). This demonstrates that everyone uses metaphors, however the understanding and usage of metaphors change from person to person. At the same time, language is a metaphor for people to express themselves. This can also be seen in the figures and results above. Even when the answers are multiple choice, participants' answers differed a lot from each other in the sense of interpretation of metaphors.

Figure 4 asks the participants about the definition of heaven, and it can be seen that people have different answers to the multiple choice question. This result gets even more different in question 6, which asks the definition of heaven. The answers are short-essay types. More than 95% of people's answers differed from each other. To illustrate, some of the answers were: sky, nowhere, dream, wonderful area, earth, and health. As it can be seen from these answers, people's

interpretations of metaphors are very different from each other.

An important implication of these results occurs in the therapist-patient relationship in therapy. As Aleksandrowicz has mentioned, the therapist should be able to meet the patient on his own level and provide symbolic metaphors. However, it is very important that the patient understands these metaphors in the same manner (1962). As it has been discussed, the meaning of the metaphor is what the client wants to say, not the interpretation of the metaphor by the therapist. As Clarke said, "two-faced" metaphor can be used by meaning coping at the school and home by the client, however, if the therapist interprets this metaphor, he can understand it as having a borderline disorder (2014). Another example can be, if a client says "red", it may mean death, danger, love, or blood, therefore the therapist should not interpret this metaphor on his or her own. However, the therapist can help the patient by developing metaphors for patient's problems and provide a solution-friendly framework, according to Gordon (1978). Taking these into consideration, the metaphors change in context and from the perspective of the person, therefore they should not be interpreted. However, they can be used in therapy as a beneficial approach that provides a solution for the patient's problems.

According to the results of this study, it seems very unlikely that the patient would understand and interpret a metaphor as the therapist was trying to say. Therefore, therapists must be very careful while using metaphors and interpreting their patients' metaphors since the interpretation of metaphors differs from person to person.

As discussed earlier in the study, there are common metaphors such as "affection" (Kövecses, 2005). This means "warmth" for almost all people, because this is used to personify human experiences as Lakoff and Johnson said (1999). Moreover, as some of them have been researched in this study, love, death, coffee, red and silent night are common metaphors in the world.

The hypothesis of this study was that everyone interprets metaphors differently, and the results support this claim. The findings from this study may help people when they are using metaphors or interpreting other people's metaphors, which generally cause misunderstandings. As Littlemore has indicated, this is also significant for people who live in foreign countries, because culture affects the interpretation of metaphors as well (2001). If people realise this, they will be able to provide more explanations for what they said without causing any misunderstandings.

## **Limitations**

The results of this study were obtained from Google Forms. This means that there might be some biases in the findings. Some participants might have been hesitant to answer questions. Moreover, this study did not include any statistical procedure to analyse the data that had been collected.

## **Conclusion**

This research adds to our understanding of how metaphor interpretation varies across the globe. People understand metaphors differently from each other and they use them with different meanings.



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