

Metaphor and Figurative Language in Moral Instruction: A Conceptual Metaphor Analysis of Religious Sermons

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Abstract

This study investigates the use of metaphor and figurative language as instruments of moral instruction in religious sermons. For this purpose, this study utilizes the texts of khutab authored by Sheikh Mohamed Ewas that are analyzed by employing conceptual metaphor theory, and critical metaphor analysis to identify, categorize, and interpret the dominant cross-domain conceptualization through which Islamic moral concepts are constructed and communicated to the Muslim audience. The analysis reveals five recurrent conceptual metaphors: (1) the community is a body, (2) sin is a physical substance or mark, (3) moral corruption is disease, (4) virtuous deeds are currency, and (5) the spiritual journey is a path. These source-domain structures serve interrelated rhetorical functions (i.e., physical representation of abstract doctrine, emotional mobilization, and identity construction). Thus, this study contributes to the growing literature on religious discourse analysis and argues that metaphor in the khutbah is not a stylistic device but constitutes a primary cognitive mechanism through which Islamic moral theology is made practical to the lay person in linguistically and culturally hybrid contexts.

Keywords: applied linguistics, conceptual metaphor, figurative language, religious discourse, cross-domain mapping

Introduction

Language has always been the primary vehicle through which religious communities transfer moral values, shape communal identity, and regulate

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behaviour. Within the Islamic tradition, the Friday sermon, known in Arabic as the *khutbah* (pl. *khutab*), holds a uniquely authoritative position as the principal medium of oral religious instruction for lay Muslim congregations. Delivered weekly from the *minbar* (pulpit) in mosques worldwide, the *khutbah* functions simultaneously as moral and directive communication, religious practice, and persuasive discourse (Alyan, 2016; Aldhaheeri et al., 2026; Rahman et al., 2025). Despite its importance in Muslim communities, the *khutbah* remains relatively underexplored within applied linguistics and religious discourse studies particularly in its English-language and bilingual manifestations.

This study, therefore, addresses this gap by examining bilingual *khutab* authored by Sheikh Mohamed Ewas (i.e., a collection of over ninety sermons delivered in mosques across the United Kingdom and the United States (Ewas, 2020)). The collection presents each sermon independently in both Arabic and English by making it a valuable resource for analyzing figurative language in religiously and linguistically hybrid communicative contexts. The Ewas collection of *Khutab* is distinctive in several respects, that is: it addresses Muslim diaspora communities whose members represent dual linguistic and cultural identities (Haque, 2025); it is explicitly organized around thematic unity (one moral topic per sermon); and it is the work of a single author which offers internal consistency to facilitate systematic linguistic analysis. The main research questions of this study are:

- What conceptual metaphors and figurative schemas does the *khutbah* use in the service of moral instruction; and
- What rhetorical and cognitive functions do these cross-domain conceptualizations serve?

To address these questions, this study draws on conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003; Lakoff, 1993) and critical metaphor analysis (CMA) (Charteris-Black, 2004, 2019). Both frameworks treat metaphor not as a stylistic linguistic device but as a fundamental cognitive mechanism through which abstract constructs are structured in terms of more concrete, and embodied source domains. These frameworks are well suited to religious discourse, where moral abstractions (sin, virtue, community, salvation) must be rendered cognitively accessible to audience whose primary engagement with doctrine is oral rather than textual.

❖ **Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Critical Metaphor Analysis**

The basic idea of CMT, as articulated by Lakoff and Johnson (2003) in *Metaphors We Live By*, is that metaphor is not primarily a feature of language but of thought.

Conceptual metaphors are systematic cross-domain mappings between a source domain (typically concrete, embodied, and practical) and a target domain (typically abstract). For example, when we say that an argument has weak foundations, we are activating a concept from the source domain of physical structures onto the target domain of reasoning. Such concepts are not arbitrary. Instead, they reflect the embodied, and experience-oriented nature of human cognition (Gibbs, 2017; Lakoff, 1993).

Subsequent research has extended CMT in several directions. Kövecses (2010, 2015) demonstrated the cross-cultural variability and universality of conceptual metaphors by showing that while some metaphors (e.g., important is big, affection is warmth) appear across many languages, others are culture-specific. Steen et al. (2010) developed the MIPVU procedure for identifying metaphorical language in naturally occurring discourse with greater inter-rater reliability. These methodological developments have made CMT increasingly applicable to corpus-based discourse analysis (Semino, 2008).

CMA (Charteris-Black, 2004) extends CMT by integrating pragmatic and ideological dimensions. CMA asks not only what conceptual metaphors are present in a text, but also explains why particular metaphors are chosen over alternatives, and what social, political, or ideological function they perform. CMA has been applied extensively to political discourse (Charteris-Black, 2006, 2019; Mushtaq et al., 2018), media discourse (Musolff, 2004), and, more recently to religious texts (Alyan, 2016; Aldhaheeri et al., 2026; Charteris-Black, 2004; Imani, 2022). This present study adopts CMA as its primary analytical framework, treating the khutbah as a discourse in which figurative choices are not merely stylistic but also reflect the rhetorical purposes of the preacher and the ideological commitments of the tradition.

❖ **Metaphor in Religious Discourse**

The relationship between metaphor and religious language has long been a concern of theologians (McFague, 1982; Ricoeur, 1993; Soskice, 1985). Religious language is inherently metaphorical because the target domains of religious discourse (e.g., the divine, salvation, sin, the afterlife) are by definition beyond direct empirical experience and must therefore be approached through. As McFague (1982) argues, religious metaphor is not merely illustrated but cognitively constituted. Therefore, it enables communities to think about realities that cannot otherwise be conceptualized.

Within linguistics, a growing body of work has examined metaphor in specific religious genres. Chilton and Schäffner (2011) analyzed the role of spatial metaphor in political and religious discourse. Charteris-Black (2004) devoted a chapter to metaphor in the Bible, arguing that agricultural, water, and light metaphors structure core Christian theological concepts. Ferrari (2007) examined metaphorical framing in Catholic pastoral letters, and found that institutional authority was consistently mapped onto spatial elevation (high is authoritative). In Islamic discourse specifically, studies have examined Qur'anic metaphor (Abdul-Raof, 2013; Chaer et al., 2025) and conceptual metaphors in the sermons of Said Nursi (Thomas et al., 2015). However, the khutbah as a distinct genre has received comparatively little attention in applied linguistics.

Studies of preaching discourse have emphasized the role of discourse organization and figurative expression to communicative effectiveness (Aldhaheeri et al., 2026; Pihlaja, 2014). Aldhaheeri et al. (2026); Eslami and Mirzapour (2019) analyzed Friday sermons and found that metaphor density correlated positively with audience engagement markers. Pihlaja (2014) examined YouTube-mediated Christian preaching and demonstrated that figurative language mediates between textual authority and contemporary lived experience. The present study is the first systematic CMT/CMA analysis of English-language Islamic khutab addressed to the Muslim diaspora communities.

❖ **The Khutbah as a Discourse Genre**

The khutbah is a highly religious speech event governed by formal requirements derived from Prophetic tradition (Sunnah). It typically opens with a praise (hamd and thana), includes a declaration of faith (shahada), incorporates a blessing upon the Prophet, cites Qur'anic verses and authenticated prophetic traditions (hadith), and closes with a supplication (du'a). Within this formal frame, the preacher exercises considerable freedom in thematic focus, rhetorical strategy, and linguistic realization (Aldhaheeri et al., 2026).

Aldhaheeri et al. (2026) classified khutbah discourse into three speech act types, that is: didactic (transmitting doctrine), exhortatory (mobilizing action), and consolatory (offering comfort). All three types make substantial use of figurative language. The didactic function is served by analogical cross-domain mappings (explaining abstract concepts through concrete comparisons); the exhortatory function is served by emotionally charged imagery; and the consolatory function is served by metaphors of shelter, light, and abundance. The Ewas khutab exemplify

all three, often within a single sermon. The bilingual dimension of the Ewas khutab add further significance. English-language khutab delivered in diaspora contexts must navigate the challenge of communicating a tradition whose conceptual vocabulary is deeply embedded in Arabic to communities with variable proficiency in that language. Conceptual metaphor, thus, becomes a bridging mechanism: familiar English-language concepts from embodied life (the body, disease, debt, journey) serve as source domains for the unfamiliar target domains of Islamic moral theology (Ali, 2022; Haque, 2025).

Methodology

❖ Data Description

The primary data are drawn from Friday sermons by Sheikh Mohamed Ewas (Ewas, 2020), a 524-page bilingual collection comprising approximately ninety Friday sermons organized according to the Hijri calendar. The data covers all twelve months of the Islamic year and addresses a wide range of moral and theological topics including brotherhood, sincerity, prayer, backbiting, marriage, child-raising, repentance, and the virtues of the Prophet's companions. The sermons were delivered in mosques in the United Kingdom and the United States, that is, the contexts in which English is the dominant public language.

For this study, the English-language portions of the text were extracted and analyzed. The Arabic texts were consulted for comparative purposes where questions arose about conceptual equivalence between the two versions, but the primary analysis focuses on the English-language sermons, which were composed or adapted by the authors for English-speaking audiences rather than translated mechanically from the Arabic originals.

❖ Analytical Procedure

The analysis in this study followed a three-stage procedure adapted from Charteris-Black's (2004) CMA framework.

• Stage 1: Metaphor Identification

All instances of figurative language were identified using an adapted version of the MIPVU procedure (Steen et al., 2010), which involves identifying lexical units whose contextual meaning differs from their more basic, more concrete meaning. Both

explicit (simile: “like a building”) and implicit (conceptual metaphor: “the path of religion”) instances were included.

- **Stage 2: Metaphor Interpretation**

Identified instances were categorized into source-domain clusters, and the core conceptual metaphors were articulated following the convention ‘target domain is source domain’ (e.g., the community is a body). The frequency, distribution across topics, and linguistic realizations of each conceptual metaphor were recorded.

- **Stage 3: Metaphor Explanation**

The identified metaphors were analyzed in terms of their rhetorical and ideological functions within the khutbah genre, drawing on Charteris-Black (2004) and on genre-specific considerations of the khutbah as a formal religious speech event. Attention was given to the interplay between Qur’anic and Prophetic precedent (many metaphors are citational i.e., drawn directly from scripture or hadith) and the preacher’s own figurative innovations.

Analysis

- ❖ **Dominant Conceptual Metaphors**

Table 1 summarizes the five dominant conceptual metaphors identified in the Khutab. Each is then analyzed in turn.

Table 1. Dominant Conceptual Metaphors in the Ewas Khutab

Conceptual metaphor (Target IS Source)	Source domain	Target domain	Example linguistic realization
The Community Is A Body	Human body	Muslim community (<i>ummah</i>)	“The believers are like one body. When one organ suffers, the whole body responds.”
Sin Is A Physical Substance or Mark	Physical stain / dirt / weight	Sin	“A black dot appears on his heart... if he repents it gets erased.”
Moral Corruption Is Disease	illness (contagion, cure)	Moral vices (e.g., backbiting, hypocrisy)	“A very dangerous social disease... backbiting and gossip.”
Virtuous Deeds Are Currency	Commerce / finance	Good deeds, divine reward, moral bankruptcy	“The bankrupt is one who has no money... good rewards are finished.”

The Spiritual Journey Is A Path	Spatial navigation (path, direction, obstacles)	Spiritual life, repentance, afterlife	“Strove in the path of the religion... If you have committed a sin, return to the path.”
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❖ **The Community Is a Body**

The most prevalent and structurally dominant conceptual metaphor in the khutab maps the Muslim community (ummah) onto a single human body (target domain: community; source domain: body). This concept is established early and returned to consistently across multiple sermons, functioning as a master metaphor that organizes the cluster of moral obligations associated with communal solidarity. The primary source of this metaphor is Prophetic tradition: the author cites a hadith reported by Al Nu‘man bin Bashir: “The believers in their mutual kindness, compassion and sympathy are just like one body. When one of the organs suffers, the whole body responds to it with wakefulness and fever”.

The implications of the body mapping are systematically necessitated: individual members are organs; suffering is pain that spreads; solidarity is not a virtue but a physiological response; and the failure to respond to another’s suffering is pathological. This cross-domain mapping realizes communal obligation (the body’s response to pain is involuntary) and grounds the abstract theological concept of brotherhood (ukhuwwah) in the most universally accessible source domain (i.e., the human body). A secondary source domain (i.e. architecture) overlaps with the body concept in another Prophetic citation: “The relationship of the believer with another believer is like (the bricks of) a building, each supports the other”. The preacher physically enacts this metaphor by interlocking his fingers by extending figurative language into embodied performance.

❖ **Sin as a Physical Substance**

The khutab develop an elaborate figurative framework for conceptualizing sin. Sinful acts are construed not as abstract moral transgressions but as physical substances that accumulate on and within the body particularly the heart. A hadith-based passage in the sermon how we deal with sins states: “When a person commits a sin, a black dot appears on his heart, and if he repents then it gets erased, but if he does more sins then the dot becomes bigger and bigger, until it covers the entire heart with the accumulation of sins”. This excerpt activates a ‘sin is a stain’ mapping (source domain: physical stain; target domain: sin). The dynamics of the cross-domain mapping are precisely adjusted to the moral theology: just as a physical stain

grows with repeated contact, so sins accumulate; and just as a stain can be removed by washing, so repentance erases the moral mark.

❖ **Moral Corruption as Disease**

A third major metaphorical domain maps moral and social pathologies onto medical illness. The sermon on 'backbiting' and 'gossip' opens with: "Our topic today is about a very dangerous social disease, which has spread among most of us today; it is backbiting and gossip". The 'moral corruption is disease' mapping (source domain: disease; target domain: moral corruption) operates on both individual and collective levels: backbiting is a disease that afflicts individuals and spreads through communities like an infection. The epidemiological logic of infection realizes the proscription on participating in gossip.

The medical conceptual metaphor is structurally complemented by Qur'anic imagery of hypocrisy as a heart disease. In the sermon on 'The Hypocrisy of Faith', the preacher cites: "There is a disease in their hearts, so Allah has increased their disease". This Qur'anic metaphor maps moral corruption onto cardiac pathology (source domain: cardiac illness; target domain: hypocrisy). The disease concept implies remedies, and the collection of khutab is equally rich in figurative language of healing: repentance as medicine, prayer as prophetic, and the company of the righteous as a sanitizing environment.

This concept is reinforced by a complementary conceptual metaphor: 'sin is dirt/filth'. In the sermon on 'Optional Prayers', the preacher states: "The five daily prayers erase the minor sins committed in between them; they are a sort of bath in which the person washes himself five times daily." Here 'prayer is washing' (source domain: hygiene; target domain: prayer). A third variant is 'sins are weights', which maps moral transgressions onto physical burdens: "On the Day of Judgment, they shall carry the entire load of their own sins" (source domain: gravitational weight; target domain: sin). This is consistent with Qur'anic imagery of the mizan (scales of justice).

❖ **Virtuous Deeds are Currency / The Moral Life is Commerce**

A fourth pervasive metaphorical domain maps the moral life onto economic exchange. The most developed realization appears in the discussion of the "bankrupt" Muslim: "The prophet replied that the bankrupt is one who has no money or property. The prophet [then explained]: a person comes on the day of judgement with a good record of prayers, fasting and Zakat. But also he abused

somebody... Then all the oppressed people will receive parts of his good rewards. Until all his good rewards are finished”.

This passage activates a ‘the moral life is commerce’ mapping (source domain: commerce/finance; target domain: moral life). Good deeds are capital assets; moral transgressions generate debts; creditors (those harmed) make claims against the debtor’s assets; moral bankruptcy occurs when virtuous deeds are exhausted. The economic conceptual metaphor transforms abstract justice into the familiar logic of financial accounting. Other economic mappings appear throughout the khutab. In the sermon on the ‘Virtue of the Four Phrases’ (dhikr), the preacher describes words of remembrance as “seeds of Janna” (agricultural investment) and as “a shield against hellfire” (military equipment). In the sermon on ‘Married Life in Islam’, the preacher states: “The Prophet (PBUH) said that a sweet word is a charity (sadaqa), i.e. a matter of reward”. Here linguistic behaviour is mapped onto the legal-theological category of charity giving.

❖ **The Spiritual Journey as a Path**

The fifth major conceptual metaphor maps the moral and spiritual life onto a physical journey along a path. This is among the most universal metaphors for moral life across religious traditions (Kövecses, 2010, 2015; Charteris-Black, 2004) and is deeply embedded in Islamic theological vocabulary: the Arabic word shari’ah and sirat (path) is central to Qur’anic imagery of divine guidance. In the sermon on ‘Mindfulness of Allah’, the preacher describes the Prophet as one who “strove in the path of the religion until his death”. The ‘path’ source domain here is directional and progressive: religious life has a destination, a trajectory, and requires sustained effort. Those who follow the right path are “guided” (muhtadun); those who deviate are “going astray” (dallin). The preacher constructs the moral life as a journey with forks (choices between halal and haram), obstacles (tests), companions (the community), and a destination (paradise or hell).

The ‘journey’ metaphor generates an extended entailment for repentance. In the sermon on ‘Fear Allah Wherever You Are’ the preacher urges: “If you have committed a sin, do not give up repenting no matter what the sin is”, repentance is construed as a return to the correct path after deviation (i.e., a re-routing). This entailment implies that sin is a temporary wrong turning and that the path back to righteousness is always accessible that performs consolatory as well as moral-didactic functions. The journey does not end at death but continues through stages

(barzakh, Day of Judgement, crossing of the sirat), making earthly moral choices consequential across an eschatological timeline.

Discussion

Table 2 summarizes the three main rhetorical-cognitive functions of conceptual metaphors in the Ewas khutab.

Table 2. Rhetorical and Cognitive Functions of Conceptual Metaphors

Function	Description	Conceptual Metaphors Used
Embodiment of abstract doctrine	Using concrete, embodied source domains to render abstract theological target domains cognitively accessible	BODY, STAIN, DISEASE, COMMERCE, PATH
Emotional mobilization	Transferring affective associations from the source domain to the target domain to evoke fear, urgency, hope, or consolation	DISEASE (fear, contagion), COMMERCE (anxiety about bankruptcy), STAIN (visceral unease)
Identity consolidation in diaspora contexts	Constructing an “imagined community” of moral fellow-travelers or a single organism to transcend geographical and cultural barriers	BODY, PATH (shared journey)

❖ Embodiment of Abstract Doctrine

The most fundamental function of conceptual metaphor in the khutab is experiential grounding (Lakoff, 1993; Lakoff & Johnson, 2003), that is, the use of embodied, concrete source domains to render abstract theological target domains cognitively accessible. Islamic moral theology deals with realities (sin, divine judgement, paradise, the state of the heart) that are not directly observable. The khutbah must communicate these realities to the audiences whose primary engagement with doctrine is oral. Each of the five conceptual metaphors performs this embodiment function in a distinct way: the ‘body’ metaphor grounds communal ethics in physiology; ‘stain/washing’ grounds repentance in purification; ‘disease’ grounds moral corruption in epidemiology; ‘commerce’ grounds divine judgement in financial logic; ‘path’ grounds spiritual life in spatial course. Together, these metaphors map the entire moral world of Islamic doctrine onto the familiar territory of physical and social life.

❖ Emotional Mobilization

Beyond their cognitive functions, conceptual metaphors perform powerful emotional work. Charteris-Black (2004) argues that metaphor's emotional force derives from the affective associations of the source domain, which are transferred to the target domain through the cross-domain. When the preacher describes backbiting as a disease that has "spread among most of us", the emotional associations of epidemic disease (i.e., fear, contamination, urgency) are transferred to the moral transgression. When sin is described as a growing black dot that eventually covers the heart, the instinctive discomfort of encroaching darkness is mobilized in the service of moral exhortation. The 'commerce' metaphors are particularly effective for diaspora audiences directing economic pressures: the prospect of arriving at the Day of Judgement as a "bankrupt" person speaks directly to anxieties about financial vulnerability.

❖ Identity Construction in Diaspora Contexts

A third rhetorical function is identity construction by using conceptual metaphors to construct and reinforce a coherent Muslim communal identity under pressure. The 'body' metaphor frames the global Muslim community (Ummah) as a single organism, creating an imaginative solidarity that transcends geographical distribution and cultural heterogeneity (cf. Anderson, 2020). The sermon's English-language audience, physically gathered in London or New York, are metaphorically incorporated into a body whose suffering anywhere demands a response everywhere. The 'path' metaphor similarly constructs a shared narrative trajectory: all Muslims are fellow travelers on the same path, moving through the same challenges toward the same destination. The preacher's consistent use of the inclusive second person ("whenever you find that you have committed a sin, always hurry to do something good") involves the audience directly in the figurative world of the sermon.

❖ The Citational Dimension: Textual Metaphor and Prophetic Authority

A distinctive feature of conceptual metaphor in the khutbah is the high proportion of figurative language that is citational (i.e., drawn directly from the Qur'an and hadith rather than invented by the preacher). The black dot metaphor, the body metaphor, the bankrupt Muslim metaphor, and many others are all attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). This citational embedding gives conceptual

metaphors a dual authority: they carry both the cognitive-emotional force of the cross-domain mapping and the theological authority of Prophetic utterance. The preacher's role is not to invent figurative comparisons but to activate, interpret, and apply an inherited figurative vocabulary that carries the weight of revelation (Ukaegbu, 2025). When the same figurative metaphors appear in both the Arabic and English versions, they mean that the conceptual metaphors are not translation strategies but theological necessities.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that conceptual metaphor and figurative language hold a central and multifunctional role in Islamic Friday sermon discourse as evidenced by the analysis of the Ewas bilingual khutab. Five dominant conceptual metaphors were identified, (i.e., the community is a body, sin is a physical substance or mark, moral corruption is disease, virtuous deeds are currency, and the spiritual journey is a path) each performing distinct cognitive, emotional, and social functions in moral instruction.

The analysis confirms and extends key claims of CMT and CMA in religious discourse. First, Islamic preaching relies on embodied source domains to render abstract theological target domains cognitively accessible. Second, figurative language in the khutbah is structurally moral which implies that conceptual metaphors structure the very framework within which moral reasoning takes place. Third, the citational embedding of metaphor in Prophetic and Qur'anic sources gives khutbah figurative language a uniquely authoritative status that distinguishes it from secular genres.

This study contributes to the understanding of religious discourse in diaspora contexts. English-language khutab direct the challenge of communicating an Islamic moral theology rooted in Arabic and seventh-century Arabia to communities living in contemporary Britain and America. Conceptual metaphor, drawing on universal or widely shared source domains (i.e., the human body, disease, economics, spatial navigation) serves as a bridging mechanism which enables the tradition's moral content to be communicated across linguistic and cultural distance without sacrificing theological integrity.

This study argues that conceptual metaphor in the Islamic sermon is not a stylistic device but moral cognition in action, that is, a primary means through which doctrine is transmitted, community is constituted, and the abstract is embodied. So, future research should: (1) conduct comparative analysis of Arabic and English

versions of the same sermons to examine how cross-domain mappings shift across languages; (2) perform corpus-linguistic studies of larger, multi-author collections of English-language khutab to assess whether the metaphors identified here are genre-wide features; and (3) examine how audiences process and are moved by figurative language in real-time religious listening.

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Article Information:

<i>Received</i>	2-Apr-2026
<i>Revised</i>	20-May-2026
<i>Accepted</i>	17-Jun-2026
<i>Published</i>	30-Jun-2026

Declarations:

Authors' Contribution:

- **All Authors Conceptualization, and intellectual revisions. Data collection, interpretation, and drafting of manuscript**
- The authors agree to take responsibility for every facet of the work, making sure that any concerns about its integrity or veracity are thoroughly examined and addressed

• **Conflict of Interest:** NIL

• **Funding Sources:** NIL

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