

CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS IN THE JAPANESE DRAMA “MIDNIGHT DINER”

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Abstract

In Japanese culture, food serves as a “silent language” to convey complex emotions and social status. While the drama series *Midnight Diner* is recognized for its profound use of culinary elements to represent human struggles, there is a lack of cognitive linguistic research on how these gastronomic concepts map onto human experiences. This study aims to identify and analyze the conceptual metaphors related to gastronomy in the series, specifically exploring how culinary source domains represent target domains such as trauma, identity, and relationships. The research employs a qualitative descriptive method grounded in Lakoff and Johnson’s Conceptual Metaphor Theory. Data were collected from selected episodes through digital observation and transcription of dialogues. The Vrije Universiteit’s Metaphor Identification Procedure was used to identify linguistic metaphors systematically. The findings reveal a dominant primary metaphor: **LIFE IS A MEAL**. Specific mappings identified include: “Human Relations is a Simmering Process,” “Emotional Healing is Sweetness,” “Loneliness is Cold Food,” “Honesty is Raw Food,” “Past Trauma is Bitterness,” and “Social Identity is a Food Topping.” These mappings show how taste, temperature, and ingredients are systematically used to understand abstract life experiences. The study concludes that food serves as a vital medium of nonverbal communication in Japanese high-context culture. Ultimately, the series conveys that true emotional satisfaction (*iyashi*) is found in the “warmth” of authentic, simple human connections rather than material luxury.

Keywords – *Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Midnight Diner (shin’ya shokudo), Domain Mapping, ng, Gastronomic Metaphors, Japanese Sociocultural*

Introduction

1. Background of the Problem

In Japanese culture, food is not simply a means of satisfying biological needs, but rather a “silent language” capable of conveying emotions, social status, and even reconciliation over past events. This phenomenon is beautifully depicted in the drama series *Midnight Diner (Shin’ya Shokudo)*. Set in a small shop in a narrow Shinjuku alley, the series features a character called “The Master” who serves dishes according to customers’ requests. Remarkably, each dish ordered is not merely a menu item but a representation of the trauma, longing, or inner conflict experienced by the character who ordered it.

So far, studies of the drama series *Midnight Diner* have tended to focus on the aesthetic aspects of cinematography or its role in the *iyashi* (healing) genre in Japanese popular culture. However, little research has examined how the culinary elements within it function as cognitive tools at the linguistic and perceptual levels. For example, why do we feel “warmth” when we

see a character eating Buttered Rice? Why does Octopus Sausage represent the identity of a Yakuza? This is where the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) becomes relevant. This research stems from the need to examine how humans use concrete concepts (e.g., food) to understand more abstract concepts (e.g., life and social relationships).

2. Literature Review

This research is based on several theoretical foundations and previous research:

1. Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980): Metaphor is understood not as a mere embellishment of words, but rather as a mental process through which we understand the “Target Domain” (abstract things like love or time) through the “Source Domain” (physical/sensory things).
2. Multimodal Metaphor (Forceville, 2009): Given that the object of study is drama, metaphors appear not only in dialogue but also through visuals (food textures, rising smoke, the color of dishes) that reinforce the emotional message.
3. Gastronomy and Identity Studies: Previous research by Niehaus and Walravens (2017) suggests that in modern, alienated Japanese society, food serves as a social bond. However, this research has not specifically mapped the cognitive structure of metaphors.

3. Research Questions

Based on the above background, this paper formulates two main questions:

1. What are the dominant forms of gastronomic (culinary) conceptual metaphors appearing in the Midnight Diner series?
2. How is the mapping process from the source domain (flavors, ingredients, cooking processes) to the target domain (life experiences, identity, and trauma) carried out to construct a compelling narrative?

4. Research Objectives

This research aims to:

1. Identify the dominant conceptual metaphors related to food in Midnight Diner.
2. Analyze the cognitive mechanisms behind the use of food as a symbol of complex human experiences, so that the audience can understand the play’s moral message more deeply.

5. Benefits of Research

1. Theoretical Benefits: Contributes to the field of Cognitive Linguistics, particularly in the application of conceptual metaphor theory to audio-visual media and Japanese popular culture.

2. Practical Benefits: Helps lay viewers or Japanese drama enthusiasts understand that communication is not always through words, but can also be through everyday symbolism, such as food. Furthermore, it provides a new perspective for academics in examining the relationship between culinary arts and human psychology.

Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative-descriptive approach under the theoretical umbrella of Cognitive Linguistics. This design was chosen because the study aims to explore and describe abstract concepts about human life, understood through gastronomic metaphors, in audiovisual media. The main focus of this study is the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980).

2.2 Subjects and Objects of Research

Research Subject: The Japanese drama series *Midnight Diner (Shin'ya Shokudo)*, specifically selected episodes with a high density of culinary metaphors.

Research Object: Metaphorical expressions appearing in the form of linguistic metaphors, namely, sentences spoken by characters that use culinary terms to refer to non-culinary concepts.

2.3 Data Collection Procedures

Data was collected using the observation and recording method with the following steps:

1. Digital Observation: Watching the series repeatedly to understand the narrative context.
2. Transcription: Noting sentences containing culinary terms suspected to be metaphorical.

2.4 Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using systematic procedures, namely:

1. Identification (MIPVU): Using the Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije Universiteit (MIPVU) to determine whether a word is used metaphorically by comparing its contextual meaning with its base meaning.
2. Domain Classification: Grouping data into Source Domains (e.g., taste, temperature, food texture) and Target Domains (e.g., emotions, social status, memories).
3. Conceptual Mapping: Explaining the logical connection between why a culinary concept was chosen to represent a particular life experience.

2.5 Research Procedures

The research was conducted in three main stages:

1. Pre-Analysis Stage: Literature study on Japanese culinary culture.
2. Analysis Stage: Application of CMT and MIPVU theories to the collected data to find conceptual mapping patterns.
3. Inference Stage: Concluding the cognitive and sociocultural functions of the metaphor in the context of Japanese society, then presenting them in the form of a descriptive report.

The analysis steps include:

1. Data Identification: Collecting dialogues (linguistic metaphors) and visual representations of food (multimodal metaphors).
2. MIPVU Procedure: Using a systematic procedure to ensure that the analyzed expressions are truly metaphorical.
3. Mapping: Connecting the physical properties of food with the psychological state of the character.

Finding and Discussion

The main findings show that, in the narrative of the drama series *Midnight Diner*, the abstract concept of “Life” is systematically understood through the concrete concept of “Dish.” Life is not seen as a straight line of achievement, but rather as a composition of various flavors to be enjoyed.

The following is a summary of the mapping from the source domain to the target domain, based on linguistic and visual identification, for the six conceptual metaphors selected in the series.

Table 1. Metaphor Analysis (MIPVU Procedure)

Data (Keywords/Visuals)	Contextual Meaning (Target Domain)	Basic/Physical Meaning (Source Domain)	Metaphor Mapping
“Boiling”	The process of building patience and trust.	The process of heating a liquid until it reaches the boiling point.	THE RELATIONSHIP PROCESS IS COOKING

Data (Keywords/Visuals)	Contextual Meaning (Target Domain)	Basic/Physical Meaning (Source Domain)	Metaphor Mapping
“Sweet”	Feelings of being loved, appreciated, or having fond memories.	The sensation of sugar taste on the tongue receptors.	HAPPINESS IS A SWEET TASTE
“Tasteless”	Loss of purpose in life or emotional emptiness.	Lack of salt or seasoning in food.	LIFE WITHOUT A PURPOSE IS FOOD WITHOUT SEASONING
“Raw”	Painful honesty or self-vulnerability.	Food ingredients that have not been processed by fire.	HONESTY IS RAW FOOD
“Bitter”	Persistent regret or past trauma.	Bitter taste from natural ingredients such as bitter melon or bile.	TRAUMA IS A BITTER TASTE
“Spices/Toppings”	Social status, occupation, or external attributes.	Additional ingredients to add flavor or aesthetics.	SOCIAL IDENTITY IS A TOPPING

These metaphors show that in *Midnight Diner*, food serves as a substitute language for Japanese society, which tends to be verbally closed (a high-context culture). By ordering certain foods, they are essentially sharing what is on their hearts.

3.1 Human Relations is a Simmering Process

Troubled relationships or the process of reconciliation are often mapped out through the cooking technique of *simmering* (boiling over low heat for a long time).

The character context that illustrates this conceptual metaphor is the relationship between a boy and his adoptive mother, which shows how emotional “seasoning” seeps in over time.

- **Analysis:** Emotional depth is not instantaneous. Just as broth takes time to extract flavor from bones, trust between characters takes time to “seed.”
- **Quote:** The Master said, “*Do not rush things. The best flavors come after everything is allowed to simmer. So it is with apologies.*”

(Source: Season 1, episode 7: Egg Lily and Meat)

3.2 Emotional Healing is Sweetness

Sweetness is not just glucose but a form of acceptance and comfort.

The character context illustrating this conceptual metaphor is the interaction between Ryu (a Yakuza member) and Cosuzu (a gay bar owner). The sweet *tamagoyaki* serves as a bridge between self-acceptance and childhood.

- **Analysis:** *Tamagoyaki* (sweet omelets) often appear as symbols of sincere affection. Sweetness is mapped as the target realm for “tenderness” or “the end of suffering.”
- **Quote:** “*Why are these eggs so sweet? They taste as if my mother forgave them.*”

(Source: Season 1, episode 1: Red Wieners and Sweet Omelet)

3.3 Loneliness is Cold Food

The temperature of the food (hot vs cold) represents social isolation. Food that cools before it can be eaten symbolizes a loss of hope or connection.

The character who illustrates this conceptual metaphor is Miyuki, a poor *enka* singer. This quote appears as Miyuki is eating hot cat rice amid her otherwise “cold” life.

- **Analysis:** Depressed characters are often seen staring at food that has cooled and lost its steam. Metaphorically, **LOSING THE ZEST FOR LIFE IS LOSING THE HEAT OF FOOD**.
- **Quote:** *“Eating alone is cold. It is not the food that’s cold, it is the air.”*

(Source: Season 1, episode 2: Cat Rice)

3.4 Honesty is Raw Food

The “raw” and “sharp” properties of the onion were mapped to the “honest” and “painful” properties. Potato salad without raw onions would be boring; a life without honesty (even if it is embarrassing) will feel fake.

The character who exemplifies this conceptual metaphor is Oki, who lives a double life. In Tokyo, she is known as a successful adult film star, but she keeps her profession a secret from her mother back home due to shame. When her mother arrives in Tokyo and begins to lose her memory (dementia), Oki is forced to confront the “raw” truth of who she is and how she wants to be remembered by her mother before her memory is completely lost.

- **Analysis:** Honesty is positioned as something “raw”—it is uncomfortable, it can bring tears to the eyes (like slicing an onion), but it is the element that gives life and authenticity to the relationship between Oki and his mother. Without accepting that “raw” part, emotional reconciliation will never happen.
- **Quote:** “The secret to a great potato salad is fresh sliced raw onions. They give it a tangy flavor you cannot get if everything is cooked.”

(Source: Season 1, episode 4: Potato Salad)

3.5 Past Trauma is Bitterness

The realm of taste (gustatory) is used to describe bitter experiences that cannot be removed by time.

The character context that illustrates this conceptual metaphor is when a former actress reminisces about her bitter past and failed relationships through the sour-bitter taste of Plums (*Umeboshi*).

- **Analysis:** Characters with dark pasts are often associated with foods that have a strong aftertaste. Bitterness on the tongue is mapped to pain in memory.

- **Quote:** *“This bitter taste will not leave my tongue, just like the image of his face that night.”*

(Source: Season 2, episode 2: Chicken Breast Wraps)

3.6 Social Identity is a Food “Topping.”

In the episode “Ochazuke,” three women (the Ochazuke Sisters) always order rice with different toppings: plum, salmon, and cod roe. Conceptually, these variations are not just about taste but rather represent their position in the social hierarchy and their search for a partner.

The character context that illustrates this conceptual metaphor is when three women (Ochazuke Sisters) are bound by friendship but often conflict about their single status and taste in men.

- **Analysis:** The three of them feel different because of the “toppings” of their lives (work, single status), but basically they are in the same “bowl” (fate) as lonely urban women.
- **Quote:** *“We are like Ochazuke. It looks different on top, but the base is the same rice and tea. It is warm but cools down quickly.”*

(Source: Season 1, episode 3: *Ochazuke*)

Conclusions

This study concludes that the drama series *Midnight Diner* is not just a culinary spectacle but a narrative built on a strong metaphorical cognitive structure. The main findings show that the **main metaphor “LIFE IS A DISH”** is the foundation of thinking in this drama, namely, the taste of food (sweet, bitter, bland) is systematically mapped to represent the complexity of human emotions and life experiences.

Inside the shop, rigid social identities (such as job hierarchy) are dissolved and replaced by identities based on their food orders. Rigid social **identities** in the outside world (such as Yakuza status) are dissolved inside the shop and replaced by more honest, intimate, and personal taste identities. In the context of Japanese society, often considered emotionally closed, food serves as a nonverbal medium of communication that bridges physical needs (eating) and metaphysical needs (a sense of belonging). This mapping gives rise to **the Identity Metaphor: HUMANS ARE INGREDIENTS**. This metaphor allows the audience to understand others’ suffering and happiness through a universal sensory experience.

This study asserts that the function of *iyashi* (healing) in this drama is achieved through the mapping of the metaphor **“HAPPINESS IS SIMPLICITY”**. By mapping high-status figures to simple dishes, the series critiques modern consumer culture. The moral message conveyed through this metaphor is that true inner satisfaction is not found in luxury, but in the “warmth” of authentic human connections. This series modifies the common view that luxurious food is a symbol of satisfaction. Through the gastronomic metaphor, it is shown that true emotional satisfaction (*iyashi*) is found in the “warmth” of authentic, simple human connections, not in the price of the dishes.

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