

# Conceptual Metaphors Involving “Treasure” In English

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**Received:** 12 February 2026; **Accepted:** 09 March 2026; **Published:** 31 March 2026

**Abstract:** This study investigates conceptual metaphors involving the lexical item “treasure” in English within the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). Drawing on data from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), the British National Corpus (BNC), and selected literary texts, the study analyzes a dataset of 176 metaphorical instances of the lexical item “treasure,” identified through the Metaphor Identification Procedure (Pragglejaz Group, 2007). The findings reveal systematic metaphorical mappings, including love is treasure, memory is treasure, time is treasure, and knowledge is treasure. These mappings are structured around semantic features such as value, rarity, emotional attachment, and preservation. The study argues that “treasure” constitutes a distinct value-based source domain that differs from related metaphors such as time is money by foregrounding affective rather than transactional meanings. The results contribute to cognitive linguistic research by refining our understanding of value metaphors and highlighting the role of culturally embedded schemas in shaping metaphorical conceptualization [6; 4; 9].

**Keywords:** Conceptual metaphor, cognitive linguistics, treasure, metaphorical mapping, value conceptualization, English semantics, figurative language.

**Introduction:** The role of metaphor in structuring human thought has been extensively documented within cognitive linguistics, particularly since the seminal work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), who demonstrated that metaphor is a central mechanism of cognition rather than a peripheral stylistic device. Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) posits that abstract domains are systematically understood in terms of more concrete, embodied experiences through cross-domain mappings [4; 9]. These mappings are not arbitrary but grounded in recurring patterns of human interaction with the physical and social world.

A significant body of research has examined value-related metaphors, including “time is money” and “love is a valuable commodity”, which reflect economic models of evaluation [6;3]. However, comparatively little attention has been paid to alternative value-based

source domains such as “treasure,” which encode not only value but also rarity, emotional attachment, and preservation. Unlike “money,” which implies exchangeability and quantification, “treasure” foregrounds uniqueness and irreplaceability, suggesting a qualitatively different conceptualization of value.

In English, the word “treasure” frequently appears in metaphorical expressions referring to abstract entities, as in “a treasured memory,” “children are our greatest treasure,” and “knowledge is a treasure.” These expressions indicate that “treasure” functions as a productive source domain for structuring diverse aspects of human experience. Despite this, its role has not been systematically analyzed in the literature.

This study addresses this gap by examining the conceptual metaphors involving “treasure” in English.

It aims to answer the following research questions: 1) What are the dominant metaphorical mappings associated with “treasure”? 2) What semantic features are transferred from the source domain to target domains? 3) How does the “treasure” metaphor differ from other value-based metaphors? By addressing these questions, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of metaphorical conceptualization and semantic extension in English.

Recent developments in metaphor studies demonstrate a growing interdisciplinary orientation, integrating cognitive linguistics with psychology, corpus linguistics, and computational modeling [8; 11]. Bibliometric evidence indicates a steady increase in conceptual metaphor research worldwide, highlighting its central role in understanding abstract conceptualization and discourse practices. These developments reinforce the relevance of examining less-studied source domains such as “treasure” within contemporary cognitive linguistic inquiry.

## **METHODS**

This study adopts a qualitative corpus-based approach within the framework of cognitive semantics to investigate metaphorical uses of the lexical item “treasure” in English. The dataset consists of 176 metaphorical instances of the word “treasure” and its related forms (e.g., “treasured,” “treasuring”), compiled from three primary sources: the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), the British National Corpus (BNC), and a selection of literary texts published between the 19th and 21st centuries.

The use of corpus-based analysis aligns with recent trends in metaphor research, which increasingly rely on empirical and data-driven approaches to identify systematic metaphorical patterns [11].

Data collection was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, all occurrences of the lemma “treasure” were extracted from the corpora using keyword-based searches. To ensure representativeness across registers, examples were sampled from spoken, fiction, magazine, and academic subcorpora. From this initial pool (approximately 420 occurrences), a subset was selected based on relevance and contextual clarity.

In the second stage, metaphorical instances were

identified using the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) proposed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007). Each occurrence was analyzed by comparing its contextual meaning with its basic, more concrete meaning (i.e., material wealth such as gold or valuable objects). Instances were classified as metaphorical when a contrast was observed and the contextual meaning could be understood via cross-domain mapping.

Out of the initial dataset, 176 instances were classified as metaphorical, while literal uses (e.g., references to physical treasure) were excluded from further analysis. The identified metaphorical expressions were then categorized according to their target domains, including LOVE, MEMORY, TIME, KNOWLEDGE, and SOCIAL VALUES.

The analytical procedure involved four steps:

- 1) extraction of relevant lexical items;
- 2) identification of metaphorical usage using MIP;
- 3) categorization into conceptual domains; and
- 4) identification of underlying conceptual metaphors based on recurring semantic features such as value, rarity, emotional attachment, and preservation.

To enhance the reliability of the analysis, ambiguous cases were re-evaluated after an interval of two weeks, and classification consistency was checked across the dataset. Although the study is qualitative in nature, frequency patterns were also considered to identify dominant metaphorical mappings. Additionally, insights from cultural linguistics were incorporated to account for the influence of shared cultural schemas on metaphor interpretation [10].

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

A total of 176 metaphorical instances of the lexical item “treasure” were identified and analyzed. The distribution of these instances across conceptual domains reveals clear patterns in the metaphorical structuring of abstract concepts in English.

The analysis shows that the most frequent mappings involve interpersonal and emotional domains, followed by cognitive and evaluative domains. Table 1 summarizes the distribution of the identified metaphorical patterns.

**Table 1. Distribution of Conceptual metaphors involving “treasure”**

Conceptual Metaphor	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Love is treasure	48	27.3%
Memory is treasure	36	20.5%
People/values as treasure	34	19.3%
Knowledge is treasure	30	17.0%
Time is treasure	28	15.9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>176</b>	<b>100%</b>

The data indicate that “love is treasure” is the dominant metaphorical mapping, accounting for over one quarter of all instances. This suggests that emotional relationships are most frequently conceptualized in terms of value, rarity, and emotional significance. The second most frequent mapping, “memory is treasure”, highlights the role of personal experience and recollection as valuable and preservable entities.

The category “people/values as treasure” includes references to children, health, freedom, and cultural heritage, reflecting broader social and cultural priorities. The relatively high frequency of this category indicates that the metaphor extends beyond individual cognition to collective value systems.

The mappings “knowledge is treasure” and “time is treasure”, while slightly less frequent, remain significant. Their presence supports the idea that intellectual and temporal domains are conceptualized not only in economic terms (e.g., TIME IS MONEY) but also through affective and evaluative frameworks.

To illustrate these patterns, several representative examples from the dataset are presented below:

For the love is treasure mapping:

“I will always treasure you.”

“She is the greatest treasure in my life.”

For the memory is treasure mapping:

“These are memories I will treasure forever.”

“Childhood moments remain a hidden treasure.”

For the knowledge is treasure mapping:

“Knowledge is a treasure that cannot be taken away.”

“Books are treasures of wisdom.”

For the time is treasure mapping:

“Learn to treasure every moment.”

“Each day is a treasure we should not waste.”

For the people/values as treasure category:

“Children are the nation’s greatest treasure.”

“Freedom is a treasure worth protecting.”

These examples demonstrate that the metaphorical use of “treasure” consistently encodes notions of high value, emotional attachment, rarity, and the need for preservation, regardless of the specific target domain. This supports the argument that “treasure” functions as a coherent and productive source domain in English conceptual metaphor systems.

The distributional analysis of the dataset reveals that metaphorical uses of “treasure” are not random but systematically patterned across conceptual domains. The predominance of the “love is treasure” mapping (27.3%) suggests that interpersonal relationships are primarily conceptualized through schemas of high value, rarity, and emotional investment. This finding aligns with previous research indicating that love is frequently structured through value-based metaphors [3], yet it extends this framework by emphasizing non-exchangeable and irreplaceable value, in contrast to economically grounded metaphors such as “love is a commodity”.

For instance, expressions such as “I will always treasure you” and “She is the greatest treasure in my life” illustrate how emotional attachment is framed in terms of preservation and uniqueness rather than exchange or utility. This supports the argument that metaphor choice reflects not only conceptual structure but also evaluative stance and cultural prioritization [9].

The second most frequent category, memory is treasure (20.5%), demonstrates how experiential knowledge is conceptualized as something that can be

stored, protected, and revisited. Expressions such as “These are memories I will treasure forever” reflect the interaction between this metaphor and the broader conceptualization of the mind as a container [6]. However, the “treasure” metaphor adds an additional layer of affective valuation, suggesting that not all stored experiences are equally significant.

The category people/values as treasure (19.3%) highlights the extension of this metaphor into collective and cultural domains, as seen in examples such as “Children are the nation’s greatest treasure” and “Freedom is a treasure worth protecting.” These expressions reflect culturally shared value systems and support the claims of cultural linguistics that metaphor plays a key role in encoding collective cognition and ideology [10].

The mappings “knowledge is treasure” (17.0%) and “time is treasure” (15.9%) further demonstrate that abstract domains traditionally conceptualized in economic terms may also be framed through affective and evaluative metaphors. For example, “Knowledge is a treasure that cannot be taken away” reinforces the intrinsic and enduring value of knowledge, while “Learn to treasure every moment” foregrounds the uniqueness and irreversibility of time. This supports recent findings that metaphor variation reflects different contextual and cultural emphases [4; 8]. The mapping “knowledge is treasure” further illustrates the evaluative function of this source domain. Expressions such as “knowledge is a treasure” and “a treasure of wisdom” reinforce the cultural importance of education and intellectual enrichment. As Charteris-Black argues, such metaphors serve persuasive functions in discourse, shaping attitudes toward learning and knowledge acquisition [1].

Importantly, the contrast between time is money and time is treasure highlights two distinct conceptualizations of value: one based on efficiency and exchange, and the other on emotional significance and scarcity. This distinction suggests that “treasure” constitutes a distinct subtype of value metaphor, characterized by its focus on non-quantifiable and affective dimensions of experience.

Recent developments in metaphor research further support this interpretation, emphasizing the role of metaphor in shaping not only cognition but also

discourse and social meaning [11;8]. The consistency of patterns observed in this study also aligns with emerging computational findings suggesting that conceptual metaphors exhibit systematic and modelable structures [2].

These findings are consistent with recent perspectives emphasizing the role of metaphor in shaping abstract reasoning and discourse across domains [8]. Furthermore, emerging computational approaches demonstrate that conceptual metaphor structures are systematic enough to be modeled algorithmically, supporting their cognitive reality.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study has examined the conceptual metaphors involving “treasure” in English and demonstrated that the term functions as a significant source domain for structuring abstract concepts. The analysis identified key mappings, including love is treasure, memory is treasure, time is treasure, and knowledge is treasure, each reflecting specific cognitive and cultural patterns.

The findings contribute to cognitive linguistic research by identifying “treasure” as a distinct value-based metaphor that differs from economically oriented metaphors such as “time is money”. By emphasizing rarity, emotional attachment, and irreplaceability, the “treasure” metaphor provides an alternative framework for conceptualizing value.

The study also aligns with recent interdisciplinary developments in metaphor research, which emphasize the integration of cognitive, cultural, and computational approaches to understanding metaphorical thought [8; 11].

However, the study is limited by its qualitative scope and focus on English-language data. Future research could expand the analysis through cross-linguistic comparison or quantitative corpus methods to further investigate the universality and variability of “treasure”-based metaphors.

Overall, the study underscores the importance of metaphor in shaping human cognition and highlights the role of culturally embedded schemas in language use.

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