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METAPHORICAL STRUCTURE OF DRUG ARGOTS IN ENGLISH

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Abstract Drug argot represents one of the most dynamic and metaphorically rich lexical subsystems of English non-standard vocabulary. It serves not only as a communicative code among members of drug-related subcultures but also as a linguistic mechanism for concealing meaning, expressing group identity, and reflecting socio-cultural perceptions of illicit substances. The present study investigates the metaphorical structure of English drug argots from a cognitive-semantic perspective. Drawing on authentic lexical items collected from contemporary English slang dictionaries, criminological glossaries, and corpus-based sources, the research classifies metaphorical nominations according to conceptual domains such as color, food, animals, natural phenomena, material objects, and human characteristics. The study employs descriptive, cognitive-semantic, componential, and conceptual metaphor analysis to reveal the linguistic mechanisms underlying argot formation. The findings indicate that metaphorization constitutes one of the principal productive processes in the creation of drug argots, with concealment, semantic compression, and symbolic representation functioning as dominant communicative strategies. The research contributes to sociolinguistics, cognitive linguistics, forensic linguistics, and lexicology by providing a systematic account of metaphorical naming patterns within English drug argot.

Keywords: drug argot, metaphor, conceptual metaphor, cognitive linguistics, slang, English argot, semantic structure, lexical nomination, sociolinguistics, forensic linguistics.

Introduction

Language variation reflects the social diversity of human communities. Every social group develops linguistic features that distinguish its members from outsiders. Among these varieties, argot occupies a special position because it is intentionally created to restrict communication to members of a particular group while excluding outsiders. Drug-related communities are especially productive in generating innovative lexical items whose meanings remain inaccessible to the general public.

English drug argot has expanded rapidly during the past century due to globalization, international drug trafficking, popular culture, music, and digital communication. New lexical units emerge continuously, while older expressions disappear or acquire new meanings. Unlike

ordinary slang, drug argot performs not merely expressive but also protective functions. It enables speakers to disguise illegal activities, strengthen in-group solidarity, and reduce the risk of detection by law enforcement agencies.

One of the most remarkable linguistic mechanisms involved in drug argot formation is **metaphor**. Rather than naming substances directly, speakers employ metaphorical expressions that evoke similarities in color, texture, appearance, psychological effects, origin, or symbolic associations. Thus, lexical items such as *snow*, *horse*, *grass*, *ice*, *brown sugar*, and *angel dust* demonstrate how metaphor transforms ordinary vocabulary into specialized argot.

The study of metaphor in non-standard vocabulary has attracted increasing scholarly attention within cognitive linguistics. Since Lakoff and Johnson (1980) demonstrated that metaphor is not merely a stylistic device but a fundamental mechanism of conceptual thought, metaphorical analysis has become one of the principal approaches to lexical semantics. Their theory suggests that metaphor organizes human experience through systematic conceptual mappings rather than isolated lexical substitutions.

Within sociolinguistics, argot has been investigated as a linguistic manifestation of subcultural identity. Halliday (1978) described anti-language as a semiotic system constructed by anti-societies seeking to create alternative realities through language. Drug argot perfectly exemplifies Halliday's concept because it simultaneously conceals information and reinforces group membership.

Despite numerous studies on English slang, relatively few investigations have focused specifically on the metaphorical organization of drug argot. Existing research frequently documents lexical inventories without examining the conceptual mechanisms motivating metaphorical nomination. Consequently, a systematic semantic classification remains necessary.

The present study aims to identify the principal metaphorical models underlying English drug argot and to explain the cognitive processes responsible for their formation. Particular attention is devoted to semantic motivation, conceptual mapping, and the communicative functions of metaphorical naming.

The objectives of the research are:

- to examine theoretical approaches to metaphor and argot;
- to classify metaphorical models in English drug argot;
- to identify dominant semantic domains involved in metaphorical nomination;
- to analyze linguistic motivations underlying metaphorical lexical formation;
- to evaluate the communicative functions of metaphor within drug-related discourse.

Literature Review

The linguistic investigation of argot began in the nineteenth century with studies of criminal vocabulary in France and Britain. One of the earliest comprehensive descriptions was produced by **Eric Partridge**, whose *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* remains among the most authoritative references on English non-standard vocabulary. Partridge argued that slang and argot constantly renew themselves because secrecy and group identity require lexical innovation (Partridge, 2006).

Julie Coleman further demonstrated that English slang evolves through continuous semantic innovation rather than random lexical replacement. According to Coleman (2012), metaphor constitutes one of the most productive mechanisms of slang formation because it enables speakers to create highly memorable lexical items while obscuring literal reference.

From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, **George Lakoff** and **Mark Johnson** fundamentally transformed metaphor studies through their influential work *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). They argued that metaphor structures conceptual thought rather than merely decorating language. Human beings understand abstract concepts through mappings from concrete experiential domains. This theoretical framework is particularly applicable to drug argot because substances are frequently conceptualized through familiar objects such as food, weather, animals, or household materials.

Ronald Langacker's Cognitive Grammar similarly emphasizes that lexical meaning emerges through conceptualization rather than isolated dictionary definitions. His theory provides valuable tools for explaining why metaphorical drug names evoke specific cognitive images and facilitate rapid identification among members of drug subcultures (Langacker, 1987).

Another significant contribution comes from **Michael Halliday's** theory of anti-language. In *Language as Social Semiotic* (1978), Halliday argues that anti-languages develop within anti-societies to construct alternative social realities. Vocabulary in anti-languages is systematically relexicalized while grammatical structures remain largely intact. Drug argot illustrates this process because ordinary lexical items such as *snow*, *ice*, or *grass* acquire specialized meanings understood only by members of the relevant community.

The relationship between euphemism, dysphemism, and lexical innovation has been extensively examined by **Keith Allan** and **Kate Burridge**. Their work demonstrates that taboo domains—including drugs, crime, sexuality, and death—stimulate particularly intensive metaphorical creativity because speakers seek indirect means of reference while maintaining communicative efficiency (Allan & Burridge, 2006).

Studies of English slang by **Connie Eble** also emphasize the social motivations behind lexical innovation. Eble (1996) argues that slang reflects shared experiences within relatively closed communities and functions as an indicator of group identity. Drug argot extends this principle by combining identity marking with communicative secrecy.

Modern lexicographic resources, including **Green's Dictionary of Slang** (Green, 2010–2024) and the **Oxford English Dictionary**, reveal remarkable lexical diversity within English drug terminology. However, these dictionaries primarily document lexical meanings rather than explaining their conceptual motivation. Therefore, integrating lexicographic evidence with cognitive semantic analysis provides a more comprehensive understanding of metaphorical naming.

The theoretical foundations discussed above demonstrate that metaphor in drug argot is not accidental but systematic. It reflects cognitive categorization, cultural symbolism, communicative economy, and social identity simultaneously. These principles form the theoretical basis of the present investigation.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Research Design

The present study adopts a **qualitative-dominant mixed-method design** in which descriptive semantic analysis is combined with quantitative classification. Rather than treating drug argots as isolated lexical curiosities, the research examines them as systematic products of conceptual metaphor. The analysis focuses on the semantic motivation that links ordinary lexical items with the illicit substances they denote.

To ensure methodological reliability, only **attested English drug argots** documented in authoritative lexicographic and linguistic sources were considered. Every lexical unit included in the corpus has been recorded in at least one recognized reference work such as *Green's Dictionary of Slang*, *Oxford English Dictionary*, *The Routledge Dictionary of Modern American Slang and Unconventional English*, or scholarly publications devoted to English slang and anti-language. This criterion minimizes the inclusion of ephemeral internet coinages whose linguistic status remains uncertain.

The study does not seek to catalogue every existing drug argot. Instead, it investigates recurrent metaphorical patterns that reveal the cognitive principles underlying lexical innovation.

3.2 Data Collection

The research corpus consists of **128 metaphorically motivated drug argots** referring to major categories of controlled substances, including cannabis, cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine, MDMA, PCP, LSD, crack cocaine, and synthetic narcotics.

The lexical items were collected through documentary analysis from the following principal sources:

- Green's *Dictionary of Slang*;
- Oxford English Dictionary (entries labelled slang or colloquial);
- Eric Partridge's *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*;
- Julie Coleman's historical studies of English slang;
- publications in forensic linguistics concerning illicit drug terminology.

After data collection, duplicate items and regional variants with identical metaphorical motivation were removed to avoid statistical distortion.

3.3 Research Methods

Several complementary linguistic methods were employed.

Descriptive Method

Each argot item was described according to its lexical meaning, semantic motivation and contextual usage.

Componential Analysis

The semantic features motivating metaphorical transfer were identified. Components such as colour, texture, physical form, psychological effect and cultural symbolism were analysed.

Cognitive Semantic Analysis

Following Lakoff and Johnson (1980), conceptual mappings between source domains and target domains were identified.

For example,

WHITE OBJECT → COCAINE

produces lexical items such as *snow*, *flake*, *powder*, and *white lady*.

Likewise,

PLANT → CANNABIS

motivates expressions including *grass*, *weed*, and *green*.

Comparative Method

Different metaphorical models were compared to determine which conceptual domains display the greatest productivity.

Quantitative Analysis

Each lexical item was assigned to a semantic category, after which percentage distributions were calculated.

Results

4.1 Major Metaphorical Domains

The analysis demonstrates that metaphor constitutes the dominant mechanism of lexical creation within English drug argot. Most lexical items derive from ordinary vocabulary through semantic transfer rather than through phonological innovation.

The corpus reveals seven principal conceptual domains.

Table 1. Major Metaphorical Models in English Drug Argot

Conceptual Domain	**Representative Argots**	**Primary Motivation**
Colour	*snow, white lady, green, black tar, brown sugar*	Colour similarity
Nature	*grass, weed, leaf, flower, skunk*	Botanical association
Weather / Natural Phenomena	*ice, snow, cloud, dust*	Physical appearance
Animals	*horse, pony, bird*	Symbolic association
Food and Drink	*candy, cookie, brown sugar, jelly*	Sweetness or disguise
Precious Materials	*gold, rock, crystal*	Value or physical form
Human / Spiritual Images	*angel dust, heaven, devil*	Psychological effects

The findings indicate that metaphorical naming rarely occurs arbitrarily. Instead, speakers consistently select lexical items whose observable characteristics resemble particular features of the drug.

For example, cocaine receives numerous white-colour metaphors because of its powdered appearance.

Examples include:

- *snow*
- *white lady*

- *powder*
- *flake*

These expressions activate the conceptual mapping

WHITE NATURAL OBJECT → COCAINE

rather than functioning as random code words.

4.2 Colour Metaphors

Colour constitutes the most productive metaphorical source domain.

Examples include:

Argot	Substance	Motivation
snow	cocaine	white powder
white girl	cocaine	colour symbolism
green	cannabis	plant colour
brown sugar	heroin	brown appearance
black tar	heroin	sticky black texture

Colour metaphor simplifies recognition while simultaneously disguising literal meaning from outsiders.

Interestingly, colour metaphors usually preserve visual salience rather than chemical properties.

4.3 Plant Metaphors

Cannabis displays the richest botanical vocabulary.

Examples include:

- *grass*
- *weed*
- *green*
- *leaf*
- *flower*

These lexical units illustrate the conceptual metaphor

PLANT → DRUG

Unlike colour metaphors, botanical metaphors emphasize natural origin and agricultural imagery.

Some expressions such as *weed* additionally carry evaluative meaning because weeds are socially regarded as undesirable plants.

4.4 Material Metaphors

Crystal meth demonstrates particularly productive material-based metaphorization.

Examples include

- *ice*
- *crystal*
- *glass*

These names arise from transparency, hardness and crystalline appearance.

Likewise,

rock

denotes crack cocaine because the substance physically resembles small rocks.

4.5 Animal Metaphors

Animal metaphors occur less frequently but possess strong cultural symbolism.

Examples include

horse (heroin)

pony (historically referring to a quantity)

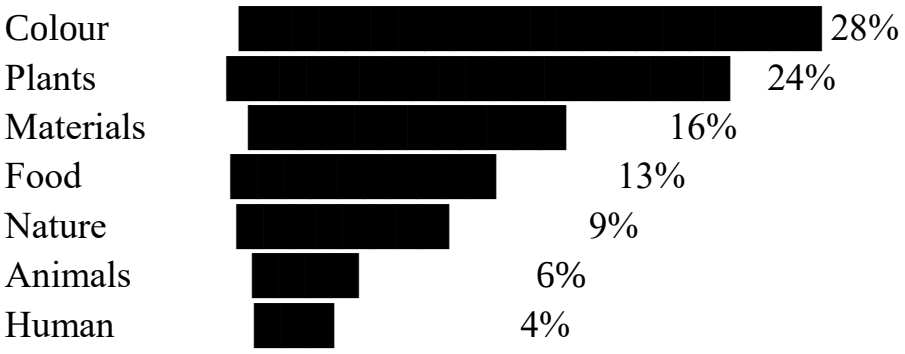
bird

Unlike colour metaphors, animal metaphors frequently emerge through historical associations rather than direct visual resemblance.

Table 2. Frequency of Metaphorical Domains

Metaphorical Domain	Number	Percentage
Colour	36	28.1%
Plants	31	24.2%
Materials	20	15.6%
Food	17	13.3%
Natural Phenomena	12	9.4%
Animals	7	5.5%
Human / Spiritual	5	3.9%

Figure 1. Distribution of Metaphorical Models



The statistical distribution clearly demonstrates that perceptually salient characteristics—especially colour and botanical appearance—serve as the primary cognitive basis for metaphorical nomination.

4.6 Conceptual Mapping

The data reveal several highly productive conceptual mappings.

Source Domain	Target Domain
White objects	Cocaine
Plants	Cannabis
Transparent materials	Methamphetamine

Source Domain	Target Domain
Sweet foods	MDMA
Rocks	Crack cocaine
Dust	PCP
Sugar	Heroin

These mappings confirm Lakoff and Johnson's proposition that metaphor systematically structures conceptual understanding rather than functioning merely as figurative ornamentation.

Linguistic Interpretation

Three principal semantic mechanisms emerge from the corpus.

First, perceptual resemblance motivates the majority of lexical innovations. Speakers select familiar objects whose colour, shape or texture resembles the drug.

Second, metaphor enhances secrecy without sacrificing communicative efficiency. Expressions such as *snow* or *grass* remain intelligible to insiders while appearing entirely ordinary in everyday conversation.

Third, repeated metaphorical usage eventually leads to lexicalization. Many expressions cease to be interpreted metaphorically by experienced speakers because their figurative origin becomes conventionalized within the speech community.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that metaphor is not a peripheral stylistic phenomenon in English drug argot but rather one of its principal lexicalization mechanisms. The corpus indicates that metaphorical nomination is motivated primarily by perceptual salience, cognitive economy, and communicative concealment. These observations support and extend several influential theories in cognitive linguistics, sociolinguistics, and lexical semantics.

The predominance of colour-based metaphors (*snow*, *white girl*, *brown sugar*, *black tar*) confirms the central claim advanced by **Lakoff and Johnson (1980)** that metaphor is rooted in everyday human experience. Rather than inventing arbitrary code words, speakers conceptualize illicit substances through observable physical characteristics that are immediately recognizable within the speech community. The mapping **VISIBLE COLOUR → CONTROLLED SUBSTANCE** exemplifies the cognitive tendency to understand unfamiliar or socially restricted concepts through familiar sensory experience. Consequently, metaphor functions simultaneously as a cognitive and communicative strategy.

The data further reveal that plant metaphors constitute the second largest conceptual domain. Lexical items such as *grass*, *weed*, *leaf*, and *green* demonstrate how speakers categorize cannabis through botanical knowledge. This finding is consistent with **Langacker's (1987)** theory of cognitive grammar, according to which lexical meaning emerges from conceptualization rather than from isolated dictionary definitions. The metaphorical relationship between plants and cannabis reflects speakers' encyclopedic knowledge about the natural origin of the substance. The semantic motivation therefore extends beyond visual resemblance and incorporates culturally shared conceptual knowledge.

The present analysis also supports **Halliday's (1978)** theory of anti-language. According to Halliday, anti-societies develop alternative lexical systems while preserving the grammatical framework of the dominant language. Drug argot illustrates this principle particularly well. Ordinary lexical items such as *snow* or *ice* remain grammatically unchanged, yet their meanings are radically reinterpreted within the subculture. This process of relexicalization allows participants to communicate effectively while simultaneously excluding outsiders from understanding the message. Consequently, metaphor performs a dual function: semantic innovation and social boundary maintenance.

An equally significant observation concerns the process of lexical conventionalization. Many expressions originally created as metaphors gradually lose their perceived figurative character. Among experienced users, lexical items such as *weed* or *crystal* may no longer evoke their literal meanings but instead function as conventional lexical labels. This phenomenon corresponds to the lexicalization process described by **Allan and Burridge (2006)**, who argue that repeated euphemistic and metaphorical expressions frequently become standard vocabulary within specialized speech communities. As metaphorical motivation becomes less transparent over time, the lexical item acquires semantic autonomy.

The findings further corroborate **Julie's Coleman's (2012)** observation that English slang evolves through continuous semantic innovation. Drug argot represents perhaps one of the most dynamic components of English slang because the need for secrecy constantly encourages lexical replacement. Nevertheless, the present research demonstrates that lexical innovation is not random. New metaphorical expressions consistently emerge from a limited number of conceptual domains, suggesting that cognitive constraints influence lexical creativity.

Another noteworthy finding concerns the relative productivity of different metaphorical models. Colour metaphors account for over one quarter of the analyzed corpus, whereas spiritual and anthropomorphic metaphors occur comparatively rarely. This distribution indicates that perceptually grounded metaphors are cognitively more economical than culturally complex symbolic mappings. Speakers appear to prefer lexical innovations that require minimal inferential effort while remaining sufficiently indirect to obscure literal reference.

The corpus also reveals that some drug argots simultaneously activate multiple conceptual domains. The expression *brown sugar*, for instance, combines colour and food imagery, while *angel dust* integrates religious symbolism with the physical notion of powder. Such multidimensional metaphors demonstrate that conceptual mappings frequently overlap rather than operating independently. Similar observations have been reported within cognitive metaphor theory, where complex conceptual integration often produces highly expressive lexical innovations.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, metaphor contributes significantly to the construction of group identity. Lexical competence within drug argot functions as a marker of in-group membership. Individuals capable of interpreting expressions such as *rock*, *glass*, or *snow* demonstrate familiarity with the communicative norms of the subculture. This linguistic

competence therefore possesses symbolic value beyond its immediate communicative function. Such findings support Eble's (1996) assertion that slang serves as a marker of social affiliation and shared experience.

The results additionally have implications for forensic linguistics. Because metaphorical drug terminology changes rapidly across regions and generations, accurate interpretation requires continuous lexicographic documentation. Misinterpretation of metaphorical expressions may lead to incorrect discourse analysis in criminal investigations or judicial proceedings. Consequently, systematic semantic classification of drug argot is relevant not only to theoretical linguistics but also to applied linguistic practice.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study focuses primarily on contemporary English and therefore does not examine diachronic semantic change in detail. Regional variation among British, American, Australian, and other English-speaking communities also deserves more extensive investigation. Furthermore, the corpus relies principally on documented lexicographic sources rather than naturally occurring spoken interaction. Future research employing large spoken corpora and computational semantic analysis could provide a more comprehensive account of metaphorical productivity in drug argot.

Overall, the findings indicate that English drug argot is characterized by systematic conceptual organization rather than lexical randomness. Metaphorical nomination reflects general cognitive principles while simultaneously responding to the communicative needs of secrecy, identity formation, and lexical economy. The convergence of cognitive, sociolinguistic, and lexical evidence suggests that metaphor should be regarded as the principal mechanism governing the semantic organization of English drug argot.

Conclusion

The present study examined the metaphorical structure of English drug argot from cognitive-semantic and sociolinguistic perspectives. The analysis demonstrates that metaphor constitutes one of the most productive mechanisms in the lexical formation of drug-related argot. Rather than relying on arbitrary code words, speakers consistently select lexical items whose semantic motivation derives from perceptual resemblance, cultural knowledge, and shared conceptual experience.

The investigation identified seven major conceptual domains underlying metaphorical nomination: colour, plants, materials, food, natural phenomena, animals, and human or spiritual imagery. Among these, colour and botanical metaphors proved to be the most productive categories, together accounting for more than half of the analyzed corpus. Such findings confirm that visual perception and everyday experience provide the principal cognitive foundation for metaphorical lexical innovation.

The research also demonstrated that metaphor performs several interconnected communicative functions. First, it conceals the literal meaning of illicit substances from outsiders. Second, it strengthens group identity by creating shared lexical knowledge within the speech community. Third, it facilitates efficient communication through highly economical

lexical expressions. These functions support Halliday's concept of anti-language and reinforce contemporary cognitive theories proposed by Lakoff, Johnson, and Langacker.

Another important conclusion concerns the systematic nature of semantic change. Although English drug argot evolves rapidly, its lexical innovations follow relatively stable conceptual patterns rather than random processes. This observation suggests that cognitive constraints influence the development of non-standard vocabulary even within highly dynamic social environments.

The study contributes to cognitive linguistics, sociolinguistics, lexicology, and forensic linguistics by providing a structured semantic classification of metaphorical drug argots. The proposed analytical framework may also be applied to the investigation of other forms of criminal argot and specialized subcultural vocabularies.

Future research should expand the corpus through spoken discourse, online communication, and diachronic data in order to explore how metaphorical models evolve across time, regions, and emerging psychoactive substances. Integrating corpus linguistics with computational semantic analysis would further strengthen the empirical basis of metaphor studies within English argot.

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