

METAPHORICAL FRAMING OF CRIME AND PUNISHMENT IN ENGLISH

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Abstract: This article investigates the metaphorical framing of crime and punishment in English discourse from a cognitive-linguistic and pragmalinguistic perspective. Drawing on conceptual metaphor theory, metaphorical framing theory, literary analysis, and recent legal-philosophical discussions of punishment, the study examines how English conceptualizes crime not merely as an unlawful act but as a beast, disease, war, moral contamination, social disorder, and enemy. Punishment, in turn, is framed as communication, payment, containment, cure, moral balance, and social protection. The analysis demonstrates that metaphorical frames do not simply decorate legal and public language; they organize social reasoning, influence attitudes toward offenders, and shape preferred penal responses.

Keywords: metaphorical framing, crime, punishment, English discourse, conceptual metaphor, penal communication, cognitive linguistics, legal discourse

Introduction

Crime and punishment are among the most socially sensitive concepts in English public, legal, political, journalistic, and literary discourse. They are rarely discussed in purely literal terms. English speakers do not simply say that crime “exists” or that punishment “is imposed”; they say that crime is “spreading,” “rising,” “attacking communities,” “preying on victims,” “infecting neighbourhoods,” or “destroying the social body.” Similarly, punishment is described as “paying a debt,” “sending a message,” “fighting crime,” “locking criminals away,” “correcting offenders,” or “restoring justice.” These expressions show that crime and punishment are not only legal categories but also metaphorically structured social concepts.

The theoretical basis of this article is conceptual metaphor theory, especially the view developed by Lakoff and Johnson that metaphor is not merely a rhetorical device but a fundamental mechanism of thought. According to this approach, people understand abstract domains through more concrete domains. Therefore, metaphors such as “argument is war, time is money, or life is a journey” are not simply linguistic ornaments; they structure perception, reasoning, and action. In the same way, metaphors of crime and punishment shape how English-speaking communities imagine criminality, offenders, victims, the state, and justice. Metaphorical framing is especially important in crime discourse because different metaphors suggest different

solutions. If crime is framed as a beast, the logical response is to hunt, capture, cage, or destroy it. If crime is framed as a virus, the logical response is to diagnose the cause, prevent transmission, treat the infected social body, and strengthen communal immunity. If crime is framed as war, society needs enemies, weapons, campaigns, and victory. If crime is framed as moral disease or sin, punishment becomes purification, repentance, or moral correction. Thus, metaphorical framing creates a link between language, cognition, ideology, and policy.

Materials and Methods

The study is based on qualitative cognitive-discursive analysis. The materials include theoretical and analytical sources on conceptual metaphor, metaphorical framing, literary representation of crime and punishment, and penal communication. The key sources used are Lakoff and Johnson's theory of conceptual metaphor, the discussion of metaphorical framing, Thibodeau and Boroditsky's experimental research on crime metaphors, Pershina's analysis of crime and punishment metaphors in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Melyukhanova's work on matching punishment to crime, and Fatić's philosophical discussion of punishment as metaphorical substitution.

The study is not a statistical corpus investigation. It is a theoretical and interpretive article that uses selected English examples and scholarly sources to explain how metaphorical framing works in crime-and-punishment discourse. Therefore, the findings should be understood as conceptual categories rather than quantitative frequency results.

Results

The analysis reveals that English discourse frames crime through several dominant conceptual metaphors. The first and one of the most powerful is crime is a beast. This frame is visible in expressions such as "criminals prey on victims," "police hunt criminals," "offenders are caught," and "dangerous criminals must be caged." The source domain is the world of wild animals and hunting. In this frame, the offender becomes a predator, the victim becomes prey, the police become hunters, and prison becomes a cage. The frame supports a punitive logic: if crime is a beast, society must capture and restrain it.

The second important frame is "crime is a disease or crime is a virus". English expressions such as "crime is spreading," "a crime epidemic," "violence infects the community," and "social conditions breed crime" present criminality as a pathological condition of the social body. This frame changes the focus from individual evil to diagnosis, prevention, treatment, and social reform. If crime is a disease, then the community must identify root causes, prevent transmission, and strengthen institutions such as education, employment, family support, and social services.

The third frame is "crime is war". This metaphor appears in expressions such as "war on crime," "war on drugs," "fight crime," "combat violence," "crack down on

criminals,” and “zero tolerance campaign.” Here crime becomes an enemy force, police and courts become weapons of the state, and justice becomes victory over an opposing side. The war frame is emotionally powerful because it creates urgency and collective mobilization. However, it can also simplify crime into a binary opposition between “society” and “criminals,” reducing the possibility of restorative or rehabilitative thinking.

The fourth frame is “crime is moral contamination”. This metaphor is strongly connected with religious, literary, and ethical discourse. Criminal acts are described as “evil,” “dirty,” “corrupt,” “sinful,” or “staining” the conscience. In literary English, especially in Shakespearean tragedy, crime is often associated with darkness, blood, damnation, demonic temptation, and inner disintegration. In this frame, punishment is not only legal reaction but also moral purification or spiritual consequence. The frame is powerful because it connects law with conscience, guilt, and moral order.

The fifth frame is “punishment is payment”. English expressions such as “pay for the crime,” “pay one’s debt to society,” “the price of wrongdoing,” and “justice demands repayment” conceptualize punishment as economic exchange. The offender has taken something from the victim or community and must repay it through suffering, deprivation, or loss of freedom. This frame supports proportionality: the more serious the crime, the heavier the payment. However, the payment metaphor may hide the fact that suffering does not literally restore the victim’s loss.

The sixth frame is “punishment is communication”. In this model, punishment “sends a message,” “expresses condemnation,” “communicates blame,” or “addresses the offender as a responsible moral agent.” This frame is important in expressive and communicative theories of punishment. It presents punishment not merely as pain but as a symbolic act through which society condemns wrongdoing. Nevertheless, this metaphor is unstable because a message requires understanding and uptake. If an offender experiences punishment only as coercion, humiliation, or exclusion, the intended moral message may fail.

The seventh frame is “punishment is containment”. Imprisonment is described through spatial metaphors: offenders are “locked up,” “put away,” “behind bars,” “removed from society,” or “kept off the streets.” In this frame, punishment protects the community by physically separating dangerous persons from public space. It is closely related to the beast metaphor, where the dangerous creature must be caged. The frame is pragmatically effective because it offers a simple visual solution: danger is removed. However, it can hide long-term questions of reintegration, rehabilitation, and social trust.

The eighth frame is “punishment is treatment” or “correction”. This frame appears in words such as “correctional facility,” “rehabilitation,” “reform,” “treatment programme,” and “social reintegration.” The offender is viewed not only as guilty but

also as changeable. The goal is not only to impose deserved suffering but to transform behaviour. This metaphor is closer to the disease frame of crime and often supports preventive and restorative approaches.

Discussion

The findings show that metaphorical framing performs three major functions in English crime-and-punishment discourse: cognitive simplification, emotional evaluation, and policy orientation. First, metaphor simplifies complex social phenomena. Crime is not one thing: it includes theft, violence, fraud, corruption, cybercrime, domestic abuse, drug offences, and many other acts with different motives and consequences. However, metaphor compresses this complexity into one image. When crime is called a beast, the public imagines danger and attack. When crime is called a virus, the public imagines spread and prevention. When crime is called war, the public imagines enemies and victory. This simplification helps communication but may also distort the issue. Second, metaphor carries emotional evaluation. The beast frame produces fear and anger. The disease frame produces concern and a desire for treatment. The war frame produces urgency and solidarity against an enemy. The payment frame produces a sense of balance and deserved consequence. The contamination frame produces moral disgust. These emotional meanings are not secondary; they influence what kind of response appears reasonable. Third, metaphor guides policy preferences. Thibodeau and Boroditsky's research is especially important here because it demonstrates that metaphorical frames can influence reasoning about crime even when people believe they are responding to objective statistics. In their experiments, participants exposed to the beast metaphor were more likely to support enforcement and punishment, while those exposed to the virus metaphor were more likely to support social reform and investigation of root causes. This supports the idea that metaphorical framing can function covertly: people may be influenced by a metaphor without consciously recognizing its role.

The relationship between crime and punishment is also metaphorically constructed through proportionality. The common idea that punishment should "fit" the crime suggests a measurement metaphor: crime has weight, gravity, or seriousness, and punishment must correspond to it. Melyukhanova's discussion of matching punishment to crime is relevant here because it shows that legal classification can become problematic if punishment itself becomes the criterion for measuring the seriousness of crime. From a metaphorical perspective, this means that the "scale" of justice must not become circular: punishment should respond to the public danger and nature of the crime, not define that danger by itself.

The communicative metaphor of punishment is particularly complex. If punishment is a message, then imprisonment, fines, community service, or other sanctions are treated as symbolic language. The state "speaks" through punishment. It

tells the offender that the act was wrong and tells society that justice has been done. However, Fatić's argument about the semantic opacity of penal communication challenges this assumption. Punishment may intend to communicate moral condemnation, but the relation between imposed suffering and intended meaning is not transparent. Five years in prison does not naturally or logically "mean" remorse, repentance, or restored moral order. Its meaning depends on social convention, institutional context, and the interpretation of the punished person.

This problem is important because communication requires uptake. A sentence may be intended as moral address, but an offender may receive it as exclusion, revenge, state violence, or social abandonment. Victims may receive it as insufficient, excessive, or irrelevant to their harm. Society may receive it as security, spectacle, or political performance. Therefore, the metaphor "punishment is communication" can hide the gap between the sender's intention and the receiver's interpretation. Literary discourse reveals the deeper cultural roots of these metaphors. In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, crime and punishment are framed through darkness, blood, evil, demonic forces, temptation, fear, conscience, and damnation. Pershina's analysis shows that metaphorical symbols in *Macbeth* represent not only external crime but also inner moral collapse. This literary model continues to influence English moral imagination: crime is not only an act against law but also a disorder of the soul, a stain of conscience, and a movement toward destruction.

At the same time, no single metaphor is sufficient. The beast metaphor highlights danger but hides causes. The disease metaphor highlights prevention but may weaken responsibility. The war metaphor highlights urgency but may justify excessive force. The payment metaphor highlights proportionality but may reduce justice to suffering. The communication metaphor highlights moral meaning but may ignore the offender's actual experience. The treatment metaphor highlights rehabilitation but may understate blame and victim harm. A balanced English discourse on crime and punishment requires awareness of these metaphorical limits.

Conclusion

The metaphorical framing of crime and punishment in English shows that legal and public discourse is deeply shaped by cognitive metaphors. Crime is framed as a beast, disease, war, moral contamination, and social disorder; punishment is framed as payment, communication, containment, treatment, and restoration of balance. These frames are not neutral. They influence how society identifies the problem, evaluates offenders, sympathizes with victims, and chooses between punishment, prevention, rehabilitation, and restorative justice.

The main conclusion is that metaphorical framing has both explanatory power and ideological risk. It helps people understand complex legal concepts through familiar images, but it can also narrow reasoning and make one type of penal response appear

natural or inevitable. In English discourse, punitive metaphors such as beast, war, and containment often support enforcement-oriented policy, while medical and restorative metaphors support prevention, reform, and rehabilitation. The communicative metaphor of punishment is especially problematic because punishment may be intended as a moral message but received as coercive suffering.

Therefore, scholars, policymakers, journalists, and educators should treat crime-and-punishment metaphors critically. The question is not whether metaphor should be used, because metaphor is unavoidable in human thought. The real question is which metaphors are used, what they highlight, what they hide, and what kinds of justice they make imaginable.

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