

THE REFLECTION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

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Abstract

This article examines how figurative language – including metaphors, idioms, and symbols – embodies and reflects national and cultural identity. Drawing on theories of conceptual metaphor and cultural linguistics, the study reviews how national ideals, historical narratives, and collective values are encoded in language. For example, metaphors such as the nation-as-body or nation-as-family illustrate how speakers conceptualize their country (Musolff, 2020). Idioms and proverbs – deeply rooted in local history and customs – similarly mirror cultural worldview. Case studies like national anthems show that lyrical metaphors explicitly evoke patriotism and unity. We synthesize cross-cultural examples (e.g. Portuguese fado music as a metaphor for Portugal; differing notions of “motherland” in British vs. Ukrainian contexts) to illustrate that figurative expressions carry unique ethnolinguistic meaning. The analysis finds that while some metaphoric patterns may be near-universal, their usage and interpretation are shaped by each culture’s historical experiences and ideology. Overall, the evidence suggests that figurative language serves as a cultural lens, perpetuating national identity by linking abstract concepts to shared social realities. Implications for intercultural communication and cognitive linguistics are discussed.

Keywords: figurative language, national identity, metaphor, idiom, cultural linguistics, symbolism

Introduction

Language is a core medium through which cultural values and national identity are expressed. Beyond literal meaning, figurative language – such as metaphors, idioms, and symbols – often encodes collective history, values, and attitudes. Metaphors, in particular, shape how people conceptualize abstract domains (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) by mapping familiar physical experiences onto intangible concepts. As Zou, Fuller, and Wang (2025) note, metaphors do not merely decorate speech; they “reflect what people perceive” about the world and carry cultural connotations. Thus, the ways a nation speaks about itself – for example, calling the country a “body,” “family,” or “mother” – can reveal underlying cultural mindsets.

Scholars have observed that figurative expressions are closely intertwined with cultural identity. Wang (2017) emphasizes that idioms and proverbs “reflect the environment, life, history, and culture of the native speakers”. Similarly, national discourse (e.g. political rhetoric, songs, and folk narratives) is rich in culturally specific metaphors that both convey and shape national sentiment. For instance, in the Portuguese fado tradition, Christine Nielsen et al. (2008) find that the music functions as a cultural metaphor encapsulating Portuguese values; the fado is embraced as an “enduring symbol of national identity”.

This article explores how figurative language mirrors national identity across cultures. We ask: How do metaphors, idioms, and symbols encode a nation’s self-image and values? What differences appear in figurative expressions across linguistic contexts? To answer, we synthesize insights from cognitive linguistics and cultural studies. We review literature on metaphors and culture (e.g., Kouvesz 2005; Musolff 2020), then analyze examples from national anthems, idiomatic speech, and cultural symbols. We demonstrate that figurative language offers a lens into collective identity: national metaphors and idioms preserve historical memory and shared ideals, while unique symbolic references reveal ethnocultural particularities. Throughout, we cite empirical studies and provide illustrative examples of figurative expressions. By highlighting the deep connections between language and identity, we contribute to understanding how nations see themselves through words.

Literature Review

Figurative language and culture. Foundational work in cognitive linguistics posits that metaphors shape thought as well as language (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Metaphors structure abstract concepts by mapping them onto concrete domains: e.g. argument is war, time is money, or nation is family. As Wu’s corpus study (2020) echoes Lakoff, “metaphors construct the ordinary conceptual system and reflect what people perceive”. Notably, what is taken for granted in one culture may be expressed differently in another. Zou et al. (2025) review literature showing that metaphors carry deep cultural embeddings: they “embody cultural cognition, historical values, and societal ideologies,” extending beyond mere words. In practice, shared metaphoric schemas facilitate in-group communication but can lead to misunderstanding across cultures if the mappings differ (Musolff, 2014; Zou et al., 2025).

Metaphors of nationhood. Within socio-political discourse, a few metaphor complexes recur as tools for construing national identity. Musolff (2020) identifies the nation-as-body/person metaphor as a key scheme. For example, in English and many traditions, the “body politic” or national personification (Fatherland, Motherland, Uncle Sam) are common. Musolff’s intercultural study (2020) finds that English

speakers often envision the nation as a single body or person, whereas Chinese speakers may prefer variants like the nation as a geographical whole or part of a larger body. This suggests that, though the idea of nation-as-organism is shared, each culture draws on its own experiences to flesh it out. Similarly, research on political language shows that national identity is metaphorically framed as a “body” with vulnerable parts, or as “family” with parents and children (Goatly, 2011). These mappings highlight how people metaphorically project family and bodily imagery onto the state, reflecting notions of unity or hierarchy.

Another example is the “motherland” vs. “fatherland” distinction. Some cultures use feminine imagery (motherland) emphasizing nurturing and heritage, others use masculine (fatherland) emphasizing lineage and authority. Shutova’s (2024) analysis of English and Ukrainian usage shows this disparity concretely: in Ukrainian consciousness, the motherland is associated with home and family warmth, invoking close, intimate feelings. By contrast, British references to “motherland” (e.g. in historical poetry) evoke pride in a long history but often lack the personal intimacy found in Ukrainian usage. Indeed, although “motherland” is considered an abstract universal concept, Shutova notes that its “deeper reconstruction shows... a clearly expressed ethno-cultural marking”. In other words, even a seemingly neutral metaphor of nation varies by culture.

Idioms and proverbs. Idiomatic expressions and proverbs provide another window into national mentality. Idioms are often rooted in local folklore, ecology, and history. Wang (2017) observes that each idiom “carries... unique cultural connotations, such as historical development, natural environments, religious belief, custom & habits”. For instance, English idioms often preserve ancient history: British sayings like “When in Rome, do as the Romans do” or “All roads lead to Rome” reflect the Roman occupation of Britain. These proverbs about Rome are embedded reminders of historical events familiar to British culture. Likewise, Chinese, Arabic, or indigenous idioms commonly feature local flora, animals, or anecdotes (e.g., Chinese “骑虎难下” qí hǔ nán xià “ridden a tiger and can’t dismount” meaning being in a difficult situation). Lingua theorists note that idioms inherently reflect the environment, life, history, and culture of their speakers. Thus, to understand a nation’s idiomatic repertoire is to glimpse its collective worldview.

Researchers have also specifically linked idioms to national mentality. One study found that English idioms like “free spirit” or “give someone free rein” mirror Western individualism (inferring personal autonomy). Similarly, metaphors of hospitality or filth may show differing attitudes: e.g., a proverb in one culture may value communal sharing, while another’s equivalent idiom underscores personal privacy. In sum, idioms

encapsulate what is familiar and valued – the local folktales, myths, and social norms passed through generations. (As Wang 2017 emphasizes, they are “crystallizations” of cultural experience).

Cultural symbolisms. Beyond fixed phrases, cultures also use symbolic metaphors and personifications that become shorthand for national identity. Examples include national animals (the American eagle, the Russian bear, the Indian tiger) or mythical figures. These often appear in figurative speech: e.g. a leader called a “lion” implies courage, reflecting that animal’s status in local culture. In literature and song, entire cultural metaphors can arise. Nielsen et al. (2008) detail one such case: the Portuguese fado music is treated as a “cultural metaphor” for Portugal. Fado’s melancholic themes of fate and *saudade* (longing) are said to richly represent the Portuguese mindset; the authors conclude that the fado metaphor is “embraced by the population as an enduring symbol of national identity”. This illustrates how artistic symbols become part of national self-image. National anthems provide parallel evidence: Tocharoen and Tapinta (2019) analyze 24 English-language anthems and find extensive use of personification and symbolic imagery (flag, land, lion, eagle, etc.) to evoke patriotism. They note that anthems are “socially constructed patterns of meaning” that actively construct and conserve national identity, pride, and sovereignty through language. In short, whether via official symbols or folk traditions, figurative references to these symbols anchor identity in shared heritage.

Theoretical perspectives. The reviewed literature suggests that figurative language is neither arbitrary nor universally identical across cultures. While some primary metaphors (like HAPPY IS UP) appear nearly universal (due to shared bodily experiences), higher-level metaphors (like NATION IS BODY) carry culture-specific variants. Musolff’s (2020) survey of English and Chinese responses found that while both groups recognize “nation as body” metaphors, they differ in emphasis: English L1 speakers tended to personify the nation, whereas Chinese L1 speakers more often conceptualized it in geographic or group terms. This aligns with general cognitive linguistic views: metaphoric mappings emerge from shared experiences, but the linguistic expressions and preferred mappings are culturally shaped. Additionally, as Zou et al. (2025) argue, metaphors contribute to shaping culture just as much as they reflect it. In practical terms, the metaphors a society adopts can reinforce certain values (e.g. defining the country as a “family” may stress unity over dissent).

In summary, existing research across disciplines – linguistics, anthropology, sociology – converges on the notion that figurative language serves as a vessel for cultural identity. Metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) provides the conceptual basis, while empirical studies (e.g. Nielsen et al., 2008; Musolff, 2020; Zou et al., 2025)

give specific examples. These works show that by studying metaphors, idioms, and symbols in context, one can trace the contours of a nation's identity and values (Zou et al., 2025).

Methodology

This article is based on a qualitative analysis of secondary sources and illustrative examples. We conducted a thematic literature review, synthesizing findings from cognitive linguistics, cultural studies, and discourse analysis. We extracted relevant passages from journal articles, books, and theses that address national identity and figurative language (including Zou et al., 2025; Musolff, 2020; Tocharoen & Tapinta, 2019; Wang, 2017; Nielsen et al., 2008; Shutova, 2024). These sources were searched using keywords like metaphor, idiom, national identity, and culture. In addition, we examined corpora of symbolic language (e.g. lyrics of anthems, folk songs) as reported by scholars, to see how figurative elements were used. The collected material was coded for metaphoric themes and idiomatic content. For each identified example, we analyzed its meaning in cultural context and how it reflects collective values. Throughout, we adopted an interdisciplinary approach, integrating theoretical insights from conceptual metaphor theory with sociocultural interpretation. No new empirical data were collected; rather, this work synthesizes existing research to draw broader conclusions about how figurative language functions as an expression of national identity.

Analysis and Discussion

Metaphors of National Identity

Metaphors of nationhood vividly illustrate how national identity is framed. For instance, the idea of the “body politic” portrays the nation as a living organism with parts that must function in harmony. This metaphor conveys that citizens (as organs) have roles to play in national well-being. In many cultures, the collective is literally referred to as “the body” of the people (e.g. Körper in German political discourse) or “head” of state (the leadership). Musolff (2020) identifies five scenarios of nation-as-body metaphors, including nation as a person, as a geobody (like a physical whole), or as parts of a larger body. His cross-cultural survey found that English speakers often treat the nation like a single human persona, whereas Chinese speakers more often see the nation as a large geographic entity or as part of a greater whole. These differences reflect underlying cultural models: Western discourse emphasizes the individual (even in metaphors), while Chinese discourse may emphasize collective or relational aspects.

Another pervasive metaphor is the “family” metaphor for a nation. In some contexts, countries are spoken of as Motherland or Fatherland. The gender choice here is telling: as Shutova (2024) notes, Ukrainians tend to conceptualize the motherland in

terms of familial warmth and home, while British usage of “motherland” is more abstract and linked to historical pride. Indeed, a study comparing Anglo and Ukrainian notions of “motherland” found that the British expression was marked by a sense of historical legacy and formal pride, whereas the Ukrainian concept evoked intimate, familial feelings. This reveals that a shared metaphor (nation as mother) can carry different emotional tones. In Germany, “Fatherland” (Vaterland) carries connotations of heritage and duty, underscoring how each language’s etymology of patria yields distinct image (similar in Russian *otchizna* and English “mother country”).

War and construction metaphors also surface in national rhetoric. Political speeches often talk of the nation building its future (“Our country is being built by hard work”) or waging battle against problems (“We must fight inflation”). These metaphors cast national development either as a positive creative process or as a struggle against adversaries. For example, Wu (2020) identifies a conceptual metaphor “National Identity is Building” in Hong Kong political addresses, suggesting officials view identity construction as an on-going project. Such metaphors function as “nomination strategies” to show the government’s stance on national cohesion. Conversely, war metaphors (e.g. “war on poverty”) evoke existential urgency and unity but also can exclude dissenting voices. These metaphorical framings influence public sentiment about national goals and what it means to be a citizen.

Metaphors can also highlight national values and geography. For island nations like New Zealand, the metaphor of the nation as a ring of islands or *waka* (canoe) is used in Māori discourse to signal unity despite dispersion. In contrast, a landlocked country might use a fortress or ship of state metaphor. Regardless of specifics, the chosen metaphor reflects what each culture considers salient. As Loudermilk and Schanze (2024) remark, metaphors act as “implicit cultural codes” – they resonate in contexts where shared experiences make the mapping natural.

Idioms and Cultural Connotations

Idiomatic expressions provide concrete evidence of how everyday language carries national identity. As Wang (2017) stresses, idioms are like cultural artifacts embedded with collective memory. Many idioms literally name local phenomena – for example, the English idiom “kick the bucket” has an obscure origin but has become a fixed phrase for dying, familiar to English speakers through literature. In contrast, Portuguese has “bater a bota” (“to hit the boot”) meaning the same, showing different imagery. Neither phrase would be understandable to someone outside the culture without explanation.

Proverbs, in particular, reveal historical influences. English speakers routinely use Rome-related proverbs reflecting centuries-old history: “When in Rome, do as the

Romans do” or *“All roads lead to Rome”*. These proverbs, originating from the Roman Empire’s legacy, persist in modern English as commonplace wisdom. Similarly, after the Scottish Clearances, there are Scots proverbs about emigration. In Asia, Chinese idioms drawn from dynastic history or folklore (like “盲人摸象” máng rén mō xiàng “blind men touching an elephant”, meaning partial understanding) are used without English equivalents. Such idioms require cultural context to interpret.

Idioms also reflect national self-images. English idioms like “the whole nine yards” or “big brother” carry connotations of completeness or surveillance influenced by American culture. In the UAE, a study notes Arabic idioms like “washing someone’s face” (meaning to flatter) reflect values of honor and social harmony. Idioms for personal traits often differ: an American might say someone is “one in a million” to praise uniqueness, whereas a Japanese idiom “出る杭は打たれる” (deru kui wa utareru, “the stake that sticks out gets hammered down”) warns against standing out, reflecting a collectivist ideal of conformity.

Overall, idioms reveal how language encodes what each culture finds normal or noteworthy. To a local, idioms are almost transparent; but for outsiders they signal differences. Metaphor theory emphasizes that idioms “draw on common experience that bonds a writer to her audience”. By communicating shared values succinctly, idioms reinforce group identity. As Tocharoen and Tapinta (2019) point out, even devices like repetition and alliteration in anthems (e.g. repeating “nationwide we stand”) help embed national ideals in poetic form. This stylistic use of figurative language – though seemingly decorative – actually codifies belief in unity and pride, making the message stick in the collective consciousness.

Symbols as Figurative Emblems

Symbols, whether in language or material culture, function much like figurative language. In discourse, national symbols often appear as metaphorical referents. For example, referring to “Uncle Sam” or “John Bull” personifies the United States or Britain, respectively. Calling a policy “the last straw that broke the camel’s back” might show how even domesticated imagery slips into political rhetoric (e.g. tensions in Middle Eastern cultures often use camel references). While these are standard metaphors, sometimes entire cultural artifacts become metaphors.

Music and folklore often use symbolic motifs. The earlier example of fado music shows how a genre can symbolize a national “soul”. Similarly, we might say “Auld Lang Syne” embodies Scottish sentiment, though not exactly figurative language. More directly, flags and emblems permeate language: people speak of “trampling on our flag” to connote national insult, or “our common home” (Earth as Mother Earth metaphor). These expressions carry powerful symbolism: adjectives like sacred, holy,

or beloved often qualify the homeland in literature and poetry, equating country with family or deity.

In political discourse, symbols are used metaphorically to contrast with national identity. For instance, during conflict, one side's symbols (flag, anthem) may be invoked as "sacred heritage" while the opponent's are denigrated. This contrast shows how symbolism in language can also enforce in-group identity by delineating an out-group. Musolff (2021) notes that labeling fellow nationals as "cultural others" often involves metaphorical language about pollution, illness, or animals – a dehumanizing symbolism that paradoxically reflects one's own self-image as pure or "civilized". While this is negative, it underlines that figurative language is a battleground for identity.

Comparative Insights

Across cultures, certain figurative patterns recur but are colored by context. For example, many countries conceive of national growth or decline in spatial metaphors (rising sun, falling star, anchor dragging). In East Asia, the dragon often symbolizes power; in Western contexts it implies danger. Such symbols in idioms and metaphors show that even the same archetype can have different slants. Shutova (2024) exemplifies this: although both the British and Ukrainians share common cultural archetypes (benevolence, patriotism, etc.), their expressive profiles differ – the British valuing rational kindness, Ukrainians openness and sincerity. These subtle differences manifest in figurative expression: a British patriotic phrase might sound formal and measured, whereas a Ukrainian equivalent may sound more emotional.

This variability has practical implications. As Zou et al. (2025) highlight, when people lack shared figurative mappings, communication suffers. For example, an American idiom like "open the kimono" (to reveal secrets) is meaningless or even offensive in Japan. On the other hand, some metaphors transcend borders (e.g. HAPPINESS IS UP is found in English, Chinese, Hungarian), because they arise from universal experiences. However, as Kóvecses (2010) and others note, the extent of universality is nuanced. A metaphor that could be universal might be overshadowed by culture-specific connotations: the English phrase "glass ceiling" has no immediate analog in all languages, reflecting gender issues in Western corporate culture.

In sum, the analysis shows that figurative language serves as a mirror to national identity: it preserves what a culture regards as important, and it filters conceptual understanding through collective lenses. When a nation says its values (e.g. freedom, unity, endurance) are like something – say, a lamp shining in the dark (a common metaphor for guidance) – it is asserting what it stands for via imagery. These metaphoric assertions often become part of education, media, and art, reinforcing

identity. Moreover, the interplay is dynamic: cultural changes (technology, globalization) introduce new metaphors (e.g. “wireless citizens” in the digital era) even as old metaphors fade. But the underlying principle holds: figurative language continually shapes and reflects the ever-evolving national self-image.

Conclusion

Figurative language provides a rich tapestry for understanding national and cultural identity. This review has shown that metaphors, idioms, and symbols are not mere linguistic decorations, but carriers of collective meaning. Metaphors like the nation-as-body or as-family reveal implicit beliefs about how a country is organized and how its people relate to it. Idioms and proverbs preserve historical memory and social values: they are verbal heirlooms linking past and present. Symbolic expressions, from personified national figures to cultural artifacts, further embody what a society cherishes about itself. Crucially, these figurative forms vary across cultures. What may be a positive metaphor in one language could be neutral or negative in another. For example, emotional warmth in a “motherland” trope emerges vividly in Ukrainian speech but is more muted in British usage.

The scholarly evidence underscores that national identity and figurative language are mutually constitutive. Metaphors “reflect cultural cognition” by encoding values and worldview, and they can also reinforce identity by structuring thought. Idioms mirror collective experience, and the specific idiomatic repertoire of a language reveals what that culture finds familiar and important. Across genres – whether the solemn verses of a national anthem or the casual idioms of daily talk – speakers continually express their national story through figurative means.

In conclusion, to study a country’s metaphors and idioms is to study its self-image. Linguists and cultural scholars can gain insight into national psyche by decoding these expressions. Future research might extend this analysis to lesser-studied cultures or to multilingual contexts (e.g. how immigrant communities adapt metaphors). For now, this analysis affirms that figurative language is a powerful vessel for national identity: through creative wordplay and imagery, it tells the story of who “we” are.

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