



IRAQI
Academic Scientific Journals



العراقية
المجلات الأكاديمية العلمية

ISSN: 2663-9033 (Online) | ISSN: 2616-6224 (Print)

Journal of Language Studies

Contents available at: <https://jls.tu.edu.iq/index.php/JLS>



An Analysis of Image Schemas in Selected English Superstitious Sayings

Asst. Lect. Zhala Abdulqader Ikram*

Religious Education Department, College of Islamic Sciences, Salahaddin University, Erbil,
Kurdistan Region, Iraq
zhala.ikram@su.edu.krd

&

Dr. Avin Nadir Qadir

Individual Games Department, College of Physical Education and Sport Sciences,
Salahaddin University, Erbil, Kurdistan Region, Iraq
avin.qadir@su.edu.krd

Received: 19/01/2026, Accepted: 23/02/2026, Online Published: 30/06/2026

Abstract

The present study examines image schemas in English superstitious sayings from a cognitive semantics perspective. Image schemas, which have become a trend in cognitive linguistics, are conceptual structures derived from recurring embodied experiences, and they facilitate the understanding of both abstract and concrete concepts. The study explores the contribution of image schemas in interpreting the meaning of superstitions. Moreover, it aims to shed light on how everyday life experiences are conceptualized, as it is obvious that superstitions are basically an indispensable belief and practice of every culture. The data of the study was collected from books on superstitions, focusing on well-known English superstitions. The study presents a descriptive, qualitative analysis that investigates English superstitions using Johnson's (1987) image schemas by identifying and

* **Corresponding Author:** Zhala Abdulqader Ikram, Email: zhala.ikram@su.edu.krd

Affiliation: Salahaddin University – Iraq.

© This is an open access article under the CC by licenses <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>



categorizing them according to the image schema types and the conceptual metaphors they motivate. The analysis of the research has revealed several image schema types that exist in English superstitions, namely CONTAINER, PATH, PART-WHOLE, FORCE, CONTACT, LINK, CYCLE, SCALE, and NEAR-FAR schemas. In addition to that, applying image schemas to English superstitions demonstrates that they are grounded in recurring embodied experiences that map onto abstract notions like *luck*, *protection*, *danger*, or *fate* through conceptual metaphors.

Keywords: cognitive semantics, conceptual metaphor, embodied experience, image schemas, superstitions

تحليل مخططات الصور في أقوال خرافية إنجليزية مختارة

م. م. زاله عبد القادر اكرام

قسم التربية الدينية، كلية العلوم الإسلامية، جامعة صلاح الدين، أربيل، اقليم كردستان، العراق

و

د. أفين نادر قادر

قسم التربية البدنية وعلوم الرياضة، كلية التربية البدنية وعلوم الرياضة، جامعة صلاح الدين، أربيل، اقليم كردستان، العراق

المستخلص

تدرس هذه الدراسة المخططات التصويرية في الأقوال الإنجليزية المتعلقة بالخرافات من منظور الدلالات الإدراكية. المخططات التصويرية، التي أصبحت اتجاهًا في اللغويات ادراكية، هي هياكل مفاهيمية مستمدة من تجارب جسدية متكررة، وتساعد في فهم كل من المفاهيم المجردة والملموسة. تستكشف الدراسة مساهمة المخططات التصويرية في تفسير معنى الخرافات. علاوة على ذلك، تهدف الدراسة إلى تسليط الضوء على كيفية تصور تجارب الحياة اليومية، حيث من الواضح أن الخرافات هي في الأساس اعتقاد وممارسة لا غنى عنهما في كل ثقافة. تم جمع بيانات الدراسة من كتب عن الخرافات، مع التركيز على الخرافات الإنجليزية المعروفة. تقدم الدراسة تحليلًا وصفيًا نوعيًا يستقصي الخرافات الإنجليزية باستخدام مخططات الصور التي وضعها جونسون (1987) من خلال تحديدها وتصنيفها وفقًا لأنماط الصور والاستعارات المفاهيمية التي تحفزها. كشفت تحليل البحث عن عدة أنواع من المخططات التصويرية التي توجد في الخرافات الإنجليزية، وهي: المخططات التصويرية للحاوية، المسار، الجزء-الكل، القوة، التماس، الرابط،

الدورة، المقياس، والقريب-البعيد. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، فإن تطبيق المخططات التصويرية على الخرافات الإنجليزية يُظهر أنها مستندة إلى تجارب جسدية متكررة تتوافق مع مفاهيم مجردة مثل الحظ، الحماية، الخطر، أو القدر من خلال الاستعارات المفاهيمية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الدلالة الإدراكية، الاستعارة المفاهيمية، التجربة المجسدة، مخططات الصور، الخرافات

1. Introduction

Superstitions are nonscientific beliefs that attribute events to luck, fate, and supernatural forces. Naturally every culture has its own superstitions, and throughout history, people were always in search of various rituals for protection or to prevent bad luck. In ancient times, people sought a solution for their survival, especially when they faced adverse events, as there were no proper sanitation, food, clean water, and medicines, so they depended on such beliefs or practices to save them from bad outcomes. For example, medieval Londoners, in an attempt to treat the bubonic plague, applied dead pigeons to buboes (Rhodes, 2012). In the past, amulets were natural objects; people used or carried four-leaf clovers, rabbit's feet, and horseshoes in order to protect themselves from the evil eye, misfortune, illness, and danger. However, with the passage of time, man-made objects were also used like jewelry in the form of amulets (Webster, 2008). Although people know that there is no scientific validity to superstitions, they do believe in them because psychologically, they give a sense of security and control over their lives.

People are still as superstitious today as they have ever been. Have you ever knocked on wood or avoided the Friday the 13th? These indispensable practices are grounded in our embodied experiences that reflect in image schemas.

The study aims at examining English superstitions through image schema theory to see how they shape or conceptualize our embodied experiences, even before learning a language, and to examine the role of image schemas in interpreting meaning or understanding English superstitious sayings. There are so many studies on superstitions dealing with the psychological aspect of human behavior or comparative studies of the superstitions of different cultures, while the significance of this study lies in examining superstitions through cognitive semantics, specifically image schemas. Moreover, the paper has its own value, as it shows how image schema works in a traditional form of language, and also it paves the way for understanding superstitions of other cultures. The current study attempts to answer the following questions:

1- Which image schema types are found in English superstitious sayings?

2- How do image schemas structure meaning in English superstitious sayings?

3-How are abstract concepts in English superstitious sayings understood through embodied image schemas?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Cognitive Linguistics

Cognitive linguistics (henceforth CL) is a modern school of linguistics that emerged in the 1970s. It is also rooted in the emergence of modern cognitive science in the 1960s and 1970s, especially in work relating to human categorization, and in earlier traditions such as Gestalt psychology. CL investigates the relationship between language, mind, and socio-physical experiences. The outstanding figures are Fillmore, Lakoff, Langacker, and Talmy (Evans, 2009, p. 47). To cognitive linguists, language reflects patterns of thought, which is the main assumption behind studying language, which in turn means studying patterns of conceptualization. CL is a new approach to language that appeared within the modern field of interdisciplinary study known as cognitive science (Evans & Green, 2006, p. 5).

It was first started as a reaction against generative approaches, since the Chomskyan-generative tradition sheds light on syntax and disregards the role of meaning in linguistic theorizing, which was not accepted by many CL authors, such as Langacker (1987 as cited in Barcelona & Venezuela, 2011, p. 18).

meaning is what language is all about; the analyst who ignores it to concentrate solely on matters of form severely impoverishes the natural and necessary subject matter of the discipline and ultimately distorts the character of the phenomena described.

Accordingly, CL proposes three tenets, the first is, language is not an autonomous cognitive faculty, second, grammar is conceptualization, and the third, knowledge of language emerges from language use (Croft & Cruse, 2004, p.1).

2.2. Cognitive Semantics

Cognitive semantics, which is an essential part of CL, deals with the study of human conceptual systems, including meaning and inference. The concepts are perceived through the body, the brain, and our worldly experiences, and they get their meaning via embodiment, perceptual and motor capacities (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 492). One of the conceptual structures that has a significant role in cognitive semantics is image schema, which is regarded as the reflection of human experiences and bodily interactions and explains how meaning is constructed. Another central claim of cognitive semantics is that metaphor is conceptual rather than merely linguistic. According to George Lakoff and

Mark Johnson (1980), *Conceptual Metaphor Theory*, metaphor functions as a cognitive mechanism through which abstract domains are structured and understood via more concrete domains of experience. Linguistic expressions are thus seen as manifestations of underlying conceptual mappings between source and target domains, and image schemas provide a basis for these metaphorical mappings. (Evans & Green, 2006, p.191).

2.3 Image Schema

The notion of image schema was coined by Mark Johnson and George Lakoff in their 1987 books, *The Body in the Mind* and *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*. Johnson (1987) defines an image schema as “a recurring, dynamic pattern of embodied experience that structures our conceptual and linguistic understanding of the world” (p. xiv).

Grady (2005, p. 45) defines image schemas based on the proposed definition as related repeated patterns of particular bodily experience, involving perceptions via sight, hearing, touch, kinesthetic perception, smell, and possibly also internal sensations such as hunger, pain, etc. Furthermore, as stated by Saeed (2013, p.366), the central notion is that our bodily experiences, such as perceiving the environment, moving, applying force, and sensing resistance, give rise to fundamental conceptual patterns that help us build basic mental frameworks that we later use to think about more abstract ideas.

According to Dancygier and Sweetser (2014, p. 22), image schemas are “skeletal structures representing spatial configurations and/or the various forces that affect a human body,” such as gravity, pressure, etc.

For example, because humans stand upright, our bodies have an asymmetrical vertical axis. This means there is a clear top–bottom distinction: we have a head at the top and feet at the bottom, making the upper and lower parts of the body different. This vertical structure interacts with gravity, shaping how we perceive and make sense of the world around us. According to Johnson (1987), this aspect of our experience gives rise to an image schema: the UP-DOWN schema (Evan & Green, 2006, p. 178). In addition to the UP-DOWN schema, standing up straight is a simple action that refers to different image schemas such as VERTICALITY, STRAIGHT, and BALANCE. Such image schemas are not stored in the long-term memory but emerge from patterns of bodily experience over the course of our lives (Brenda, 2014, p. 13).

If we examine the meaning of ‘image’ in ‘image schema’, it is seen that the word ‘image’ corresponds to its usage in psychology, where imagistic experience is connected to and originates from our encounters with the external world. In addition to that, "sensory experience" is another term for this type of experience, because it comes from sensory-perceptual mechanisms; however, they are not restricted to the visual system. It is crucial

to point out that the term ‘image’ is restricted to visual perception in everyday language, while it has a wider application in psychology and in CL, where it comprises all types of sensory-perceptual experience.

The term ‘schema’ in ‘image schema’ is significant because it indicates that image schemas are not rich or detailed concepts; however, they are abstract ideas formed from recurring patterns that arise through repeated embodied experiences. (Evan & Green, 2006, p. 178).

2.3.1 Image Schema Properties

The following properties of image schemas are drawn from (Evans & Greens, 2006, p.180-86):

1- Image schemas have a pre-conceptual origin; for example, according to Johnson (1987, p. 21), image schemas like the CONTAINER schema are rooted in our bodily experiences, as they emerge from and are connected to our sensory interactions with the world.

2- An image schema can act as a basis for more detailed concepts; for example, in the sentence ‘John went out of the room,’ in addition to the CONTAINMENT schema, it involves a MOTION or PATH schema; that is to say, more specific schemas arise from the fundamental ones.

3- Image schemas emerge from our interaction with the world; for example, the FORCE schema arises from our experience of acting upon or being acted upon by entities, which results in transferring motion energy.

4- Image schemas carry intrinsic meaning because they derive from our embodied, perceptual, and motor experience, and they have predictable consequences. Let’s think of a cup of coffee in our hand. If we move the cup slowly in different directions, we expect the coffee to move with it, and this happens as a result of containment, as it is defined by its boundaries, which limit the location of entities.

5- Image schemas are inherently complex structures that can be analyzed separately; for example, the CONTAINER schema consists of interior, boundary, and exterior elements. Another example of a complex image schema is the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL, as the source is the starting point, the path is the means for moving from one location to another, with a goal or destination. All complex image schemas have an internal structure but emerge as a coherent whole.

6- Image schemas are different from mental images. You can close your eyes and imagine the face of a person you know, as they are rich in detail and relatively conscious, while image schemas are schematic and more abstract in nature.

7- Image schemas are subject to transformations from one image schema to another because they arise from our embodied experience. Johnson (1987, p. 428) explains this feature by the example of a 'herd of cows': if you are close enough to them, you can see each individual cow, but if you move back to a far position from the cows, you perceive them as a mass.

2.3.2 Image Schemas and Conceptual Metaphors

Image schemas play a great role in formation of conceptual metaphors by providing repeated, embodied patterns of experience that structure abstract thought. So, conceptual metaphors built on the idea that certain concepts are image schematic in nature. Lakoff and Johnson both maintained that image schemas can function as source domains in metaphorical mapping, as they emerge from our bodily and embodied experiences which are directly meaningful (Evans & Green, 2006, p.300). Kövecses (2010, p. 4) clarifies "the conceptual domain from which we draw metaphorical expressions to understand another conceptual domain is called the source domain, while the conceptual domain that is understood this way, is the target domain". The former is usually a familiar physical domain while the latter is a less familiar, abstract one. The source domain usually helps to comprehend the target one. In other words, a systematic correspondence is detected between the source and the target domain since constituent element of B corresponds to the constituent elements of A and this correspondence is called as mappings. For example, the CONTAINER schema with all its features, as we experience it in our physical world maps onto abstract concepts, such as being in states can be understood through the conceptual metaphor STATES ARE CONTAINERS, as in 'George is in love' and 'Lily is in trouble' (Evans & Greens, 2006, p. 46).

2.3.3 Image Schema Types

Johnson (1987, p. 126), in *The Body in the Mind*, outlines a preliminary set of image schemas, and for the purposes of this study, some types were chosen such as:

1-CONTAINMENT Schema: The sense of being contained and bounded is among the most fundamental aspects of our embodied experience. We view our bodies as three-dimensional containers into which we put certain things (food, water, and air) and out of which other things emerge (food and water waste, air, and blood). Moreover, it is an essential experience of our daily life as we move in and out of rooms, clothes, vehicles, and numerous kinds of bounded spaces with respect to our interaction with objects as we place them in containers like cups, boxes, cans, bags, etc. (Johnson, 1987, p. p.21).

A container has the following structures: an inside, a boundary, and an outside. This can be conceived in terms of gestalt structure, in the sense that the parts make no sense without the whole (Lakoff, 1987, p. 39). Container schemas can be mapped into abstract concepts through conceptual metaphors. LIFE IS A CONTAINER, as in, "His life contained a great deal of sorrow" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 51).

There are experientially based characteristics of a container, such as

a- Containers act as a form of disjunction, so elements are either inside or outside the container.

b- The relationship of containment tracks the rule of transitivity; if the container is placed in another container, the entity is within both, as Johnson says: "If I am in bed, and my bed is in my room, then I am in my room" (Saeed, 2013, p.359).

2- PATH Schema: is one of the pervasive schemas that emerge from our constant bodily functioning, which denotes a movement from one place to another, consisting of a starting point, a goal, and a sequence of intermediate points connecting the source with the goal; that is to say, paths are routes for moving from one point to another, which are metaphorically mapped onto abstract domains like PURPOSES AS PHYSICAL GOALS, as in 'he has gone a long way toward changing his personality' (Johnson, 1987, pp. 113-114).

3- PART-WHOLE Schema: throughout our lives, we have experienced our bodies as wholes with parts, which give rise to the PART-WHOLE schema, as it involves physical and metaphorical wholes with their parts. For example, families are seen as wholes with parts, and marriage is regarded as a whole with the spouses as its parts. (Lakoff, 1987, p. 273).

4- CONTACT Schema: it is one of the image schema types, which is grounded in our sensorimotor experiences of **physical contact** with other objects or people. The CONTACT schema is explained as one of the primitive image schemas that structure systems of spatial relations (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p.32). It is also mapped onto abstract concepts by the conceptual metaphor EMOTIONAL EFFECT IS PHYSICAL CONTACT, as in 'That really made an impression on me' (Johnson & Lakoff, 1980, p. 50).

5-FORCE Schema: The FORCE schema originates from our everyday interactions with the physical world, such as pulling, pushing, resistance...etc., as we encounter wind or gravity. The elements of the FORCE schema are as follows: a source and target of the force, a direction and intensity of the force, path of motion and a sequence of causation (Johnson, 1980, pp. 42-44). It is also metaphorically mapped onto abstract domains like

LOVE IS A PHYSICAL SOURCE, as in 'I could feel the electricity between us' (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, p. 49). Some FORCE schema types are as follows:

a-ATTRACTION schema: The force in the ATTRACTION schema is a kind of gravitation toward an object, either physically or metaphorically, which is drawn from our experience with magnetism, gravity, and vacuum cleaners (Johnson, 1987, p. 48).

b-COUNTERFORCE Schema: as its name suggests, it is the meeting of two opposing forces either physically or metaphorically, for example, football players' collisions or head-on auto accidents demonstrates the two counter forces (Johnson, 1987, p. 46).

c- BALANCE schema: Originates from our ongoing physical experiences like standing, sitting, walking, lifting, or carrying objects, which is crucial for all bodily movements in order to maintain equilibrium. This repeated experience creates the foundation for comprehending not only physical balance but also mental, emotional, and moral balance (Johnson, 1987, pp. 74–77). **EQUILIRIUM Schema:** is a kind of BALANCE schema that represents internal or external pressure on container-like objects, either physically or metaphorically. For example, in terms of psychological balance, one can repress, suppress, hold in, or put a lid on an emotion like anger, which is about to explode or erupt, in order to maintain stability (Johnson, 1987, pp. 86–88).

6- LINK Schema: The LINK schema is composed of two entities (A and B) connected either physically or metaphorically by a bonding structure. For instance, we as human beings come into existence tied to our biological mothers by umbilical cords. Another example is a child holding her mother's hand. (Johnson, 1987, pp. 117-18). In terms of metaphors, for instance, social and interpersonal relationships indicate the LINK schema as we make connections and break social ties (Lakoff, 1987, p. 274).

7- CYCLE schema: The CYCLE schema originates from our bodily and environmental experiences that form a consistent circular pattern, such as day and night, the seasons, biological rhythms, and repeated actions. There is a starting point, a progression through connected events, and a return to the initial state (Johnson, 1987, p. 119).

8- SCALE Schema: The roots of the SCALE schema are grounded in our experiences when we add more substance to a pile or a container and the level rises, as in the conceptual metaphor MORE IS UP (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 15); moreover, our experience of perceiving entities or assessing them as more/less, bigger/smaller, higher/lower, etc., underlies our conceptualization of quantity, degree, and intensity. This embodied experience is metaphorically mapped onto non-physical domains. For example: Our sales dropped last year (Johnson, 1987, pp. 122–123).

9-NEAR-FAR Schema: is a type of image schema that emerges from our physical interaction with the environment in terms of proximity and distance. Spatial orientations like up-down, front-back, center-periphery, and near-far offer a basis for understanding concepts in orientational terms. As with the other schema types, near-far schema reflects on abstract concepts (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 56) as in, "Who are the men closest to Khomeini?" means Who are the men who have the strongest effect on Kho-mei-ni? Based on the conceptual metaphor CLOSENESS IS STRENGTH OF EFFECT (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 56).

2.4 Origin and Definitions of the Term ‘Superstition’

The word ‘superstition’ is derived from the Latin *superstitio*, from *superstes*, which means standing over (as witness or survivor), from the verb *superstare* ("to stand over"). The first known use of the word ‘superstition’ dates back to 13th century (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

According to Cameron (2010, p.4), the term ‘superstition’ is derived from conventional ancient times and almost always enclosed a negative sense; it implied ‘bad’ in contrast to ‘good’ or ‘correct’ belief or practice in the domain of religion. Even though its linguistic roots are unclear, it always presumed an opposite, or even a collection of opposites.

In the late Roman Empire, Pagans frequently viewed Christianity as superstition, just as Christians described paganism as superstition. Generally, ‘superstition’ could be opposed to other forms of assumed ‘wrong’ religion, such as idolatry, heresy, or fanaticism. It could also be different from putatively ‘right’ or valid religion, to expressions such as ‘piety,’ ‘true religion,’ ‘orthodoxy,’ or ‘reasoned faith.’ Finally, it can be used as it is usually used in contemporary worldly culture: as a negative term used for any belief system that fails to meet the speaker’s notion of what is ‘rationality.’

Consequently, superstition mostly grows from unawareness. Early people thought that every phenomenon of nature was the deed of an evil spirit, since their reasoning could not provide another explanation. Fear became associated with this belief. Thunder, lightning, earthquakes, and darkness all filled them with dreadful fear. They viewed these events as the works of hostile powers that needed to be soothed. When people face danger, fear, or confusion, they automatically seek relief. Thus, the search for comfort or protection ultimately led to the emergence of superstition.

Oxford Learner’s Dictionary defines the word superstition as “the belief that certain events occur in a way that cannot be clarified through logic or science; the belief that particular occurrences either bring good or bad luck.”.

In the Online Britannica Dictionary, the term is defined as “a belief or way of behaving that is based on fear of the unknown and faith in magic or luck: a belief that certain events or things will bring good or bad luck”.

Rhodes (2012) describes the word superstition as an irrational idea that magic, luck, or supernatural forces have the supremacy to shape one’s life, and he points out that people mostly attach to such beliefs when they leave themselves to the mercy of chance.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive design, aimed at identifying and analyzing image schemas in English superstitious sayings. The data of this study have been taken from books on superstitions named ‘*Black Cats and Evil Eyes: Old-Fashioned Book of Superstitions*’ (2012) by Chloe Rhodes, ‘*Encyclopedia of Superstitions*’ by Richard Webster (2008), ‘*Dictionary of Superstitions*’ (1995) by David Pickering, and ‘*Signs, Omens, and Superstitions*’ (1918) by Astra Ceilo. A total of 33 superstitious sayings are selected depending on the popularity of the superstitions in English culture. The analysis is grounded in cognitive semantics, specifically the work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1987). The study also draws on Conceptual Metaphor Theory, and conceptual metaphors are derived from the analysis, and also previously recognized conceptual metaphors by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) are applied where appropriate. The superstitious sayings are identified and selected from the index of the mentioned books, then go through a reading process in order to collect the relevant data based on the origin and the interpreted meaning of the superstitious sayings. Then each was analyzed in terms of its underlying image schema and categorized into groups based on the image schema types.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

The selected superstitions are thoroughly examined, and categorized according to Johnson’s (1987) image schema types:

1- CONTAINMENT Schema

- Finding a coin in a Christmas pudding

This superstition is structured by the CONTAINER schema. The ‘pudding; is the container for the coin, which is hidden inside something else. Our physical experience of containment maps onto the abstract belief of fortune or good luck. Traditionally, coins were added to Christmas puddings, and the one who finds it will enjoy the good luck for the next twelve months (Webster, 2008). Based on the origin of the superstition, we can draw the conceptual metaphor GOOD LUCK IS AN UNEXPECTED OBJECT IN A CONTAINER.

- Birthday wishes will only come true if it is kept as a secret

The wish must be kept inside the person's mind or heart, which indicates the CONTAINER schema, as there is an inside, a boundary and an outside, so the mind or the heart is the container for the wish, which means the secret should be kept inside, but once it is shared with others, it means crossing the boundary, which results in losing the effectiveness of the wish to come true. The idea can be understood through Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) conceptual metaphor MIND IS A CONTAINER.

- The gift of a purse or wallet should always include money

A purse or a wallet function as a container for money (the content); it shouldn't be empty, as it indicates bad luck. According to Rhodes (2012), the superstitions stem from the idea that the devil would inhabit an empty purse and push people into unethical acts. Our bodily experience of emptiness or absence maps onto loss or poverty, while including money denotes prosperity; we can express it through the conceptual metaphors PROSPERITY IS FULLNESS and POVERTY IS EMPTINESS. This bodily experience of including money in a wallet becomes cognitively meaningful through the CONTAINER schema denoting fullness versus emptiness.

- Evil spirits can't harm a person standing inside a circle

From a cognitive point of view, the preposition 'inside' encodes the CONTAINER schema, so the 'circle' acts as a container (with an interior, a boundary, and an exterior). Generally, our bodily experience with boundaries tells us that the boundary protects us from external negative events, as evil spirits exist outside the boundary. This embodied understanding of containment cognitively maps onto abstract concepts like spiritual protection, which is motivated by the conceptual metaphor SAFETY IS BEING INSIDE A CONTAINER.

Originally the belief that the symbol (circle) protects man from evil spirits dates back to ancient Babylonians, Assyrians, and early Kabbalists. It is considered as a safe place, especially during incantations, as they draw it with salt, chalk, or dust, which becomes a metaphysical sphere of protection (Rhodes,2012).

- It is bad luck to let milk boil over.

The pot is a container for the milk. Normally when the milk heats up, it remains in the pot; however, when it overflows the container due to rising temperature or lack of attention, it breaches the boundaries, and this breaching extends to an abstract notion of bad luck because the scene is associated with loss of control, mess, and waste. So, based on this interpretation, we can serve the conceptual metaphor BAD LUCK IS CROSSING THE BOUNDARY.

- A bride should never be seen by a groom before the wedding

A bride should remain inside an enclosed space, with a boundary for separation, and an exterior place for a groom, which evokes the CONTAINER schema. So seeing the bride before the wedding is a boundary violation, and this violation extended onto the abstract idea of bad luck or misfortune. It can be described by the conceptual metaphor MISFORTUNE IS BOUNDARY VIOLATION.

- Horseshoe hanging above doors of houses

The house is conceptualized as a container for luck, prosperity, and good spirits, and because people always want to protect them from external evil spirits, they hang horseshoes above doors of houses (which denotes the boundary of the container). Our embodied experience with objects and containers maps onto an abstract idea of protection. Cognitively, it can be said that we can protect the inside of a container if the boundary is well guarded; the superstition can be understood through the conceptual metaphor PROTECTION IS AN OBJECT AT THE BOUNDARY OF A CONTAINER.

Originally, the idea of horseshoe may have originated from its crescent shape, as there were pre-Christian moon worshippers, or from the fact that the ‘horseshoes’ were made of iron, and it was believed that iron is a magical metal, as it repels the evil spirits (Rhodes, 2012).

- Friday thirteenth is unlucky.

Friday the thirteenth is regarded as unlucky because of the Christian belief that the Crucifixion of Jesus took place on a Friday, and the number thirteen is unlucky because the origin of the superstition dates back to an event that took place at the Last Supper, which was held by Jesus, as there were thirteen guests at the table, and the 13th guest was the betrayer Judas Iscariot (Pickering, 1995, p. 258). Thus, our embodied experience with these social events grounds the abstract idea of bad luck. Friday the 13th becomes a symbolic container for holding misfortune. Thus, misfortune is conceptualized as an object in a container. So, events occurring within this date have negative outcomes. It can be understood through the conceptual metaphor DATE IS A CONTAINER.

2- PATH Schema

- Walking under ladders is considered bad luck

The superstition evokes the PATH schema, as it is clear that the verb ‘walking’ is a motion from one point to another that is regarded as a dangerous act, and, according to Rhodes (2012), a ladder leaning against a wall forms a triangular shape with the wall and the ground, which is considered a sacred triangle, and walking through the center of the holy triangle is regarded as a sin. Thus, because our physical interaction with the world shapes our abstract belief, the act maps onto misfortune or bad luck; depending on the

origin of the superstition, we can say that BAD LUCK IS PASSING THROUGH SACRED SPACE.

- A black cat walking towards you is a sign of good luck

There is a SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schema in the superstition ‘a black cat walking towards you is a sign of good luck.’ The cat’s motion is the source; it walks along a path and comes towards the endpoint, which is your position. The black cat’s motion is metaphorically conceptualized as good luck arriving. Although in most cultures, ‘black cats’ are considered a symbol of bad luck, as they resemble witches or devils, while in British culture, seeing a black cat has a positive meaning (Rhodes, 2012). Thus, our physical experience of approaching entities toward the body extended to an abstract concept of luck, which can be understood through the conceptual metaphor LUCK IS A MOVING ENTITY TOWARD THE SELF.

- Not Stepping on a Crack in the Sidewalk

The verb ‘stepping’ represents the PATH schema, since there is movement from one point to another, and cracks on your way represent interruptions. This embodied experience shapes the abstract belief of bad luck. According to Webster (2008), the superstition comes from an old belief that stepping on cracks takes you straight to your burial place. Therefore, it can be described through the conceptual metaphor BAD LUCK IS AN OBSTACLE ON A PATH.

- Never use a crossroads as a meeting place

The superstition ‘never use a crossroads as a meeting place’ is structured by the PATH schema, where the crossroads are the points in which multiple paths intersect, so at this point there is a movement or a transition. According to Webster (2008), it is regarded as a place of threat because it is believed that crossroads are the witches' meeting place. In addition to that, crossroads are physically experienced as places of uncertainty and danger. Cognitively, it shows how abstract cultural beliefs are grounded in everyday embodied experiences. Thus, the abstract notions like risk, threat, and bad luck can be understood from a concrete meeting place (crossroads). It can be described by the conceptual metaphor BAD LUCK IS A CROSSROAD ON A PATH.

- Seeing a shooting star

It is believed that if you make a wish when you see a shooting star after dark, your wish may come true. This superstition is described through the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL

schema. It is known that when a meteor enters the Earth's atmosphere, it results in a shooting star, so the source or the starting point of movement is space (the location of the meteoroid entering the atmosphere), and the star passes through a shiny path and then reaches the end point as it finally burns up and disappears. Our physical experience of motion is symbolically interpreted in terms of good luck and wishes. We can draw the conceptual metaphor LUCK IS A MOVING OBJECT. The star's motion or journey is conceptualized as a turning point in one's life journey toward good luck. This can also be described by the conceptual metaphor LUCK IS A JOURNEY.

- It is bad luck if your shoelace breaks or comes loose while you're walking along.

The verb 'walking' indicates the PATH schema, since there is a point where you start walking, then go through a path, till the path is disrupted due to the breaking of the shoelace, so the incident metaphorically symbolizes your life journey, and this physical disruption becomes meaningful and is interpreted as a sign of bad luck, and it shows how the superstitions emerge from our cognitive understanding. The superstition can be described by the conceptual metaphor BAD LUCK IS AN OBSTACLE ON A PATH.

- Itching palms

In English culture, left-hand itching indicates the going away of money, and right-hand itching signals the coming of money. There is a metaphorical movement of money along an unseen path, which can be described by the conceptual metaphor MONEY IS A MOVING OBJECT. So, our bodily sensation turned into a symbolic meaning, which is either receiving or losing money. Furthermore, based on the cognitive understanding of the left- and right-hand itching, the belief can be expressed by the conceptual metaphor FINANCIAL CHANGE IS A JOURNEY.

- Catching a falling Autumn leaf

In this superstition, the falling leaves signify motion through space, and according to Webster (2008), if you can catch one of the leaves, you will be free of colds for the next twelve months. The source is the branch of the tree, moving along a downward path (through the air), toward the goal, which is either your hand or the ground. Our bodily experience of catching moving objects is conceptualized as protection or good luck. It can be expressed by the conceptual metaphor GOOD LUCK IS CATCHING OBJECTS.

- Never Sweep the house at night as it sweeps away wealth or luck.

In the superstition ‘Sweeping the house at night sweeps away wealth or luck,’ the act of sweeping indicates a directed motion from inside to the outside, so luck or wealth is conceptualized as an object that can be removed. It can be described by the conceptual metaphor LUCK IS A MOVEABLE OBJECT. The superstition demonstrates how meaning is constructed from our physical experience of removing dirt or moving things outward onto an abstract belief like bad luck. In addition to the PATH schema, the CONTAINER schema is involved in the superstition, since the house is a container for wealth or luck, so sweeping it at night indicates that you push prosperity or good luck out of the container, in other words, inside/outside of a bounded space.

Based on the encyclopedia of superstitions, sweeping at night has negative impacts because it is generally believed that the spirits of dead people might be walking at night (Webster, 2008).

- If you catch the bride's bouquet, you will be the next to get married.

The superstition is structured by the PATH schema; the bouquet is the object that moves from the bride (source), through the air (path), to the catcher (goal). The scene demonstrates how the physical experience of throwing the bouquet toward the catcher maps onto an abstract belief of good luck, which can be represented by the conceptual metaphor GOOD LUCK IS A TRANSFERABLE OBJECT.

-Finding a four-leaf clover is a sign of good luck

The phrase ‘finding a four-leaf clover’ implies a movement along a path, so there is a starting point, movement along a path, and an endpoint, in which you face the good outcome or the fortunate journey. Based on an old legend, it is believed that Eve took a four-leaf clover from the garden of Eden to remind her of the joy she had there. That’s why finding a four-leaf clover became a sign of good luck (Webster, 2008). So, this embodied experience is conceptually mapped onto the abstract belief of good luck. The superstition can be described by the conceptual metaphor GOOD LUCK IS AN OBJECT YOU ENCOUNTER ALONG A PATH.

- Breaking a mirror brings seven years of bad luck

Mirrors reflect self-image, so it is believed that breaking them causes misfortune. The conceptual metaphor BAD LUCK IS DAMAGING OBJECTS expresses how our embodied experience of damaging objects extends to the abstract notions of misfortune or bad luck. And, because damaging such objects results in seven years of bad luck, we can apply the PATH schema. Since bad luck originates from a source, which is ‘breaking the mirror,’ then goes along a period of seven difficult years, then reaches the end of the misfortune, in which bad luck may come to an end. So, the period that reflects itself in a journey is familiar to human experience; it can be motivated by the conceptual metaphor

DURATION or TIME IS A PATH. We can also conceptualize it through the conceptual metaphor BAD LUCK IS A JOURNEY, as it starts due to something and then ends.

3- PART-WHOLE Schema

- Carrying a rabbit's foot to ward off evil

In this superstition there is the PART-WHOLE schema; the foot is the part, and the rabbit as a whole is conceptualized as protection or blocking danger. So, a small part (foot) is linked to a larger conceptual domain, the whole (rabbit), which signifies protection. It is believed that having the part retains the properties of the whole. It can be expressed by the conceptual metaphor THE PROPERTIES OF THE WHOLE ARE LOCATED IN ITS PARTS. The belief emerges from our bodily experience of the part-whole schema. Cognitively, it shows how the mind uses schemas to connect a concrete object to an abstract idea. Moreover, carrying a rabbit's foot in your pocket or in your bag demonstrates CONTAINER schema. It can be described by the conceptual metaphor PROTECTION IS AN OBJECT IN A CONTAINER.

The origin of the charm is unknown; one of the reasons is because rabbits are born with their eyes open, and it was used as a protection against the evil eye (Webster, 2008).

- Breaking a wishbone

The PART-WHOLE image schema is involved in the superstition of breaking a wishbone. The wishbone functions as a whole that is divided into two parts, and when two people break it, the one who obtains the larger part is believed to receive good luck. From a cognitive perspective, humans tend to associate largeness with power and success, while smallness is associated with loss or failure. This gives rise to the conceptual metaphors SUCCESS IS BIG and FAILURE IS SMALL. The superstition is thus grounded in embodied human experience and is metaphorically mapped onto the abstract concept of luck.

4- CONTACT Schema

- Knocking on wood

The act of 'knocking on wood' and the preposition 'on' represents the CONTACT schema in which two entities come into physical contact with each other, the first entity (the hand) striking a second entity (wooden surface). Conceptually, this bodily action leads to protection because physical touch is believed to prevent misfortune. That is to say, an abstract notion of protection is grounded in our embodied experiences by the CONTACT

schema, so from this interpretation we can say that PROTECTION IS PHYSICAL CONTACT. In this way, we can conceptualize safety through physical interaction.

- Crossing fingers to make wishes come true

Crossing fingers can be understood through the CONTACT schema, as there is a physical contact of the two fingers (the index finger over the middle finger), and because the interaction forms the cross symbol, it is believed that the holiness of the symbol brings positive outcomes, so the abstract concept of wish fulfillment is understood through the bodily experience of physical gesture. Cognitively, the contact schema represents a concrete way to conceptualize abstract ideas like luck or hope. We can express it by the conceptual metaphor GOOD LUCK IS OBTAINED THROUGH PHYSICAL CONTACT.

- It's good luck if you are pooped on by a bird.

In this superstition, the bird droppings come into physical contact with your head or your body, which denotes CONTACT schema. Culturally this unexpected contact is interpreted as good luck, so many people regard it as a good sign. So, the abstract idea of luck is understood through our bodily experience, which can be expressed by the conceptual metaphor GOOD LUCK IS PHYSICAL CONTACT.

5- FORCE Schema

. a- COUNTERFORCE Schema

- Spilling salt over the left shoulder to ward off evil

Salt was regarded as something precious since it was used in Greek and Roman religious ceremonies and is still used to make holy water in the Catholic Church. In medieval times it was believed that the Devil waited behind your left shoulder for any opportunity to pounce, which gave rise to the tradition of throwing a pinch of salt over your left shoulder immediately after you spilled it to strike him in the face and prevent him from making further trouble. (Rhodes, 2012).

Based on the origin of the superstition, we apply the COUNTERFORCE schema to the superstition 'throwing a pinch of salt over the left shoulder' in order to counteract evil spirits. Evil is conceptualized as an approaching force from behind, so spilling salt repels the opposing negative force. The schema shows the meanings are not arbitrary while they are grounded in our bodily experience of meeting opposing forces. We can apply the conceptual metaphor EVIL IS A FORCE THAT CAN BE OPPOSED BY ANOTHER FORCE.

b- EQUILIBRIUM Schema

- Holding your breath when passing a cemetery

It is believed that you should hold in your breath when passing a cemetery to prevent bad luck or to prevent the bad spirits from entering your body. So, holding your breath or suppressing it indicates the EQUILIBRIUM schema. Because breath control relates to body stabilization; in other words, it is the body's attempt to be in a physiological equilibrium by an internal pressure. So, this embodied experience maps onto an abstract concept like safety. It can be expressed by the conceptual metaphor SAFETY IS EQUILIBRIUM (conceptualizes safety as a state of balance).

Additionally, the CONTAINER and PATH schemas are noticed in this superstition, since the lungs act as a container for holding the breath inside it, which can be described by the (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) conceptual metaphor BODY IS THE CONTAINER. Moreover, there is motion along a path and keeping the breath along the particular path (passing the cemetery) to an end point, but primarily the belief can be described through the EQUILIBRIUM schema because the focus is on breath control for maintaining stability.

c-ATTRACTIOIN Schema

- Money attracts money

In the superstition 'money attracts money,' there is a metaphorical force that is structured by the ATTRACTION schema. In this conceptualization, money or wealth growth is viewed as a source that leads to pulling more money toward itself. So, the abstract concept of prosperity is understood through the embodied experience of physical pull. From a cognitive perspective, it shows how the belief in this superstition is grounded in our embodied experience. It can be described by the conceptual metaphor MONEY IS A FORCE OF ATTRACTION or MONEY IS A MAGNET.

6-LINK Schema

- Never kill a spider

There is a widespread belief that killing spiders is harmful, and it is considered a taboo act since they are helpful, and according to Webster (2008), spider webs protected baby Jesus from Herod's men in a cave; similar stories are told about King David, Prophet Mohammed, and Frederick the Great.

The superstition is grounded in our embodied experience with the LINK schema, as we physically experience connections with the entities around us for stability, while breaking the link results in loss. Thus, there is a link between ‘killing spiders’ and ‘the blessings of life.’ The LINK schema creates a metaphorical bond between the two, so by not killing them, you keep the fortune, but if you kill them, you break the connection, which means you lose the prosperity and the wealth you have. From this interpretation we can draw the conceptual metaphors MISFORTUNE IS CAUSED BY BREAKING LINKS or BAD LUCK IS HARMING HELPFUL BEINGS.

- To dream of a lizard is a sign that you have a secret enemy

According to Rhodes (2012), lizards are associated with trickery and deception; they can play tricks and camouflage themselves.

So, from this interpretation, we can infer that there is a symbolic connection between ‘dreaming of a lizard’ and ‘a secret enemy,’ which is understood by the LINK schema. Humans naturally link events to each other, although the connection is not physically seen. So, our embodied experience with lizards and their physical qualities (being tricky) maps onto a threatening social relationship; that is to say, we can conceptualize an abstract belief like danger through our embodied perception. Cognitively, it can be expressed by the conceptual metaphors DANGER IS A SECRET ENEMY (LIZARDS) or THREAT IS A STEALTHY ANIMAL.

7-CYCLE Schema

- Accidents happen in threes

The superstition ‘accidents happen in threes’ is structured by the CYCLE schema. Generally, it is believed that when you face a bad event or a misfortune, two more will find you soon, so there is a recurring set of events or a cyclic pattern. This belief is reflected in humans' physical experience with repeated actions like day and night. The superstition demonstrates how this experience of recurrence becomes cognitively meaningful and maps onto predictable events because we naturally conceptualize them in cycles, and the number three indicates the completion of the cycle. The idea gives rise to the conceptual metaphor MISFORTUNE IS CYCLIC.

8-SCALE Schema

Magpies: one for sorrow, two for joy

This superstition relates to the number of magpies; it shows how people attribute significance to different quantities, that is to say, the number of magpies seen, which is an

example of the SCALE schema. There is even a classic English nursery rhyme on this superstition: ‘One magpie for sorrow, two for joy, three for a girl, and four for a boy.’ So, increasing the number of magpies increases the fortune. From a cognitive perspective, this belief can be expressed through the Lakoff & Johnson (1980) conceptual metaphor GOOD IS UP, which means that positive states are linked to numerical increase (an abstract form of upward movement). So, our perceptual experience of counting birds maps onto abstract concepts like sorrow or joy; it shows how our cognitive understanding emerges from our embodied experience.

9- NEAR-FAR Schema

- When dogs howl, death is near

The superstition ‘when dogs howl, death is near’ is structured by the NEAR-FAR schema. The physical event (the howling of dogs) is mapped onto the abstract concept (death being near). Culturally, people feel fear and anxiety when they hear the sound of howling, and this embodied sensory experience is extended to abstract concepts such as threat or danger, so the howl is a warning that danger (death) is approaching, which is metaphorically conceptualized as a sign of death. It can be expressed by the conceptual metaphor DEATH or DANGER IS PROXIMITY.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of the study reveals that English superstitious sayings are not arbitrary and not irrational; rather, they are systematically structured by embodied image schemas, which are grounded in our sensorimotor and embodied experiences. They are cognitively meaningful and metaphorically motivated through conceptual metaphors that connect physical experience to abstract thought like luck, protection, danger, or fate. The study identifies several image schema types in English superstitious sayings that are structured by recurring image schemas such as CONTAINER, PATH, PART-WHOLE, FORCE, CONTACT, LINK, CYCLE, SCALE, and NEAR-FAR schemas, which function as an essential cognitive structure that shapes the semantic construction of superstitious sayings. Among them, the CONTAINER and PATH schemas are prevalent in English superstitions due to their basis in core embodied experience and the nature of superstitious belief. As the analysis shows that containers act as a protection against evil spirits, and since superstitions often involve controlling outcomes or avoiding misfortune, they demonstrate themselves in the PATH schema. Moreover, the linguistic items, like nouns, verbs, and prepositions, have a great role in identifying the type of image schema. As a recommendation for further study, it would be valuable to investigate ‘image schemas in English news headlines.’

References

- Barcelona, A., & Valenzuela, J. (2011). An overview of cognitive linguistics. In M. Brdar, S. T. Gries, & M. Ž. Fuchs (Eds.), *Cognitive linguistics: Convergence and expansion* (pp. 17–44). Amsterdam, the Netherlands: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Brenda, M. (2014). *The cognitive perspective on the polysemy of the English spatial preposition 'over'*. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Cameron, E. (2010). *Enchanted Europe superstition, reason, and religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cielo, A. (1918). *Signs, omens and superstitions*. New York: G. Sully & Company.
- Croft, W., & Cruse, D. A. (2004). *Cognitive linguistics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Dancygier, B., & Sweetser, E. (2014). *Figurative language*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Encyclopaedia Britannica. (n.d.). Superstition. In *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Retrieved October 10, 2025, from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/superstition>
- Evans, V. (2009). *How words mean*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Evans, V., & Green, M. (2006). *Cognitive linguistics: An introduction*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press.
- Grady, J. E. (2005). Image schemas and perception: Refining a definition. In B. Hampe (Ed.), *From perception to meaning: Image schemas in cognitive linguistics* (pp. 15–33). Berlin, Germany: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Johnson, M. (1987). *The body in the mind: The bodily basis of meaning, imagination, and reason*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Lakoff, G. (1987). *Women, fire, and dangerous things: What categories reveal about the mind*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1999). *Philosophy in the flesh: The embodied mind and its challenge to Western thought*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). *Superstition*. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. Retrieved October 15, 2025, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/superstition>

Oxford University Press. (n.d.). *Superstition*. In *Oxford Learner's Dictionary*. Retrieved October 10, 2025, from <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/word>

Pickering, D. (1995). *Dictionary of superstitions*. London, UK: Cassell.

Rhodes, C. (2012). *An old-fashioned book on superstitions: Black cats and evil eyes*. London, UK: Michael O'Mara Books.

Saeed, J. I. (2013). *Semantics*. Singapore: Wiley-Blackwell.

Webster, R. (2008). *The encyclopedia of superstitions*. St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications.