

PAPER

## COGNITIVE MODELLING OF THE “CHILDHOOD” CONCEPT IN LITERARY DISCOURSE

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### Abstract

This paper investigates the conceptual structure of “childhood” in literary discourse from a cognitive-semantic perspective. The study explores how childhood is represented as a multi-dimensional mental construct encompassing core semantic features, emotional-evaluative layers, and metaphorical imagery. By applying cognitive modelling and contextual analysis, the research reveals how literary texts encode cultural values and individual authorial perspectives through the conceptualization of childhood.

**Key words:** conceptual modelling, childhood representation, cognitive linguistics, literary discourse, semantic structure, cultural cognition.

### Introduction

The rapid development of cognitive linguistics has significantly transformed the understanding of language as not merely a communicative tool but as a reflection of human cognition and cultural experience [7]. Within this paradigm, literary texts are viewed as complex cognitive spaces where conceptual structures reveal both individual and collective patterns of thought. Conceptual analysis thus enables scholars to explore deeper semantic layers embedded in literary discourse [18: 34].

Among the key cultural and psychological concepts reflected in literature, the concept

of “childhood” occupies a special position. Childhood in literary representation is not limited to a chronological stage of life; rather, it encompasses emotional memory, identity formation, socialization processes, and moral development. As a result, the concept of childhood functions as a multidimensional cognitive construct that integrates experiential, emotional, and symbolic elements [19].

Examining the “childhood” concept through a cognitive-semantic lens allows for the identification of its internal structure, its dynamic contextual transformations, and its cultural specificity. Therefore, the present study aims to

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determine the semantic organization and cognitive model of the concept of “childhood” as realized in literary texts.

### Literature Review

In cognitive linguistics, a concept is understood as a mental unit that structures knowledge and experience in human consciousness [20]. Within this framework, concepts function as cognitive organizers: they do not merely label reality but arrange it into meaningful categories that guide perception, interpretation, and communication. In other words, conceptualization operates as a mechanism through which individuals transform lived experience into structured mental content, and language becomes one of the primary means for accessing and describing that content. Because concepts mediate between experience and expression, they are central to explaining how meaning is generated, stored, and activated in discourse.

Scholars emphasize that concepts are not static lexical meanings but complex cognitive formations shaped by cultural and historical contexts [14: 88]. This position implies that conceptual structures develop and change over time, responding to social norms, collective memory, ideology, and shifting cultural values. As a result, the same concept may be realized differently across communities and historical periods, reflecting culturally specific patterns of evaluation and interpretation. Conceptual meaning therefore includes not only definitional features but also associative, axiological, and experiential layers that become salient in particular communicative situations. Such variability is especially evident in concepts that relate to human life stages and personal identity, where cultural expectations and historical conditions strongly influence how experience is categorized and narrated.

Literary texts, in turn, serve as productive environments for the realization of such conceptual structures. Literature provides a particularly rich medium because it foregrounds meaning-making: narrative perspective, characterization, imagery, and stylistic choices activate conceptual content in ways that everyday communication does not always make explicit. In addition, literary discourse

frequently intensifies conceptual salience through metaphorical language, symbolic patterns, and emotionally charged contexts.

Consequently, literature enables researchers to observe how concepts are constructed, negotiated, and transformed within imaginative worlds while still remaining anchored in shared cultural knowledge. From a cognitive perspective, literary representation can be viewed as a space where conceptual schemas are not only reflected but also creatively reconfigured, allowing a concept to reveal its internal complexity through plot, voice, and aesthetic form.

Previous research demonstrates that conceptual studies in literature often focus on identifying core semantic features and peripheral associative meanings. In many cases, scholars reconstruct conceptual structure by distinguishing a relatively stable semantic nucleus from more flexible peripheral zones that include culturally conditioned associations, evaluative components, and context-driven extensions. Such approaches have proven effective for mapping conceptual fields and for showing how certain features become prominent depending on genre, narrative strategy, or authorial worldview. However, descriptive identification of core and periphery does not always explain how these layers interact dynamically in discourse, nor how the concept is cognitively processed as part of a broader network of related meanings.

The concept of childhood has been explored in psychological, cultural, and literary contexts; however, its systematic cognitive-semantic modelling in literary discourse remains insufficiently examined. Existing work often addresses childhood as a theme, symbol, or sociocultural phenomenon, emphasizing motifs such as innocence, memory, vulnerability, or socialization. Yet less attention has been given to childhood as an internally organized cognitive construct with a traceable architecture in literary texts – one that can be modelled through recurring semantic features, evaluative patterns, and figurative projections.

A modelling-oriented approach is needed to clarify which features constitute the conceptual ядро of childhood in literary discourse, which meanings function as peripheral extensions, and

how narrative context shifts the balance between them. Such an approach also makes it possible to compare how different literary traditions prioritize distinct conceptual layers, thereby revealing the interplay between universal experiential foundations and culturally specific interpretative frames.

### Research Methodology

The present research is grounded in the theoretical framework of cognitive linguistics. The methodological basis includes:

- cognitive-semantic analysis
- conceptual modelling
- contextual interpretation
- comparative literary analysis

The analysis demonstrates that the concept of “childhood” consists of two primary structural levels: a core semantic layer and a peripheral layer. The core layer includes fundamental semantic features such as immaturity, innocence, dependency, and early developmental experience. The peripheral layer incorporates culturally conditioned associations, emotional evaluations, and author-specific interpretations [14: 88].

Contextual analysis further reveals that the conceptual content of childhood varies depending on narrative perspective and ideological orientation. Thus, the concept functions as a dynamic cognitive structure rather than a fixed semantic entity.

### Results and Discussion

The emotional-evaluative component constitutes one of the most significant aspects of the childhood concept. Literary texts frequently associate childhood with joy, purity, nostalgia, and innocence. At the same time, certain narratives portray childhood as a period marked by trauma, social injustice, or premature psychological maturity [3: 119]. These contrasting representations confirm the multidimensional nature of the concept.

In English literature, childhood is often conceptualized through memory and identity formation. For instance, in the works of J. Irving and Ch. Dickens, childhood is depicted as a formative and socially influenced stage that shapes individual

destiny [5: 214; 2: 97].

In Russian literary tradition, childhood frequently symbolizes moral purity and ethical self-awareness. L. Tolstoy’s “Childhood” presents early life as a spiritual foundation of personality development [21: 56]. Conversely, M. Gorky’s autobiographical narratives portray childhood as a domain of hardship and social struggle [15: 143].

Metaphorical representation also plays a crucial role in shaping the conceptual field of childhood. Light, memory, lost dreams, and symbolic spaces function as cognitive metaphors that structure the literary understanding of early life [7; 11]. Through these figurative devices, the concept acquires cultural depth and aesthetic expressiveness.

### Conclusion

The study demonstrates that the concept of “childhood” in literary discourse represents a multi-layered cognitive-semantic structure. It includes core semantic features, emotional-evaluative components, and metaphorical-symbolic dimensions. The conceptual modelling proposed in this research highlights the dynamic and culturally conditioned nature of childhood representation in literature.

The findings contribute to the broader field of cognitive poetics and conceptual studies and may serve as a theoretical basis for further research in literary discourse analysis.

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