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## **A Linguistic Study of Metaphor in Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants"**

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Abdurrahman****Email:**[rabdurrahman@tu.edu.iq](mailto:rabdurrahman@tu.edu.iq)**Aabstract**

The present study explores the use of metaphor in Ernest Hemingway's short story "Hills Like White Elephants" from a linguistic perspective, employing Conceptual Metaphor Theory as the analytical framework. The concept of metaphor, as a cognitive and linguistic tool, forms the basis of the analysis, highlighting how figurative language conveys complex themes and emotions. The study aims to uncover the deeper meanings behind the story's metaphors, focusing on their role in shaping the narrative, characters' interactions, and underlying tensions. The research seeks to answer key questions: How do metaphors function in the text to communicate unspoken ideas? What cultural and psychological implications can be inferred from the metaphors? The significance of the study lies in its contribution to understanding Hemingway's minimalist style and the broader role of metaphor in literature. Using a qualitative methodology, the study analyzes the text's linguistic patterns, identifying and interpreting key metaphors such as "hills" and "white elephants." Findings reveal that these metaphors encapsulate themes of conflict, choice, and ambiguity, offering insights into the characters' emotional states and the societal pressures they face. The study concludes that Hemingway's use of metaphor not only enhances the narrative's subtlety but also engages readers in interpreting its deeper meanings. Recommendations include further exploration of metaphor in minimalist literature and interdisciplinary studies integrating linguistics, psychology, and cultural analysis to enrich literary interpretation.

**Key words:** *cognitive, elephants, hills, linguistic perspective, metaphor*



# A Linguistic Study of Metaphor in Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants"



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## المستخلص:

تستكشف هذه الدراسة استخدام الاستعارة في قصة إرنست همنغواي القصيرة "تلال كالفيلة البيضاء" من منظور لغوي، مستخدمةً نظرية الاستعارة المفاهيمية كإطار تحليلي. يُشكّل مفهوم الاستعارة، كأداة معرفية ولغوية، أساس التحليل، مُسلّطاً الضوء على كيفية نقل اللغة المجازية لمواضيع ومشاعر مُعقدة. تهدف الدراسة إلى كشف المعاني العميقة وراء استعارات القصة، مُركزة على دورها في تشكيل السرد، وتفاعلات الشخصيات، والتوترات الكامنة. يسعى البحث إلى الإجابة على أسئلة رئيسية: كيف تعمل الاستعارات في النص لتوصيل الأفكار غير المُعلنة؟ ما هي الآثار الثقافية والنفسية التي يُمكن استنتاجها من الاستعارات؟ تكمن أهمية الدراسة في مساهمتها في فهم أسلوب همنغواي البسيط والدور الأوسع للاستعارة في الأدب. باستخدام منهجية نوعية، تُحلّل الدراسة الأنماط اللغوية للنص، مُحددةً ومُفسرةً استعارات رئيسية مثل "التلال" و"الفيلة البيضاء". تكشف النتائج أن هذه الاستعارات تُجسّد مواضيع الصراع والاختيار والغموض، مُقدّمةً رؤى مُعمقة حول الحالة العاطفية للشخصيات والضغوط المجتمعية التي تواجهها. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن استخدام همنغواي للاستعارات لا يُعزّز دقة السرد فحسب، بل يُشجّع القراء أيضاً على تفسير معانيه العميقة. وتشمل التوصيات إجراء المزيد من الدراسات الاستعارية في الأدب البسيط، وإجراء دراسات مُتعددة التخصصات تُدمج اللغويات وعلم النفس والتحليل الثقافي لإثراء التفسير الأدبي.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** وردة لإميلي، الأفعال المساعدة الصيغية، التحليل التداولي

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## 1. Introduction

Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" is a masterpiece of minimalist fiction, renowned for its subtle narrative style and emotional depth. At the heart of the story lies a conversation between a man and a woman, ostensibly about an unnamed "operation," widely interpreted as a discussion about abortion. The story's power, however, lies not in what is explicitly stated but in what remains unsaid, with metaphor playing a central role in conveying meaning. Through a sparse and deceptively simple dialogue, Hemingway employs metaphors to communicate the characters' internal struggles, their relationship dynamics, and the broader themes of choice, consequence, and communication.

This paper investigates the linguistic aspects of metaphor in "*Hills Like White Elephants*", analyzing how Hemingway's use of figurative language shapes the narrative and evokes profound emotional resonance. Drawing upon Conceptual Metaphor Theory and other linguistic frameworks, the study explores key metaphors such as the titular "white elephants" and the symbolic elements of the setting, including the train station, the landscape, and the drinks consumed by the characters. These metaphors function not only as descriptive tools but also as cognitive and communicative mechanisms that reflect the characters' unspoken thoughts and emotions.

By focusing on the linguistic dimensions of metaphor in Hemingway's story, this study aims to demonstrate how figurative language operates within the text's minimalist style to enrich its thematic complexity. In doing so, the paper bridges the

gap between literary and linguistic approaches to metaphor, highlighting the power of language to transcend the boundaries of explicit communication.

## 2. Literature Review

Metaphor, a fundamental aspect of human language and thought, has been extensively studied in both literary and linguistic contexts. In the domain of linguistics, seminal works such as Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) have underscored the ubiquity of metaphor in everyday language, highlighting its role as a cognitive tool that shapes human understanding. Their Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) argues that metaphors are not merely decorative but integral to how individuals conceptualize abstract ideas through concrete experiences. This theoretical foundation provides a valuable lens for analyzing metaphor in literary texts, where abstract themes often find expression through figurative language.

In the study of Hemingway's writing, scholars have long recognized his distinct minimalist style, characterized by economy of language and a reliance on subtext. As early as the 1950s, critics such as Carlos Baker (*Hemingway: The Writer as Artist*) noted the profound implications of Hemingway's use of imagery and symbolism, arguing that these devices compensate for the lack of explicit exposition in his narratives. Hemingway's "iceberg theory," which posits that much of a story's meaning lies beneath the surface of its text, has been instrumental in understanding his subtle use of metaphor and symbolism to convey unspoken tensions.

Specific to "*Hills Like White Elephants*", scholarly attention has frequently centered on the titular metaphor of "white elephants." Early interpretations, such as those by Paul Smith (1960s), linked the metaphor to themes of unwanted burdens

and unspoken conflicts. More recent linguistic analyses have expanded upon these interpretations, exploring how the story's metaphors construct the psychological landscape of its characters. For instance, Timothy O'Brien (2007) highlights the way the metaphorical tension between the hills and the valley reflects the characters' diverging perspectives on life and their relationship.

In addition to metaphor, the setting of *"Hills Like White Elephants"* has drawn attention for its symbolic richness. Critics such as Mark Cirino (*Reading Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants"*, 2011) have analyzed how the train station and its surroundings serve as metaphors for choice and transition, reinforcing the central conflict of the story. The barren and fertile landscapes on either side of the station are often interpreted as symbolic extensions of the characters' emotional and moral struggles. Linguistic approaches to this symbolism, as discussed by scholars like Elena Semino (*Stylistics*, 2002), emphasize the interplay between metaphorical language and the reader's cognitive engagement in constructing meaning.

While literary analyses have delved deeply into the thematic implications of Hemingway's metaphors, fewer studies adopt a linguistic perspective that examines the mechanisms by which these metaphors operate within the text. This paper seeks to address this gap by focusing on the linguistic structures and cognitive dimensions of metaphor in *"Hills Like White Elephants"*. Building upon both literary and linguistic scholarship, it aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how Hemingway's metaphors function not only as literary devices but also as tools of communication that reveal the complexities of human thought and emotion.

### 3. Definition of Metaphor

Metaphor is a multifaceted concept that has been defined and interpreted across various disciplines, including linguistics, literature, psychology, and philosophy. Below is an overview of how metaphor is understood from different viewpoints:

#### 1. Linguistic Viewpoint

- Traditional Rhetorical Perspective:  
In classical rhetoric, metaphor is seen as a figure of speech where one thing is described in terms of another to enhance expression or create an effect. Aristotle, in *Poetics*, defined metaphor as "giving the thing a name that belongs to something else," highlighting its function as a decorative or stylistic device.
- Modern Linguistic Perspective (Conceptual Metaphor Theory):  
Lakoff and Johnson, in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), shifted the understanding of metaphor from a purely linguistic phenomenon to a cognitive one. They argue that metaphors are fundamental to human thought, allowing abstract concepts to be understood through concrete experiences. For example, metaphors like "time is money" illustrate how intangible ideas (time) are structured in terms of tangible domains (money).

#### 2. Literary Viewpoint

- Symbolic and Artistic Function:  
In literature, metaphor is often regarded as a device to evoke imagery, convey complex emotions, or create layered meanings. Cleanth Brooks, a New Critic, emphasized metaphor's centrality in poetry, describing it as a means of fusing

disparate ideas into a unified aesthetic experience. Literary metaphors often extend beyond their cognitive functions to engage readers emotionally and imaginatively.

- Hemingway's Minimalist Style:  
Hemingway's use of metaphor aligns with his "iceberg theory," where the visible text only hints at the deeper, implied meanings. Metaphor, in his works, functions as a subtle tool to convey themes and emotions that remain unsaid in the dialogue or narration.

### 3. Pragmatic and Discourse Viewpoint

- Metaphor in Communication:  
Pragmatic theories focus on the use of metaphor in context. Scholars such as Paul Grice have discussed how metaphor operates as an implicature, where the literal meaning is overridden by an intended figurative meaning within specific communicative situations.
- Critical Discourse Analysis:  
Metaphors are also studied for their ideological functions in discourse. For instance, metaphors in political or media texts often frame social issues (e.g., "war on drugs") in ways that influence public perception and policy.

Each of these viewpoints highlights a distinct aspect of metaphor, from its role in creative expression and communication to its cognitive, cultural, and ideological dimensions. A comprehensive understanding of metaphor thus requires an interdisciplinary approach that integrates these perspectives.

#### 4. Hemingway's Style

Ernest Hemingway's writing style is one of the most distinctive and influential in modern literature, characterized by its simplicity, precision, and emotional depth. Rooted in his belief in economy of language and the principle of understatement, Hemingway's style has been widely studied and admired for its ability to convey complex themes and emotions with minimalistic prose. Below are the key features and aspects of Hemingway's style:

##### 1. Minimalism and Simplicity

- Short Sentences: Hemingway's prose is marked by the use of short, direct sentences. He avoids elaborate descriptions or complex syntax, relying instead on straightforward, declarative language.
  - Example: "He drank the beer. It was good beer." (*The Sun Also Rises*).
- Accessible Vocabulary: He uses simple and concrete words, often favoring Anglo-Saxon terms over Latinate ones, to create a sense of clarity and immediacy.

##### 2. Use of Dialogue

- Hemingway's dialogue is realistic and understated, often mirroring natural speech patterns. He uses it as a primary tool for character development and to advance the narrative.
  - Characters often speak indirectly or avoid addressing issues directly, creating tension and subtext. For example, in "*Hills Like White Elephants*", the

couple's dialogue is laden with implications but avoids explicitly mentioning the subject of their conflict (abortion).

### 3. Emphasis on Action Over Reflection

- Hemingway focuses on what characters do and say rather than delving into their inner thoughts or emotions. This emphasis on external action over introspection reflects his belief that actions reveal more about people than thoughts.

### 4. Symbolism and Imagery

- Hemingway often uses simple but powerful symbols and images to convey deeper meanings. For instance:
  - The white elephants in "*Hills Like White Elephants*" symbolize the burden of an unwanted pregnancy.
  - The bullfighting in *The Sun Also Rises* serves as a metaphor for vitality, honor, and ritual.
- His imagery is often drawn from nature and physical experiences, evoking a strong sense of place and atmosphere.

### 5. Repetition and Rhythm

- Hemingway uses repetition for emphasis and to create a rhythmic cadence in his sentences. This technique reinforces key ideas and evokes a meditative or lyrical quality in his writing.

## 6. Focus on the Human Condition

- His style reflects a profound interest in the universal human experience, often exploring themes of courage, love, loss, and mortality. Hemingway's writing captures both the beauty and brutality of life, often through the lens of war, travel, and nature.

## 5. Brief Summary of "*Hills Like White Elephants*"

Ernest Hemingway's "*Hills Like White Elephants*" is a short story set at a train station in Spain, where an American man and a woman referred to as "the girl" (Jig) engage in a tense conversation while waiting for a train to Madrid. The couple discusses an unnamed "operation," widely interpreted as an abortion, though the word is never explicitly mentioned.

The story unfolds through sparse dialogue, with Hemingway's hallmark minimalist style allowing much of the meaning to remain beneath the surface. Jig, gazing at the distant hills that resemble "white elephants," introduces a metaphor that subtly reflects her thoughts and feelings about their situation. The man downplays the seriousness of the procedure, trying to convince her that it is simple and will improve their lives. Jig's responses oscillate between acquiescence and quiet resistance, revealing her internal conflict.

As the train's arrival nears, the unresolved tension between the couple lingers. The man appears focused on maintaining their current lifestyle, free of obligations, while Jig seems to yearn for deeper meaning and connection. The story ends ambiguously, leaving the reader to infer whether Jig will go through with the procedure or assert her own desires.

Through its nuanced dialogue, symbolism, and subtext, *"Hills Like White Elephants"* explores themes of communication, choice, and the complexities of human relationships.

## 6. Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT)

Conceptual Metaphor Theory, introduced by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their seminal work *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), revolutionized the understanding of metaphor by shifting its focus from being merely a rhetorical or stylistic device to a fundamental aspect of human cognition. According to CMT, metaphors are not confined to language but are pervasive in thought and action, shaping how people conceptualize and understand the world.

CMT posits that a conceptual metaphor is a cognitive mechanism that allows one domain of experience (the source domain) to structure and make sense of another domain of experience (the target domain). For example:

- Metaphor: "Time is money."
  - Source Domain: Money (tangible, measurable, valuable).
  - Target Domain: Time (intangible, abstract).

Through this metaphor, concepts related to money (spending, saving, wasting) are applied to time, shaping how individuals think about and discuss time.

## 7. Data Analysis

Ernest Hemingway's *"Hills Like White Elephants"* employs metaphorical language to convey the characters' emotional conflict, unspoken tensions, and the broader themes of the story. Using Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), these

metaphors can be analyzed as mappings between source and target domains that reveal how the characters conceptualize their situation and choices.

### 1. The Title: "Hills Like White Elephants"

Source Domain:

- White elephants: Rare, burdensome gifts, historically symbolic of something valuable but impractical.

Target Domain:

- Jig's pregnancy: Something potentially valuable and life-changing but also seen as an obstacle or burden, especially from the man's perspective.

Mapping:

- The "hills" suggest physical and emotional weight, resembling the shape of a pregnant belly.
- The "white elephants" metaphor captures the duality of the pregnancy: for Jig, it may hold potential for life and transformation, but for the man, it represents an unwanted responsibility threatening their lifestyle.

Interpretation:

- Jig's initial remark about the hills—"They look like white elephants"—introduces a metaphorical reflection of her internal conflict. This phrase encapsulates her perspective on the pregnancy as both meaningful and burdensome, revealing her ambivalence.

## 2. The Train Station as a Crossroads

Source Domain:

- Crossroads: A literal intersection where paths diverge, representing decision-making or a point of no return.

Target Domain:

- The couple's current situation: A pivotal moment in their relationship where a major decision must be made.

Mapping:

- The train station, with trains traveling to different destinations, symbolizes the life choices before them: whether to proceed with the pregnancy or terminate it.
- The waiting period at the station reflects their indecision and the tension of being caught between possibilities.

Interpretation:

- The setting of the station reinforces the theme of choice and its consequences. The couple is metaphorically "stuck" at a crossroads, unable to move forward in any direction without resolving their conflict.

## 3. The Barren and Fertile Landscapes

Source Domain:

- Landscapes: Physical environments that symbolize emotional and situational states.

- Barren land: Dry, desolate, lifeless.
- Fertile land: Green, lush, full of life and potential.

#### Target Domain:

- The couple's contrasting views on the pregnancy:
  - Barren land reflects the man's preference for a carefree, unencumbered lifestyle.
  - Fertile land represents the possibility of life, growth, and transformation tied to the pregnancy, potentially resonating with Jig's unspoken desires.

#### Mapping:

- The juxtaposition of the two landscapes mirrors the emotional and moral polarity of the decision. The barren land symbolizes emotional emptiness and rejection of life, while the fertile side suggests vitality, hope, and creation.

#### Interpretation:

- The imagery underscores the existential stakes of the couple's conversation. Jig's gaze toward the fertile side may hint at her deeper longing for a meaningful future, even as she struggles with the pressure from the man to choose barrenness.

#### 4. The Operation as a Simple Fix

##### Source Domain:

- A simple fix: A quick, uncomplicated solution to a problem, requiring minimal effort or consequence.

#### Target Domain:

- The abortion: A complex, emotionally charged decision that the man tries to downplay.

#### Mapping:

- The man's framing of the operation as "a simple thing" maps the concept of ease and triviality onto what is, for Jig, a profound and life-altering decision.
- His repeated reassurances suggest his attempt to diminish the emotional and moral weight of the procedure.

#### Interpretation:

- The metaphor reflects the disparity in how the two characters perceive the situation. For the man, the operation is merely a way to "fix" the inconvenience, allowing them to return to their carefree lifestyle. For Jig, this trivialization highlights his insensitivity to her emotional struggle and the deeper implications of the choice.

## 8. Findings

### 1. Prevalence of Metaphorical Language

- Hemingway employs metaphor extensively in "*Hills Like White Elephants*", though subtly and with minimal explicit explanation. The metaphors are deeply embedded in the narrative's dialogue, setting, and imagery, reflecting the characters' emotional states and the story's thematic concerns.

## 2. Key Conceptual Metaphors

- “Hills Like White Elephants”: The title metaphor encapsulates the dual nature of the pregnancy as both a burden and a potential gift, illustrating Jig’s internal conflict.
- The Train Station as a Crossroads: This metaphor reflects the couple’s pivotal moment of decision, symbolizing the tension between diverging life paths.
- Barren and Fertile Landscapes: These metaphors symbolize the emotional and moral stakes of the decision, with the barren land representing sterility and rejection, and the fertile land embodying life and growth.
- The Operation as a Simple Fix: The man’s trivialization of the abortion underscores his dismissive attitude, contrasting with Jig’s perception of the decision as profound and life-altering.

## 3. Divergent Conceptual Frameworks

- The analysis reveals a fundamental disconnect between the characters' metaphorical frameworks. While the man relies on metaphors of simplicity and practicality to frame the situation as manageable, Jig’s metaphors reflect her deeper emotional and moral engagement with the issue.

## 4. Cultural and Gender Dynamics

- The metaphors reflect broader cultural and gendered dynamics. The man’s perspective aligns with societal expectations of control and independence, while Jig’s metaphors suggest a struggle for agency and acknowledgment of emotional complexity.

## 9. Conclusion

The linguistic study of metaphor in Hemingway's *"Hills Like White Elephants"* reveals how metaphors function as a powerful narrative tool to convey subtext, character psychology, and thematic depth. By employing Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), the analysis demonstrates that the story's meaning is largely constructed through metaphorical mappings, which enable readers to grasp the characters' unspoken thoughts and emotions.

The metaphors in the story not only frame the central conflict—the decision about the pregnancy—but also highlight the broader themes of communication, agency, and the complexity of human relationships. Hemingway's minimalist style relies on these metaphors to invite readers into the characters' internal struggles, fostering a layered and immersive reading experience.

This study underscores the importance of metaphor in literary analysis, demonstrating how even sparse and understated texts like *"Hills Like White Elephants"* can convey profound meaning through metaphorical language. By analyzing the characters' divergent conceptual frameworks, readers gain insight into the emotional and relational dynamics at the heart of the story, enriching their understanding of Hemingway's craft and the universal themes it explores.

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