

## ***The politics of imagination: A discourse analysis of John Lennon's Imagine***

La política de la imaginación: Un análisis discursivo de *Imagine* de John Lennon

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### **Abstract**

This article analyzes the metaphorical and figurative language of John Lennon's 1971 song *Imagine* to examine how a seemingly simple musical text communicates a political vision of peace, global unity, and social change. Drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and work on metaphor in discourse, the analysis considers how abstract political and ideological concepts are made accessible through spatial, material, and embodied representations. The analysis focuses on three CMT categories associated with Kövecses—structural, ontological, and orientational metaphors—while also distinguishing metaphor from the song's participatory and inclusive rhetorical strategies. The discussion situates *Imagine* in the social and political climate of 1971, marked by the Vietnam War, the Cold War, and sustained antiwar mobilization. It also considers the song's subsequent use in public events and peace-oriented contexts, including Olympic ceremonies and United Nations initiatives. The findings suggest that the song's political force lies partly in the tension between linguistic simplicity and ideological complexity: ordinary words and familiar experiences are used to invite listeners to reconsider borders, institutions, possessions, violence, and collective identity. Rather than presenting a detailed political program, *Imagine* constructs an accessible imagined alternative that encourages reflection on how societies are organized and how they might be transformed.

**Keywords:** Discourse analysis, conceptual metaphor, politics, ideology, John Lennon.

### **Resumen**

Este artículo analiza el lenguaje metafórico y figurativo de la canción *Imagine* (1971) de John Lennon con el propósito de examinar cómo un texto musical aparentemente sencillo comunica una visión política de paz, unidad global y cambio social. A partir de la Teoría de la Metáfora Conceptual (TMC) y de estudios sobre metáfora y discurso, se analiza cómo conceptos políticos e ideológicos abstractos se vuelven accesibles mediante representaciones espaciales, materiales y corporizadas. El análisis considera tres categorías asociadas con Kövecses: metáforas estructurales, ontológicas y orientacionales, y distingue estas metáforas de las estrategias retóricas participativas e inclusivas de la canción. Asimismo, el artículo sitúa *Imagine* en el contexto social y político de 1971, marcado por la Guerra de Vietnam, la Guerra Fría y la movilización contra la guerra. También considera el uso posterior de la canción en eventos públicos y contextos orientados a la paz, incluidos ceremonias olímpicas e iniciativas de las Naciones Unidas. Los resultados sugieren que la fuerza política de la canción se encuentra, en parte, en la tensión entre la sencillez lingüística y la complejidad

ideológica: palabras cotidianas y experiencias familiares invitan a reconsiderar las fronteras, las instituciones, las posesiones, la violencia y la identidad colectiva. En lugar de presentar un programa político detallado, *Imagine* construye una alternativa imaginada y accesible que fomenta la reflexión sobre la organización de la sociedad y sus posibilidades de transformación.

**Palabras clave:** Análisis del discurso, metáfora conceptual, política, ideología, John Lennon.

## Introduction

John Lennon's *Imagine*, released in 1971 on the album of the same name, is widely associated with peace, but its political significance is more complex than its calm melody and accessible vocabulary might initially suggest. The song asks listeners to imagine a world without national divisions, religious divisions, material possessions, and the conditions that make killing or dying seem necessary. Its political discourse therefore operates less through explicit argument than through the construction of an alternative social reality. The central question is not simply whether peace is desirable, but what social arrangements would have to be imagined differently for peace to become possible.

The historical context of 1971 is important for understanding this political dimension. The song appeared during the Vietnam War and the Cold War, when military conflict, ideological confrontation, and public debates about nationalism and state power were prominent features of international life. The antiwar movement had also developed into a broad and diverse form of political activism rather than a single homogeneous movement. Historical research shows that antiwar mobilization remained significant in 1971, including large demonstrations and forms of activism that connected opposition to the war with wider questions about political participation and social change (Hall, 2025; Chatfield, 2004). This context does not mean that *Imagine* should be reduced to a direct commentary on one historical event. Rather, it helps explain why a song centered on borders, violence, collective identity, and peace could function as political discourse.

The song's later reception further demonstrates the connection between its language and public imaginaries of peace. *Imagine* has been incorporated into major public events in ways that explicitly foreground its message of unity and hope. The Olympic movement, for example, included the song in the London 2012 Closing Ceremony, the PyeongChang 2018 Opening Ceremony, and the Tokyo 2020 Opening Ceremony. Official Olympic materials describe the song in terms of peace, the removal of barriers, and global harmony (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2012, 2018, 2021). The United Nations has likewise used *Imagine* in peace-oriented initiatives: in 2021, the United Nations Postal Administration honored Lennon on the International Day of Peace and described the song as a message of hope that encourages people to set aside differences. In 2016, UNICEF also organized an international version of the song to draw attention to children displaced by conflict (United Nations, 2021; UNICEF, 2016). These uses help explain why the song has become more than a popular recording: it has become a cultural resource through which institutions and audiences publicly express ideals of peace and solidarity.



This public afterlife is especially relevant to discourse analysis because the song does not rely on technical political vocabulary. Its lyrics are built from short clauses, common nouns, repeated imperatives, negation, and familiar verbs. The repeated invitation to imagine, together with references to countries, religion, possessions, life, death, sharing, and the world, gives the song an unusually accessible surface. Yet the ideas behind these words are highly complex because they concern nationalism, religion, ownership, violence, social organization, and collective identity. In this sense, the simplicity of the language should not be confused with simplicity of thought. The song's ideological work depends precisely on making difficult political questions appear concrete and imaginable.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory provides a useful framework for examining this process. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that metaphor is not merely an ornamental feature of language but a way of structuring thought: abstract concepts can be understood through more concrete and familiar domains of experience. Kövecses (2002) similarly explains that conceptual metaphors involve mappings between a source domain and a target domain, allowing people to reason about abstract experiences through embodied and concrete patterns. Later work also emphasizes the importance of context in determining how metaphorical meanings are activated in discourse (Kövecses, 2020). This perspective is particularly appropriate for *Imagine* because the song repeatedly converts large-scale ideological questions into concrete images of space, boundaries, objects, movement, and shared existence.

The present article therefore asks: How are metaphors in *Imagine* used to engage politically with the audience and communicate a message of peace? To answer this question, the study identifies and interprets metaphorical expressions in the song through the structural, ontological, and orientational categories associated with CMT. It then considers their ideological implications and the way they contribute to the song's political invitation to imagine social alternatives. The analysis also distinguishes metaphorical mappings from participatory rhetorical devices so that the argument does not treat every meaningful expression as a metaphor. The purpose is to show how a short, accessible song can organize complex political ideas through ordinary language and thereby encourage listeners to reconsider dominant assumptions about division, ownership, religion, and violence.

## Literature review

Conceptual Metaphor Theory was introduced by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) as a challenge to the idea that metaphor is primarily a decorative feature of literary language. In CMT, metaphor is understood as a cognitive mechanism through which one conceptual domain is structured in terms of another. This approach is important for discourse analysis because it connects linguistic choices to broader patterns of thought, evaluation, and interpretation.

Kövecses (2002) develops this perspective by describing three major types of conceptual metaphor: structural, ontological, and orientational metaphors. Structural metaphors allow one concept to be understood in terms of the structure of another concept. Ontological metaphors allow abstract experiences or processes to be conceptualized as entities, substances, or objects. Orientational metaphors organize concepts through spatial relations, often drawing on embodied experiences such as up/down, inside/outside, or center/periphery. These



categories are analytically useful, although actual expressions may involve more than one mapping and should therefore be interpreted in context rather than mechanically assigned to a single category.

Kövecses's later work also stresses that metaphor cannot be separated from context. His extended view of CMT argues that contextual factors help activate particular metaphorical meanings in actual discourse (Kövecses, 2020). This observation is particularly relevant to *Imagine*: the same words can acquire political force because they are presented within a song that addresses war, national division, religion, material ownership, and collective life.

Metaphor has also been examined as an ideological resource. Semino (2008) argues that metaphor in discourse can influence how people conceptualize social reality and can contribute to particular perspectives or evaluations. Charteris-Black (2004) similarly demonstrates how metaphor can be persuasive in political discourse because it provides emotionally resonant frames through which complex issues can be interpreted. These approaches support an analysis of *Imagine* that moves beyond identifying figurative expressions and asks what political worldview those expressions make easier to imagine.

Research specifically addressing *Imagine* also supports treating the song as a discourse with ideological and social dimensions. Recent critical discourse analyses have examined its language, social cognition, and representations of peace and unity (Jaelani et al., 2023; Ulfha et al., 2023). The present study differs in emphasis by focusing specifically on conceptual metaphor and by relating the metaphorical patterns to the song's political accessibility and its continuing public use as a symbol of peace. The analysis therefore combines cognitive-linguistic and discourse-oriented perspectives.

## Methodology

The material analyzed is John Lennon's *Imagine* (1971), treated as a short artistic and political discourse. The study uses qualitative textual analysis rather than audience measurement or experimental testing. The lyrics were read repeatedly to identify expressions that construct abstract political or social concepts through concrete domains. These expressions were then grouped according to the structural, ontological, and orientational categories described in CMT (Kövecses, 2002), while allowing for overlap when a phrase activates more than one conceptual mapping.

The analysis proceeds in three stages. First, metaphorically relevant expressions were identified through close reading. Second, each expression was interpreted in relation to its source and target domains and assigned to the most relevant CMT category. Third, the ideological and political implications of the mappings were examined in relation to the song's historical context and its discourse of peace, unity, and social change. This procedure follows the general principle that metaphor analysis should not stop at linguistic form but should consider what a metaphor makes easier to think, feel, or evaluate (Charteris-Black, 2004; Semino, 2008).

The analysis also distinguishes conceptual metaphor from rhetorical participation. The repeated invitation to imagine all people, for example, is important to the song's persuasive design, but it is not automatically classified as a conceptual metaphor. Instead, it is treated as an inclusive rhetorical strategy that positions the listener as a potential participant in the imagined social world. This distinction makes it possible to discuss the



song's persuasive force without expanding the category of metaphor beyond what the theoretical framework supports.

**Table 1.** *Conceptual metaphor categories used in the analysis*

| CMT category    | General definition                                                    | Application to <i>Imagine</i>                                                                                                           |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Structural      | One conceptual domain is understood through the structure of another. | Social unity and peace are framed through concrete relations of shared space, boundaries, and collective existence.                     |
| Ontological     | Abstract concepts are treated as entities, objects, or substances.    | Institutions and social systems such as countries, religion, and possessions are represented as entities that can be absent or removed. |
| Orientalational | Concepts are organized through spatial or embodied orientations.      | Ideas of unity and separation are partly organized through spatial relations such as being together, apart, or under a shared sky.      |

The categories in Table 1 are analytical rather than mutually exclusive. A single expression can evoke several conceptual dimensions, and the interpretation depends on the broader discourse in which it occurs.

## Findings and discussion

The analysis indicates that *Imagine* constructs its political message through a recurring movement from abstract social systems to concrete and imaginable relations. Rather than explaining a political ideology through specialized terminology, the song asks listeners to picture what the world would look like if certain boundaries, institutions, and forms of ownership did not organize human relationships. The following categories illustrate the principal patterns.

### Structural metaphors

A central structural pattern conceptualizes social unity through the organization of shared space. The expression "sharing all the world," for example, frames global coexistence through the familiar physical experience of sharing something. The political target domain is global solidarity, while the source domain is the concrete practice of occupying or using a common space or resource. This mapping makes the abstract principle of international cooperation easier to visualize: instead of thinking about unity as an institutional agreement, listeners are invited to think about it as something people can physically share.

A related pattern appears in the idea that the world can live "as one." Here, social unity is represented through the structure of singularity rather than division. The contrast between one collective world and separate groups provides an implicit political critique of fragmentation. The song does not need to name particular geopolitical disputes; its conceptual structure establishes division itself as a problem and collective existence as the desired alternative.



These mappings are politically significant because they simplify a highly complex issue without making it intellectually empty. Global unity involves institutions, competing interests, histories, and unequal power relations, but the song presents the issue through the accessible image of people sharing a world. This is consistent with CMT's view that abstract concepts become easier to reason about when they are structured through familiar experience (Kövecses, 2002).

### Ontological metaphors

Ontological metaphor is particularly important in the song because several social and ideological systems are represented as entities that can be imagined as absent. Expressions such as "no religion" and "no possessions" turn complex systems of belief and ownership into conceptual objects. Countries can likewise be represented as bounded entities whose absence can be imagined. This grammatical and conceptual framing is powerful because it makes historically established institutions appear contingent rather than inevitable.

The political implication is not simply that these institutions are physically removable. Rather, the metaphorical framing creates a cognitive distance from them. Once a system can be represented as an entity, listeners can ask what social life might look like without it. The song therefore transforms ideological structures into objects of reflection. This is one reason the language can sound simple while raising difficult questions about nationalism, religion, private ownership, and social organization.

The phrase "no possessions" is especially significant because it turns a complex economic and ideological question into a familiar category of objects. Ownership is not discussed through economic theory; it is represented through possessions, something people ordinarily understand as belonging to someone. This makes the song's critique accessible while also leaving the precise political alternative open to interpretation. The listener is asked to imagine the disappearance of the organizing principle rather than being given a detailed institutional model of what would replace it.

### Oriental metaphors

The song also draws on spatial organization to conceptualize human relations. The phrase "above us only sky" establishes a common vertical space shared by all people, while the image of the world living as one reinforces the idea of a collective spatial field rather than separated territories. These expressions do not fit a rigid up/down metaphor in the narrowest sense; instead, they illustrate how spatial and embodied experience can support the conceptualization of social unity.

This spatial framing is politically relevant because national and ideological divisions are frequently experienced through boundaries and territories. Imagine counters that logic by foregrounding the physical world as a shared environment. The result is a discourse in which separation appears constructed and unity appears imaginable. The metaphorical organization of space therefore supports the song's broader ideological preference for connection over division.



The importance of this strategy becomes clearer when contrasted with the song's references to killing and dying. Violence is not presented as an abstract geopolitical process but as a concrete human action with a bodily consequence. By placing this concrete reality beside the imagined absence of borders and divisions, the song connects political organization to embodied human costs. The effect is to make the political question emotionally immediate without resorting to graphic or aggressive language.

### Participatory and inclusive metaphors

The repeated invitation to imagine all people is central to the song's persuasive structure, but it is more accurately described as an inclusive rhetorical strategy than as a conceptual metaphor in itself. The imperative "imagine" directly addresses the listener and turns interpretation into participation. The audience is not merely told that another world is possible; listeners are asked to construct that possibility mentally.

This participatory structure strengthens the ideological effect of the metaphors described above. Once listeners accept the invitation to imagine, they are encouraged to visualize the removal of divisions and the possibility of shared life. The song therefore combines cognitive framing with audience participation: metaphor provides the conceptual structure, while the imperative form invites listeners to enter that structure themselves.

The persuasive force of *Imagine* also derives from the contrast between form and content. The song's vocabulary is predominantly every day and concrete, and its syntax is relatively direct. It relies heavily on short clauses, repetition, negation, and familiar social nouns rather than specialized political terminology. Yet these ordinary forms address highly contested concepts such as nationalism, religion, ownership, war, and collective identity. The accessibility of the language therefore helps the political message travel across different audiences and historical contexts.

### Ideology, peace and nonviolent political expression

Taken together, the metaphors construct a particular ideological orientation: peace is associated with the reduction of divisions, shared existence, and a rethinking of institutions that separate people. The song does not offer a detailed political program, and it would be too strong to claim that every listener interprets its anti-national, anti-religious, or anti-ownership implications in the same way. What the discourse does provide is a counter-image to dominant assumptions. It asks listeners to treat established social arrangements as imaginable alternatives rather than unquestionable necessities.

This can also be understood as a form of nonviolent political expression. Like other traditions of peaceful protest, the song uses cultural expression rather than physical force to challenge assumptions about violence and social order. The comparison with figures such as Mahatma Gandhi or Martin Luther King Jr. should not imply that Lennon's political practice was identical to theirs; rather, the comparison highlights a broader principle in which public persuasion, symbolic action, and collective imagination can participate in political resistance without reproducing the violence being criticized.

The continuing public use of *Imagine* reinforces this interpretation. Its presence in Olympic ceremonies and United Nations initiatives shows how the song's symbolic meaning has been recontextualized as a public



language of peace. The song's later institutional uses do not erase its ideological tensions, but they demonstrate the durability of its central imaginative frame: people can temporarily suspend ordinary divisions and publicly perform the possibility of collective belonging.

## Conclusions

This article has argued that the political force of *Imagine* is closely connected to its metaphorical organization of experience. Using Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the analysis shows how abstract political ideas are made accessible through concrete domains such as space, boundaries, objects, and shared existence. Structural metaphors frame unity through shared space and collective existence; ontological metaphors turn institutions and systems into entities that can be imagined as absent; and spatial or orientational framing supports the representation of the world as a common environment. In addition, the song's repeated invitation to imagine functions as an inclusive rhetorical strategy that places the listener inside the construction of the alternative world.

One of the most important findings is the contrast between linguistic simplicity and ideological complexity. *Imagine* uses ordinary words and relatively direct structures, but those words address some of the most difficult questions in political and social life: How are communities divided? What makes violence seem legitimate? How do religion, nationality, and ownership shape collective identity? What would it mean to imagine a world organized differently? The song does not resolve these questions through theoretical argument. Instead, it uses accessible language to make alternative arrangements cognitively and emotionally imaginable.

The historical and cultural afterlife of the song strengthens this interpretation. Its appearance in Olympic ceremonies and United Nations-related peace initiatives demonstrates that *Imagine* has been repeatedly recontextualized as a symbol of solidarity and hope. Its continued circulation suggests that the discourse remains adaptable: different audiences can reinterpret its idealistic vision according to contemporary circumstances while retaining its central invitation to imagine peace and collective life.

Finally, the analysis suggests that political discourse does not have to sound overtly political to have ideological effects. A quiet melody, simple vocabulary, and repeated invitation can communicate a demanding vision of social change. *Imagine* demonstrates how metaphor can transform abstract political questions into concrete possibilities and how artistic discourse can invite audiences to reconsider ideas that otherwise appear fixed or inevitable. Its lasting relevance therefore lies not only in its message of peace, but also in its demonstration of how language can make alternative ways of living together imaginable.



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