

## Introduction

We can think of conceptual categories as having a variety of dimensions, where the dimensions possess a variety of smaller aspects. These dimensions and aspects define the content and structure of concepts. The major question that the present paper addresses is this: What are the major dimensions and aspects that characterize the concept of cellphone?

How can we find out? One way to study it is to find linguistic examples in which people talk about cellphones. The way in which and the frequency with which people talk about the various dimensions and aspects of cellphones can give us a good idea of the content and structure of the concept. My focus in this paper is not on the physical dimensions and aspects of cellphones but on those nonphysical dimensions and aspects that tell us something about how people think and feel about and relate to cellphones.

A large part of this system of everyday knowledge seems to be presented and hidden in the metaphorical language people use about cellphones, as they discuss them. For this reason, one of my major claims is that this metaphorical language constitutes a gold mine of examples from which we can gain valuable insight into the concept of cellphone.

In order to figure out the hidden content and structure of the concept of cellphone, conceptual metaphor theory<sup>1</sup> provides us with an excellent tool. By examining the most common “source domains” as they apply to the “target domain” of cellphone, we can find out what the main dimensions and aspects of cellphones are and how they are structured. In other words, I will use conceptual metaphor theory as a diagnostic tool. This theory of metaphor maintains that we conceptualize a domain (the target) in

---

<sup>1</sup> See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980; Zoltán Kövecses, *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

terms of another (the source) by means of seeing a set of correspondences (or mappings) between the two domains. Often, the logic of the source is mapped onto the target.

### *Method of Analysis*

To find out about how people conceptualize cellphones, I did two searches on Google: one with the phrase “cell phone is like”, the other with the phrase “cell phones are like”. The phrase “is/are like” indicates the kinds of entities and processes to which people compare cellphones. Some of these comparisons are based on literal similarities, while others on figurative ones, that is, metaphors. As we will see, the metaphors are especially revealing as regards the conceptualization of cellphones.

The two searches yielded several thousand hits. Out of these, in both searches only the first one hundred examples were kept and taken into account. Since many of the 200 examples revealed the same metaphors or they were literal analogies, they were left out of consideration. Altogether, the present study is based on nearly 80 examples. In the paper, I will refer to these as “the data”.

### **Function**

The first general dimension of the concept of cellphone I will discuss is that of function. This is a dimension that appears to be talked and thought about both through literal and figurative comparisons.

The most commonly used object in the data to which people compare cellphones is the computer. For many people cellphones are like small computers, which of course they are. In such cases, people can be said to literally think of cellphones as computers.

However, it seems that for some other people cellphones, or at least some cellphones, are not computer-like enough. These people use the cellphone-as-computer comparison as a metaphor, rather than a literal analogy. Take the following example:

If **cell phones are like** little computers -- a comparison many pundits like to make these days -- then you'd probably want them to perform more computer-like tasks ...  
tech.yahoo.com/blog/samiljan/962 - 32k

Clearly, for such a person there are not enough literal similarities between cellphones and personal computers; therefore, they can be said to think

about cellphones as computers metaphorically.

More importantly, the computer-like features of cellphones seem to be related to the dimension of function as regards cellphones. They share with computers such functions as storing information, net access, communication with others, and so forth. Many of these have to do with the functions of the human nervous system. Since the computer serves (in some views at least) as the model of the human nervous system and as the model of the cellphone as well, the cellphone can be seen as a model for central functions of human beings. In this sense, the cellphone is the objectified version of a human being. This objectified version can be handled, carried, and easily manipulated with the human hand.

The size is small, which is almost invariably defined in relation to personal computers. People in the data commonly describe cellphones in this way: “A cell phone is like a really small/a tiny/a mini computer.”

Its size and easy manipulability make it a perfect tool – a tool that can take over and perform several important cognitive functions (such as memory). Thus, the cellphone is an objectified cognitive tool that humans find easy to deal with most of the time. Its major advantage over computers is its size and the easy maintenance of communication with others (but also with oneself) that its size affords. This kind of conceptual fusion is called conceptual integration by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner.<sup>2</sup>

The objectified version of a human being that performs a variety of useful tasks is easily regarded as a friend. Here is one example from the data:

Hi all, this is Hsiao-Ying and her cell phone, Buddy. Cannot think of any other names better than this because my cell phone is like my buddy. In the morning, Buddy is my alarm clock who wakes me up. When shopping, Buddy is my calculator. When being bored, Buddy is my mini play station. Buddy is with me 24/7. I like to take pictures very much and Buddy is also helpful whenever I want to do so. Although the quality of the pictures is not as good as the quality of a real camera, it is really convenient. Please see the album: [NY Images](#) of my recent collaboration with Buddy.

Cellphones, like friends, help us do things, play with us, and spend a lot of time with us.

But the cellphone is conceptualized not only as a computer or a friend but also as a variety of additional tools. One of these is the TV set.

---

<sup>2</sup> Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities*, New York: Basic Books, 2002.

Cellphones are also viewed as mobile offices and personal wallets. In these cases, cellphones help us store business-related or personal information.

Most obviously, however, cellphones are compared to telephones. To be able to talk to someone who is not present without being tied to a particular location is a major function of cellphones.

Given the wide variety of functions for which cellphones can be used, it is not surprising that they are also metaphorically referred to as Swiss army knives.

In sum, the metaphors and literal analogies we have seen above display the wide variety of functions cellphones are used for. Many of the functions reflect cognitive functions humans engage in. For this reason, we can think of cellphones as objectified versions of human cognitive abilities that are integrated into a single handheld tool.

## **Significance**

How do people see the significance of cellphones for their lives? Given the many important cognitive functions that cellphones represent, we can expect cellphones to be highly valued by their users. Indeed, in a large number of cases people think of having a cellphone as an absolute necessity. There is a distinct set of metaphors in the data that suggest the inevitability of possessing a cellphone.

First, the cellphone is compared to air and food, which are basic necessities of, or preconditions for, biological life. The metaphor suggests that in the same way as air and food are preconditions for life, so is a cellphone. A special case of this is when cellphones are thought of as oxygen.

Second, people also use the related metaphor of lifeline. The metaphor suggests that without a cellphone one cannot function in the world; it is the lifeline that connects us with our energy source. The cellphone corresponding to the lifeline provides the connection with the energy source. The connection can only be broken very briefly, as indicated by the scuba diver metaphor. The scuba diver depends on his energy source with which he is connected through the lifeline and the connection cannot be cut off for a long time without jeopardizing his life. In the same way, the user of a cellphone cannot function long in his or her social world without creating problems in his or her social world.

Cellphones are also viewed as bodily appendages. It follows from the logic associated with bodily appendages that we carry them around all the time. Appendages can be extra limbs on the body and can take the form of the arm. Appendages can be used in a variety of functions but

the arm extension is specifically used for holding, touching, and manipulating objects. In the metaphor, this corresponds to maintaining contact with other people and the world at large.

The flip side of having access to other people and the world is that other people and the world also have access to us – whether we want it or not. This is an aspect of cellphones that I will discuss in more detail in a later section.

Another group of metaphors that directly addresses the issue of the significance of cellphones to people centers on body organs.

Let it be our personal life, business life or the professional life;  
**cell phone is like** an organ of the body we carry all the time. ...  
[telecomforyou.blogspot.com/2007/05/cellphone-numbers-easy-to-search-choose.html](http://telecomforyou.blogspot.com/2007/05/cellphone-numbers-easy-to-search-choose.html) - 74k

The organ can be the eye, the hand, or even cells in the body. The same logic that applies to appendages also applies to such body organs: they are always with us, and the same goes for cellphones.

There is, however, an interesting difference between conceptualizing cellphones as air, food, and lifeline, on the one hand, and as appendages and body organs of various kinds on the other. The difference comes from the metaphorical logic of the two groups of metaphors. In the lifeline group, the necessity of possessing a cellphone is portrayed as absolute, as a must without which social life is impossible. In the organ group, no such strong claim is made. One can live without an organ; similarly, one can function socially without a cellphone. However, social functioning is greatly improved if one has a cellphone. In other words, the two groups of metaphors represent different degrees of the necessity of having a cellphone.

### *Not Having a Cellphone*

If possessing a cellphone is an absolute necessity (lifeline) or a basic necessity (body organ), the question arises how people conceptualize not having a cellphone. Will they correspondingly see this state as one that endangers social life (makes social life difficult)?

One metaphor that people came up with in the data is that being without a cellphone is like being without water in the desert.

<p>when you need a cell phone.          We seek to ship every order          the same day that it is          paid, we know that          being without a</p>	<p><u>cell</u>  <u>phone</u>  <u>is</u>  <u>like</u></p>	<p>being stranded in the desert          with no water. We are not          always able to do it,          however, we are successful          over 90% of the time</p>
---	--	---

If you do not have water in the desert, your life is in danger; if you do not have a cellphone, your social life is in danger. Not having a cellphone is also compared to torture. This corresponds the (unbearable) difficulties that life without cellphones may mean. Although the difficulties that this state can cause are considerable, they are not absolutist in the sense that one's social life is not jeopardized.

The same, less absolutist necessity is reflected in some other metaphors, such as the “disabled person” metaphor. When we are disabled, we have difficulties, but our lives are not in immediate danger. Likewise, our social life is made difficult but is not impossible if we do not possess a cellphone.

The comparisons as regards not possessing a cellphone go beyond not having access to life-supporting needs and body organs. The metaphors take their source domains not only from the biological realm but also from the social realm. An example from this realm includes “a cell phone is like being an American and not knowing English”. An American who does not speak English is not quite an American. In the same way, a person who does not own a cellphone is not quite a full-fledged social being.

Another theme regarding the non-possession of a cellphone takes us to the realm of what's fashionable and what's not. The metaphor that came up in this connection is that someone who does not have a cellphone is like someone wearing last year's sneakers. Someone who does not have a cellphone, especially among teenagers, runs the risk of becoming a socially insignificant person in his or her group.

**Effect**

Through the metaphors found in the data, people make explicit several effects of cellphones on their lives. From the examples it is not always clear whether the effect reported is presented as an effect on the person reporting the effect or on other people. Though important from a sociological perspective, in the present discussion I will not be concerned with whether the effect is on the person reporting it or it is on somebody else.

In the data under consideration, it seems that the negative effects significantly outnumber the positive ones. Having and using a cellphone is often conceptualized as an addiction – either generally or in some spe-

cific form, such as addiction to drugs, coffee, or cigarette smoking:

“**Cell phones are like** cigarettes,” Matz said. “We all know they’re bad for us, but alas, we won’t do anything about it until the medical reports come out 10 years from now.”  
[www.cavalierdaily.com/CVArticle.asp?ID=21576&pid=1224](http://www.cavalierdaily.com/CVArticle.asp?ID=21576&pid=1224) - 11k

The example applies the logic of cigarette smoking to conceptualize the use of cellphones. Although we know that smoking is not good for our health, we still smoke, and we only do something about it when we see some worrying signs of its effect on our health. In the same way, we seem to be oblivious to the negative effects of cellphones, and we use them without paying attention to its bad effects. Some of these negative effects will be mentioned later on in the section.

The effects are also compared to new toys for children and Venus’s flytraps. In the former case, people are attracted to their new cellphones as children are to their new toys: they use them a lot for a short time, but then they lose interest. In the latter case, people, and especially children, are lured into buying cellphones in the same way as flies are enticed by the bright colors of the Venus flytrap.

But addiction and attraction are not the worst kinds of states that people can enter as a result of the use of cellphones. People can entirely lose their freedom to act. This is portrayed by the prison and shackles metaphors. But the view of cellphones as constraining freedom comes through especially in the leash metaphor:

I can certainly understand the attraction in the case of true emergencies, but otherwise, to me, carrying a **cell phone is like** being on a leash. No thanks. ...  
[fodors.com/forums/pgMessages.jsp?fid=134&tid=35002678&numresponses=49&start=50&screen\\_nam...](http://fodors.com/forums/pgMessages.jsp?fid=134&tid=35002678&numresponses=49&start=50&screen_nam...) - 45k

If we are on a leash, we can’t move around at will. If we carry around a cellphone and are always accessible to others, we cannot act the way we want. This reasoning is based on what is known as the FREE ACTION IS FREE MOTION metaphor.<sup>3</sup>

Cellphones can be seen as physically dangerous, as the example below suggests:

---

<sup>3</sup> See Kövecses, *op. cit.*

I did some research on the Internet and was shocked to learn that there are many doctors that believe using a **cell phone is like** putting a loaded gun to ...  
[www.gunthergifts.com/cellphones.html](http://www.gunthergifts.com/cellphones.html) - 26k - 3 July 2007

The loaded gun metaphor stands for the electromagnetic radiation exposure that some scientists warn people against. The dangerousness of the cellphone also appears in another metaphor: the microwave. Both the loaded gun and the microwave metaphors focus on the physical danger that cellphones are purported to have.

Finally, the effect of cellphones on people can also be irritation. This effect is produced in people who are exposed to somebody else's use of a cellphone. Consider the following example:

**Cell phones are like** annoying kids in restaurants. When you see them, you say to yourself, "My kids will never be like that." ...  
[www.dooce.com/archives/daily\\_photo/02\\_12\\_2005.html](http://www.dooce.com/archives/daily_photo/02_12_2005.html) - 62k

The example becomes clearer in the larger context from which it is taken:

Cell phones are like annoying kids in restaurants. When you see them, you say to yourself, "My kids will never be like that."

But then you have kids and realize that they're just like that, or get a cell phone and find yourself calling someone because you just had to tell something you didn't get to five minutes ago when you were eating lunch together.

People who use cellphones annoy the people who are exposed to their conversations. However, the people so affected do not mind their own use of cellphones.

As we have seen in this section, the major reported effects of cellphone use are addiction, loss of freedom, dangerousness, and irritation. This last effect concerns the people who are exposed to somebody else's use of a cellphone.

## Use

The metaphorical map of the cellphone suggests that people regard cellphones as commodities that have a value, that function or do not func-



tion well, and that can be used appropriately and inappropriately. All of these aspects of cellphones can be subsumed under the general category of use. Commodities have a certain value, they function in certain ways, and they can be put to certain uses. I will analyze the metaphors in the data according to these categories.

### *Value*

As commodities, cellphones have a value. The most common comparison in this category is that of a car; people liken the value of cellphones to the value of cars. Cars vary considerably in their value, and so do cellphones. Some are luxury cars and some are standard versions. Cellphones also have their sports versions:

The nokia 5300 **cell phone is like** a sports version. The color combination has capability to target at the youth market. The chalk white, silver grey, ...  
[www.wirelessunique.com/Nokia/Nokia-5300.html](http://www.wirelessunique.com/Nokia/Nokia-5300.html) - 16k

Interestingly, the value distinction is also captured by means of metaphors that use people in their source domains: women and men as sexual partners, respectively:

**Cell phones are like** hookers, the thin ones cost more. Bowhunter57 ...  
[www.ohiosportsman.com/forum/showthread.php?p=200726](http://www.ohiosportsman.com/forum/showthread.php?p=200726) - 42k - July 20, 2007

This was my first cell phone. What have I learned? **Cell phones are like** men. After the first one, you're more equipped to select better ones next time. ^^ ...  
[www.amazon.com/gp/cdp/member-reviews/A1IKYBTMNI3R5W?ie=UTF8&sort\\_by=MostRecentReview](http://www.amazon.com/gp/cdp/member-reviews/A1IKYBTMNI3R5W?ie=UTF8&sort_by=MostRecentReview) - 51k

The two metaphors probably indicate the value difference between two cellphones from the male and female point of view, respectively.

Given that the value of cellphones is commonly talked about by means of using the car metaphor, it is not surprising that people commonly talk about buying a cellphone using the same metaphor:

For these people, buying a **cell phone is like** buying a car. It's a huge investment. CONTINUED: Profiting from numbers... Page 1 | 2 ...  
[news.com.com/2100-1039\\_3-6159491.html](http://news.com.com/2100-1039_3-6159491.html) - 52k - July 3, 2007

The two processes are similar in two ways. First, for many people, both require a major investment, and, second, a variety of choices and decisions have to be made.

Just like with many other commodities, cellphones are acquiring a status that points beyond their use as an object of utility. One common metaphor that is used to indicate this is clothes:

These days, **cell phones are like** clothes. People don't treat them simply as an object that performs a task. People have begun using cell phones as an ...  
[www.dailymantra.com/2006/11/dear\\_god\\_this\\_is\\_sprint.html](http://www.dailymantra.com/2006/11/dear_god_this_is_sprint.html) - 33k

Clothes are often used to indicate who we are. Similarly, even the ringtone of a cellphone can be used to express a person's uniqueness, as the fuller quote shows:

These days, cell phones are like clothes. People don't treat them simply as an object that performs a task. People have begun using cell phones as an expression of who they are. I suppose this isn't a bad thing, but, personally, any sort of ringtone that doesn't sound like a normal phone drives me crazy.

### *Function and Functioning*

Since cellphones are objects of utility, people expect them to perform certain functions. They judge them on the basis of how well the functions are performed:

To me, **cell phones are like** cars: if they do what they're supposed to do, who cares how blingy they are? Still, this one's got some nifty options, ...  
[www.thelogbook.com/earl/category/gadgetology/](http://www.thelogbook.com/earl/category/gadgetology/) - 52k

A major function of cellphones is talking. A metaphor that showed up in the data involves a stereotype of women:

A **Cell Phone is like** a Woman: Talks non-stop, Costs a fortune, Disturbs you when you're busy and when you need them urgently they have no service. ...  
[www.vxxxstuff.com/forums/showthread.php?t=937](http://www.vxxxstuff.com/forums/showthread.php?t=937) - 69k

But just like women, cellphones can “malfunction”. We can call this the RELUCTANT LOVER metaphor:

At these moments the **cell phone is like** nothing more than a reluctant lover; we have a problematic, codependent relationship; it refuses sex (charging) when ...  
[jeremydenk.net/blog/2006/04/25/morning-wreckage/](http://jeremydenk.net/blog/2006/04/25/morning-wreckage/) - 31k

The correspondences between the source and the target domain are interesting. We get a hint from the author himself (in parentheses) concerning how to interpret the metaphor: sexual intercourse should be understood as charging. We can lay out the mappings as follows: the man trying to make love to a woman is the person trying to charge his/her cellphone; the love-making is the charging of the cellphone; and the woman who refuses to make love is the cellphone. It is the second mapping, or correspondence, that motivates the metaphorical analogy, in that penetration and ejaculation in sexual intercourse can be conceived as image-schematically similar to electricity “going into” and “filling up” the cellphone.

### *Inappropriate Use*

As we just saw, cellphones have functions and they are expected to perform those functions well, but malfunctions can occur. Now when people use cellphones, similar to any other object of utility, they can use them appropriately or inappropriately. Appropriate use can mean two things: either the appropriate handling of the cellphone or the situationally appropriate use of it. It is the latter sense that is found frequently in the data.

Many people apply their expectations concerning the use of other devices to cellphones. They can do this literally or they can do it by relying on metaphorical analogies, such as the following:

**Cell phones are like** cigarettes were in the '50s. Everyone uses them everywhere all the time. The lady in the grocery store behind me yapping in Spanish. ...  
[www.tucsoncitizen.com/ss/opinion/14989.php](http://www.tucsoncitizen.com/ss/opinion/14989.php) - 23k

This quote comments on the inappropriate use of cellphone; namely, that they are used all too often and without moderation, just like cigarettes were in the 1950s.

But the issue of the inappropriate use of cellphones is tied most closely to the use of cellphones while driving.

### *Driving*

The inappropriate use of cellphones while driving is commented on frequently. Here the main metaphorical source domain is that of drunken driving; that is, talking on a cellphone while driving is compared to driving under the influence of alcohol. An example that indicates this is the following:

visible and undeniably valid health concern about the use of cell phones is not a physiological effect--at least, not immediately. Driving and talking on a	<b><u>cell</u></b> <b><u>phone</u></b> <b><u>is</u></b> <b><u>like</u></b>	drinking and driving. In both cases, the driver's reaction time is slowed, especially in the event of a roadway mishap requiring urgent response. In addition
---	---	---

In other words, in such cases lack of sufficient attention to driving is conceptualized as lack of sufficient attention caused by drinking too much alcohol.

### *Other Dangers*

The inappropriate use of cellphones can present other dangers to the user. In such cases, the cellphone is compared to devices that are typically thought of as the embodiment of things that can threaten life: weapons. One of these is hand grenades:

**Cell phones are like** hand grenades: if you don't handle them properly, they can destroy you. An Internet friend describes the cell phone like this: "If I ...  
[www.cefgroups.org/eng\\_txt/oc6807.htm](http://www.cefgroups.org/eng_txt/oc6807.htm) - 9k

The fuller quote gives us a good list of these potential dangers:

Fong Shia-kang's movie, "Cell Phone", not only presents us with the new "cell-phone-paradigm", but also with new dangers. This new paradigm concerns the close relationship between the cell phone and its owner: the two cannot be separated. Any text messages or cell phone numbers with the potential to create family conflicts have to be deleted. Cell phones are like hand grenades: if you don't handle them properly, they can destroy you. An Internet friend describes the cell phone like this: "If I forget to take my cell phone with me, I feel quite insecure. I am afraid that people might discover my secrets, and I am also afraid that people won't be able to reach me when they need to."

As the text suggests, the inappropriate use of cellphones can seriously damage human relationships. They can also lead to "anti-social" behaviour. Some forms of such behaviour are provided in one of the texts:

Furthermore, cell phones actually lead to "anti-social" behavior, as users "retreat to their own cocoons", while parents who give their children cell phones in effect evade the responsibility of "interacting" with them in any meaningful way. Other writers report the occasional use of texting by students to cheat on exams, or the use of cell phones to spread rumors and gossip that may ruin someone's reputation. As one Filipino on-line writer put it, cell phones are like "loaded weapons" and its avid use needs to be tempered with some caution.

In light of such potential dangers to social life, it was inevitable for people to begin to think about ways of regulating the use of cellphones.

### *Regulating the Use of Cellphones*

The issue of regulation comes up repeatedly in connection with schools. Should schools allow or ban cellphones? The participants of the debate can evoke the analogous case of how to deal with chewing gum in schools several decades ago. Participants in the debate can also use other con-

cepts in the debate; concepts that people can use for both good and bad purposes, such as fire.

Still others remind us that it is not the device itself (the cellphone) that poses danger to people but the people who abuse the device. In this case, the gun metaphor is used. The implication of this view is that, according to one author, “[o]utlawing cell phones because creeps in our world abuse them makes little sense”.

In this section, we have seen how a variety of metaphors address various use-related aspects of cellphones: the car metaphor is used to deal with the value and buying aspects of cellphones, the drunkenness metaphor addresses the issue of inappropriate use, and the weapons metaphor is employed to conceptualize the numerous social dangers that cellphones present to people.

## Conclusions

In this study I attempted to draw a metaphorical map of the concept of cellphone. In particular, I tried to identify some of the common metaphors that people use to address certain aspects of the concept. Four large dimensions of the conceptual category of cellphones were discovered that serve as target domains of certain metaphorical source domains: function, significance, effect, and use.

The *functions* of cellphones are mainly captured by the computer metaphor, together with some other devices and tools. The usefulness of the functions of cellphones is metaphorically viewed as a friend.

In the dimension of *significance*, cellphones are presented as inevitable ingredients of human existence. The lifeline, air, and food metaphors make the cellphone an absolutely necessary precondition for social life. The body part and appendage metaphors present cellphones in less absolutist terms, but they also suggest that people who want to fully function in their social worlds cannot live without them.

Cellphones can have certain *effects* on people. These are largely negative, as the metaphorical examples in the data indicate. The addiction metaphor reveals people’s dependency on cellphones; the prison and leash metaphors suggest reduced freedom that the use of cellphones imposes; the loaded weapon and microwave metaphors indicate the danger they might involve; and the annoying children metaphor reveals cellphones as irritating.

The concept has an elaborate *use*-related dimension. To talk and reason about the value aspects of cellphones people use the car metaphor. Drunkenness as a source domain is used for comprehending the inap-

propriate uses of cellphones. And, again, the weapon metaphor serves to capture the socially dangerous character of cellphones.

In general, the concept of cellphone seems to be characterized by these four dimensions and the metaphors defining them – at least according to the data I have examined. A larger set of data may modify these results, although I believe that the major tendencies as regards both the dimensions and their metaphors would remain more or less the same. However, this is an empirical issue that may be further investigated in future research.