

Intercultural Comparison of Metaphors

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Abstract—Metaphorical concepts play an important role in the course of human cognition and remoulding of the world, and figurative language is the best way of presenting metaphorical concepts. Comparative analysis of metaphorical phenomena in the Chinese and English languages is helpful in exploring the formation and development of metaphorical concepts all over the world and their internal relations with cultural value orientation of various nations.

Index Terms—metaphor, comparison, culture

I. INTRODUCTION

Language and culture are twin sisters. Language is a part of culture. Without language, culture would not exist at all. On the other hand, language is influenced and shaped by culture and reflects culture. In the broadest sense, language is the symbolic representation of a people, and it comprises their historical and cultural backgrounds as well as their approach to life and their ways of living and thinking. (Wang, 2013) As metaphor is fully saturated with the culture, it is of great significance for us to explore the cultural connotations of metaphors and then to seek for appropriate translation strategies. This thesis views from a synchronic angle the embodiments of similarities and differences of metaphorical concepts in Chinese and English and the relations between metaphorical concepts and cognition and culture.

II. METAPHORICAL CONCEPTS AND CULTURAL VALUE ORIENTATION

The system of metaphorical concepts results from metaphorical thought. Thinking metaphorically by metaphorical concepts is a cognitive ability common to all humankind. In languages of various nations, usually there are same or similar metaphorical concepts. For example, in Chinese and English, there are concepts of cherishing time—一寸光阴一寸金/Time is money; descriptions of the quickly passing and never coming back time—Time flies like an arrow/光阴似箭, 时光飞逝 and Time and tide wait for no man/岁月不待人, which reflect the similarities of cultural thinking modes of the two nations. In Chinese, as to the quickly passing time, there is still unique metaphor like“白驹过隙”.The differences show that different national cultures have different influences on metaphorical concepts.

Human thinking ability and linguistic competence gradually grow and develop in the course of the cognition and remoulding of the world, during which time unknown things constantly spring up. As Prof. Hu Zhuanglin states, “人们要认识和描写以前未知的事物, 必须依赖我们已经知道的概念及语言表达方式, 由此及彼, 由表及里, 同时还要发挥惊人的想象力, 这个过程正是隐喻的核心, 它把熟悉和不熟悉的事物作不寻常的并列, 从而加深了我们对不熟悉事物的认识。” (Hu, 1997, p.51) All peoples have similar basic physiological, psychological and cognitive ability, and with geographical and natural conditions more or less alike, which result in the existence of generality among different cultures and provide possibility for the production of the same or similar metaphorical concepts in various languages. However, differences in living environments, physical features (i.e., color of skin and hair), and ways of life, language and historical tradition, inevitably create different cultures. The creation and development of culture reversely have constant effect on human thought and cognitive mode, bringing about differences of metaphorical concepts among various nations, which are reflected in differences of metaphorical language.

Let's view from a synchronic angle the embodiments of similarities and differences of metaphorical concepts in Chinese and English and the relations between metaphorical concepts and cognition and culture.

III. THE SIMILARITIES OF METAPHORICAL CONCEPTS IN CHINESE AND ENGLISH

Roughly, the similarities of metaphorical concepts in Chinese and English may be summed up as follows.

A. *Metaphorical Concepts Related to Human Body*

Metaphorical concepts related to human body contain metaphors taking parts of human body as vehicles, those taking human body as referring planes, those treating human body as containers and those of human feelings expressed by physiological reaction of human body to outside stimuli. (Wang, 2013)

In both Chinese and English, there are lots of such expressions as 桌子腿, 椅背, 瓶颈, 山脚, 针眼, 箭头 (In English, a leg of a table, chair's back, bottle neck, at the foot of a mountain, the eye of a needle, the head of an arrow), which embody metaphorical concepts. Words like “leg”, “back”, “neck”, “eye” and “head” which are used to describe parts of human or animal body, when they are used to metaphorize other objects, form vivid expressions easy to understand and

accept. This method is used to realize and describe new things around by the two nations and as time passes on, these names are established in language and these metaphorical concepts naturally become part of the cultural generality.

There are three referring planes of human body: up-down, left-right and front-back. People instinctively believe that “up” or “high” are better than “down” or “low”, thus “up” or “high” are always associated with positive meaning, while “down” or “low” with negative meaning. In the two languages there are such expressions: 高水平, 坠入爱河 (at a high level, fall in love), which express reason and emotions; 上台, 下野 (high on the ladder, fall from office), which express status; 提起精神, 沉睡 (wake up, fall asleep), which express consciousness and unconsciousness, and what not. In both Chinese and English, “right” and “front” are positive, while “left” and “back” are not so positive, thus come the English expressions “right-handed man”, which means “chief assistant, most reliable helper”, and “a left-handed compliment”, which means “compliment that is ambiguous in meaning but possibly ironic”, and the Chinese expression “无出其右者” indicating no one surpasses him in power.

In the two languages, body is viewed as a container, so we may say “She is filled with love” and “She is filled with anger” in English, and in Chinese when speaking of an angry person we may say “他惹了一肚子气”.

All people in the world have the five senses, i.e. sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch, to receive directly the external stimuli; these senses may evoke different emotional reaction in people’s mind, which may be described by metaphorizing the physiological senses. There are many instances in the two languages of expressing emotions by senses: 宽容, 心胸狭窄, 热情, 冷漠, 痛哭流涕, 苦恼 (broad-minded, narrow-minded, warmhearted, cold words, sweet smile, cry bitterly) and the like. All humans have the same senses and the interlinked emotional reaction is basically the same among nations. Of course, there is no lack of differences caused by cultural background, which will be discussed later.

B. *Metaphorical Concepts Related to Nature*

As has been mentioned above, all humans live in generally similar environments. Therefore, when objects in nature were applied to metaphorize abstract concepts or those difficult to describe directly, different nations may adopt the same vehicles. (Wang, 2013) For example, in both Chinese and English, flowers are used to describe beauties: 这闺女真是一朵花。/ Oh, my love is a red, red rose; stone means being pitiless: 铁石心肠/ a heart of stone; wood means being awkward or stupid: 这人真是个榆木疙瘩。/ wooden manner; sea means great in number: 王处长真是海量。/ fight against a sea of trouble, etc.

Metaphorical concepts, whether relevant to human or to nature, are the results of action or general character of human physiology and psychology and the environment. Their production results in the generality in culture and language, which will in turn affect metaphorical thought of human; and similar or alike metaphorical concepts and cultural generality interweave to improve and develop human cognitive ability.

IV. THE DIFFERENCES OF METAPHORICAL CONCEPTS

When vehicles of metaphorical concepts are further related to specific phenomena of physiology, psychology and nature and to history and cultures of various nations, differences manifest themselves. Thanks to the influence of various factors such as living regions, climates, ecological environments, history, religion and color of skin, the Chinese people and the British and American peoples have different cultures, which directly result in the dissimilarities of people’s thinking mode and value orientation, and thus become the major cause for the differences of metaphorical concepts. (Wang, 2013)

A. *Influence of History and Region*

Chinese civilization has been built on agriculture and so in Chinese there are a surprising number of metaphors related to farming. Besides, feudalism existed over two thousand years, and, though wars were unceasing, the dominant trend was national blending and reconciliation. However, Britain is an island country, in tradition the chief living means of the British was fishing and hunting, England was the first industrialized country, it was powerful at sea and once possessed global colony, it kept intruding into and pillaging other countries in large scale in history. The marked regional and historical differences between the two nations have great influence on their thought, language and national character, which is expressed remarkably in the figures of speech and metaphorical concepts. (Wang, 2013)

The English and Chinese have different understanding of locality and its correspondents. In China, people have thought 面南为王, 面北为朝 and often say 从南到北, 南来北往, and the locality of 南 often proceeds that of 北 because south is superior to north from ancient times, hence the expression 败北. On the contrary, in English culture, English-speaking people will say from north to south to express what 南来北往 stands for in Chinese from the perspective of English regional culture. So, 北屋 is actually a room facing south.

Concerning 东风 and east wind, each has its corresponding word in English and Chinese but with totally different connotation. In mind of Chinese, 东风 represents spring and warmth, which revitalizes the frozen land and brings the new life, so there is a saying of 东风报春 (The east wind predicts the coming of Spring.) and the Chinese people like the east wind. But in Britain, the east wind comes from the northern part of the European Continent, which stands for

cold and unpleasant, so the English abhor the east wind. On the contrary, the English like west wind, for it brings Britain spring, hence the saying of 西风报春. In the famous poem *Ode to the West Wind*, Percy Bysshe Shelley expressed his glorious longing for and firm belief in the future by the sentence: O, wind, if winter comes, can spring be far behind? In translating this poem, it is quite necessary to give the explanation to this regional cultural difference. Otherwise, the Chinese readers who have limited knowledge about English regional culture will feel puzzled.

Under the influence of agriculture, the Chinese people regard food as their primary needs. So there are many metaphors related to eating and food. For example, “吃饱了撑的” (be restless from overeating—have so much surplus energy as to do sth. senseless), “吃不了, 兜着走” (get more than one bargained for; land oneself in serious trouble; be left holding the bag), “吃大锅饭” (eat from the same big pot—get the same pay whether one works hard or does not work at all; practice egalitarianism regardless of work), “吃独食” (have things all to oneself; refuse to share with others), “吃皇粮” (receive salaries, subsidies, or other support from the government), “吃里爬外” (eat sb.’s food and cater to his enemy; live on one person while secretly serving another; betray one’s own side) “吃软不吃硬” (susceptible to persuasion rather than coercion), “吃小灶” (eat at a small mess where better food is prepared and served for a restricted number of diners—enjoy special privilege). (新时代汉英词典) In addition, there a lot of dietetic metaphors, for example, “吃豆腐” (dally [with a woman]; flirt), “添油加醋” (embellish or embroider a story), “哪壶不开提哪壶” (touch a sore point; bring up an undesirable subject), “醋意” (feeling of jealousy), “吃醋” (be jealous), “吃干醋” (experience uncalled-for or vicarious jealousy).

In English, there are many metaphorical expressions related to sea, fishing and ship, such as “go by the board” ((安排) 落空; (计划) 失败), “be taken aback” (大吃一惊), “big fish” (大亨), “cool fish” (厚脸皮的人), “dull fish” (枯燥无味的人), “fresh fish” (新囚犯), “loose fish” (放荡的人), “old fish” (怪人), “poor fish” (愚蠢易欺骗的人), “shy fish” (羞怯的人), “able seaman” (一级水手), “be left high and dry” (陷于困境), “give (sb. or sth.) a wide berth” (让出一条宽宽的水域, 指远远地躲开), and “show one’s (true) colours” (显露真面目).

The British and Americans have a keen sense of time, which is relevant to the long period of hunting life of their ancestors and to the fierce competition for existence in capitalist society, while China had been an agricultural country in history, people used to get up to work at sunrise and retire at sunset and the growth period of crops was measured by month or season, thus their sense of time was not so keen as that of the British and Americans. The British and Americans look on time as wealth, thus comes the metaphor “Time is money” and the same collocation of time and money with verbs like “spend”, “invest”, “cost”, “budget”, etc. In Chinese though there is the saying “一寸光阴一寸金”, the measurement of time by season, month, day and division of a day into 12 two-hour periods don’t bear comparison in precision with that in English by hour, minute and second.

B. *Influence of Aesthetic Standards and Customs*

The Chinese people and the British and American peoples belong to different races and have different cultures, thus their aesthetic standards and customs are dissimilar. The Chinese belong to the yellow race and consider black hair, black eyes and fair complexion to be beautiful; while most of the British and Americans are white people who consider golden hair and blue eyes to be beautiful. (Wang, 2013) These aesthetic criteria are reflected in the metaphorical concepts and produce in Chinese such expressions as “黑色的瀑布”, “黑缎子”, which indicate hair of a beauty; and in English, blonde, which the British and Americans are used to describe a beauty. In Chinese, there are expressions like “樱桃小口”, “柳叶眉”, “卧蚕眉”, “鹅蛋脸”, “瓜子脸” that have difficulty finding their counterparts in English.

The different Chinese and English customs can be represented by metaphorical concepts of animal, color, numbers and so on.

For our Chinese, the dragon and the phoenix were the traditional symbols of royalty. The dragon stood for the king or emperor, and the phoenix for the queen or empress. There were few negative connotations and even today, these mythological creatures occasionally appear in traditional Chinese designs. As an auspicious creature that supposedly brings good luck, the dragon gave rise to the saying that parents 望子成龙—longing to expect one’s son to be dragon, that is, be successful. To Westerners, however, the dragon is often a symbol of evil, a fierce monster that destroys everything and therefore must be killed. Interestingly, Western drawings of dragons show the monsters with wings, whereas in Chinese design and drawings, the creature has none.

The phoenix, in Western mythology, is associated with rebirth and resurrection. According to Greek legend, the phoenix lives a certain number of years—500 by one account. At the end of its life, it makes a nest, sings a death song, then sets fire to its nest by flapping its wings. The phoenix is burned to ashes, but from these ashes emerges a new bird. Thus, when a town, a place, or the headquarters building of an organization is destroyed by fire or other form of disaster, well-wishers may express the hope that it will “...like the legendary phoenix, rise from the ashes in new splendor.” In Chinese mythology, the phoenix was regarded as the king of birds. The male was called feng, the female, huang. The phoenix is used in metaphors, standing for something rare and precious, for example, 凤毛麟角 (phoenix feathers and unicorn horns—rarity of rarities).

In Chinese, dog is generally derogatory, and phrases “狼心狗肺”, “狗仗人势”, “狗腿子” are often applied to bad persons, while in West dog is a popular pet, and phrases like “lucky dog” and “top dog” are not derogatory at all,

indicating respectively a person who is lucky and who has a high position. There are other similar examples, such as 鼠辈(yellow dog), 落汤鸡(drowned rat), 狐假虎威者(lion hunter), 孔雀(公主)(bunny), 狂如疯狗(as mad as a wet hen), 狗咬狗的小人(rat racers), 猫哭老鼠(shedding crocodile tears), 害群之马(a black sheep), 捅马蜂窝(to wake a sleeping dog), 瓮中之鳖(a rat in a hole), 热锅上的蚂蚁(like a cat on hot bricks).

Various colors in Chinese and English cultures have different metaphorical concepts. Take 黄色(yellow) as an example, yellow appears in such Chinese expressions as 黄色电影, 黄色音乐, 黄色书刊. How should these be translated into English? Not as yellow movies, yellow books, yellow music. Such terms would not be understood. For 黄色 one might use pornographic, trashy, obscene, filthy, or vulgar, as in pornographic pictures, obscene movies, filthy books, vulgar music.

Numbers are used by the whole humanity so that culture of numbers has come into Beijing. As far as the Chinese culture is concerned, it bears the similarity to the world culture, but the Chinese culture lays more stress on the use of number, so did the ancient Chinese culture. There are numerous Chinese metaphors that use “numbers”. For example, 七上八下, 七嘴八舌, 七情六欲, 七窍生烟, 七大八小. And in English culture, “seven” is a holy and mysterious number which is made up of “4” and “3” and “4” and “3” are regarded as lucky numbers, so there are such expressions, like “the Seventh Heavens”(七重天), “the Seventh Senses”(七种官能): vigour, sense of touch, taste, sight, smell and hearing and speech ability, “the Seven Deadly or Capital Sins”(七大罪): arrogance, anger, jealousy, lust, gluttony, greed, laziness or sloth.

C. Influence of Religion and Mythology

Religion and mythology have far-reaching influence on cultural values. The religious culture refers to the culture formed by the nation’s religious belief and ideology, which represents in the cultural difference of different nations in worship and taboo. Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism are the three main thought systems in China, which has profound influence on the Chinese people. Therefore, there are many expressions and proverbs reflecting this influence, which can not find full equivalent in English because of the different religious beliefs. In Chinese, “九” often indicates the maximum, thus come the expressions as “九曲回肠”, “九死一生”, “九州”, “九重天”, etc. Taoism is the Chinese locally born and bred religion that makes a mystery of the concept “Taoism” in the theory of the former Qin dynasty. The Taoist school denies the distinction between different things, and chases the goal of becoming immortals, thus come the various euphemisms for death: “化仙、升天、升仙、登仙、仙游、仙逝、跨鹤、化鹤、贺鹤西游”. Buddhism was introduced from India into China in 59AD. The final aim of Buddhism is to liberate human beings from samara and reach the state of nirvana. Many special euphemistic expressions are used to refer to the death of Buddhism believers. For example, “成佛、圆寂、归真、迁化、示化、示寂、入灭、入寂、灭示、迁神、迁形、寂灭、灭度、灭谛、生化”. These terms reflect the obvious cultural characteristics of Buddhism. The following examples can also reflect special religious Chinese culture,

临时抱佛脚 (embrace Buddha’s feet in one’s hour of need)—seek help at the last moment/make a frantic last-minute effort.

做一天和尚撞一天钟 (go on tolling the bell as long as one is a monk)—do the least that is expected of one / take a passive attitude towards one’s work.

道高一尺, 魔高一丈 (the truth grows a foot high, the evil grows to ten / as virtue rises one foot, vice rises ten)—the more illumination, the more temptation / Where God has his church, the devil will have his chapel.

放下屠刀, 立地成佛 (drop one’s cleaver and become a Buddha)—achieve salvation as soon as one gives up evil.

人面兽心 (the face of a man but the heart of a beast)—beast in human form / A fair face may hide a foul heart.

The westerners believe in Christianity, so people universally have the sense of salvation and original sin, and they believe God is the only deity. In English, most euphemisms about death come from the Bible, or the legend and allusion of Christianity. According to the Christian creed, the process of living is just the process of atoning for one’s crime. After experiencing various sufferings, people can be saved through death then go into heaven. This creed is well reflected by the euphemisms about death in English. For example, there are expressions as “return to dust, pay the debt of nature, be called to God, go the way of all flesh, launch into eternity and so on”.

Other metaphorical expressions are related to “God”, “Devil”, “Hell”, “Church” are “God help those who help themselves (自助者, 天助也)”, “He that serves God for money will serve the devil for better wages(为金钱侍奉上帝的人, 为了更好的报酬也会给魔鬼卖力)”, “The devil take the hindmost(落后者遭殃)”, “Hell and Tommy (彻底毁灭)”, “as poor as a church mouse(一贫如洗)”, “act of god (不可抗力)”, “Thank heaven / Thank god(谢天谢地)” and so on.

In English, a wicked person is said to be a devil, as in “Hitler is a devil”, a traitor is called Judas and action hypocritical and malignant is a Judas kiss, sleep is the land of Nod, and when taking leave of relatives and friends, people may say “Good-bye” which means may God be with you. These are from Christianity and the Bible. From Greek mythology also come some metaphors: a Pandora’s box—the root of disaster, Jupiter’s arrow—the happy fate which brings lovers together, Titan—person of great size, strength, intellect, importance, etc.

D. Influence of Literature

Literary works are an important source of metaphors in various national languages. Metaphors from literary works appear repeatedly in language and some gradually merge into people's thought which become concepts and lose the original meanings. (Wang, 2013)

In China if one has never read Lu Xun's *The True Story of Ah Q* (《阿 Q 正传》), he would be at lost to understand the remark about the utterance “你这个人真阿 Q.” Merely to know the plot of *A Dream of Red Mansions* (*Dream of the Red Chamber* 《红楼梦》) is hardly enough to appreciate the expression “她是个林黛玉式的人物” which reference to the heroine 林黛玉 in the story. And so many Chinese classics as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *A Journey to the West*, *Outlaws of the Marsh*, *Dream of Red Mansions* and operas as *Hua Mulan*, *Liang Shanbo* and *Zhu Yingtai*, have vital influence on Chinese metaphors and metaphorical concepts, and “智多星” (Wu Yong (a resourceful person; a mastermind)), “三顾茅庐” (repeatedly request someone to take up a responsible post), “四面楚歌” (be besieged on all sides; utterly isolated; in desperate straits), “拔苗助长” (to spoil things by excessive enthusiasm), “女蜗补天” (Lady Nuwa mends the sky), “猪八戒倒打一耙” (Zhubajie (the pig in Pilgrimage to the West) puts blame on his innocent victim—make unfounded countercharges / recriminate.), “身在曹营心在汉” (body in Cao, but heart in Han—in one place physically but another place in mind and heart.), etc. have become metaphorical concepts in people's thought and part of the language, frequently appearing in daily conversations. Some figures in classics have lost some of their original characters and become symbols of a certain kind of people: “诸葛亮” or “小诸葛” indicates a person who has much wisdom and has the situation well in hand, not showing the spirit of Zhuge Liang himself of bending his back to the task till his dying day; “曹操” stands for fraudulent villain, neglecting Cao Cao's excellent art of military strategy and outstanding leadership; “唐僧肉” refers to benefit that everyone hankers for, obliterating Tang Seng's meritorious service of making a pilgrimage for Buddhist scriptures for the salvation of common people through innumerable hardships.

Western classics, such as Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *The Merchant of Venice*, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Balzac's *Le Pere Goriot*, Gothe's *Faust*, also play an important role in the formation of metaphors in English and in that of metaphorical concepts of the British and American peoples. For instance, *Romeo and Juliet* are the symbol of pure love, and their names may indicate respectively young men and women in love; Grandet becomes the synonym of misers; *Don Quixote* means a person with high but completely unrealistic ideals. Other household terms include:

a Cleopatra (克娄巴特拉)—a woman of breathtaking beauty; from Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra*

a Shylock (夏洛克)—a cruel, greedy, money-grabbing person, one who will go to no ends to acquire wealth; from *The Merchant of Venice*, another play by Shakespeare

a Pandora's box (潘朵拉之盒—灾难、麻烦、祸害的根源)—a present or something which may seem valuable, but which brings trouble and misfortune. In Greek mythology, Pandora was the first woman, sent to the earth by the gods as a form of punishment. Zeus (or Jupiter, in Roman mythology) gave her a box which she was to give to the man who married her. When this box was finally opened, all the evils that were in it flew out, and since then have caused trouble to mankind. Example: The project, which seemed so promising, turned out to be a Pandora's box. (那个项目看起来好像很有希望, 结果招来许多灾祸。)

V. CONCLUSION

The formation of metaphorical thought and concepts is a complex issue involving many aspects such as national language, culture, physiology, psychology and living environment, etc. The generality of metaphorical concepts between Chinese and English originates in the similarities of physiology, psychology and living environment; the development of metaphorical thought and concepts gives impetus to the formation and development of culture which in turn influences human thought and metaphorical concepts. In view of the marked differences between the Chinese culture and the British and American cultures, it is not difficult to understand the differences lying in the metaphors in the two languages and those in the metaphorical concepts.

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