

Discursive Metaphors Analysis: The Love Metaphor of Plant in Chinese Love Poetry

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Abstract

A conceptual metaphor may have various meanings in different languages, and usually contains cultural background. Based on cognitive approach, this paper aims to study Chinese metaphor through analyzing four conceptual metaphors of four typical plants in traditional Chinese poetry. This article also discusses why these ancient metaphors can still be used commonly in modern Chinese language. At the same time, through analyzing these metaphors, relevant implicating Chinese cultural aspects are described.

Key words: Discursive metaphor; Ancient Chinese poetry; Love; Plant

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INTRODUCTION

LOVE is A PLANT metaphor is quite common to most Chinese speakers. Consider the way native speakers of Chinese often talk about love -- either their own love, emotions in love and lovers, or these love-relatives of others: a couple of lovers might say that they met each other occasionally in a café, and it seems to plant a seed for their love. Then, they made a few appointments, which encouraged their love to germinate rapidly. Afterwards, they became lovers and drown themselves into a love flower ocean. They firmly believed their relationship was

growing well and strongly, and would flower and fruit in the near future. Unfortunately, the love withered away. What I show above is a small sample of all possible linguistic expressions of LOVE is A PLANT conceptual metaphor. The use of phrases above, such as to plant a seed, to germinate, to draw someone into a love flower ocean, to grow, to flower and fruit, and to wither away would be thought by most Chinese to be obvious cases of the plant concept for everyday purposes.

In spite of the metaphors used in ordinary Chinese, there are a lot of plant species as metaphor concepts describing love, which appears to be more frequent in Chinese literature, especially poetry, than everyday language. However, in modern Chinese language, a few plant species in ancient Chinese poetry used to be conceptual metaphors have been conventionalized. Why can these metaphors be used commonly in ancient even though modern China? This essay will focus on cognitive approach to analyze these conceptual metaphors of four typical plants in traditional Chinese poetry. In this paper, firstly, cognitive metaphor theory will be reviewed and methodology will be introduced. The second part will explain Chinese literary metaphorical expressions through four plant iconographies, and the cultural influence on the uniqueness of Chinese literary metaphor will also be considered. Finally, this essay will proposed some problems in the conclusion.

1. METAPHOR THEORY IN THE COGNITIVE LINGUISTIC VIEW AND METHODOLOGY

1.1 Metaphor Theory in the Cognitive Linguistic View

Why do people draw heavily on the domain of love plant in their effort to comprehend? In the cognitive linguistic view, they do so because thinking about the

abstract concept of love is facilitated by the more concrete concept of plant. Further stated that people usually use metaphor to make some abstract of physical concepts (source domains) facilitated by more concrete concepts (target domains), which is easy and helpful to understand. But how does target domain is understood in terms of target domain? Actually, there are a set of mappings between the source and the target domain, which means that elements of the source domain correspond to elements of the target domain. For example, let us take the LOVE is A PLANT conceptual metaphor first. The sentence the relationship will flower and fruit suggests that future happy ending of lover's relationship are conceptually equated with a plant's flowering and fruiting. On the other hand, cognitive linguistics claims that the certain sources we select are motivated. In addition to pre-existing similarity, these metaphors are also based on and a variety of human experience, including correlations in experience, non-objective similarity, biological and cultural roots shared (Kövecses, 2000, pp.78-79). High or low quality is a case of correlations in experience, which means that there are not similarities but correlations between two events. Non-objective similarity, for instance the conceptual metaphor LIFE is A DRAMA created by Shakespeare; perceive certain similarities between life and a drama, but these are not pre-existing similarities between them. Biological and cultural roots refer to biological events and historical origin.

1.2 Methodology

This essay follows four steps of metaphor analysis. The first step is choosing typical examples. There are four cases will be chosen, they are LOVE is PEACH BLOSSOMS; YEARNING is RED BEANS; LONGING is A WILLOW and LOVERS are TWO TREES WITH BRANCHES TWINED. Secondly, the linguistic expressions in Chinese poetry will be described. Thirdly, source domains and target domains will be claimed. Finally, this paper will analyze the mappings, motivations and purposes of these metaphors, focusing on Chinese culture.

2. FOUR PLANT ICONOGRAPHIES AS CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS

Why does one part of traditional poetry metaphors can be used commonly in China? History, possibly, plays an inherit role in conventionalizing the concepts. Originally, as claimed by Kövecses (2010, p.50) "everyday language and the everyday conceptual system contribute a great deal to the working of the artistic genius". In other words, love metaphors of different plant species in literature are still based on the everyday conceptual metaphor -- LOVE is A PLANT. Four plant iconographies of traditional Chinese poetry will be examined, and they are different life forms of plants, including peach blossom, red beans, willow and two trees

with branches twined. It aims to show literary metaphor relevance to everyday Chinese expressions, because we can find, in the beginning of this article, the description of a developing process of love is almost a life of a plant--from seeds to wilt.

2.1 LOVE is PEACH BLOSSOMS

LOVE is PEACH BLOSSOMS is a quite common metaphor in Chinese. LOVE is the target domain and the PEACH BLOSSOM is the source domain. "This door, this day, this year, where are you, the peach blossoms still giggling at the spring breeze" (Cui, p.790; cited in Qiu, 2003, p.33) is quoted from a quite famous Chinese poem -- Lines on South Village. This poem is a typical metaphorical example. It seems to be an important allusion that strengthens the metaphorical relationship between peach blossoms and love, because of the poem's excellence and its background. According to a legend story of Li (p.978), the poet saw a cottage surrounded by peach blossoms, when he was thirsty during a travel. Then he knocked the door for water and met a girl who attracted him very much, but because of the strict etiquette between male and female in ancient China, he left her. Next year, he went to the same place and hoped to see her again. Unfortunately, the girl was dead due to missing him. However, when the poet cried sadly, the girl revival and then, they got married. Although there are many poems describing peach blossoms and love, this poem and its story are important to develop Chinese. In modern everyday Chinese language, this kind of flower is a typical source domain of love. Here I briefly mention the most common everyday metaphorical linguistic expressions:

How many peach blossoms do you have recently?

The girl is looking at you; it seems that you will have peach blossom luck.

The boy has peach blossom eyes.

The correspondence of the domains of peach blossoms and love is achieved via detailed mappings shown below:

Source: PEACH BLOSSOMS

the peach blossoms

the peach blossom luck

the peach blossom eyes

Target: LOVE

love or romantic encounters

luck with the opposite sex

the eyes can attract love

We can find this example would be impossible to explain wholly its metaphorical expression with the notion of pre-existing similarity. In fact, the selection of this source is based on human experience. Firstly, the Chinese are quite familiar with this plant species. Peach tree is rather traditional and common in a lot of areas of China whose warm and sunshine climate is suitable for its growth. As a result, peach blossom as traditional flower is for an important view in China. Secondly, peach blooms

in the spring season, which has special meaning for Chinese. A Chinese idiom said “A year’s plan starts with spring” -- spring is the beginning of everything: plants, animals, the work or study, the life, also including love. In addition, as we all know that spring is a romantic season for love. For example, the word “spring fever” which refers to love sexual appetite exists both in Chinese¹ and English. Thirdly, because of the beauty of the peach blossom, it is often used to describe female beauty and glamour since ancient China. For example, there is a common Chinese phrase says “a face that can only be matched with the flowers of peach”. On the other hand, the basis of using the word “peach blossoms” to talk about somebody’s beauty is the similarity between the colour of peach blossoms and that of the colour of female attractive cheeks. It is often used to describe women’s beauty and attraction in ancient China. Finally, pink is a warm colour often used to describe positive, especially love emotions. According to colour psychology, “pink is a sign of hope. It is a positive colour inspiring warm and comforting feelings, a sense that everything will be okay” (Empower-yourself-with-colour-psychology Online, 2012). This positive aspect of pink colour relates pink with the emotions of romantic love. However, it may not be absolute. “A pink triangle is frequently used to represent gays, lesbians, and bisexuals” (Sensational Colour Online, 2012).

2.2 YEARNING Is RED BEANS

In this conceptual metaphor, YEARNING for lovers is the target domain and the RED BEAN is the source domain.

The Red Beans grow in the South.
Each spring this tall shrub puts out some new twigs.
I hope you would pick a great deal.
They bring on the most exquisite love’s yearnings
One can feel.

This is a renowned Chinese Tang poem of Wang Wei (pp. 701-761), named Love’s Yearnings, and translated by Gong in Yeeyan Online (2012). We can find from this poem that red bean is the symbol of “love’s yearnings”. In fact, since ancient China, red bean always refers to love longings either in literary or everyday language. For example, there is well-known Chinese modern song singing endowing the red bean with my sentimental lingering by sharing, we could clear about the sorrowful yearning, the Chinese usually know that YEARNING is RED BEANS in this lyrics.

Red beans as the source domain may be a cultural root of the target and thus lead to the formation of this metaphor. In China, there is an old story about red beans and longing. It is said that in ancient China, a woman got lovesickness because her husband went to a war. She cried so sadly that her tears were blood, and then her blood

tears became red beans in the ground. In this story, the blood tear is the expression of serious yearning. Yearning, namely, lovesickness usually is seen one kind of illness. On the other hand, when someone blood, it means this person may get illness. As a result, yearning refers to blood tears and red beans refer to yearning, but not other emotions. In summary, a historical origin of the red bean becomes a natural source domain for the target.

However, what did motivate people choose red beans as the embodiment of blood tears? Basically, the colour between red beans and blood tears is the same. Red is a strong emotional love colour. “Being the colour of physical movement, the colour red awakens our physical life force. It is the colour of sexuality and can stimulate deeper and more intimate passions in us, such as love and sex on the positive side” (Empower-yourself-with-colour-psychology Online, 2012). By the way, the heart-shaped of red beans also make people think of love. Heart may be the most important organ when people fall in love. In addition, like peach trees, the tree of red beans is quite common in China, and its seeds also sprout in the spring season.

2.3 LONGING Is a WILLOW

“The colour of the fresh willow shoots out there precipitates her into regret: She should not have sent him away, so far away, going after fame” (Wang, pp. 698-757; cited in Qiu, 2003). In this ancient poem, there is a metaphor -- LONGING is A WILLOW. The willow is the source domain, and LONGING for the woman’s husband is the target domain. Whether in ancient or modern Chinese literature, the willow is often seen as the symbol of longing. For example, Saying Goodbye to Cambridge Again which is a famous modern Chinese poem describes that “the golden willows of that riverside, are brides in the setting sun” (Xu, 1928; cited in East Asia Student Online, 2003). The poet employs a personification metaphor (GOLDEN WILLOWS are BRIDES) in this poem. LOVERS the target domain and WILLOWS are the source domain. This is just the surface meaning, in fact, the target domain is the LONGING for the University of Cambridge which is the deep expression that the poet hopes to talk about.

The metaphor primarily has three motivations. Firstly, the willow is usually used to describe women’s beauty because of its shape. Willow branches are soft, long and thin, so the Chinese use it to describe female good figure. On the other hand, because of the shape of willow leaves are similar to woman’s eyebrows, the Chinese usually use “willow leaf eyebrows” to appreciate female eyebrows. Secondly, the growing location of willow is usually in the riverside. In China, especially in ancient period, river transport is more common than other transports. Therefore, riverside is a place of separation and someone bidding farewell often break off a willow branch as a gift

¹ “Spring fever” is translated in “fa chun” which can be seen a metaphor in Chinese. “Fa” which is a verb means germinate in this word, “chun” means the spring.

to the traveler, which means I am reluctant to part with you and hope you come back earlier.

Why do people prefer to choose willow but not other plants by the riverside? It is a phenomenon near homonymy. The pronunciation of willow is very similar to a word “liú”² which means “stay here, do not leave”. Homophonic phenomenon is quite common in Chinese. There are more than 80,000 Chinese words; most of them are one word, one syllable. However, Chinese only has 400 basic syllables. On the other hand, homonymy is pretty important for Chinese language, because it is a good way to create symbolic metaphors. A metaphor, in a certain degree, is an implied expression, and the Chinese also prefer indirect and implicit communicative styles. For example, because the same pronunciation between “bats” and “blessing” in Chinese, Chinese people usually draw bats to bless in festival (Imextrade Online, 2012).

2.4 A COUPLE IS TWO TREES WITH BRANCHES TWINED

“That we wished to fly in heaven, two birds with the wings of one. And to grow together on the earth, two branches of one tree” (Bai, pp. 772-846; cited in Lü, 2002, p.255). Actually, I do not agree with the translation of “two branches of one tree”, “TWO TREES WITH BRANCHES TWINED” is more close to the Chinese original meaning. Thus, in this metaphor, TWO TREES WITH BRANCHES TWINED is the source domain, and An AFFECTIONATE COUPLE is the target domain. In modern Chinese, TWO TREES WITH BRANCHES TWINED has been a typical natural source domain to describe a couple. Chinese usually say “happy to be two trees with branches twined” instead of “get married”.

This metaphor is motivated by two aspects. Firstly, two trees with branches twined closely link to each other, which perceives a similarity of an intimate relationship of a couple. Secondly, the motivation refers to Chinese traditional culture. Chinese prefer one pair of objects which is usually considered as a good sign. The iconography of twin lotuses with one stalk is another source domain often used in poems corresponds to an affectionate couple as the target domain. This preference is based on Ying-yang Theory, which is one part of the Confucian philosophy. It means one male object has its corresponding female object. Thus, there is ‘good things come in pairs’ idiom in Chinese.

CONCLUSION

This essay analyzes four LOVE IS A PLANT metaphors in Chinese love poetry and relevant everyday linguistic

expressions. Different countries and cultures have special domains and motivations. PEACH BLOSSOMS, RED BEANS, LONGING IS A WILLOW and TWO TREES WITH BRANCHES TWINED perhaps are Chinese unique source domains that correspond to the LOVE domain. We also can find the love metaphors of plant in Chinese have some distinctive motivations because of local natural conditions and national culture, including historical stories, homophonic phenomena and Confucian Yin-yang Theory. There are also some ordinary motivations, such as colour and season. In summary, this essay researches a special and specific field about metaphors in Chinese poems based on cultural aspects; it may provide a new experience for modern and future research.

Although this essay proposes some answers to plant metaphors, there are some further problems needed to be discussed. For example, we can find that, people rarely use animals to describe love, except birds which have showed in the last example (two birds with the wings of one). People use plant metaphors to talk about love much more frequently than animal metaphors. Plants can be source domains usually have beautiful appearance, even though the appearance may have no relationship with metaphor motivations. However, a lot of animals also have beautiful appearance, but people prefer to employ plants as domains. I think the reason is that love is an advanced and positive emotion exists only in human beings, people think love emotion is not deserved to be owned by lower animals. In the subconscious, human beings compare themselves with other animals, because human beings are the one species of animals. Human beings believe that they are the most advanced animal and other animal species are lower and are not really equal with human beings. On the other hand, plant is totally different species from human beings; there is no any comparability between plants and human beings. In addition, plants have no intelligence and emotions, so people can confer them feelings freely.

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2 “Liú” is the second tone in Chinese. The pronunciation of willow is the third tone “liǔ”

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