

A Study on Metaphor and Its Differences Between English and Chinese Cultures

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Abstract

Metaphor is one of the most common rhetorical devices. It is widely used everywhere. This thesis is an attempt to illustrate a comprehensive knowledge of English metaphor. The writer elaborates metaphor through six parts: the definition of metaphor, the distinction between metaphor and simile, the categories of metaphor, the application of metaphor, a contrastive study of metaphorical cognition concerned with English and Chinese cultural backgrounds and the magical effects that metaphor produces. In this way, the writer reveals the importance of metaphor in our daily life.

Key words: Metaphor; Application; Culture comparison; Proverb; idiom

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1. THE DEFINITION OF METAPHOR

Metaphor are the most widely used figure of speech. They are like the seasonings in a dish or the flowers in spring that add salt to language. Many new words spring up recently contain metaphors. For example, terms like “download”, “information highway”, “mouse”, “soft landing”, “bottle neck” and “cyber surfing” are all metaphorical expressions. Besides, some additional meanings of words involve metaphors as well. For instance, the shape of clover leaf resembles a motorway intersection in a pattern,

so the phrase “clover leaf” is used to describe a motor intersection. Similarly, people use rabbit-warren to indicate a building or district full of narrow winding passages. Obviously, the examples mentioned above hold the idea that a metaphor serves the purpose of illustrating things which bear close resemblance in their shape or character. So What’s a metaphor? The Random House Unabridged Dictionary (second edition) defines metaphor as a figure of speech in which a term or phrase is applied to something to which it is not literally applicable in order to suggest a resemblance. Metaphor is “characterized by the conceptualization of one cognitive domain in terms of components more usually associated with another cognitive domain” (Taylor, 1989, pp.132-133). It is “a conceptual mapping from a source domain to a target domain, with both ontological correspondences and epistemic correspondences entailed by the mapping” (Yu, 1998, p.15). Schroots (1991) provides a clear and concise account of the current view of metaphor as follows:

- a. Metaphors are concerned with systems of ideas
- b. Such systems are specially constructed
- c. Metaphors are projective in that they allow one field of thought (subject) to organize another, whether by selecting, filtering, focusing or other means and
- d. Models are extended and systematic metaphors.

Lakoff & Johnson in their book “Metaphors We Live By” define the term metaphor as follows: Metaphor is for most people a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish--a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language. Moreover, metaphor is typically viewed as characteristic of language alone, a matter of words rather than thought or action. For this reason, most people think they can get along perfectly well without metaphor. We have found, on the contrary, that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.

2. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN METAPHOR AND SIMILE

Like a simile, a metaphor is a comparison. It is a compressed simile as well, because the comparison in a metaphor is implied rather than stated since there's no metaphorical signal words like "as" and "like" employed to show the relation between the element described and the element compared to. Shakespeare has ever written "All the world is a stage, and all the men and women are merely players." There is a typical metaphor in this sentence. If he had written "All the world is like a stage and all the men and women are merely like players", he would have used a simile instead of a metaphor. In a metaphor, there is a complex of three dimensions, namely object, image and sense, which reflects the tension between resemblance and disparity. A metaphor doesn't directly mention the resemblance between the image and the object. Comparatively speaking, a simile points out the similarities between the object and the image straight out. Here is an example. The sentence "He has a heart of stone" conveys the same idea as the sentence "He has a heart as hard as a stone." The former sentence includes a metaphor, and the latter contains a simile. In the first expression, there is no statement of the likeness between the object "heart" and the image "stone". Hence, it's necessary for the readers to imagine and conjecture the implication of the comparison. In contrast to it, the expression "as hard as a stone" is offered to explain the ground of comparison in the second one.

3. THE CATEGORIES OF METAPHOR

Therefore, conclusions can be drawn from the examples that a metaphor is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them. When a metaphor is used, a person or a thing is identified with someone or something of a different kind. There is a metaphor in "Old age is a withered stalk", and the writer compares an old age to a withered stalk, which carries us a new idea by means of the general notion of bloom: A person's growth is like that of a bloom, both of which lose their splendor as time goes by. Equally, in the expression "Defeat in the election was a bitter pill for him to swallow", the writer compares defeat to a bitter pill, which means something that is unpleasant or humiliating to accept. The founder of English metaphysical poet John Donne compares two lovers as the stiff twin compasses in A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning. A reader may puzzle about the metaphor and wonder in what way two lovers can resemble the feet of the compasses. The explanation is that the hearts of true lovers can never be separated by the distance just like the two feet of a pair of compasses that are always linked. Therefore, a metaphor should imply things that not only

bear close resemblance in their shape or character but appeal strongly to the senses.

According to their inner features, metaphors are divided into several categories.

3.1 Live Metaphor

Fresh and effective metaphors may take on great impact on readers. The newly created ones are called live metaphors. The examples are as follows:

a. Her rich relatives rained birthday present on her only son.

(The collocation "rain ...on somebody" means falling like rain on somebody. So the implied meaning is that her rich relatives send a lot of presents to her only son.)

b. That snake in the grass reported me to the boss.

("That snake in the grass" refers to a deceitful or treacherous person who pretends to be a friend.)

c. She was breathing fire and brimstone.

(The literal meaning of "fire and brimstone" is torture suffered in Hell as a result of God's anger. The implied meaning is: she was furiously angry.)

3.2 Dead Metaphor

A metaphor that has been frequently used over a long period of time will become dull and stale, and cease to function as a metaphor. These are called dead metaphors. The leg of a table must have been a metaphor when it was first used, but today we feel that leg is used in its literal sense. In the sentence "They have no ground for complaint.", People can hardly feel the figurative sense of ground because its image is quite worn out. Besides, there are a great number of dead metaphors such as an arm of the sea, the heart of mystery, deliver a speech, and wolf down your food. All of these expressions have lost their strong appeal and no senses of metaphors come to people's mind. Below are some more examples of dead metaphors.

a. An atmosphere of tension filled the room.

b. What a dull speech! He's merely parroting what many others have said.

3.3 Conceptual Metaphors

Conceptual metaphors are the use of one concept to expound another concept comparatively, thus forming an acceptable concept or mode so as to guide and influence the listener's thinking. That is, the speaker talks about something in the light of the mode of thinking of another thing.

Examples:

1). The concept of "travel":

a. Life is a journey.

b. We are well on the way to solve this problem.

c. You are getting off the subject.

d. So far, we've seen that no current theories will work.

2). The concept of "war"

a. Argument is war.

b. His criticisms were right on the target.

c. He shot down all of my plans.

d. He attacked every weak point in my argument.

3.4 Sustained Metaphors

In order to make expressions more forceful and colorful, people sometimes use sustained metaphors. The following sentence would be frowned on as an example.

When the new method was introduced, some teachers, as a friend of mine put it, climbed on the bandwagon and could not play the instruments.

("Climb on the bandwagon" signifies joining others in doing something fashionable or likely to be successful, and the phrase is followed with another metaphorical expression "play the instruments". The general meaning is: when the new method was introduced, some teachers joined others in adopting this new method, but failed to use it correctly.)

3.5 Mixed Metaphors

A sustained metaphor can bring language clarity and force. However, a page cluttered with figures of speech will be pompous and involved, and must be condemned and avoided by good writers, though it can produce very amusing and illogical imagery. This combination of inconsistent metaphors is called mixed metaphors, which weaken rather than strengthen a sentence. Take the following sentences as examples.

a. She left the room like an ocean-liner setting out to sea, her lapdog husband bobbing in her wake.

(The metaphorical expression "lapdog" doesn't coordinate well with the word "ocean-liner". "Lapdog" means a small pampered pet dog. "Ocean-liner" refers to one of the routes regularly used by ships)

b. He was tossed away on a great wave of music that was flying over the gleaming floor.

(Music is compared to a wave as well as a bird.)

A similar abuse of language can be found in an American magazine. Here is an example from Time.

The soothsaying fraternity conjures all the year long to supply the public addiction. The orgiastic bumper crop comes as a sort of specific start-of-the-year fix. One effect of the overdose is that it makes everyone momentarily forget that public dependence on prognosticating is not seasonal but chronic.

This account is highly exaggerated. "The soothsaying fraternity" alludes to those who predict the future. The predicting process is compared to a sort of conjuration. The author uses "conjure" instead of the word "foretell" to tickle the fancy and strike the eye. Following on the heels of the word is another metaphor: public addiction. It is all too far-fetched to liken the public demand for foreknowledge of something to "addiction to drug". What is more revolting is the use of the noun phrase "orgiastic bumper crop". "Bumper crop" usually refers to a rich harvest of crops. The expression here is used to mean "a great number of predictions that have been made." The modifier orgiastic is outrageously irrelevant and inappropriate.

4. THE APPLICATION OF METAPHOR

In most cases, Many words are used in their extended meaning for the purpose of making comparisons or calling up pictures in the reader's mind. In "a blooming rose", the word blooming is used in its literal sense, but in "blooming health", the word is used in its figurative meaning: Be in a healthy or flourishing condition. The word suggests a comparison between health and rose, and this association makes the word more impressive. In fact, metaphors may be single one word or extended expressions such as a collocation, an idiom, a sentence, a proverb and a complete imaginative text. Hence, in the following section, metaphors are introduced respectively according to their application in nouns, verbs, adjectives and measure words.

4.1 Nouns Used in a Metaphorical Way

a. We must give our guests the red-carpet treatment.

(We must take our guests as important visitors and give them warm treatment.)

b. The study was an oasis of calm in a noisy household.

("Oasis" is used to indicate a fertile tract in a desert or a shelter serving a place of safety or sanctuary)

c. While most of us are only too ready to apply to others the cold wind of criticism, we are somewhat reluctant to give our fellows the warm sunshine of praise.

(The writer compares criticism to cold wind and compares praise to warm sunshine, which makes the expression more graphic and meaningful.)

d. Irrigation is the lifeblood of agriculture.

(Lifeblood bears the meaning of something that gives strength and vitality.)

4.2 Verbs Used in a Metaphorical Way

a. He often prefaced his remarks by "I can't help thinking..."

(The verb preface compares the man's way of beginning every remark with "I can't help thinking..." to providing a preface to a book.)

b. Some books are to be tasted, others swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested.

(In this sentence, "reading books" is compared to eating food.)

c. They was allowed to leapfrog the long lines of traders and get immediate appointments with Chinese representatives.

("Leapfrog" is used in its extended meaning to denote the meaning of jumping vigorously.)

4.3 Adjectives Used in a Metaphorical Way

a. Shortage of experienced staff and inefficient use of office equipment are teething troubles of any new company.

("Teething troubles" implies minor problems occurring in the early stages of an enterprise.)

b. But it was difficult to stand or walk on the glassy surface.

“Glassy” is used to modify the surface that is covered with snow. The metaphor is vivid as smooth and transparent glass are much alike to an icy surface.)

c). For me, teaching is a red-eye, sweaty-palm, sinking-stomach profession.

(The three phrases vividly describe teaching as hard work with great intensity.)

4.4 Adverbs Used in a Metaphorical Way

a). There were a few lordly poplars before the house.

(The word “lordly” suggests that the poplars before the house are tall, straight and stately, just like ancient aristocrats.)

b). The old man looked completely down and out.

(“Down and out” implies that the old man has gone bankrupt without home and money.)

c). The charcoal fire glowed and dimmed rhythmically to the strokes of the bellows.

(The word “rhythmically” indicates constantly recurring sequence of events or processes.)

4.5 Measure Words Used in a Metaphorical Way

a). There isn't a grain of truth in it.

(“a grain of” means very small amount)

b). My cup of joy is overflowing.

(I'm extremely happy.)

c). Mothers know instinctively that for children an ounce of praise is worth a pound of scolding.

To acquire a sophisticated command of metaphors, special attention should be directed to allusions, idioms and sayings. They are mirrors of English culture. Expressions coupled with them are usually forcible, terse and vivid. Study the examples:

4.6 Allusions Used in a Metaphorical Way

a). It was a Herculean task, but he managed to do it.

(“A Herculean task” refers to an activity that demands the application of unusually tremendous physical and mental effort to enable one to decipher or endure a task.)

b). The project, which seemed so promising, turned out to be a Pandora's box.

(“A Pandora's box” means a present or something which may seem valuable, but which brings trouble and misfortune.)

c). Just when his rivals started to rub their hands with glee, he played his trump card.

(“Play one's trump card” refers to taking a course of action by which one believes one holds the advantage.)

4.7 Idioms Used in a Metaphorical Way

a). Don't be a wet blanket by prohibiting people from doing this or that.

(“A wet blanket” refers to a person who spoils other people's pleasure because he is gloomy, dull and pessimistic.)

b). Herbert won a scholarship to Duke University. Over 500 students applied for the scholarship. It was a

real feather in his cap when he won.

(The expression indicates an accomplishment that one can be proud of.)

c). He walked at the head of the funeral procession, and every now and then wiped away his crocodile tears with a big handkerchief.

(“crocodile tears” refers to insincere sorrow.)

4.8 Sayings Used in a Metaphorical Way

a). The childhood is the father of the man.

(The experiences of childhood determine a person's character as an adult.)

b). Time is a file that wears and makes no noise.

c). He who keeps company with the wolf will learn to howl.

d). No bird soars too high if he soars with his own wings.

5. CULTURE COMPARISON IN METAPHOR

Kovecses (2005) provides abundant linguistic data from typologically different languages, showing that variations in the use of metaphors occur not only cross-linguistically, but also within the same culture. Culture greatly influences how complex conceptual metaphors emerge from the embodied experiences and there is a lot more that must be added to give a more comprehensive account of both universality and variation in metaphor. Obviously, a good command of metaphors is closely related to the linguistic context, but it is associated with cultural context as well. People often associate certain qualities with certain creatures or objects. These qualities often arouse certain creations or emotions, although there is little or no scientific ground for such association. Such qualities and emotions are not always the same due to their diverse cultural backgrounds. In that case, comparisons related to culture are set forth afterwards.

5.1 Cultural Differences in View of Animals

1). Take the beaver and the bat as examples. The beaver is chiefly a North American animal, not widely known in China. In English metaphor, “an eager beaver” is a person who is anxious to get something done, works hard, and is somewhat impatient. But in Chinese, people hardly carry such association. In their eyes, they are merely animals that are not common. Similarly, the bat is usually associated with negative qualities in the west. “As blind as a bat”, “crazy as a bat”, “He is a bit batty”, and “have bats in the belfry” are typical expressions of the negative associations. It is even worse that the mention of the bat often evokes the image of an ugly, sinister, blood-sucking creature. To Chinese, however, the bat is a symbol of good fortune, well-being, and happiness, all of which are positive qualities.

2). Dog in Chinese often conveys the meaning of derogatory. For example, “狗眼看人低” (act like a

snob), “狗嘴里吐不出象牙” (a filthy mouth can not utter decent language), “狼心狗肺” (cruel and unscrupulous). These idioms are deeply rooted in ancient Chinese cultures, which regard dogs as servile and inferior things. While in English, dog usually attaches positive meanings. In western countries, dog is considered to be the faithful friend of mankind. Americans take dogs as their family members. The idiom “Love me, love my dog” shows American people’s egalitarian ideas towards dog. Phrases like “lucky dog” “top dog” “clever dog” indicate a person who is lucky or superior or clever. A similar proverb such as “Every dog has its day” as well as expressions “help a lame dog overastile” and “like a dog with two tails” also uses dog in a metaphorical way to describe a person.

5.2 Cultural Differences Implied in English Sayings and Idioms

Such cases in point are available in sayings and idioms as well. There is a Chinese saying about monks fetching water. One monk, two buckets; two monks, one bucket; three monks, no bucket, no water. The saying means more hands, less work done. However, in English we can hardly find equivalents for the saying, and the saying “Many cooks spoil the broth” carries the similar meaning. Likewise, “Gild the lily” bears the meaning of doing useless work, which is much alike to the Chinese idiom “add feet to a snake” (画蛇添足). Furthermore, Chinese are inclined to using the idiom “play music to an ox” (对牛弹琴) to suggest people who can not appreciate beautiful or valuable things. While in English, the saying “cast pearls before swine” is in accord with it. The idiom “See Naples and die” is similar to the Chinese saying “He who doesn’t reach the Great Wall is not a true man”. In Chinese, we say “疾风知劲草”, while in English the sentence “A good pilot is not known when the sea is calm and the water is fair” conveys the same meaning. In addition, many English proverbs and idioms don’t have corresponding expressions in Chinese. For instance, the idiom “Set the Thames on fire” carries the meaning that one can do unbelievable things and achieve greatness, but we can hardly find a coordinate expression in Chinese. Similarly, we are not able to express the same meaning in English as to the Chinese proverb “The sea of bitterness has no bounds, repent and the shore is at hand.” (苦海无涯回头是岸). The English saying “A cat may look at a king” holds the concept that everyone has equal rights in society. However, because of cultural differences, seldom will a Chinese person use an animal to present his equal ideas.

CONCLUSION

“The greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor. It is the one thing that cannot be learnt from others; and it is also a sign of genius since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of similarity of dissimilar. Through resemblance, metaphor makes things clearer.” (Aristotle, *Poetics*, from Kittary, p.2). Thus metaphor is not only a figure of speech, but also the mode of thought. Naomi Quinn (1996), an anthropologist, argues that the systematic presence of metaphor in linguistic expressions reflects not only the operation of individual mental structures but also the workings of different cultural models. Therefore, Metaphor is an inspiring and graphic device that conveys the writers’ ideas in an implicit and amusing way. Sometimes, it is difficult for readers to have a taste in the essence of metaphors due to cultural diversities. However, a vigorous and meaningful metaphor is liable to trap readers into deep thought and they may find it a delight when immersed in it. That’s just the miraculous effect that metaphors bring about.

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