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AUTHOR & ACADEMIC EXCHANGE QUARTERLY

## Metaphors in English and Chinese

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### Abstract

This article first introduces definitions of metaphors. It illustrates the importance of metaphors in our daily life and explains the relationship between metaphors and culture. It then compares similarities and differences between English and Chinese metaphors. The possible reasons for the different expressions of metaphors in the two languages are explored. Finally, the article concludes with some teaching practice from the comparison.

### Introduction

In today's constant cross-cultural communication in our global village, language has become more and more important, functioning as a tool to express and communicate thoughts and feelings (Carbaugh, 2017). Among all kinds of forms of language, metaphors are considered as a reflection of culture, which consists of values and beliefs about the world held by the members of a speech community. Metaphors underline all aspects of people's daily life through people's understanding and reforming the world (Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). This article first addresses the concepts of metaphor and second compares and contrasts metaphorical expressions in English and Chinese. Data have been collected from daily use of metaphors and metaphors appearing in literary works in the two languages. Through comparison and contrast, similarities and differences of metaphors in English and Chinese have been found out. The similarities and differences are illustrated with detailed examples. Subsequently, an exploration of factors which may cause variations in metaphorical expressions across the two languages is presented. Finally, the pedagogical implications of the comparison for language teaching are illustrated.

### The Concept of Metaphor

In English the word "metaphor" comes from the Greek word "metapherein", which means that metaphor is a rhetorical device to carry the meaning of one subject to another unrelated subject (Gibbs, 1994; Richards, 1936). Lakoff (1993) considers a metaphor is "a cross-domain mapping, a way of thinking" (p. 203). Lakoff and Johnson (1980), for example, define metaphor as "understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (p. 5). They maintain that in real usage, metaphors always take the form of "The X is a Y" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). To be more specific, a metaphor describes a first subject as being a second subject in some way. The first subject can be successfully depicted as the second subject because implicit and explicit attributes from the second subject have an advantage to enhance the vividness of the first (Geng, 1993).

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metaphors can be broadly divided into two types: creative metaphors and conventional metaphors. A creative metaphor is usually constructed by a particular person and they require hearers to unpack it in order to make sense. A conventional metaphor, on the other hand, contrasts with a creative metaphor, as this type of metaphors is metaphorical usage which appears repetitively to refer a particular meaning, an event, or an object. One of stereotype of conventional metaphors is well regarded as idiom. In order to form a metaphor, there must be two basic elements: a target domain and a source domain (Richard, 1936). Source domain refers to the area from which a metaphor is drawn; whereas target domain means that the area to which a metaphor is applied (Geng, 1993; Jiang, 2002).

### **The Importance of Metaphor**

Metaphor is pervasive in language, and it is a basic phenomenon that occurs throughout the whole range of our linguistic activities (Hintikka, 1994). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) point out that “the concept is metaphorically structured, the activity is metaphorically structured, and consequently, the language is metaphorically structured” (p. 5). Due to its pervasiveness nature, the study of metaphors is of vital importance in the field of language studies (Kövecses, 2002). The importance of metaphors can also be illustrated from the following three perspectives.

1. Metaphor is a basic process in the formation of different senses of meaning for individual words (Zou, 2008). Many senses of multi-sense words are generated through metaphors. Similarly, the names of many new concepts or devices are metaphorical extensions of existing lexical items. For instance, in high technology, the words web, bug, and virus are all created based on metaphorical meaning of these words.
2. Metaphor because plays multiple functions in discourse, such as explaining, clarifying, describing, expressing, and entertaining (Kövecses, 2008). Through employing metaphors, these functions can be fulfilled more successfully. As a result, people use metaphors in speech and/or in writing intentionally in order to exchange their thoughts and feelings in a more interesting and creative way.
3. Metaphors function well in educational settings, as using metaphors can make profound concepts be accepted easily (Cameron & Low, 1999; Thornbury, 1991). In language teaching, using and understanding metaphors is an important skill to master as metaphors frequently appear in literary writing to add flavor and to enrich the content of literary works (Zhou & Li, 2005).

### **The Relationship between Metaphor and Culture**

Metaphor and culture are related in many ways. As has been mentioned, culture can reflect people's values and beliefs about the world. These values and beliefs influence speakers' perceptions, expectations, and assumptions about the role of language in communication (Nida, 1993). In this sense, metaphors can be considered as one of the best expressions of culture as metaphors can be observed in nearly every domain in a speech community (Yu, 1998). The birth and development of metaphors has a close relationship with the culture in which metaphors located (Knowles & Moon, 2006). As human beings have similar physiological functions and share similar emotional experiences, and metaphors are formed based on these functions and experiences; there is no surprise that similar metaphorical expression have been found across cultures and languages. On the other side of the coin, people in diverse speech community have formed their own culture, including different religions, customs, and history, all of which can be responsible for the variations in metaphors in different languages. In the following sections, similarities and differences of metaphors in English and Chinese are discussed.

### **Similarities between English and Chinese Metaphors**

Although English and Chinese are typologically different languages, similarities in metaphorical expressions have been frequently observed. The similarities are particularly apparent in source domains between the two languages. Both English and Chinese often use human body parts, health and illness, animals, heat and cold, light and darkness as source domains for creating metaphors.

The human body is an ideal source domain since human beings know their body parts very well. As a result, various parts of the body, such as head, hands, heart, and shoulders, are involved in metaphorical expressions to express abstract ideas. For instance, to describe the central part of an object, people speaking English and Chinese often use heart metaphorically, such as the heart of a problem.

### **Human Body Parts as Source Domains**

<b>English</b>	<b>Chinese (word to word translation)</b>
the heart of the problem	question's heart
to shoulder a responsibility	shoulder (particle) responsibility
the head of the department	department's head
tongue of flame	fire tongue
arm of a chair	chair's arm
wash one's hand off something	wash hand not to do

Health and illness is another common source domain for metaphorical expressions in both English and Chinese. As people share the same feelings when they feel well and/or ill, their concrete feelings are used to describe abstract things in metaphorical ways. Take describing problems and stability in a society as an example, the words illness and health are often borrowed in phrases a healthy society, and an ill social system.

Animals have also been found to be a productive source domain, which produces substantial similarities between English and Chinese metaphors. For instance, metaphorical expressions are found in the two languages that using fox to describe a cunning person, and using wolf in sheep's skin to describe camouflage of someone.

### **Health and Animals as Source Domains**

<b>English</b>	<b>Chinese (word to word translation)</b>
a healthy society	healthy society
a sick mind	unhealthy mind
hurt one's feelings	hurt one's emotions
He is an old fox.	He is an old fox.
He is a wolf in sheep's skin.	He is a wearing-sheep-skin-wolf.
dove	peace dove

Words related to heat are used metaphorically to talk about our attitudes to people and things in both English and Chinese. For instance, in English, we say "the heat of passion", and in Chinese, we say "hot passion"; in English, we often give somebody "a warm welcome", and in Chinese we "welcome somebody warm-heartedly". When we do not like someone, we may give him/her "an icy stare" in English, and we give someone "a cold eye" in Chinese. Likewise, the properties of light and darkness often employed as source

domains in both English and Chinese. In both languages, expressions have been found to use “light” to indicate “hope” and to use “dark” to suggest “bad”, such as “a dark mood” in English, and “a cloudy mood” in Chinese.

### Heat and Light as Source Domains

English	Chinese (word to word translation)
the heat of passion	hot passion
a cold reception	cold reception
an icy stare	cold eye
a warm welcome	hot welcome
a dark mood	His mood is cloudy.
a cloud of suspicion	a face full of suspicious cloud
a dark period	darkness before dawn

### Differences between English and Chinese Metaphors

Despite the fact that there are similar source domains of metaphorical expressions in English and Chinese, the meanings of some source domains differ from each other, because of cultural variations in terms of the connotation of these sources. Take dragon as an example from animal source domain to illustrate. Although dragon exists in both English- and Chinese-speaking worlds, people in two speech communities hold different perspectives and understandings towards the implied meanings of dragons. Chinese people consider themselves as descendants of dragons. In Chinese dictionary, a great many of four character idioms containing the word “dragon” can be found. These metaphorical expressions always carry positive meanings and attitudes, such as “long feng cheng xiang” (auspice brought by the dragon and the phoenix, often hints a happy marriage) and “long teng hu yue” (dragons rising and tigers leaping, often used to describe the prosperity of a society). Although dragons can be found in English literature, they are often described as evil monsters. If someone is referred to as a dragon in English, it is always associated with the derogatory connotation, meaning “a fierce person”. For instance, Nancy Reagan, the wife of former US president Ronald Reagan once was nicknamed as “Dragon Lady” due to her interference to affairs of Whitehouse.

### Possible Reasons for the Differences

The differences between English and Chinese metaphors may be attributed to the following aspects:

*Firstly*, there are differences in natural environments in English and Chinese speech communities, including geography, landscape, and fauna and flora. The unique natural environment of each speech community to some extent has shaped metaphors in each language. Speakers living in a certain kind of habitat may be attuned to phenomena that are special in that habitat. As a result, they tend to make use of things surround them to the create metaphors. For instance, British people live in an island where people’s daily life is closely connected with the sea; whereas Chinese people live on vast land. English-speaking people prefer to use water metaphorically while Chinese-speaking people favour the word soil in metaphorical expressions. For instance, to describe somebody wastes money, English people have a saying “spend money like water”, whereas Chinese has an expression “spend money like soil”.

*Secondly*, culture-specific concepts are another factor which may account for the distinctiveness of metaphors in the two languages. These differences are especially reflected in the area of religion. In China, Buddhism used to be a dominant religion (Cheng

& Cheng, 2000). Many unique metaphorical expressions hence have inherited from Buddhism. For instance, “a living Buddha” is used to refer to a very nice person. In English-speaking countries, Christianity is the dominant religion, which has a profound impact on language. Many frequently used metaphors are derived from the Bible, such as “olive branches” symbolizing peace, and “scapegoat” referring to an innocent person.

*Thirdly*, history is another aspect which may take responsibility of differences between English and Chinese metaphors. This is particularly common between English and Chinese idioms. As most idioms have come from historical stories, understanding their metaphorical meanings often requires knowledge of history. Two examples are given in each language. In Chinese the idiom “dong shi xiao pin” is based on a story, which tells about an ugly woman, Dong Shi, always tried to imitate the knitting brow of Xi Shi, a beauty in Chinese history. Her imitation, however, made her uglier than before. In English, the expression “meet one’s Waterloo” comes from a famous Waterloo battle, in which Napoleon was finally defeated. Without history knowledge of the two speech communities, hardly can one comprehend the figurative meaning behind these expressions.

### **Implications to Language Teaching**

Comparison of metaphors in English and Chinese can provide rich linguistic information on which language teaching practice of either English or Chinese should be based (Li, 2010). In teaching practice, language teachers’ metaphor awareness needs to be raised before they are going to teach metaphors in the target language. They should be aware of similarities and differences of metaphors between the two languages. Besides, teachers should explicitly point out to the learners the common target and source domains of metaphors in the two languages, and this may facilitate learners to transfer metaphor knowledge in first language to foreign language in a positive way. The various causes for differences of metaphors in the two languages should also be explained to learners. Culture-specific elements, such as religions, customs, history, and geography knowledge can also be added in language teaching. Such explanation of target culture will be valuable and useful for them to accelerate metaphor learning in the target language.

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