

# Metaphorical Thinking in English and Chinese Languages

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Received: May 22, 2011 Accepted: June 16, 2011 doi:10.5539/ach.v3n2p9

*Acknowledgement: this research is sponsored by 985 Project, Harbin Institute of Technology.*

## Abstract

This study examines the metaphoric meanings in English and Chinese and explores the similar patterns and variations. With specific reference to metaphors with human bodies and animals, the study analyzes the cultural conceptions behind the metaphors and discovers that the interpretation of metaphorical meanings lies in the different cultural values and attitudes. The awareness of metaphor usages in different languages may contribute to smooth intercultural communication.

**Keywords:** Metaphor, English, Chinese

## 1. Introduction

Metaphor refers to the use of a phrase which describes one thing by stating another thing with which it can be compared (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English). Derived from Greek, metaphor means to transfer: 'meta' indicates 'beyond' while 'phor' suggests 'taking something from one place to another' (Xie, 2000, p.32). In this study, we will firstly examine the metaphoric meanings in English and Chinese, with an attempt to show how metaphors share similar patterns and variations in English and Chinese; we will then provide evidence to suggest that variations in metaphors may result from different cultural conceptions.

## 2. Metaphors in English and Chinese languages

Lakoff (1993) believed that basic level of conceptual metaphors are grounded in human experience, and therefore are likely to be found widely across different languages and cultures. As an important part of culture, the cross-cultural study of metaphor is an interesting area. Many scholars have devoted a large amount of research in metaphors and culture studies (Johnson, 1987; Sweetser, 1990; Ungerer, and Schmid, 2001), and most of them drew their conclusions based on English. This cross-cultural study of metaphor will stress the issue of variation of metaphors in English as well as in Chinese.

On the theory of conceptual metaphors, Lakoff (1993) argued that bodily experience is universal, and therefore probably results in basic level metaphors that are widely shared by humans in different times and places. Based on this theory, we will analyze some of the well-known conceptual metaphors in the cognitive linguistic literature in some detail, especially those connected with human body and animals in Chinese and English.

In English, the expressions associated with *anger* and *heat* are:

--- burn with indignation

- a fiery temper
- nearly explode
- go ballistic
- You make my blood boil.
- I have reached the boiling point.

In a similar vein, Chinese language possesses a range of expressions of this nature:

- 怒火 (flame of anger)
- 火冒三丈 (a surge of great fury)
- 怒火心中烧 (burning with rage)
- 怒气冲冲 (anger welled up, a fit of violent anger)
- 生气 (angry air)
- 怨气 (air one's grievances)

As can be seen, both English and Chinese are rich in metaphors, and share the same general conceptual metaphors: ANGER IS HEAT, which ‘make images vivid’ and ‘bring so much life to languages’ (Deng and Liu, 1989, p.54). However, closely examined, anger is a “heated fluid” common in English (Chen, 2010), whereas “anger is hot air” in Chinese. For example, 他脾气很爆 (he has an explosive air in his spleen/he is hot tempered); 我心中有气 (I have air in my heart/ I am not happy); 他憋了一肚子气 (he holds back a belly of air/have a bellyful of repressed grievances). Tang (2004) illustrated the theories of *yin-yang* and the five elements of traditional Chinese medicine, as a suggestion for the explanation of the particular conceptual metaphors of anger expression as underlying cultural models. The theories of *yin-yang*, five elements theory from traditional Chinese medicine are the epitome of the traditional Chinese culture, whose influence is still there in the language and in metaphors. This example suggests the source domain may vary from culture to culture, and some shared metaphors may draw on the same source domain but differ in details across languages.

Boers (2009) drew on Lakoff’s work to suggest that the figurative language of a community might be seen as a reflection of that community’s conventional patterns of thought or worldview. Acknowledgement of culture has a role in shaping embodiment and consequently, metaphorical thought. In particular, certain cultural representations of metaphor enable people to “off-load” (Raymond, 2006) some aspects of conceptual metaphor out into the cultural world when interpreting the world around them. In some cases people with only an outsider’s knowledge of the source domain might not understand what is alluded to. For instance, Chinese students learning English may have come across expressions like these:

“You chicken!” he cried, looking at Tom with contempt.

The stork visited the Howard Johnston’s yesterday (Wang, 2003).

The students may have been puzzled, unless they knew that chicken in English means a coward, or a person without courage; that a visit by the stork refers to the birth of a baby.

Likewise, English students learning Chinese would probably wonder about the meaning of 你真熊! (Chinese meaning: ‘You bear!’) or 那家伙是个泥鳅!(Chinese meaning: ‘he is a loach!’) To English-speaking people, the bear does not carry any special associations as it does to Chinese. The animal might be considered fierce or dangerous; a bear in a zoo or wildlife park might be regarded as mischievous or playful, but not stupid, incompetent, good-for-nothing, as is implied in the Chinese remark above.

The loach, which is not all common in most English speaking countries, could merely be taken as another kind of fish; people would not think of it as being slippery and untrustworthy. However, there does exist the English saying ‘slippery as an eel’ which has the same meaning and feeling as the Chinese expression about the loach above.

It seems that metaphors may affect the way people think because people coming from different cultures may associate certain qualities with certain creatures or objects. Those qualities may arouse certain reactions or emotions, though there is hardly any scientific ground for such association.

It has been argued (Charteris-Black, 2003; Deignan, 2003) that metaphors are cultural loaded expressions, whose meaning has to be inferred through references to shared cultural knowledge. It is highly likely that creatures may have certain associated qualities in one culture, but not in the other. Take the bull and the beaver as examples, to Chinese people, the bull and the beaver are merely animals. Chinese might be able to guess the meaning of a bull

in a china shop, yet they would not have the image that would be evoked in the minds of English-speaking people: an angry and snorting bull charging into a shop filled with exquisite fragile porcelain. Thus Chinese would be less appreciative of the vividness of the expression – meaning a person who is clumsy and bungling causes a lot of trouble in a situation requiring tact and delicacy.

The beaver is chiefly a North American animal, not widely known in China. Its habit of gnawing down trees and building complex ‘homes’, coupled with its skill and ingenuity in doing this have earned for the animal the name of eager beaver. Metaphorically, an eager beaver is a person who is anxious to get something done or too keen on his job, and is somewhat impatient. In English, the metaphor sometimes has a slight derogatory connotation.

Meanwhile, creatures with certain associated qualities in both cultures may have some different meanings. A good case in point is dog and tiger. To the English, a dog is people’s best friend or even regarded as a family member. However, a dog in China are generally associated with unpleasantness as evidenced in the expressions: 狗东西 (dirty dog/poorly-educated), 狗娘养的 (son of a dog/ ill-bred), 狗改不了吃屎 (a dog never stops eating rubbish/developed a bad habit).

To the English, the king of beasts is lion, who enjoys high prestige, as can be seen from such expressions: regal as a lion, majestic as a lion and rise like a lion. In the Western literature, ‘Achilles is a lion’ appears to be associated with the link between Achilles and a lion. It seems that this metaphor is based on “a conventional understanding of a certain behavior of a lion in terms of the courageous behavior of a human” (Lakoff & Turner, 1989). By contrast, in Chinese culture, it is the tiger rather than the lion that more likely evokes such associations. Interestingly, the characteristics of a tiger in Chinese culture are two sided: positive and negative. On the positive side are courage, vigor, and decisiveness, and on the negative side are ferocity, cruelty, and ruthlessness. Reflecting the positive associations are expressions such as 虎将 (a general like a tiger), 虎老雄心在 (ambitious as a tiger), 虎虎有生气 (vigorous as a tiger). Reflecting the negative associations are terms such as 苛政猛如虎 (a hard ruler like a tiger), 拦路虎 (a blocking tiger, indicating a barrier difficult to overcome), 纸老虎 (a paper tiger, suggesting fierce on the surface but actually fragile).

Worthy of some note is that in Chinese culture, dragon and phoenix are two royal animals, which symbolize king and queen. The images of dragon and phoenix are deeply rooted in many aspects of Chinese culture, though the two sorts of animals do not exist in the real world. Even nowadays, many parents in China hope that their sons will become dragons, and their daughters will become phoenixes in the future, and the equivalent common metaphorical expressions are “望子成龙, 望女成凤 *Wang zi cheng long, wang nv cheng feng*”. However, in the Western culture, a dragon is an image of a monster. In traditional Western culture, a dragon is a large fierce imaginary animal with wings and a long tail, and fire comes out of its mouth. A phoenix is also an imaginary bird that sets fire to itself every 500 years, rising from its ashes and born again. Thus, Chinese metaphorical expressions about dragons and phoenixes would be undesirable and unacceptable to Western culture.

According to Lakoff and Turner (1989), metaphor is not only “a matter of words”, but also “a matter of thought”. Human thought processes are largely metaphorical, and the human conceptual system is structured and defined in a metaphorical way. Most metaphors, including structural metaphors and orientational metaphors, are grounded in systematic correlations within our daily experience. Human experience consists of a large range of conventional models. These models are essential elements, which construct a conceptual system in the human minds. In view of this, metaphor plays a major role in people’s everyday language using and thinking.

### 3. Conclusion

As can be seen from the above discussion, cultural differences are reflected in metaphors. Although human bodies are physiologically the same (universally), there are divergent conceptualizations of the human bodies in different cultures, leading to different expression in metaphors. Metaphor provides insights into the way people conceptualise abstract concepts (Cienki and Müller, 2008), and sheds light on the process of formulating thoughts.

Although English and Chinese people hold particular attitudes towards some particular animals, the animals are used to stand metaphorically for a particular quality in a given culture. The interpretation for cross-cultural metaphorical meanings may lie in the different culture values and attitudes. In the process of globalization, the awareness of metaphorical expressions in different cultures may hopefully facilitate intercultural communication.

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