Influences of Cultural Elements on Metaphor

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Abstract

Metaphor is not only an important figure of speech, but also a cognitive means of the human mind. The people with different means of thinking have different cultures. The metaphorical language used by people must be fully saturated with culture peculiar to it. Metaphor, as a figure of speech, is unavoidably associated with culture due to the relationship of language and culture. As far as the theme of the thesis is concerned, it tries to analyze the cultural factors influencing the formation of metaphor.

Keywords: metaphor, cognitive means, cultural elements, differences

1. Introduction

With the development of globalizations, intercommunication becomes more and more important across the world. Thus, languages play an indispensable role in communicating. The latest view about metaphor has claimed that metaphor participates and reflects the cognition process of mankind. Thus, the differences across different cultures and language would reflect different cognitive basis of metaphor. If the differences of working mechanism and cognitive function of Chinese and English metaphor can be exposed, it is significant for foreign language learners to grasp a foreign language and make intercommunication easier.

In the past time, culture interchange has been neglected in metaphor field. However, with rapid development of science and technology, especially that of mass media, the communication between different people has become more and more frequent, and many problems come from cultural interchanges. Therefore, intercommunication is generally regarded as a cultural exchange now from the perspective of social-cultural reason.

Metaphor is a heated topic for scholars over a long period of time. There are many scholars such as rhetoricians, philosophers, linguists, anthropologists and psychologists both at home and abroad, who have made profound research on metaphor. It is Aristotle who began to study metaphor in a serious way. In his *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*, he discussed the metaphor's construction and rhetoric function. G. Lakoff and M. Johnson studied metaphor from a new perspective. In their collaborated book *Metaphors we live by*, metaphor is studied systematically in the light of cognitive semantics. Their argument is "that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action," and "our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature." (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 4) Furthermore, they point out that understanding is comparative to different cultural conceptual system done through conceptual system basing on culture.

2. Relationship Between Culture and Metaphor

It is well-known that language is a social phenomenon and the life of human society is woven around it so that language can only be understood in terms of the special culture. Language and culture hence interact so closely with each other that we cannot separate them. On one hand, language is an integral part of culture and plays a very important role in it. On the other hand, language is influenced and shaped by culture. We often regard words as the first articulation of meaning, and since all symbols are metaphors or metonymies replacing the objects, all words therefore are metaphorical. Language is structured metaphorically; language itself is a metaphorical web. Thus, culture influences upon language are obvious on metaphor.

In other words, Metaphors acquire their associative meanings from native literature, local customs, religions, world views, folk believes, senses of value, modes of thinking, and so on, which sometimes are clearly different and sometimes overlap in different cultures. It is indispensable to make clear the relationship between metaphor

and culture.

3. The Influences of Cultural Elements on Metaphor

From the first chapter, we have made it clear that different speech communities hold different cultural patterns. Differences in culture would be reflected in almost every aspect of language, at the same time, they also influence metaphors. However, in the study of the cultural aspects of translation, the problem that we should solve firstly and importantly is to find a suitable tool for the translation of metaphor. In the condition, a notion of the culture-specific factor will enable us to define the strictly cultural component. It is important for the translation of metaphor to analyze these cultural elements. Thus, it is very necessary to know the differences in cultural pattern, how they influence the understanding of metaphor, and so on.

In the following section, we will discuss and analyze cultural elements in metaphor, how they influence on metaphor. In this part, the discussion of cultural influences on the understanding of metaphors will mainly focus on four aspects, such as ecological and physical elements, social elements, ideological elements and linguistic elements.

3.1 Different Ecological and Physical Elements

Ecological and Physical elements include many aspects, such as ecology (plants, creatures, climate, etc.), a way of production, exchange, and distribution of goods and crafts, technology and science, artifacts. Although geographical location is just a kind of natural surroundings of different nations, it operates significantly by taking the shape of a nation's culture patterns and its development and diversification. In fact, language is the reflection of not only objective world, but also a social phenomenon as well. Therefore, surrounding people lives in would produce corresponding language.

England, as an island surrounded by sea, is rich with sea faring on which people's lives necessarily depend on. Hence, numerous words are related to sail and seafaring. Some of them gradually are endowed with metaphoric connotations to express similar things or abstract qualities, as the following: fish in the air (缘木求鱼), plain sailing（一帆风顺）, sail before the wind（发迹）, trim the sail to the wind（见机行事）, go with the stream（随波逐流）, in the same boat（同舟共济）, know the rope（内行）, all at sea（茫然不知所措）, etc.

However, as an interior land, China mostly depends on agriculture, which is the backbone of the national economy. Thus, the Chinese people usually use the metaphoric expressions, which are associative with farm working to convey some abstract feelings. For example:

三年耕，必有一年之蓄；而学者朝学之，夕丧之。（杨万里《庸言》

土牛耕石田，未有得稻日。（寒山〈诗百首〉）

瓜田不纳屦，李下不整冠。

前人栽树，后人乘凉。

种瓜得瓜，种豆得豆。

When describing something abundant or great, English people are accustomed to the words related to seafaring, as following:

"A sea of jubilant people"

"A sea of trouble"

"A sea of debt"

Though there are some expressions such as "随波逐流"，"同舟共济"，"一帆风顺"，and"人的海洋"in Chinese, Chinese people never say "麻烦的海洋" or "债务的海洋". They merely say"大麻烦" and"沉重的债务"in spite of using metaphorical expressions.

English weather is changeable due to its oceanic climate. Thus, English people have treated talking about weather as a habit. Some words about it are used with metaphorical meanings, such as:

There was frost in her voice.

The suggestion had been received with frosty disapproval.

As we know, London is called "city of fog". Therefore, frog, mist and haze are often used to describe problems happening during understanding, remembrance and attention. E.g.

She left in a frog of depression. (她心情沮丧，精神恍惚地离开了。)

I didn't have the foggiest idea about this bit. (关于这一点，我一点都不了解。)

"…lost in the mist of memory." (在尘封的记忆中消失得太久)

Many people have only a hazy idea of their expenditure. (许多人对自己的开支糊里糊涂。)

"Love" is always a stock subject in both cultures; people use the most beautiful and precious things to describe it. But in different nations, because of the different ecological and physical conditions, the images used to represent love are various. For example, according to the Chinese, love is as pure as "lotus", and they often compare lovers to "双飞燕 (a couple of swallows)" and "连理枝 (two branches join together)". However, in Britain, love is considered as precious as money or other valuable articles because commercial economy has been developed in early times.

Technology and science play an important role in people's life, and they also influence the language in many ways. There are many metaphorical expressions related to technology and science, e.g.

traffic intensity (交通强度)

traffic flow (交通流)

delivery platform (输送流)

station (站点)

rush hours (高峰时期)

run user (运行用户)

data bus (数据总线)

fuel system (燃料系统)

down load (下载) upload (上载)

In China, technology and science lag behind those in the western countries, so there are few such metaphorical expressions.

Furthermore, mushrooms grow quickly because of the warm and humid weather in England. So, they like to use "to spring up like mushrooms" or "to mushroom" to describe business or thing's prompt development. Chinese people, however, usually use "like bamboo" in such cases.

3.2 Different Social Elements

Social factor consists of social classes and groups, kinship system (typology, sex and marriage, procreation and paternity, the size of the family, etc.), politics and the law, education, sports and entertainment, customs, etc. Generally, sports are people's passion in western countries and there are a lot of metaphorical expressions about sports in English, such as the following:

not to get to first base (没有跑到第一垒 / 没有取得初步成就)

to have two strikes against one (三击两不中 / 处境不利)

to hit below the belt (打对方下身 / 用不正当手段打击别人)

to play one's trump card (打出王牌 / 使出绝招)

behind the 8th ball (在第八号球后面 / 处于危难境地)

to have the game in one's hands (稳操胜券，有支持力)

to play oneself in (先熟悉情况，先作好准备)

the ball in your court (轮到你作出反应或采取行动)

to skate over (一语带过)

to hit the mark (成功)

to shoot off (进行某项程序)

In Chinese, there are also some such expressions that are different from English metaphorical expressions relating to sport. For example:

"短平快" (short, adaptable and fast)/ doing something with little investment but quick result.

"擦边球" (edge ball/in a fortunate way)

"将军" (to checkmate/to put somebody on the spot; Challenge; embarrass)

"踢皮球" (to play football/ to shift one's responsibility)

"出界" (out of range/beyond the bounds)

Chinese catering culture is very famous, and quite different from that in English countries. So, in Chinese, there are many metaphorical expressions related to it. For example, "吃不开" (be unpopular; won't work), "吃不了兜着走" (get more than one bargained for; land oneself in serious trouble), "吃闭门羹" (be refused), "癞蛤蟆想吃天鹅肉" (a toad lusting after a swan's flesh; aspiring after what one is not worthy of), "捞油水" (reap some profit), and the like.

Chinese people also attach rich metaphorical connotations to bamboo for its rich usages, such as: "胸有成竹", "势如破竹", "敲竹杠", etc. However, there is not any associative meaning for bamboo in English.

3.3 Different Ideological Elements

The Ideological system includes cosmology, religion, magic and witchcraft, folklore, artistic creations as images, values (moral, aesthetic, etc), cognitive focus and thinking patterns, ideology, etc.

Religion, as an important part of human's culture, reflects cultural disparities. In western countries, with the Bible spreading all around the world, Christianity takes an important position in the heart of people, and they worship God. Thus, there are many expressions with containing a certain connotation. For example:

the old Adam (原罪)

the mark of Cain (罪恶的污点，不端行为)

to play Judas (当了叛徒)

He thinks he's a tin God. (他自认为是个了不起的人物)

Thanks, you're an angel. (谢谢，你真是个大好人)

between the devil and the sea (左右为难)

the fall of Jericho (不可思议的奇迹)

noah's ark (避难所)

apple of Sodom (金玉其外败絮其中的人或物)

to smite hip and thigh (彻底压倒)

the sword of Damocles (千钧一发，即将临头的危险)

to help coals of fire on somebody's head (以德抱怨 使某人感到后悔惭愧)

However, Chinese people often believe in Buddhism and Daoism that are used in many metaphorical expressions, for example, "菩萨心肠", "如来佛的掌心", "在世观音", "放下屠刀，立地成佛", "木鱼脑袋", "唐僧肉", "一人得道，鸡犬升天", "道高一尺，魔高一丈", "跑了和尚，跑不了庙", "做一天和尚，撞一天钟", etc.

Because there are different value systems between two countries, Chinese people and western people may show different attitudes to the same thing. Modesty is much valued by Chinese people. There are many metaphorical expressions. Such sayings are like "枪打出头鸟", "树大招风", and so on. However, individualism functions as a dominant cultural pattern in America. There are many expressions related to metaphorical connotation in this aspect, such as "pull yourself up by our own boot straps"; "the squeaky wheel gets the grease"; "a man's home is his castle"; "He travels the fastest that travels alone"; etc.

In thinking pattern, as we know, the western people think abstractly, and take the object and nature as the center of the world. But, Chinese people prefer visual thinking and take human as the world center. Jacques Gernet, the French historian who studies Chinese culture, claims that Chinese is "so difficult to express how the abstract and the general difference fundamentally, and not just occasionally, from the concrete and particular…" In the translation of metaphor, we can find the influence of the difference of thinking pattern. For example, in English we say: "Wisdom prepares for the worst; but folly leaves the worst for the day it comes." When the metaphorical expression is translated into Chinese, the abstract words, "wisdom" and "folly", would be transferred into visualized words as: "聪明人防患于未然，愚蠢者临渴掘井".

Because they think the nature at the center of the world, the western people like to take inanimate words as the subject of a sentence, which can be found in some metaphorical sentences, for example, "The thick carpet killed the sound of my footsteps"; "An exciting sight met Mary's eyes." Chinese people are used to using animate words as the subject of a sentence for they often treat human as the center of the world. They would translate these two sentences into "我走在厚厚的地毯上，一点脚步声都没有。", "玛利看见了一件激动人心的事。"

3.4 Linguistic Elements

Linguistic elements include phonology and graphemes, grammar (morphology and syntax), semantics and pragmatics.

In different languages comparable words may carry strikingly different associative meanings. In Chinese, for instance, "vinegar" is often another name for jealousy, e.g., chicu ("eat vinegar"-to be jealous). In English, however, the word is connotative of ill-tempered speech and character, etc. One way says that when someone's remarks are "made with a strong note of vinegar", metaphorical expression relating to "sour" or "vinegar" means in English "bad-tempered", "peevish" ("a sour mood"), "ill-disposed or bitter". But in Chinese sourness or being sour is connected with pedantry, so a pedantic scholar is often said to be a "sour" one.

Through the above analysis, it is distinctive that language is endowed with cultural characteristics in almost every aspect except its phonology or syntax. But, in fact, grammar sometimes also affects metaphor. Linguistic structures and lexical units are often unique to each language.

Chinese is an ideographic writing system and a kind of tonal language and every Chinese character can be regarded as a trinity of pictograph, ideograph and phone. (Cheng Hongwei, 2000, p. 262) Chinese characters are a complex means to convey ideas vividly with images. For example, 人(man) is exactly the image of one man standing with legs separated, 雨(rain) has four dot strokes symbolizing raindrops. 日(sun) and 月(moon) are like the sun (⊙) and the moon (Ð)in the sky. 从(to follow) very vividly describes how a man follows the other. 男 is the image of a laborer who works in field. 鱼(fish) is nearly the shape of fish. So, we can find that many Chinese words are vivid with images, shapes and qualities. These Chinese words are difficult to be translated into English with the images and shapes preserved because "English is an alphabetic writing system with words composed of letters without any connotative meaning." (ibid)

4. Conclusion

And from the aspect of grammar the traits of Chinese grammar are non-inflectional and parataxis, whereas that of English is inflectional and hypotaxis. Due to the differences in grammar between English and Chinese, there are different metaphors in both languages. From the above analysis, it is safe to get the conclusion that cultural elements influence on the form of metaphor in four aspects, as follows: ecological and physical influences, social influences, ideological influences and linguistic influences.

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