

A Corpus-Based Study on English and Chinese “Water” Metaphors

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Abstract

Metaphor, as a way of thinking and an important cognitive tool, plays a significant role in the process of understanding the world. Based on CCL corpus and METALUDE corpus, this paper applies the theoretical framework of conceptual metaphor to analyzing and comparing the “water” metaphors in English and Chinese. The paper intends to explore and explain the similarities and differences of “water” metaphors in the hope of enhancing people’s comprehension of conceptual metaphors, raising people’s intercultural awareness and improving people’s cross-cultural communication abilities.

Keywords

Water, conceptual metaphor, corpus-based comparative study.

1. Introduction

The cognitive study of metaphor can be traced back to the 18th century. Before that, the metaphor research defined metaphor simply as a figure of speech which, for rhetorical effect, could only be used to directly refer to one thing by mentioning another, that is to say, to modify languages. However, as a matter of fact, metaphor is not merely the use of a word or phrase to indicate something different from the literal meaning. Metaphor is not simply a language feature; it is also an embodiment of human nature. [1] Metaphor is a kind of effective cognitive tool and it is deemed as the way we live by and the basis for human cognition, experience, thinking, etc. Everything in this world can be metaphorized; even though the metaphor itself and the contents it refers to are, to a great extent, random, they both can reflect the values of the language user himself [2]. The study of metaphor is considered to be one of the most important branches of cognitive linguistics. Conceptual Metaphor Theory rejects the notion that metaphor is just a decorative device, peripheral to language and thought. Instead, Conceptual Metaphor Theory holds that metaphor is central to thought, and therefore to language.

Conceptual metaphor, or cognitive metaphor, involves two aspects: source domain and target domain. The source domain is the conceptual domain from which metaphorical expressions are drawn. Conceptual metaphor is the projection from the source domain to the target domain, which is an irreversible process. According to the conceptual view of metaphor as outlined in *Metaphors We Live By*, a metaphor is a cognitive process that allows one domain of experience, the target domain, to be reasoned about in terms of another, the source domain. The target domain is usually an abstract concept such as HIGH STATUS, whereas the source domain is typically a more concrete concept, such as CLOUD. Consequently, values, life, arguments, love, ideas, theories and others are target domains, while water, war, buildings, food, plants, and others are source domains. The target domain is the domain that we try to understand through the use of the source domain. The metaphor allows us to export conceptual structure about the more concrete domain to the more abstract target domain. . . . [3]

The cognitive study of metaphor holds that the conceptual metaphor is derived from people’s experience, people’s sensory perceptual system and people’s social and cultural experience. The conceptual metaphor created by people is in consistency with people’s physical experience [4].

However, different cultural and historical heritage may cause difference in people's way of thinking of cognitive style. The difference is, then, projected on specific language expression.

Water, the most common liquid, exists in abundance in nature, from the polar ice caps to the steamy geysers. Water is essential to people's life and is an inseparable requirement for people's survival. There is a direct correlation between water and the shaping of culture. In most cultures, water is a source of inspiration and has been so for many centuries, especially for writers, poets, playwrights and philosophers. Water is deeply rooted in a great many of famous literary works and classic poems. Water teaches us adaptability and encourages us to keep on moving in spite of the hurdles. Based on the theoretical framework of conceptual metaphor, this paper intends to compare and analyze the metaphorical scope of the concept of "water" in English and Chinese, in the hope of finding out the cognitive difference of the same source domain in different cultures. The Chinese corpus used by the author in this study is the Contemporary Chinese Language Corpus of Peking University (also known as CCL) and the English corpus for reference is the English and Chinese Metaphor Corpus of Hong Kong Lingnan University (also known as METALUDE).

2. A Corpus-based Comparative Analysis on English and Chinese "Water" Metaphors

Water is the source of life; there would be no life without water. In the course of history, plenty of water-related metaphorical expressions have been produced, which corresponds with the theory that "metaphor is based on physical experience". [5]

2.1 Common Water metaphors in both English and Chinese

In both cultures, water can be projected on specific things or abstract concepts, mainly based on the flowing of water, the quality of water, the level of water, etc.

Level is Water.

The water level refers to the height reached by the water in a river, reservoir, etc. The change of water level is mainly caused by the increase and the decrease of the amount of water. People then project the meaning of water level on the target domain of "achievement level".

The high water mark of our trip was Barcelona.

In this sentence, "the high water mark" means the most enjoyable point of the most unforgettable moment.

“你小时候的出身不好，没钱供书，吃了点亏，后来是你自己不长进，弄成这么一个半桶水；文不文、武不武的！”

The Chinese expression “半桶水”(half bucket of water) has a negative connotation, referring to people who lack of the required skills or knowledge in certain field. Low water level has the metaphorical meaning of low achievement level.

Situation is Water.

“Hot” and “deep” can be added to water to describe a difficult and dangerous situation, which respectively reminds people of burning and drowning, both are situations that people do not want to be stuck in.

(3) She's been in hot water at school twice this year.

(4) You certainly seem to be in deep water.

(5) 中国人民还有百分之九十的劳苦大众眼下处在水深火热之中。

(6) 应该把危机告诉全体职工，让他们知道企业处于危险境地的真相，唤起他们的危机感，振奋起背水一战的士气。

Both “水深火热”(deep water and flaring fire) and “背水一战”(fight with one's back to the river) are vivid expressions to describe a formidable and critical situation that people need to strive to get out of as soon as possible.

Unemotional/Unfriendly is Cold Water.

(7) It is not nice to pour cold water on someone's plan when you do not want to be a part of it in the first place.

(8) 为了防止骄傲自大的情绪，管理者得每天想出办法来给他们泼冷水，为他们设立几乎不可达到的目标。

This is an interesting coincidence: the literal translation of “泼冷水” in Chinese is exactly “pour/throw cold water on somebody or something” in English. This metaphor also derives from people's skin feeling of touching cold water and not liking being poured by cold water. The metaphorical concept is to discourage someone's enthusiasm for something or dampen high spirits about doing something, just like pouring cold water to cool things down.

Quantity is Water.

(9) My wife spends money like water so I have to do extra work.

(10) 生活水平提高了，在儿童消费上多投入一些是无可非议的，但为孩子花钱，也应讲个适度，不能让孩子从小养成“花钱如流水”和好吃懒做的习惯。

This is another pleasing coincidence. The equivalent translation of “花钱如流水” is “spending money like water”. This metaphor originates from people's understanding of constantly flowing water. Hence, large amounts of water flowing is a metaphor for spending large amounts of money excessively, carelessly or wastefully.

Emotion is Water.

(11) I was a bit skeptical and decided to test the water before committing the complete management team.

(12) 该公司表示，选择在石家庄市开办第一家连锁店，是一种“试水”的做法，目的是先培养人们适应这种新的口味，再逐步向北京等大城市渗透。

Before drinking water or taking a bath, people are used to feel the temperature of the water (“试水”) to make sure the water is neither too hot nor too cold. People project this behavior onto the metaphor for informally or casually attempting to gauge the reaction of a potential audience or recipient of something in order to find out whether something is likely to succeed without accidentally hurt other people's feelings.

Strength/Power is Water.

(13) His silence suggests he is stupid, but perhaps in his case still waters run deep.

(14) 文化是可长可久、静水流深的。

(15) 观者流连徜徉之余，也无不感叹收藏家为实现自己的收藏目标而付出的心血和时间，那确是一种水滴石穿的恒久心力。

Water is the force behind all the industry, agriculture, manufacturing and trade and commerce. No production of any kind is possible without water. The power of water cannot be neglected. Based on people's observation, slowly moving waters are not shallow, as is shown in the above examples. Hence, people relate this experience to describing people who say little but are actually wise and insightful. With flowing water comes strength. As long as the water keeps flowing, it will generate strength. “水滴石穿”(dripping water wears through a stone) also demonstrates that persistent determination will yield desirable results.

Time is Water.

(16) I should probably have asked for more money when I was offered the job, but hey, that's water under the bridge now.

(17) 子在川上曰：逝者如斯夫，不舍昼夜

This is another example of people's observation in life: water of a river flows constantly towards the sea and is never still. This fact indicates that the water that has already flowed by will not return. People then project this natural phenomenon onto the metaphor for "things that happened in the past cannot be changed or have been forgotten. Let bygones be bygones."

2.2 Special Water metaphors in English

Knowledge is Water.

(18) Arguments for banning abortion don't hold water.

This metaphorical expression stems from people's observation of water leakage. It alludes to a container that can hold water without leaking. If a container can hold water without leaking, then the container is valid. On the contrary, if a container cannot hold water and incurs leaking, then the container is invalid. Thus people project the expression "hold water" onto the metaphor for something that can stand up to critical examination, something that is sound, valid or true.

Travel Activity is Water.

(19) After the Wall Street crash, the American economy moved into uncharted waters.

(20) We're starting to get into uncharted waters exploiting these tax loopholes. If we aren't careful, the government may crack down on us hard!

Sailing played a significant role in the history of British Empire-building. Sailors used a great number of nautical terms, many of which have been projected onto daily expression, metaphors in particular. Sailors recorded what they have experienced and investigated. Consequently, "uncharted waters", originally meaning sea that has not been mapped, refers to unknown, unclear or unfamiliar situation or circumstance that may be dangerous or difficult as a result, just like the sea that is completely new and unknown and therefore has never been described before.

Communication is Water.

(21) They have watered down their proposals.

(22) They have returned with a watered-down and more acceptable version of proposal.

In English, "water" can be used as a verb through part of speech conversion, meaning "put water on something or sprinkle something with water". Hence, the phrase "water down", meaning "make something weaker or dilute something", is given the metaphorical meaning of "make something less strong".

2.3 Special Water metaphors in Chinese

Traditional Chinese culture places great value on euphemism. When it comes to writing, Chinese people prefer to resort to imagery and metaphor rather than direct and straightforward description to express their feelings. A typical manifestation is the widely used Chinese four-character idioms, a literary form used in the Chinese written language that can be traced back to the ancient times and are still commonly used today. These four-character idioms, though succinct in form, usually lead to a meaningful afterthought.

Woman is Water.

Chinese people believe that women are "made from water" because women embody the tenderness and purity of water. Women are tender and loving creatures. Women bring men comfort and support when they need it the most.

(23) 贾宝玉说得好，女人是水做的，哭起来似乎都显得分外娇美。

(24) 但是她开始设想，冷酷的男主角如果遇到一个女人，该是什么样的女人。温柔似水的睿智女人，还是可以并肩作战的斗士。

These are the positive examples of water as a metaphor for tender women. As a matter of fact, in reality, water and women are not always tender and mild. For instance, a great overflow of water results in disastrous flood. Likewise, women may cause disasters to families and even countries when they are considered to be dangerously seductive. That's why women are also known as a destructive

force in any society throughout the course of history. Hence, “祸水”(disastrous water) is given the metaphorical meaning of femme fatale.

2.3.2 Virtue is Water.

(25) 老子曰：“上善若水，水善利万物而不争”。

This classic quote by Laozi, founder of Taoism, means that the greatest virtue is just like water, nurturing all things without competing with them. This term upholds the belief that a virtuous ruler should govern with gentle and obliging qualities as demonstrated by water. He should provide great assistance for people just like what the water does, instead of competing with them for valuable resources. Later, this term evolved to mean that people should nourish and nurture all things as water does and try their best to help people without seeking fame or profit. Water, in this case, can also be projected onto human virtues such as endurance for the sake of achieving a noble goal and modesty.

Limpid Eye is Water.

(26) 秦牧《艺海拾贝·神速的剪影》：“通过这二十几个字，一个雪肤花貌、十指纤纤、唇红齿白、云鬓蛾眉、秋水盈盈、嫣然含笑的古代美女的形象，就呈现在人们眼前了。”

(27) 蒲松龄《聊斋志异·宦娘》：“今日箇蹙损春山，望穿秋水。”

The Chinese expression “秋水”，which literally means autumn waters, embodies the metaphorical meaning of limpid eyes of a woman since autumn waters make people feel carefree and joyous. This vivid expression reminds people of the gentle and compassionate characteristics of women.

2.4 Common Characteristics Analysis of “Water” Metaphor in English and Chinese

There are altogether 13 conceptual metaphors in both English and Chinese “water” metaphors, among which 7 metaphors can be found in both English and Chinese; 3 metaphors are only used in English and 3 metaphors are exclusively applied in Chinese. Overall, differences and similarities coexist.

In terms of language expression, although these metaphors are different to some extent, the summary on the conceptual level is based on distinctive characteristics of “water”. This shows that when it comes to experience and cognition of certain things, similarities can be observed among different ethnic groups since “people have the same body structure and perceptual senses. Therefore, when faced with the same material world, people with the same perceptual and cognitive abilities are bound to acquire similar conceptual structure”. [6] Flowable, varied depth, dilutable...all these distinctive and recognizable characteristics of water determines the fact that English speakers and Chinese speakers share similarities which, through further cognitive conceptualization, will produce the same or similar metaphorical projection.

2.5 Difference Analysis of “Water” Metaphor in English and Chinese

At the same time, concepts are subject to people’s subjective initiatives. Due to differences in geological environment and cultural background, inevitably there are differences between English speakers’ subjective initiatives and Chinese speakers’ subjective initiatives. As a result, when it comes to the concept of “water”, English speakers and Chinese speakers will demonstrate relatively large differences. These differences lead to different metaphorical projection and reflect diversified and distinctive cultural features. Take the metaphorical expression “hold water” for example, it is rather common to use “water” as a metaphor for opinions in the English language because “since ancient Greece, the west has fostered a truth-seeking cultural orientation. For western people, understanding the law of nature is based on hypothesis. During the process of verifying hypothesis, people attach great importance to analysis, reasoning and logical deduction while laying emphasis on difference and contradiction [7]. Therefore, people apply their observation of water in a valid container to describing sound, valid or true facts that can stand up to critical examination as “hold water”.

It is universally known that the English culture is, in essence, a marine culture. Living by the sea, the English people are born with an adventurous and risk-taking spirit and are always striving to break away from constraints, hence the marine civilization[8]. On the contrary, China boasts vast plains for

cultivation, which contributes to China's agriculture civilization. What's more, China has a history of over 2,000 years of feudal regime so Chinese people tend to be more reserved. Traditional Chinese culture values euphemism and implicit style in language expression and behavior. It is a manifestation of Chinese people's spiritual core to be peaceful and serene. They do not seek emotional outbursts; rather, they speak and behave in a more restrained manner. In addition, the most frequently used "water" metaphors in Chinese are Chinese four-character idioms, which is closely related to China's geographical environment, Chinese philosophy of "man is an integral part of nature" as well as the unique way of thinking of Chinese people. Such conceptual metaphors as "Time is Water" and "virtue is Water" show that water, as a natural element and the source of life, is closely associated with Chinese people's life and culture, has provided the basic metaphors for the early philosophical thoughts in China and also reflects the cognitive mode of ancient china seeking to understand the universe and human nature from the natural world.

In addition, in the English language, a noun can be converted into a verb through the part of speech conversion (a word of one grammatical form becomes a word of another grammatical form without any changes to spelling or pronunciation). Therefore, the specific concept expressed in a noun can be converted into the descriptive meaning expressed in a verb during the process of metaphorization in the hope of helping people understand the target domain better.

3. Conclusion

It has come to light that metaphor is a powerful tool for people to understand abstract and obscure concepts. It is the specific embodiment of people's way of thinking and cognitive abilities around the world. Metaphorical expressions in English and in Chinese are both valuable and precious fruits of human society, whether they are similar or different in meaning and in form.

Based on the comparative analysis of "water" metaphors found in CCL corpus and METALUDE corpus, this paper reveals the similarities and differences in both English and Chinese with regard to "water" metaphors. The author holds that the projection of "water" conceptual metaphors both in English and in Chinese are all based on people's experience and understanding of the distinctive features of water, the natural element essential to people's survival. People use their body and experience as the source domain for reference. On the other hand, the differences are derived from the different ways of thinking between Chinese people and western people which are caused by different cultures, different values, different aesthetic tastes, etc. These experiences and cognition are then correspondingly projected onto other conceptual domains and demonstrate respective characteristics in Chinese culture and English culture. Generally speaking, English speakers are more inclined to express concepts in a direct, straightforward and explicit way whereas Chinese speakers resort to more euphemistic ways to convey abstract and obscure concepts.

This study on similarities and differences of "water" metaphors in English and Chinese intends to help people realize the significant role that metaphors play during people's cognition process as well as the vital function of cultural elements in the process of people's thinking, such as second language acquisition, English-Chinese translation, etc. Besides, it can serve as a valuable and useful reference for general conceptual metaphor studies. What's more, once people from diversified cultural backgrounds acquire a deeper understanding of the similarities and differences of "water" metaphor, it will be beneficial to enhancing people's comprehension of conceptual metaphors, raising people's intercultural awareness and improving people's cross-cultural communication abilities.

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