

Original Paper

A Comparative Study of Love Metaphors in Chinese and English

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Abstract

Metaphor is not only a linguistic phenomenon, but also a cognitive phenomenon of human beings. This paper attempts to compare the similarities and differences between Chinese and English love metaphors, and to explore the factors leading to the similarities and differences. It is found that there are both similarities and differences in Chinese and English love metaphors. The similarities are caused by the common physiological and psychological characteristics, physical and social experiences of human beings. The differences result from the fact that Chinese people and westerners have different cultural experiences, including differences in cultural origins, geographical environments, historical backgrounds, legends and customs, as well as differences in language itself.

Keywords

love, metaphor, conceptual metaphor, metaphorical expressions

1. Introduction

Modern metaphor theory holds that metaphor is not only a linguistic phenomenon, but also a cognitive phenomenon of human beings. People use one concept to express another. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) believe that metaphors are pervasive in daily life and all languages are metaphorical. When describing the abstract thing “love”, people around the world use rich conceptual metaphors. This paper attempts to make a comparative analysis of the similarities and differences between Chinese and English love metaphors, and to explore the deep reasons for the similarities and differences.

2. The Similarities of Chinese and English Love Metaphors

The research of cognitive psychology proves that human cognitive process always develops from the concrete to the abstract and from the known to the unknown. As an abstract concept, love has rich symbolic meanings. There are many conceptual metaphors about love in both English and Chinese.

Because of the common regularities of the mindsets, people around the world look at love from a similar perspective. Therefore, there are many similarities between Chinese and English love metaphors. That is, there are many common source domains in the metaphorical expressions of love in the two languages. They are conceptual mapping processes from the same various source domains to the target domain, which is love. In the following part, we will explore the same love metaphors in Chinese and English with examples.

1) LOVE IS A JOURNEY

English: a. The marriage is on the rocks.

b. This relationship isn't going anywhere.

c. We can't turn back now.

d. We're at a crossroads.

e. Our way lies where God knows.

Chinese: a. 情路艰辛

The journey of love is arduous.

b. 分道扬镳

To go our separate ways

c. 他们风雨同舟，患难与共，一起走过了 30 年的历程。

They share weal and woe and have gone through 30 years of journey together.

2) LOVE IS A CONTAINER

English: a. She was overflowing with love.

b. They fall in love with each other.

c. She is filled with love.

Chinese: a. 坠入爱河

Falling in love

b. 她春心荡漾，像有一种力量在体内冲激，不能控制。

Her heart is fluttering, as if there is an uncontrollable force surging within her body.

3) LOVE IS WAR

English: a. He attacked her, courted her.

b. He overpowered her.

c. He made an ally of her mother.

d. He won her hand in marriage.

Chinese: a. 他终于征服了她的心。

He finally conquered her heart.

b. 他向她进攻，求爱。

He attacked her and begged for love.

4) LOVE IS HEART

English: a. I love you with all my heart.

b. I gave him my heart.

c. He breaks my heart.

Chinese: a. 他俩心心相印。

They are close to each other's heart.

b. 他们两心相悦。

Their hearts are agreeable to each other.

c. 他送我的那颗心，我用爱的缠绵拴紧。

I tied the heart he gave me tightly with my lingering love.

5) LOVE IS MENTAL DISORDER

English: a. I'm crazy about her.

b. He's gone mad over her.

c. I'm insane about her.

Chinese: a. 他们爱得疯狂。

They were madly in love.

b. 恋爱中的女人都是傻子。

Every woman in love is a fool.

6) LOVE IS A PHYSICAL FORCE

English: a. They gravitated to each other immediately.

b. I was magnetically drawn to her.

c. I could feel the electricity between us.

Chinese: a. 她的美貌与气质深深地吸引了他。

Her beauty and temperament attracted him deeply.

b. 我们问，为什么星宿万千，能够亘古同行，不相妨碍？吸力，是吸力把它们牵住——吸力中最强的岂非恋爱？

Why, we ask, can the stars orbit together for eternity without hindering each other? The attraction. It is the attraction that holds them together. Isn't love the strongest attraction?

7) LOVE IS A FLAME

English: a. I am burning with love.

b. She is his latest flame.

c. I don't want to get burned again.

Chinese: a. 你就像那一把火，熊熊火焰照亮了我。

You are like that fire and the blazing flames illuminate me.

b. 爱情不是一颗心去敲打另一颗心，而是两颗心共同撞击的火花。

Love is not one heart beating another heart, but the spark of two hearts hitting together.

8) LOVE IS A DISEASE

English: a. I am heart-sick.

b. It's a tired affair.

c. Their marriage is on the mend.

Chinese: a. 他患了单相思的心病。

He suffers from a heart disease of unrequited love.

b. 爱情是一种病，而且是一种难以治愈的病毒，让我朝思暮想，无法自拔。

Love is a kind of disease, and it is a kind of virus that is difficult to cure, making me yearn for it day and night and unable to extricate myself.

9) LOVE IS MAGIC

English: a. I was entranced by him.

b. He has me in a trance.

Chinese: 她好像有魔力似的，紧紧地吸引着他。

She seems to have a magical power to attract him.

10) LOVE IS UNITY

English: a. We are one.

b. We function as a unit.

Chinese: a. 你是我的另一半，我是你的另一半，我们共同组成一个完整的圆。

You are my other half and I am your other half, so we form a complete circle together.

b. 爱情的魅力在于互爱双方把彼此的一切融为一体，和谐、纯洁又永相依存。

The charm of love lies in the fact that the two lovers merge everything into one, harmonious, pure, and forever dependent on each other.

11) LOVE IS NOURISHMENT

English: a. I am starved for love.

b. He hungered for love.

c. Lovers live by love, as larks live by leeks.

Chinese: a. 爱情，是生活的营养剂，能把原先青黄不接的人生变得生机盎然。

Love is a nutrient of life, which can make the previously dull life full of vitality.

b. 爱情是女人最好的保养品，它能让她的皮肤发光，让她的眼神闪耀，让她的心灵变得更加年轻和活力。

Love is the best skincare product for a woman, which can make her skin glow, her eyes sparkle, and her soul more youthful and energetic.

12) LOVE IS A PLANT

English: a. Our love flowered.

b. Her love keeps growing.

Chinese: a. 爱情就像是一颗种子，没有人知道会长出什么样的花，但是却给整片森林带来了色彩。

Love is like a seed and no one knows what kind of flowers it will grow, but it will bring colors to the whole forest.

b. 甘蔗越吃越甜，爱情越长越深。

Sugarcane becomes sweeter as you eat it, and love grows deeper as it lasts longer.

13) LOVE IS A PRECIOUS THING

English: a. You're my treasure.

b. I paid a lot for so little love.

Chinese: a. 他把自己所有的爱都给了她。

He gave her all his love.

b. 爱情买不到，全靠忠诚换。

You can't buy love, for it's all about loyalty.

14) LOVE IS A BOND

English: The first time I went to church they threw water on my face, and the second time they tied me to a woman I've had to keep ever since.

Chinese: 爱是一把箭，穿得两人心。

Love is an arrow that pierces both hearts.

3. The Characteristic Metaphorical Expressions of Love in Chinese

Due to the differences in culture and thinking patterns, conceptual metaphors have special national and cultural characteristics. The following are some love metaphors that are unique in Chinese.

3.1 Love Is Spring

In Chinese, "spring" is used as a metaphor for love, but the metaphor "LOVE IS SPRING" doesn't exist in English. The following are two examples in Chinese:

a. 忆昔娇小姿，春心亦自恃。

Recalling the time when she was unmarried, she was still a petite girl. Although she had a longing for spring, her spring heart could still hold on to itself.

b. 满园春色关不住，一枝红杏出墙来。

Riotous spring cannot thus be shut in the garden;

There, a red apricot is stretching out of the wall.

"Spring" has the connotative meaning of "love between men and women" or "sexual desire" in Chinese. Although the word "spring" in both Chinese and English has the associative meanings of "being beautiful, happy, sweet, young, and energetic", the Chinese connotative meaning of "spring" in the above examples is missing in the semantic field of "spring" in English (Wang, 2001, p. 160). Therefore, "LOVE IS SPRING" is a unique metaphorical concept in Chinese.

3.2 Love is an Agriculture Product

In Chinese, there are metaphorical concepts such as "love is an agricultural product" or "love is a part of agricultural life". However, westerners rarely use agricultural products as metaphors for love. For example, in Chinese there are:

a. 春蚕到死丝方尽，蜡炬成灰泪始干。

Spring silkworm till its death spins from love-sick heart.

A candle but when burned out has no tears to shed.

(Lu & Xu, 2020, p. 122)

b. 桑之未落，其叶沃若。于嗟鸠兮，无食桑葚！

How fresh were mulberries. With their fruit on the trees!

Beware, O turtledove. Eat not the fruit of love!

(Yan & Xu, 2020, p. 83)

In the two cases, “silkworm” and “mulberry” are used respectively to refer to love, which is closely related to the fact that China has been an agricultural country since ancient times. Although there is also agriculture in Britain, it is not the same as in China. Therefore, English love metaphors related to agricultural production and life are also different from Chinese. For example, in English, there is “bread-and-cheese marriage”, which means poor couple.

3.3 *Love is Water or the Moon*

In Chinese, there are metaphorical concepts such as “LOVE IS THE MOON” and “LOVE IS WATER”, while in English, people use the metaphorical concepts “LOVE IS THE SUN” and “LOVE IS FIRE”. For example:

English: a. the fire of love

b. You're my sunshine.

Chinese: a. 月亮代表我的心。

The moon represents my heart.

b. 爱情是一湖不皱的清水，照得见心头的太阳和月亮。

Love is a lake of unwrinkled water, illuminating the sun and moon in one's heart.

Although the metaphorical concept “LOVE IS FIRE” also exists in Chinese, Chinese prefers to use “moon” and “water” as metaphors for love, while English prefers “fire” and “sun”.

3.4 *Love is Fate*

Chinese people regard marriage as a kind of fate, and people often say that “marriage is destined”, so there is a metaphorical concept “LOVE IS FATE” in Chinese. For example, 千里姻缘一线牵 (A fate match across a thousand miles is drawn by a thread).

In English, marriage is regarded as a kind of bond, so English has the conceptual metaphor “marriage is a durable bond between two people”, as shown in the following examples:

a. Their marriage nearly broke up.

b. Their marriage lasted 60 years.

3.5 *Love is the Unity of Two Inseparable Things*

“The unity of two things” is one of the common sources of love metaphors in both Chinese and English. There exists a metaphorical concept of “love is a whole composed of two parts” in both languages. However, in the process of conceptualization, there are some differences between the two languages. English emphasizes the complementarity of the two parts, that is, “love is a whole of complementary parts”, such as the expressions “She is my better half”, “We are made for each other”. However,

Chinese emphasizes the inseparability of the two parts, that is, “love is two inseparable things”, so there are metaphorical expressions in Chinese as follows:

- a. 上有并蒂莲，下有并根藕。

There are twin lotus flowers on one stalk on the top and twin lotus roots at the bottom.

- b. 他们是一对形影不离的鸳鸯。

They are a pair of inseparable mandarin ducks.

3.6 Metaphorical Expressions Related to Historical Allusions or Conventions

In Chinese, there are some metaphorical expressions related to historical allusions or Chinese traditional conventions, which can make the expressions implicit. The following are some examples:

- a. 红豆生南国，春来发几枝。愿君多采撷，此物最相思。

The red beans grow in southern land.

How many loads in spring the trees?

Gather them till full is your hand;

They would revive fond memories.

(Lu & Xu, 2020, p. 98)

- b. 柔情似水，佳期如梦，忍顾鹊桥归路！两情若是长久时，又岂在朝朝暮暮！

Their tender love flows like a stream.

This happy date seems but a dream alliance between the two families by marriage.

Can they bear a separate homeward way?

If love between both sides can last for aye,

Why need they stay together night and day?

(Wu & Xu, 2020, p. 66)

- c. 倒陪家门，情愿与英雄结婚，成秦晋。

Instead accompanying the family, she was willing to marry the hero and form a lifelong alliance between the two families by marriage.

- d. 结发为夫妻，恩爱两不疑。

To knot the hair together and become a husband and wife, without doubting their love and affection.

The above expressions have special historical and cultural background, which are unique to Chinese language and culture. To understand the connotations of them, one must know the related historical allusions or customs.

In the first example, “red bean” is also known as “jequirity”, which is a symbol of the love or lovesickness of couples or lovers. According to the Chinese legend, once upon the time, a woman cried and died under a red bean tree, for she missed her husband who died in the frontier.

In the second example, the Chinese poet uses “Magpie Bridge” as a metaphor, which also originates from an ancient Chinese legend. According to the legend, the Cowherd and the Weaving Maid, who were once a happy couple, are now separated by the Milky Way. They can meet only once in a year on

the night of Chinese Valentine's Day when magpies fly together to form a bridge over the Milky Way. In the third example, “a lifelong alliance between the two families by marriage” originates from the Chinese historical allusion of the alliance and reconciliation between the Qin state and the Jin state during the Spring and Autumn Period.

In the fourth example, “Knot hair” comes from an ancient Chinese marriage custom. In ancient China, the newlyweds' hair is tied together at the wedding ceremony to bless their lasting marriage.

4. Reasons for the Similarities and Differences between Chinese and English Love Metaphors

4.1 Reasons for the Similarities

Modern metaphor theory holds that metaphor is essentially a cognitive phenomenon, which is a result and tool of human cognitive activities. It is a cognitive activity in which human beings use the experience of one field to explain or understand the experience of another field (Shu, 2003, p. 28). Lakoff (1987) defines metaphor as the conceptualization of another domain by an independent domain. “Conceptual metaphors are systematic mappings across conceptual domains: one domain of experience, the source domain, is mapped into another domain of experience, the target domain” (Ning, 1998, p. 138). He points out that the structures that make up our conceptual system are derived from our own experiences, and that the core of our conceptual system is directly derived from our experiences of perception, physical movement and social nature. Therefore, our understanding and interpretation of metaphors should be traced back to our personal experiences.

4.1.1 The Same Physiological and Psychological Bases

It is found that the same metaphorical concepts of love in Chinese and English are rooted in the same physiological and psychological bases of human beings. For example, both in Chinese and English, love is conceptualized as a container. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that human conceptual system is largely based on ontological metaphors, and container metaphors are the most typical ontological metaphors. Each of us is a container, and people project this concept to things outside the human body. Thus, there is the metaphorical concept “LOVE IS A CONTAINER”. Similar examples can also be found in English and Chinese. For example, Zoltan and Koveces compare the words for anger in English, Hungarian, Japanese, and Chinese, and find that the words for anger in the four languages all refer to the human body as a “container”, from which anger is a “gas” or “fire” that “erupts” (quoted in Shu, 2003, p. 217).

The commonness of Chinese and English love metaphors stems from the common psychological base of human beings. Chinese and westerners have similar feelings about love, so they all compare love to mental disorders, fire, disease and so on.

4.1.2 The Same Physical and Social Experience

The commonalities of physical and social experience lead to similar metaphorical expressions in English and Chinese. People of different nationalities live in the same world and share many of the same physical experiences. When describing abstract things, metaphorical thinking helps people

transform abstract things into concrete things, understand and experience unknown abstract things through concrete experiences. “LOVE IS A JOURNEY”, “LOVE IS WAR”, “LOVE IS A PHYSICAL FORCE”, “LOVE IS MAGIC” and other common metaphorical concepts in both Chinese and English are derived from the same physical and social experience. Take the metaphorical concept “LOVE IS WAR” for example. People of different nationalities have the same feelings about wars. In a war, there is losing and winning; there is attack and defense; there is conquest and being conquered, and there may be war alliances. These same experiences have led people of different nationalities to produce the same metaphorical expressions when talking about love. This shows that human beings have the common ways of thinking, perspectives and cognitive models when it comes to love.

4.2 Reasons for the Differences

The differences of cultural experience are the cause of the differences between Chinese and English love metaphors, Metaphor is a tool of human cognition, which is rooted in language, thinking and culture. Allan (quoted in Wang, 2004, p. 60) believes that although our physical sensations give us a starting point to experience the society, our perception of the world varies according to various cultures. “The source domains of some metaphors not only reflect the cultural characteristics of the language, but also form part of the culture” (Zhang, 2000, p. 31). Human perception of the world cannot be independent of specific culture and society, so the metaphorical conceptual systems of different cultures are inevitably different.

4.2.1 Differences in Cultural Origins

Chinese culture is deeply influenced by Buddhism and Taoism. In Chinese love metaphors, the Yin and Yang theory in Taoist philosophy is particularly prominent. According to *Yi Chuan*, an ancient Chinese philosophical and ethical work, *yin* and *yang* are two contradictory forces and properties that exist in the universe. Anything rigid, hot, upward, outward, bright, strong, etc., is *yin*, while anything soft, cold, downward, inward, dark, weak, etc., is *yang*. In Chinese culture, *yang* is often used to refer to men and *yin* is used to refer to women. Male and female, like *yin* and *yang* in nature, are opposite, interdependent, and inseparable. This idea emphasizes harmony under the unity of opposites. Therefore, when describing love, Chinese focuses on the harmonious beauty of pairs, using mandarin ducks, phoenixes, double swallows, twin birds (a mythical creature in ancient Chinese mythology) and so on. Moreover, the philosophical thought of “Yin theory” in the philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi in Chinese traditional culture is one of the contributing factors of Chinese preferring to use “moon” and “water” as metaphors for love. Chinese people believe that love is beauty of femininity, so they use the moon and water classified as *yin* to describe love.

In addition, the Taoist concept of predestined fate also affects the Chinese people's views on love and marriage. Marriage is regarded as a kind of fate; therefore, in Chinese, there is the metaphorical concept “LOVE IS FATE”.

Different from traditional Chinese culture, Western culture originates from Greco-Roman culture, Judeo-Christian culture and modern industrialism. In English, the metaphorical concept “love is a

whole of two complementary parts” is heavily influenced by the myth of Adam and Eve in the Bible. In this myth, a woman is seen as a rib of a man. Thus, English metaphorically refers to the man and woman in love as two complementary parts. In English, marriage is seen as a contract due to the Roman culture's emphasis on human value and individualism.

It can be seen that the differences between the Eastern and Western cultural experience are major factors leading to the differences in metaphorical thinking between Chinese and westerners.

4.2.2 Differences in Geographical Environment and Historical Background

Language is rooted in the social and natural environment, and various languages have been affected to some extent by the unique natural environment (Wen, 2001, p. 127). Located in the Eastern Hemisphere, China's territory is mainly land, and the Chinese people have relied on agriculture for their livelihood since ancient times. Therefore, there is the metaphorical concept in Chinese “LOVE IS AN AGRICULTURAL PRODUCT”. On the contrary, the UK is in the north temperate zone, which is an island country with an unfavorable climate for crops. Its agriculture is different from that of China. Its crops are mainly wheat, so the staple food of British people is milk and bread. Accordingly, there is a metaphorical expression “bread-and-cheese marriage” in English.

From a historical point of view, the differences in metaphorical thinking between Chinese and English are also resulted from the historical differences to a certain extent. The Chinese nation had experienced the feudal system for more than two thousand years. Under the imprisonment of the feudal ethics, the expression of love is implicit and euphemistic. Britain has gone through the feudal aristocracy era, the Renaissance era and the bourgeois revolution era, so British people are more extrovert when expressing feelings. As a result, the Chinese people prefer to use gentle and soft things, such as “moon” and “water” to mean love, while English use “fire”, “sun” and other passionate things to refer to love.

4.2.3 Differences in Legends, Allusions and Customs

Differences in legends, allusions and customs are another contributing factor of the differences between Chinese and English love metaphors. Legends and allusions are usually unique to a language and culture, with strong national characteristics. This makes some words of the language have the national and cultural connotations related to the culture of the nation. The metaphorical expressions given in section 3.6 are all based on allusions and customs peculiar to Chinese language and culture. In Chinese, “spring” is used as a metaphor for love, but there is no such metaphorical expression in English, which is precisely because “spring” in Chinese has the meaning of “love between men and women” or “sexual desire”, while the English equivalent “spring” has no such connotations. Language is a carrier of culture. When people use these historical allusions or customs to describe love, the metaphors used will in turn bear the special national and cultural connotations.

4.2.4 Differences in Language Itself

Language is a system combining sound and meaning. Every language has its own phonetic and semantic features. There are some differences between English and Chinese in the phonetic and semantic features of words. In Chinese, some love metaphors are based on the relationship between the

sounds and the meanings of some words by using homophony. For example, in Chinese, "silk" is used as a metaphor for love, because the Chinese character 丝 (*si*) which means silk and 思 (*si*) which means miss have the same pronunciation. The famous line written by Li Shangyin, a famous poet in Ancient China, "Spring silkworm till its death spins from love-sick heart", expresses the deep longing and endless love for someone. Another example is the use of "lotus" as a metaphor for love in Chinese, because the pronunciation of the Chinese characters 莲 (*lian*) which means lotus and 恋 (*lian*) which means love is the same.

5. Conclusion

Chinese and English love metaphors have both similarities and differences. There are several common source domains in the metaphorical expressions about love in the two languages, because the Chinese people and westerners have the same physiological and psychological bases, physical and social experiences. Therefore, the mindsets of people who speak Chinese and English are similar. The differences of love metaphors in the two languages are caused by the different cultural experience, which in turn leads to the different ways of thinking. The comparative study of Chinese and English love metaphors can help us discover the commonalities and differences in thinking between Chinese people and westerners as well as the different cultural backgrounds behind the differences, which will help us better understand metaphors.

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