

## *Original Paper*

# A Cognitive Comparison of Color Metaphors in Chinese and English

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### **Abstract**

*In interaction with the world, human beings categorize and code colors perceived by their visual systems. Color words are often used metaphorically to express and understand the concepts of non-color domains. The research aims to explore the similarities and dissimilarities of metaphors in Chinese and English through examining the target domains (emotion, politics and economy domains) onto which Chinese “红” and English “red” map. It is found that there are more differences than similarities in metaphorical meanings between Chinese and English. The motivations behind these metaphorical meanings are also analyzed. The research could shed light on language acquisition, cross-cultural communication and foreign language teaching.*

### **Keywords**

*conceptual metaphor, cognitive motivation, color metaphor, mapping*

## **1. Introduction**

We human live in a world of color, black or white, red or green. We acknowledge that color is closely related to us and an indispensable part of our life. Langacker (1987) states that color domain, just like time, space and emotion domains, is one of the most essential cognitive domains in language. Human cognition of color in life is reflected in the color words of various languages. Different words and expressions have been created by people from given cultures and communities to describe a great variety of things in their languages. Color words derive from human interaction with the world through their visual systems and perceptions, in the process of which they employ their cognitive ability to categorize and code colors perceived by their visual system.

There is a large number of color words across world languages. These words, over time, are not only used to describe the objective real world, but more often to represent language, society, culture and

even human emotion in a metaphorical way. The latter is referred to as color metaphor, which is ubiquitous in our daily language and employed to describe and understand abstract concepts and represent indescribable feeling and experience (Liu, 2014).

Heretofore, many researchers have been interested in color words and have conducted much research on them from different perspectives. However, majority of the available literature, at least to the best of my knowledge, is concerned with the cultural connotations and characteristics of color words, or make a simple analysis of cultural differences between different languages, such as such as Chen (2003) and Luo (2016), leaving open the cognitive motivations behind cultural connotations of different color words.

Therefore, the present research is to refine the previous research by making a comparative study on the metaphorical mappings of Chinese “红” and English “red” to reveal the cognitive motivations behind these metaphorical usages of red color. The research is argued to provide a better understanding of the essence of color metaphor in Chinese and English and promote the cross-cultural communication between China and English-spoken countries.

## **2. Review of Previous Studies**

### *2.1 Metaphor*

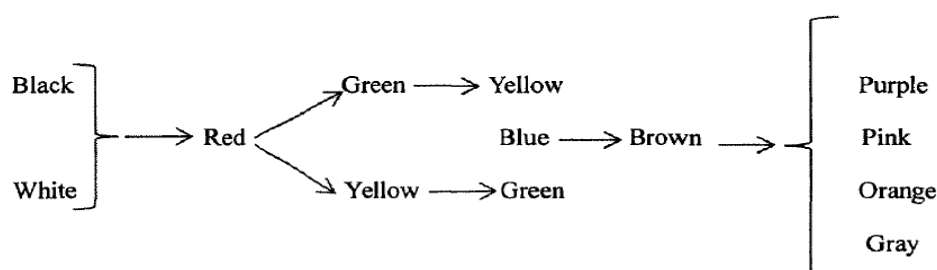
The study of metaphor can be dated back to the seminal work of Aristotle who has claimed that “metaphor is the application of foreign names by transference from genus to species, from species to genus, from species to species, or through analogy” (Aristotle, 2013). This definition assumes that metaphor is merely a sort of poetic imagination or a rhetorical device of certain language based on the similarity and comparison between two entities. Such assumption has profoundly influenced the following study of metaphor for more than two thousand years. However, this was challenged by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) who have argued that metaphor is viewed as not only a rhetoric device but also a way of thinking. According to them, metaphor permeates daily life not only in language, but also in thought and activity. The ordinary conceptual system through which we think and act is essentially metaphorical. Since then, scholars have increasingly admitted that metaphor is more a way of thinking and cognitive means for human daily life than only a rhetorical device in language alone (Kövecses, 2010; Lakoff, 1993; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Yu, 2004, 2016). This way of thinking and cognitive means is closely related to human experience. Human beings, through thinking, connect two different but correlated cognitive domains and achieve an understanding of the abstract target domain based on their understanding of the source domain. That is, metaphor is a means of understanding one thing in terms of another through partially mapping the salient structure of the source domain onto the target domain (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999).

### *2.2 Color Category Theory*

Color words are linguistic forms used to describe the color of things. Human beings have learned about colors through a series of physiological and psychological activities. Thus, the study of color words to

some extent is a bridge to explore the relationship between language and cognition. However, colors are not inherent in objects themselves but are scientifically the sensation produced by various light rays in the eyes after the decomposition of white light, or the effect produced by light with a specific wavelength or mixed light. That is, people only rely on the degree of light reflected on the surface of objects and their sensory organs to obtain color vision.

The study of color can be traced back to 2000 years ago in English-spoken countries. Traditionally, Plato and Aristotle tend to be regarded as the pioneers of the study on color and color words. However, a new age of color study has begun due to the work by Berlin and Kay (1969) who have proposed after his investigation of color words in 98 languages that there are universally 11 basic colors in each language and they are acquired by any culture in a fixed order. The development order of colors is proposed as shown in Figure 1:



**Figure 1. Development Sequence of Basic Color Words (Berlin & Kay, 1969)**

The figure clearly shows that black and white are the earliest colors, implying they are the universal colors in all languages. Then comes red, implying that if a language has three colors, they should be black, white and red. Then they are followed by green and yellow. Following this line of hierarchy, “Red” in English and “红” in Chinese are basic colors and are frequently used color words in the two languages. Thus it can be a good example to examine the similarities and differences of color metaphors between Chinese and English.

### 2.3 Color Metaphor

Metaphors have a cognitive function of organizing human conceptual systems and guiding human experience, which has a significant impact on human thinking. When we use color categories to express and explain categories in other cognitive domains, we form color metaphorical cognition. In such case, the colors are the source domains and the non-colors domains onto which certain structures of colors are mapped are the target domains. For example, in both Chinese and English, when red is used to describe a person’s anger like “red faced”, “anger” is a color metaphor derived from the mapping of the source domain “red” to the target emotion domain “anger”, which is a shared experience by English and Chinese that one bodily response when he gets angry is his face becomes red. There is a widespread mapping in language from the color domain to non-color domains, like reasoning, spirit, quality, mentality, and so on (Cheng, 2006). And these metaphorical expressions have become routine

and fixed in language due to people's long-term repeated use.

From a cognitive perspective, nature is colorful, and humans have artificially created many colors based on the external colors they have already encountered. Therefore, there are a huge number of color words, and many scholars have only selected basic color words or focal color words in Chinese and English for comparison. These color words are typical members of various color categories. Due to the different understandings of these colors between Eastern and Western ethnic groups, different metaphors have emerged. Scholars have compared and analyzed the commonly used meanings of these color words, such as Chen (2003) and Luo (2016), who have conducted color metaphor comparisons. But they rarely analyze the differences in metaphorical cognition, and still stay at analyzing the different cultural metaphorical meanings of color words. In recent years, there have been some literature on the analysis of metaphorical meanings of color words in Chinese and English but they focus only on color words in either Chinese or English without making comparisons. For example, Xu and Tian (2020) has analyzed the target domains onto which color word "Green" can map, but they have focused only on the color word "绿" in Chinese. The present research will examine the similarities and differences of target domains onto which "red" map in Chinese and English from the cognitive linguistic perspective.

### 3. Color Metaphors in Chinese and English

According to *Longman Advanced American Dictionary* (Xu, 2003), "red" as an adjective or a noun is defined as "(having) the color of blood". The sixth edition of *Contemporary Chinese Dictionary* (Shen & Song, 2014) defines "红" as "a color resembling fresh blood". It is implied that "红" and "red" similarly refer to the color of a specific thing from a cognitive perspective. This literal meaning can be identified as the prototype meaning of "red" belonging to the category of color domain, which functions as the source domain of red metaphor, from which some properties are mapped onto emotion, politics, economy and state domains which are analyzed in details in this section.

#### 3.1 Emotion Domain

In metaphorical structures, humans tend to associate two things in different cognitive domains relying on their resemblance (Sun, 2013), and use interactive perception of the two things to express their true feelings towards objective reality.

##### 3.1.1 Happiness

In the human cognitive domain, "fire" is assumed to be the unity of light and heat which can bring warmth and light to people. The warm imagery of "red" in English is projected onto festive occasions, expressing people's excitement and joy. For example, in English, "red letter day" refers to an important commemorative or festive day, such as Christmas Day and other special days. "Red carpet" refers to welcoming and a red carpet tends to be rolled for distinguished visitors as a sign of welcome.

Comparatively speaking, "红" (Chinese red) is more highly favored by the Chinese nation for its rich content. Tracing back to the origin of Chinese culture, the sentiment towards red originates from the

instinctive attachment and worship of the sun by ancient Chinese people who believe that the scorching sun is like fire and its color is red, which brings happiness and warmth to people, so red has become a color of festive in China. Thus, the expressions are more diverse and colorful, with red as the main decoration for occasions such as weddings, festivals, and celebrations. For instance, when people get married, a red “囍 (double happiness)” is posted on the doors and windows; the house is decorated with red candles; the bride wears a red dress and marriage is also known as “红事 (red ceremony)”. Put it simply, “红” is the popular color on the wedding ceremony. In this sense, “红” has also developed into a symbol of “love”. On the contrary, in English red seems to have nothing to do with wedding ceremony where the groom traditionally wears black suit and the brides wears white dress.

### 3.1.2 Anger, Embarrassment and Envy

Traditionally, emotions can be classified into positive and negative emotions. The former is mainly composed of happiness, joy and excitement and the latter is primarily composed of anger, embarrassment and envy. This subsection is concerned with the target domains of negative emotions.

When people are shy, nervous, or excited, they reflexively stimulate the sympathetic nervous system in the human body, which accelerates the heartbeat, dilates capillaries, and causes facial flushing, i.e. the red face. This is in a close relationship with the embodied experience of both Chinese and English people, which motivates people to associate “红脸 (flushed face)” and “red face” with certain emotions, like anger, shyness, embarrassment. Therefore, there are some similar expressions in both Chinese and English. “The thought of being cheated made her see red” implies “she was very angry”. “She was red with shame” also used “red face” to express her embarrassment and shame. The Chinese idioms “面红耳赤 (red face and flushed ears)” and “脸红脖子粗 (red face and thick neck)” both mean somebody is red with anger.

Although Chinese and English have the same metaphorical meaning of red face, they differ in the metaphorical uses of “red eyes”. In Chinese, when people are jealous, their eyes often turn red with anger, and the symptoms of “红眼病 (red eye disease)” such as “eye congestion and redness” are just similar to those of people who are jealous, and “red eye disease” can also be said to be “眼热 (eye heat)” in traditional Chinese medicine, which is also very similar to the feelings of people when they are jealous, and “heat” is also directly related to red. Therefore, the “红眼 (red eyes)” is usually employed in Chinese to represent one’s envy and jealousy. Surprisingly, there is no such expression in English, where “green” carries the meaning of envy and the idiom “green eyed” is often employed to show some one is very envious and jealous. One explanation for such difference is provided by Nie (2017), who has attributed this dissimilarity to the green paper money in English countries. But I argue that another reason may be that it is originated from *Othello*, a classical work by Shakespeare, who describes the envy as a “green-eyed monster”.

### 3.2 Politics and Power Domain

The color “red” can also be mapped onto politics and power domains in both Chinese and English. “红” is a symbol of high status and power in ancient China. It is a color common to ancient Chinese palaces

and official residences of dignitaries, symbolizing wealth and authority. For example, the royal court painted in vermilion is also called “彤庭 (red court)”; the pillars in front of the palace are called “赤阙 (red pillars)”; the red steps are called “丹墀 (red steps)” and the gate of the house building for a high-ranking official used to be painted red, earning its name as “朱门 (red door)”. Additionally, the robes that officials wear also have different colors to show the different ranking of officials. The top-three ranking officials wear the purple robes, the fourth and fifth ranking wearing bright red, the rest can't wear anything red at all. Inheriting from this history and culture, the documents issued by the government in modern China are usually known as “red header document” due to the fact that the title of the header document is often printed in red.

On the contrary, “red” in English seems to have much fewer and even more negative metaphorical meaning occurring in politics and power domains. For example, in English culture, stemming from the custom that government agencies often use red or pink tape to bind official documents, “red tape” has become a symbol of excessive regulation or bureaucratic style, which tend to impede decision-making. In addition, “红” in China has also become a symbol of progress, socialism and revolution since Marxism and Leninism were introduced into China. The new China is a red regime. Red army is the force of liberating people from oppression. The flag for China is a red flag. In English, red is also linked with socialism and communism, but there is different sentiment orientation among English people, who are opposed to something red in political systems. That is, English people consider red as a symbol of horror and extremeness, like in the expression “red terrorism” and “red battle”. One possible explanation for this derogatory sense may derive from the tradition that in the traditional bullfight in the west, matadors often shake the eye-catching red cloth to provoke bulls. But the fundamental reason for this could lie in the properties of “red” which attract the attention of English people. As mentioned earlier in this research, in both English and Chinese, “红” and “red” are defined as the color of blood, but for English people, they focus on the bloody scenes such as death, violence, or war, whereas Chinese people focus on the results they could get through death and bleeding.

Consequently, the same color is endowed with different concepts, having quite contrastive metaphorical meanings in politics and power domain.

### 3.3 Economy Domain

For a long time, red has been favored by the Chinese nation, which stems from the ancient people's instinctive dependence and worship of the sun. The scorching sun provides bright and warm with people and brings vitality to all things. Therefore, the conceptual meaning of the color word “red” is also mapped onto economic life. It is used to refer to economic prosperity, rich profits, smooth success, and being valued by people, such as “红红火火” referring to prosperous and booming; “开门红” symbolizing a good and fortune beginning of a company or a shop; “红人” implying someone who is valued by boss or his superiors and “网红” showing someone who is popular across the Internet. In a word, “红” is associated with prosperity, success and profits.

Whereas in English, the metaphorical meaning of “red” is quite the opposite. “Red cent” means

someone who has little money; “be in the red” means someone in debt deficit. In Chinese, “赤” is used to express the lack of money and economic losses, such as “赤贫如洗 (which is used to describe someone who is extremely poor)” and “赤字 (deficit)”. Here be reminded that in Chinese, “红” and “赤” represent the same color, but they are opposite in their metaphorical meanings. In a word, the color “red” has completely different metaphorical meanings when it is mapped onto economics domain in Chinese and English.

#### 4. Conclusion

Experiential philosophy is the basis of cognitive linguistics, that is, human beings recognize more abstract and complex things based on the direct experience formed in interaction with the surrounding world. This research examines the similarities and dissimilarities of metaphorical meanings through examining the target domains onto which the color “red” in Chinese and English map. It is found that the differences between the metaphorical meanings are greater than the similarities. Based on human cognitive experience of fire, sun and other natural objects, English and Chinese people have similar emotional experience of “red”. However, language is the carrier of culture, and the languages of all ethnic groups deeply reflect the cultural brand of their own nation. When English and Chinese people cognize the metaphor of “red” color words, they are influenced by their own traditional culture, religious beliefs, political background and so on. Consequently, the same color derives unique meaning or has opposite meanings in the target domains. The metaphorical meaning of “red” in Chinese is mostly positive, while it is predominantly negative in English. This difference shows the different cultural accumulation and distinctive cultural characteristics of English and Chinese nations. Analysis of the differences in the metaphorical meanings of “red” in English and Chinese can play a positive role in language acquisition, cross-cultural communication and foreign language teaching.

Undoubtedly, the present research is not complete and further research is needed in the future. For example, the research is only concerned with three target domains the color mapped. It is reasonable to believe that there should be more domains onto which the color can map since the color plays a basic role in our life. Therefore, the future research could analyze more target domains of color words to provide more reliable findings.

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