

A Contrastive Study of Food Metaphor in Chinese and English Language

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Abstract: Metaphor is considered by cognitive linguists as a fundamental tool of human beings to cognate their physical and social surroundings. Based on the Conceptual Metaphor Theory of Lakoff and Johnson, this paper compares and contrasts the food metaphors existing in English and Chinese languages based on different categories and four types of source-target domain relations, and then attempts to conclude the similarities and differences between the food metaphors in both languages.

Keywords: cross-cultural study; conceptual metaphor; translation study

1. Introduction

Traditionally, metaphors are deemed as special ornaments to language, making it less plain and literal. However, advocates of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson 1980) proposed that conceptual metaphors, like ARGUMENTATION IS WAR, are a more systematic and abstract cognitive process rather than the various linguistic metaphoric expressions to realize the more basic and abstract notion. Our conceptual system is metaphorical, meaning that when we attempt to comprehend or construct something abstract, unfamiliar, or novel, we like to draw on our past experiences or previous realities that are real, concrete, or familiar to us. The conceptual metaphors occur between two domains: the concepts of the source domain can be mapped onto the concepts of the target domain.

According to Lakoff, experiential realism characterizes meaning in terms of embodiment, that is, in terms of our collective biological capacities and our physical and social experiences as beings functioning in our environment.

Among all the existential realities, food is one of the most vital and fundamental domains across all regions, religions, or races, which proves to be a natural and convenient vehicle for people to utilize with a view to symbolize themselves, or other things. In everyday communication, every aspect of food is frequently and extensively employed to serve as a source domain. Besides, the organization of food is systematic and the food habit or ritual may find some similarities among all cultures and societies. Hence, it is conductible to probe into the comparison of food metaphors globally. However, despite of the pervasiveness of conceptual metaphors in each society, sometimes they rely heavily on the cultural context to be fully comprehended by people from different cultural background, which can pose serious obstacles for Chinese EFL learners in their cross-cultural communication between Chinese and English cultures or their translation tasks given that these two cultures embody extensive differences.

Recent studies in cognitive linguistics have seen a large amount of research regarding food metaphors. However, more systematic contrastive studies are advocated to examine not only the linguistic differences between two languages, but also the cultural and psychological differences between two cultures behind languages, given that food is a qualified metaphor to symbolize various concepts or notions related to emotion, idea, relation or personal identity, which may give birth to fruitful outcomes. This paper attempts to explore on how food metaphors are constructed in two languages and what cultural implication may arise from this contrastive study.

2. Comparative analysis of food as source domain in English and Chinese

Food is a broad topic comprising various elements, from the shapes and sizes, the act of eating or drinking, the way food is cooked, people's appetite, organs in human body to digest or hold food, to the importance or value of food to human beings. Thus, this part is to elaborate on these points respectively.

2.1 Food taste, shape, or size as source domain

Studies have shown that the taste of food are closely associated with emotions by people. When they attempt to express their emotions, they resort to the specific descriptions of different tastes of food, e.g., sweet for happiness, bitter for sadness and sour for jealousy.

2.2 Act of eating or drinking

It is very interesting to shift attention on the human body and the way it functions as a fundamental source domain when striving to comprehend things that are more abstract and less basic (John Newman, 1997). Therefore, it is of vital importance to inspect how human body takes care of what it takes in. The whole "eat or drink" act is a continuous process of acts including inhaling, cutting, grinding, digesting, etc. Here, the basic metaphor THOUGHT IS FOOD is employed for people to talk about the process of thinking about, comprehending and accepting an idea.

It is noted that in Chinese, there are abundant use of the Chinese character "吃 (eat)" to help construct metaphoric concepts. Yang (2004) concludes that "吃" can construct four basic conceptual metaphors in Chinese including "EATING IS RELYING" in the example of "吃老本 (to eat off the old capital)" meaning to count on or sit on the previous achievement, "EATING IS OBTAINING" in the example of "吃回扣 (to eat the kickback)", "EATING IS SUFFERING" in the example of "吃苦 (to eat the bitterness)" meaning to suffer the difficulties in life, "EATING IS BEARING" as the example of "吃力 (to eat the strength)" meaning to do something that is strenuous physically or mentally, and "EATING IS DESTROYING" like the example "吃你的车 (to eat your war chariots)" meaning to destroy your chariot in the Chinese chess game.

2.3 Pronunciation of food

The differences in cooking method also lead to the distinctive conceptualization process of two cultures, which to some extent generates marked differences in their respective food metaphors. In China, people like to stir fry with strong heat and stew with soy sauce while in the Western countries, people prefer to bake or grill.

In Chinese, the pronunciation of certain characters can generate auspicious meanings, like saying “年年有鱼(余)(May you have fish for the next year/May you have prosperity for the next year)” when paying relatives a visit in the Spring Festival; displaying “枣”“生”“桂”“子”(date, peanut, longan and melon seeds) to express best wishes to a newlywed couple with the similar sound as “早生贵子”(may you have a baby soon)” in Chinese. The list goes on as “汤圆(tangyuan: rice dumpling)” for “团圆(tuanyuan: reunion)”, “苹果(pingguo: apple)” for “平安(ping'an: safety)”, “米糕(mi gao: rice cake)” for “步步高升(bubu gao sheng: advance to a higher position)”.

3. Contrastive study of food metaphors in two languages

3.1 Same source domain and same target domain

[E] sour grape (referring to a type of mindset where people think less of or undervalue things that they cannot or fail to obtain so that they may ease their feeling of loss and acknowledge the truth)

[C] “酸葡萄”

[E] hot girl (referring to a female with sexy appearance)

[C] “辣妹”

[E] fruitful (producing good results)

[C] 硕果累累

3.2 Same source domain and different target domain

Sometimes, food, which are common in both cultures, can convey very different metaphoric meanings, as in the following examples:

[E] lemon (an ill-conditioned second-hand car with a lot of problems)

[E] when life gives you lemons, make lemonade (to encourage a person to ignore the setbacks present and adopt a positive outlook)

[C] “柠檬精”(a lemon elf: referring to a person who is too envious about other peoples' appearance, living standard or romantic relationships)

[E] have a sweet tooth (have a propensity and preference for sugary food)

[C] “嘴很甜”(to say words that sound pleasant to others)

3.3 Different source domain and same target domain

It means in both languages, the target domain is the same while the two languages employ the different words or phrases as the source domain.

[E] my cup of tea

[C] “我的菜”(my dish)

In Britain, people have their tea made in different ways according to their own taste: they may choose whether to add sugar or milk, or just have a normal black tea while in China, tea is served without any extra additive. So phrase “my cup of tea” is specifically referred to someone's favorite thing or way of doing things in English.

[E] bread and butter

[C] “吃这口饭的”(describing someone destined to obtain cooked rice through his unique talent)

In English, people use “bread and butter” to refer to one's core skills to sustain oneself or make a living because in the western world, bread is a necessity while in China, the same symbolic implication can be derived from the above expressions “吃这口饭的” with “rice” in it, referring to someone who has a knack for something so he can be well off on that. It is noted that in Chinese, expressions containing characters “米(rice)” and “饭(cooked rice)” have appeared frequently just as the “bread” and “potato” in English, which is not a surprising phenomenon given that in two societies the staple food is sharply differentiated. In Chinese, expressions with “米” or “饭” include “吃软饭(to eat soft rice)” meaning to totally live off a woman, “吃大锅饭(to eat from a large wok)” meaning that everyone can get the same salary regardless of their workload and “要饭(to ask for rice)” meaning to beg strangers in the street for food or money.

3.4 Different source domain and different target domain

[E] have one's cake and eat it too

[C] “鱼和熊掌不可兼得”(One cannot choose to have fish and bear's paw at the same time and they must choose one over the other.)

In English, “have one's cake and eat it too” indicates a situation where someone wants to have more than his fair share. It is often used to indicate the unlikelihood of realization of someone's contradictory thoughts while in Chinese, the expression “鱼和熊掌不可兼得” more sounds like sincere words of advice to other people that they should think twice before making a choice because it may determine what kind of a person he is.

Conclusion

Metaphors are employed linguistic expressions by human being to comprehend abstract concepts through concrete concepts or to describe novel experience through previous life experience. The metaphorical thinking mode of human beings and the sharing of common

living experience across different cultures results in the pervasiveness of similar metaphors in some cultures. However, at the same time, metaphors are culture-laden, indicating they also function as a reflection of different culture elements in a society including their values, thoughts, rituals, etc. which may lead to the marked differences of some expressions across cultures and pose an impediment for ESL learners.

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