Critical Metaphor Analysis in Emily Dickinson’s Poems

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Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA) is usually used to analyze metaphors in various discourse to reveal the emotion, attitude and thoughts behind metaphors. In the present thesis, Emily Dickinson’s poems are analyzed in terms of the theory of Critical Metaphor Analysis, which reveals the working mechanism of metaphors, metaphorical implications as well as the cognitive factors behind the choice of metaphors in Emily Dickinson’s poems.

Keywords: conceptual metaphor, critical metaphor analysis, Emily Dickinson, poem

Introduction

Critical Metaphor Analysis is a powerful tool to analyze metaphors, which was proposed by Charteris-Black in 2004. It integrates Critical Discourse Analysis and Conceptual Metaphor Theory with corpus-based analysis method, pragmatic research as well as cognitive linguistic research. It is usually used to analyze metaphors in political discourses, government reports, business financial reports, news reports and so on, which can reveal the ideology behind metaphors. Therefore, Critical Metaphor Analysis has been widely conducted in different texts abroad and in China because of its powerful applicability. However, the study of poetry from the perspective of Critical Metaphor Analysis is much fewer than those of political discourses, government and news reports, or business reports.

Emily Dickinson is one of America’s greatest and most original poets of all time, and her poems are full of novel metaphors, which mostly have been studied in a rhetorical way or under the guidance of Conceptual Metaphor Theory. These studies mainly concern the features and working mechanism of the metaphor itself, but the cognitive reasons behind Emily Dickinson’s choices of metaphors in her poems are rarely studied.

In this study, sixteen poems are selected from the translation works of Emily Dickinson’s poems translated by Zhou Jianxin (2013). These poems are classified by the themes they reflect—nature, love and death. The metaphors selected are sorted and analyzed in detail according to the theme of the poems. The metaphors in Emily Dickinson’s poems will be analyzed from the perspective of Critical Metaphor Analysis, which aims to interpret the working mechanism of metaphors in her poems and explain the cognitive factors behind the choices of metaphors.
Literature Review

Charteris-Black (2004) integrates the research method of Critical Discourse Analysis and Conceptual Metaphor Theory and has proposed a new approach of Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA). CMA is a useful tool to analyze metaphors in political discourse, news discourse and so on. Maalej (2007) states that pervasiveness, cognitive unconsciousness, psychological reality and product-process nature of conceptual metaphor are mostly close to the core of CDA. Dirk Geeraerts (2007) has done a lot of researches on CMA from different perspectives, either in sociology or historical change of metaphors. Musoff (2012) stresses the difference of conceptual metaphor in traditional metaphor theory and the concept of metaphor in CDA theory.

Zhang Lixin (2014) explores the function of metaphor from the pragmatic and cognitive aspects. He studies many metaphors in political and economic areas, holding that metaphor helps construct political and economic activities. Zhang Hui and Yang Yanqin (2019) have studied metaphor from the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis and cognitive linguistics. Wang Hui (2019) and Zhao Yonghua (2021) apply CMA to political and news discourses, which aims to reveal the attitude, emotion and ideology behind linguistic expressions. As we can see, although there are some achievements on the application of CMA, yet the employment of CMA in poetry is rare.

Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1870) is the first scholar to study Emily Dickinson’s Poems and he focuses on the poetic features of her poems. And then many other scholars are mainly concerned on the theme, prosody and style of her poems. In 1970s, critics try to analyze Emily Dickinson’s poems from the perspective of psychology, phenomenology, or feminism. Margaret H. Freeman (1995) suggests that we need to study the metaphors in her poems in order to get a deeper understanding of the way she structures her experience of life. He shows the power of the metaphors by using schema theory to analyze the working mechanism of metaphor, which can help readers understand the psychology and cognition of Emily Dickinson. Margaret H. Freeman (2021) also asserts the advantages of reading Emily’s poems from a cognitive perspective.

Chinese scholars have studied her poems by doing translation work. Jiang Feng (1996) is one of the earliest translators to introduce her poetry to Chinese readers in journals and books. Later on, many domestic studies focus on the following five aspects: the theme, the art style, the source of influence, the analysis of translation and the comprehensive review. Although many aspects have been studied, more new aspects need to be explored in her poems from a cognitive perspective, for instance, the cognitive factors behind the choice of metaphors.

Critical Metaphor Analysis in Emily Dickinson’s Poems

In this section we will identify the major metaphors in Emily Dickinson’s poems and then explain their metaphorical implications.

Metaphor Identification and Interpretation

In Emily Dickinson’s poems, there are many metaphors which are used to describe nature, her strong feeling of love and the theme of death. We will illustrate the major metaphors as follows:

(1) NATURE IS HUMAN BEING

The poem “The Bee is not afraid of me.” indicates that nature is human being.
Example (1)

“The Bee is not afraid of me.”
I know the Butterfly.
The pretty people in the Woods
Receive me cordially--
The Brooks laugh louder when I come--
The Breezes madder play;
Wherefore mine eye thy silver mists,
Wherefore, Oh Summer's Day?" (Dickinson, 2013)

In cognitive linguistics, metaphor is an approach to employ the similarity between two concepts, mapping the features and structure of the source domain onto the target domain. The metaphor NATURE IS HUMAN BEING is vivid in this poem. Some abstract features of the target domain are similar to the “human” features in the source domain. Human is a creature that has feelings and emotions. Here’s the mapping between these two domains:

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source Domain (HUMAN BEING)</th>
<th>Target Domain (NATURE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>excited person’s welcome</td>
<td>the Bee and the Butterfly wave their wings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>human’s laughter</td>
<td>the sound of brooks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>children play with each other</td>
<td>the madder waves in the wind</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As our common sense, the actions such as “afraid of”, “receive”, “laugh”, and “play” can only be done by human being, part of human life experiences. This cognition and understanding is inevitably reflected in human language. Therefore, the author attempts to construct the concept of nature in terms of human being. The mapping from the source domain “human being” on the target domain “nature” is obvious and very vivid. The keywords of metaphor such as “receive”, “laugh”, and “play” are used and imply that nature is like a human being.

(2) NATURE IS CREATURE

Example (2)

“New feet within my garden go.
New fingers stir the sod.
A Troubadour upon the Elm,
Betrays the solitude.
New children play upon the green.
New Weary sleep below.
And still the pensive Spring returns.
And still the punctual snow!” (Dickinson, 2013)

In this metaphor, “nature” as the target domain has similar features with “creature” in source domain. Here’s the mapping between these two domains:

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source Domain (CREATURE)</th>
<th>Target Domain (NATURE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>new feet are going</td>
<td>the breeze is slightly blowing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>new fingers stir the sod</td>
<td>new grass is growing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troubadour betrays the solitude</td>
<td>the bird is singing to welcome the warm spring</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The author describes the coming of spring. New feet refer to the gentle breeze; new fingers refer to green grass; the Troubadour refers to the bird. All these things are metaphorically used to vividly describe the natural phenomenon, i.e. the spring is coming. The actions like go, stir, and betray can only be done by living creatures, by which the author expresses the lively characteristics of the nature.

(3) LOVE IS BROOK

Love, which people cannot hold it or touch it, while in this poem, the author expresses “love” in terms of a “brook”.

Example (3)

“Have you got a Brook in your little heart,
Where bashful flowers blow,
And blushing birds go down to drink,
And shadows tremble so---
And nobody knows, so still it flows,
That any brook is there,
And yet your little draught of life
Is daily drunken there---”
(excerpts) (Dickinson, 2013)

A brook is quietly flowing and spends a long time from the starting point to the destination. Love always make people peaceful and also takes time to maintain. Here’s the mapping between the source domain of brook and the target domain of love:

Table 3
Mapping of Two Domains in Metaphor LOVE IS BROOK

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source Domain (BROOK)</th>
<th>Target Domain (LOVE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>new feet are going</td>
<td>the shyness of love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The bashful flowers blowing</td>
<td>the sweetness of love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nobody knows the Brook, however it is still quietly flowing</td>
<td>love is quiet and everlasting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Through long-term life experiences, human beings have carefully observed this phenomenon. In this process, they have an overall understanding and concept of love. This cognition and understanding, whether from direct or indirect experience, is reflected in human language. Therefore, the author uses the features of a brook to conceptualize love, on the basis of the conceptual metaphor “LOVE IS BROOK”. The author also writes that nobody knows the Brook, however it is still quietly flowing, so love in the author’s heart is also as quiet and everlasting as the Brook. Emily expresses love in terms of a brook, which reveals that she considers love is flowing quietly and persistently in human hearts even though people can’t touch it.

(4) LOVE IS SUN

In this poem, the pursuit of love is the pursuit of the sun.

Example (4)

“The Daisy follows soft the Sun.
And when his golden walk is done.
Sits shyly at his feet.
He—waking—finds the flower there.
Wherefore—Marauder—art thou here?
Because, Sir, love is sweet!
We are the Flower---Thou the Sun!
Forgive us, if as days decline.
We nearer steal to Thee!
Enamored of the parting West.
The peace---the flight---the Amethyst,
Night’s possibility! (Dickinson, 2013)

Emily portrays the process that she pursues love in terms of the process that “The Daisy follows soft the Sun”. Here’s the mapping between the source of sun and the target domain of love.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source Domain (SUN)</th>
<th>Target Domain (LOVE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the sun is warm</td>
<td>love makes people warm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the sun provides energy which plants need</td>
<td>love makes people powerful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plants all pursue the sun</td>
<td>love is what everyone is eager for</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In cognitive linguistics, metaphor is an approach to employ the similarity between two concepts, mapping the features and structure of the source domain onto the target domain. As our common sense, plants all pursue the sun. Love in human life is indispensable as the sun is in plants’ growth. This cognition is inevitably reflected in human language. Therefore, the author expresses love in terms of sun. When the sun has gone down, the daisy “sits shyly at his feet”, and even days decline, she “nearer steals” to the sun. The pursuit of love is in the same way according to the writer. Emily thinks that girls pursue love shyly but persistently, just as “the Daisy” keeps following the sun, even the sunset has begun. Love sometimes may be not as passionate as it used to be, but the human pursuit of love won’t stop. Here view of love can be conveyed by choosing this metaphor.

(5) DEATH IS A SURGEON

Example (5)

“Surgeons must be very careful.
When they take the knife!
Underneath their fine incisions,
Stirs the Culprit--Life!” (Dickinson, 2013)

In human life, it is a common experience of being afraid of a surgeon. People fear to suffer it or to be dead. This cognition is inevitably reflected in human language. In this metaphor, the source domain of “surgeon” is mapped onto the target domain of “death”. Here’s the mapping between the two domains:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source Domain (SURGEON)</th>
<th>Target Domain (DEATH)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the operation is ruthless</td>
<td>Death is cruel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>doctors need cold knife during a surgeon</td>
<td>Death is cold and stiff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>patient is unconsciousness during a surgeon</td>
<td>human would lose consciousness when they’re dead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>people are always afraid of going through a surgeon</td>
<td>people fear death</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this poem, the source domain “surgeon” is employed to explain the target domain “death”. A surgeon is usually regarded as a person without sympathy when doing an operation. There’s a great chance to die during a
surgeon, which makes people terrified. Death is enough to frighten anyone and death is as indifferent as the surgeon when it takes life away. This metaphor reveals that Emily considers Death is ruthless, scary and unmerciful. Her world views and values are conveyed by choosing this metaphor.

(6) DEATH IS A CARTER

Example (6)

“Because I could not stop for Death.
He kindly stopped for me.
The Carriage held but just Ourselves,
And Immortality.
We paused before a House that,
seemed
A swelling of the Ground.
The Roof was scarcely visible.
The Cornice--- in the Ground---
Since then--- ’tis Centuries---and yet,
Feels shorter than the Day.
I first surmised the Horses’ Heads,
Were toward Eternity---”
(excerpts) (Dickinson, 2013)

Metaphor is an approach to use the similarities between two concepts, mapping the features and structure of the source domain onto the target domain. In this poem, “carter” as the source domain is mapped onto the target domain “death”. Here’s the mapping relationship between the two concepts:

Table 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source Domain (CARTER)</th>
<th>Target Domain (DEATH)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the carter carries goods</td>
<td>Death carries people’s life to death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the carter usually carries goods from a starting point to the destination house</td>
<td>Death carries people from the state of living to death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the direction of the horses</td>
<td>eternity tomb</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In western culture, there is a god (Death) who controls human’s life and when he comes, people will die. This understanding is inevitably reflected in Emily’s language. According to Emily, Death carries her and “Immortality” towards tomb (Eternity). Death is not so horrible, he is just like our friend, and the destination is not so terrible, it is eternity, which is another resting place for us. As a result, death is just a friendly person who accompanies us in the course of life. Her view on death is clearly conveyed to the readers.

Cognitive Factors behind the Choice of Metaphors

In cognitive linguistics, metaphor is also a way of thinking. Through long-term life experiences, human beings have an overall understanding and concepts of things they are familiar with. The cognition and understanding, whether from direct or indirect experience, is inevitably reflected in human language. Metaphors used in language are influenced by our cognition. On the other hand, metaphors reflect people’s mind, in particular, their views, values and emotions.
Emily Dickinson’s Personality can be reflected by these metaphors. Emily Dickinson’s poems mainly focus on the themes of nature, love and death. By reading her poems, people can feel the author’s strong feeling of longing for nature, the enthusiasm for love, and the courage towards death. Besides, Emily Dickinson’s attitudes towards nature, love and death also have impact on her choice of these metaphors in the poems.

Her family environment can be regarded as one of the factors of her metaphor choices. Her father was a lawyer in Amherst and a trustee of Amherst College, who was very strict with her, and therefore, Emily Dickinson felt little of her father’s love. Her mother was in a traditional woman image, a gentle wife and obedient to her husband, but Dickinson thinks that women should be independent. Therefore, in her poems, her love is strong, bold and full of passion. She was troubled from a young age by the “deepening menace” of death, especially the deaths of those who were close to her. She was traumatized and needed a long time to recover, and since then death is the theme of her thought.

Time background is also a factor which influences her metaphor choices. Emily Dickinson was born in 19th century, when Romanticism was prevailing in literature, which is characterized by its emphasis on emotion, individualism and nature. Influenced by Romanticism, she puts emphasis on the expression of individuality and admiration for nature.

**Conclusion**

Based on the theory of Critical Metaphor Analysis, based on the illustrations, the following are the main findings: firstly, from the above metaphors we have analyzed, it can be found that there are three main target domains in her poems, including the domain of nature, the domain of love and the domain of death. Secondly, these source domains are mostly related to nature, such as the “living creatures”, “port”, “sea”, “brook” as well as “human being”. Besides, ontological metaphors are frequently used, including personification from the metaphors related to nature and death. Thirdly, from the use of metaphors, readers can have a better understanding of the author’s attitudes towards nature, love, and death, in particular, her world view and values. Furthermore, through the analysis of the family environment and time background of the author, the reasons why she chooses those metaphors can be found, and then people can understand her poems deeper and deeper.

However, the metaphors mentioned above in parts of Dickinson’s poems can’t fully reflect all the metaphors used in her poems, so it is no doubt that there are still some limitations in this analysis. The present thesis only explores metaphors related to the theme of nature, love, and death, which covers little about other themes in her poems, such as religion and life, which might not adequately reveal her overall thought and ideas. The reasons of the author’s choice of metaphors may underlie in many aspects, while this paper only covers several factors in Dickinson’s life, which might partly explain the choice of metaphors in her poems.

**References**


