Comparative Study of the Metaphorical Image of “Apple” in Chinese and German Proverbs From the Perspective of Conceptual Metaphor

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With the development of globalization, the interaction between language and culture has become increasingly intertwined. Metaphor, as a crucial cultural linguistic phenomenon, not only plays an important role in everyday communication, but also serves as a key element of cultural heritage and cognitive expression. Taking China and Germany as examples, this study conducts a metaphorical analysis of the shared symbolic food, the apple, to explore the multidimensional metaphorical images of apples in both cultures. Through this analysis, the research aims to gain a deeper understanding of the unique ways in which Chinese and German cultures interpret common concepts. This article aims to contribute to cross-cultural studies by shedding light on the metaphorical intricacies surrounding the concept of the apple in these two cultures.

Keywords: proverbial metaphor, German-Chinese culture, apple, cultural interchange

Introduction

Metaphor has long been a prominent and fascinating topic in linguistic research. From the publication of Aristotle’s *Poetics and Rhetoric* around 300 BC to the present day, scholars have continuously delved into the depths of metaphorical understanding.

Metaphor is seen not only as a linguistic phenomenon but, more importantly, as a cognitive phenomenon for humans. It is a cognitive activity in which concepts from one domain are applied to another domain in order to understand and explain experiences. (Shu, 1998, p. 10)

As Lakoff and Johnson noted in their work *Metaphor We Live By*, they argue that metaphor is not only a linguistic phenomenon, but also a cognitive phenomenon. phenomenon and, more importantly, a way of thinking (1980, p. 7).

Metaphor is an immensely creative and inspiring cognitive tool that not only exists in our language but also permeates our ways of thinking. It plays a vital role in the human cognitive process by bridging different domains.

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and experiences. By introducing concepts from one domain into another, metaphor helps us gain a deeper understanding and express complex ideas and emotions.

Among the fundamental aspects of human existence, the act of “eating” occupies a central place. Concepts related to “eating” have provided a wealth of metaphorical expressions in our daily lives. As one of the most commonly consumed fruits in the daily diet, the apple has been widely used in different metaphorical contexts. Referring to the apple’s close association with Western culture, Nan Huijin once pointed out that “Western culture is the story of two and a half apples” (1993, p. 9). Against this background, this article explores the metaphorical phenomena related to apples in Chinese and German proverbs from the perspective of metaphor. By studying specific expressions, we aim to uncover the similarities and differences in cultural connotations, thus facilitating a better understanding of how different cultures interpret common concepts. This exploration aims to reduce misunderstandings and promote more effective cross-cultural communication, providing strategies for mutual learning and inspiration between different cultures.

**Literature Review**

**The Essence of Food Metaphor**

Food metaphor is based on Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory, which proposes that each metaphor consists of two essential elements: the source domain and the target domain. The mapping between these two conceptual domains realizes a cognitive process, linking an abstract target domain to a concrete source domain. The cognitive mapping structure can be summarized as $F: A \rightarrow B$. Here, $F$ represents the cognitive mapping rule, which is the foundation of experiential activity. Set $A$ signifies the target domain, while Set $B$ represents the source domain. For example, in the metaphor “Knowledge is power”, the source domain is “power”, and the target domain is “knowledge”. The cognitive mapping rule ($F$) maps the concrete and substantial concept of power into the more abstract domain of knowledge.

The cognitive mapping rule relies on the similarity between elements in two conceptual domains. This means that for $A$ to be mapped to $B$, there must be a connection or similarity between $A$ and $B$. However, individuals from different cultural backgrounds may have different perceptions, leading to differences in the criteria used to judge these connections when applying the cognitive mapping rule. In this way, metaphorical structures will exhibit both a degree of uniqueness and a degree of universality across different cultural settings. While similar metaphors may coexist in different languages, they do not always carry identical meanings. “However, due to the shared cognitive foundations embedded in different metaphors, metaphors in different cultures also exhibit some similarities” (G. C. Wang & X. Q. Wang, 2000, p. 51). This suggests that despite linguistic and cultural differences, common cognitive features and structures exist. By comparing metaphors of a specific concept in various cultural contexts and analyzing their connections with the concepts in the source domain, we can investigate cognitive variations among cultures.

**Metaphorical Connotations in Proverbs**

“Proverbs are expressions of people’s cognitive experiences and their processing of the external world. They have metaphorical qualities” (Huang, 2020, p. 51). They carry with them a rich cultural heritage, including values, beliefs, history, and social norms that serve as distinctive markers for particular cultures. Proverbs often have deep cultural connotations and can be seen as a cultural code that embodies the values, beliefs, and behavioral norms of a particular community. Thoroughly analyzing the metaphorical connotations contained within proverbs...
can help to understand the core elements of other cultures and reduce misunderstandings arising from cultural differences. By comprehending the cultural connotations expressed in proverbs, individuals can interpret each other’s words more accurately, avoiding ambiguities resulting from cultural differences. Proverbs can facilitate intercultural communication by enhancing mutual understanding and promoting cultural integration. Besides, when participants proficiently use proverbs from another culture, it expresses respect for the target culture and helps build closer, more trusting relationships. This mode of communication promotes cultural integration and sharing by delving into cultural cores, moving beyond surface-level expressions in cross-cultural communication. Therefore, in the realm of intercultural communication, analyzing the metaphorical connotations in proverbs helps reduce misunderstandings and cultural conflicts.

**Conceptual Metaphors Related to Apples**

**Metaphorical Images of Apples in German Culture**

The word “apple” has many symbolic meanings in Western culture, and its etymology can be traced back to the Latin word “malum”, plural “malus”. In Latin, possibly influenced by Jerome’s Latin Bible translation, “‘malum’ can refer to both apples and evil” (Schippe & Stetson, 2006, p. 37). This linguistic coincidence has a significant impact on the metaphorical representations of apples in literature, religion, art, and culture.

Apples are often regarded as symbols of forbidden fruit and original sin by scholars, stemming from the story of Eden in the Christian Bible. According to this narrative, Adam and Eve fell into original sin by consuming the forbidden fruit, leading humanity down the path of corruption. However, there is no precise evidence indicating that the forbidden fruit was an apple. The depiction of the forbidden fruit as an apple was a later artistic choice made by painters who found apples more common. Viewing apples as a symbol of taboo suggests the moral choices and potential moral degradation faced by humanity in the pursuit of knowledge.

Additionally, apples appear in various other Western myths. In Greek mythology, Mother Earth gave Zeus and Hera a tree bearing golden apples as a wedding gift. The daughters of Night and Darkness were tasked with guarding this special tree day and night. However, Zeus’s infidelity and promiscuity provoked Hera’s anger and sorrow. In retaliation against Zeus, Hera devised a scheme that led Zeus and Heracles (son of Zeus and Alcmene) to pick apples from the tree guarded by the goddess Ladon. What was initially a symbol of a blissful marriage turned into Hera’s greatest agony. Hera was ready to destroy this symbol in revenge for Zeus’ unfaithfulness. As a result, this apple acquired the meaning of “discord and dispute”, “with the English term ‘an apple of discord’ signifying a source of contention, discord, and trouble” (Li, 2004, p. 55).

Furthermore, apples are widely employed in commercial branding, such as the iconic bitten apple logo of Apple Inc., which symbolizes creativity and innovation. The logo was inspired by the story of Newton being hit by an apple while sitting under an apple tree, which led to his research on gravity. This event is seen as a symbol of knowledge, expressing a desire for the pursuit of wisdom. Therefore, the apple represents the continuous pursuit of cognition and intelligence.

In Western mythology, the frequently appearing apple has also given rise to numerous proverbs. “Proverbs composed of the word ‘apple’ mostly carry positive connotations in English expressions” (Li, 2004, p. 57), where the metaphorical image of apples tends to lean towards positivity. However, within the realm of the German language, which is also part of the Western linguistic family, this assertion may not be absolute. Table 1 below enumerates all the idioms related to the word “Apfel” (apple) as documented in *Duden Band 11: Redewendungen und sprichwörtliche Redensarten*. 
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>German proverb</th>
<th>Dictionary explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>für einen Apfel/Appel und ein Ei (ugs.) (Drosdowki &amp; Scholze-Stubenrecht, 1992, S. 47)</td>
<td>spotbillig, fast umsonst (Drosdowki &amp; Scholze-Stubenrecht, 1992, S. 47)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first proverb, which is literally translated as “An apple doesn’t fall far from the tree”, suggests that a person closely resembles their parents in a negative aspect. The use of the apple and tree relationship symbolizes the connection between offspring and parents. In Western culture, the metaphorical image of apples is associated with negative aspects such as original sin and temptation. Therefore, using the proverb to describe similarities between children and parents often emphasizes negative traits, such as personality and behavior. The second proverb uses the unrelated fruits of apples and pears to signify that there is no connection between two things. This metaphor highlights the absence of correlation between two items and is often used to criticize unreasonable or inappropriate comparisons. The third proverb uses apples and eggs to represent goods with extremely low prices. The fourth proverb implies the need to confront and handle a difficult, unpleasant, or challenging decision with courage. Here, the metaphorical use of sour apples symbolizes unresolved issues or difficult decisions, and biting the sour apple denotes courageously confronting and addressing tricky problems. The fifth proverb uses the concept of apple sauce to convey someone’s highly excited emotional state.

In these German proverbs related to apples, the metaphorical image of apples encompasses various aspects, reflecting people’s interpretations of different meanings associated with apples. The proverbs in German culture use multilayered metaphors of apples to reflect diverse understandings of this fruit. These metaphors embody abstract reflections on life, interpersonal relationships, and dilemmas. It is worth noting that the metaphorical images related to apples in German tend to lean more towards the negative side, carrying a slightly pejorative undertone.

**Metaphorical Images of Apples in Chinese Culture**

The term “苹果” (píngguǒ, apple) in modern Mandarin Chinese originates from Sanskrit, referring to a fruit mentioned in ancient Indian Buddhist scriptures. Initially known as “频婆” (pínpó), the term “苹果” first appeared in Ming Dynasty’s 學圃余疏 (Xué Pǔ Yú Shū) (Liu, Dong, Zhang, & Wang, 2002, pp. 45-55). Apples are not commonly used in Chinese idioms or proverbs due to their limited association with cultural expressions.

However, in daily life, the homophonic word “平安” (píng’ān, safe and sound) is often associated with “苹果” (píngguǒ, apple) due to their similar pronunciation in Mandarin. This is why some Chinese people exchange apples as a gesture of goodwill and blessing. Chinese dictionaries of idioms and common expressions contain very few expressions directly related to apples. However, in recent years, with the continuous exchange and mutual learning between Chinese and Western civilizations, the original meaning of “苹果” as a type of fruit has gained new connotations. The word has been culturally associated with Western culture and projected into the Chinese language, leading to a renewed understanding of the term.
Several scholars have researched the metaphorical use of apples in Chinese. Yang Juan’s 2020 study shows that the metaphorical projection scope of the apple concept has formed a relatively complete system. “The metaphorical projection scope of the apple has gradually expanded from the concrete to the abstract and continues to be influenced by foreign cultures” (Yang, 2020, p. 84). The following are expressions related to apples selected from “The CCL Corpus of Chinese Texts” (Zhan, Guo, & Chen, 2003) and Dingxiu Ancient Books Full-Text Retrieval Platform¹, along with an analysis of the metaphorical images of apples in these expressions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Metaphorical images</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. 这个译本，是一位已近耄耋之年的中国诗人，最后地抛给这个世界的一个金苹果。 (1994)</td>
<td>苹果喻文学成就、贡献</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. 公司生产的iHealth品牌电子血压计畅销全球，被誉为“移动健康领域的‘苹果’”。 (2015)</td>
<td>苹果喻先进科技产品</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. 一个苹果一颗心。这些苹果表达了190万延安人民和3600万陕西人民对澳门回归的期盼和热烈庆祝。 (1999)</td>
<td>苹果喻关心、爱心</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. ……生活就像“冰糖心”苹果一样香甜。 (2018)</td>
<td>苹果喻幸福生活</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. 当政治人物利用社交媒体获得成功，这个“苹果”就开始有了巨大的诱惑力。 (2016)</td>
<td>苹果喻诱惑、利益</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These examples showcase the various metaphorical images of apples in contemporary Mandarin Chinese from different perspectives. In the first example, the poet’s final work is likened to a “golden apple”, emphasizing its precious contribution to the literary field and using the apple as a symbol of literary achievement. In the second example, the iHealth brand electronic blood pressure monitor is referred to as a leading product in the mobile health field. In the third example, the phrase “one apple, one heart” is used to express anticipation and congratulations for Macao’s return, symbolizing care and love. In the fourth example, the metaphorical description of life as a “sugar heart” apple conveys wishes for a happy life, making the apple a symbol of happiness and sweetness. In the last example, likening the success of a political figure on social media to an “apple” emphasizes the apple as a symbol of temptation and interest.

Although apples are not commonly featured in traditional Chinese idioms and proverbs, their symbolic meanings have evolved in contemporary culture due to the influence of Western culture. Apples now represent literary achievements, technological products, caring and love, a happy life, and the temptation of success. In different contexts, apples carry multiple layers of significance, making them a vocabulary rich in cultural connotations.

**A Comparative Analysis of Metaphorical Images of Apples in Chinese and German**

Analyzing the metaphorical images of apples in Chinese and German proverbs discussed above, we observe that both languages involve emotional and sensory aspects in their apple metaphors. In German, apples are associated with the courage to bravely face challenging problems, while in Chinese, apples can represent a happy life or someone’s care for others. Moreover, both German and Chinese languages use apples as a symbol for advanced technological products due to the global recognition of Apple, a company known for its innovative and high-quality products. This usage typically expresses admiration or refers to technology, advancement, and high quality in context. However, these metaphors also reflect some cultural differences, manifested in the breadth and depth of apple metaphors in German and Chinese. The German examples mainly focus on family, life

difficulties, and price comparisons, highlighting aspects related to daily life and emotional experiences. In contrast, Chinese apple metaphors cover a wider range of fields, including literature, technology, and care.

Analyzing the meaning of the term “apple” in Chinese and German reveals that the metaphorical images of apples in the two languages are not very similar. Although “apple” is a common fruit in both languages, its symbolic meanings in metaphors vary across different cultures. This highlights the impact of culture on cognitive mappings, emphasizing that even with a similar cognitive foundation, different cultures may interpret metaphors significantly differently. This difference may be rooted in history, tradition, religion, as well as habits and experiences in people’s daily lives.

Moreover, while the metaphorical image of apples in German may carry a slightly negative emotional tone, it is not necessarily associated with negative meanings in daily life. In fact, during some German festivals, people exchange apples as a gesture of goodwill. The symbolic meaning behind apples is generally positive in Western and some Eastern cultures, and this metaphorical image has been integrated into German culture as well. Therefore, although apple metaphors in German idioms may have slightly negative connotations, people’s perspectives on apples in real life may be more diverse and positive. This emphasizes the importance of considering multiple factors, such as language, social practices, and history, when seeking to understand cultural differences.

**Conclusion**

Language and culture are interdependent and influence each other, playing a significant role in shaping people’s cognition, values, and behaviors. Wilhelm von Humboldt (1998), a renowned German linguist and educator, compared language to “an external form of national thought”, stating that language is “a product of thought, making thought expression possible through the form of speech” (pp. 48-65). Metaphors are an important tool in language. They convey cultural nuances. The analysis of metaphors provides insights into a society’s cognitive patterns, symbolic meanings, and emotional nuances related to a specific concept. The metaphorical analysis of the common symbol, the apple, reveals the significant influence of cultural backgrounds on the shaping and interpretation of metaphors. In the era of globalization, it is crucial to foster understanding and respect between different cultures. This study provides valuable insights into promoting mutual learning, respect, and cooperation among cultures, which can aid in establishing a more harmonious international society.

**References**


