

Comparative Analysis of Metaphors of “Flowers” in English and Chinese Poetry from the Perspective of Cognitive Metaphor Theory

WANG Jie-yu

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

Poetry, as a crucial form of literary expression, often employs metaphor as a common rhetorical device. According to the perspective of cognitive metaphor theory, metaphor transcends its traditional linguistic boundaries and is recognized as a profound cognitive mechanism, manifesting as a broader cognitive phenomenon. This article is based on metaphorical examples of “flowers” in Chinese and English poetry, carefully selecting representative cases for in-depth analysis. The aim is to compare the imagery of “flowers” in Chinese and English poetry, observe their similarities and differences, thereby fostering a better understanding of poetry in both languages. Through this study, we not only delve into the intricacies of metaphor within poetry but also shed light on the distinct interpretations of the symbol of “flowers” in different cultural contexts, expanding our appreciation for the cultural diversity inherent in poetry.

Keywords: metaphor, poetry, flower

Introduction

Poetry—An Important Form of Literary Expression

Poetry, as a literary form for expressing emotions and thoughts, is distinguished by its highly condensed language style. This unique artistic form not only focuses on various aspects of social life but also vividly conveys the poet’s rich emotional world through lively imagery. As a critical form of literary expression, poetry has always been highly esteemed and valued by literati in both Eastern and Western cultures. Its clear and precise language, powerful rhythmic structure, and enduring poetic charm allow readers to deeply experience the emotions and thoughts expressed by the poet.

The roots of Chinese poetry can be traced back to ancient societies, covering themes such as labor, primitive religion, and relationships between genders. Therefore, poetry from that period largely inherited from folk traditions, becoming an important medium for laboring people to express their emotions. These poems not only celebrate the joys of life but also lament the hardships of humanity, primarily existing in a form passed down through folklore. “The Book of Songs,” “Chu Ci,” and “Han Yuefu” are the most representative literary treasures from ancient Chinese society. Chinese poetry has continued to develop throughout history, reaching

its pinnacle during the Tang and Song dynasties. Tang poetry and Song lyrics shine brightly as treasures of Chinese and even world literature, leaving behind a rich cultural heritage with profound aesthetic and literary significance, thus becoming a focal point of study in this paper.

English poetry originates from the European poetic tradition, with figures like Homer and Hesiod being prominent representatives whose masterpieces such as “The Iliad” and “The Odyssey” profoundly influenced the development of later poetry. The evolution of Western poetry is closely linked to the passage of time, and compared to Chinese poetry, its development is more closely intertwined with historical events. Whether in the Romantic period’s pursuit of freedom and individuality or the explorations of new forms and techniques during pluralism (including movements like Romanticism, Symbolism, Imagism, Surrealism, etc.), each advancement and development in poetry is intricately tied to significant historical contexts. This continual evolution allows poetry to breathe and expand with each historical moment, making its forms and content increasingly rich and profound.

Metaphor—A Common Rhetorical Device in Poetry

Metaphor, as a rhetorical device, is a form of analogy where a word or phrase from a familiar object or concept is used to represent another object or concept, revealing their similarities in a subtle manner. This mode of expression is often employed to convey implicit meanings with deep metaphorical and ironic effects. Particularly in the realm of poetry, the use of metaphor is prominent. Poets tend to associate seemingly unrelated things, effectively breaking the usual connections between words and phrases. In this unique form of expression, poets skillfully utilize the profound implications of metaphor to convey genuine emotions and sentiments. This creative technique enriches poetry, making it more engaging and thought-provoking by transcending the limitations of literal language, thereby providing readers with a richer reading experience to deeply appreciate the beauty of poetry.

In Western culture, metaphor has long been a core topic in rhetoric, studied intensively since ancient Greek times. Many scholars view metaphor as an extraordinary linguistic expression that surpasses ordinary language phenomena, thereby generating specific aesthetic effects. This enduring academic interest has enriched various disciplines with diverse cultural and linguistic perspectives (Sun Xiaoyan, 2012). Over time, deeper studies of metaphor have provided valuable insights into understanding the relationships among language, literature, and culture.

A profound exploration of metaphors in English and Chinese poetry involves not only a deep analysis of the thoughts, vocabulary, and lines contained within but also expands the imaginative scope of poetry within a few lines. This research is remarkably imaginative, containing rich implications that reveal unique interpretations and emotional expressions of nature and society across different cultural systems. Simultaneously, such studies highlight diverse values, ethnic beliefs, and characteristics in the developmental trajectories of English and Chinese literature. Through in-depth exploration of metaphors in poetry, we gain a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural connotations embedded in literary works, offering new perspectives for cross-cultural understanding and literary studies.

II. Cognitive Metaphor Theory

Cognitive metaphor theory emphasizes that metaphor is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but also a profound cognitive phenomenon. This theory includes several key points that deepen our understanding of the nature of metaphor: (1) Metaphor is viewed as a conceptual structure rather than just a linguistic structure; metaphors in language are manifestations of conceptual metaphors at the surface level. (2) Metaphors in language should align with normal expression, becoming a natural way of expression. (3) The expression of metaphor is not about similarity but about mapping across different domains. (4) The meaning of metaphor is not limited to the literal, possessing genuine value. (5) Metaphor is based on bodily experience, arising from the body, brain, mind, and life experience. (6) The systematic nature of metaphor is reflected not only at the linguistic level but also in metaphorical expressions derived from the same concept. There exists systematicity within and between conceptual metaphors. (7) Metaphor exhibits hierarchy. From the perspective of structural complexity, it can be categorized into basic metaphors (primary/primitive metaphors) and complex metaphors. The former originates from daily life experiences, has a simple structure, connects subjective experience with perceptual motor experience, and provides rich inferential structures and qualities (qualitative free). Similar metaphors are acquired automatically and unconsciously in our daily lives.

Since Aristotle's “Rhetoric,” metaphor has been a favored technique among literary figures, widely used in numerous literary works, especially poetry. However, since the publication of “Metaphors We Live By” by Johnson and Lakoff, metaphor has ceased to be merely a rhetorical tool and has become recognized as a cognitive phenomenon. This viewpoint has gradually been accepted and deeply integrated into our daily lives. Due to its widespread application, metaphor has had a significant impact on various aspects of people's psychological, cultural, and everyday life. For example, the term “eye of a needle,” due to its frequent use, has gradually been perceived as a common expression, overlooking its metaphorical meaning. Thus, metaphor is more accurately described as a mode of thinking that has permeated our daily communication and thought processes. This mode of thinking not only plays a crucial role in literary creation but also profoundly influences the formation of individual and societal concepts, values, and cultural cognition.

Metaphor plays a crucial role in how people perceive the material and spiritual world through language, enabling connections to be drawn from initially disparate things, concepts, and language expressions, thus constructing exceptionally rich imaginative links. This ability allows us to establish unique and profound connections in complex thought processes, expanding our understanding and expression of the world (Hu Zhuanglin, 1997, p. 13). It is through metaphor that readers can engage deeply with a work, communicate with the author's ideas, and find resonance within the work. This communication and resonance make literary works more expressive, capable of eliciting deeper levels of thought and emotion.

III. Case Analysis

Floral vocabulary in poetry is not merely a simple language expression but a complex cultural symbol that carries multiple cultural connotations, which may be similar or entirely different. This linguistic phenomenon manifests diversity across different societal backgrounds, serving as a crucial link for cultural communication. In Chinese culture, the “Four Gentlemen” including plum, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum are not only typical representatives expressing emotions and aspirations but also common subjects in poems and literati

paintings. In contrast, in Western culture, lilies or roses are often considered representative flowers, linked to historical events such as the “War of the Roses” in England. Due to differences in national aesthetics and cultural psychology, there exist varied perceptions of floral meanings across different cultures. In Sino-English cultural contexts, while some metaphorical meanings of flowers may be similar, more prominently, each country has its unique cultural metaphors, forming rich and distinct floral cultural traditions. These differences are not only reflected in language expressions but also profoundly reveal unique understandings of nature, beauty, emotions, and expression within respective cultures, providing rich cultural elements for cross-cultural communication.

Metaphors of “Flowers” in English Poetry

In both Chinese and English poetry, “flowers” symbolize beauty. For instance, in the English poem “A Light Exists in Spring,” Emily Dickinson writes, “A color stands abroad on solitary fields that science cannot overtake, but human nature feels.” Here, the poet uses the metaphor of “flowers” to convey the beauty in nature during spring that cannot be fully captured by science but is felt by human nature. However, due to differences in social backgrounds, the portrayal of female beauty shows distinct differences in the use of flowers as metaphors. In English poetry, female poets not only express pursuit of love but also adeptly use flowers as metaphors to convey this emotion. Furthermore, in English poetry, “flowers” often imply moments of “existence” and transience, linking them with the brevity of life, such as in Robert Frost’s lines, “Nature’s first green is gold; Her hardest hue to hold. Her early leaf’s a flower; But only so an hour.” Moreover, “flowers” in English poetry are extensively used to express emotions. The fragrance of flowers refreshes the soul, providing a strong olfactory impact, while their vibrant colors offer rich visual enjoyment. Therefore, “flowers” become cherished images for poets, imbuing them with diverse emotional values, prominently including “love.”

Metaphors of “Flowers” in Chinese Poetry

Since ancient times, Chinese poetry has been enamored with depictions of “flowers.” In countless poems, Li Qingzhao’s “Like a Dream” stands out, renowned for its use of “plum blossoms” as metaphors. “Last night, the rain was sparse, and the wind was sudden; Deep sleep could not dissolve the leftover wine. I asked the maid behind the curtain, ‘Has the plum blossoms stayed the same?’” The poet uses “plum blossoms” metaphorically to express lament over the passage of time and helplessness towards the changing nature of love. In another poem, “Intoxicated Under the Blossoms,” she writes, “The curtain rolls up in the west wind, and people are thinner than yellow flowers”, Vividly portraying the desolation of the deep boudoir. During the time of Chongyang when honesty prevails, husbands are far away on distant travels, and loneliness becomes unbearable. As the autumn wind rustles, whether it is the “yellow flowers” that accentuate one’s pale and thin appearance, or human sorrow that dyes the yellow flowers with a delicate fragility, that autumnal melancholy seeps into the reader’s heart like a wisp of thin smoke, endlessly lingering.

Conclusion

Metaphor serves as a cognitive tool, not only providing unique perspectives that deepen our understanding of the world, but also harboring the potential to create entirely new meanings. The meanings implied by vocabulary related to “flowers” in both English and Chinese exhibit similarities as well as differences. This not

only reflects the commonalities and uniqueness of Chinese and Western cultures at a profound level, but also underscores the importance of in-depth cultural studies. Through thorough comparison of metaphorical uses of “flowers” at the cognitive level, differences in cultural connotations of words are revealed, emphasizing the indispensable role of cultural studies in accurately understanding lexical meanings. By contrasting the metaphorical use of “flowers” from a cognitive perspective, this helps to deepen the understanding of the metaphorical connotations of “flowers” in both languages, providing valuable guidance for achieving more precise translation.

References

- Duan, Y. G. (2009). A comparative study of metaphors of “Flower” in English and Chinese. *Journal of Hubei University of Economics (Humanities and Social Sciences Edition)*, 6(03), 128-129.
- He, J. Y. (2009). A preliminary exploration of metaphors in English poetry and their translation (Dissertation: Foreign Affairs University).
- Hu, Z. L. (1997). Language, cognition, metaphor. *Modern Foreign Languages*, (04).
- Ibarretxe-Antuñano, I. (2009). The relationship between conceptual metaphor and culture. *Intercultural Pragmatics*.
- Liu, Y. H. (2005). Re-examining cognitive metaphor theory. *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*, (08), 16-18+29.
- Shu, D. F. (1998). On the essence and semantic features of metaphor. *Foreign Languages (Journal of Shanghai International Studies University)*, (06): 11-20.
- Shu, D. F. (2002). On the mechanism of metaphor operation. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, (02), 98-106+160.
- Sun, X. Y. (2013). A comparative study of cognitive metaphors of flower imagery in English and Chinese poetry (Dissertation: Anhui University).
- Sun, X. Y. (2018). A cognitive and translational comparison of metaphorical flower imagery in English and Chinese poetry—Review of “Spiritual Connection of Chinese and Foreign Poets: Comparative Study and Translation Research of English and Chinese Poetry”. *China Educational Journal*, (05), 145.
- Wang, X. T. (2021). A comparative analysis of metaphors involving Chrysanthemums. *International Journal of Languages, Literature and Linguistics*, 7(3):
- Xiao, J. Y., & Li, H. W. (2010). Metaphor translation studies from the perspective of conceptual metaphor. *Chinese Foreign Language*, 7(05), 106-111. DOI: 10.13564/j.cnki.issn.1672-9382.2010.05.015
- Yu, X. (2013). What are the metaphors we live by?. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 3, 1467-1472.