

Cross-Cultural Metaphor and Discourse Comprehension

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Metaphor is a fundamental cognitive mechanism that structures human thought and expression across languages. Its cross-cultural variation significantly influences discourse comprehension. This paper examines how conceptual metaphors differ between Chinese and English, shaped by distinct cultural models, and explores their impact on textual interpretation. Through comparative analysis of linguistic and poetic examples, we highlight the role of metaphor in organizing discourse and conveying culturally embedded meanings. The study concludes with pedagogical implications, suggesting that explicit instruction in cross-cultural metaphor enhances students' discourse awareness and intercultural communication skills.

Keywords: conceptual metaphor, cross-cultural, discourse, culture, cognition

Introduction

Metaphor, far from being merely a decorative linguistic device, is a fundamental cognitive process through which we understand and structure abstract concepts in terms of more concrete, familiar experiences (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). This cognitive view positions metaphor as central to human thought and, by extension, to language. Since thought and language are deeply embedded in culture, metaphors are inevitably culturally infused. Consequently, the cross-cultural dimension of metaphor plays a critical role in discourse cohesion and comprehension. This paper explores the manifestations of conceptual metaphor in Chinese and English, analyzing their points of convergence and divergence, and discusses the implications for teaching English as a foreign language, with the aim of fostering deeper discourse comprehension and improving cross-cultural communicative competence.

Theoretical Framework: Conceptual Metaphor

The conceptual theory of metaphor, pioneered by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), argues that metaphors are not just linguistic expressions but systematic mappings across conceptual domains—from a source domain (typically concrete or physical) to a target domain (typically abstract). These mappings are largely unconscious and form the foundation of much of our reasoning. For instance, the abstract concept of LIFE is often understood via the more concrete concept of a JOURNEY, giving rise to expressions like “He’s at a crossroads”, “She’s going nowhere with her life”, or “I need to find a new path”.

This process is fundamentally cognitive and experiential. When we encounter a metaphor like “He is a fountain of evil”, the entities “he” (target) and “fountain” (source) belong to different categories, creating semantic tension. The metaphorical mapping resolves this tension by projecting the attribute of “continuous

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emission” from the source (fountain) to the target (he), allowing us to conceptualize the person as a perpetual source of maliciousness.

Metaphor, Culture, and Cross-Cultural Variation

While the cognitive capacity for metaphor is universal, the specific manifestations are culturally determined. A culture’s values, traditions, and physical environment shape its metaphorical systems (Kövecses, 2020). Therefore, learning a foreign language involves not just learning new words but also understanding the culture’s distinctive metaphorical mappings. Without this, learners may misinterpret discourse or produce utterances that are grammatically correct but culturally incongruous, often resulting in what is termed “Chinglish”.

Case Studies in Cross-Cultural Difference

The different cultural perceptions of “dog” in English and Chinese offer a classic example. In English, rooted in a tradition where dogs are companions, metaphors involving “dog” are often positive or neutral: “a lucky dog”, “to work like a dog”, “it’s a dog-eat-dog world”. The phrase “dog-eat-dog” describes intense competition without inherent moral judgment. In contrast, in Chinese culture, where the dog historically holds a lower status, related metaphors are predominantly negative. “Dog bite dog” is a strongly derogatory term describing vicious infighting among despicable people.

Religious context provides another layer of difference. In the text “Salvation”, the phrase “to bring the young lambs to the fold” is unintelligible without understanding the Christian metaphor where “Jesus is the shepherd and his followers are the sheep”. The “young lambs” are children being guided into the Christian faith. A Chinese student lacking this conceptual framework would struggle to grasp the discourse’s deeper meaning.

Poetic imagery further illustrates this divergence. In Chinese poetry, the “moon” is frequently associated with solitude, longing, and separation, influenced by myths like Chang’e’s isolation on the moon. Lines like “I lift my head to gaze at the bright moon, And bow my head, thinking of my hometown” cement this connection. In English poetry, the moon is often linked to the goddess Artemis/Diana, embodying chastity, beauty, and serene illumination, as seen in descriptions like “the tender moon” or “the Queen-Moon”.

Cross-Cultural Commonalities and Discourse Comprehension

Despite significant differences, cross-cultural metaphor comprehension is possible due to shared bodily and fundamental life experiences (Sharifian, 2017). This “cultural common core” gives rise to similar metaphors in different languages. For example, the conceptual metaphor “Knowing is seeing” is nearly universal (“I see what you mean”). Similarly, “More is up” (“Prices are high”) and “Time is motion” (“Time flies”) are widespread.

This common ground allows for the understanding of many metaphors even between disparate cultures. The metaphor of “sour grapes” from Aesop’s fable, denoting the pretense of despising what one cannot have, is readily understood in both English and Chinese (“suan pu tao”). Similarly, the use of natural phenomena to symbolize eternal love appears independently in both a Tang Dynasty poem (“Our vow shall hold till mountains turn to dust, And rivers run no more, as pledge in trust”) and Robert Burns’s “A Red, Red Rose” (“Till a’ the seas gang dry...And the rocks melt wi’ the sun”). This shared understanding facilitates the comprehension of discourse across cultural boundaries.

Pedagogical Implications

The cross-cultural nature of metaphor has profound implications for foreign language teaching.

Raising metaphoric awareness: Instruction should move beyond vocabulary lists and grammar rules to explicitly teach common conceptual metaphors in the target language. Teachers should contrast them with the learners' native language metaphors, highlighting both overlaps and divergences.

Culture-integrated language teaching: Language should be taught as an integral part of culture. Texts rich in cultural metaphors—such as religious texts, proverbs, news articles, and literature—should be incorporated into the curriculum to expose learners to the target culture's conceptual system.

Fostering conceptual fluency: The ultimate goal is to help students develop “conceptual fluency”—the ability to think and use the language in ways that align with its native speakers' conceptual patterns (Danesi, 2016). This involves practice in decoding metaphors in reading and listening and appropriately producing them in speaking and writing, thereby avoiding literal translations from the L1.

Conclusion

Metaphor serves as a vital bridge between language, cognition, and culture. Its cross-cultural study reveals not only the diverse ways in which different peoples conceptualize the world but also the shared human cognitive underpinnings that make intercultural understanding possible. For foreign language learners, navigating these metaphorical landscapes is essential for true discourse comprehension and effective communication. By systematically integrating the analysis of cross-cultural metaphor into language pedagogy, educators can equip students with the tools to decode textual nuances, construct discourse more authentically, and ultimately build a more robust cross-cultural communicative competence.

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