Contrastive Prominence of "Snake" Metaphors in English and Chinese from the Perspective of Conceptual Metaphor Theory

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Abstract: With the continuous advancement of globalization, the interactions between people from different countries are becoming increasingly close. In cross-cultural communication, proverbs about animals are difficult to understand literally and must be understood based on relevant myths and cultural backgrounds, which may lead to misunderstandings in communication. Based on Chinese and English corpora, this article compares the three types of metaphorical expressions of "snake" and explores the deep reasons for their similarities and differences. The study found that the overall emotion of "snake" metaphors is similar, but the specific references have differences between referring to oneself and external causes. Systematic comparative research on the similarities and differences of "snake" metaphors in Chinese and English allows us to have a better understanding of the language conventions caused by different cultures and provide useful references for better cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: Conceptual Metaphor; Snake; Chinese-English Comparative Study

1. Introduction

There are many abstract concepts used in daily communications, such as the universe, value investment and structuring, etc. How do people understand these abstract concepts? The answer is to use metaphors. Metaphor is a rhetorical device in our view, often appearing in literary and artistic works. For example, metaphor was used in "Guan Guan Jujiu, on the river island, graceful lady, gentleman good match," which is a sentence in an ancient Chinese book—— *The Book of Songs.* Guan Ju is a kind of water bird and we use Guan Ju's mutual chirping to metaphorize the love between men and women.[1] But metaphor is far more important than what we think. Without metaphor, there would be no language; without language, there would be no concepts; without concepts, there would be no thoughts. Therefore, without metaphor, we would not be able to communicate normally. Metaphor is involved in our entire cognitive process, not only in thinking but also in the language expression. In a sum, metaphor is in everything.

2. Theoretical Overview

For more than two thousand years, many linguists have never stopped studying metaphors. In traditional linguistics cognition, metaphor is a marginal language usage. Later, linguist Richards re-evaluated the scope of metaphor in our language. He believed metaphor is a universal principle of language and that human thought is metaphorical. Later, Lakoff and Johnson's "Metaphors We Live By" was published, in which, metaphor was introduced into the field of cognitive linguistics. According to the conceptual metaphor theory in this book, metaphor is not only a rhetorical decoration mean but also a cognitive activity. The conceptual system on which our thoughts and behaviors are based is based on metaphors. The essence of metaphor is a systematic mapping from one conceptual domain to another conceptual domain, that is, mapping from the source domain to target domain. In order to enhance people's understanding of metaphors, and then enhance people's understanding of the culture, many scholars have completed or are conducting research on animal metaphors, among which, some animals we are familiar with such as dogs, sheep and dragons. Xiang Chengdong, Dean of the School of English of Tianjin University of Foreign Chinese, has wrote an article Cross-cultural Research on English-

Chinese Animal Metaphors which mainly takes the "cosmic giant chain" metaphor and the metaphor highlighting principle as a theoretical framework to make cross-cultural comparisons of English-Chinese animal metaphors, attempting to reveal the nature of animal metaphors; Zhang Wei, Xi' an University of Foreign Chinese's published an article Based on the Conceptual Metaphor of English and Chinese "Dog" in Corpus which studies the similarities and differences in the metaphorical expression mechanism of "dog" in the two language backgrounds from the perspective of conceptual metaphor theory. But so far, there are few studies of the metaphor of snakes. In CNKI, "English-Chinese, snake" as the keywords for the theme search, there are 3 related articles; "metaphor, snake" as the keywords for the topic search, there are 19 related articles; "conceptual metaphor, snake" as the keywords for theme search, there are no related articles. So this article decided to study snake-related metaphors from the perspective of conceptual metaphor theory.

3. Analysis of Related Conceptual Metaphors of "Snake"

Because our lives are closely related to various animals, as we gradually become familiar with their habits and characteristics, we will use some of their characteristic traits or associative meanings to explain the objective world and related things, and then create many words about animals, phrases or sentences to express some abstract or difficult-to-understand things. Snake is one of these animals. When it comes to snakes, due to different metaphors leaving different impressions in our minds, different people have different feelings about snakes. Especially under the background of cultural differences between Chinese native speakers and English native speakers, the image of snakes is particularly different. Therefore, this article will be based on three types of metaphors contained in conceptual metaphors: ontological metaphors, structural metaphors and orientation metaphors[2]. According to rich Chinese-English corpora, this article analyzes the similarities and differences between snake metaphors in Chinese and English to explore the connection between culture and "snake" metaphors.

3.1 The Cognitive Prominence of "Snake" from the Perspective of Ontological Metaphor

Ontological metaphor is one of the classifications of conceptual metaphor. In Metaphors We Live By, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson believe that ontological metaphor establishes abstract concepts on physical objects related to our own experience around us . In short, it refers to the condition that abstract things such as states or activities are used to mean concrete things such as objects or substances.

In ontological metaphors, the source domain is humans['] specific understanding of a certain entity formed by their activities taken place in the objective world. The target domain is a certain abstract or vague thing that we want to describe,which can be an real or virtual. On the premise of similar characteristics between source domain and target domain, the process of applying ontological metaphors is that characteristics of source domain are projected into target domain to make events described in target domain, where behaviors or activities are materialized so that people can understand target domain from a familiar perspective and establish a connection between source domain and target domain. Based on the Chinese and English corpus, the following will analyze the commonality and individuality of "snake" in terms of conceptual metaphors in Chinese and English from the perspective of ontological metaphors.

3.1.1 Chinese-English Cognitive Commonality

In the mapping of metaphors, the source domain has many different conceptual meanings, which is reproduced in the target domain depends on the reader's cognition[3]. Although Chinese and English people live in the east and west of the mainland, human common sense organs enable Chinese and Western people to have a common understanding of the concept of "snake". Such cognition is reflected in different target domains.

(1) "Snake" refers to something that is long and curved

The first impression of a snake's appearance is slender and curved. In Chinese and Western cultures, there have been cases where the appearance characteristics of snakes are projected onto the abstract objects to form a more intuitive and clear understanding of them.

Example 1:

The season has entered early winter, and the Erduos plateau is vast. The broken line of the ancient Great Wall is like a hibernating snake, winding and lying in the boundless sand. (*Morning starts at noon*)

Example 2:

Idaho: Driving next to the curvy and meandering Snake River.

In example 1, the Great Wall is the target domain whose majestic posture are not familiar to readers consequently. It's difficult for readers to imagine the winding structure of the Great Wall when reading text. Because the winding Great Wall twist around like a snake, the author uses metaphor to project the characteristics of "snake" in the source domain into the Great Wall. With the help of familiar and tangible concept of "snake", the image of Great Wall is vivid in reader's mind, allowing readers to intuitively feel the majesty of Great Wall.

In example 2, the "river" is the target domain, an entity that readers are not familiar with. "Curvy and meandering", two adjectives, are relatively general. They do not have corresponding concrete concepts in reader's mind. Based on human cognition of snake shape, the author describes "river" as "Snake River", metaphorizing winding river into well-known entity, that is, curved snake.

Combining these two examples shows that when encountering things with same physical properties as "snake", both Chinese and English people will choose to replace them with "snake".

3.1.2 Sino-British Cognitive Differences

"Metaphor is a cognitive process of reasoning that maps some characteristics of things to another thing."[5] People's perceptions of snakes are largely the same because snakes look and behave in much the same way around the world, but there can be significant differences in their experiential cognition due to geography, climatic differences and religious practices. Therefore, some differences in the ontological metaphors for snakes in the English and Chinese corpora appear.

(1) Ontological metaphors with same source domain but different metaphorical connotations

Two-headed snake (two-headed snake), both Chinese and English corpora have this metaphorical body. In some ancient cultures of British nation, "two-headed snake" metaphorizes time. One head of snake leads to life and the other head leads to death. However, in Tang Han Yu's Yongzhen Xing poem: "I have never seen a two-headed snake before, and strange birds call out making people hate." In this poem, the poet uses "two-headed snake" to refer to treacherous and fierce people.

(2) Ontological metaphors unique in Chinese

Many ancient Chinese books have a lot of ontological metaphors. Spirit Snake can metaphorize beautiful writing or articles, such as Book of the Jin Dynasty and A Guest Going at the door "High talk about flying rabbits, holding algae in hand." etc.

(3) Ontological metaphors unique in English

In English, abstract or concrete things are compared with "snake's heel" or "snake's belly", metaphorizing low-level things.

Example 3:

Humphrey was lower than a snake's heel. He was depressed.

This example compares Humphrey with a snake's heel. In fact, it wants readers to experience how sad Humphrey is through this ontological metaphor.

3.2 The Cognitive Prominence of "Snake" from Perspective of Structural Metaphor

Event-structure metaphor is an advanced theory of structural metaphor. Traditional structural metaphors use the structure of one concept to map the structure of another concept, such as: Life is a journey. Event-structure metaphor is to express all aspects of event structure, such as state, change, process, action, cause, purpose and method, in a metaphorical way as space, force and movement.[4] Lakoff and his students proposed the event-structure metaphor theory in the book *Contemporary Metaphor Theory* in 1993, and improved this theory in the book *Living Philosophy* published in 1999.

This chapter mainly uses two representative works, The Little Prince and Anecdotes about Spirits and Immortals to analyze the event-structure metaphor of "snake".

3.2.1 Sino-British Cognitive Commonality

As a well-known children's literature work, The Little Prince has many structural metaphors, that is,

abstract concepts are materialized on certain people or things. This is not listed one by one. Among them, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry used "snake" to do structural metaphors in two fragments. The technique can be described as clever.

Example 5:

In the book it said: "Boa constrictors swallow their prey whole, without chewing it." After that they are not able to move, and they sleep through the six months that they need for digestion.

In The Little Prince, whose first chapter is a depiction of the boa is portrayed as a greedy creature that "swallows their pray whole", no matter how long it takes to digest, reflects the symbolism of greed in the Western view of the snake. The use of the python as a metaphor for greed means that the snake is the embodiment of greed, acting with the intention of swallowing its prey, representing the act of taking in everything out of greed without considering whether or not one can take the consequences. At the same time, historically, the snake was one of the ancient totems of Egypt, often wrapped around the scepter of the pharaohs, symbolizing greed and power. The snake's greed is also depicted in Chinese, as in "The heart of a man is not enough for a snake to swallow an elephant".

3.2.2 Cognitive Differences Between the UK and China

(1) The unique event structure metaphor in Chinese

Anecdotes about Spirits and Immortals is a collection of novels written by the Eastern Jin historian Gan Bao, which mainly contains stories of ghosts, spirits and folklore, most of which are short, concise and vivid.

In the story The Pearl of the Marquis, the snake holds a pearl in its mouth to repay its benefactor Sui Hou for saving his life, and the 'snake' presents a positive image of repaying kindness, but for the majority of the stories the snake appears as an unpleasant negative.

In the event structure metaphor, the cause of change is often understood metaphorically as 'the force (that controls the movement of all things, i.e. gives or takes away)'.[5] In The Marquis of Shouguang Impeaches a Ghost, the 'evil' that turns into good fortune is caused by a snake's death; in Hua Tuo treated laryngeal disease, the 'disease' that is cured by the 'spitting out' of a snake; and in The Great Snake in the Mansion of Situ, the murder of an unlucky abode is caused by a snake. The author skillfully uses the metaphor of event structure, as the snakes in these stories invariably symbolize 'bad luck' and are seen as the 'root of misfortune' to the people. The abstract concept of 'bad luck' is interpreted by the concrete image of the 'snake'.

Snake, as a reptilian, cold-blooded animal, is not surprising that in ancient China. As the boundaries between nature and human settlements were not clearly defined, snake is the competitor of humans, meanwhile humans had a phobia of it. When this phobia was reflected on some strange events, the snake acted as the source of all evil and became an ominous metaphor.

(2 The event structure metaphor unique in English[6]

the snake adds: "Whomever I touch, I send back to the earth from whence he came." and "I can help you, some day, if you I can…", hiding the true purpose of his action to use his venom to release the little prince's soul and lighten its weight so that it can fly back to its own planet, and finally to be met by the little prince with the words "But why do you always speak in riddles?". The author's use of the snake symbolizes 'stupidity', and the snake's stupidity as a possession, as a means of helping the little prince, but with a wrong prediction of its actions.

The study of the metaphorical structure of snakes is not simply an analysis of the things that snakes symbolize, but an exploration of the metaphorical structure of snakes in Western culture based on a series of events centered around snakes.[7] In summary, snakes in Western culture symbolize greed, arrogance, foolishness, blind obedience, and shortsightedness, with a predominantly negative image. This is consistent with the evil image of snakes in Christianity, where they tempted Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. It can be explained that in Western literature and culture, people tend to describe the negative image of snakes.

3.3 The Cognitive Highlight of the Directional Metaphor Perspective of "Snake"

Directional metaphors are mostly related to spatial orientation, such as up and down, exception, front and back, and depth. Generally speaking, the directional metaphor of animals is not common in Chinese and English.

However, due to the special way of movement of snakes, the English word "snake" has a verb form, meaning "to move in a winding way", while the similar expression in Chinese is "snake-like movement". The difference between Chinese and English in this regard is that "snake-like movement" in Chinese does not have a directional tendency, while in English, "snake" as a verb is often paired with "down" to describe rivers, implying the directional metaphor of "down".

For example 8, in the following sentence excerpted from The Guardian: "According to legend, this was at Al Qrnah, the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates, the twin rivers that snake down from the mountains north of Iraq, bringing green life to its deserts."

The phrase "snake down" is used to describe rivers and streams, and since water flows from top to bottom, it deepens the directional metaphor of "snake as down" in English.

4. Comprehensive Analysis and Discussion

Table 1: The conceptual metaphor of "snake" in Chinese and English is highlighted

English-specific cognitive prominence	Perceived prominence of shared English and Chinese language	Chinese-specific cognitive prominence
Ontological metaphors: time, lower things Structural metaphors: arrogance, stupidity	Ontological metaphors: long, curved things, ugly-looking people, cold-blooded, cruel women Structural metaphors: greed Orientation metaphor: below	Ontological metaphors: sinister and vicious people, good writing Structural metaphors: uncertainty, bad luck, bogeyman

The above table can intuitively compare the cognitive highlights brought by the metaphor of "snake" in English and Chinese. Overall, the similarities are greater than the differences. In both language contexts, "snake" has a negative meaning, but the specific negative meanings are different. In English, the structural metaphor of "snake" mostly refers to a person's specific character qualities, while in Chinese it mostly refers to external misfortunes. The cognitive highlights brought by metaphors permeate every aspect of human life and can be used to understand abstract concepts such as social behavior and emotional attitudes. It reflects the complexity and multi-directionality of human conceptualization of things.[7]

5. Conclusion

This article reveals the relationship between the "same and different coexistence" of the cognitive highlights of the conceptual metaphor of "snake" in English and Chinese through systematic comparative analysis. The research results show that the overall emotional color of the cognitive highlights of the metaphorical meaning of "snake" in English and Chinese is similar, and both are negative. However, there are still subtle differences that should be noted in cross-cultural communication. Therefore, systematic comparative research on the conceptual metaphor of "snake" has important practical guiding significance.

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