

A Cognitive Approach to the Metonymy and Metaphor-Based Study of “Black” in English

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Abstract

According to the contemporary theories, metonymy and metaphor are two major types of word meaning extension, which reveal how people perceive unfamiliar, abstract concepts via familiar, concrete one on the basis of bodily experience. Through the data of “black” from Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary (6th Edition), under the theories in cognitive linguistics, namely, the prototype theory, conceptual metaphor theory, metonymy theory, this paper takes the basic color term “black” in English as an example to analyze the cognitive semantic structure and summarizes the cause of it. This paper aims to strengthen the accuracy of words meaning and translation as well as the cross-cultural awareness and capacity.

Keywords

Black, Cognitive Approach, Metonymy, Metaphor, English

1. Introduction

Traditional studies usually regard metonymy and metaphor as rhetoric devices, a figure of speech since Aristotle Period (384-322 BC) while in the book *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) revolutionized the concepts of metonymy and metaphor. They found that metonymy and metaphor are not merely rhetoric devices that people have always believed them to be. Instead, they function also in people’s conceptual system and play a significant role in shaping how people think and behave. They are the means by which it is possible to ground our conceptual systems experimentally, and to reason in a constrained but creative fashion (Johnson, 1992: p. 351). As language is linked closely with one’s thinking, the language-based research they conduct sheds light on how people actually think and behave. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) pointed out “Hu-

man conceptual systems are pervasively structured by metaphor, metonymy and other kinds of imaginative structure”. Later, Lakoff (1993) adapted the definition of “metaphor” as “a cross-domain mapping in the conceptual system”. In the title of the thesis, not only metaphor but also metonymy is mentioned. Both of them are the most important ways in which man construe the word. Metaphor and metonymy are similar in that both function in such a mechanism that one thing is understood or interpreted in terms of another. Lakoff & Turner (1989) pointed out several distinguishing features of metaphor and metonymy:

- 1) In metaphor there are two conceptual domains, while metonymy involves only one conceptual domain;
- 2) Metonymy, but not metaphor, involves a “stand-for” relationship between the source and target domains;
- 3) In metaphor a whole schematic structure, called the *source* domain, is mapped, together with its accompanying logic, onto another whole schematic structure, called the *target* domain; the function of the mapping is to allow us to understand and reason about the target in terms of the source. In contrast, a metonymy is primarily used for reference: we refer to an entity by means of another entity.

What could be simpler and more obvious than colors? The sky is blue. Fresh grass is green. Blood is red. The sun and moon are yellow. It has been estimated that human eyes can discriminate no fewer than 7.5 million just noticeable color differences (Brown & Lenneberg, 1954). There are good reasons for describing color terms and color metaphors. The color domain is one of what Langacker Ronald (1987: p. 148) called “basic domains”, which are not reducible to others, i.e., more primitive cognitive structure, and which are bodily grounded concepts that enable the further structuring of our understanding of the world. Berlin and Kay (1969) concluded that there exist universally for humans eleven basic perceptual color categories, which serve as the psychophysical referents of the eleven or fewer basic color terms in any language in the following order.

From Figure 1, it is obvious that “white” and “black” are the basic color words. In previous studies, many studies focus on the comparison between English and Chinese color metaphor. They chose several different colors as models. But studies on “black” color in a single language appear relatively rare. Therefore, in this paper, we choose the representative color—black, as a model and study its metonymic and metaphorical use in only one language—English. What is more, this paper not only analyzes the symbolic meaning of “black” color but also makes a detailed analysis of “black” color under the framework of metaphorical mapping, which helps form the cognitive thinking about metonymy

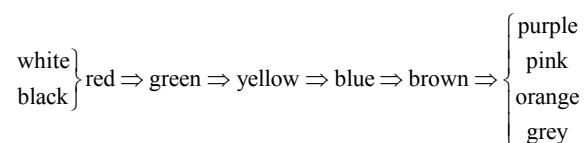


Figure 1. An evolutionary sequence of basic color lexicon.

and metaphor.

2. Metonymies and Metaphors on “Black”

According to Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary (6th Edition) (to hereafter to as: Oxford), the original paraphrasis on “black” is “having the very darkest color, like night or coal”. So, if on etymology, “black” refers to a specific color; if on cognitive linguistics, its archetype meaning belongs to color gamut. The senses of “black” are closely connected with each other, the author attempts to group the metonymical and metaphorical meanings into several categories. The categorization is shown as follows.

2.1. Metonymies on “Black”

2.1.1. Visual-Metonymy

Light and dark are the most direct experience in our daily life. *Wierzbicka (1996)* believed that the notion of “black” and “white” might be inherently associated with “dark” and “light”. The notion of seeing is the clue to the semantics of dark and light, and that the prototypical use of these words has nothing to do with any objects but with the ambient. Thus we can say “It was (already) dark.” or “It was (still) light”. Though “black night” is based on human experience, it has far more abstract meaning, which can be classified into visual gamut.

For example:

- a. He groped for the door handle in the black.
- b. Darkness was blacking out both sea and jungle.
- c. It would be a black night with the rain.

The neurological firing pattern for low brightness signals black, and its relative absence signals white, with gray in between (*Zhao, 2001: p. 42*). Black is to human eyes the most distinct of color experiences. Black can make people think of night and darkness. The physical experience facilitates metonymic transfer of black from blackness to darkness, as in “black night”. They are physically grounded and their meanings come directly from our perceptual proximity between “black” and “dark”. In the above examples, “black” means “without light, completely dark”. Through “black” to elicit “night”, it points out the close relationship between two things, which is the result of metonymic cognition.

2.1.2. Emotional-Metonymy

Everyone has a bad mood at some point, thus being restless. We can know about a person not only by oral expression but also facial expression. “Black” can also mean “gloomy, somber”. This kind of metonymy is just using different facial colors to express emotional change.

For example:

- a. Rory shot her a black look.
- b. He was black and blind with hatred of her.
- c. You had almost charmed away my black mood.

A person goes black when he feels surprised or frightened. The relationship

between cause and effect is a kind of metonymy.

2.1.3. Racial- Metonymy

In objective world, people from different races have their own distinct features, which can always be easily perceived and memorized. The people in the Orient are mainly yellow or brown, so people use “yellow race” to name them; those in the west are mainly white, so people use “white people”. Of course, the naming process is realized by metonymy.

For example:

- a. a black woman writer.
- b. black culture.
- c. This has made new black investors wary.

In Oxford, here “black” means “belonging to a race of people who have dark skin; connected with black people”.

2.1.4. Thing-Metonymy

Thing metonymy of color terms uses colors to refer to things themselves. Such as “green apple”, “the white book”, “blue print” and so on. In this kind of usage, “black” means “without milk”.

For example:

- a. Two black coffees, please.

In this case, “black coffee” refers to “coffee without milk or coffeemate”. And we call “coffee milk” as “white coffee”. Moreover, “Hongcha” should be translated as “black tea” not “red tea”. In Chinese and the languages of neighboring countries, it is a description of the colour of the liquid. The western term “black tea” refers to “the color of the oxidized leaves”. While green tea usually loses its flavor within a year, black tea retains its flavour for several years. Although green tea has been recently seen as a revival due to its purported health benefits, black tea still accounts for over ninety percent of all tea sold in the west.

2.2. Metaphors on “Black”

2.2.1. Feeling-Metaphor

“Black” has been used in many different aspects and owns quite many characters. Therefore, there are many phrases, idioms and sentences including “black”, which make the expressed meaning vivid. As for people in English-speaking countries, “black” can arouse different emotions on different conditions, including the negative feeling. In addition, “black” owns its figurative connotations. A great number of metaphorical expressions convey sadness of human beings. And the understanding of such feeling is various, including desperate, anger and so on. It can be interpreted as inner feeling of human beings towards the outside world. It means “without hope, very sad or melancholy”. The strong emotion is described by the degree of darkness.

For example:

- a. The future looks black.

b. Black dog means one is in despair.

c. It's been another black day for the north-east with the announcement of further job losses.

d. Black mood is the mood that sinks into low spirits.

In sentence a, "black" literally means "the darkest color or darkness without light". "Completely darkness" is frequently used to describe "the bleak prospect". In English, there are a large number of idioms and phrases related with the extended meaning of "black". As time goes by, this fear has become a kind of sub-consciousness in the mind of human beings, and language is just a manifestation of this sub-consciousness (Gu, 2002: p. 134).

2.2.2. Moral-Metaphor

One of the meanings of "black" is "without light", which is always linked to the hidden places. Activities engaged in the hidden places are more often than not fair and square. So "black" is also the symbol of evil, which can be classified into moral gamut. As we all know, a great number of immoral acts can be expressed by "black", which means that such acts are wicked or harmful.

For example:

a. black deeds/lies.

b. He is not as black as he is painted.

c. A black lie refers to someone tell a lie deliberately with bad or evil purpose.

In the English language, "black sheep" is an idiom used to describe an odd or disreputable member of a group, especially within a family. The term has typically been given negative implications, implying waywardness. And also "black and white" means "in a way that makes people or things seem completely bad or good, or completely right or wrong".

2.2.3. Political-and-Economic Metaphor

People do illegal things that are often carried out in the dark, or not openly. From color gamut to political and economic gamut, "black" means "unfair, illegal". From the source domain to the political and economic domain, this projection gives us vivid perception about the illegal market.

For example:

a. black money

b. But a large black market probably means the 20 percent unemployment rate is overstated.

"Black economy" is unofficial system of employing and paying workers without observing legal requirements such as the payment of income tax. And "black market" means "illegal buying and selling goods or currencies (especially where there is official rationing)". Otherwise, "white market" refers to "legal market". In addition, in some ways, English develops faster than Chinese. There isn't "huishi" in Chinese, but in English "gray market" has already appeared. From "black market" to "white market", and then to "grey market", it shows that people use the basic category of color words to describe and interpret things in

other domains, which is the result of cognitive metaphor.

2.2.4. State-Metaphor

Color is often closely related with the state of things, such as old man with white hair, dead tree with yellow leaves. More examples are as follows:

- a. The landlord beat the old peasant black and blue.

When referring to death, people always connect death with “black”. It is the symbol of ominous. As we all know, during the Middle Age, there was disease spreading through the whole Europe. It is the Black Death that was the widespread plague hitting England in 1348-1349, which was caused by deadly bubonic plague spread by rat fleas. It killed millions and the population drastically shrank from 4 million to 2 million, leaving streets with corpse. In the sixteenth century, Sweden and Denmark for the first time used “black” to describe the event in their almanac. The reason why they used “black” to record the event is not only that the patients’ skins went black but more exactly that it refers to the events which brought dark and horrible haze to the human being.

For the basic color word “black”, in order to understand more clearly about its semantic structure and semantic change, the readers can see **Figure 2**.

3. Conclusion

It is well known that black is one kind of color, which is familiar to our human beings. Since the ancient times, it has close relationships with human beings’ perspective. Throughout history, it has been connected with such fields as philosophy, arts, literature, and power. To some extent, it is no doubt that black has

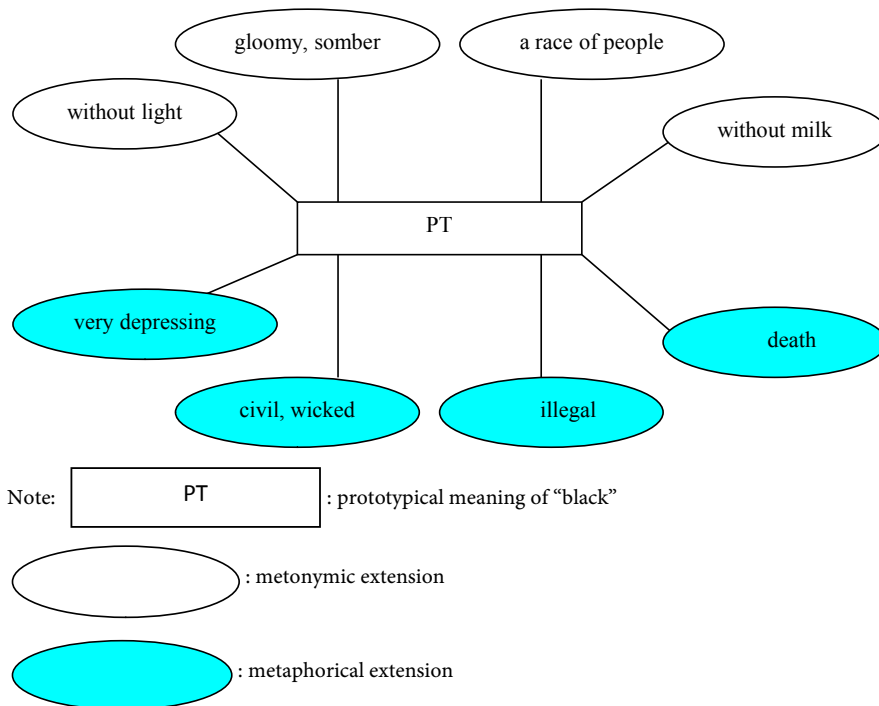


Figure 2. Radial category of “black”.

an essential influence on human beings' cognitive system.

By analyzing the linguistic data collected from dictionaries, newspapers, the Internet, and our casual daily conversations, we divide the meanings of the color term "black" into two main types: the prototypical meaning and the prototype-based extended meanings. The prototypical meaning of the color term "black" is regarded to be the very darkest color. The extended meanings of "black" are further classified into two categories: i.e., metonymic extension and metaphorical extension. Significantly, the radical category of the color term "black" demonstrates that all senses of "black" are related to the other ones because of their direct or indirect relation to the prototypical meaning of "black". The metonymies and metaphors of "black" discussed in this paper show their cognitive role. It is very useful for us to understand the abstract concepts such as visual-metonymy, emotional-metonymy, racial-metonymy, thing-metonymy, feeling-metaphor, moral-metaphor, political- and economic-metaphor and state-metaphor. In addition, it is also a good tool for us to know about the unknown things and generate different perspective to understand things. As Ning (2001) said, "such an attempt is obviously collective and collaborative in nature".

To a great extent, this paper has explored in detail many aspects of metaphors about "black" in English. The contributions of this paper lie in the following aspects: firstly, metonymies and metaphors of "black" are ubiquitous that penetrate our daily life including our thinking pattern, cognitive style, culture and literature. And these aspects contain such domains as emotions, times, power, beauty, evil and virtues. Secondly, the metonymies and metaphors studied in the paper rely on English culture and surroundings and are related with our specific living environment. To some extent, we can say that metaphor is interdependent on the specific culture. We realize the metaphorical system reflecting the specific culture by studying the metaphors which take the certain cultures as their roots. Thirdly, the metaphors of "black" in English investigated in the paper show their cognitive role. It is very useful for us to understand the abstract concepts such domains as times, emotions, power and virtue. In addition, it is also a good tool for us to know about the unknown things and generate different perspective to understand things.

Inevitably, the metonymic and metaphorical meanings of "black" under discussion may not be fully covered in this paper. It is a modest start to a monumental task, droplets of words drawn from the ocean of the human vocabulary. Therefore, the conclusion can only be tentative. The situation points to the need for more serious research in this area. It calls for close scrutiny to question and test my findings and to explore the unsolved problems as well, hence, to enrich the cognitive study of metonymy and metaphor.

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