



# A Contrastive Study of Metaphors in English and Chinese

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**How to cite this paper:** Li, L.L. (2023) A Contrastive Study of Metaphors in English and Chinese. *Open Access Library Journal*, 10: e10565.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1110565>

**Received:** July 31, 2023

**Accepted:** August 22, 2023

**Published:** August 25, 2023

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## Abstract

Language serves as a medium for conveying ideas, and the mastery of verbal expression is best understood through the study of rhetoric. Metaphor, being one of the most ancient and frequently employed forms of rhetoric, holds a significant place in communication. The study of metaphor in human research can be traced back to the time of Aristotle in ancient Greece during the latter half of the fourth century B.C.E. Initially, metaphor was solely observed as a linguistic phenomenon, serving as an embellishment to language in order to enhance its vividness and captivate the interest of the audience. Later, in the 1980s, American cognitive linguist Lakoff proposed the theory of “conceptual metaphor”, which has since emerged as a means for human beings to perceive and comprehend the world. Therefore, the concept of metaphor extends beyond its linguistic nature and encompasses a cognitive framework that holds significant influence over human thought processes. Although both the English and the Chinese nations inhabit the same natural environment and share similar social experiences and foundations, they have developed distinct conceptual frameworks and individual perspectives and interpretations as a result of their specific historical contexts, living circumstances, and cultural customs. For instance, the understanding of the term “dog” differs considerably between the two nationalities. In Chinese, metaphors employing the term “dog” often carry a negative connotation, such as when referring to power struggles or the inability to produce valuable outcomes. Similarly, in English, metaphors utilizing the term “dog” tend to have a pejorative meaning. In the English language, the metaphorical usage of the term “dog” often carries positive connotations. For instance, phrases like “a lucky dog” and “love me, love my dog” are commonly employed to express favorable sentiments. In addition, there exists a shared characteristic between English and Chinese cultures in terms of emotional metaphors. Both languages employ the metaphorical expression “anger is fire”. Therefore, it can be observed that there exist both shared characteristics and distinctions when

comparing metaphors in English and Chinese. Drawing upon the conceptual metaphor theory proposed by Lakoff and Johnson, the primary focus of this paper is to examine the similarities and differences between metaphors in English and Chinese. Additionally, this study aims to explore the underlying reasons behind these variations, with the ultimate goal of providing readers with a valuable reference for conducting comparative analyses of metaphors in English and Chinese.

## Subject Areas

Linguistics

## Keywords

Metaphor, English-Chinese Metaphor, Comparative Analysis

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## 1. Introduction

This section primarily provides the background of the study and outlines its structure. We can comprehend the structure of the paper in order to investigate the purpose and significance of the research.

### 1.1. The Background of this Study

Language is both the primary means of thinking and the manifestation of thinking. Language and thinking are inseparable. Language is used to construct and communicate meaning and serves as a window into the human mind (Fauconnier, 1999) [1]. Metaphor, as a form of rhetorical art, initially served as a rhetorical device. However, in 1980, Lakoff and John's book *Metaphors We Live By* [2] revolutionized the understanding of metaphor. They argued that metaphor is not only a linguistic phenomenon, but also a way of thinking. Subsequently, cognitive linguistics has pointed out that metaphor is the process of understanding and experiencing one thing in terms of another. It is not only a rhetorical device in language but also a significant cognitive mode. Although the English and Chinese people inhabit the same natural world and share similar social experiences and foundations, they have developed distinct conceptual systems and possess their own perceptions and understanding as a result of their unique historical backgrounds, living conditions, and cultural practices. Therefore, there are both similarities and differences between English and Chinese metaphors. Metaphors are a common way of perceiving and thinking, and they have received significant attention. By comparing metaphors in English and Chinese, we can identify similarities and differences in various aspects. Conducting a contrastive analysis of metaphors in English and Chinese will enhance our understanding of the characteristics of these two languages.

### 1.2. The Purpose and Significance of This Study

In essence, metaphor is a cognitive phenomenon. Metaphors can be found eve-

rywhere in our daily lives, and the more abstract the concept, the more we need to use metaphors to help us comprehend it. Language is one of the reflections and means of the cognitive phenomenon of metaphor. Human beings need to engage in metaphorical thinking in order to perceive and understand the world, as well as to explore uncharted territories. When encountering unfamiliar things, individuals often rely on familiar concepts to relate to and comprehend new information, thereby enhancing their understanding and knowledge. Metaphors in language arise from cognitive processes in humans and function as cognitive tools for the purpose of understanding and classifying novel concepts. In the past few decades, the study of metaphor has gained significant attention, not only in the realm of traditional rhetoric but also in various other academic disciplines. Metaphor encompasses not only a linguistic aspect but also a cognitive aspect. Whether expressed in English or Chinese, metaphor serves as a profoundly significant rhetorical tool. The utilization of metaphorical language is not limited to literature, but also varies across different languages.

In previous studies, scholars have discussed metaphors in English and Chinese from the perspectives of concept blending theory and cross-cultural analysis, and have made significant achievements. For example, Fu Yanli (2012) [3] analyzes the human metaphors in English and Chinese languages from the perspective of conceptual integration. The study highlights the similarities and differences in human metaphors between Chinese and English language and culture. It also confirms the strong explanatory power of conceptual integration theory in constructing the meaning of human metaphors. Zhao Yaling (2007) [4] discussed the similarities and differences in the use of metaphors in Chinese and English cultures.

However, in the current field of contrastive study of metaphors in English Chinese, most of the studies provide an opportunity for an examination of the contrastive study of metaphors in English and Chinese sentences. This aims to explore on the similarities and differences between English and metaphors, as well as and the behind these differences. The goal is to provide readers phenomenon, a providing reference by comparing English and Chinese metaphors.

### 1.3. The Layout of the Paper

The paper consists of an introduction, the main body, and a conclusion. The main contents are as follows: Chapter one provides a comprehensive description of the full text, including the background, significance, and purpose of the research. Chapter two is a literature review. This paper mainly discusses the previous studies on metaphors in English and Chinese. Chapter three introduces the theoretical framework, specifically focusing on conceptual metaphor theory. Chapter four examines the similarities and differences in metaphors between English and Chinese. Chapter five describes the factors that contribute to the differences in metaphor usage between English and Chinese. Finally, chapter six provides a conclusion that summarizes the findings and discussions. The main objective of this paper is to explore the similarities and differences between Eng-

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lish and Chinese metaphors and to provide readers with a reference for comparing and analyzing these metaphors.

## 2. Literature Review

Metaphors have always been one of the focuses of linguistic research, not only in English but also in Chinese. In this chapter, we will review the achievements gained by researchers in their studies abroad and at home.

### 2.1. Relevant Studies Abroad

The study of metaphor in foreign countries can be divided into three stages: the first stage is the traditional study of metaphor represented by Aristotle, who proposed the “comparative theory”. He believed that the phenomenon of metaphor is caused by comparing different kinds of things, and metaphor plays a decorative role in language (Chen Jiaxu, 2004) [5]; the second stage is the transition from metaphor as a figure of speech to cognitive research represented by Richards and Blake. Richards elevated the examination of metaphor to the level of sentences for the first time and introduced the “tension theory”. This theory posits that metaphor is composed of the “signified” and “signifier”. Because of the conceptual incompatibility between the signified and the signifier, metaphor came into existence (Yang Ming, 2005) [6]. The third stage, represented by Lakoff and others, viewed metaphor as a cognitive tool, marking the period when metaphor truly entered the realm of linguistic research. Lakoff and Johnson believed that metaphor is not only a linguistic form, but more importantly, a universal cognitive process in which human beings recognize, understand, think, and express one thing in terms of another. They challenged the traditional “metaphorical rhetoric view” and proposed a unique “cognitive view of metaphor”. Since then, metaphor has transitioned from being seen as a rhetorical language phenomenon to being recognized as a widespread language phenomenon, thereby marking a shift towards the cognitive aspect of metaphor research.

### 2.2. Relevant Studies at Home

Since the 1990s, Chinese scholars have been introducing and drawing lessons from foreign cognitive linguistics and metaphor cognitive theories, leading to the development of contemporary metaphor research in China. This research has entered the cognitive research stage. On the one hand, some scholars began to introduce foreign theories of cognitive research on metaphor to China. Lin Shuwu was the first to introduce cognitive research theories of metaphor in China. He mainly introduced several foreign schools of metaphor research and commented on the basic status quo, focus, and trend of metaphor research. [7] [8] Zhao Yanfang (1995) [9] systematically introduced the classic book of cognitive linguistics, “*Metaphors We Live By*”, which was co-authored by Lakoff and Johnson. On the other hand, some scholars have discussed the cognitive function of metaphor and the operational mechanism of metaphor cognition based on foreign theories of metaphor cognition. Shu Dingfang (2000) [10] proposed

the idea of establishing modern metaphor and wrote the first monograph on metaphor research in China from a cognitive perspective. Lan Chun (1999) [11] studied the phenomenon of spatial metaphor in Chinese pronunciation through the analysis of a real corpus.

### 3. Conceptual Metaphor Theory

The year 1980 witnessed the collapse of the conventional rhetoric metaphor theory's domination. This is the consequence of the publication of a book, "*Metaphors We Live By*", co-authored by Lakoff and Johnson [2]. In this book, a cognitive conception of metaphor, known as conceptual metaphor, is put forth. This perspective offers a fresh approach for future studies and research on metaphor. This book marks a significant advancement in the study of metaphor and has sparked a lively debate on conceptual metaphor. It is widely regarded as a milestone in metaphor research. According to conceptual metaphor theory, metaphor is the process of using one thing to understand another. Lakoff explains that conceptual metaphor involves a relationship between a SOURCE DOMAIN, which provides the literal meaning of the metaphorical expressions, and a TARGET DOMAIN, which represents the actual experience being described by the metaphor (Croft & Cruse, 2004) [12].

## 4. A Comparison of Metaphor in English and Chinese

### 4.1. Their Major Similarities

Despite the distinct cultural backgrounds of China and the West, there exist certain parallels between human beings and the natural environment that surrounds them. Therefore, owing to the presence of comparable cognitive concepts and a shared comprehension of objective phenomena in nature, human beings possess analogous cognitive mechanisms for metaphors. Zhou Hong (2001) [13] and Qin Yaoyong (2002) [14] conducted separate studies on the similarities between emotional metaphors in English and Chinese languages, respectively. Both researchers reached the conclusion that there exist four commonalities between English and Chinese emotional metaphors. These include the utilization of metaphors related to human physiological and behavioral changes, as well as metaphors associated with orientation words, liquid, and weather.

Firstly, in their study, Lakoff and Kövecses (1987) [15] identified a general principle of metonymy in English, specifically related to human physiological and behavioral change metaphors. They observed that individuals often use specific physiological changes in the human body, which occur during certain emotions or feelings, to express those emotions. We also observe the presence of the metaphorical transformation principle in Chinese. For instance, in the English language, the emotion of "anger" is conveyed through the phrase "You made my blood boil", whereas in Chinese, it is expressed as "我气的脸上火辣辣的(My face is burning with anger)". In the English language, the phrase "He jumped for joy" is used to express a feeling of extreme happiness. Conversely, in Chinese,

the phrase “孩子们高兴得活蹦乱跳 (the children jumped for joy)” is employed to convey the same sentiment.

Secondly, the concept of orientation is often expressed through metaphors, as highlighted by Lake off. It is worth noting that the English language contains numerous metaphors that utilize directional terms. These metaphors are conveyed through the terms “up” and “down” (or “high” and “low”). These orientation metaphors are frequently employed to convey individuals’ emotions of joy, anger, and sadness. In this framework, “joy and happiness” are associated with an upward or elevated position, while “sadness” is linked to a downward or lower position. In the English language, there exist two metaphors that represent the concept of “HAPPY IS UP” and “SAD IS DOWN”. For instance, the English expression for “joy” is “I’m feeling up”, whereas in Chinese, it is expressed as “他很高兴(he is happy)” The English expression for “sadness” is “He is in low spirits” whereas in Chinese, it is expressed as “他情绪低落(He is feeling down)”.

Based on the theory proposed by Lake off and John (1980) [2], Andrew Goatly (1997) [16] conducted additional research on English metaphors. His study revealed that a significant portion of the English language, which conveys the shift in emotions and moods, draws from words associated with weather or weather changes. Additionally, Goatly identified the expression “EMOTION = LIQUID” in his findings. For instance, There is a wave of panic (enthusiasm/indignation). 有一阵惊慌(热情/愤怒)/She felt quite calm.她心情很平静。/He was swollen with anger.他满腔怒火。/Her heart was flowing with happiness.她心中充满幸福。

And lastly, the weather metaphor. Similarly, Andrew Goatly has discovered that a significant number of emotional or mood-related expressions in English are derived from vocabulary related to weather or weather changes. Examples of such expressions include “HUMAN = PLANT DEVELOPMENT/SUCCESS = MOVEMENT FORWARDS UNDERSTAND/KNOW = SEE” and others (Goatly, n.d.). In the above example sentences, expressions such as “bluster oneself into anger 勃然大怒/feel gloomy 心情沮丧/a frosty smile (or look)冷淡的笑(或表情)” illustrate the connection between people’s moods and weather. This comparison suggests that moods can be described as either “sunny” or “cloudy”.

#### 4.2. Their Major Differences

First of all, Chinese and Western nations have their own national characteristics, which can easily lead to different perceptions of the same vehicle. In China, the dragon is a symbol of power, success, and positive image. Therefore, in Chinese, “龙腾虎跃”, also known as “天之骄子”, is a term used to recognize and praise someone. However, in English, “dragon” is often associated with monsters, symbolizing fierceness and cruelty. It can also be used to describe negative images, such as saying “My wife is a dragon”.

Secondly, there are differences between China and the West in terms of religious beliefs, political systems, and thinking patterns. For expressing similar meanings, English and Chinese metaphors employ different vehicles. For exam-

ple, in China, people use the phrase “害群之马” to describe individuals whose actions have a negative impact on the entire group, whereas in Western culture, the expression “a black sheep” is used to convey the same idea.

Finally, it is unique either to the English or Chinese language and culture, and only exists in one of them. This phenomenon is usually caused by unique deified legends, religious beliefs, and historical stories in China and the West. Besides, there are certain metaphorical meanings in English that do not exist in Chinese, like “blue boy” which refers to a transgender person. Correspondingly, there are also some Chinese metaphors that do not have direct equivalents in English, such as “外屋” (literally “outside room”), “狐狸精” (literally “fox spirit”), “守株待兔” (literally “waiting by a stump for rabbits”), and “大回小回” (literally “big turn small turn”).

## 5. Factors of the Differences in Metaphor between English and Chinese

### 5.1. Differences in Living Environment

China is a predominantly agricultural landlocked country, where metaphors involving people and things on land are commonly used. On the contrary, Britain is an island nation, with fishing, shipbuilding, and shipping as its primary economic lifelines. What mainly associated with language expression are things related to the sea. If there are many sea-related expressions in English, such as “smooth sailing”, “go with the stream”, “on the rocks”, “give up the ship”, “to rest on one's oars”, “to keep one's head above water”, “all at sea”, “to clean the decks”, “to tide over” and “drunk as a sailor”. Additionally, the word “fish” is commonly used metaphorically in English, for example, “dumb as a fish”, “drink like a fish”, “lose fish” and “cool fish”. Metaphorically, spending money is seen as wasteful. Chinese is “挥金如土” while English is “spending money like water”. Farmers in China have accumulated a wealth of experience in agricultural production through generations of productive labor, which is clearly evident in their language expression. For example, “只问耕耘，不问收获”，“瓜田不纳履，李下不理冠”，“前人种树后人乘凉”，and “留得青山在，不怕没柴烧”. All of these clearly reflect the distinct regional colors of the land and sea.

### 5.2. Differences in Cultural Conventions

Human beings share many common life experiences and emotions. However, due to the influence of diverse cultural customs, people from different nationalities often use different metaphors to convey the same ideas. For example, the Chinese phrase “天生有福” is translated differently in different cultures. In Russian culture, it is translated as “born in a shirt” in British culture as “born with a silver spoon in one's mouth” and in German culture as “born with one's hair combed”. Dogs are often considered to be the most loyal companions of human beings in the Western world. Generally speaking, metaphors involving dogs are all commendatory. Examples include: “You are a lucky dog”, “Every dog has his

day”, “top dog”, and “important person”. Another common metaphor is “as sick as a dog”. Old dogs will not learn new tricks. Love me, love my dog. In Chinese, a dog is considered a humble animal. Metaphors involving dogs are generally derogatory, such as “狐朋狗友” (meaning “friends who are untrustworthy”), “狗急跳墙” (meaning “a desperate person will do anything”), “狗嘴吐不出象牙” (meaning “a person who is unable to speak eloquently”), “狗腿子” (meaning “a person who is a lackey”), “狗头军师” (meaning “a person who is a cunning advisor”), and so on.

### 5.3. Differences Cultural Heritage

Most of the Western traditional cultures are influenced by ancient Greek civilization and Christian civilization, resulting in a language that is rich in related metaphors. For example, “Achilles’ heel” refers to a fatal weakness, “a Herculean task” refers to a task that requires great physical strength and intelligence, “Pandora’s box” refers to the root of disasters, troubles, and scourges, while “Prometheus” is a symbol of loving human beings and resisting oppression, and “Solomon” refers to intelligence. “Judas” refers to the betrayer, someone who pretends to be friendly but ultimately harms others. “A kiss of death” refers to the behavior of being friendly on the surface while actually causing harm. The traditional Chinese culture is influenced by Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. China’s Confucian educators adhere to the principle of the “golden mean”. Taoist educators prioritize cleanliness and contentment, while Buddhist educators, who possess insight into the mortal world and believe in karma, have developed a philosophy of life that is self-contained, moderate, and wise. Therefore, there are idioms such as “枪打出头鸟” (the bird that sticks its head out gets shot), “出头椽子先烂” (the beam that sticks out first rots first), “借花献佛” (borrowing flowers to offer to Buddha), “临时抱佛脚” (last-minute attempt to seek help from Buddha), “道高一尺，魔高一丈” (the higher the virtue, the higher the devil), and so on.

## 6. Conclusion

Metaphor is a cognitive tool that allows people to understand the objective world and serves as a vehicle for thought. There are similarities and differences between China and the West in terms of geographical location, cultural customs, history, religious beliefs, political systems, and thinking patterns. This paper explores the similarities and differences between English and Chinese metaphors, drawing on Lakoff and Johnson’s conceptual metaphor theory. The aim is to provide readers with a reference for comparing and analyzing English and Chinese metaphors, and to understand the reasons behind these similarities and differences.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.



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## Appendix 1: Abstract and Keywords in Chinese

### 英汉隐喻对比研究

**摘要：**语言是表达思想的工具，语言表达的艺术通过修辞更好的诠释出来。隐喻是历史最悠久、使用最普遍的修辞方式之一。人类对于隐喻的研究最早可以追溯到公元前四世纪后半叶古希腊的亚里士多德时期，隐喻起初仅仅作为一种语言现象，是作为装饰物添加在语言上的，目的是使语言变得生动有趣。而后来随着 20 世纪 80 年代美国认知语言学家莱考夫“概念隐喻”理论的提出，隐喻逐渐成为了人类认识、了解世界的方式，因此，隐喻不仅作为一种语言现象，还是一种思维方式，在人类的认知活动中起着重要作用。虽然英汉两个民族虽然居住在同一个自然界中，有着相似的社会经验和基础，但由于他们独特的历史背景、生活条件、文化习俗不同从而形成了不同的概念系统，有着各自的感知和认识。例如，关于“狗”的观念在两个民族中有着很大的差异，在汉语中以“狗”为喻体的隐喻常常带有贬义色彩，如：狗仗人势，狗嘴里吐不出象牙等；而在英语中以“狗”为喻体具有褒义色彩，如：a lucky dog (幸运儿)/love me, love my dog (爱屋及乌)等。此外，英汉民族在情感隐喻上有一定的共性，他们都有“愤怒是火”这一隐喻，英语对应的为 Anger is fire。因此，英汉隐喻之间既存在共性，也存在差异。本文基于莱考夫和约翰逊的概念隐喻理论，主要探讨英汉隐喻之间的异同点，以及导致这种现象的原因，旨在为广大读者对比分析英汉隐喻提供借鉴意义。

**关键词：**隐喻，英汉隐喻，对比分析