



CONCEPTUALIZATION OF “ DEATH IS THE END OF A DAY” IN ENGLISH AND CHINESE LITERARY TEXTS

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Abstract

Some events are too distasteful to be approached without linguistic maneuvering. One of these is undoubtedly death, a timeless taboo in which psychological, religious, and social interdiction coexist. The study investigates and compares two conceptual metaphors “death is night/ darkness” and “death is sleep/rest” in English and Chinese literary texts, these two subordinate metaphors are included in the metaphor “death is the end of a day”, using the framework of the well-known conceptual metaphor theory initiated by Lakoff and Johnson(1980, 2003).

It has been found that, based on 11 examples that are extracted from English and Chinese literary texts that both languages use strikingly similar conceptual metaphors of expressing death to mitigate the effect of death. Evidence based on data analysis supports the view about the universality of conceptual metaphors(2005).

Key words:

Conceptual metaphor theory, Chinese, English, death

1. Introduction

There is always a feeling of discomfort at mentioning harmful and embarrassing words to which society is often sensitive (Crystal, 2003, p173); therefore, language has its own ways of avoiding such taboos. Mankind’s failure to come to terms with death has been pervasive in different times and societies. In fact, human beings have traditionally felt reluctant to deal with the subject of death using straightforward terms. Whether owing to superstition, fear or social respect, the fact remains that when facing death language users try to soften the effect of what they really wish to communicate(Crespo, 2006, p101). To this end, they resort to metaphor. Metaphor is not merely a response to a forbidden subject; rather , it provides a way to speak about the taboo, that is, about the unspeakable, about those concepts banned from public domain and removed from our consciousness.



The Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) as set forth by Lakoff and Johnson (1980; 2003) provides a very useful tool for analyzing such a linguistic phenomenon. The main point of the theory is that our conceptual system is based on a group of mental metaphorical images that determine our way of thinking and influence our experience of the world. Conceptual system plays a key role in defining our everyday realities and our concepts are based on metaphors, hence "what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor" (Lakoff & Johnson, p. 4). Conceptual Metaphor Theory rests on three essential propositions: first, metaphor is a cognitive phenomenon, rather than a purely lexical one; second, metaphor should be analyzed as a mapping between two domains; and thirdly, linguistic semantics is experiential grounded (Geeraerts, 2010, p 204). The main function of metaphorical language is that of enabling us to understand abstract concepts (i.e. concepts that are not directly accessible via bodily experience) in terms of concrete concepts (i.e. concepts that are directly accessible to us).

Because "life and death are such all-encompassing matters [...] there can be no single conceptual metaphor that will enable us to comprehend them" (Lakoff & Turner 1989, p 2), "each of these metaphors focus on different aspects, highlighting or downplaying them, and giving rise to different interference, which often conflict." (Lakoff & Turner 1989, p 18). Lakoff and Turner (1989) have found five basic metaphors for death that are used naturally, automatically, and largely unconsciously in understanding death. The researches on the death metaphors of one language mainly focus on one or two death metaphors from a micro perspective. The study conducted by Fernandez (2006) aims at substituting the notions of death and dying in Irish early Victorian newspaper. Cross-culture and cross-language researches are scarce to explore death metaphors. Mohamed Mazen Galal (2014) conducted a study, which investigates and compares the conceptualization of death euphemism in English and Arabic as embodied in various euphemistic metaphors. From the previous studies, we can know that metaphors can hide offensive and obscene overtones to avoid speak death straightforward. This study explores two metaphors and compares how death is conceptualized in English and Chinese literary texts.

2. Discussion

We'll make an investigation into primary conceptual of death: death is the end of a day. The metaphor include two subordinate two metaphors: death is night/darkness, death is sleep/rest.

2.1 Death is night/darkness

We begin with talking about the different stages of life in specific metaphors. We are familiar with the expressions signifying that birth is dawn, maturity is noon, old age is twilight, the moment of death is sunset, and the state of death is night and darkness. Since light is produced by the sun during the daytime, naturally life is metaphorically conceived as light. Consequently, putting out of the light and extinguishing of fire corresponds to the onset of death and indicates one's last hour of one's life. The light might be emitted by the candle or the flame of a fire.

Common expressions:

English: go to sunset, one's sun is setting/eternal dawn, to black out, the switching off of the light, etc.

Chinese: 夕阳西下、日薄西山、日落西山、行将就木、人近黄昏、桑榆暮景 (the evening of one's life, someone is near death), 迟暮之年、风烛残年、风前残烛 (an old age near death),

Expressions in literary texts

(1). Sunset and evening star. And one clear call for me!

And may there be no moaning of the bar, When I put out to sea.

(Crossing the bar Alfred, Lord Tennyson)

(2). I heard a Fly buzz – when I died – The Stillness in the Room

.....

With Blue – uncertain – stumbling Buzz – Between the light – and me –
And then the Windows failed – and then. I could not see to see

(I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Die Emily Dickenson)

(3) In me thou seest the twilight of such day

As after sunset fadeth in the west,

Which by and by black night doth take away

Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.

(Sonnet 73 Shakespeare)

(4). 天德悠且长，人命一何促。百年未几时，奄若风吹烛。（怨诗行）

(Nature runs eternally and lives forever, but life is short! One hundred years have not passed, but it stopped at once, as if the wind had blown out the candle without warning, very quickly.)

(5). 财主们已经是日落西山，过不了多长时间。（上唐书）

(The rich men are already at the evening of their life, and they will die soon.)

(6) 生死为昼夜。（至乐 庄子）

(Life is daytime, death is night)

(7) 正是：身如五鼓街山月，命似三更油尽灯。（红楼梦）

(His body was like the waning moon being devoured by the mountains an the fifth watch, his life flicked like a dying lamp at midnight.)

Example (1) describes Tennyson's placid and accepting attitude toward death, Tennyson uses the metaphor of a sand bar to describe the barrier between life and death, he announces the close of the day and the evening bell, which will be followed by darkness. Tennyson presents death as occurring at sunset. In example (2), the poet illustrates what happens when she dies. She says that she hears a fly buzzing when she dies then details the moments that eventually lead to her death. "buzzing of the fly" refers to the presence of death. However, the "fly" which comes between light and her, represents the last vision she sees before death, or it could be the death that has put a full stop before her life. Example (3) begins with "a lifetime is a day", in which death is night and twilight after sunset is the stage just before death.

In example (4), "风烛" means the burning candles in the wind. Nature runs eternally and lives forever, but life is short! A hundred years has not passed, but it stopped as quickly as the wind blows out a candle. The candle fire is extinguished refers to the end of one's life. In example(5), the literal meaning of "日落西山" is that the sun is about to set. It is used to describe people is dying because of their old age. In example (6), the speaker says that death and life are basically day and night, and they have the same natural process. Example (7) compares life to a dying lamp, and "flicked" indicates the spark of life is about to die out.

In English literary texts, death can be replaced by "occurring at sunset", "night" and "light is disappearing". In Chinese literary texts, death is viewed as "darkness", and "night". The metaphor "death is night / darkness" exist in English and Chinese literary texts, the expression is strikingly the same, and death is viewed as a negative event. As we all know, light is produced by the sun, and it gradually "goes away" as the sun sets. When little daylight remains, little life remains. When we speak of the night and darkness, we will think of coldness and chill. What's more, death's coldness is night's coldness. As a result, the night refers to death, and that the close of day and dying of the light refer to the brief span just before death.

2.2 Death is sleep/rest

This metaphor is derived from “death is night”. During night, people sleep or have rest and appear to be inactive. In this conceptual metaphor, the source domain is “rest”, the target domain is “death”. The cognitive domain “rest” is systematically mapped into the cognitive domain “death”: being in the state of rest, going to rest initiatively, going to rest passively, seeking for rest, and etc. In the process of this cognitive mapping, the concept “rest” is highlighted, while other aspects of “death” such as pain, horror and etc. are hidden. The corpse correspond to the body of a sleeper, and the appearance of the corpse--inactive and inattentive--to the appearance of the sleeper. Optionally, the experiences of the soul after death correspond to our mental experiences during sleep, namely dreaming. And just as death is a particular sort of departure, a one-way departure with no return, so death is a particular sort of sleep, an eternal sleep from which we never waken. Many Chinese and English euphemisms for “death” are constituted through such conceptual metaphor.

Common expressions

English: to be at rest, to be at peace, to have been laid, to have rest, to be carried to rest, to sleep, to be asleep in the valley, the last sleep, God rest his soul, etc.

Chinese: 睡了(sleep), 安息(quiet breath), 沉眠, 沉睡(sink sleep) 长寐, 长眠, 长寝(long sleep), 安眠(quiet sleep), 瞑目(close one's eyes in death), 瞑目长眠(rest in peace), 瞑目而逝(close one's eyes and passed away), 瞑目九泉(rest in peace)

Expressions in literary texts

(8). Death, be not proud, though some have called thee .

Mighty and dreadful . for thou art not so;

For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow

Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.

From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,

Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,

.....

Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.

.....

One short sleep past, we wake eternally

(Death, be not proud John Donne)

(9). 愿将军留须臾之虑，少思察之，则冥目之日，所怀毕矣。

(南史·虞寄传)

(I hope the general will consider this for a moment, and take into account what I said, then I will not regret anything even if I close my eyes in death.)

(10). 家珍像是睡着了一样，脸看上去安安静静的，一点都看不出难受来。

(余华 活着)

(Jia Zhen seems to be asleep, her face looks quiet and peaceful, and he can not see that she has any discomfort)

(11). 老马，你现在可以永远安息了！

(马寅初传 杨建业)

(Lao Ma, you can rest in peace now)

In example (8), the speaker directly addresses and personifies death, telling it not to be arrogant just because some people find death scary and intimidating. In fact, death is neither of

these things because people don't really die when death—whom the speaker pities—comes to them; nor will the speaker truly die when death arrives for him. Comparing death to rest and sleep—which are like images of death—the speaker anticipates death to be even more pleasurable than these activities. Death is nothing but a mere sleep in between people's earthly lives and the eternal afterlife. The speaker compares death to sleep and rest. In example (9), that speaker hopes that the general will think about his advice, then he will not be regretful even if he dies. “瞑目” means close one's eyes. In example (10), the speaker says that his wife seems to be asleep, her face looks quiet and peaceful, and he can not see that she has any discomfort. Actually, his wife is dead. In example (11), the speaker tells that may his friend soul rest in peace. These examples use “瞑目” (close one's eyes in death) “睡了” (fall asleep) and “安息” (rest) to indicate the death.

In this metaphor, death effect is mitigated by replacing it by sleep/ rest, and death is viewed as a positive event. The conceptualization mean that the dying person is no longer dead, but sunk in a comforting sleep. Whether in English literary texts or Chinese literary texts, the expressions are the same to refer to death. The aspects of sleep/rest as mapped onto death, which can provide consolation for those who are left behind.

3. Conclusion

This study has investigated two conceptual metaphors of death in English and Chinese literary texts. It has been observed that the two conceptual metaphors almost match in both languages. Death can be viewed as “night/darkness” and “sleep/rest” both in English and Chinese literary texts, the expressions of conceptualizing death are similar in two languages, and it is strikingly amazing to see that both languages almost reflect identical metaphors to avoid death. Koveceses (2002) states that culture universality mainly happens at a generic level across different cultures. According to the statement, we may say that both Chinese and English people have the similar conceptual system of death. As human beings, we generally do not want to be reminded of our mortality and therefore often deny it. This is a major (and common) motivation for the use of metaphors both in English and Chinese. The role metaphors play in metaphor reference has been shown to be extremely important in both languages. On the basis of our analysis, it seems that English and Chinese literary texts share the same conceptual mappings as regards death, which in all likelihood stems from the fact that DEATH metaphors are deeply entrenched in our physical and bodily experience, which is universal.

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