A Contrastive Study of Body Metaphors in English and Chinese

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Abstract  This paper summarizes similarities and differences of body metaphors in English and Chinese in the hope of having a better understanding of body metaphor. Similarities are found as follows: (1) Similar modes of metaphorization (2) Similar semantic features (3) Similar foundation of metaphorization (4) Similar motivation of word-making. Differences are: (1) In English and Chinese, some body metaphors have the same source domain but a different target domain. (2) There exist evident asymmetry in body metaphor between English and Chinese. (3) There are differences in the degree and breadth of body part metaphorization in English and Chinese.

Keywords: body metaphor  body part terms  conceptual metaphor

Introduction

Metaphor, deeply rooted in human beings’ life, is a fundamental way of human thinking, cognition and conceptualization. As a cognitive model, metaphor is a “cross-domain mapping in the conceptual system” (Lakoff 2006, p.186) and “a systematic mapping of entities and relations from a sensorimotor source domain to an abstract target domain” (Johnson 2007, p. 165). The human body, as the object initially recognized and known by human, is often regarded as the dimension to measure things surrounded. It provides for people a reference point in interpreting the world and orienting ourselves in it, enjoying great importance in human cognitive system. Human body parts are the most fundamental and essential source domain of conceptual metaphor. The interaction between the target and source domain makes body parts sometimes also become the target domain. Body metaphor actually emerges in all aspects of life, constituting the foundation for human to understand and describe the world. It is of great significance for human thinking and cognition.
A lot of research on body metaphor (Wang, 2002; Wang, 2002; Lu, 2004; Swan, 2009; Wongthai, 2015; Çakır, 2016) has been conducted before, but the systematic contrastive study of body metaphor in English and Chinese has seldom been done. This paper mainly summarizes the similarities and differences of body metaphors in English and Chinese in the hope of having a better understanding of body metaphor and helping Chinese learners learn body metaphor better.

The similarities are found as follows: (1) Similar modes of metaphorization (2) Similar semantic features (3) Similar foundation of metaphorization (4) Similar motivation of word-making. The differences also exist: (1) In English and Chinese, some body metaphors have the same source domain but a different target domain. (2) There exist evident asymmetry in body metaphor between English and Chinese. (3) There are differences in the degree and breadth of body part metaphorization in English and Chinese.

**Similarities of Body Metaphor in English and Chinese**

Bodily experience plays a fundamental role in human cognition. Although English and Chinese peoples live far away from each other with much difference in cultures and philosophies, many similarities, determined by common physiological and psychological foundation, have been found in body metaphor in both languages.

1. **Similar Modes of Metaphorization**

   Lu (2004) summarizes three types of body metaphorization existing in both English and Chinese. (1) structured mapping from the body-part domain to the non-body domain. The terms of body parts, first known by human, are used in various non-body domains to know, experience and express things in other domains. In English, such metaphorical mapping is rich: *head of an arrow, arm of a chair, heart/skeleton of a story, eye rhyme*, etc. Abundant examples also exist in Chinese: “火柴头”/ tip of a matchstick, “鞋舌”/tongue of shoes, “菜心”/ Chinese flowering cabbage, “书目”/ bibliography, “大腕”/a big name, “口吃”/ stutter, etc. (2) mapping from the non-body domain to the body-part domain. In English, expressions like *with a light heart, with half a heart, eyelid, eyeball, nose wing, green fingers, blue blood, heart of gold, cold feet* are all expressions mapped from spatial domain, color domain, material domain and weather domain to human body domain. In Chinese, a lot of expressions are produced in the same way; “心房”/atrium., “眼帘”/eyes, “脑门”/forehead, “大胆”/boldness, “红脸”/ blush, “猫眼”/peephole, “十足”/sheer, etc. (3) mapping between two organs in the human-part domain. For example, in “手心”/ the palm of the hand. the head word “手” is the target domain, and the modifier “心” is the source domain. Expressions like “手头”/on hand, “额头”/forehead, “眉心”/ the spot between the eyebrow, and
“心口”/heart all belong to this type. In English, there exist similar mapping like ridge of a nose, hair in armpits, eyetooth etc.

2. Similar Semantic Features

The physiological organizations and physiological responses of humans are essentially the same. Therefore, the semantic features of expressions in English and Chinese should be similar as long as they are based on human’s similar physiological features. Lu (2004) finds many body metaphor expressions in English and Chinese have similar semantic features. For example, expressions the head of a mountain and the foot of a mountain have the same semantic features as “山头”/hilltop and “山脚”/the foot of a mountain in Chinese. In the expressions, human’s head and foot are used respectively to represent the top and bottom of a mountain. In this way, there exist complete consistency on the metaphorization of some body part terms in these two languages. This type of body metaphor has not only the same source domain but also the same target domain. More examples are as follows: “眼球”/eyeball, “头儿”/head, “脚注”/footnote, “心弦”/heartstring, “老手”/old head, “新手”/new hand, etc.

Some idioms including human organs also have similar semantic features. For example, in English, mouth, lips, teeth, tongue, throat and gums are all vocal organs, often associated with the behavior of speaking. The examples go as follows: button one’s lip, to hold one’s tongue, word of mouth, to beat one’s gums, and to stick in one’s throat etc. Similar usage also exists in Chinese: “唇枪舌剑”/cross verbal swords, “伶牙俐齿”/be eloquent, “哑口无言”/ be dumbfounded, “七嘴八舌”/all sorts of gossip. In these expressions, 唇, 舌, 牙, 齿, 口, and 嘴 are all vocal organs.

3. Similar Foundation of Metaphorization

Humans understand and express new concepts based on bodily experience. In English and Chinese, body metaphor has similar foundations. Wang (2002) summarizes three types: (1) Based on the position’s correspondence of the source domain and target domain. The head of a mountain and the foot of a mountain correspond to the head and the foot of a human being respectively. “山头” and “山脚” also correspond to the head and the foot of a human being respectively. (2) Based on the forms’ and structures’ similarity of the source domain and target domain. In English, organs like human’s eyes, mouth, neck and legs are often used to express new things, like the eye of a hurricane, the mouth of a cup, the neck of a bottle, the leg of a desk. In Chinese, many metaphors came into being because there is similarity between something’s form or structure and that of certain human organ, like “针眼”/eye of a needle, “瓶颈”/bottleneck, “壶嘴儿”/spout etc. (3) Based on the functions’ similarity of the source domain and target domain. For example, things can both move into and out of the mouth. There are some metaphors in
both languages involving the functions of the mouth: the mouth of a river/a bag in English, “风口”/a place where there is a draught; and “洞口”/mouth of a cave in Chinese. Head is the top of a body and of great importance. Some metaphors are connected to the functions of head, like head of department/state/government in English, “元首”/head of state, “特首”/chief executive and “党首”/head of Party in Chinese.

4. Similar Motivation of Word-making

Body metaphor is a very important motivation of constructing new language forms or units like words and phrases. Wang (2002) points out that, as motivation of word-making, the role of body metaphor mainly lies in the following six aspects.

(1) Body part terms, with metaphoric meaning, can be used as basic words to express the concepts in target domain. In English, hand, as a basic word, has the metaphoric meaning of worker, which can be used in new hand, old hand and farmhand to express new concepts. In Chinese, “手”, as a basic word, can mean sportsman. It is often used in 选手/player, 老手/old hand, 新手/new hand, 国手/national champion and 投篮手/shooter to represent various sportsmen. (2) Body part terms can be used as modifiers to express concepts in target domain. As modifiers, body part terms are often used in structures like numeral/color word/characteristics adjective + noun of body part, which functions as an adjective to represent characteristics of one person or certain thing or as an adverb to represent a kind of state or manner. In English, there are expressions like a two-faced person, light-fingered, hot-blooded, hot-headed, etc. In Chinese, there are expressions like “热心”/warm-hearted, “冷血”/be cold-blooded, “铁腕”etc. (3) There are reduplications or the repeated use of one word in a phrase. In English, there are face to face, eye to eye, heart to heart, hand in hand, back to back, etc. In Chinese, there are “心心相印”/telesthesia, “头头是道”/clear and logical, “手把手”/(give instructions) in person, etc. (4) The terms of closely-related organs are used to form a new phrase to state the same concept. In English, heart and soul means with all one’s feeling and spirit; skin and bone means very thin in a way that is unattractive and unhealthy; tooth and nail means (of fighting) fiercely. In Chinese, terms of related organs are also used in a phrase to mean the same thing, like “唇齿相依”/be as close as lips and teeth -- be closely related and mutually dependent, “没头没脑”/jolter-head, etc. (5) Terms of body parts which have an opposite or contrary position or relation are used together in a phrase to express one concept. In English, there are body and soul, to make head or tail of sth., to tie sb’s hand and foot, etc. In Chinese, there are “手足之情”/brotherly affection, “骨肉”/flesh and blood, etc. (6) There are a lot of idioms from body part terms in both English and Chinese. It is so common that examples are omitted here.
Differences in Body Metaphor between English and Chinese

Common physiological and psychological experiences bring a lot of similarities of body metaphor in English and Chinese. However, influenced by factors like culture, geographical environments, economy, etc., there exist some unavoidable differences of body metaphorical expressions between English and Chinese.

1. In English and Chinese, some body metaphors have the same source domain but different target domain (Lu, 2004). For example, in Chinese, “红眼”/red eye means rage, while red eye in English refers to a kind of cheap Whisky or a long-distance night flight. “黑心”/black heart means being insidious and vicious, while in English, blackheart refers to heart cherry with dark flesh and skin, or an abnormal darkening of the woody stems of some plants. In Chinese, “白脸”/white face is a role in Peking Opera who is treacherous and crafty, while whiteface is a clown whose face is covered with white make-up in English. Moreover, nose is often used in English and Chinese to refer to other concepts. But in English it more often refers to the prominent part of something, like the nose of a missile meaning the head of a missile, and win by a nose meaning win narrowly. In these metaphors, the characteristic that nose is very prominent on westerners’ face is taken into account. However, this is not applied to Chinese people, so nose is often used to refer to things with holes, like “门鼻子”/knob, “针鼻儿” /the eye of a needle, etc.

2. There exist evident asymmetry in body metaphor between English and Chinese. In Chinese, there are “帽舌”/visor, “银耳”/white fungus, “页眉”/header, etc., while there aren’t any similar metaphors in English. Equally, there are mother tongue, farmhand, deadeye, lips of a cup, ears of wheat etc., while there are no counterparts in Chinese.

3. There are differences in the degree and breadth of body part metaphorization. For example, there are a lot of metaphors concerning “心” in Chinese (Lu, 2004), like “心田”/deep heart, “心坎” /the bottom of one’s heart, “心潮”/thought and emotions, “心窍”/capacity for clear thinking, “细心”/be careful, etc., while there are many metaphors about neck in English, like neck and neck, a stiff neck, a pain in the neck, up to one’s neck, harden the neck, etc. Besides, China is a country with many mountains, so there are many body metaphors with mountain as target domain, like “山头”/hilltop, “山嘴”/counterfort, “山口”/mountain pass, “山腹”/hillside, “山腰”/hillside, etc. Britain is an island country, so there are a lot of body metaphors with sea and island as the target domain, like tongue of land, finger of land, neck of the sea, neck of land, arm of the sea, etc. (Lu, 2004). In addition, there are more body metaphors coming from mapping between two organs in the human-part domain in Chinese language, like “手心”/the palm of the hand, “额头”/forehead, “鼻头”/the tip of the nose, “眉心”/the spot between the eyebrow, “心眼”/mind’s
eye, etc. While in English, there are more metaphors coming from mapping between body domain and action domain, like face the future, shoulder the responsibility, elbow one's way, eye a needle, leg after etc. Such kind of usage is comparatively rare in Chinese.

**Conclusion**

The cognitive law that man cognizes things from the near to the far determines the basic role of body-parts in cognizing the world. The metaphorization of body part terms is a significant way for humans to form and express new concepts. Due to commonly shared bodily experience, there exist a lot of similarities in body metaphor between English and Chinese. But there also exist some differences due to the difference of natural and cultural environment. However, the similarities outweigh the differences, which is determined by the same physiological and psychological characteristics and the general cognitive law of English and Chinese peoples.

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**References**


