A Contrastive Study of the Conceptual Metaphor of "White" in Both Chinese and English

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Abstract: Color words are very common in both English and Chinese. There are similarities and differences between color words in metaphorical objects and projected objects. This paper selects the color word "white" to analyze the commonness and individuality of "white" from the perspective of conceptual metaphor. Hopefully, it can help people understand color words better.

1. Introduction

Color is everywhere. It can be said that our life is surrounded by color. People in different countries always have a certain commonality in people's cognition of color. For example, "white" usually stands for purity and beautiful things. "Red" stands for revolution, danger, etc. However, due to different cultural backgrounds, religious beliefs and ways of thinking, people always give different cultural meanings to colors according to their own cultural habits and cultural characteristics. Therefore, on the basis of commonness, different countries also have their own personalities in the expression of colors. Taking the basic color word "white" as an example, this paper analyzes its commonness and individuality in Chinese and English expressions from the perspective of conceptual metaphor and discusses the cultural differences behind it. This paper hopes to help people have a deeper understanding of the meaning of "white", and then study other color words through this comparative approach.

2、The basic status quo of conceptual metaphor

Lakoff and Johnson continuously absorbed the achievements of their predecessors and raised conceptual metaphor in the book *Metaphors We Live By*, which laid the foundation of conceptual metaphor. Their research results are more comprehensive and mature than those of predecessors, making a qualitative leap and considerable development in the study of conceptual metaphor [2].

2.1 Foreign Studies on Conceptual Metaphor

Reviewing the previous literature, the author finds that there are a lot of studies on conceptual metaphor. It covers almost every aspect of every domain. For example, it discusses the

contributions of Kant, Blumenberg and Weinrich to the theory of metaphorical cognition. Thinking about Goodman's symbol theory and Davidson's metaphorical theory; studying metaphor and analogy from Kant's point of view; Sweetser, a scholar, has done a lot of research on conceptual metaphor. He believes that conceptual metaphor dominates the conceptual metaphor of metaphorical expressions of English sensory verbs (see, hear, touch, taste and smell) [2]. But the research on conceptual metaphor is not detailed enough.

2.2 Domestic Studies on Conceptual Metaphor

In the process of literature review, the author found that the research on conceptual metaphor is still in a stage of continuous exploration. In linguistics, Chinese scholars combine conceptual metaphor with Chinese language. In 2017, Mr. Yubo Zhu established the corpus of three German translation versions of *Tao Te Ching* to construct the semantic category formula of *Tao Te Ching*. Some scholars also expand their research horizons and try to combine conceptual metaphor with other disciplines. Shi Yong, for example, combines conceptual metaphor with traditional Chinese medicine and studies the prospect and background of the development of traditional Chinese medicine from the perspective of metaphor. Some scholars combine conceptual metaphor with literary creation, such as the translation of theme image of Xiaohui Liang (2013) -- On the English translation of conceptual metaphor by Goldblatt. Another example is Jiarui Song (2020), who uses conceptual metaphor to study *Dream of Red Mansions*, a classic Chinese literary work.

It can be seen that although Chinese scholars constantly try to combine conceptual metaphor with different disciplines from multiple perspectives and aspects, the longitudinal study is not in-depth enough. If these longitudinal studies can be more in-depth, it will be a major advance in conceptual metaphor.

3. Characteristics of Color Words

Color words, simply speaking, are words that describe the color of things. Black, white, red, green and blue are all basic color words. Most of the other words that depict colour are developed from the basic color words, such as lake green, apple red, light blue, dark green, light yellow, etc. Linguists divide color words in Chinese and English into three categories: Basic color words, Color words indicating color of objects and color words of different situations [1].

3.1 Basic Color Words

Basic color words are widely used in various languages, and linguists believe that there are 11 basic color words in nature. Basic color words in Chinese include black, white, purple, purple, green, blue, etc. Basic color words in English include: blue, yellow, red, purple, pink and so on. This paper takes white, a basic color word commonly used in both Chinese and English, as an example to explore the comparison between English and Chinese in the conceptual metaphor of "white".

3.2 Other Color Words

Object color words and combination color words are not the focus of this paper. So the writer only use a simple exposition that readers can have a general understanding of the concepts of these two words.

As the name suggests, it is a word describing the colour of an object. For example, violet, the flower we speak of; The word orange, represents both fruit and color

When a color cannot accurately describe the color characteristics of the object, people tend to add two or more colors to describe the color of the object, and this kind of word becomes the combined color word. Common combination color words include golden yellow; Blue gray, etc.

4. A Contrastive Study of the Conceptual Metaphor of "White" in Both Chinese and English

Looking through the Modern Chinese Dictionary, I found that "white" is interpreted as the color of snow or frost. Clearly, definitions in dictionary attempt to convey to the reader a sense of elegance, purity and transparency. The Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary offers another explanation, saying that "white" is the colour of milk or snow. According to the corpus retrieval analysis, there are as many as 13 metaphorical uses of the concept of "white" in Chinese and more than 10 metaphorical uses of the concept of "white" in English, indicating that the metaphorical uses of "white" are very rich in both English and Chinese.

Many scholars have studied the basic color word "white" from the perspective of conceptual metaphor. As one of the basic color words, "white" embodies purity and transparency in Chinese while "white" embodies clean and waste in English. However, few scholars have carried out in-depth discussions on the commonness and individuality between the two. Therefore, this paper attempts to compare "white" conceptual metaphor from the following two aspects: (1) what are the commonalities of "white" conceptual metaphor projection in Chinese and English? (2) What are the characteristics of metaphorical projection of "white" in Chinese and English?

4.1 Similarities between Chinese and English Conceptual Metaphors of "White"

Due to the differences in customs, religious belief, historical background and value orientation, there are great cultural differences between China and the West. However, the bridges built between different things often have similarities. So there must be some similarities in the conceptual metaphor of "white".

4.1.1 "White" is an Emotion

The words expressing color have distinct national characteristics. When the color words are projected to another concept by conceptual metaphor, they often express richer emotional colors and can convey the speaker's tone and intention more vividly.

(1)*zai ta mei you cheng gong zhi qian, bao shou shi ren de chao feng he bai yan.*

Before he succeeded, he was scorned and despised by the world.

(2)Mary was so scared that her face was white as a sheet, and her hands trembled and she could not utter a word.

ma li xia de lian se cang bai, shuang shou chan dou, yi ju hua ye shuo bu chu lai.

In Example 1, "the roll of the eyes" vividly depicts the subject's contempt, disdain and emotional color. In Example 2, the image of white depicts the subject of the action as angry. It's an instinctive physical reaction to go very pale when you're scared, flustered or angry. The expression "pale with fear" also appears in Chinese. Of course, there is no color to human emotion. Here, the concept of the color word white is mapped to emotion, resulting in the metaphorical expression of "white as a sheet".

4.1.2 "White" is a Quality

As mentioned above, "white" is described in the Modern Chinese Dictionary as the color of snow or frost. The Oxford Dictionary defines white as having the colour of fresh snow or of milk. It is not hard to see that both Chinese and English are trying to convey a sense of elegance, purity and

transparency to the reader. In both Chinese and English, "white" has a metaphorical meaning of purity.

(3)*zheng yi zhe de mian ju shi bai se de.*

The mask of the just man is white.

(4)*ni yi jiu jie bai ru xue, liu gei wo de zhi you wu bian de hei an.*

You are still as white as snow, leaving me nothing but darkness.

(5)She was dressed in a white wedding dress, like a fairy falling from heaven to earth.

ta chuan zhe yi jian bai se de hun sha, xiang yi ge xian nv cong tian tang zhui luo dao ren jian.

E.g.3 is to praise the purity of the just; Similarly, sentence 4 wants to express that in the dirty environment, the characters are still not contaminated with worldly dust, and still maintain pure quality and pure heart. E.g. 5, a white wedding dress ostensibly talks about color, but actually implies a kind of pure white, standing for innocence.

4.1.3 "White" is a Metaphor of "Failure"

The use of "white" to express failure is very common in both Chinese and English, which has certain historical reasons. In ancient times, when two sides were at war, a white flag would be hoisted when one of them wanted a truce. At first, waving the white flag was just a sign of truce, but over time it evolved into surrender and was applied to all countries. Therefore, the concept of white metaphor for a "surrender" and "defeat" meaning. Nowadays, the white flag is used not only for those who surrender in battle, but also for those who concede or lose in competition, business and other situations.

(6)*zai wo jun de wei zhui du jie xia, di fang zui zhong ju le bai qi.*

Surrounded by our troops, the enemy finally raised the white flag.

(7)The enemy were at their wit's end and had to raise the white flag.

di ren yi zhi qiong ji jin, zhi de sheng bai qi tou xiang.

4.1.4 "White" is a Metaphor of "Waste"

The color word "white" can mean "no effect" or "futile" in Chinese.

(8)*ta zai zhe ge xiang mu shang fu chu de suo you nu li dou bai fei le.*

All the hard work he put into the project went down the drain.

(9)*ta kan dao qing kuang dui ta bu li, jiu zhi dao zui hou ye shi bai mang huo yi chang, wei yi de ban fa shi zuo xia lai deng dai.*

When he saw that things were going against him, he knew that in the end it was all for nothing and the only way was to sit back and wait.

The above examples all use the color word "white" to stand for "waste and uselessness". In English, "white elephant" is often used to express something flashy or worthless, which happens to coincide with the metaphor of "white" in Chinese.

(10)The house they bought was a white elephant; they had never lived in it.

ta men mai de fang zi shi ge lei zhui, ta men cong wei zai na li zhu guo.

4.1.5 "White" is a Metaphor of "Authority"

"White" as a metaphor for authority was not common before. However, with the development of economy and social progress, the conceptual metaphor of "white" also has a new development. In modern times, the term "white paper" is not unfamiliar to us. It is mainly used for official reports issued by the government and was originally used only between the United Kingdom and the United States. However, important official reports issued by the Chinese government are always bound in white with the word "White paper", which corresponds to "white paper" in western

countries. This also reflects the commonness of "white" projection in the conceptual metaphor of Chinese and Western languages. Since the meaning of metaphorical authority of "white" is mainly derived from the word "white paper", there are few examples of metaphorical authority of "white", which are basically limited to the exposition of "white paper".

4.2 Individuality of the Metaphor of "White" in Chinese and English

Although there are some similarities between Chinese and English conceptual metaphors of "white", they are not completely one-to-one correspondence. Due to differences in geographical environment, value orientation and religious belief, different countries and nationalities have their own national characteristics in treating the color word "white". Specific analysis is made below.

4.2.1 The Specific Metaphorical Projection of "White" in Chinese is as Follows.

a. "White" is a metaphor for "blank, nothing"
The Chinese word for "nothing" can be denoted by "white". Seen the following examples:
(11)*che huo fa sheng de shi hou, ta de nao dai yi pian kong bai.*
His mind went blank when the car accident happened.
(12) *wo men dao xian wei shen mo hai shi yi qiong er bai ? wo men ying gai fan si bei hou de yuan yin.*
Why are we still so poor? We should reflect on the reasons behind it.
In English, "white" is not projected into the concept of "nothing". In English, words such as "blank" and "poor" are often used to mean "nothing".
b. "White" is a metaphor for "no reward" and "no cost"
The color term "white" is also often used as a metaphor for "gain without action" in Chinese. But it is often used in spoken speech, not in more formal writing. For example, in colloquial expressions, "not for nothing", "freeloading" and so on.
c. "White" is a metaphor for "Death"
"White", in Chinese culture has the meaning of death, which is related to the customs and habits of Chinese people. In China, when a loved one dies, people often wear plain clothes and white hats to mourn and show respect. "Bai Shi" in Chinese is commonly used to represent funeral rites among the people. Therefore, "white" is often a metaphor for death, reflecting something related to death.
(13) *bai wan bai shi de na tian wan shang, ta yi lian pi bei, zhong zhe shuang yan jing yi zai qiang shang.*
She leaned against the wall with her tired face and swollen eyes on the evening of the white affair.
d. "White" is a metaphor for "clear"
The Chinese expression use "white" to represent "clear" and "understand". This has to do with China's history. "Vernacular" originated in the Qin Dynasty, when the government required people to write "vernacular" in order to make articles accessible to people who had never read books. Therefore, the metaphor of "white" here is "ordinary people can understand" [6].
(14) *xiao li shi ge ming bai ren, bu hui bu dong ni de liang ku yong xin.*
Xiao Li is too sensible to fail to understand your good intentions.
(15) *ta ba zhe jian shi de qian yin hou guo jiang de ming ming bai bai.*
He made a clear account of the cause and effect of the affair.
(16) *wo shuo hua suan shu, zhe ni ying gai ming bai.*
I'm a good judge of words, you know.
e. "White" is a metaphor of "treacherous evil"
"White" being a metaphor for treachery is limited in scope and is generally used only in Peking

Opera masks. In Beijing Opera, evil and treacherous officials are often dressed as white faces, so "white face" is often used as a metaphor for evil and treacherous villains.

(17) *mei dang ta fan le cuo, ma ma zong shi ban yan bai lian jue se.*
Whenever she made a mistake, mother always played the good cop.

4.2.2 The Metaphorical Projection of "White" in English is as Follows.

a. "White" is a metaphor for "timidity"
"White feather" is used in English:
(18) Pull yourself together; do you want to show the white feather in front of these people?
zhen zuo qi lai, ni xiang zai zhe xie ren mian qian shi ruo ma ?
The literal meaning of white feather is incomprehensible. Westerners believe that white - feathered chickens tend to shrink and lose the game. So they project the metaphor of "white" onto the concept of "timidity". "White feather" is used to describe a coward.

b. "White" is a metaphor for kindness
"White man" means a kind and cultured person. The English use of "white" for kindness is very common. For example, "white lie" means a kind lie, which is different from the Chinese understanding of "white". In Chinese, "white" has negative emotional colors such as treachery and evil, while in English, it is full of positive emotional colors. This is the personality of the conceptual metaphor of "white" in Both English and Chinese.

c. "White" is a metaphor for size
The English expression "white rage" is definitely not literal. In Western countries, "white rage" is used to express the depth of anger. In Chinese, "white" often corresponds to the concept of "great". The similar expression is "white hope". "White sale" also reflects the concept of "big".

d. The "white" is a metaphor for being not hurt
"White" can also mean "avoiding injury" or "bloodless". "White" can be used in some of the more abstract war description. For example, "white war" is often used to refer to economic war, rather than the war that we understand requires the use of force and bloodshed.

5. Conclusion

There are similarities between Chinese and Western metaphors of "white". Because the bridge built by metaphor is based on iconicity. Human beings have a common physiological structure, and also have something in common in vision, so the understanding of color is also common. However, due to the differences in religious belief, historical background and cultural customs between China and the West. In some aspects, people's metaphor for color will be different.

In fact, there are many metaphors of the color word "white", which are not listed in this paper. The way people perceive and think about the world is closely related to the metaphors they use. In other words, the commonness and individuality of metaphorical words in different cultures also reflect the similarities and uniqueness of people's cognition of the world. The author hopes that readers can have a deeper understanding of the color word "white" through this paper, and at the same time, it can also help people to study the color word more deeply.

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