

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF “DEATH IS GOING TO A FINAL DESTINATION” IN ENGLISH AND CHINESE LITERARY TEXTS

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Abstract: In this paper we contrastively analyse the metaphor “death is going to a final destination” in English and Chinese literary texts using the theoretical framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory as initiated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980,2003). Such a cognitive approach enables us to demonstrate “the mitigating capacity” of metaphors used as a powerful source for euphemistic reference thanks to their ability to hide certain unwanted, negative and undesirable aspects of the target domain. We exemplify the metaphor extracted from English and Chinese literary texts in order to contrastively establish similarities and differences in the conceptualisation of “death is going to a final destination ” in the two languages, as well as to demonstrate the ways metaphors are used as a euphemistic device for speaking about this “fear-based taboo”.

Key words: Conceptual metaphor, death, English, Chinese

Introduction

There is always a feeling of discomfort at mentioning harmful and embarrassing words to which society is often sensitive (Crystal, 2003, p. 173); 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. Death and dying are among the most commonly referenced semantic fields in linguistic discussions of euphemism (Hughes, 2000, p. 43-43; Mey, 2001, p. 33-34). There are various reasons why people want to keep away from touching upon the topic of death, probably the most cited one is that of relevance to fear, a deeply seated human instinct; people are afraid for losing their loved ones and its consequences. They are afraid of what would happen after death, mysterious life and hidden destiny, evil spirits, which strikes fear into their hearts. 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. To this end, they resort to metaphor (Mohamed, 2014). 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. Of central significance in Conceptual Metaphor Theory is Lakoff and Johnson’s metaphorical systematicity, which “allows us to comprehend one aspect of a concept in terms of another” (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 10), which, in turn, necessarily leads to downplaying or hiding other aspects of the concept. Following Lakoff (1993:2003), a metaphor can be defined as “a cross-domain mapping in the conceptual system”; in other words, a set of conceptual correspondence from a source domain (the realm of the physical or more concrete reality) to a target domain (the death taboo, in our case).

In this paper we analyse one conceptual metaphor “death is going to a final destination” in English and Chinese literary texts using the theoretical framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory as initiated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). Such a cognitive approach will enable us to demonstrate “the mitigating capacity” (Fernández 2006a: 14) of metaphors thanks to their ability to hide certain unwanted, negative and undesirable aspects of the target domain, which is why “metaphorization constitutes a potent source for euphemistic reference” (Fernández 2006a: 102).

Discussion

In both countries, life is conceived of as a journey, and consequently death is the ending point. Here, a basic conceptual metaphor “states are location” is employed, death is a last state and metaphorically a last destination.

Common expressions:

English: go west, be in heaven, be taken to paradise, go to heaven, go to the better world, reach a better world, go to another world, go to Nirvana, go to one’s long homes, go to one’s last home, go south, return to dust, return to earth, bite the dust, kiss the dust, return to the earth

Chinese:返真”、“归山”、“还山” 归西(return the west), 归阴(go back to the Yin), 归天(go back to the heaven), 回老家(go back to the hometown), 上西天(go to west), 上黄泉路(road to Hades), 去阴曹地府(go to netherworld), 下地狱(go to hell), 去了另一个世界(go to another world)

Expressions in literary texts

(a). Afraid! Of whom am I afraid? Not Death—for who is He?

The Porter of my Father's Lodge. As much abasheth me!

(Afraid! Of whom am I afraid? Emily Dickson)

(b). Going to heaven! I don’t know when, Pray do not ask me how,—

Indeed, I’m too astonished .To think of answering you! Going to heaven!—

How dim it sounds! And yet it will be done .As sure as flocks go home at night . Unto the shepherd’s arm!

(Going to heaven Emily Dickson)

(c) . He declared he wasn't ready to go west just yet.

(The American Heritage Idioms)

(d). There was no pain now and just before sunrise he said with a smile to those about him: “Turn up the lights, I don’t want to go *home* in the dark.” He died as he had lived.

(The complete poetical works of O.Henry)

(e).我活一千岁后，等老祖宗归了西，我才死呢。

(红楼梦 曹雪芹)

(I may live to be a thousand not dying until our old grandma has ascended to the Western Paradise)

(f). “大太爷着了这一急，得了重病，不多几日就归天了。”

(儒林外史第二八回 吴敬梓)

(The milord felt anxious suddenly, then he got ill seriously. A few days later, he went to the heaven/ passed away)

(g). 未能在你离开这个世界前，让你过上一天舒心的日子。如今，终于有能力同报你，计你不用起早摸黑地劳作，你却永远去了另一个世界。

(父亲和故乡 陈修平)

(My father didn't lead a comfortable life before he died. Now, I have the ability to provide everything for him and he doesn't need to work hard any more, but he has gone to another world forever.)

(h). 中国人说“回老家”，是一种归祖的心里期盼，归祖实际上是把过去与现在的命运和祖先的命运、自己的死与祖先的死认同起来。不管祖辈去哪里，后辈总是沿着他们的足迹，与他们相聚。

(死亡哲学 杨足仪)

(Chinese people say that "going back to my hometown" is a kind of expectation of returning to my ancestors. In fact, returning to my ancestors is to identify the fate of the past and the present, the fate of my ancestors, my own death and the death of my ancestors. No matter where the ancestors go, the younger generation always follow their tracks and get together with them.)

In example (a), Dickson tells people that death is nothing more than the “Porter” who lets people into the lodge of heaven. “the father’s lodge” is home, and is the soul’s final resting place after death. In example (b), Dickinson is drawn to the idea that going to heaven is a process as natural as a sheep returning home at night. Christian believe that every human being has an immortal soul that will go straight to heaven, and “heaven” is the last destination for them.

Example(c) has been ascribed to a Native American legend that a dying man goes to meet the setting sun. Go west seems anciently to be connected with the direction of the setting sun, symbolising the end of the day and so figuratively the end of one’s life. In example (d), “I don’t want to go home in the dark” means “I don’t want to die in the dark”. In example (e), “归西”(go west)also corresponds to death. In example(f), the speaker uses “归天”(go to heaven) to refer to death, and the same expression also exists in English. In example (g) the author uses “去了另一个世界”(go to another world) to refer to his father’s death. In example (h), “回老家”(go back to the hometown) means go to the grave, express the concept of “death”.

When the metaphor “death is going to a final station” is applied in English ,the ways to expressing the death is similar. In English literary texts, death is represented as a “place” in which someone is better than he/she currently is . In English, death is depicted as “the father’s lodge”, “go to heaven”, “go home” and “go west”. In Chinese literary texts, death is viewed as “归西”(go west),“归天”(go to heaven) ,“回老家”(go back to the hometown), “去了另一个世界”(go to another world). The observed similarities that we see here emanate from primary metaphor “states are locations”, the state of death is reinterpreted in spatial embodiment. both English speakers and Chinese have the same motivation to use the metaphor, this metaphor can provide them the

possibility to circumlocute and negotiate the true meaning of death. These metaphorical expressions in English literary texts have the same counterparts in Chinese literary ,such as “go to heaven” corresponds to “归天” and “去了另一个世界”, “go home” corresponds to “回老家”, “go west” corresponds to “归西”.

According to Kövecses (2005), a conceptual metaphor is likely to be near-universal if it functions at an extremely general level, and the above similarities are discussed at a general level. Kövecses (2005) also holds that a generic-level conceptual metaphor is instantiated in culture-specific ways at a specific level. This is one kind of cross-cultural variation. “go to heaven” in English literary texts means going to the place where god lives, while Chinese phrase “归天” means going to he place where Buddha lives. Besides, the expression of “Go to west” is viewed as death can be found both in English and Chinese literary texts, but the underlying means are different in two cultures. “Go to west” is referred to death due to the fact that the East is where the sun rises, and is regarded as the place of birth, while the West is seen as the place where the sun or human life is set. However, in Chinese culture, “归西”(go to west) is go to the heaven/paradise, which is influenced by the culture of Buddhism. Buddhism believes that kind people will enter the world of western paradise after they die.

Conclusion

The metaphor of “death is going to a final destination” is shared both in English and Chinese literary texts. Although the metaphorical expressions for this metaphor have some similarities between two languages, some subtle differences exist. The religious environments in which the two cultures represented by Chinese and English are very different. In China, Taoism and Buddhism are the main religions; while English people mainly believes in Christianity and Catholicism. People cannot understand the mysterious and frightening natural phenomenon of "death", so they associate it with religion, hoping to get relief from the interpretation of "death" by religion. Therefore, "death" metaphors in different religious backgrounds often show different religious features.

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