

A Comparative Study of COVID-19 Metaphors in Chinese and Foreign Media Discourse

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Abstract: Traditional metaphor studies only analyze metaphor as a common linguistic phenomenon, thinking that metaphor is only a rhetorical phenomenon that modifies discourse. In fact, as Lakoff said, metaphor is a universal phenomenon, it is everywhere, Metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Lakoff's conceptual metaphor theory is a new breakthrough for the linguistics community. Metaphor has since got rid of the shackles of traditional rhetoric, and has officially embarked on the road of investigation and research in cognitive linguistics and cognitive science. Lakoff said, "The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another." There are many things in our real life that need to be expressed urgently, but due to the limitations of our thinking, the narrowness of our understanding or the accomplishments, the lack of expression makes us have to use metaphors to understand one thing from another. In 2020, COVID-19 broke out globally, and the major media of China and Western housing rushed to report the outbreak of COVID-19. It is impacting on economic and cultural life from all-round levels. The article studies COVID-19 from the perspective of conceptual metaphors, and aims to explore the kinds of conceptual metaphors. This article selects the two books of *China Economic Weekly* and *The Economist* as the research objects with some reports on COVID-19 in 2020, explores the conceptual metaphors related to COVID-19. The study has the following three findings: 1. In *China Economic Weekly*'s report on COVID-19, conceptual metaphors contain war metaphors and human metaphor. 2. In *The Economist*'s report on COVID-19, the mainstream reports mainly coverage war metaphor. 3. Understanding the similarities and differences in Chinese and foreign media of the conceptual metaphors on COVID-19 in the discourse. The purpose of this research is to provide readers with better ideas for understanding discourse reports, and to understand ideological concepts from a deeper perspective.

Keywords: Conceptual metaphor, Source domain, Target domain, COVID-19.

1. Introduction

Since the outbreak of the global epidemic in 2020, major Chinese and foreign mainstream media have reported relevant matters. Amid in such an epidemic, many linguistics scholars have carried out research on it, and this article is also exploring for that.

1.1. Background of the Research

Since the global outbreak of the epidemic, major mainstream media have specifically opened up a section of the epidemic, and some media have even published special issues and forums of COVID-19, the research atmosphere is strong. Although the importance of conceptual metaphor has been recognized by many scholars, there are still few corpus-based studies on the metaphor of COVID-19 between Chinese and foreign media. Based on a self-built Chinese-English comparable language materials, this paper systematically compares the status of COVID-19 conceptual metaphors between Chinese and English and explores the reasons behind it.

1.2. Purpose and Significance of the Research

Chinese streaming used a large number of war metaphors, such as "fight the epidemic prevention and control war", "war without gunpowder", "thousands of people fighting on the Vulcan Mountain, China's speed and time race" to outline a realistic picture of war. War metaphors are also seen in Western media newspapers, such as the Canadian mainstream media *The Globe and Mail*: "We are at war with the new epidemic, we must fight this hard battle." The war metaphor

regards the virus as an enemy on the battlefield, which can not only increase the vigilance of the people against the enemy, but also inspire the confidence of victory, and gather people who share the same hatred. This article will analyze the structure of metaphor in both Chinese and western media reports, explore the cognitive causes and historically cultural origins behind it, discuss war metaphors, and explore the generalization of the metaphor.

2. Literature Review

The literature review includes theoretical framework, domestic and foreign research. The theoretical framework mainly uses the metaphor proposed by Lakoff & Johnson. While domestic and foreign research focus on the exploration of conceptual metaphors by scholars in recent years.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

Lakoff and Johnson believe that conceptual metaphor is to understand the abstract, unknown and unfamiliar things through familiar things with concret, they regarded metaphor as a cognitive way which is the most essential difference from the traditional metaphorical rhetoric research. Metaphor is usually a rhetorical device used to enhance the effect of language. In the author's words, "For many, metaphor is simply a strategy of poetic imagination and rhetorical variety." Conceptual metaphor is not only a kind of language, but also a process of human thinking. Conceptual metaphor is systematically used in daily life, which affects people's thinking and behavior. COVID-19 is seen in the Western media as a conceptual metaphor that affects the way people think. It have strong concealment and complexity.

“Source domain is target domain” is the formula of conceptual metaphor. “Love is war” is a classic example for conceptual metaphor, in this case, love is source domain and war is target domain. As far as metaphor is concerned, Lakoff believes that metaphor is not a superficial phenomenon of language, but a deep cognitive mechanism that organizes our thoughts and forms our judgments. Make the language structured, it has a huge power of language production. For example, metaphorical concepts such as “argument is war” or “love is travel” can derive a variety of concepts and language expressions. Therefore, by providing a framework for experience, metaphor helps us to think and deal with newly acquired abstract concepts.

The metaphorical network at the bottom of people’s thinking forms is a cognitive map, based on the material experience of the cognizant and constitutes the connection between the cognizant and the outside world. Lakoff called it “cognitive topology”, which is the system people give structure to space, so as to derive space (Lakoff, 1988).

2.2. Studies in and abroad

This part mainly discusses the research of conceptual metaphors by domestic and foreign scholars. Domestically, it takes the metaphor and cognition proposed by scholars as the research object.

2.2.1. Domestic Studies of Metaphors

Through out the history of the Chinese rhetoric study, term metaphor has not found a clear definition and explanation in ancient books. The study of “metaphor” as an academic term originated from the modern west. It is also popularly rhetoric in Chinese. At present, the domestic reference book *Modern Chinese Dictionary* defines it as: a kind of metaphor without the use of “such as, like, as if”, and using words such as “being, becoming” to compare something to another thing that has a similar relationship with it. For example, “children are the flowers of the motherland”, “The lotus leaf has become a small umbrella to open.” It is also called metaphors.

Domestic scholars have used comparative methods to compare and analyze theories of foreign metaphors in an endless stream. When comparing the status of metaphor research at home and abroad, Yang Jun pointed out that the current domestic academic circles still attach importance to the study of metaphor in the field of rhetoric (Yang, 2013). Yang Jun agrees that Western metaphor research draws on the achievements of other disciplines such as linguistics, cognitive psychology and even artificial intelligence. He also classifies Western metaphor rhetoric theories into naming theory, comparison theory, interaction theory, speech act theory, metaphor cognition theory and other theoretical analysis. Chen Zhian and Jiang Guangyou contrasted Jacobson’s metaphorical linguistic centralism, Halliday’s metaphor theory of everyday language, Sadak’s lexical metaphor solidification theory, Lakoff and Johnson’s conceptual metaphor cognition, they believed that it was in the traditional metaphor understanding theory (Chen & Jiang, 2011).

The comparative view, interaction view, and pragmatic view of the book failed to touch the essence of metaphor understanding. Chen Zhian and Jiang Guangyou re-examined the generation, operation and understanding of metaphor from the perspective of human thinking, cognition, and successfully solved the internal problems of metaphor understanding (Chen & Jiang, 2011). Through the analysis of Chinese native fables, Huang Hua believes that the difference

between conceptual metaphor theory and conceptual integration theory is a mapping between two mental representations, its understanding process is a one-way cognitive process; The latter focuses on the non-unidirectional synthesis of an online process, its understanding process involves at least four mental spaces, including two input spaces, an universal space and a composite space (Huang, 2015).

Through the comparison of one-way mapping and indirectly non-one-way projection, it analyzes the fixed language expression of conceptual metaphor mapping and the online projection of conceptual integration theory. It is concluded that in the process of explaining the mechanism of metaphor, conceptual metaphor theory is more suitable for single metaphorical sentences and conventional metaphors; while conceptual integration theory is more suitable for allegorical metaphors and novel metaphors. It is hoped that these conclusions will help future metaphor research and provide a broader research space for literary criticism and discourse analysis. Li Fuyin and Tian Cong pointed out that both are theories explaining conceptual structure, analyzing the similarities and differences between the two in the construction of meaning (Li & Tian, 2016). The synthesis theory attempts to explain the general laws of the thinking process, its explanatory nature adapts to the generation of new meanings; The domains of knowledge show a fixed relationship, which can explain some conventional language expressions more effectively, and it is also suitable for the interpretation of a word. To a certain extent, the two complement each other, but both have the problem of psychological authenticity that lacks empirical research.

Yang Xinzhang analyzed the discourse on metaphors. In order to enhance the metaphor explanations, Yang Wen translated two perspectives as “angle theory” and compared the theory of grammatical metaphors (Yang, 2009). Finally, he pointed out that not only the characteristics, nature and characteristics of metaphors should be known in detail Cognitive function, to understand the role of metaphor in word knowledge and the manifestation of metaphor in lexical grammar, which can help explain metaphor more comprehensively (Yang, 2009). Wei Zaijiang concluded that previous metaphor studies were mainly limited to vocabulary and sentence levels (Wei, 2011). Lakoff and Johnson’s metaphorical coherence function, metaphorical discourse organization function. From the perspective of functional linguistics, metaphor is always a discourse basis, we need to focus on metaphor cognition and discourse interface, reveal the discourse function of metaphor, further enrich theoretical research, and expand new fields of discourse research.

2.2.2. Foreign Studies of Metaphors

In 1980, Lakoff and Johnson co-wrote the book “The Metaphors We Live By”, which became an important symbol of the birth for conceptual metaphors. The book redefines metaphor from a cognitive perspective, and is called “metaphoric revolution”. In this book, Lakoff proposed the term “conceptual metaphor” for the first time. Lakoff believes that human beings’ knowledge about the objective world is based on their own experience, so metaphors belong to the conceptual system.

In 1987, Lakoff published his another book *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*, which explained the relationship between thinking and meaning, influenced a series of subjects in cognitive science. Since then, conceptual metaphor has established an absolute position in cognitive linguistics,

creating a school of “conceptual metaphor” and “experiential cognition”.

3. Research Methodology

In the third part, It will introduces the research purpose, research object and research process of this paper.

3.1. Research Question

Based on COVID-19 outbreak worldwide in early 2020, this study started with the the two journals of *The Economist* and *China Economic Weekly* in 2020. The study of these two journals has solved the following three problems.

1. Which kind of the metaphors mainly used in domestic media reports on COVID-19?

2. Which kind of the metaphors mainly used in foreign media reports on COVID-19?

3. What are the similarities and differences between them? These issues will be discussed in the fourth part.

3.2. Research Subjects

Any social practice is inseparable from discourse, not only because practice includes the use of language, but also the construction of practice. Discourse is social, discourse construction is cognitive. Architecture is one of the most basic conceptual structures and cognitive methods that people use when thinking and communicating. Metaphor involves the mapping from one structure to another. The high-frequency words activate the war structure, the competition structure, the education structure, the mysterious organism structure. The mapping from these structures to the prevention and control structure constructs a series of deliberate metaphors, mainly including war metaphors. In many media discourses, COVID-19 is described as an enemy, a beast, a problem, a prey, and a plague. A game of chess across the country is to build a life pod by increasing troops, focusing on the battle, and restarting this sick city.

According to the cognitive metaphor theory proposed by Lakoff and Johnson, the essence of metaphor is to use people’s familiar and concrete experience to construct unfamiliar and abstract concepts, that is, abstract concepts are the subject in concrete concepts constructed on the basis of specific experience.

In the metaphor of “anti-epidemic is war”, the image of war is self-evident with the concepts of cruelty, which can generate rich visual, auditory, and psychological associations. The description of war constitutes a complete framework system. On the contrary, COVID-19 is the global pandemic with the widest impact on humans in the past 100 years. It is a serious crisis and a severe test for the whole world. The masses generally lacked sufficient crisis at the beginning of the outbreak, especially in the large-scale outbreaks in western countries, and the momentum was not contained, which reflected the lack of public awareness. Mapping the war metaphor to the sudden COVID-19 epidemic will help people strengthen their understanding of the severity of the situation, and pay attention to this public health emergency. For example, on April 5, 2020, Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom delivered a special speech on the severe new epidemic. At the end, she said: “We will be with our friends again; we will be with our families again; we will meet again.(Elizabeth, 2020)”

Leaving home and joining the ranks of defending the country. The melodious and beautiful music played down the sadness of parting, allowed people to face the difficulties of

reality calmly. Similarly, the previous Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte cited the darkest time in Winston Churchill’s World War II speech to describe the difficulties faced by Italy. These war-related metaphors can activate deep national anti-war emotions and fears, make people realize the threat posed by COVID-19. For public health, we need to help localities take urgent and effective defense actions, mobilize human resources in a short time cope with this emergency.

3.3. Research Process

Discourse analysis is mainly based on the framework theory proposed by Lakoff. The words in the report can activate a certain psychological structure, that is, the surface structure, and the surface structure can activate the corresponding values. Structures are usually manifested as metaphors, images, and cultural stories, which are connected to the nerves of the emotional center of the brain. People use architecture to think, to affects our behavior and mentality. The same problem will have different structural effects due to different structural methods, guide the audience to produce different decision-making judgments. Metaphorical expressions such as “a battlefield without gunpowder smoke” can draw the audience’s full attention to the epidemic more than “treatment of the new crown virus”, and positive expressions such as “isolate the virus, not isolate love” than “return home with illness, and deny six relatives”. Negative expression can more motivate the public to actively and rationally prevent and control the virus. The main focus of this research is the use of deliberate metaphors. Deliberate metaphor focuses on whether conceptual metaphors use and exist in thinking. The theory of deliberate metaphor believes that metaphors involve not only language and thinking levels. It also involves the communicative level. The communicative level is the most concerned level. Deliberate metaphor theory can explain the cognitive process of metaphor in a specific context in order to achieve a communicative goal. It mainly analyzes the mapping between specific words and explores the use of metaphors.

4. A Comparative Study

As the core part of this paper, we will give the dominant metaphor types in the coverage of COVID-19 by Chinese and foreign media, as well as the analysis of the differences.

4.1. Main Source Domain in Domestic Media

The construction of the war metaphor in the media discourse of COVID-19 has a realistic foundation on historical level. Wars pervade ancient modern China and abroad, change the development of human society, affect people’s thinking and consciousness. Looking at the development process of Chinese history, it is, to a certain extent, a history of war. Especially in the modern history of China, the Chinese nation has been bullied by Western powers. The entire nation has gone through military struggles such as the Northern Expedition, the War of Resistance against Japan, and the War of Liberation. Under the leadership of the Communist Party of China, it finally won the independence of the nation and the birth of a new China. The direct or indirect experience of war has had a profound impact on the cognitive methods and conceptual systems of the entire nation.

When the epidemic broke out, governments across the country took full action under the instructions of the Party Central Committee to concentrate on preventing and controlling the epidemic. At the same time, propaganda

slogans of “prevention and control of the epidemic” emerged endlessly. Examples are as follows:

(1) *Under the leadership of the Party Central Committee with General Secretary Xi Jinping at the core, resolutely win the battle against new coronavirus infection*(CEW202006, 22)!

(2) *Take action urgently to fight a people’s war to prevent and control the new coronavirus epidemic*(CEW202006, 16)!

(3) *The epidemic is the order, and the prevention and control is the responsibility*(CEW202006, 5)!

(4) *Resolutely win the fight against the epidemic by strengthening confidence, helping each other in the same boat, scientifically preventing and controlling, and implementing precise policies*(CEW202006, 24).

(5) *Make every effort to curb the spread of the epidemic and maintain the safety and health of the people*(CEW202006, 38).

The media formed a war reporting framework in this epidemic report. The selection and combination of news facts is dominated by the image of “war”, and it runs through the process of screening and production of virus news, with obvious ideological colors. The symbolic discourse system affects the public’s perception of virus facts. The rhetorical intention behind the war metaphor has become a tool for the media to influence public opinion. Nouns such as “war”, “command”, “hard fight” and “movement” in the above propaganda slogans, as well as the verbs such as “winning”, “containment”, “spreading”, “prevention and control” and “maintenance” are all directly used in terms of warfare. The state and process of the war are mapped to the field of disease, similar connections are established between each other, so that the public can form a certain understanding of the new epidemic, as well as to promote the active implementation of policy instructions.

4.2. 4.2 Main Source Domain in Foreign Media

The war metaphor, the real war analogy of non-war acts or events often uses war terms to describe the strong antagonism, urgency and rhetorical cognitive tension of other categories.

(1) *The boss of IKEA on dealing with the fall out of the covid-19 crisis*(ECO20200425, 12).

(2) *Xi Jinping is the commander of the fight against the epidemic*(ECO20200327, 5).

(3) *Covid-19 masks give the French a new way to be chic*(ECO20200503, 36).

In the first case, the target domain is COVID-19. The source domain is war, and war creates crises. The crisis metaphor for COVID-19 has brought many bad things to the people. For the second, COVID-19 is the source domain for a war that needs to be fought, the target domain is that Xi Jinping is compared to a commander who will lead the people to win this war. Finally, it is only in times of war that people need to be protected. Put on strong armor and hide in a strong house. For the third, source domain of this statement is COVID-19 epidemic, and target domain is the people being protected. People are wearing masks to protect themselves against COVID-19.

The war metaphor in the foreign media shows that the fight against COVID-19 epidemic is an either-or success or failure. American scholar Fosoi fundamentally explained the impact of war and military on modern society. It is believed that the experience of war has profoundly affected people’s ideology and language expression. One is the prevalence of idioms, the

second is the simple distinction between things. It can be seen that war thinking tends to shape a thinking mode(Fosoi, 1997). People often observe and analyze social phenomena with distinct opposites, abstracting, simplifying, and one-sided complex historical social phenomena. However, the unification of language may trigger irrational blind obedience, lead to a single understanding, and induce radical emotions. In the metaphor of the concept of “anti-epidemic is war”, the prominent ones are strong exclusivity and utilitarianism. What may be overlooked may be the root cause of the outbreak, the reasonable return mechanism of front-line doctors, nurses, the formalism of indicators for resumption of work and production, etc.

Another important component of conceptual metaphor is human metaphor, which contains the concept of “human beings are natural substances”. From a macro perspective, it can be said that human metaphors form a huge and deep network, which is the language. The intangible framework of the overall meaning of the text, the metaphorical expression of “person” form a tangible network in the text, which make the text smooth, natural, and integrated. Here are the examples:

(1) *Covid-19 has emboldened Italy’s fauna*(TE20200530, 5).

(2) *With covid-19 dominating the news, lonely hearts are also increasingly anxious about the future: they want a partner with whom to face the unknown*(TE20200602, 21).

(3) *Covid-19 may change things some what. The ratio of jobs to applicants hit a three-year low of 1.39 in March, well be for the full effects of the virus were felt. Surveys suggest that firms plan to trim hiring further*(TE20200906, 14).

In the first case, the target domain of this quote is COVID-19 epidemic, and the source domain is that animals are getting bolder. Only human beings can have the courage to make it become greater. In the second case, the source domain is people worrying about the future, the target domain is that COVID-19 epidemic has made us all lonely. The COVID-19 epidemic has isolated everyone at home, lengthened the distance between people. In the third case, the target domain is COVID-19, and the source domain is the declining job-seeking rate. People are isolated at home and fewer people are going out to look for job, sending the number of people looking for work to a record low.

4.3. 4.3 Comparative Study of COVID-19 Metaphors in Chinese and Foreign Media

The similarity between Chinese and foreign media’s conceptual metaphors used in mainstream coverage of COVID-19 is that they both use war metaphors. The widespread use of war metaphors shows that COVID-19 is a disaster for the whole world and will cause huge damage to people’s lives and property. Therefore, a virus epidemic is called war. It shows the attitude that the country and the people have to fight against, to defeat it to win the final victory. War metaphor has always been a rhetoric commonly used by people in dealing with the plague. One reason why people are keen to use war metaphors is that in the conceptual metaphor system, a variety of target domains including “love” and “marriage” are all mapped to the source domain of war, “love is war”, “marriage is war”, and even “disease is war”, is a more common way of thinking and cognitive inertia; on the other hand, war has imprinted deep memories in human memory, war is a simple dualistic thinking. The model has been deeply rooted in people’s mind and has become one of

the inherent ways of thinking for people to understand the world. War metaphors can indeed help people understand unfamiliar diseases at some levels. For example, COVID-19 virus, as a new virus, produces plagues that are different from ordinary diseases. It has the special transmission nature of malignant infectious diseases and unknown mechanism of occurrence. It has a high degree of identity in certain values with a war of “unpredictable future, uncertain outcome, unknown death and injury”. People naturally pick up war metaphors to explain the plague, which has its deep-rooted historical and cultural causes, as well as its own logic of language use.

The differences between Chinese and Western metaphor is that human metaphors are not seen in foreign media. This is not to say that there are no human metaphors in foreign media reports, but that the description of human metaphors is not main stream in the only language materials that I have found. The differences metaphors are mainly due to the different cultural roots. From the level of language, we can see that there are big differences in the metaphor research based on language. The cognitive view of metaphor also tends to have obvious localization characteristics.

English pinyin text emphasizes the connection between sound and meaning; while Chinese hieroglyphs have a unique tracing function, which is essentially connected with things in the real world, and emphasizes the changes in sound. This difference gave birth to the tradition of language centralism in the west and the meaning centralism of Chinese. Highlighting the differences between two different linguistic philosophies, the linguistic centralism of “meaning goes with the form” brings metaphor into the language world, the imprint of language is a metaphorical brand; while the meaning centralism of “the form goes with the form” expands metaphor into the meaning of language. The economic characteristics of language coexist with reality emphasize the direct correspondence between reality and meaning. The prevalence of metaphor studies in the west since the last century has not been able to conceal the theoretical interpretation of metaphor studies. It can’t keep our attention in the famous theoretical monographs, and strive to advocate a strong rhetoric thought research foundation. The localized metaphor theory framework and briefly take the conceptual metaphoric epistemology to illustrate the differences.

As a linguistic phenomenon, metaphor widely exists in the Chinese language system. Its basic form is to use one thing to refer to another thing in language expression, such as “epidemic prevention is war”. Views from linguistic philosophy mostly look at metaphors from the perspective of language use or rhetoric. For example, metaphors are considered to be only a semantic phenomenon of word meaning replacement, or metaphors have only literal meanings. In daily life, people often use a series of non-scientific symbolic expressions to describe and interpret disease problems. Although in most cases, the expression and interpretation of the disease problem by these non-expert ordinary people will not have a significant impact on the disease problem itself. Exploring it can help people understand how they perceive diseases and medical problems, and then promote research on people’s health psychology. Among the expression patterns of various ordinary people’s diseases, one of the important positions is metaphor.

5. Conclusion

A large number of tweets by *China Economic Weekly*

actively guides public opinion and ideology. The text, pictures and video corpus show more prominent cognitive characteristics. The report conveys the characteristics of pictures and texts, and focuses on the community with a shared future for the Chinese nation and the community. Highlighting the structure of war, competition, education, unity, encouragement, and cooperation. Using deliberate metaphors such as “prevention and control of the epidemic is war”, “prevention and control of the epidemic is a competition”, and “prevention and control of the epidemic is a big test”. These reports tell stories of support from all parties in difficulty, through the activation of the united anti-epidemic scene, and the narrative of traditional culture with Chinese characteristics. These reports stimulate the positive emotions of the audience, arouse collectivist values, and build a unified public awareness system for epidemic prevention. It is realized the discourse guidance function of conveying morality and persuasion. In short, in public health emergencies such as COVID-19, both the structure and the deliberate metaphor have strong cognition. The good use of the structure and deliberate metaphor can highlight the combat effectiveness of language, and on the one hand, it can positively guide domestic public opinion. Value judgments and behavior trends, on the other hand, infect international audiences, form consensus and enhance international recognition.

Metaphors in literature are pure and harmless, but metaphorical thinking in reality is potentially harmful. In the view of west, Susan Sontag clearly stated in the “Metaphors of Illness”, the most sincere way of looking at a disease—it is also the healthiest way for a patient to treat a disease as much as possible. Eliminate or resist metaphorical thinking (Sontag, 1989). However, in modern society, this vision is almost impossible to achieve. War metaphor can be used as a rhetorical discourse of a state of emergency, but the problem lies in the abuse of war metaphor: in the education system, in the construction system, and in crisis response—including in the response to this epidemic. The war metaphor emphasizes the binary opposition between the enemy and ourselves, and is intended to divide and separate, so as to arouse the strong will and emotion of “our side” and throw into the “battle” against the “enemy” in order to win victory. When applied indiscriminately in a society where the discourse ecology is normal, there are many moral facts that need to be reflected. In the final analysis, no one has the moral obligation to make sacrifices in the face of illness. Compared with fighting, human beings need repair and cure more.

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