



Metaphors of Plant Words in Chinese and Western Culture

Li Zhao^(✉)

School of Foreign Languages, Dalian Jiaotong University, Dalian 116000, Liaoning, China
3521051@qq.com

Abstract. Metaphor is not only a linguistic form, but also a cognitive way in which human think about the world. Plant metaphors map features of plants to human body, character or emotions, enriching human language and cognition. Studying the similarities and differences of plant metaphors in China and western countries will help us better understand the characteristics of different languages and cultures, as well as the differences in people's living habits and cognitive styles of different nationalities, which will promote cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: metaphor · plant words · cross-cultural communication

1 Introduction

Metaphor is not only a linguistic form, but also a cognitive way in which human think about the world. In human daily life, metaphor exists universally. The conceptual system on which our thoughts and behaviors are based is itself metaphor-based [1]. Metaphor is to understand and experience one kind of thing in terms of another by projecting the relatively specific and easy-to-understand source domain to the relatively abstract and difficult-to-understand target domain. Conceptual metaphors falls into three categories: structural metaphors, orientational metaphors and ontological metaphors.

Distributing widely on the earth, plants have played an important role in human production and life. Plants have made great contributions to human survival, life and entertainment. People's daily diet, dressing, living space and amusement way are inseparable from plants. In the process of interacting with nature, through long-term perception, observation and experience, human beings gradually associate their own characteristics with plant characteristics, projecting various characteristics of plants to people or things, thus creating many metaphorical expressions of plants in language. Due to the differences in geographical environment, living habits, and ways of thinking, there are certain differences of metaphorical expressions of plant words between Chinese and Western nations. On the other hand, some of People's sensory perception and aesthetic standards are similar, so there are also similarities of plant metaphors in different culture. This paper intends to explore the plant metaphors in English and Chinese, including both differences and similarities.

2 Metaphorical Meanings of Plant Words

2.1 Peach

Growing in both the East and the West, peach flowers are gorgeous and beautiful. This feature is similar to that of beautiful women. Both Chinese and English will associate peach with beauty and other favorite things. In Chinese, beautiful women are described with words such as “almond-shaped face and peach cheeks”, or “peach cheeks and vermilion lips”. Cui Hu, a Chinese poet of the Tang Dynasty, once wrote a famous line: “On this same day last year within this door, a comely face and peach blooms together did glow. She I’ve admired has gone I know not where, the peach blooms are smiling still in the breeze to blow”. In this poem, peach blossoms and beauty have a corresponding relationship.

In English, the word peach express the same metaphorical meaning as in Chinese. For example, “Walking in sunset, she is really a peach”. In English, people also use “peachy cheeks” to describe a girl’s face as beautiful as a peach blossom. Through the above analysis, it’s obvious that the word peach has the same metaphorical meaning in Chinese and western languages.

2.2 Grass

Grass is commonly seen everywhere in nature. It has tenacious vitality. No matter how bad the weather is or how unfavorable the geographical environment is, the growth of grass cannot be stopped, just like ordinary people in the world. Therefore, there are metaphorical expressions of grass as ordinary people in different languages. For instance, there are “grass root level”, “grass root culture” and “grass root democracy” both in English and in Chinese. Chinese famous poet Li Bai had written a well-known sentence: “Looking up at the sky, I laugh aloud and leave. Am I a man to crawl amid the brambles low?”. This sentence expresses the poet’s self-confidence and he believes that his artistic talent is outstanding from ordinary people. In Chinese, people also use grass to mean gratitude. “Who says mine heart like a blade of grass, could repay her love’s gentle beams of spring sun?” This sentence comes from Chinese poem *The Wandering Son’s Song*, written by Meng Jiao, a Tang Dynasty poet. It demonstrates a wandering Son’s gratitude to his mother. However, there is no such metaphorical meaning for grass in English.

2.3 Chrysanthemum

Chrysanthemum is one of favorable flowers by Chinese people. It is regarded as one of “four gentlemen in flowers” in China. Not afraid of the cold in autumn, Chrysanthemum continues to blossom in the frost season, like what a poem said: When autumn comes on Double Ninth Festival, my flower (the chrysanthemum) will bloom and all others perish. So one of Chrysanthemum’s metaphorical meanings is “a person with noble quality”. Chrysanthemum also means a hermit from society. It gets this metaphorical meaning from Tao Yuanming, an idyllic poet, who described his reclusive life in the following lines: I pick fence side asters at will; Carefree I see the southern hill.

In Australia, chrysanthemum is a symbol of mother. In addition, in some parts of the United States, chrysanthemums are considered positive and energetic. In some European countries, the meaning behind chrysanthemum is death, so chrysanthemums are only used for funerals or visiting cemeteries. In China, chrysanthemums also represent the heaviness of death.

2.4 Lotus

Lotus grow in both East and West, but English and Chinese people perceive it quite differently. In the West, lotus grow quietly in water. It is neither taller than trees nor more beautiful than flowers. Therefore, it is endowed with the meaning of “enjoying comfort”. In Greek mythology, If a person eats lotus, he will have blissful dreams, forgetting troubles and pain and forgetting loved ones and friends. Affected by this, it is found in English “lotus-land” is used as a metaphor for “a comfortable township” and “lotus-eater” is used to refer to a person who is not ambitious.

In Chinese, lotus has completely different metaphorical image. In Chinese culture, lotus has the characteristics of “emerging unstained from the dirty mud”. So the lotus is a metaphor for a noble and pure gentleman. In Chinese, lotus is also used to describe a beautiful lady, because of its slim and graceful figure. The term “lotus rising out of water” describes the freshness, quiet refinement and natural beauty of a lady. In China, lotus represents beautiful love as well. There is a kind of jubilant lotus. When it blooms, two lotus flowers will bloom on one branch, just like lovers in love. Eastern countries believe in Buddhism, lotus is the flower of Buddhism, representing a clean world free from worries.

2.5 Willow

In English, willow is often linked to sadness. The term “wear the willow” means losing a loved one or being in mourning. It is common for Chinese literati and writers to express their feelings with willows when parting with friends. “Fold willow” means to send off a friend. Because “willow” and “stay” are homophonic in Chinese language, people use “willow” to show their attempt to detain those who will travel far away. The willow branches are slim and soft, swaying in the breeze, twisty and charming. Chinese language maps the softness of willows to women bodies.

3 Characteristics of Metaphorical Mapping of Plants

3.1 Mapping Plants to Human Characters

Different plants grow in various environments and seasons, leading to different growth characteristics of plants. When these different characteristics are projected to people, different personalities and virtues are demonstrated. Plum, orchid, bamboo and chrysanthemum are hailed as “four plant gentlemen” in China because they respectively represent different noble qualities. Plum flowers often bloom in the severe winter and are fragrant in cold air. Its branches are leafless and their shape is iron-like, so it is used as a symbol

of elegance, purity and iron spirit. Most orchids are born in valleys, and they are elegant and fragrant. Therefore, the Han nationality often compares the elegance of orchids to that of people's character. A woman with pure heart and elegant character as praised with "orchid heart", and people call a hermit who lives in the mountains with noble morality "an orchid in an empty valley". Bamboo is evergreen all the year round, tall, straight and dignified. It is widely loved by scholars and gentlemen, and is used to symbolize integrity, chastity, backbone and other qualities.

3.2 Mapping Plants to Human Images

Some plants are metaphorically used to describe a person's image or external looks, because their appearance or postures are similar to those of human's in certain degree. Peach blossoms are gorgeous and beautiful, in both Chinese and English, people describe attractive women with "peachy cheeks". The character of softness of willow branches are mapped to the slim figure of elegant ladies.

3.3 Mapping Plants to Human Feelings and Emotions

Plants have closed relationship with human daily life and production. In the long history, people, with wisdom, in different nations passed on some legends and stories concerning plants. Because of these stories, people project some special feelings on some plants. The red bean in Chinese is also known as "acacia bean". It is said that in ancient China, a soldier died when he defended the frontier. His wife missed him so much that she wept under the ormosia tree and died. Later, in Chinese culture, red beans become a symbol of "lovesickness".

3.4 Mapping Plants to Human Life Stages

In both Chinese and English, plants are used to describe different stages of life. For example, the "flower season" is used to describe the period of youth. A plant is often the most beautiful when it blooms. For a person's life, adolescence is often the most energetic and vigorous stage, just like a blooming flower. So we use flower season to describe adolescence. "Fallen leaves" are frequently adopted in Chinese literature as a metaphor for old age. There is a saying in Chinese that leaves fall and return to their roots, which means that people will return to their hometown of birth in their old age, just like leaves fall and return to the roots of trees.

4 Conclusion

Plant metaphors, as an important way for human beings to understand the world, is widely used in English and Chinese. The metaphorical expressions of plant words are closely related to human living environment, values, cultural traditions and ethics, etc. Studying plant metaphors in English and Chinese can not only help us better understand the similarities and differences between English and Chinese cognitive thinking and cultural connotation, understand the essence of conceptual metaphor more comprehensively and

profoundly, appreciate the diversity and colorfulness of world culture, but also guide us to better carry out language teaching and cross-cultural communication, so it has a far-reaching practical significance.

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