

A Contrastive Study of Death Metaphors in English and Chinese

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the metaphorical structure of the domain of death in Chinese within the framework of the conceptual metaphor theory. The Chinese data come from an essay collection and two dictionaries, one general dictionary, the other a dictionary of euphemisms. It aims to account for the way the Chinese conceptualize death metaphorically in terms of a limited system of metaphors, metonymies and image schemas which are grounded in our bodily and social experience, with the goal of identifying cross-linguistic/cross-cultural variation in the types of metaphorical mappings proposed by Lakoff and Turner for English. The analysis fails to reveal a single coherent conceptual organization underlying Chinese death expressions. The data suggest a high degree of similarity between English and Chinese in the types of metaphorical mappings and support the claim that primary metaphors are shared by all human languages. However, cross-linguistic discrepancy is observed in complex mappings. One potential reason for this is that the cultural models of death and afterlife are very much blended with the religious formulations of these concepts, and given the vast differences between the religious formulations of death and afterlife in Chinese and Western religions, it is a likely outcome that the metaphors based on these cultural models will be different. In addition, the Chinese emphasis on the social roles and responsibilities of the individual and the belief that life and death form a continuum rather than a break give rise to various mappings and death expressions that have no counterpart in English.

Keywords: Chinese, death, embodiment, image schema, metaphor

1. Introduction

If we observe some of the terms used for death and dying we find a proliferation of disparate metaphorical expressions, which do not appear to have much in common:

(1) a. Pass away; be feeding the daisies; go to the great beyond

b. xie binke (decline visitors) “decline to receive visitors”; deng tui (kick leg) “turn up one’s toes”; san chang liang duan (three long two short) “coffin, fig. unexpected misfortune”

This paper aims (i) to account for the use of various expressions for death and dying in English and Chinese in terms of a limited set of metaphors that are grounded in our bodily and social experiences and (ii) to contrast these metaphorical mappings in English and Chinese and explore the extent to which they are common to both languages or whether they are language-specific.

2. Background

The experientialist approach views meaning in term of “embodiment”, that is, in terms of our collective biological capacities and our physical and social experiences as beings functioning in our environment. Our concepts are structured and that “structure is meaningful because it is *embodied*, that is, it arises from, and is tied to, our preconceptual bodily experiences” (Lakoff, 1987).

This preconceptual experience is itself structured and is directly meaningful through our direct and recurrent bodily experiences. An instance of such embodiment, of structure emerging from our physical experience, is the existence of image schemas, which are those “recurring structures of, or in, our perceptual interactions, bodily experiences, and cognitive operations” (Johnson, 1987).

This notion of meaning in terms of embodiment must also account for abstract conceptual structures. In our

understanding of abstract concepts there is a metaphorical projection from the realm of the physical to more abstract domains (Fauconnier & Turner, 1998). Metaphors may thus be viewed as a process whereby we understand and structure one conceptual domain in terms of another domain of a different kind.

Metaphors then are mappings, i.e. sets of conceptual correspondences from a source domain to a target domain. There are ontological correspondences, correspondences between entities in the source and target domain, and epistemic correspondences, which are correspondences between knowledge about source and target domains. For example, in *DEATH IS A JOURNEY*, the correspondences that constitute the metaphor map our knowledge about journeys onto knowledge about death. Such correspondences permit us to reason about death using the knowledge we have about journeys. Some of the correspondences that characterize the mappings are:

- The dying person corresponds to the traveler.
- The dying person's destiny corresponds to the destination of the traveler.

The mappings can be "primary" or "complex", with the former being derived from more basic physical and cognitive experiences than the latter. Primary metaphors are learned initially by the correlation of a basic perceptual and a basic cognitive experience that co-occur in our everyday interactions with the world. Thus, they are natural outcomes of the interaction between the particulars of our physical and cognitive makeup as human beings and our subjective experience in the world, independent of language and culture. The universality of such embodied experiences renders primary metaphors universally applicable (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999).

The source concepts for primary metaphors are image schemas, and it is via these image schemas (e.g., a CONTAINER schema, SOURCE-PATH schema, or PART-WHOLE schema) that our experience in the world is initially structured (Johnson, 1987; Lakoff, 1993; Kövecses, 2000). For example, the CONTAINER schema or the SOURCE-PATH schema have a number of structural elements that can be experienced at the sensorimotor level, either via one's experience of one's body or via one's interaction with spatiotemporal events in the world. These elements include an interior, a boundary, and an exterior for the CONTAINER schema, and a source, a path, and a goal of motion for the SOURCE-PATH schema. Our bodily experiences of these structures give rise to primary metaphors, such as *BODY IS A CONTAINER* or *STATES ARE LOCATIONS*. These primary metaphors motivate more complex metaphors such as *MIND IS A CONTAINER*, where we conceptualize the mind as a bounded space, with consciousness and ideas located within and mental activity as movement within or into this space (e.g., *The thought of it had sent me reeling off into the shadows of my mind*), or *EMOTIONAL STATES ARE CONTAINERS*, where being in an emotional state is conceptualized as being in a bounded space and a change in emotional state as movement into this space (e.g., *He gave no evidence of a collapse into unhappiness or self-pity*). Complex metaphors, which are formed by the "conceptual blending" of primary metaphors, are less directly tied to embodied experiences, and are more likely to show cross-linguistic/cross-cultural variation than primary metaphors which stem from universally applicable embodied experiences (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999).

Projection or extension of meaning may also take place through metonymy, which involves primarily a process of transferred reference (Fauconnier & Turner, 1994). In metonymy, reference to one salient characteristic of one conceptual domain represents the entire domain, so the mapping or connection between two things is done within the same domain.

3. Procedure

In this article, I will attempt to provide an account of the various expressions for death and dying in Chinese on the basis of metaphorical and metonymic extensions and image-schematic structures, with the goal to test the universal applicability of the mappings outlined for English by Lakoff and Turner (1989). Chinese data come from *Death Diary*, a collection of diaries by a Chinese cancer patient during the last three months of his life, and two Chinese dictionaries, one being a general dictionary, the other a dictionary of euphemisms. English death expressions are taken from *Oxford Dictionary of Euphemisms* (1995).

In Section Four, Five and Six, I will interpret the death expressions in terms of image schema, physical domains and socio-cultural domains respectively.

4. Image Schema

In a fairly extensive group of expressions "death" is conceptualized in terms of our bodily experience of spatial domains. In this case image schemas which characterize the source domains (containers, paths etc.) are mapped onto the target domain (death), and the metaphors in general preserve the image schematic structure of the source domain.

4.1 Container Schema

In our experience existence is associated with physical presence and life is understood metaphorically in terms of bounded regions, or “containers”. The properties of life can be seen as following from the topological properties of containers plus the metaphorical mapping from containers to life via the metaphors “LIFE ON EARTH IS A CONTAINER” and “DEATH IS A CONTAINER”.

Containers have as structural elements an interior, a boundary and an exterior, as well as an entrance point. “Dying” may be conceptualized as exiting container A (this world/life on earth) and entering or being in container B (the world of death/existence in another place):

- (2) a. Be at the portals of death
 b. Quit this world
 c. Be in Morgue city
- (3) a. likai renshi (leave human-world) “leave this world”; xie shi (abandon world), “abandon this world”
 b. gui-men-guan (ghost-gate-pass), “the portal of death”

There are ancient indigenous Chinese beliefs in the triple world of gods (heaven), humans and underworld. Everything in the universe manifests qualities of *yin* and *yang*. While the person is alive the *yin* and *yang* aspects of the soul are entirely homogeneous, upon death they separate out into the idea of two souls – the *hun*, the *yang* soul which is thought to go up to the heaven, and the *po* soul, which goes downward into the earth (underworld). We have the Chinese expressions:

- (4) a. qu le *yin*-cao-di-fu (go PRT *yin*-mansion-ground-mansion) “have gone to the underworld”

In the Western tradition, the two worlds (this world/the world of death) or containers have a boundary separating them (Bettelheim, 1954). Thus passing from life to death, from container A to container B, is conceptualized as crossing a barrier or a dividing line:

- (5) a. Cross the great divide
 b. Take the big jump

However in the Chinese tradition, boundaries between this life and death are porous – life and death form a continuum not a break. The world after death appears to have been simply an extension of the mortal world. Thus we cannot find similar expressions in Chinese.

4.2 Path Schema

This preconceptual experience is structured in terms of Source-Path-Goal schema, which provides the basis for a series of metaphorical mappings from this spatial domain into an abstract domain like “death”.

In this way through the metaphor “DEATH IS A JOURNEY”, dying is conceptualized as a journey along a path from a starting point to an end point, where we may focus on the elements of the schema and the relation of directionality:

- Setting off from the starting point
 - Motion along path
 - Destination or end point
- (6) a. The last voyage
 b. Put out to sea
 c. Step westward
 d. The journey’s end
- (7) a. huangquan lushang qu le (yellow-springs en-route go PRT) “on the way to the yellow springs”(Note 1)
 b. kua-he-xi-you (mount-crane-West-travel) “traveling on a crane to the West” (Note 2)

In addition, we have a metaphorical understanding of the passage of time based on movement along a physical path, and we understand the course of processes in general metaphorically as movement along a path towards some end point. Thus human life is characteristically construed as a process, and as such it is constrained by the Source-Path-Goal schema, so that it is viewed as having a starting point, an end point and a time span. In this way, death may be conceptualized as the last moment in our time span, through the metaphor “DEATH IS THE LAST HOUR”. And I find a variety of expressions related to time and to measuring time, which are used to refer

to the temporal limitations of life:

- (8) a. The hour has come.
 b. The sands of life are running out.
 c. Snuff it
- (9) a. rizi bu duo le (days not many PRT) “have few days left”
 b. bainian zhihou (hundred-year after) “after a hundred years”
 c. qianqiu zhihou (thousand-year after) “after a thousand years”

The passage of time will eventually result in death. Thus the overall shape of the event of death has an entity that over time ceases to exist as the result of some cause. I thus find expressions which focus on the end-point of the process, through the metaphor “DEATH IS THE END”, and on the result, which is non-existence or disappearance from this world.

- (10) a. The latter end
 b. The ebb of life
 c. Be no longer a going concern
- (11) a. bi ming (finish life) “finish one’s life”
 b. shan zhong (good ending) “have a good ending”

4.3 Up-Down Schema

Our preconceptual structures of spatial orientation, based on the verticality schema, similarly provide the basis for metaphorical mappings. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that there is a physical and cultural basis for these metaphors:

- Serious illness forces us to lie down physically.
- When you are dead, you are physically down.

Verticality serves as an appropriate source domain for understanding life and death, as there is a regular correlation in our experience between verticality and life and death. We thus have the metaphors “LIFE IS UP” and “DEATH IS DOWN”.

When speaking of death we often find a simultaneous activation of metaphorical mappings based on the verticality schema and on our experience of the death scenario.

- (12) a. The downward path
 b. Be beneath the sod
- (13) a. xing zhui (star fall) “a star falls from the sky”
 b. yun luo (fall fall) “falling from the sky”
 c. lun mo (sink submerge) “sinking into water”

4.4 Link Schema

Link schema consists of two entities, A and B, connected by a bonding structure. This schema provides the basis for the metaphorical interpretation of life as the link which connects our being with this world, and of death as a form of disconnection with life:

- (14) a. Be at the end of one’s rope
 b. Hop the twig
 c. Be cut adrift
- (15) a. sa shou (let-go hand) “let go one’s hold”

Thus, “DEATH IS SEVERING”, the splitting of that link to life, as a consequence of which we become disconnected. This breaking of connections, however, may also be viewed as a form of freedom, as liberation from the ties of the world:

- (16) a. Shuffle off this mortal coil. (Shakespeare)
 b. Be released

c. Be free

(17) a. yongyuan de jietuo le (forever MOD free-oneself PRT) “be forever free”

b. si shi zui qingsong de jietuo (death be most easy MOD free-oneself) “Death is the easiest way out.”

5. Physical Domains

Our knowledge of the physiological effects of death forms the basis for one of the most general metaphors for death: DEATH IS SLEEP. In ontological terms, we find correspondences between entities in the source and target domains, that is, between “a sleeping person” and “a dead person”. Knowledge about the source and target domains renders the following epistemic correspondences between the “effects of sleep” and the “effects of death”:

- Entities which are sleeping are still and lying down, the effect of sleeping is stillness and lying down.

- Entities which are dead are still and lying down, the effect of death is stillness and lying down.

There is a variety of expressions in both languages where death is conceptualized in terms of sleep, rest or some other form of non-consciousness.

(18) a. To die, to sleep.

b. The big sleep.

c. Be reposing.

(19) a. chang mian (long sleep) “long sleep”

b. an xi (peaceful rest) “rest in peace”

On the basis of our experience of the physiological effects of death, we may also construct metonymic extensions following the principle of THE PHYSIOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF DEATH STANDING FOR DEATH. From this, we may draw the following system of metonymies for death based on various aspects of the death scenario:

- Last movements, pains, sound made at death-bed

- Lack of movement

- Interruption of breathing

Thus I find a whole series of expressions for death and dying in both languages which draw upon the above system of metonymies:

(20) a. Turn up one’s toes

b. Kick the bucket

c. Be a stiff

d. Breathe one’s last

(21) a. he yan (close eye) “close one’s eyes”

b. duan qi (cut-off breath) “breathe one’s last”; yan qi (swallow breath) “breathe one’s last”

c. ting tui (stiffen leg) “stiffen one’s legs”

d. deng tui (kick leg) “kick one’s legs”

Metonymic extensions applying to different aspects of the burial scenario and the subsequent decay of the body are also found:

(22) a. Leave feet first

b. Become a landowner

c. Be pushing up the daisies

d. Turn to ashes

(23) a. jiu mu (come-near wood) “come near wood, enter the coffin”

b. san chang liang duan (three long two short) “coffin, fig. unexpected misfortune)

Sometimes there may be an overlap with other metaphorical mappings. Thus, on the basis of the metaphor THE GRAVE IS OUR LAST BED/HOME, I find:

- (24) a. Be put to bed with a shovel
 b. Go to one's last home
- (25) a. gui tu (return earth) "return to earth"
 b. hui lao jia (return old home) "return to one's old home"

In Chinese, there is a tendency to use depictions of physical conditions of plants and jades as euphemisms for people's death.

- (26) a. lan cui yu zhe (orchid withered jade broken) "The orchid has withered and the jade is broken."
 b. diao xie (wither fall) "wither and fall"
 c. diaolin "wither"

6. Socio-Cultural Domains

6.1 Religious System of Beliefs

In English, there is a series of expressions for death whose origin is based on the system of beliefs in the Judeo-Christian tradition (Jobes, 1962):

- There is a life hereafter, an immortal life.
- Heaven is located up in the skies.
- People who die and go to heaven are reunited in life hereafter.
- There is a day of the last judgment, when all the dead are summoned and judged, and are rewarded or condemned for eternity.

In this way, the mapping of the belief in a life hereafter with the domain of death forms the basis for the metaphor DEATH IS ETERNAL LIFE. Various aspects of this reunion in life hereafter with God and with the Saints are also dwelt upon:

- (27) a. Be alive with Jesus
 b. Join the choir invisible
 c. The final summons.

Chinese religion reflects four strands of influence – the ancient indigenous beliefs in spirits and the triple world of gods, humans and underworld -- and the influence of three great religious traditions – Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism. From Confucianism, comes the emphasis on this life and proper behavior towards the living and the dead, from Daoism, the interest in the mystical way of nature and the magic that is inherent in the nature of things and from Buddhism, the concern with karma, with cause and effect – merit and demerit. There are four recurring themes concerning death and afterlife:

- A. Boundaries between this life and death are porous – life and death form a continuum not a break – just as the family has an ancestor, the dead are under the high ancestor.
- B. Main religious issue is the health and well-being of the person in this life and beyond this life: how does one maintain and enhance one's physical, mental and economic vitality.
- C. Concern with the long term fate of the person, i.e. the ongoing welfare of the person after death.
- D. That although there were ideas of an end of time and final eternal salvation, these were never as prominent as in western traditions and really do not have much to do with how religion is practiced.

According to the native Chinese religion Daoism, death meant the dispersion of vital forces, or *qi*, and life meant the coming together of vital forces, and the alternating of life and death were parts of the same processes of metamorphosis and transformation of nature, of which human beings were also a part. Thus I find a series of Chinese expressions implying that death means going back to the old, pure origins and being one with nature. Life and death are a continuum. Nobody disappears. Death is simply another phase in the eternal way of nature.

- (28) a. wu hua (thing transform) "become one with the outside world (as distinct from oneself)"
 b. da gui (big return) "the major return (return to nature)"
 c. qi san (*qi* disperse) "vital forces disperse"

According to Daoism, a Daoist monk who has attained *Dao* will become a deity/immortal and ride on a white crane flying to the heaven. Thus we have:

(29) kua he xian qu (mount crane immortal go) “ride on a white crane and pass away as an immortal”

The imported religion Christianity has also showed its influence on the Chinese language in the following death expression:

(30) a. jian shangdi (meet God) “Meet God”

We also find multiple, overlapping metaphors where there is a simultaneous activation of some of the most common metaphorical mappings for death (see the following) together with mappings based on the systems of beliefs, which provide the basis for a series of expressions:

- DEATH IS SLEEP.

- DEATH IS DEFEAT.

- DEATH IS A CONTAINER.

- DEATH IS A JOURNEY.

- ETERNAL LIFE IS UP.

(31) a. Be asleep in Jesus

b. Yield the ghost

c. Saddle a cloud and ride to the great beyond

d. Enter into a better world.

e. Go up to meet one’s Maker.

(32) a. kua he xi qu (mount crane west go) “ride on a white crane and head west”

b. shang xi tian (ascend west heaven) “ascend to the west heaven”

6.2 Other Socio-Cultural Beliefs and Practices

Some mappings seem to have their origin in certain social and cultural beliefs and practices. Just as our life may be conceptualized in terms of the various activities we undergo while in the land of the living, death is conceptualized as the conclusion of all activity, or as the final act, in the metaphor DEATH IS THE FINAL ACT.

(33) a. Cash in one’s chips

b. Take the last curtain call

c. Shut up shop

d. Lay down one’s knife and fork

(34) a. wan wan le (play finish PRT) “Game is over”

In Chinese, much emphasis is focused on one’s social roles and social obligations:

(35) a. jiaodai le (account-for PRT) “have justified oneself; have handed over work to one’s successor”

b. xie binke (decline visitors) “decline to receive visitors”

c. qi yang (abandon provide-for) “death of parents, i.e. the offspring no longer has the opportunity to provide for the parents)

d. bu lu (no salary) “no longer earn a salary”

7. Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to account for the way the Chinese conceptualize death metaphorically in terms of a limited system of metaphors, metonymies and image schemas which are grounded in our bodily and social experience, with the goal of identifying cross-linguistic/cross-cultural variation in the types of metaphorical mappings proposed by Lakoff and Turner (1989). Although I find no single coherent conceptual organization underlying Chinese death expressions, my analysis suggests a high degree of similarity between English and Chinese in the types of metaphorical mappings. The data also supports the claim that primary metaphors are shared by all human languages. However, cross-linguistic discrepancy is observed in complex mappings. Unlike primary metaphors, complex metaphors are not directly tied to embodied experiences, and thus are more likely to show culture-specific variation (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). One potential reason for this is that the cultural models of death and afterlife are very much blended with the religious formulations of these concepts, and given the vast differences between the religious formulations of death and afterlife in Chinese and Western religions, it is a likely outcome that the metaphors based on these cultural models will be different. The Chinese emphasis on

the social roles and responsibilities of the individual and the belief that life and death are a continuum with the world after death simply being an extension of the mortal world give rise to various mappings and death expressions that have no counterpart in English.

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Notes

Note 1. There was the idea that the dead went to a kind of underworld called the yellow springs.

Note 2. The West is something like Heaven.

Appendix A

The Character Version of the Chinese Examples

- (1) b. 谢宾客; 蹬腿; 三常两短
- (3) a. 离开人世; 谢世 b. 鬼门关
- (4) a. 去了阴曹地府
- (7) a. 黄泉路上去了 b. 跨鹤西游
- (9) a. 日子不多了 b. 百年之后 c. 千秋之后
- (11) a. 毕命 b. 善终
- (13) a. 星坠 b. 陨落 c. 沦没
- (15) a. 撒手
- (17) a. 永远地解脱了 b. 死是最轻松的解脱。
- (19) a. 长眠 b. 安息
- (21) a. 合眼 b. 断气; 咽气 c. 挺腿 d. 蹬腿
- (23) a. 就木 (入棺) b. 三长两短

- (25) a. 归土 b. 回老家
(26) a. 兰摧玉折 b. 凋谢 c. 凋零
(28) a. 物化 b. 大归 c. 气散
(29) 跨鹤仙去
(30) a. 见上帝
(32) a. 跨鹤西去 b. 上西天
(34) a. 玩完了
(35) a. 交代了 b. 谢宾客 c. 弃养 d. 不禄

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