



## Contrastive Analysis of Chinese and English Love Proverbs From the Perspective of Ontological Metaphor

ZHOU Wenjia<sup>[a],\*</sup>; LI Yuying<sup>[a]</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>Foreign Language College, Jiangxi Normal University, Nanchang, China.

\* Corresponding author.

Supported by Multimodal Interaction Research in Foreign Language Teaching, a Social Project of Jiangxi (17YY04).

Received 6 January 2019; accepted 21 April 2019

Published online 26 April 2019

### Abstract

With the advancement of technology, the communication among diverse cultures has grown rapidly, which brings more opportunities to people in all countries who can have mutual understandings and then fall in an international love. Nevertheless, as an abstract conception, love in different countries has metaphorical expressions basically. Therefore, the development of international love could be influenced by misunderstanding caused by cultural differences. The paper makes a contrastive analysis of Chinese and English love proverbs from the perspective of ontological metaphor. The result proves that it has further the cultural, economic and environmental reasons, as for the abstract conception of 'love', that the similarities and difference of Chinese and English nations' cognition, thus enriching recognitions and comprehensions about "love" between these two nations and eliminating communication misunderstandings from cultural difference to a certain extent.

**Key words:** Conceptual Metaphor Theory; Love Proverbs; Ontological Metaphor

Zhou, W. J., & Li, Y. Y. (2019). Contrastive Analysis of Chinese and English Love Proverbs From the Perspective of Ontological Metaphor. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 18(2), 38-43. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/10980> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/10980>

### INTRODUCTION

With the development of cognitive linguistics, linguists have paid much attention to the metaphor research. Because people always express their feelings and abstract emotions with concrete entities in words, they have found that metaphor is the association between irrelevant entities and these emotions. When scholars are studying the process of cognition and pondering atmospheres behind metaphor, they have researched that not only do metaphor is a rhetorical device in classical rhetoric, but it also is a crucial thinking method and cognitive tool to explore some abstract sentiments. As a strong affection and a personal attachment, love is an abstract emotion that is owned by anyone, which everyone can use to appreciate someone or something. However, when people want to describe their loves, they have to use some entities to express the abstract emotion for their lovers, the process of which is metaphor. Meanwhile, proverb is often metaphorical and uses formulaic language in our daily lives, for it is a simple, traditional short saying that expresses a truth based on common experience, which ordinarily passed down verbally among the people. With its rich connotation and concise expression, proverb is commonly believed as the fruit of people's wisdoms and popularly has used by natives so far. So when they meet the needs of conveying their love, proverbs would be applied to express and even record love from ancient time to present time. Although it is people who live in those countries, there are totally different love proverbs or same ones that indicate different meanings in Chinese and English nations. And because of cultural differences, there are a host of cultural misunderstandings in Chinese and English love proverbs, which may influences some international lovers when they attempt to communicate each other with his/her domestic proverbs.

Based on the perspective of ontological metaphor in the conceptual metaphor theory, this paper will focus on similarities and differences in Chinese and English love proverbs to find out the reasons behind them. The first one part is to find the similarities and then to study cognitive and environmental reasons in two nations' love proverbs from the idea "love is container and human" while the next one is to study the differences and to find out cultural and economic reasons from the opinion "love is commodity and plant", aiming to reduce communication misunderstandings from cultural differences by having contrastive analysis of two nations' love proverbs.

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## 1. CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR THEORY

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Before the late of 1970s, linguists treated metaphor as a rhetoric phenomenon, not a cognitive method. The publishing of Lakoff and Johnson's book *Metaphors We Live By* in the year of 1980 changed scholars' views and brought a linguistic turn from rhetoric to cognitive metaphor study. They claim "the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 3). They made an early introduction of Conceptual Metaphor Theory and put forward some new terms such as target domain, source domain and conceptual domain. Meanwhile, three categories of conceptual metaphor are classified in the book: structural metaphors, ontological metaphors and orientational metaphors. Later, Fauconnier and Turner have been making a further exploration into conceptual metaphor theory (Fauconnier & Turner, 1998, p. 133-187) and then they advanced Conceptual Blending Theory which classifies four conceptual spaces: Input Space I, Input Space II, Generic Space and Blend Space.

Compared with the metaphor studies in the western countries, the studies in China began in the late of 1990s. The year of 1994 witnessed the publishing of the first article, which was written by Zhao Yanfang, that is about metaphor from cognitive linguistics in China (Zhao, 1994). In the next year, she introduced Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory to Chinese audience, which has aroused Chinese scholars' attentions. After 1996, there are a host of articles about conceptual theory published in public, from which we can find that scholars make great efforts to research this theory. The 21 century has marked the diversified development in researching metaphor with the concept metaphor field enlarging gradually. Shu Dingfang (2000) and Hu Zhuanglin (2004) published their works respectively, *Studies in Metaphor*, *Metaphor and Cognition*, that offer some detailed introductions of cognitive metaphor after making a thorough literature review of the Chinese metaphor studies. Although concept metaphor does not enjoy a long history in China, it is being studied by Chinese scholars and thousands of graduates.

The author only focuses on ontological metaphors of Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory to make a contrastive analysis because of limited text. Lakoff made a conclusion that the key point of metaphor is not in language at all, but in the way we conceptualize one mental domain in terms of another. Therefore, to realize two important terms "source domain" and "target domain" is essential for us to know the working mechanism of ontological metaphors. Source domain is a specific and familiar illumination of the concept while target domain is an abstract and unfamiliar property. It is some rules they must obey that these two domains can have correspondences because the association is not arbitrary. It must be based on people's social experiences regardless of education backgrounds and social status, which presents a way of thinking rather than a speech.

As we all know, proverbs are the abstractions and summarizations of human thoughts and experiences that reflect people's one life and are passed down from one generation to the next. One nation's proverbs must contain its cultures while other nations' proverbs also embrace its exclusive cultures. Although love is an abstract emotion that all people hold and that people express using something concrete in real life, there are different expressions about love in different nations' proverbs, because of different cultural backgrounds and even more reasons. So it is essential to research about Chinese and English love proverbs for knowing more specific reasons behind those words. Therefore this paper chose the perspective of ontological metaphor in Conceptual Metaphor Theory to have a contrastive analysis with Chinese and English love proverbs.

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## 2. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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According to the Conceptual Metaphor Theory that Lakoff and Johnson refer to, there are three categories, structural metaphors, ontological metaphors and orientational metaphors, in conceptual metaphor, which all reveal the association between language and human experiences and sentiments.

The author will choose ontological metaphors to do the research about similarities and differences between Chinese and English love proverbs. Lakoff and Johnson say that ontological metaphors refer to those metaphors that people treat abstract and invisible thoughts, feelings, mental activities, events and state as concrete and visible entities and substance so that people can measure and identify them (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 25). They allow people to determine the physical property of events, experience and process. The noun inflation, a general and progressive increase in prices, can be taken as an example.

If there's much more inflation, we will never survive.

The experience of rising price is metaphorically viewed as an enemy, which can be understood from the word "survive" that refers to live through hardship or

adversity. So we can find that “we” seem “inflation” as our “enemy”. And if the “enemy” attacks and then seizes our land, we will never survive. The “inflation” is source domain while the “enemy” is target domain. Because the “enemy” is a concrete and visible entity, the correspondence between them can be called ontological metaphor. And the author will choose four entities to explain their different connotations and the reasons behind these love proverbs.

## 2.1 Love is Container

**Example 1:** 爱情五味杂陈

**Example 2:** 每一个沐浴在爱里的人都是诗人

**Example 3:** Love is full of trouble

**Example 4:** In love folly is always sweet

**Analysis:** There are several examples of Chinese and English love proverbs that metaphorically use some entities to describe the abstract sentiment “love”. The first Chinese example indicates that “爱情” love is seemed as a container that is full of all flavors, rather than one simple flavor. The whole flavors also implicate all emotions, envy meaning sour, happiness indicating sweet, separation showing bitter, quarrel presenting spicy, which imply the whole period of love with simple words. And love to target domain is what the container to source domain, which can be understood by audience more specifically. Then the source domain is easier to find in the next Chinese proverb than the first one. The word “沐浴” means taking a shower that only made by human, which implies an ontological metaphor. Because love is like a river, people who fall in love with his lover can take a shower or even swim in the river that is boundless and deep as same as love. And “里” indicates someone is surrounded by love and delightfully has a romantic relationship. It is the sweet of love that can be revealed from the association between source domain “river” and target domain “love”.

The third one also mentions “love” is full of trouble, which implicates love is a container that has all sorts of problems and difficulties. However, it reveals the negative emotion of love and further views the “love” as a bottle filled with garbage. So the ontological metaphor of the proverb describes a malcontented couple who is sick of each other. And the last one is opposite to the former. Likewise, it indicates “love” is a container that is full of sweet, the sweet love and lovers’ sweet memories, which reveals positive emotion of the couple for love. The word “in” means lovers are in love with each other and wish to get married. The container “love” conserves lovers’ memories so that the lovers smile like follies when they recall their loves.

All the above proverbs can be found that all have ontological metaphors can more vividly demonstrate various aspects of love and bring more spaces to the readers to have a divergent image about love from their graceful words. And both Chinese and English use some specific entities to describe the abstract sentiment “love”

for expressing lovers’ experiences, which may be either sweet or bitter. It is obvious that the concept “love is container” is all showed in Chinese and English love proverbs. The reason why the similar concept exists in those proverbs is that Chinese and English have the similar or same cognitive thinking and interaction with surrounding environment. First of all, love is a sentiment that the whole people have even in different countries. Chinese brain structure is as same as that of English so that they have same basic cognitive thinking when they think of love which is an abstract and essential affection. When they want to express the sentiment, they have to seek some specific objects to show it, which is an evident ontological metaphor. Then how do they find suitable things to describe their feelings about love? As we all know, people of all countries live in the environment all the time, from cradle to grave, such as family, school, workplace and even the society. Therefore, they have an idea that they regard the place that they live in as a container which is sometimes full of family affection, stress or more abstract feelings when they always live in a house where family members surround them to take care of their daily life. And when they sit in a classroom for studying, an office for earning money, they actually have to stay in closed space to do what they should do. So when they want to express the abstract sentiment “love” with entities, they will learn from the interaction between the objective environment and themselves. It comes naturally that people use the ontological metaphors “love is container” to demonstrate the abstract affection.

## 2.2 Love Is Commodity

**Example5:** 爱情买不到，全靠忠诚换

**Example6:** 标了价的爱情是虚假的

**Example7:** Love can neither be bought nor sold.

**Example8:** Love is the true price of love.

**Analysis:** The word “买” means buy and the first proverb uses the word to get love, which is a obviously ridiculous action. Because love is the reward of lover who really falls in love with each other, they do not care his spouse’s education background, social state and personal fortune, and love is the only requirement for the relationship. So the first part reveals love can neither be bought nor sold but is held by real lovers. The second part further demonstrates that if someone wants to get a love, he/she will pay for complete loyalty to the lover. The target domain is love while the source one is commodity from the word “买”. Commodity, however, is not equal with invaluable love, because someone can buy a love that also can be bought by others. There is the same principle in the next proverb. If love is marked its price “标了价”, everyone will pay for it even though they do not at all love each other only for each other’s money and power. And when love is marked price, it may be a fake that has other evil intentions. Ontological metaphors of these two proverbs emphasize loyalty of love and priceless love.

Likewise, the first English proverb apparently refers to the characteristic of commodity from the words “bought” and “sold”. It also reveals the invaluable love that cannot be held by business, which has the same truth as Chinese one. Love to target domain is what the commodity to source domain. The source domain can be facilely identified by readers so that they can image the proverb’s love for which the ancients yearned from the ontological metaphor. Then the latter one demonstrates a truth that real love can produce love and love is the reward of love. Compared with other proverbs, it remarkably notes “true price” of love that seems not to show priceless love. Nevertheless, the result of love is itself in the proverb, which is different with daily commodity. The commodity “love” is created by lovers’ love and is sold to themselves not the others. In other words, it comes from lovers and comes back to them. The source domain is also commodity. The ontological metaphor of the proverb romantically expresses love is invaluable goods that only belong to lovers.

It is all known that love is priceless, which exactly showed in the above proverbs. But is there the similarity of cognitive thinking between Chinese and English? Actually, there are hardly ontological metaphors in ancient China, which appears widely throughout China in recent dozens of years, because agriculture, as an important part of national economy, has been the basement of China in these five thousand years. As a short Chinese saying “士农工商”, there has implied Chinese social classes: government officials, farmer, worker and businessman, which indicates agriculture is secondary to administrative work. Therefore, ancient Chinese did not focus on making a progressive career with enough material conditions. With the influence of Confucianism, people turned to seek the affluence of spiritual life, so they did not use commodity that is the lowest thing in China to describe the pure love. However, because of geographical conditions, English nation has to live with the development of business and navigation industry, which greatly influences people’s characteristics. People who are almost outgoing and even eager to explore anything that they do not know prefer to seek the affluence of material life rather than have a spiritual life. When they need to express their hot love, they use their pursuit of fortune to metaphorically describe love. Due to the development of social economy and some historical reasons, China is developing business on a massive scale for these several decades. Therefore, there are some proverbs which have the ontological metaphor that love is commodity in China.

### 2.3 Love is Human

**Example 9:** 爱情教人成熟

**Example 10:** 爱情永不老

**Example 11:** 真爱自会寻出路

**Example 12:** Love is deaf as well as blind

**Example 13:** Love is not happy with evil, but happy with truth.

**Example 14:** When poverty comes in at the window and love flies out of the door.

**Example 15:** Love never dies. The marriage is dead, and it can’t be revived.

**Analysis:** It is the meaning of the first proverb that love is a good teacher to help people grow and learn something that they should know in a romantic relationship. The word “教” means teach in English that a teacher or other knowledgeable person bring the impacting of knowledge. It compares love to an excellent teacher whose aim is that teaching someone to learn how to love his lover in a better way from the last failure. And he will become a mature individual who can contain his couple’s weakness and explore shinning spots on each other. Facing disagreements, he should try to find the reason, not to quarrel with the other party. The source domain of the proverb is teacher, which is an ontological metaphor that love refers to a teacher who teaches the subject “love” to help people have happiness. There is the same ontological metaphor in the next two proverbs. The word “永不老” and “寻” is the action that human can do. The first word “永不老” indicates one will be young forever no matter what he has been through or no matter who he meets. But we all known that everyone will grow old, love brings its magic which makes people believe that he is still young because he can do anything crazy beyond his young for the love. Then when something was lost, it is human who are conscious of it and want to find the thing. The word “寻” refers to the meaning that the action that one look for the thing he lost.

But the abstract affection “love” belongs to human and cannot do the action by itself. Only by ontological metaphor can it find the best path to develop itself. The source domain to human is what the target domain to love. Meeting conflicts or getting into trouble, people will find solutions to deal with them by themselves or ask others for help, which is given to love so that love is like human in the proverb.

Love is an abstract sentiment, without body and organ. So the proverb says “love is deaf as well as blind” that indicates man who fall in love is deaf and blind. Human is metaphorically used to describe love so that love has the characteristics of human’s organ. The reason why love is deaf as well as blind is that one believes his lover is the most beautiful person in the world when they are in love. Even though the other party has shortcomings, he also turns a blind eye to them. Another Chinese love proverb “情人眼里出西施” share the same truth. “西施”(Xi Shi) is one of the four most beautiful women in ancient China. Because of love, ordinary people will consider his lover to be Xi Shi, in other words, he thinks that his lover is the apple of his eye. Then the second one is also an ontological metaphor which refers to that love is like human with different temperaments under various conditions. From the proverb, we can find that if there is an evil in love, the couple will be unfortunate



and the romantic relationship is about to break down but that if truth is in love, the couple will maybe get married and establish a happy family. And the evil may be the marriage involving a third party or the different concept about education and living standard between them. So under different situations, love will present different temperaments. In the third proverb, there is a disgraceful image we can see from it. Poverty that is a condition of a person comes in the house from the window and love that is an abstract affection escapes from the house, which depicts a conflict between them in daily life. When the couple falls in love with each other, the romantic relationship may be break down if one party suddenly falls into poverty, which implies that love is a snob who cannot live without money and also presents an ontological metaphor that love is an indecent human. There is obvious the fact that two words “die” “revive” in the last English proverbs, which are both the actions people make. So there is also an ontological metaphor in here. And the proverb demonstrates that love exists in a marriage. So if the couple break down and end the marriage, their love will disappear from then on.

From the above Chinese and English love proverbs, there are apparent ontological metaphors which all show love is human, such as these word “deaf”, “revive”, “happy” and “教” “寻”. As Lakoff and Johnson said: “what we experience, what it can mean to us, how we understand that experience, and how we reason about it are all integrally tied up with our bodily being”(Lakoff&Johnson, 1980, p. 108). Because our experiences of the world has great influence on the method that we applied to understand anything, especially some abstract emotions, people from different countries may have the same feelings about love. Meanwhile, the similarities of our brain structures also play an essential part in the usage of ontological metaphor. People use the concept “love is human” to endue many emotional characteristics to love, which not only provides a new approach that we take to run a romantic relationship.

#### 2.4 Love is Plant

**Example 16:** 忠诚的爱是永不凋零的

**Example 17:** 生在人间是莲藕，死在阴间共枕头

**Example 18:** 莲花并蒂开，情心相印

**Example 19:** Real love will flower

**Example 20:** Love only grows when it's on the vine.

**Analysis:** As an indispensable factor in the world, plant also has massive influence on human's affection, so the concept “love is plant” is also shared between Chinese and English proverbs when they want to express love. There is the word “凋零” that means withered in the first love proverb. Therefore, we can speculate that love is referred to a plant because only plant can be withered. It also persuades that if we want to keep love everlasting, the couple both need to be loyal in the relationship. The source domain is plant in the proverb,

which also reappears in the next proverbs. The second proverb demonstrates that love is lotus root “莲藕” which is hardly seen in English love proverbs. The reason why Chinese use the lotus root to describe love is that lotus stems spring from the selfsame root. And the meaning of the proverb is that lovers who are living in the world are lotus roots and then after death they are buried together. The source domain is lotus root that indicates the love between the couple can be perpetual from cradle to grave. And then the source domain of the next proverb is lotus which is the flower of lotus root. When its root is born with one stalk, lotus only grows a twin lotus flower with slim chance. So if one couple's love is compared to a twin lotus flower, which implies their love is rare and priceless. Therefore, the ontological metaphor is deserved to be recorded in proverb.

There is the same concept of ontological metaphor that presents in English love proverb. The first one is that love metaphorically refers to a plant which can flower with the whole love. And it can further demonstrate that the growth of a plant is a developmental stage, so is the development of love, which indicates that source domain is a plant. Having experienced a difficult growth when it maybe encounters many challenges, real love flowers continue to grow in the relationship. The ontological metaphor shows the couple will have a satisfied marriage only if they love each other with the whole real love. And the second proverb also shows love is plant that grows on the vine. It implies that the abstract sentiment only appears between couple. Above all, love cannot grow without a couple, which also indicates another ontological metaphor that the vine is like the couple who relies on each other because of their love.

Various plants, which play essential parts in the word, are grown by people to meet their daily needs. Because the same cognitive experience that different countries' people take will make them take the plant as the source domain in the ontological metaphor. However, there are different plants used in Chinese and English love proverbs. Comparing with English ordinary plants used in its proverbs, Chinese prefer to cite twinned plants, such as “并蒂莲” and “莲藕”. Because there are same pronunciations between “莲” and “联” as well as “藕” and “偶” in China, with “联” and “偶” meaning that lovers who have a perfect marriage can still love forever, Chinese proverbs use the rhyme to give the best wish to the next lovers. Due to Chinese long-term agricultural society, almost Chinese had to work in their fields for support their families, and they are born in the field, grow in here, get married and die. They assume that the family is a unity so that they also compare love to twinned plant which relies on each other to build their happy families. However, because of the different economies in the English nation, the perspective is not realized by the nation. They only use beautiful plants to describe love, not giving some special meaning to the plants.

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## CONCLUSION

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As an emerging field of cognitive linguistics, conceptual metaphor can also be used to study people living methods and ways to express some abstract sentiments. As an abstract affection, love can be metaphorically compared to other entities. Meanwhile, because of the development of the society, the international love is not an unusual phenomenon among people. After making a contractive analysis of Chinese and English love proverbs, the paper draws a conclusion that these love proverbs have similar and different expressions because of people's similar experiences from the environment and cognitive methods as well as two nations' different cultures and economies from the perspective of ontological metaphors. The paper aims to provide a new angle to see the abstract emotion 'love', which maybe resolve the cultural conflicts between the international lovers in their daily life and can offer some new perspectives

to the future research. What's more, it can bring Chinese cultures to the world and Chinese can also know the English nation's cultures in order to a better communication among people.

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