

## A Study of “Oil” in Chinese From the Perspective of Conceptual Metaphor

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Received 5 June 2016; accepted 14 September 2016  
Published online 26 October 2016

### Abstract

Oil is one of the basic elements of the world, is human beings' intimate partner in our development of existence. There are lots of metaphors about oil in China in our daily life. After identifying, analyzing and classifying, there are five conceptual metaphors of “oil” in Chinese: MONEY IS OIL, CATALYZER IS OIL, ENERGY IS OIL, BRIGHTNESS IS OIL, and CUNNING IS OIL. The findings indicate that the metaphorical mapping and the semantic extension of these conceptual metaphors are based on the perception and embodiment of people on oil, which forms from Chinese culture. In addition, conceptual metaphors of “oil” in China are of systematicity and generalities.

**Key words:** Conceptual metaphor; “Oil”; Systematicity; Generality

Tan, H. (2016). A Study of “Oil” in Chinese From the Perspective of Conceptual Metaphor. *Studies in Sociology of Science*, 7(5), 36-39. Available from: URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sss/article/view/8636>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/8636>

### INTRODUCTION

Metaphor is a topic which has been given much attention by scholars for a long time. According to the traditional view of metaphor, there are several theories related to metaphors, but the most widely acknowledged theories to metaphors are Comparison Theory from Aristotle (Hu, 2009), Substitution Theory from Quintilian (1920), and Interaction Theory from Richards (1936). *Metaphors We Live By* was jointly published by Lakoff and Johnson in

1980, drastically promoted studies of metaphors from cognitive perspective. Shu (1997) discusses details of Richards' theory of metaphor and argues that Richards' understanding of metaphors is very macroscopic and comprehensive, and that contexts are rather necessary for metaphors; meanings are dependent on contexts; tenor and vehicle of a metaphor may interact to function as a whole.

Regarding whether metaphor lexicon can be used in science and technology, Jiang (2010) builds a small-scale corpus based on 20 random yet representative articles of balanced materials, and then carries out an empirical study of the lexicon of English of petroleum science and technology. It is found that such lexicon is obviously metaphorical and that metaphorical lexicon can serve three cognitive functions in English of petroleum science and technology, including analogy assumption, theoretical construction and statement explanation. Guo and Yang (2011) discovers a large number of metaphors in petroleum lexicon, including metaphorical words concerning human body and animals and deriving from biological and social properties of human, and metaphorization of object lexicon. Zhao (2014) studies the grammatical metaphors and their main types in texts of English of petroleum science and technology, and discusses the instructive role of grammatical metaphor theory in translation of English petroleum science and technology. Data analysis shows that adjectivization is as frequent as nominalization in English of petroleum science and technology. Grammatical metaphors enhance objectiveness and simplicity of texts of English of science and technology while increasing difficulty of comprehension to a certain degree. As a consequence, further exploration is necessary for how to make use of grammatical metaphor theory for the purpose of translation of English petroleum science and technology.

Since China is late to start promoting its modern civilization, resources have been viewed as gifts of

nature to mankind during a long period, but without any awareness of their properties and features. Oil is another essential material for life in the early history of China. Therefore, as a matter of fact, there is a wide use of oil metaphors in Chinese. Some scholars began to do some research on metaphors of “oil” in English, but there is no analysis on metaphors of “oil” in Chinese. Our research will carry out empirical analysis at various levels with an aim to uncover conceptual metaphors of “oil” in Chinese.

## 1. CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR

Lakoff regards metaphor as a systematic way for people to think, behave and express ideas, that is, “metaphorical concept”. In daily life, people usually perceive, consider, experience and deal with those invisible, ill-defined concepts with reference to those familiar, visible and specific concepts so as to form cognition that interconnects different concepts”. For conceptual metaphor, according to Lakoff (1993), the word “metaphor” may be used in different ways and in the study of cognitive linguistics, it means a cross-domain mapping in the conceptual system. Metaphor is not considered to be linguistic, but conceptual. Here come the questions like why the conceptual metaphor is claimed as metaphors we live by, whether it is the same as we live by air and water. From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, the answer is “yes”. Many ordinary language comes from metaphorical expressions derived from conceptual metaphor and often it is used by people in an unconscious way. That is to say, people combine two unrelated things together, talking and experiencing abstract concepts in terms of more concrete concepts, and which can also prove that the metaphorical mode of thinking is the same with other cognitive functions as a basic model for people to know the world they live by.

Shu (2000) argues that metaphor is not only a linguistic phenomenon and a tool of mankind’s perception but also conceptualization of the physical world of nature, and a tool of mankind’s cognition as well. It is deeply rooted in mankind’s language, thought and culture. We can better perceive and comprehend the world by means of metaphors. Wang (2007) holds that metaphor is a kind of mental mapping from one thing to another or from source domain to target domain in cognition. Pan (2008) argues that in metaphors, there is correspondence between the source domain and target domain. Such correspondence is a concept. Comprehension of metaphorical meanings is, in fact, mapping of experience from a source domain to a target domain so as to understand features of the target domain again. This is the mechanism of metaphor. Conceptual metaphor is the mapping interaction between two different fields of concepts.

## 2. ANALYSIS OF CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS OF “OIL” IN CHINESE

### 2.1 Money Is Oil

Oil exists physically in nature and money is a derivative as a result of the development of human society. They belong to different cognitive domains. As we know, in ancient China, oil is scarce and much needed in human daily life, so oil is expensive and people always think of more nutrients and fats contained in the food as “油水”, in turn, there is no “油水” or less “油水”. Therefore, people are accustomed to call the unexpected gains, added benefits and improper income “油水”. The metaphorical thought is often used to construct concepts of money domains and that there are some phrases and expressions of “Oil metaphorizes money” in Chinese. For example:

- (1) 那些揩油的家伙想要一顿免费的午餐, 但免费午餐可是要钱的—它要花你企业的钱。  
Freeloaders want a free lunch, and a free lunch is not free—it costs your business money.
- (2) 这使他甚至捞到了更多的油水, 因为赏金一般是给予缉拿罪犯的有功之臣的。  
This brought him even more money, for a reward was generally offered for wanted criminals.
- (3) 这些人都富得流油, 却来抢我们的钱。  
All of them are wealthy. -Robberies and shit.

From the examples above, “油水”, “揩油”, “流油” are metaphors of such kind in Chinese. As we know, oil is a kind of nonrenewable resource, which has become one of the important energy in people’s daily life. The attribute of being expensive of oil metaphorizes money. The metaphorical meaning of “揩油” is getting free lunch at the expense of others paying for him, which transfer the attribute being expensive from the source domain of oil to the target domain of getting something of value. The metaphorical meaning of “油水” is the profits, which transfer the attribute being expensive from the source domain of oil to the target domain of extra income. The metaphorical meaning of “流油” is that drips in fat, which transfers the attribute being expensive from the source domain of oil to the target domain of being not willing to give out something valuable. As for “揩油” and “流油”, the emphasis is on the verbs. Oil is sticky, when someone touches oil, some of it will be taken away. The expression “Oil metaphorizes money” is more often shown in adjectival and verbal metaphors.

### 2.2 Catalyzer Is Oil

Oil is the name for liquid hydrophobic substance at normal atmospheric temperature. When oil is exposed to an ignition source, makes oil be not at the normal temperature, and vigorously accelerates the combustion of the materials. Therefore, it has the attributes of

combustibility. On the basis of our perception and experience, oil can help to burn something. People use oil to compare to catalyzer. Take the following cases as examples:

- (4) 他把韦尔纳描摹得十分可怕, 很可能是有点添油加醋。  
He paints a very black picture of Werner, which may well be distorted.
- (5) 泼油救火  
Try to mend a situation but end up making it even worse.
- (6) 柴火上烧汽油——一点就着  
Pour gasoline on the firewood—easily burns with a bit.

The metaphorical meaning of “添油加醋” is that overstating in a speech for exaggeration, and changes the speech atmosphere, which transfers the attribute “combustibility” from the source domain of oil to the target domain of the development of the speech. For “泼油救火”, “柴火上烧汽油”, the metaphorical meaning is that the situation is being changed into a worse situation, which transfers the attribute “combustibility” from the source domain of oil to target domain of the dangerous situation we are in.

### 2.3 Energy Is Oil

There are a great number of nutrients and fats contained in oil, which provides us with energy every day. When we are energetic, we will try our best to do more meaningful things without the feeling of being tired, sad, sorrow and unhappy. However, when we use out our energy or lose our energy, we will die or be unhappy. So people use oil to compare to energy. The following cases are examples.

- (7) 搬不倒葫芦洒不了油——一不做, 二不休。  
If you are going to do it, just do it and complete all.
- (8) 油尽灯草枯  
When oil dries, the light goes out.

From the examples above we can get the results that oil metaphorizes energy. The metaphorical meaning of “油尽灯草枯” is that it comes to the end of one’s life, which transfers the attribute “fats and nutrients” from the source domain of oil to the target domain of one’s life. And this mapping mechanism is the same for “灯尽油干”. The attribute “fats and nutrients” of oil corresponds to our energy or our surroundings.

### 2.4 BRIGHTNESS IS OIL

In early ancient China, oil was used for lighting (Li, 2006). The oil lamp originated from the discovery of fire and the need for lighting for human beings. Brightness is that the light reflects from the surface of objects, it is related to the colour. Therefore, there are similarities between brightness and oil. People would like to use oil to metaphorize different kinds of colours.

- (9) 油光可鉴  
With oil on your hair, comb very bright, like a mirror.

- (10) 图片上是个被阳光透晒成棕褐肤色的男人后背, 在阳光下油光发亮, 他身上仅佩带一条金色的皮带子站在一片美丽的海滩上, 双手搭在臀部。

It showed the rear view of a very sun-tanned man, glistening with oil, standing on a perfect beach wearing only a golden thong. He had his hands on his hips.

According to the examples above, the metaphorical meaning of “油光可鉴” is that it is quite bright, just like a mirror, which transfers the attribute “lighting” from the source domain of oil to the target domain of someone’s skin. The metaphorical meaning for “油光发亮” is that he is very healthy, which transfers the attribute “lighting” from the source domain of oil to the target domain of healthy state of someone’s skin.

### 2.5 Cunning Is Oil

Morality refers to individual’s stable thought and behavior tendency to society, to others, to the things around us according to certain social and moral standards. And oil has the attribute of lubrication. However, human beings do not like to communicate with the one who is able to achieve things in a clever way, often by deceiving other people. Therefore, people would like to use oil to metaphorize the one who is cunning. Here are some of the examples:

- (11) 凡油滑的嘴唇, 和夸大的舌头, 耶和华必要剪除。

The smooth lips and the tongue of pride will be cut off by the Lord.

- (12) 人人向邻舍说谎. 他们说话, 是嘴唇油滑, 心口不一。

Everyone says false words to his neighbour: their tongues are smooth in their talk, and their hearts are full of deceit.

For the expression “嘴唇油滑”, the metaphorical meaning of it is that the one is as slippery as an eel, which transfers the attribute “lubrication” from the source domain of oil to the target domain of movement on someone’s lip.

## 3. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS OF “OIL” IN CHINESE

### 3.1 Systematicity

The formation of every metaphor has its own reasons and characteristics. Here we analyze the characteristics of conceptual metaphors of oil from the perspective of systematicity. Systematicity is on the basis of the features

of cognitive rules and life experience. As a fundamental mode of cognition, metaphor is consistent and systematic (Chen, 2007). Systematicity of oil metaphor refers to the consistence and systematicity in the mapping structure of oil metaphor. In oil metaphors, systematic mappings from the source domain to the target domain suggest structural metaphor. In MONEY IS OIL, take the expression “油水” as an example. We analyze it like this, that he gets so much “油水”; his “油水” is squeezed out; so he has to go back to work and tries to get “油水” from his company; and he begins to deposit the “油水” for his future. Therefore, the systematic relation exists among oil metaphors. This association is implied in various metaphorical expressions.

### 3.2 Generativity

As one of cognitive ways, metaphor with oil as the source domain has great generative power. With the metaphorization on thinking and the language expressions, people create an infinite number of metaphorical expressions. Oil metaphor is the same case. On the one hand, oil being used as the source domain has various physical and social attributes and plays a very important role in the objective world and human society. The role of oil allows people to have more enough cognition and imagination. For example, the expressions like “油水” could be “rich”, and also bring “poverty”. On the other hand, some oil metaphors’ functions as root metaphor in human thinking. In terms of cognitive function, metaphor can be divided into root metaphor and derivative metaphor. In terms of a root metaphor, it is the one which is embedded within culture or a language that is often not realized as being a metaphor. And there is another definition of a root metaphor, which refers to the one from which other metaphors spring. A root metaphor is of strong generativity and is regarded as a metaphor containing a central concept. In most cases, it is connotative, which is not usually perceived by people. The oil metaphor is analyzed in this paper mainly focuses on the conventional metaphor with oil being used as the source domain. Conventional metaphors are produced in the early days of the human mind, so they are strongly generative.

### SUMMARY

Based on corpus and the dictionaries, and within the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the author

introduces the specific metaphor mapping target domain and ways of cognition of oil. This current study investigates the conceptual metaphors of “oil” in Chinese, there are five categories of oil metaphors. There are more arduous efforts should be paid into the study of the underlying causes of these conceptual metaphors of “oil” in Chinese and that there is still a long way to go before we make a more serious and convincing conclusion.

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