
The Universality and Variation of Flower Metaphors for Love in English and Chinese Poems

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Abstract:

Metaphor is ubiquitous in everyday life, not only in language but also in action and thought (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Difficult, intangible and abstract concept can be understood by applying metaphor. Emotion is viewed as a kind of abstract and private personal experience. Many of the metaphors have been studied by cognitive linguists over the past two decades, emotional metaphor is an important aspect of cognitive linguistics, and love has become one of the focuses of the researches. By applying the conceptual metaphor theory as a framework, this paper focuses on analyzing flower metaphors for love from the cross-cultural perspective based on figurative expressions in Chinese and English poems. The results of the study suggest that flower metaphors for love are likely to be near-universal at a general level in English and Chinese poems because of universal experiences, while cross-cultural variations and diversity exist in English and Chinese poems in culture-specific ways at a specific level in virtue of cognitive preferences.

Keywords: love metaphors; flower; poems; cognitive linguistics

1. Introduction

Conceptual metaphor seems to be very common in language and culture (Steen, G. J. 1999). All the people from different countries and different cultures use a large number of metaphors when they communicate about the world. Metaphor is understood as a set of correspondences, or mappings relationship between source domain and target domain (Lakoff, 1986, Kövecses, 2010), such as LOVE and FLOWER due to the fact that there are some possible likenesses between the two domains. Metaphor is for most people a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish—a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p3).

Emotional metaphors have become one of the best researched domains, love is one of the most basic and most beautiful emotions in human nature, and the most common source of poetry (Wang Lihao, 2005). However, romantic love is commonly regarded as a mysterious and complex emotion which it is difficult to pin down (Kövecses, 1986, p61). The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p5) and link one intangible entity to another to promote visualization for the reader (Alistair Brown, 2018, p153). We use metaphors when we find it difficult to describe a thing or an experience (Mashak, S. et al. 2012).

In order to vividly express love, people often metaphorize love with many figurative devices (Muhammet, 2020, p56).

Creative writers and poets commonly apply metaphors in their literary texts, and metaphor can be seen as the ornamental use of language (Kövecses, 2005, p1), and a poet can elaborate the source domain in an extraordinary way to achieve a novel expression that is based on metaphor (Kövecses, 2005, p261), hence Chinese poems and English poems are chosen as research object in this study. Love is an eternal topic in Chinese and English literature. Especially in poetry, there are a great many poems that are associated with love, and flower image is a common technique used by Chinese and English poets. Each poem is impressive and touches us because of the magic of love. The love is delivered in a very delicate way in these poems then arouse our resonance. All the examples are taken from English and Chinese ancient poems. Even though a few words are used in ancient poetry to express love, those can directly touch people's hearts and have a huge emotional power. The present study is meant to explore the metaphors of flower metaphors for love in Chinese and English poems, and to identify if these metaphors can be found both in English and Chinese poems, besides, to see if these expressions are conceptualizing love metaphorically in exactly the same ways.

2. Love Metaphors from a cross-cultural perspective

The concept of love is perhaps the most ‘metaphorized’ emotion concept (Kövecses, 2000, p.27). By examining a number of ordinary English expressions of love, Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p.49) list five love metaphors: love is a physical force, love is patient, love is madness, love is magic and love is war. Kövecses (1986, pp. 61-103) comes up with a fairly more clear and detailed definition of the concept of love from the central metaphor, the object of love, basic concepts, intensity, passivity and lack of control, etc.

Love can be expressed with a great plenty of words in many different languages (Karandashev, 2017, p.3). “Some metaphors are potential universal and the fact that some metaphors vary cross-culturally” (Kövecses, 2005, p. 292). Some cross-cultural researches (Aksan & Kantar, 2008, Mashak et al., 2012) indicate that although the two different languages share several love metaphors, the expressions are not totally the same. At the same time, few love metaphors are unique in one language and don’t exist in another language. The research conducted by Aksan and Kantar (2008, pp. 262–291) shows that love is a constructed object and love is an economic exchange seem to be shared both in English and Turkish, they still have subtle differences in the expressions, and the love metaphors of pain/suffering, ineffability, and deadly force are unique in Turkish.

Comparative analysis of love metaphors in Chinese and English are mainly conducted by Chinese authors. Wang Lihao (2005) explores the relationship between metaphor and language, culture and thinking through a comparative study of metaphor in ancient Chinese and English love poems, so as to prove that metaphor is a basic cognitive mode of human beings. Love is an abstract and complex concept; people cannot understand it well without metaphors. There are a lot of metaphors to express love both in English and Chinese. Since all the human beings have common physiological characteristics and emotional experience, people express their love in similar ways, and the metaphor of love in English and Chinese has a lot in common (Xue Yan, 2011). However, there are some cognitive differences in metaphorical expression of love due to the different cultural backgrounds of Chinese and English (Yin Hualing, Zheng Zhijin, 2012).

3. Discussion

There is a great deal of conceptual metaphors for love in English and Chinese, and flowers are often used as metaphorical objects especially in Chinese and English poems, of which two metaphors stand out in importance: the beloved one is a flower. and love is a flower. We will analyze the metaphors in the following examples.

3.1. The beloved one is a flower

When we speak of flowers, such common expressions as beautiful, tender, charming and sweet-smelling come to our mind. To most men of any country in the world, the woman who they love are as beautiful and charming as flowers. Seeing flowers makes the poets think of the beloved one and express their yearning and missing. The metaphor can be found both in English and Chinese poems.

- (1) Are wronging your image that blossoms a rose in the deeps of my heart.

.....

For my dream of your image that blossoms a rose in the deeps of my heart.

— The lover tells of the rose in his heart Bulter Yeats (Note 1)

- (2) O my love is like a red, red rose

That’s newly sprung in June.

O my love is like the melody

That's sweetly played in tune.

— A red rose Robert Burns (Note 2)

(3) I ne'er was struck before that hour

With love so sudden and so sweet,

Her face it bloomed like a sweet flower.

— First Love John Clare (Note 3)

In example (1), the speaker expresses his love and missing deeply because the fact that he is not being in his hometown. At the same time, he compares the good-looking of his beloved girl with a rose. Robert Burns used the same metaphor in example (2), the “red rose” to make readers know that his lover is as beautiful as a red rose, and he fully expresses his faithful, everlasting and deep love to his lover. In example (3), the author was struck by sudden love, the woman who he fell in love with is as beautiful as a sweet spring flower, and his heart was stolen away by her.

From the above analysis, we can know that the poets believe that their loved ones are the most charming and beautiful in the world, nothing can rival their loved ones in beauty except flowers. There are a lot of English poems that the beloved is referred to as a flower so as to express love and missing. The beloved one is also conceptualized as a kind of flower in Chinese poems.

(4) 孤灯不明思欲绝，卷帷望月长空叹，美人如花隔云端！

—李白 长相思

(My lonely lamp burns dull, of longing I would die; Rolling up screens to view the moon, in vain I sigh. My flower-like beauty is high. Up as clouds in the sky.)

— Lovesickness Li Bai (Note 4)

(5) 世间花叶不相伦，花入金盆叶作尘。惟有绿荷红菡萏，卷舒开合任天真。此花

此叶常相映，翠减红衰愁杀人。

— 赠荷花 李商隐 (Note 5)

(People in the world only love flowers, but pay little attention to the leaves. The flowers are planted in the pots, but the leaves are dropped into the soil and turned to dust. There is only one kind of flower whose leaves cannot be neglected. This is lotus! Lotus flowers open and close, lotus leaves roll back and forth, and

flowers and leaves contrast finely with each other. I'm afraid that the color of the flowers and leaves will fade, which makes me sad.)

— To my beloved wife Li Shangyin

(6) 去年今日此门中，人面桃花相映红。人面不知何处去，桃花依旧笑春风。

— 题都城南庄 崔护

(In this house on this day last year a pink face vied; In beauty with the pink peach blossom side by side. I do not know today where the pink face has gone; In vernal breeze still smile pink peach blossoms full blown.)

— Written in a Village South of the Capital Cui Hu (Note 6)

In example (4), the poet uses the phrase of “美人如花” (flower-like beauty) to describe his lover is like a flower so beautiful and tender. The flower-like beauty who the poet misses intensely seems is close at hand; But actually, the beauty is as far as clouds. It is impossible for them to meet each other due to the fact that the beauty is far away just like the moon. In example (5), the first line and the second line describe the characteristics of other flowers in a general sense, that is, green leaves are not taken seriously, which be used to highlight the unique feature of lotus. The poet compares himself to green leaves of lotus, and compares his wife to lotus flowers. Lotus flower and green lotus leaves are a unity, the poet hope that he and his wife can be a perfect couple forever. In example (6), the poet fell in love with a girl like a peach blossom in full bloom. The peach blossom in spring breeze is gorgeous, but the "face " brings out the charm and beauty of pink peach blossom, then we can imagine how beautiful the girl is! Moreover, the girl's face is more charming, beautiful and graceful against peach blossom. As we saw, the metaphor of “the beloved one is a flower “can be found in English and Chinese poem, and using the metaphor can make people feel that love is so romantic and pleasant.

3.2 Love is a flower

Love is such an abstract and complicated concept that it is difficult to describe. Poets prefer to use metaphor to express this particular emotion vividly. Love is conceptualized as a flower in English and Chinese poems. There are three subordinate metaphors for “love is a flower”: love is a flower, fading love is fading flowers, and missing the beloved one is fallen flowers. The following examples can be explained the three subordinate metaphors.

3.2.1 Love is a flower

The first subordinate metaphors are “love is a flower”. Love is a kind of elusive emotion that cannot be seen or even touched, it is difficult to describe. In order to present love better and more clearly, English and Chinese poets use flowers as source domain to visualize love.

(7) This bud of love, by summer's ripening breath, May prove a beauteous flower when next we meet.

— Act II Scene II Romeo and Juliet Shakespeare (Note 7)

(8) O Rose thou art sick.
The invisible worm,

.....

And his dark secret love Does
thy life destroy.

—The Sick Rose William Black (Note 8)

- (9) If love were what the rose is, And I were like the leaf,
Our lives would grow together, In sad or singing weather, Blown
fields or flowerful closes, Green pasture or gray grief; If love were
what the rose is, And I were like the leaf.

— A Match Algernon Charles Swinburne (Note 9)

Example (7) describes the sudden love between Romeo and Juliet is like an emerging flower bud, and she hopes that the bud will convert into a beautiful flower next summer. Flower bud refers to the hope of love in this poem. In example (8), the speaker describes a rose flower which is diseased and lost its vitality because it has been infected by a worm. The “dark secret love” of this worm is destroying the rose’s life. The rose in the speaker’s eyes is considered an unhealthy love relationship with his jealous wife, the rose is sick, their love is sick as well. In example (9), the poet believes that the rose and the leaves have the same root, regardless of the weather, regardless of the place, that is, regardless of the life of the favorable or unfavorable circumstances, husband and wife should be together like flowers and leaves of rose, and share weal and woe. Rose symbolizes the true meaning of love between husband and wife.

- (10) 采莲南塘秋，莲花过人头。低头弄莲子，莲子清如水。置莲
怀袖中，莲心彻底红。

— 西洲曲 佚名

(In south pool I pluck lotus red, which grows e’en high above my head. I bow and pick up its love-seed.
So green that water can’t exceed.) (Note 10)

Example (10) describes a young girl misses the beloved man terribly, she is in momentary expectation of the arrival of her lover, but her lover does not appear. As a result, she has to find an excuse to go out to pick lotus to show her love and miss for her lover. In this poem, “lotus” is used the poem to express the girl’s pure and faithful love for her lover.

From the above analysis, we can know that the metaphor is shared both in English and Chinese poems. Love sometimes is considered as the flower of hope, can give a person with power and confidence. A flower’s whole life has to experience wind and rain, which is similar to a love relationship. No matter what difficulties that lovers may encounter, they are a unity to stand together. Example (7) and example (9) look at rose and love in a positive way. On the other hand, sick rose corresponds to an unpleasant relationship between lovers, which makes them depressed. In example (10), the poetess use “lotus” to express her missing to her lover, which makes us feel the purity of love.

3.2.2 Fading love is fading flowers

The second subordinate metaphor is “fading love is fading flowers”. Some poets compare love to a flower. What he sees is not only its beauty but also the fact that it will eventually wither. Love is not always

romantic and pleasant, sometimes it is a negative emotional experience that makes people feel painful even desperate.

(11) Love is like a flower; it must flower and fade;

If it doesn't fade, it is not a flower.

It's either an artificial rag blossom, or an immortelle.

— The Mess of Love D.H. Lawrence (Note 11)

(12) Frail as thy love, the flowers were dead,

Ere yet the evening sun was set, But years

shall see the cypress spread, Immutable as

my regret.

— I Dug, Beneath the Cypress Shade Love Peacock (Note 12)

(13) 花红易衰似郎意，水流无限似浓愁。

(刘禹锡 竹枝词)

Red flowers fade fast as my gallant's love; The river like my sorrow will ever flow.

— Bamboo Branch Songs Liu Yuxi (Note 13)

In example (11), the author thinks that love is like a flower, and withering is a inevitable result both for a love relationship. In example (12), the poet and a young woman fell in love in mutual affection, but the sad thing is that she married another man. The poet said that this love frail because it is fickle just like flowers, and the flower are as ephemeral as her love. The same expression also exists in Chinese poems. Example (13) describes the woman's pain for love sickness, and she compares the love between her and her beloved to fading flowers, which makes us feel impressive but sorrowful. The lover's love for her was sweet, but vanish shortly just as the red flowers fade fast; her sorrow and pain never endless like flowing river. The same view shared by Chinese and English poets, that is, flowers bloom and fade, love relationship grow and thrive vigorously while wither gradually.

3.2.3 Fallen flower is missing the beloved one

As we discussed above, no flower can bloom forever, and all the flowers fade inevitably. Flowers bloom and fade, which is the common natural law, and that also symbolizes vicissitudes of life in Chinese culture. Seeing beautiful flowers fading away, ancient Chinese poetess express their sentimental and sorrowful feeling in their poems.

(14) 去年春恨却来时，落花人独立，微雨燕双飞。

— 临江仙 晏几道

Alone among fallen petals I stand,

In the drizzle I glimpse a pair of swallows dashing away.

- Riverside Daffodils Yan Jidao (Note 14)

(15) 花自飘零水自流，一种相思，两处闲愁。

— 一剪梅 李清照

Flower petals drifting, water flowing,

One and the same longing

Makes two hearts sad with yearning.

— A Twig of Mume Blossoms Li Qingzhao (Note 15)

(16) 花开不同赏，花落不同悲。欲问相思处，花开花落时。

— 春望词四首·其一 薛涛

Blooming flowers do not see us together; Falling

flowers do not see our reunion.

If you ask about my missing: nowhere

But when the flowers are blooming and falling.

— Spring view Xue Tao (Note 16)

In example (14), “落花” (fallen petals) and “微雨” (drizzle) are supposed to be beautiful, but they indicate the sad feeling for missing the beloved in this poem. The poet stood lonely for a long time in the courtyard, seeing fallen petals and pairs of swallows, he misses that girl so much. Fallen flowers, the passing of spring and time are all irresistible laws of nature. Seeing this, the poetess of example (15) feels bone-deep lovesickness for her husband, and she thinks that her husband is also missing her. In example (16), wonderful spring and blooming flowers, which stir up the poetess’s missing feeling. It is the most ideal state of love to see “blooming flowers” and “falling flowers” together. However, things go contrary to her wishes, which is unfortunate and sorrowful for a couple. Fallen flowers are used in these examples to express the poetess’s deep missing for their beloved ones. The metaphor only exists in Chinese poems.

4. The causes of universal metaphors and variations in these metaphors

As we saw, it is a remarkable fact that the flower metaphors for love exist both in English and Chinese poems. The examples show that the metaphors are potentially universal or near-universal at a generic level. The shared metaphors suggest that English and Chinese talk about and conceptualize love in surprisingly

similar ways. English and Chinese belong to different language families and show radically different cultures, why the two languages and cultures to conceptualize love metaphorically in such similar ways?

According to Kövecses, Z. (2005), if some metaphors are based on universal embodied experience, these metaphors may occur in many languages and cultures around the world. No one would be surprised to know that the beloved girl is universally conceptualized as a beautiful and elegant flower. Seeing beautiful flowers and charming beauties, all of us will feel better and more relaxed. In addition, universal cognitive styles produce universal metaphors in different cultures and languages. There are some similar characteristics shared by flowers and beauty, such as elegant, beautiful, charming, gentle, etc. Based on the characteristics of flowers, both English poets and Chinese poets use flowers to refer to love. As to the metaphor of “fading love is fading flowers”, the growth laws of flowers is seen as the capricious love, and flowers bloom and fade, love relationship thrive while wither gradually, which is the universal cognitive style shared by English and Chinese poets.

In the previous passage, we saw that flower metaphor for love is likely to be near-universal, we need to point out that it functions at an extremely general level, and some variations and diversity exist if we analyze the metaphor at a specific level. As is explained by Kövecses, Z. (2005:68), “conceptual metaphors for a particular target domain is roughly the same in two languages/cultures, but one language/culture shows a clear preference for some of the conceptual metaphors that are employed”. For instance, English poets prefer to use rose to refer to their love and beloved ones, In English speaking countries, there has been a social tradition of sending roses to express love. Therefore, roses must be a symbol of love. This social tradition is also reflected in poetry. Using roses to express love can also show the enthusiastic, direct and extroverted personality of English speakers. Chinese poets prefer to use lotus, peach flower to show their love and describe their beloved ones, which is easy to understand why the Chinese poets use the flowers. Peach flowers bloom in spring, they are pink and delicate, small and exquisite, these characteristics match the image of youthful vigor of young women. The lotus flower, bloom in summer, is white or pink, and it has long been favored by Chinese authors. Chinese people believe that lotus is noble and purity, and it can be used to refer to the incomparable beauty. In Chinese culture, lotus and peach flowers are extremely beautiful things, symbolizing purity and romantic love. Another variation is that the metaphor of “fallen flower is missing the beloved one” is limited to Chinese poems. In ancient China, there were many outstanding female poets whose feelings were very delicate and sensitive. Seeing beautiful flowers fading away, they feel sentimental and sorrowful, and express love and missing in their poems. Therefore, cognitive preferences are a main reason that cause the variations and diversity exist in English and Chinese poems.

5. Conclusion

Love is considered to be a private and abstract emotion experience, while love has been an enduring theme both in English and Chinese poems, and both English poets and Chinese poets prefer to apply metaphor to express their love. The article focuses on analyzing flower metaphors for love based on figurative expressions in Chinese and English poems. As we saw, the same flower metaphors for love are shared in English and Chinese poems, the metaphors are: the beloved one is a flower, love is a flower and fading love is fading flowers. The shared metaphors suggest that English and Chinese talk about and conceptualize love in surprisingly similar ways based on universal experiences and perceptions. However, there are some variations if we analyze the metaphors at a specific level because of cognitive preferences. For example, rose is a common flower to express love and describe beautiful beloved ones in English poems, but Chinese poets prefer to use lotus and peach flower to conceptualize love and refer to their beloved girls. In addition, a metaphor that Chinese poems have, but English poems do not, that is “fallen flower is missing the beloved one”.

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