

The Relationship Between Metaphor and Culture Examined Through Variations of Conceptual Metaphor Theory

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ABSTRACT: Conceptual Metaphor Theory has been one of the cornerstones of linguistics research since it was first proposed in Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) *Metaphors We Live By*, and it remains extremely influential to this day. However, the theory's heavy reliance on the notion of embodiment has been a major point of criticism, since the version of embodiment proposed in *Metaphors We Live By* fails to explain cultural variation in metaphor. In this paper, various theories that are built upon Conceptual Metaphor Theory are introduced, each attempting to address the issue of embodiment. In doing so, Conceptual Metaphor Theory may reveal key insights into the relationship between thought, body, and culture, a relationship that would be useful in other fields beyond linguistics. Furthermore, the implications of each theory are explored by applying it to Chinese and English metaphors and examining how it is reflective of Eastern and Western values.

KEYWORDS: Behavioral and Social Sciences, Cognitive Psychology, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Cross-Cultural Metaphor, Language and Thought.

■ Introduction

Metaphors are a crucial part of shaping the cultural identities of individuals. They are present in nearly all cultures, and they vary in ways that reflect each culture's values and experiences. As an extension of this influence on culture, metaphors also help shape a society's cultural practices, defined as "shared perceptions of how people routinely behave in a culture."¹ This paper seeks to understand the relationship between metaphor and cultural norms by exploring differences in Chinese and English metaphors.

The existence of a link between metaphor and culture is already well established: "the relationship is not that of one dominant over the other, but that of mutual promotion and constraint."⁷ However, the precise nature of this relationship has yet to be determined. Current theories regarding the metaphor-culture relationship have centered on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT).

Metaphors We Live By introduces the key concept of the conceptual metaphor, which is of great importance to this paper. In essence, a conceptual metaphor is a way of understanding an abstract concept through a more tangible idea.⁸ It's important to distinguish between a conceptual metaphor and a linguistic metaphor. Linguistic metaphors refer broadly to figures of speech, such as those found in works of literature. On the other hand, conceptual metaphors refer to the deeper ideas behind linguistic metaphors, breaking them down into their key components. Lakoff and Johnson describe the conceptual metaphor "argument is war", which treats the abstract notion of an argument as something akin to war. While "argument is war" is not a metaphor in a colloquial sense, it serves to categorize certain linguistic metaphors. Linguistic metaphors such as "defending an argument", which are commonly seen, would fall under the conceptual metaphor "argument is war".

By making this distinction, metaphors are broken down into structured components, revealing their influence on thought beyond decorative language. CMT, at its core, aims to make this connection; it aims to establish a relationship between conceptual metaphors and thought.

While *Metaphors We Live By* is the most influential early work on CMT, Lakoff and Johnson were by no means the first to explore the idea of a conceptual metaphor and how it plays a role in thought. Earlier philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Black explored the idea, both emphasizing the relationship between metaphor and culture.^{5,6} However, Lakoff and Johnson were the first to present this relationship coherently and completely, making their work particularly influential and useful for this discussion.

After establishing what a conceptual metaphor is, Lakoff and Johnson introduce various ideas about the role of metaphor in society.⁸ Most importantly, they propose the idea of embodiment—the notion that metaphors arise from physical experiences. However, this notion is often criticized for failing to account for why different cultures develop different metaphors. The nuances of embodiment and its criticisms will be discussed extensively in this paper.

Due to the common criticism that the CMT fails to adequately account for cultural variation,⁹ many researchers have proposed theories to elaborate on and expand it. However, specific variables that participate in conceptual metaphors have not been well defined.¹⁰ This paper examines different theories on the relationship between metaphor and culture, rather than limiting itself to one theory. Furthermore, it frames the discussion by comparing Chinese and American societies in a way that highlights the merits and flaws of each theory.

■ Discussion

Metaphors We Live By:

Metaphors We Live By, written by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, has shaped how scholars approach linguistics. Most prominently, it introduces CMT, which this section will discuss as first proposed in *Metaphors We Live By*.

The conceptual metaphor characterizes metaphors as a form of expression that allows people to understand an abstract idea in terms of a more concrete object or experience. For example, they present the conceptual metaphor “argument is war,” in which the abstract concept argument is understood using the tangible concept of war.¹⁰ This linking of a source domain (“war”) to a target domain (“argument”) is known as metaphorical mapping. Lakoff and Johnson argue that conceptual metaphors help people understand abstract concepts more easily.¹⁰

Furthermore, they argue that conceptual metaphors play a significant role in shaping people’s worldviews. For example, they claim that a culture using the “argument is war” metaphor perceives an argument as if it were a battle—participants may “attack” or “retreat” during a debate. By contrast, a hypothetical culture using an “argument is a dance” metaphor would approach arguments very differently; indeed, Lakoff and Johnson suggest that such an approach to argument would seem foreign to those accustomed to the “argument is war” perspective.¹⁰ The idea that metaphors shape one’s worldview, and by extension, culture, is central to *Metaphors We Live By*. Building on this premise, Lakoff and Johnson introduce additional components of CMT.

Lakoff and Johnson propose that a metaphor can serve as a tool for social and cultural organization. Take, for example, Aesop’s famous fable “The Tortoise and the Hare.” Modern renditions of this story are often associated with the saying, “Slow and steady wins the race,” a metaphor that falls under the conceptual metaphor “life is a race.” This conceptual metaphor serves as a factor behind unifying North American ideals, such as the American Dream, which emphasize persistent hard work. The idea that metaphors can bring societal cohesion is supported by a variety of empirical research; examining a group’s metaphors can reveal insights on how to improve unity,¹³ and perceptions of other groups are influenced significantly by conceptual mapping.¹⁴ These factors all play a significant role in the creation of social harmony, supporting Lakoff and Johnson’s view of metaphor playing a significant role in the shaping of culture.

Lakoff and Johnson also claim that certain metaphors arise from physical experiences, leading to shared metaphorical ideas. For instance, Lakoff and Johnson contrast the metaphors “conscious is up” and “unconscious is down”. They suggest that phrases such as “getting up” and “falling asleep” stem from the physical association of humans standing up when awake and lying down when asleep.¹⁰ Therefore, they suggest that this shared physical experience is the reason why there are certain cross-cultural metaphors. This is the definition of metaphorical embodiment. Take, for example, the conceptual metaphor “affection is warmth”. Lakoff and Johnson claim that the metaphor arises from the fact that being held affectionately

triggers feelings of warmth.¹² In this paper, I will use embodiment to mean the idea that certain metaphors stem from common bodily experiences.

The implications and nuances of embodiment in *Metaphors We Live By* are often criticized by other linguists. While acknowledging that there is variation in how physical experiences manifest as metaphors, Lakoff and Johnson still use the concept of universal embodiment as a core element of CMT. Indeed, Lakoff and Johnson, in their later work *Philosophy of the Flesh*, claim that shared basic physical experiences result in the same metaphors, resulting in universal metaphors.¹² Lakoff and Johnson do not refer to this idea using a standardized term. For this argument, the term universal embodiment, as termed by Zoltán Kövecses, will be used. It is important to note that there is still no standardized term for this concept across linguistic literature.

Criticisms of Embodiment:

The notion of universal embodiment has been a focal point of criticism against CMT. Specifically, the theory is seen as having a logical contradiction in its acknowledgment of cultural variation. Rakova argues that *Metaphors We Live By* fails to reconcile the idea of universality with the reality of cultural variation, two ideas that appear logically incompatible.¹⁵ An example of this between Chinese and American culture lies in metaphors involving the concept of anger. In English, the metaphor “anger is heat” is the most common: anger is conceptualized as a heated internal state, a physical buildup of tension that carries little cultural significance. However, in Chinese, anger is conceptualized differently. The common Chinese word for anger, 气 (qì), is itself metaphorical. While 气 denotes anger, its literal meaning refers to an invisible energy that flows through the world, better known as Qi, a key concept in Confucian thought. The connection between the Chinese term for anger and Confucianism illustrates that creating metaphors involves more than just shared physical experiences. Rather, it is a complex system in which metaphor influences culture and vice versa. Rakova’s argument lies within the fact that Lakoff and Johnson’s idea of universal embodiment cannot be used to explain this difference, since universal embodiment depends on physical experiences, an element not present in the Chinese manifestation of this metaphor.

Metaphors We Live By heavily relies on universal embodiment, as seen in the metaphors Lakoff and Johnson choose to analyze. For instance, the metaphors “argument is war” and “time is money” are approached from a Western perspective. Scholars criticize this Western-centric focus as a key oversight, as it assumes all cultures experience metaphor in the same way Western culture does. This assumption becomes especially problematic when examining Chinese society. Stefano Gandolfo, in an article on CMT’s application to pre-modern texts, criticizes it for not fully considering cultural context and takes issue with the assumption that cognition works the same way across cultures.¹⁶ In terms of embodiment, Gandolfo suggests that different cultures do not arrive at the same metaphors as often as Lakoff and Johnson imply.

One of the most striking examples of cross-cultural divergence in metaphor—despite a shared physical experience—is the concept of anger. Metaphors We Live By largely fails to account for the differences in anger metaphors between North American and Chinese societies, focusing almost exclusively on embodiment as the driver of metaphor.

On the other hand, it is important to note that the idea of universal embodiment is not entirely without merit; some metaphors are indeed shared across distant cultures. One example is the concept of “face.” In Chinese culture, 脸 (liǎn, “face”) metaphorically represents a person’s dignity or social standing. To “lose face” (丢脸, diū liǎn) signifies shame.¹⁷ Similarly, English uses expressions like “save face.” This commonality supports Lakoff and Johnson’s speculation about universal embodiment. Again, I should emphasize that Lakoff and Johnson did not present universal embodiment as a proven fact, but rather as a conjecture; nonetheless, their heavy reliance on it is what draws criticism.

It is also critical to recognize that the CMT is continually evolving. It would be incorrect to assume that Metaphors We Live By represents the entirety of the theory. The section above examines CMT as first outlined by Lakoff and Johnson, but there are further developments that expand on the theory. These developments are not outright rejections of CMT, though they attempt to address its shortcomings. Instead, they build on the same foundations—namely, the influence of metaphors on social cohesion and the concept of embodiment—while diverging on certain specifics. The following sections will focus on different ideas that attempt to address cultural variation within the framework of CMT.

Defenses of Universal Embodiment:

After Metaphors We Live By, many researchers sought to account for cultural variation while maintaining the fundamental framework of universal embodiment. Lakoff sought to refine the concept of embodiment to better account for cultural variation.¹⁸ His major refinement to CMT was the introduction of Idealized Cognitive Models (ICMs), the central thesis of his 1987 book *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*. Fundamentally, ICMs elaborate on the idea of metaphorical mapping. This can be illustrated using the “affection is warmth” metaphor. Metaphors We Live By would break “affection is warmth” into a source domain (“warmth”) and a target domain (“affection”). The ICM approach preserves this basic mapping but further breaks down “warmth” and “affection” into more detailed components. Affection can be thought of as an emotional and relational connection, while warmth can be thought of as physical heat or safety. Individuals then take components of both affection and warmth and connect them together, creating a metaphor. As such, even if different cultures have different metaphors, the differing metaphors still arise from the same physical experience; the difference comes from which components an individual chooses to focus on.

Lakoff notes that these general associations can sometimes rely on cultural knowledge, which may oversimplify reality. Hence, the model is “idealized.” For example, he discusses the word bachelor.¹⁸ Ideally, a bachelor is defined as an unmarried

man—but by cultural understanding, we would not typically consider the Pope a “bachelor,” even though he is an unmarried man. Lakoff suggests that cultural context skews how we apply such definitions, leading to variations. In his view, cross-cultural differences in metaphor arise not from completely different physical experiences, but from culturally biased or oversimplified mappings in the ICM process. The idea of ICMs aligns with the general notion of universal embodiment from Metaphors We Live By, but it delves much deeper into explaining cultural variation.

Similarly, researchers such as Zoltán Kövecses have attempted to explain variations in universal metaphors by breaking metaphors down into components. He attempts to reconcile the perceived contradiction between universal embodiment and cultural variation by expanding the concept of embodiment in a direction he refers to as differential experiential focus.

“We need to change the way we think about embodiment; we should not see ‘embodied experience’ as a homogeneous, monolithic factor. This is made possible by the idea that embodiment (i.e., embodied experience relative to a domain) consists of several components and that any of these can be singled out and emphasized by different cultures.”¹⁹

Kövecses suggests that the physical experience underlying metaphors, while still shared across cultures, has many varying aspects to it. The multitude of variables behind these physical experiences is what creates variation between metaphors, since different cultures will focus on different variables. Similar to Lakoff’s ICMs, Kövecses breaks down a metaphor like “affection is warmth” into its basic components. Kövecses suggests that the decision of what components are used to form the metaphor is determined by cultural values, explaining how individual discretion comes about. In essence, differential experiential focus gives a reason behind ICMs.

Differences in Chinese and English metaphors may be explained by ICMs and differential experiential focus. The “affection is warmth” metaphor can roughly be compared to the Chinese conceptual metaphor “affection is unity”. However, translating metaphors between Chinese and English has been notoriously difficult.² As such, this argument could be made with a variety of other metaphors, each with different implications. In this particular case, associating affection with warmth within American culture emphasizes the importance of individualism. Western culture focuses on comfort, such as through metaphors like “a warm smile” or, conversely, “a cold-hearted person”, all of which reflect the thoughts and emotions of the recipient. In essence, “affection is warmth” is framed through how affection is felt by the individual, reflecting ideas of Western individualism. On the other hand, Chinese associations reflect a focus on collectivism. Linguistic metaphors like 同心 (same heart) 心连心 (heart connected to heart) conceptualize affection (heart) in terms of unity and connection between individuals. Consequently, it reflects ideas of collectivism common in Chinese culture. These different focuses are what led to the different metaphors. Thus, Lakoff and Kövecses both attempt to address differences in metaphor

while maintaining the key idea that conceptual metaphors are rooted in physical differences.

Generally, CMT claims that metaphors are experienced solely as an extension of the body, and the role of culture is limited to how bodily experiences are interpreted. However, the differences in Chinese and English metaphors indicate that culture may be more significant to the formation of metaphors than CMT posits. For instance, English has a distinction between “acquaintance” and “friend”; in Chinese, the word “group” serves a similar purpose to “friend”, rather than “acquaintance”. As such, culture may play a large role in how metaphors are interpreted. Consequently, it is of use to consider culture as a direct factor in the formation of metaphor.

Ning Yu's Triangular Model:

Ning Yu also refines CMT while keeping embodiment as a fundamental principle by considering culture as a direct factor in the relationship between metaphor and body. Yu's work is especially notable here because it arises largely from his research on metaphors in Chinese culture. Notably, he explicitly integrates culture into the framework of embodiment. He proposes a close, intertwined relationship between the body, metaphor, and culture, as opposed to just between body and metaphor.

“Culture, by interpreting bodily experience, affects the formation of conceptual metaphors; body, by grounding metaphorical mappings, affects cultural understanding; and metaphor, by structuring cultural models, affects the understanding of bodily experience.”²⁰

Yu suggests that culture is affected by metaphor, the body is affected by culture, and metaphor is affected by the body. He illustrates this idea with a triangular model (Figure 1).

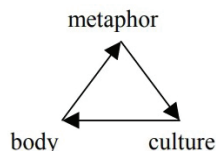


Figure 1: The triangular model of embodiment in conjunction with culture.²⁰ This diagram illustrates how culture, body, and metaphor form a cyclic relationship, each constraining and influencing the others. It forms the cornerstone of Yu's elaboration on conceptual metaphor theory, emphasizing the heavy role culture has in embodiment.

An example of this triangular relationship can be seen in the use of gallbladder metaphors in Chinese. In one study, Yu examines the significance of the gallbladder in Chinese culture and provides a conceptual metaphor: “Gallbladder is [a] Container of Courage.”²¹ The gallbladder metaphor is an example of a metaphor that does not fall cleanly within embodiment, as there is no physical basis for this association. Rather, it comes from cultural elements, where the gallbladder plays a major role in Chinese medicine. The shared physical experience in this case extends only to the fact that everyone has a gallbladder,²² and cannot adequately explain why the gallbladder is associated with courage. Yu does not explicitly frame this metaphor within the triangular model (Figure 1), but this example fits his framework well. In this case, the body, represented by the gallbladder, is associated with courage. The metaphor

then extends this association: a person with great courage is described as having a strong or large gallbladder. At the same time, a timid person is described as having a small gallbladder.²¹ This is illustrated by expressions such as 胆小 (dǎn xiǎo, “gallbladder-small”), meaning cowardly or lacking courage, and 胆壮 (dǎn zhuàng, “gallbladder-strong”), meaning bold or courageous.

Yu's research on Chinese conceptions of the gallbladder also underscores the extent of cultural variation in metaphor despite a shared physical experience. In North America, courage is commonly linked to the heart, as seen in the English metaphor “the heart is courage.”²³ For instance, the common metaphor “follow your heart”. Unlike the Chinese gallbladder metaphor, the heart metaphor is deeply rooted in physical, rather than cultural, experience. It's based on the common physical sensation of accelerated heart rate in times of distress. The gallbladder and heart metaphors emphasize a difference in focus between American and Chinese culture. It reflects a deeper focus on cultural medicine in Chinese metaphor, which may be reflective of a greater focus on traditional ideas in China, as compared to the looser connection to culture seen in North America. Overall, the difference in metaphor is reflective of how the same metaphor manifests differently in Chinese and American culture due to a heavy influence of culture, rather than exclusively the physical body.

By using the triangular model (Figure 1), Yu moves beyond the idea that embodiment alone drives metaphor formation. Instead, he shows that culture is a force intertwined with embodiment in the creation of metaphors. In doing so, he challenges the linear, one-directional relationship between the body and metaphor as proposed by Lakoff and Johnson, as well as Kövecses. Yu places much greater emphasis on culture, marking a significant departure from the specifics of *Metaphors We Live By* while still maintaining the fundamental ideas of CMT.

■ Conclusion

This paper aimed to provide an overview of CMT and to examine one of its major criticisms: the issue of embodiment. Specifically, it surveyed how various scholars have addressed the embodiment problem, and it applied these perspectives to Chinese and English metaphors for comparison.

First, the CMT was defined, focusing on Lakoff and Johnson's original formulation in *Metaphors We Live By*. The main premise of the theory is that abstract ideas are understood as concrete ideas using metaphors. An important element of the theory is that conceptual metaphors can shape individuals' worldviews. *Metaphors We Live By* also introduced the notion of universal embodiment, wherein shared physical experiences give rise to similar metaphors across cultures. This assumption formed the basis of much criticism and led to the development of the theories discussed in this paper.

One of the first researchers to address the embodiment problem was George Lakoff. His elaboration of CMT is the most similar to the original theory. He introduced Idealized Cognitive Models (ICMs), adding a new layer to metaphorical mapping. ICMs attempt to explain cross-cultural variation in metaphor while retaining the idea of universal metaphor by

splitting a metaphor into multiple components (domains) that all arise from shared physical experience. In this way, cultural differences in metaphor can be explained by different cultures prioritizing different domains of the same metaphor.

However, ICMs do not explicitly introduce culture as a variable in embodiment. Kövecses's concept of Differential Experiential Focus addresses culture more directly. In this refinement of the CMT, he proposes that different cultures focus on entirely different aspects of physical experience, thereby explaining observed cultural differences in metaphors. Here, the variable of culture is woven into the idea of universal embodiment.

Finally, Ning Yu's Triangular Model was discussed. This model directly incorporates culture as an integral part of CMT. It suggests that metaphors operate within a cycle of influence involving the body, culture, and metaphor itself, hence the triangular model. By positing this cycle, Yu argues that shared physical experience is not the only factor in metaphor usage across cultures, effectively moving away from the notion of universal embodiment.

There are still limitations to exploring the relationship between metaphor and culture. Most notably, little empirical research exists on this subject; instead, most studies are theoretical. Furthermore, most linguistic research centers around the CMT. There exists little theory about the relationship between metaphor and culture within the field of linguistics, partially due to Noam Chomsky's emphasis on the universality of language structures, a view that is still commonly held by linguists.¹¹ For further exploration of the relationship between metaphor and culture, the implications of metaphors in everyday life could be explored.

This paper also focuses mostly on Lakoff and Johnson's first work, *Metaphors We Live By*. Over the past four decades, Lakoff and Johnson have published several works addressing CMT and the issue of embodiment. Some of these are briefly discussed here, such as *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* and *The Philosophy of the Flesh*. However, these are not discussed fully in depth and are not necessarily indicative of the current state of Lakoff and Johnson's work on CMT.

In conclusion, this paper explored several approaches to the embodiment issue within CMT. Metaphors play a fundamental role in every society, and the interplay of body and culture in shaping metaphors is a topic that continues to invite exploration. It is a relationship that has far-reaching implications that extend beyond linguistics into fields such as psychology, law, and anthropology. The ideas behind how metaphors influence and reflect our worldviews are still being investigated, indicating that this field of study remains dynamic and evolving.

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