

# A Comparative Study of Conceptual Metaphors of the Body Word “Back” in English and Chinese

CHAO Anyi, WU Juyan

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

As a way of cognition, conceptual metaphor is an effective tool for people to establish conceptions of the world and understand something abstract. Under the theoretical framework of conceptual metaphor, this paper chooses one of human’s body parts “Back” as the research object and makes a comparative study between “Back” metaphors in English and “Bei” metaphors in Chinese, finding some similarities and differences between them. Also, the reasons behind similarities and differences are given.

*Keywords:* comparative study, conceptual metaphors, body word, “Back”, “Bei”

## Introduction

What is metaphor? On a broad scale, Aristotle held that all rhetorical phenomena can be regarded as metaphorical. Also, metaphor is considered not only as a linguistic phenomenon, but also a cognitive tool and thinking mode for people to understand things and establish the concept of the world, reflecting individual cognition, culture, social phenomenon, and so on. On top of that, Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 272) summarized that “Metaphors are fundamentally conceptually in nature and conceptual metaphors are grounded in every experience”. There is no denying that metaphor is of paramount value and inspiration on contemporary academic researches.

Body parts are the most useful tools for people to get to know the world. They use eyes to see, ears to hear, hands to touch and back to carry.... As time passes, the meanings of body words no longer refer to the human body parts alone but take on metaphorical meanings. “Back”, the largest area in the human body compared with other body parts and also an important human organ is frequently used in English and Chinese. There is no doubt that as languages develop, meanings of “Back” are imbued with various kinds of metaphors which are worthy our further study.

From the perspective of conceptual metaphor, the study about human words is a hotspot, because it can not only explore body words and their metaphors, but also the cognitive reasons behind them, and thus know people themselves and the physical world better. Many researchers have studied about body words in recent years: For example, Jiang (2019) conducted a research about “Heart” in English and Chinese. Fu and Peng (2020) tried to compare the body word “Eye” in Chinese and English to study the difference between two languages while Sun and Zhang (2021) studied about head and its metaphors and also put forward

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CHAO Anyi, M.A., College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

WU Juyan, Dr., associate professor, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

corresponding translation strategies. But studies about “Back” are rare and only Tian (2016) studied about the idioms of “Back” and “Bei”. So, this paper, supported by conceptual metaphor, attempts to make a comparison between metaphors of body word “Back” and “Bei”. Firstly, metaphors of body word “Back” and “Bei” will be enumerated one by one by illustrating some Back-related and Bei-related words, expressions, and phrases quoted from *Modern Chinese Dictionary* (the 7th edition) (Institute of Linguistics, 2016) and *Collins English Dictionary* (the 13th edition) (Collins Dictionaries, 2018). Then, based on these meanings and the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, this paper will compare the “Back” metaphorical meanings in English and Chinese to find similarities and differences between them.

### **An Overview of Conceptual Metaphor**

It is Aristotle, the great ancient Greek philosopher, that firstly starts to do researches on metaphor. In the book *Aristotle: On the Art of Poetry* (Aristotle, 1909), he explored the nature of metaphor and put forward that when a word is used to refer to something else, the word becomes a metaphor. He believes that metaphor is a kind of rhetorical device and plays a role of polishing languages. Then, Plato, E. Benveniste, and S. Ullman were devoted to studying metaphor from perspectives of philosophy and linguistics and had made great achievements, which laid a solid foundation for the further studies about metaphor. In 1980, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson went to great lengths to study the relationship between language and metaphor and then defined this kind of metaphor as conceptual metaphor in their book *Metaphors We Live by*. They argue that metaphor is not just a matter of language, that is, of mere words and metaphor should be understood as metaphorical concept. After the publication of this book, the study of metaphor booms.

Based on people’s own sensory experience and activities, the successful operation of conceptual metaphor cannot be done without image schema and metaphorical mapping. People’s experience is firstly processed further in the mind. The mind then will conclude abstract features of these things and finally form the image schema. The image schema stores in people’s mind to help command something with similar features and it can be regarded as the source domain in metaphorical mapping. When people expect to understand some unfamiliar concepts, they can rely on the image schema in their mind and map the source domain (the familiar one) onto the target domain (the unfamiliar one). Therefore, image schema is the foundation of conceptual metaphor while metaphorical mapping is the means of operation.

### **A Comparative Study of “Back” and “Bei” Metaphors**

In ancient times, human beings did not have a complete language system, let alone high-tech products. As a result, people had no choice but to perceive the world with their body organs and then they could step onto a higher cognitive stage. As for “Back”, it has the largest area in the human body compared with other body parts and plays a significant role in our daily life. As time passes by, the meaning of “Back” does not just refers to our body part alone and many metaphorical meanings have developed. Next, this part will list “Back” both in Chinese and English and make a systematic comparison between them.

#### **The Original Definition of “Back” and “Bei”**

According to *Collins English Dictionary* (the 13th edition), the original meaning of “Back” is the convex part of a person’s or an animal’s body. It is between their shoulders and their hips that is on the opposite side to their chest and stomach.

In *Modern Chinese Dictionary* (the 7th edition), the original meaning of “Bei” overlaps with that in

English, which is the part of a person's or an animal's body.

As we can see that original meaning of both "Back" and "Bei" refers to the body part of a person or an animal. But in these two dictionaries, metaphorical meanings are also listed.

### **"Back" Metaphors in English**

According to *Collins English Dictionary* (the 13th edition), "Back" metaphors include two aspects: One is about its orientation metaphor; and another is about its function metaphor.

1. There are eight metaphorical meanings when "Back" metaphors are related to orientation.

(1) The back of something is the side or part of it that is towards the rear or farthest from the front. The back of something is normally not used or seen as much as the front;

(2) The back of a chair or sofa is the part that a person leans against when he sits on it;

(3) The back of something such as a piece of paper or an envelope is the side which is less important;

(4) The back of a book is the part nearest the end, where a person can find the index or the notes;

(5) People can use back in expressions, such as round the back and out the back to refer generally to the area behind a house or other building;

(6) People can use back in expressions such as out back to refer to the area behind a house or other building or to refer to the rear part of something, especially a car or building;

(7) In team games, such as football and hockey, a back is a player who is concerned mainly with preventing the other team from scoring goals, rather than scoring goals for their own team;

(8) Back has the meaning of moving a car or other vehicle backwards.

"Back" metaphors refer to the rear part or something behind and its antonym is "Front". They are the metaphors having something to do with the position and the orientation. For our body part, "Back" is at the opposite direction of our face and we often regard our face as the observe side so "Back" as the reserve side. People take this experience in their mind and then develop it as an image schema. When they get the similar situation, they can map the body part domain onto the orientation domain. Finally, many other things in the world have its "Back", like the back of a book, the back of a mountain as enumerated above.

2. There are three metaphorical meanings when "Back" metaphors are related to function.

(1) Back can refer to supporting a person or a course of action, usually by voting for them or giving them money;

(2) If you back a particular person, team, or horse in a competition, you predict that they will win, and usually you bet money that they will win;

(3) Back means a band or other singers provide the musical background for the singer.

These metaphorical meanings are associated with the function of "Back". For human beings' back, it can support people's upper body and can also be used as a tool to carry something heavy. These experiences and personal activities form an abstract image schema in people's mind that "Back can support". When they are faced with similar situation, they can map the body onto the function domain.

### **"Bei" Metaphors in Chinese**

According to *Modern Chinese Dictionary* (the 7th edition), "Bei" metaphors include two aspects: One is about its orientation metaphor and another is about its function metaphor.

1. Five metaphorical meanings are listed when "Bei" metaphors are related to orientation.

(1) “Bei” means the side or part of something that is towards the rear or the farthest from the front.

书的背面

山背后

(2) “Bei” is used to describe a place which is tranquil and secluded.

背旮旯儿（偏僻的地方）

背静的小巷（偏僻的小巷）

(3) “Bei” means going in the opposite direction; running counter to.

背道而驰

把脸背过去（把脸转过去，不要朝着正面）

(4) “Bei” has the meaning of concealing or not in front of others.

背地里（暗中，悄悄的）

(5) “Bei” means facing something with one’s back.

背山面海

背水作战

Above five metaphorical meanings are all related to orientation. For our body part in Chinese, “Bei” is at the opposite direction of our face and we often regard our face as the observe side so “Bei” as the reserve side. People take this experience and then develop it as an image schema that when something is in the opposite direction of their face, they can regard the thing as in the back. When they get the similar situation, they can map the body part domain onto the orientation domain.

2. There are three metaphorical meanings when “Bei” metaphors are related to function.

(1) “Bei” can serve as a foil or a setting.

背景音乐

(2) “Bei” means that a person carries something tangible with his back.

背着书包

(3) “Bei” also means that a person bears something, usually abstract, with a difficult situation.

背了一身债

背罪（承担罪名）

These three metaphorical meanings are associated with the function of “Bei”. For human beings’ “Bei”, it can support people’s upper body and carry something or bear something both concrete or abstract. These experiences and personal activities form an abstract image schema in people’s mind that “Bei can support”. When they are faced with similar situation, they can map the body domain onto the function domain.

3. There are two metaphorical meanings when “Bei” metaphors are related to emotion.

(1) “Bei” represents bad luck and hard time.

今天真背（今天运气不好）

背时鬼（倒霉的人）

(2) “Bei” often suggests that a person has poor hearing.

耳朵有点儿背（听力不好）

背晦（糊涂；昏聩）

As examples shown above that when “Bei” metaphors are related to emotion, they always have derogatory connotations. From the perspective of Chinese people, “Bei” is always thought to at the opposite direction of the face and when the face is towards the sun, their “Bei” is in the shadow. Since shadow always gives people an impression of dark and bad influence, the body domain is mapped onto the emotion domain which can be understood.

### **Similarities of Conceptual Metaphors Between “Back” and “Bei”**

The above parts have enumerated the original meaning and their metaphorical meanings both in Chinese and English. We can find that their metaphorical meanings have something in common. Firstly, both “Back” and “Bei” can realize the metaphorical mapping from the body domain to the orientation domain. As a part of human body, the positional feature of “Back” is towards the rear which is a place people cannot see directly and is the opposite part of the front based on the common cognition. Both “Back” and “Bei” have this meaning and can refer to the rear position. Secondly, both “Back” and “Bei” can realize the metaphorical mapping from the body domain to function domain. In people’s daily life, they always use “Back” to bear burden or something heavy where “Back” serves as a tool and exert its function.

Why both “Back” and “Bei” have the same metaphorical meanings? As the paper mentioned above, conceptual metaphor is closely related to people’s experience and activities. Both Chinese and English people have the same body organ and their daily activities with back are similar, so the image schema in their minds is not much of difference, resulting similar metaphorical meanings in two languages.

### **Differences of Conceptual Metaphors Between “Back” and “Bei”**

However, difference really exists between two languages. In Chinese, “Bei” metaphors are related to emotion and they always have derogatory connotations with meanings of bad luck or a poor hearing which are negative. However, in English this meaning has a gap and “Back” has no relationship with poor hearing. As is said in Tian (2016), in the ancient China, people has suffered much from wars and undergone the dynastic changes. Therefore, Chinese people often lower their own interest and have more conservative emotions than the western people. Different attitudes towards things may be the reason to account for this difference.

## **Conclusions**

Based on Conceptual Metaphor Theory, this thesis conducts a comparative study about “Back” metaphors both in Chinese and in English by examining their meanings, analyzing their similarities and differences and the reasons behind it.

When human beings are eager to get to know a new thing, they always follow the principle of starting from easy to hard, from unfamiliar to familiar, and from concrete to abstract. Human’s body is the best tool for people to understand the world. All their body parts can be viewed as the source domain while something abstract can be regarded as the target domain. Because of this, conceptual metaphor is an inevitable means for us to comprehend something unfamiliar. For the world we live in is material and everything in the world is in close relationship with each other, “Back” and “Bei” metaphors have something in common from the perspective of orientation and emotion, reflecting that people still have the same cognitive abilities although they are in different countries. According to Conceptual Metaphor Theory, some of the meanings of “Back” metaphors in English and “Bei” metaphors in Chinese are similar to each other. As orientational metaphors,

people map the body domain onto the orientation domain and then both “Back” and “Bei” have the metaphorical meaning of the hinder position. As functional metaphors, people map the body domain onto the function domain and then both “Back” and “Bei” have the metaphorical meaning of carrying heavy things with their back. The same body organ and their same daily activities can be the direct reason.

Besides, emotional metaphor in Chinese is the difference between two languages. Chinese people map the body domain onto the emotion domain to express bad luck or poor hearing which cannot be found in English. In this aspect, different attitudes toward things are the cause to explain this difference.

In a nutshell, body parts are the foundation of people’s perception while conceptual cognition plays an important role in human cognitive reasoning. As a common way of cognition, conceptual metaphors of body parts indicate similarities and commonness of the mode of human experience, activities. So, it is necessary for language learners to foster a comprehensive awareness of learning habit and combine the culture and the language. Learning different metaphors of different languages can help learners strengthen the cultural consciousness and enhance the language skills for the further study.

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