

Spatio-temporal metaphors in Li Sao and Translation - A Cultural Dimension

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Abstract:

Due to the cultural differences, people perceive and express time differently. Ancient Chinese poets used metaphors tremendously. Those metaphors are not arbitrary, but from their physical experience and deeply rooted in the culture. Chinese culture attaches great importance to the inheritance and continuation of its history, thus its national ideology was and still is to show respect to ancestors. From the perspective of embodied cognition, people will choose to face rather than back to the object of worship. Therefore, Chinese native speakers in ancient times adopted the time cognitive model of facing the past. This paper aims to analyze the Spatio-temporal metaphors in *Li Sao (Woe after Departure)*, one of the representative works of Qu Yuan (340 B.C. - 278 B.C), the renowned patriotic poet of the state of Chu in the Warring States period of China (770-476 BC), and find that Qu Yuan tends to adopt the moving time mode, showing his woeful disappointment for the authorities and reverence for the ancient saga (前贤 qian xian, former saga). He was determined to quest for good government with his death. This proves that the time schema in ancient China was facing the past and back to the future, that is, taking the past or earlier time as the front and the future or later time as the back.

Keywords:

Spatio-temporal Metaphor, Li Sao, Translation, Culture

1. Introduction

Language system, social customs and cultural traditions involve in the realization of metaphors. In many cultures, humans conceptualize the past as behind the body and the future as in front. The temporal-focus hypothesis claims that whether people conceptualize the past or the future as in front of them depends on their cultural attitudes toward time; such conceptualizations can be independent from the space-time metaphors expressed through language. Time is objectively measurable but is subjectively understood within our own "time perspective". Many psychological researches regarding time perspective have been carried out. Researches conducted by Boroditsky and colleagues [1,2,3] provided evidence for the psychological reality of these two metaphors, showing that thinking about spatial motion under various circumstances can produce different concepts of time. Thus it is rather evident that the

social background, which means that cultural element plays an important part in the cognitive process [4]. In some cultures people face the past, which is shaped by their cultural attitude towards time, Mandarin speakers focus on past times and place high value on tradition (people who are past-focused metaphorically should have a tendency to place the past in front of them, “in the location where they could focus on the past literally with their eyes if past events were physical objects that could be seen” [5]).

Li Sao is one of the representative works of Qu Yuan (340 B.C. - 278 B.C), a poet of Chu State in Warring States Period of China. This poem is now taken as one of the two origins of Chinese classical poetry. The patriotic spirit in Qu Yuan’s works has been taken as the source of the nation since ancient China. It is a long lyrical metaphorical poem in ancient Chinese literature, which was and still is regarded as the most outstanding metaphorical masterpiece in China, though hard to understand for most people due to the obscure words. The 373-sentence poem, with more than 2,500 words, poured out the poet’s concern for the future of his beloved country Chu and people’s lives. The first half of the poem expresses the poet’s will to quest for an ideal government and not compromise with evil forces. The second half demonstrates the poet’s love for his home country and the people through his wild fantasy of wandering in heaven, pursuing ideals. In the end, Qu Yuan declared he would imitate the ancient saga Peng Xian, who drowned himself, implying would die for his country. Qu Yuan’s poem, which has rocked and encouraged countless people with lofty ideals in China for thousands of years, is one of the most outstanding masterpieces with unique and “permanent charm” in Chinese literature. In this poem, there are 85 words expressing I myself(wo), such as “我”(wo), “余”(yu), “吾”(wu), “朕”(zhen), “己”(ji), “予”(yu), and there are a large number of “hidden” “I”, which is the remarkable feature of Qu Yuan’s metaphor. This paper mainly analyzes Qu Yuan’s concept of time embodied in Spatio-temporal metaphors in Li Sao and its translation.

2. Cultural Factors in Language

Essentially metaphor can be taken as a way to recognize the world. Due to the cultural differences, people perceive and express time differently. The realization and discrimination of metaphors can not be separated from the related language background, context, situation, and other corresponding factors. All human activities must be carried out in the space, thus the concept of space is one of the most basic concepts of human beings. People use space to represent the abstract concept of time [6,7,8,9]. Time, the significant but abstract concept, is generally construed and expressed through the concept of space, which is more experience-based. The fact is that spatial metaphors are used by people not only when they are talking about time, but also representing time spatially in their minds [10,11]. As is known that Mandarin speakers always face toward the past (Alverson, 1994), because they use the spatial term “front” (qian, 前) to refer to earlier times (e.g., qian-tian, 前天, front day, “the year before last”) and “back” (hou, 后) to refer to future times (e.g., hou-nian, 后年, back year, “the year after next”). There is also the contrary view that Mandarin speakers face toward the future (i.e., similar to English speakers;), as they also use the spatial term “front” to refer to the future, as in qian-tu (前途, front road, “future; prospect”). Mandarin speakers can face toward both the future and the past [12]. The source for this kind of time concept is rather complex, which develops over time. This paper proves that Mandarin speakers face the past only in ancient China, like in QuYuan’s time.

Due to the differences in thinking modes, different nationalities' perception of space is also different in the language they use. Not identical to the English speakers, Chinese expressions of spatial concepts are rather complicated, which shows their unique cognitive style. Those related metaphors are not arbitrary, but rooted in the physical experience and cultures. According to conceptual metaphor theory, the most fundamental concepts in a culture expressed in metaphorical structure must be consistent with the most fundamental values in that culture [13]. As is known, Chinese people regard history as "transforming" and "stretching", which explains why Chinese culture places great emphasis on the inheritance and continuation of its history, and its national spirit is to respect their ancestors and look up to its past. From the perspective of embodied cognition, people will choose to face the revered objects instead of facing their backs. Therefore, traditionally Mandarin speakers often choose the time cognition mode of "facing the past". In contrast, native English speakers choose the cognitive way of "facing the future" from beginning to end, which is also the reflection of Westerners' historical view of "the future will be better". Researches have demonstrated that conceptual metaphors are as much cultural as they are internally represented in the minds of individuals, with culture playing an instrumental role in shaping embodiment and, hence, metaphorical thought.

The meaning of time has evolved from concrete (morning and evening, time sequence) to abstract (such as nobility, good or bad). It depends on the specific context to figure out the specific meanings. Context, literally speaking, is the environment in which a specific language fragment is used. Cultural knowledge is important in the analysis of metaphor sentiment. A metaphor is not merely a linguistic phenomenon, but also a cognitive mechanism of humans. Metaphors can be created relying on the similarities of the two objects. Metaphorical projection of similarities between objects is restricted by many factors such as specific culture [14,15], environment and individual cognitive ability. Therefore, different languages show different cognitive tendencies. Cognitive linguistics emphasizes that language is developed through people's interactive experience and is the result of subjective and objective interaction. Thinking mode affects language processing, and the Spatio-temporal thinking mode is influenced by language. From this point of view, language reflects the process of conceptualization of the world. The metaphorical meaning is typically so conventional that it is easy to access and understand. In some cases, it can be even more prominent and frequently found in language, compared to the literal meaning. For example, to describe a person is very "瘦" (shou, thin), Chinese will say "骨瘦如柴" (skinny as firewood), but never "骨瘦如竹" (skinny as bamboo) nor "骨瘦如草" (skinny as grass).

3. Spatio-Temporal Metaphors in Li Sao and Translation

There are a series of investigations on the relationship between cultural attitudes toward time and spacetime mappings. Cultural attitudes and practices can impose an influence on people's attentional focus on past or future and thereby shape their implicit spatializations of time. There are two kinds of metaphors concerning time. These two conceptualizations of time are often referred to in experimental literature as an 'ego-moving' representation and as a 'timemoving' representation. Recent lines of research have provided initial evidence that personality differences and emotional experiences may also influence how people envision the relation between time and ego .

Mandarin speakers can face toward both the future and the past. This is an ambivalence of psychological time and an importance of positive evaluation of current momenta. Attitude towards time are usually expressed by means of metaphors. Both moving ego and moving time metaphors can take the ego as the referent point. It is claimed that people who are past-focused metaphorically have a tendency to place the past in front of them, who focus more on past times and the old generation (past-oriented), and place more value on tradition and are more likely to put the past in front. The following analysis further proves the finding. To find how the ancient Chinese view time, we classified the time metaphors from Li Sao as follows. We just take one or two sentences as examples for every type since there are many similar sentence pattern in each.

1 年岁(nian sui, year and age)

汨余若将不及兮，恐年岁之不吾与。 Like water flowing, years (time and tide) wait for no one I fear.

及年岁之未晏兮，时亦犹其未央。 In the prime of years, though it will fleet soon.

2 时 (shi, time, age)

时缤纷其变易兮，又何可以淹留？ Capricious is the age, fickle is the man today, I stay in such a treacherous place.

3 朝 (zhao, morning, dawn) 夕(xi, evening, dusk)

朝搴阰之木兰兮，夕揽洲之宿莽。 At dawn I pluck the Mongolia on the slope, in the eve on a sand-bar I pick the winter thorn.

朝饮木兰之坠露兮，夕餐秋菊之落英。 At dawn the dew on Mongolia leaves I drain at eve the petals of chrysanthemum I dine.

謇朝谇而夕替 In the morn they'd mock me and in the eve I was removed.

巫咸将夕降兮 At night the wizard great made his descent,

曰黄昏以为期兮，羌中道而改路。 We both pledged to meet(get married) in the eve, why then did you in the middle go back on your words and stray.

4 日 (ri, the sun), 日夜 (ri ye, day and night)

昔日 (xi ri, past sun, past day)

何昔日之芳草兮，今直为此萧艾也？

How could these fragrant herbs so fair in former day have changed and turned to grass gray?

芳菲菲而难亏兮，芬至今犹未沫。

Its unusual fragrance will never fade and its sweetness lingers still today

日康娱而自忘兮， day and night was steeped in entertainments.

吾令凤鸟飞腾兮，继之以日夜。

At my instruction the Phoenix fly and hover unceasingly day and night in the sky.

5 前 (qian, front, former, past)

謇吾法夫前修兮， Since I have resolved to imitate the ancient sage

伏清白以死直兮，固前圣之所厚。 to die for righteousness only, for it is the heritage the ancient sages have left behind

忽奔走以先后兮，及前王之踵武。

Forward and backward, with utter devotion, I've bent myself to you, followed the former kings and took no rest.

鸷鸟之不群兮，自前世而固然。 The eagle don't flock with swallows, which has been the case since ancient times

依前圣以节中兮，喟凭心而历兹。

I resort to the ancient sages to ease my woe, and my anger has not been calm so far.

不量凿而正枘兮，固前修以菹醢。 The sage would lose his life and breath, like square pegs unit for holes round.

6 后 (hou, back, behind, future)

不顾难以图后兮 Regardless of the future of his kingdom

瞻前而顾后兮 Literally translated: looking forward and turn around (The past I probed, the future so to scan)

In examples 1 to 4, those physical objects, such as the morning sun, evening sun, the year and the age, all represented time. Those objects are moving so fast while the poet was passively running after them, which tells us that time flies and it waits for no one. Example 5 to 6 shows that Qu Yuan was facing the past, admiring the ancient saga and the so-called good government to demonstrate that he was disappointed at the king and his way of ruling the country. These long-term disappointments developed into desperation and the poet composed the most famous quote “长(chang, long) 太息以掩涕兮 Long did I sigh and wipe away my tears”. From the translation of the above sentences, we can see that Qu Yuan adopted the concept of time moving. He was driven by the times and cried “路漫漫其修远兮，吾将上下而求索 Long, long is the way, Up and down for the beauty (good government) I will quest”, but failed to find means to change his destiny. Disillusioned, in the end the poem, he said: “既莫足与为美政兮，吾将从彭咸之所居! Wide though the world, the thought “good government” with none to share. I'll seek the stream where once the ancient sage Pengxian was drowned”

4. Conclusions

This study contributes to discussions about representation of time flowing from past to future in a continuous spatial line, therefore proves that personality traits and emotional experiences may influence an individual's approach to time.

Qu Yuan, conceptualize the past as ahead of him and the future as behind him, envisioned time as a moving object traveling through space toward him, adopting the Moving Time perspective, thus assigning greater value to the past. This proves the fact that the Chinese culture encourages more positive thinking of past times and old generations. Ancient Chinese perceive objects in the past as being much more valuable.

Conflicts of Interest

There is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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