

A Metaphorical Interpretation of American Dream in *Green Book*

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Received: 2 July 2023; Accepted: 24 July 2023; Published: 24 August 2023

Abstract:

As an important tool for people to understand the world, metaphor is an important part of cognitive linguistics. The theory of metaphor has experienced a long period of development since ancient times. Many scholars at home and abroad have studied this theory. *Green Book* is an American film about a black pianist who goes on tour in the south of American. The movie plot of the film reflects the social phenomenon of the United States and show the pursuit of the American dream. Through the analysis of the plot in the *Green Book*, this paper studies the protagonist's pursuit of the American dream from the perspective of metaphor. The text part firstly makes an overall introduction, followed by the introduction of domestic and foreign research results, metaphors, American dream and *Green Book*, and then analyzes the American dream reflected in the plot, and finally makes a summary of the full text. Studying American dream by analyzing the plots of *Green Book* is not only conducive to deepening the understanding of American dream, but also to enriching the culture of one's nation.

Keywords:

Metaphor, *Green Book*, American Dream

1. Introduction

The United States is a new country made up of immigrants and Indians. Although the country does not have a long history, it is inclusive and has accommodated many immigrants from all over the world. And these immigrants all come here with a common purpose: the American Dream. Since 1776, generations of Americans have believed that a better life is possible through hard work, it means that people must advance to prosperity through their hard work, courage, creativity, and determination, not through the help of a certain social class or others. Many directors have made the pursuit of the American dream into films and show to the audience.

With the development of technology, movies have become part of People's Daily life. The quality of a film is usually determined by the box office. The American film *Green Book* released in 2018 and has received many positive reviews. As of November 19, 2022, the global cumulative box office had reached 320 million dollars. It is said that art comes from life, and so does the content of the film. *Green Book* is

an American film based on real events about a black musician who hires a white driver and travels to south together. *Green Book* is not just about friendship, music or work, it expresses a spirit of not giving up easily and a positive attitude towards life. It shows the audience equality, liberty and democracy. Many of the movie's storyline are metaphors for reality.

Metaphor is a fascinating phenomenon, but it is also complex and multi-faceted, varying in how it is manifested in different modes of expression, languages, cultures, or time-scales. The paper tries to explore American dream through movie plots and to dig out the metaphors of American dream in *Green Book*. It aims to analyze the metaphors in *Green Book* and what American dream these metaphors can reflect.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Domestic research

The word "American dream" originated in the 1770s and has influenced Americans for generations. In the study of the American dream, many domestic scholars have expressed their views. *The characteristics of "American Dream" and its enlightenment to "Chinese Dream"* talked about three main features of the American Dream. The first is the content, which emphasizes the inevitability of success and the importance of effort; the second is the audience, including Americans and people from other countries in the world; and the last is the way of communication, pay attention to cultural packaging and invisible penetration. [1] They believe that the "American Dream" has boosted the comprehensive development of American economy, politics and culture, and that the Chinese dream should also choose to learn from the American Dream, so as to boost the development of the Chinese dream. Ai Qi and Yang Xin selected four classic Hollywood movies in the *Cultural Connotation of the American Dream from the Perspective of American Movies*. By analyzing the protagonists' pursuit and realization of the American Dream, they interpreted the distinct characteristics of The Times and the core of contemporary American social and cultural values contained in the movie. Behind the pursuit and realization of the American dream in the movie are the core expressions of American culture: individualism, liberty and equality, self-reliance and struggle, and individual success.

Many films use metaphors to drive the plot due to time constraints, and use metaphors throughout the film through color, action, tone, etc. Chinese scholars have studied the rhetoric of "similitude" earlier than the west. The early research on metaphor in China started with "similitude". This paper mainly discusses the definition of metaphor and the research on metaphor by domestic scholars.

In terms of the definition of the metaphor: in the 3rd century BC, Xunzi and Mozi analyzed and defined "yu". In the Song Dynasty, Chen Kui put forward the term "metaphor". Although the metaphor proposed by Chen Kui is not the same as the modern metaphor, he is the first person to introduce this concept into Chinese metaphor research. In the 1930s, Chinese metaphorical rhetoric entered a new era. In the aspect of metaphor research, one of the representative scholars is Chen Wangdao, who explained the "similitude" in his book *An Introduction to Rhetoric*, and he also summarized the three elements of metaphor. So far, Chinese metaphor research is basically in the field of rhetoric research, and a relatively mature metaphorical rhetoric theory system has gradually formed.

Since the 1990s, China has continuously introduced foreign metaphor theories and tried to study metaphors from a multidisciplinary perspective. The representative scholars who have introduced foreign metaphor theories include Shu Dingfang, Hu Zhuanglin, Lin Shuwu, Zhao Yanfang and so on. In 1992, Liu Ningsheng translated some chapters of *Metaphors We Live By*, and introduced conceptual metaphor theory to China. *Studies in Metaphor* is the first monograph on metaphor in China, which comprehensively discusses and analyzes the causes, working mechanism, essential features and functions of metaphors. Metaphor and Cognition analyzed and studied metaphors from a cognitive perspective. With the introduction of foreign metaphors and the broadening of domestic scholars' horizons, Chinese scholars' research on metaphor is increasing day by day. From the 1990s to the beginning of the 21st century, our country systematically introduced foreign metaphor theories, absorbed advanced foreign metaphor viewpoints, and formed a "localized" metaphor theory.

2.2. Overseas research

Foreign research on American dream is mainly based on biographies and books. James Truslow Adams wrote in *Epic of America: The American Dream* is far more than the material category. [3] The American dream is to fully develop individual talents and realize oneself. He argued that the American dream is not a car, nor a high wage, but a social order. In this order, all men and women can achieve the most according to their own qualities and be recognized by the society, unrelated to his origin, social background and social status. Studs Terkel documented 100 true stories in *The American Dream*. This book describes the American Dream of one hundred Americans, including Miss America, a former member of the Ku Klux Klan, a housewife, a police officer, a scholar, a taxi driver, and so on. These people with very different identities and personalities all have one thing in common: brave, fighting with reality rather than simply talking about "dreams". *The American Dream* filled with setbacks, but it's also an inspiring book, because everyone in the book dares to act boldly, struggling to practice their own "American dream".

Good books can be made into movies and shown to the public. Artistic creation is inseparable from imagination, when artists carry out artistic imagination, they often choose things that people are familiar with in life to describe things that people are not familiar with. Therefore, in many films, creators often use metaphors to evoke people's imagination. The earliest study of metaphor in the West can be traced back to Aristotle's *Rhetoric and Poetics*. Here, the author mainly describes the research scope, definition, function and characteristics of metaphor by foreign scholars.

From the research scope and method, the western metaphor research can be divided into three different periods: The first is the rhetoric research of metaphor. From Aristotle to Richards, the time is from about 300 BC to the 1930s. Secondly, the semantic research of metaphor is about from the 1930s to the early 1970s. The third is the Multidisciplinary study of metaphor, from the 1910s to the present, including multi-angle and multi-level research on metaphor from the perspectives of cognitive psychology, philosophy, pragmatics, semiotics, phenomenology and hermeneutics.

In terms of the definition of metaphor, Aristotle believed that metaphor is a language means by which one word replaces another word to express the same meaning, and the two belong to a kind of contrasting relationship. Therefore, metaphor and simile are essentially the same, the greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor. [4] In AD 100, the Roman rhetorician Quintilian put forward the

“theory of substitution”. He believes that metaphor is a rhetorical phenomenon in which one word is used to replace another word. G. Lakoff and M. Johnson explained the concept of conceptual metaphor in their book *Metaphor We Live By* in 1980s. They discuss metaphor from the perspective of cognition, and believe that metaphor is a process in which people recognize, understand and express another thing based on their experience and understanding of one thing. It is a mapping process based on experience and concepts, so the theory is also called “mapping theory”. [5]

In terms of the function and characteristic of metaphor, *The Rule of Metaphor* comprehensively reviews the contributions and limitations of traditional rhetoric to metaphor research. The main purpose of Ricoeur’s metaphor theory is to make the function of metaphor transition from word-level to sentence-level and discourse-level, which is the basic difference between modern metaphor theory and classical metaphor theory. *Metaphor, its Cognitive Force and Linguistic Structure* discusses the linguistic and psychological issues involved in metaphor from the perspective of modern cognitive psychology and linguistics. *Metaphor and Cognition* discusses the cognitive function of metaphor.

3. Introduction of Metaphor

3.1. Definition of metaphor

Metaphors are defined in broad and narrow senses. Aristotle once called all rhetorical phenomena as metaphorical language. Aristotle believed that metaphor, like simile, is a comparison between different things and a modified language phenomenon. The definition of metaphor by G. Lakoff and others is also relatively broad, and they regard metonymy, synecdoche and irony as metaphors. They believe that metaphor is not only a linguistic phenomenon, but also a cognitive phenomenon. Metaphorical thinking is the only way for human beings to understand things and establish conceptual systems. Others believe that the main difference between metaphor and metonymy is that metaphor focuses on the similar relationship between things, while metonymy is based on the proximity of things, but he does not explain why metaphor and metonymy have different effects.

What is a metaphor? Rhetoricians believe that metaphor is a kind of rhetoric, a means of modifying discourse. Philosophers believe that metaphor is the fundamental characteristic of language, and human language is fundamentally metaphorical. Cognitive scientists say that metaphor is a basic way of understanding things. The word “Metaphor” comes from Greek, “meta” means “across”, “phor” means “carry”, so the metaphor is a kind of “from ... to ...” movement and a kind of transformation. This implies that the metaphor must involve two things, one as a starting point and one as a destination. Richards calls the former “vehicle” and the latter “tenor”. G. Lakoff called the former “source” and the latter “target”.

3.2. Classification of metaphor

G. Lakoff & M. Johnson mentioned conceptual metaphor in *Metaphor We Live By*. Conceptual metaphor theory holds that metaphor is a systematic mapping from a specific conceptual domain to an abstract conceptual domain. Conceptual metaphor can be divided into structural metaphor, ontology metaphor and orientational metaphor. There are many categories of metaphors, besides those mentioned by G. Lakoff & M. Johnson, there are also color metaphor.

Structural metaphor refers to the construction of another concept by the structure of one concept. The characteristics of the source domain are mapped to the target domain to form part of its characteristics, while the other characteristics of the target domain are extended by the characteristics of other source domains. [6] For example: *Life is journey*. In this metaphor, “life” and “journey” are each a concept. People map the structure of the source mode “journey” to the target mode “life”, with a point in the former corresponding to a point in the latter. The human life cycle is conceived as three stages of travel: arriving in the world, going through life, and leaving.

Ontology metaphor refers to a way of treating events, actions, emotions and thoughts as entities and substances. This means that people can understand experiences through concrete things and substances, and classify, group, quantify and infer them. Take inflation as an example, people treat the experience of rising prices as an entity, forming an ontology metaphor of inflation as an entity. For example: *Inflation is lowering our standard of living, inflation is backing us into a corner*.

Orientational metaphor refers to the implied meaning of the spatial relation and the space property projected onto non-orientation matter and concepts. Spatial orientation is the most basic concept, such as up-down, front-back, deep-shallow, center-edge, etc. People project these concrete concepts onto abstract concepts such as emotion, physical condition, quantity, social status and so on, forming some abstract concepts expressed by orientation words. For example: *happy is up, sad is down, I'm in high spirits, I'm feeling up, I'm feeling down, my spirits sank*. The color that people see every day is not as simple as it seems, it is a metaphor in cognitive linguistics. Color metaphor refers to abstract concepts such as political inclinations, emotions and physical conditions expressed through basic colors such as red, yellow, gray and blue.

4. Introduction of American Dream

4.1. Source of American dream

Three hundred years ago, when England settlers sailed across the Atlantic to Maryland on the May Flower in search of a Puritan land, the American Dream had begun to sprout: The United States has given everyone in the world the opportunity, as long as they work hard, they can realize their dreams.

James Truslow Adams first mentioned the American Dream in *Epic of America*, writing that his subject in the book was “to give all classes of our citizens a better, richer and happier life is the greatest contribution yet to the thought and welfare of the world”. Since then, the American dream became popular and became the common belief of the Americans.

4.2. Definition of American dream

The definition of the American dream can be divided into broad sense and narrow sense. In a broad sense, it refers to equality, liberty and democracy. In its narrow sense, it refers to the ideal that a better life in the United States means that people must prosper through hard work, courage, creativity, and determination, rather than relying on specific social classes and the aid of others.

American scholars generally believe that the *Declaration of Independence* is the foundation of the American dream and the Statue of Liberty is the symbol of the American dream. All men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

These words draw men and women from all over the world to the United States to fulfill their dreams.

The American Dream is a belief widely held by many Americans. Equal opportunity is the soul of the American dream. Intelligence, diligence and perseverance are the necessary conditions for the American Dream.

Since 1776, generations of Americans have believed that a better life is possible through hard work. For more than 200 years, the American Dream has been inspiring countless young people around the world with dreams to emigrate or study. They gave up their native land and went through all kinds of hardships in order to create their own value here. Therefore, the United States has become the cradle of many successful people around the world.

5. Introduction of Green Book

5.1. Influence of Green Book

Green Book is an American drama film that premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival on September 11, 2018, was released in the United States on November 16, and in the Chinese mainland on March 1, 2019. Since its launch, the *Green Book* has also won many important international awards. For example, it won the Annual Hollywood Film Awards for Best Screenplay and Group Performance in 2018. In the 91st Academy Awards in 2019, the film *Green Book* became the biggest winner. It won three important awards: Best picture, best Supporting actor and Best original Screenplay. In the same year, it also won the 76th Golden Globe Awards for Best Actor in a Comedy Film, Best Comedy Picture and Best Screenplay. *The Observer* said it was one of the best films of the decade, while *US Weekly* hailed it as a brilliant and meaningful heartwarming work. *Entertainment Weekly* said in a world that seems to get uglier every day, the tender heart and pure humanity in this film are like a dose of ointment.

5.2. Main plot of Green Book

The film is an adaptation of a true story. The title of the film comes from a book called *Green Book*. This is a book that tells people which hotels and restaurants can receive black people in each city. The film tells the story of a black musician, Shirley, in order to change the status of black people and choose to go to the South with serious racial discrimination on tour, and find a white gangster Tony as a driver. At that time, the status of black people in the United States was very low, and Shirley, the protagonist of the film, was a black man. Although he could not change the color of his skin, he still tried to do everything he could to try to improve his status and gain respect. Tony is a white man from Italy, and although he is recognized for his skin color, his identity as an Italian still causes him to receive more or less discrimination in the United States. As a white man, Tony also discriminates against black people in the beginning of the film, from his wife inviting two black helpers to help them work at home, and pouring water for them to drink after finishing the work, while Tony throws away the two cups when he sees them. The combination of a black boss and a white driver was shocking at the time, and the film portrayed white people from a “black” class, black people from a “white” background. As they drove south, they faced more and more discrimination, and the further south they went, the greater the discrimination.

6. American Dream Metaphors in *Green Book*

6.1. Equality

Equality is a relationship between people and people, and also an attitude towards people. It is one of the ultimate ideals of human beings. People are in the same position in politics, economy, culture and other aspects and are treated equally. Equality is one of the main parts of the American dream, and people from all over the world come to the United States wanting equality, too. However, there are many inequalities in the plots of the *Green Book*, as well as metaphors for the pursuit of equality. Shirley is a black pianist, introverted and prudent, noble and elegant in words and deeds, with exceptional musical talent. However, he lives in a time when blacks are discriminated against, which means that he will be treated in a lot of unequal ways. He was welcomed by high-class people, but never really treated as an equal. On stage, Shirley is a famous piano master. Off stage, he wears makeup in a storage room and lives in a small hotel. Despite the *Green Book* means vacation without aggravation, it's not plain sailing. He suffered a lot of injustice because of the color of his skin. Shirley explicitly stated that the piano he was playing on was a Steinway, but in Hanover, the concert hall attendants had not only failed to prepare the designated piano, they had not even removed the rubbish from it. When he arrived in Raleigh, he wanted to go to the bathroom at halftime, but was told he had to go to the small, flimsier toilet next to the pine tree. While in Macon, Shirley and Tony see a suit and go into the store to try it on. The clerk sees Tony and greets him warmly, but when Shirley takes the suit into the fitting room, he is stopped. At the last stop, Shirley, the invitee, couldn't go to the restaurant like everyone else. All of these stories attest to the unfair treatment that Shirley suffered because of the color of his skin.

In the film, there are two Orientational metaphors representing the social status of the characters. This is how Tony describes Shirley's residence: he lives on the top of Carnegie Hall, it was filled with statues and all kinds of fancy crap. When Shirley arrived for the last stop of his south tour, he was arranged to rest in the storage room. During Tony's interview, Shirley sits in a chair that looks like a throne, while Tony sits in an ordinary chair. Shirley's chair is not at the same level as Tony's, and Shirley's chair is significantly higher than Tony's. Whether it is a place of residence or a chair, these Orientational metaphors show that different people have different social status. High chairs and fancy homes represented the high- class, low chairs and storage rooms metaphors lower class. In reality, not only black people live in the lower class, but some white people also live in the lower class. For example, Tony, although he does not live in the storage room, he sits in a low chair. However, no matter what class, no matter what color, they are doing their best to achieve equality.

6.2. Liberty

Liberty is a concept of a political philosophy, under these conditions, humans can govern themselves, act with free will, and take responsibility for their actions. The most basic meaning of liberty is no any restrictions and obstacles. In the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, a programmatic document of the French Revolution, liberty is defined as the right to do anything that is not harmful to others.

The film takes its name from a book called the *Green Book*. The Green Book, as the name suggests, has a green cover. The "Green Book" was a guidebook for black

people. It listed the hotels, restaurants, etc. in each city where blacks were allowed to go. For black people, this book is a survival manual. Almost the whole world follows the rule that red lights means stop and green lights means go. Therefore, green should represent unimpeded. However, green in the movie does not mean unobstructed. The colors in the movie were a metaphor for liberty. Green was supposed to be unimpeded, but now it was something black people had to wear on their way to the South, because they couldn't move around as freely as white people.

6.3. Democracy

The Greek Athenians coined the term democracy (or *demokratia*). The word comes from a combination of the Greek words *demos*, meaning people, and *kratos*, meaning to rule. The combined meaning of "demokratia" is "the power of the people", meaning that the people rule and govern the country directly or by elected representatives. Literally, it stands for rule by the people, that is, "people rule". With the continuous enrichment and development of the theory and practice of democracy in modern times, the connotation and extension of "democracy" are also increasingly rich and expanded. Democracy is a set of principles and ways to protect human liberty; It is the institutionalized expression of liberty. Democracy is based on the principle of majority rule and respect for individual and minority rights. All democracies vigorously protect the fundamental rights of individuals and minorities while respecting the will of the majority. Under the control of a democratic government, everyone's rights are equal.

As Shirley and Tony went to the south, Tony picks up a green stone under a shelf of colored stones. Tony believes that what he found is his own, and that he has every right to the stone. In the ontology metaphor of the film, the stone is the source domain, which represents the black people without identity and status. Tony represents the white man who can take away the rights of black people at will, and Shirley's asking Tony to return the stone also implies that black people want to get their rights and not be controlled by others in their lives.

7. Conclusions

Having the American Dream, and striving to achieve it, is one of the main reasons that attract people from all over the world move to the United States. In his 2004 Madison Square address, Swarzinger laid out his own version of the American dream: No matter where you are born, who your parents are, or what your nationality, religion or ethnic background is, if you work hard, you have a chance to succeed. This is the American Dream.

Since the emerging of the American Dream, many directors have made films on relevant subjects. In the *Green Book*, although Tony has white skin, he lives in the lower class and relies on physical strength to make a living; although Shirley is a great pianist with wealth and status, he cannot get rid of the prejudice and discrimination of others against black skin. The metaphor of the film also let the audience see the current situation of the United States at that time, whether Shirley, with musical talent, or Tony, with white skin, all pursue the American dream, they all yearn for equality, liberty and democracy.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to acknowledge the supervisor Ms. Li, who has spent much of her precious time guiding the author in the writing of this paper. Without her valuable instruction and advice, this paper would not have been able to be finished smoothly.

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