

Understanding Oriental and Western Dragons in a Globalised World: A Cross-linguistic Study of Dragon-based Metaphorical Expressions in Chinese and English

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ABSTRACT

Animal metaphors are widely utilised across diverse linguistic landscapes and transcend cultural boundaries. This paper examines the relationship between culture and linguistic expressions by analysing metaphors in the idioms and proverbs of two typologically different languages: Chinese and English. The objective is to explore the variations in the use of the dragon as a conceptual metaphor in these two languages. Data were collected from two online platforms: Chinese-Tools.com and The Free Dictionary. A comparative analysis was performed, structured in several steps: data organisation and categorisation, followed by quantitative and qualitative analyses and concluded with a cross-cultural comparison. This methodology allowed for the identification of similarities and differences in dragon-based metaphorical expressions. A conceptual mapping model was also used to examine the variations between Chinese and English in conceptualising the human domain using dragons as the source domain. The findings reveal that the mapping of dragon characteristics onto human beings varies, encompassing behaviours, appearances, and intellectual competency. Chinese dragon metaphors generally carry positive meanings, while negative meanings are more prominent in English dragon metaphors. This contrast can be attributed to the dragon's representation as an auspicious creature symbolising power and wisdom in Chinese culture, whereas it is associated with malevolence and destruction in English culture. These findings have implications for cross-cultural communication and understanding, especially as the world becomes increasingly interconnected through globalisation. The exchange and adaptation of cultural symbols, including metaphors, have accelerated across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Keywords: dragon; metaphor; conceptual metaphor; Chinese; English

INTRODUCTION

The world is becoming increasingly interconnected due to advances in technology, communication, and transportation. These developments facilitate more frequent and fluid cultural exchanges, allowing cultural ideas, practices, and values to spread across borders and increasing the movement of people between countries. This exchange results in greater cultural diversity and the blending of traditions. However, this increased interaction also highlights the complexities of cross-cultural understanding.

Linguistic expressions, particularly metaphors, offer crucial insights into the cultural values and perceptions of different societies. Their interpretation is significantly shaped by cultural context. While some conceptual metaphors may be universally applicable, people from various backgrounds, with different upbringings, cultural settings, and languages, interpret their linguistic world differently and consequently interpret metaphors differently (Lakoff, 1993). These cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings if expressions are taken literally or if the cultural context is not understood. For instance, sports metaphors like “hitting a home run” and “the ball is in your court” are common in American English to indicate success or responsibility. However, individuals from cultures with different sports traditions may misinterpret these references entirely. Understanding these culturally specific interpretations of metaphors is, therefore, essential for fostering effective cross-cultural communication and coexistence.

This study will focus on the comparative analysis of a particular animal metaphor, the dragon, in two different languages: English and Chinese. Dragons hold significant symbolic power in both cultures, but their metaphorical meanings vary greatly due to different cultural associations and beliefs. By exploring these cross-linguistic differences in dragon metaphors, this study aims to reveal how culture is instrumental in shaping conceptualisations and in bridging the gap in understanding the cultural values reflected in these linguistic expressions. In this globalised era, understanding these conceptualisations will help us appreciate other cultures and value their perspectives, fostering an environment where multiple cultures coexist and thrive.

METAPHORS

Metaphors are pervasive in our everyday language, communication, and thought processes. They are a form of linguistic expression, typically used to help describe abstract concepts to an audience using more familiar or concrete domains (Salehuddin, 2022). Put simply, metaphors are mental shortcuts that allow the understanding of something new by comparing it to something familiar. Metaphors, therefore, make abstract concepts and ideas easier to grasp.

Metaphors are not just limited to language. They play a crucial role in human reasoning and perception, shaping how we understand the world and influence our thoughts, feelings, and actions (Thibodeau et al., 2017). For instance, one may perceive the concept of love as a progression with milestones, destinations, and ups and downs from the metaphor “love is a journey”. Metaphors, therefore, are integral to how we think, communicate, and make sense of the world around us. They are deeply integrated into our conceptual system, which is shaped by a wide range of experiences, including upbringing, social interactions, educational background, personal beliefs, and environmental factors (Hogan, 2003).

Lakoff (1993) proposed that basic conceptual metaphors are based on human experience and are universally applicable and, hence, exist across different regions, languages, cultures, and times. However, although human beings share biological similarities, their conceptualisations differ as a result of their unique upbringing. Ultimately, metaphors reflect cultural differences and give insights into how different people realise beliefs and conceptualise abstract concepts during the process of figuring out thoughts (Cienki, 2008).

Oftentimes, metaphors are used to establish relationships with nature and the environment, particularly through animal symbolism. In such metaphors, animals are employed as source domains and humans as target domains. A source domain refers to the conceptual domain from which we draw metaphorical expressions (e.g., *dragon lady*), while a target domain refers to the conceptual domain that we attempt to understand (e.g., *dragon lady*).

The present study will use the theory that Human Beings are Animals within Conceptual Metaphor Theory to compare the dragon metaphors in English and Chinese. It is believed that different human-animal relationships held by people with different languages, cultural backgrounds and geographical regions bring about different uses of the metaphors. In Chinese culture, a dragon is auspicious and symbolises various positive qualities such as benevolence, wisdom, power, dignity, fertility and even China itself (Xu & Sharifian, 2018; Zhao, 1992). Conversely, in traditional English culture, dragons are often seen as fierce, destructive beasts that are monstrous-looking, symbolising negativity (Zhao, 1992).

Through this cross-linguistic study, we aim to reveal culturally specific influences and patterns of conceptualisation of metaphors. The primary goal is to uncover and compare the hidden metaphors embedded in dragon-based expressions in both Chinese and English, exploring the relationship between dragon metaphors as the source domain and human beings as the target domain. A conceptual mapping model will illustrate how Chinese and English use the dragon as a source domain to conceptualise a human target domain. Ultimately, this study will elucidate how culture is instrumental in shaping metaphorical understanding and enhancing cross-cultural appreciation, as highlighted in the introduction.

ANIMAL IDIOMS, PROVERBS AND METAPHORS

Animals are one of the most common sources of metaphors, alongside the human body, plants, etc. (Kövecses, 2010). Animal metaphors are used ubiquitously across languages as a source of inspiration and derision and to express various concepts. To express human behaviour metaphorically in English, for instance, one can be as “busy as a bee”, “stubborn as a mule”, “quick as a hare”, “quiet as a mouse”, “cunning as a fox”, or as “wise as an owl”. Although meanings and labels may vary, this general conceptual metaphor of Humans as Animals exists across cultures, highlighting its universality (Kövecses, 1997).

Socio-biologically, humans are viewed as sophisticated animals, with animal behaviour seen as a natural reference for human actions (Goatly, 2006). The Human Beings are Animals cognitive metaphorical model conceptualises human behaviours in terms of animal characteristics, appearance, behaviour, and human-animal relations (Kövecses, 2002).

Various studies have been conducted to examine animal-related linguistic expressions across different languages. Thi (2019), for one, categorised animal idioms in English by species and identified 68 species from the English idiom database, with 201 of the idioms relating to vertebrates and 20 relating to invertebrates. From this database, mammal-related idioms were found to occur most frequently, followed by bird-related idioms and, finally, the amphibians. The

study also found that mammals that are close to humans, such as dogs, cats, horses, and pigs, are popular and typically found in English idioms. Other species of animals include fish and snakes. Thi (2019) inferred that native English speakers usually use the appearances of commonly productive animals to reflect their day-to-day activities, suggesting the superiority and popularity of animals in the English culture.

Thi's study lent support to an earlier study by Liu (2013), which gave an insight into how animal-related expressions might be related to people's relationships with animals. Liu's examination of dog idioms in English indicated that the way English culture perceives dogs is friendlier and more positive than the Chinese culture. This is because the English treat dogs as more than just a pet and more like a family member or a companion. Dogs are considered loyal and pleasing. Thus, they tend to have a higher position and status in the English culture. Numerous idioms portray dogs highly because they used to be an important partner for hunters. In addition to idioms, dogs are also popular in English metaphorical expressions. Another animal that is regarded positively is the horse, known as talented and intelligent in the English culture. This is because they not only could navigate well but were good helpers in agricultural times. Hence, horse-related idioms are commonly used to describe smart people. Cats, however, bring a more negative connotation due to medieval superstitions. They often represent something or someone evil or hypocritical. Some also perceive cats as greedy and lazy. Cats, however, are more popular and preferred in Chinese culture due to their association with mice, an animal that is unpopular to the Chinese for destroying food and causing trouble. Since cats are natural enemies of mice, they are hence seen as heroes. Cats are also used to describe vitality among individuals.

Research on animal proverbs highlights how different cultures use animals to express wisdom and moral lessons. Mieder (2004) provided a comprehensive collection of animal proverbs across various languages through his examination of the structure and meaning of animal proverbs in different languages. He identified how these proverbs function within their cultural contexts, taking into consideration historical, social, and linguistic factors that influence their use and interpretation. These proverbs often reflect cultural attitudes towards specific animals and their perceived characteristics. For instance, lions are often seen as symbols of strength and leadership, leading to proverbs that emphasise bravery or nobility. In contrast, foxes may represent cunning or deceitfulness, resulting in sayings that warn against trickery. The collection also highlights how similar ideas are expressed through different animals in various cultures. For instance, to denote loyalty and friendship, dogs are commonly used in English (a dog is a man's best friend) and Chinese (dogs know their masters well). In Arabic, however, a horse proverb (a horse is a friend to those who ride him) is used to express the same idea. This shows that while different animals are used in proverbs across cultures, the underlying themes often share common human experiences and values.

Cross-linguistic studies further demonstrate cultural nuances in animal-related expressions. Talebinejad and Dastjerdi (2005), for instance, investigated 44 animal metaphors produced in English and Persian. They found that many aspects of animal metaphors in the two languages are similar or related. Furthermore, most of the metaphors are highly culturally specific. Fontecha and Catalán (2003) analysed the metaphorical usage of animal terms in English and Spanish. They used data extracted from dictionaries with the focus of studying English word pairs of fox/vixen, bull/cow, and their Spanish counterparts of *zorro/zorra* and *toro/vaca*. They found that these animal pairs are applied to people metaphorically in both language systems. It was also revealed that the metaphorical meanings of the female terms in Spanish deliver worse qualities than the male terms to a certain extent, revealing gendered connotations in the metaphorical meanings.

Wei and Wong (2012) examined snake metaphors in English and Mandarin Chinese. They found that snake metaphors in both languages largely originated from the appearance and characteristics of the reptile. However, the number of metaphors in each language greatly differs, with 113 expressions in English and 1,152 in Mandarin Chinese. Additionally, they noted differences in metaphorical connotations between the two languages, particularly concerning gender-specific usage. For instance, snake metaphors in English and Chinese mostly come from the behaviour (e.g., coiling, uncoiling, squeezing) and characteristics of the reptile when the target domain is men (e.g., cruel, treacherous). When the target domain is women, Chinese snake metaphors mostly come from their characteristics and appearance but only from their characteristics in English. The authors also noted that English snake metaphors have a more derogative connotation for women, whilst Chinese snake metaphors have a more derogative connotation for men.

Similarly, Ying et al. (2017) explored animal symbolism in Chinese and Indonesian idioms, revealing cultural associations and perceptions of animals like goats, dogs, buffaloes, tigers, elephants, monkeys, dragons, snakes, wolves and horses as significant symbols for good things in the Chinese community. The Chinese community perceives goats as lucky and kind, and using goats in metaphorical expressions suggests that someone is gaining an opportunity or an advantage over opponents. Goats can also mean someone is cowardly and weak. In addition, dogs are seen by the Chinese to symbolise a person who obeys rules, has good ethics, is disciplined, friendly and loyal, and has a great sense of integrity, responsibility and conscience. It can also mean power and anger. Unlike the English, who view dogs more as family members or companions, it is said that the Chinese view dogs more as livestock and watchdogs to guard houses or farms. Buffaloes to the Chinese may refer to people with a big appetite or describe hardworking and tough people. It can also refer to someone who is foolish.

Tigers in Chinese culture symbolise good luck, strength, and courage. Often, tiger idioms are associated with active and lively individuals. Elephants represent prosperity, strength, and obedience (Ying et al., 2017). Monkeys are seen as intelligent, and the Chinese use them as metaphorical expressions to describe clever individuals. Snakes are also admired by the Chinese and are fondly regarded as “Little Dragon”. This represents positivity, such as wisdom, luck, diligence, the pursuit of happiness, reproduction, and wealth, despite some negative associations, such as temptation and fear. Snakes are also utilised metaphorically to describe various attributes in Chinese (Wei & Wong, 2012). They can be used to describe a man’s stare and back, a woman’s hair, waist, fingers, arms, tongues, hands, and veins. Wolves, on the other hand, symbolise good characteristics such as being cooperative, patient, perseverant, dedicated, harmonic, high-spirited, ambitious, persistent, and loyal. Negative associations such as cruel, toxic, hesitant, and fraud, however, also exist.

The above-mentioned literature, therefore, suggests that animal-related expressions are nothing new and serve as enduring elements in human language. This reflects their symbolic significance in human communication. The conceptual metaphor of Humans as Animals transcends cultural boundaries and underscores its universality in human cognition. However, as demonstrated by the comparative studies, animals carry distinct connotations and vary in frequency across languages, providing valuable insights into the cultural subtleties and societal perceptions embedded within language.

DRAGONS

Zhao's (1992) analysis of the Chinese and Western dragons examined and compared the two in terms of their appearance (or form) and symbolisation (or meaning). Zhao's analysis drew from a variety of sources, such as ancient myths, folklore, oral traditions, and literary texts, to provide a comprehensive view of dragons. A dragon is essentially a mythical creature that has permeated various human civilisations, making itself known across the diverse global literature, myths, and folklore. Yet, as Zhao reported, the Chinese and the Western dragons differ greatly. There is a diverse range of dragon types or classifications in Chinese mythology and culture. The variety of Chinese dragons is similar in terms of their appearance since they look similar to each other, but as symbols, the Chinese dragons carry a variety of ideas and meanings in different contexts. They symbolise heaven, life, water, nobility, and good fortune, among others. Western dragons, on the other hand, come in various monstrous forms that resemble aggressive and dangerous animals, yet they symbolise only a single concept, i.e., evil.

Wen and Chen (2021), in a more recent study, agreed that most Chinese people view the Chinese dragon (龙, *loong*) positively, admiring its attributes of power, good luck, and majesty. However, there are a few who regard it as vicious and aggressive. Folktales that describe the dragon as fierce and mean, with a monstrous body and destructive power, contribute to this view. Real historical events also play a role. Chinese people often regarded the emperor as a *loong*. However, some emperors were tyrannical and brutal, leading to the subjugation of their people. These historical events and folktales likely contributed to the negative associations with the *loong*, motivating negative dragon-related expressions in the language. Wen and Chen's study explored the cultural significance and conceptualisation of *loong* through Chinese idiomatic expressions sourced from authoritative Chinese dictionaries and linguistic databases.

Similarly, folklore contributes to the negative perception of dragons in other cultures, as evident in Briggs' (2002) examples of dragons in British folklore. In the various folktales featured, dragons are depicted as great worms with poisonous breath and great cunning or as winged creatures with scaly bodies, four legs, claws and fiery breath. Despite differences in form, the dragon is always portrayed as a terror, a beast, or a monster, and hence, needs to be slayed. The tales featured as examples are "The Dragon of Wantley", "The Gurt Vurm of Shervage Wood", "King Arthur and the Dragon", "The Linton Worm", and "The Longwitton Dragon". This imagery aligns with Zhao's (1992) findings regarding Western dragons.

Ying et al.'s (2017) cross-linguistic study found that, unlike other animal idioms like dogs and goats, dragon idioms in Indonesian and Chinese share positive meanings. The authors conducted a comparative qualitative method and examined an Indonesian proverb dictionary to conduct this investigation. These definitions were then compared with the definitions of the Chinese idioms. The authors include three dragon idioms in Indonesia that associate the dragon with great, wealthy, powerful, and aristocratic people. The four dragon idioms in Chinese also denote positive values, i.e. elegance, strength, honour, success, and fortune.

More recently, Sarwark (2024) explored the dragon as a universal symbol across various cultures, including Chinese, Indian, Persian, European, and Slavic, and throughout different historical periods. The author employed a comparative approach, drawing on a wide range of sources such as religious and historical texts, archaeological findings, literary works, and oral traditions to analyse dragon myths side by side. Similar to Zhao's analysis, Sarwark noted that while Western cultures often portray dragons as malevolent creatures that must be slain, Eastern cultures, particularly in China, view them as benevolent, powerful, and wise beings. The study

traced the evolution of dragon myths from ancient times to the modern era, showing how historical events, religious beliefs, and cultural exchanges have influenced their depiction. In China, the tyranny of certain emperors (see Wen & Chen, 2021) has led to some negative associations with dragons, while in the West, dragons have transformed from mythological enemies in ancient and medieval tales to more complex characters in modern fantasy literature and media. Elements from both Eastern and Western traditions blend together, forming modern portrayals of the dragon. Dragons in popular culture can range from fearsome monsters to wise and noble beings, reflecting their enduring appeal and adaptability.

This body of research on dragon symbolism across cultures suggests the universal appeal and enduring importance of dragons in human culture and imagination. The works reviewed above demonstrate a stark contrast between Chinese and English/ Western dragons in terms of their forms and meanings. Moreover, the dynamic evolution of dragon symbolism across cultures and historical periods reflects the fluidity of cultural values and perceptions over time. Understanding these differences in dragon metaphors will serve as a catalyst for this study, particularly in our increasingly interconnected world. Fostering cross-cultural understanding through an examination of metaphorical expressions is essential for cultivating an environment where multiple cultural traditions can coexist and thrive.

THE METAPHOR “PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS”

The theoretical framework of this study is based on the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT); this theory was developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and was later refined by Lakoff and Turner (1989), Stockwell (2002), and Steen (2002). According to this theory, metaphors are not merely linguistic expressions but are deeply rooted in human cognition, shaping how people perceive and interpret the world. CMT states that the human cognitive mind and conceptual recognition system are metaphorically designed and structured, leading up to the formation of human metaphorical thought processes. It can be noticed when observed that occurrences of metaphorical application are common in conversations and communication among human beings.

The metaphor “PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS” is a well-established cognitive and linguistic construct that draws on the conceptual mapping between the domains of humans and animals. In this metaphor, human behaviours, emotions, or characteristics are understood through the lens of animal traits, thus bridging complex social and psychological phenomena with more instinctual, primal attributes associated with animals. This metaphor is grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT).

CMT asserts that metaphors enable us to understand abstract or complex concepts (the target domain) in terms of more familiar, concrete experiences (the source domain). In the case of “PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS” (Baider & Gesuato, 2003; Emanatian, 1995, 1996), the target domain (people) is interpreted through the source domain (animals). This mapping allows for the projection of animalistic behaviours onto human actions, providing a framework for understanding human emotions, instincts, and social behaviour in terms of more basic, natural phenomena. For instance, calling someone a “lion” implies bravery and strength, while referring to someone as a “snake” suggests deceitfulness or cunning.

The production of metaphor is the mental process that tries to relate elements from the world with abstract facets to other things existing (Kövecses, 2002; Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Importantly, metaphor relies on cultural factors, and it contributes to building identities and cultural knowledge (López Maestre, 2009).

METHODS

RESEARCH DESIGN

This is a comparative study that focuses on examining the metaphorical expressions of dragon in Chinese and English. Conducting a comparative analysis allowed the researchers to highlight the similarities and differences in dragon metaphors between the two languages, to understand how different cultural backgrounds result in different dragon metaphors, and to study aspects of the source domain which are mapped onto human beings.

DATA COLLECTION

The dragon metaphorical expressions (idioms and proverbs) were collected as functional data for this research from the online dictionary databases, namely, The Free Dictionary and a few other websites for English dragon metaphors and The Chinese-Tools.com for Mandarin Chinese dragon metaphors. The online dictionaries The Free Dictionary for English Metaphors and Chinese-Tools.com for Mandarin Chinese Metaphors were selected for their reliability because they are reputable platforms that provide extensive and accurate collections of idiomatic expressions, ensuring high-quality data for metaphor analysis. The Free Dictionary aggregates content from authoritative sources like the American Heritage Dictionary and Collins English Dictionary, ensuring reliable definitions and examples. Similarly, Chinese-Tools.com specialises in Chinese language resources, providing detailed explanations of idioms and metaphors curated by native speakers and experts in Chinese linguistics. Both platforms are easily accessible online, allowing for quick reference and research.

However, it is important to note that collecting English metaphors required the use of multiple databases due to the comparatively lower frequency of dragon metaphors in the language. Following this procedure, a process to filter the data was carried out based on the theory that HUMAN BEINGS ARE ANIMALS. Expressions that are related to non-people matters like music, calligraphy, handwriting, food, places, and dance were excluded, and only dragon metaphors related to PEOPLE were considered.

DATA ANALYSIS

Following the data collection phase, a comprehensive and systematic comparative analysis was undertaken to explore the use of dragon metaphors in both Chinese and English languages. This stage was critical in identifying the ways in which dragons are conceptually and culturally represented in each language, as well as highlighting the metaphorical differences and similarities between the two linguistic traditions. The analytical process was carried out in several structured steps, ensuring both qualitative and quantitative insights into the metaphorical uses of dragons.

The first step was data organisation and categorisation. After retrieving the dragon-related idioms and proverbs from both Chinese and English online dictionaries, the data was meticulously organised into tables to facilitate easy comparison and thematic analysis. The proverbs and idioms were categorised based on their metaphorical meaning; this included identifying the central themes or ideas conveyed through the dragon metaphor, such as power, wisdom, danger, protection, and success. Each idiom or proverb was placed into thematic categories based on its dominant metaphorical meaning in context.

The next step involved quantitative and qualitative analyses. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed to provide a thorough analysis. First, the frequency of dragon metaphors within the datasets from each language was calculated, along with the occurrence of specific metaphorical themes (e.g., power vs. danger). This step helped quantify the prominence of various dragon-related concepts within each culture, providing a clearer picture of how often certain metaphors appeared in everyday language use. For example, the number of proverbs referring to dragons as symbols of success in Chinese compared to the frequency of dragon metaphors representing danger or threat in English was statistically measured. On the other hand, a deeper qualitative analysis was then performed to interpret the underlying meanings of the proverbs and idioms. The research examined how dragons serve as vehicles for conveying deeper social, moral, or cultural messages in both Chinese and English. For instance, Chinese proverbs like “望子成龙” (wàng zǐ chéng lóng, “hoping one’s son will become a dragon”) were analysed for their cultural significance in relation to societal expectations of success and familial honour. In contrast, English idioms such as “slay the dragon” were examined for their metaphorical depiction of overcoming challenges or facing danger.

Finally, once the data was organised and analysed, a cross-cultural comparison was conducted to carefully identify and outline the similarities and differences in the conceptual metaphors associated with dragons in Chinese and English. This comparative approach aimed to reveal the distinct cultural and conceptual frames within which each society uses the dragon metaphor. The analysis was conducted by examining the data through various lenses, including historical, traditional, cultural, and national perspectives. The expressions were carefully analysed based on their usage within sentences, taking into account the people’s languages and their connection to the nations’ backgrounds, beliefs, and cultures. This approach provided valuable insights and interpretations regarding the dragon metaphors in both languages, contributing to a deeper understanding of the cultural significance of this mythical creature and its portrayal in linguistic expressions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the extracted data from the databases revealed a notable difference in the prevalence of dragon metaphors between English and Chinese. Specifically, the findings indicate that English idioms and proverbs contain a relatively smaller number of dragon expressions, with only 24 identified. In contrast, the Chinese idiom database yielded a substantial collection of 173 Chinese dragon metaphors. This discrepancy highlights the disparity in the frequency of dragon metaphor usage between the two languages and reflects the cultural significance attributed to dragons in each context.

Upon examining the English dragon metaphors, a categorisation of metaphors was conducted to illustrate the sub-classes of how they are used in their own metaphorical expressions under the central metaphor: PEOPLE ARE DRAGONS. The nine categories identified are: (1) SLOPPY PEOPLE ARE DRAGONS, (2) DIFFICULT PEOPLE ARE DRAGONS, (3) NOTORIOUS PEOPLE ARE DRAGONS, (4) STRONG PEOPLE ARE DRAGONS, (5) UNTAMED PEOPLE ARE DRAGONS, (6) DANGEROUS PEOPLE ARE DRAGONS (THE EVIL), (7) STRONG DOMINANT WOMEN ARE DRAGONS AND (8) CAPABLE PEOPLE ARE DRAGONS, (9) PEOPLE WITH MIGHTY APPEARANCE ARE DRAGONS.

In contrast, the Chinese dragon metaphors yielded 16 categories, namely (1) STRONG OPPONENTS ARE DRAGONS, (2) EMPERORS ARE DRAGONS, (3) TALENTED PEOPLE ARE DRAGONS, (4) ACCOMPLISHED PEOPLE ARE DRAGONS, (5) OUTSTANDING PEOPLE ARE DRAGONS, (6) SAGES ARE DRAGONS, (7) STRONG PEOPLE ARE DRAGONS, (8) POWERFUL PEOPLE ARE DRAGONS, (9) HEROES ARE DRAGONS, (10) WINNERS ARE DRAGONS, (11) HEALTHY PEOPLE ARE DRAGONS, (12) MALES ARE DRAGONS, (13) ENERGETIC PEOPLE ARE DRAGONS, (14) ARROGANT PEOPLE ARE DRAGONS, (15) SWIFTLY PEOPLE ARE DRAGONS, and (16) OLD PEOPLE ARE DRAGONS.

Both sets of data reveal that while English dragon metaphors convey both positive and negative meanings, with only four out of nine categories reflecting positive traits such as bravery and strength, all 16 categories in Chinese dragon metaphors convey positive meanings. Table 1 lists the 24 English dragon metaphors that contain negative and positive metaphorical meanings.

TABLE 1. Dragon metaphors in English

	Dragon Metaphor	Meaning	Subcategory
1	Has a dragon breath	To describe one who has a horrible breath	Negative
2	Has a dragon mouth	To describe one who has a foul-smelling breath	Negative
3	You got the dragon	To describe one who has a bad breath	Negative
4	Dragon lady	A derogatory term for a woman who is aggressively domineering, pioneering and strong	Negative
5	Feed the dragon	To be at risk handling someone powerful/difficult (to contribute to a major power, i.e., person/nation)	Negative
6	Here be dragons	To describe situations where people are faced with hidden dangers or difficult people	Negative
7	Sow the dragon's teeth	To challenge someone difficult which will lead one to troubles	Negative
8	Tickle the dragon's tail	To do something risky on someone who is risky or dangerous and can bring harm to you	Negative
9	Chase the dragon	To pursue a prohibited person/substance	Negative
10	Ride on the dragon	To win over someone who is strong and powerful	Positive
11	Death comes out of the dragon's mouth	To describe a notoriously powerful person	Negative
12	A dragon's heart burns fiercely	To describe a passionate and courageous person	Positive
13	Dragons guarding the deepest treasures	To describe a protective and trusted person who provides security	Positive
14	Always speak politely to an enraged dragon	To describe someone who is bad-tempered and disruptive	Negative
15	Better to sit all night than to go to bed with a dragon	To warn that a person can harm and attack you	Negative
16	Dragon tears	This means a person with a bitter life	Negative
17	Dragon head	To mean the head/master of a triad gang	Negative
18	Dragon egg	This means awakening potential abilities within a person	Positive
19	The hunger of dragons is slow to wake but hard to sate	To describe an untamed person	Negative
20	People who do not believe in the existence of dragons are often eaten by dragons	To warn about trusting people who can turn out bad	Negative
21	An adventure is not worth telling if there are not any dragons in it	To describe the challenges people face in life	Negative

22	Everyone wants to live in a fairy tale, but do not forget there are dragons in those stories.	To describe dangerous and difficult people in life	Negative
23	Train the dragon	To tame an aggressive person	Negative
24	Slay the dragon	To organise oneself who is in a mess/ is in a chaotic situation so that he/she is back in the order	Negative

The discrepancy described above highlights how dragons are perceived differently across cultures. Dragons are imagined mythical creatures in both cultures, symbolising strength and power. However, the cultural narratives surrounding them differ significantly. In English traditions, dragons are often depicted as dangerous, fierce monsters that must be tamed or slain, a perspective supported by Zhao (1992) and Briggs (2002). Nonetheless, there exists an exception in Celtic mythology, where dragons are revered as gods or goddesses by the Celtic people and tribes for good harvests and happenings. Dragons were believed by the Celts to be the very first living creatures on earth as they were nurtured and fertilised by the sky and nature. They were also believed to gather energy from the earth and heaven internally. Dragons were worshipped for their fertility, prosperity, and wisdom in relation to their superpower in the universe. This aligns with the positive attributes ascribed to dragons in Chinese culture, where they symbolise good fortune, wisdom, and authority. Thus, in the English dragon metaphors, there are expressions that mean strong or influential people, for example, “a dragon’s heart burns fiercely”, “dragons guarding the deepest treasures”, “ride on the dragon”, and “dragon egg”. These expressions connote being brave, strong, protective, and having potential.

On the other hand, the Chinese dragon symbolises strength, power, and authority. This is because the Chinese believe that a dragon is a creature from heaven and has positive attributes. The belief that those born in the Year of the Dragon possess charismatic and leadership qualities further illustrates the positive connotations associated with dragons. Expressions such as “放龙入海” (to describe the risk of releasing a strong opponent), “蝉蜕龙变” (to describe one’s evolution into a better state), “龙争虎斗” (a tight match between equally strong opponents), “打凤牢龙” (to trap and defeat a competitive opponent), “龙腾虎踞” (brave and irresistible), “伏虎降龙” (to trap and defeat a competitive opponent) and “降龙伏虎” (to overcome powerful adversaries) reflect these favourable attitudes.

The dragon is a symbolic representation of wealth, goodness, good fortunes, prosperity, longevity, and happiness, which are all significant aspects of Chinese culture (Hann, 2013) but not necessarily in English culture. Conversely, in Western cultures, the negative perception of dragons is evident in folktales where they are depicted as malevolent beings needing to be defeated. Examples from British folklore, such as “The Dragon of Wantley” and “King Arthur and the Dragon”, reinforce this narrative.

The Chinese preference towards dragons offers an explanation for the high occurrence of dragon metaphors in the Chinese language because it is normal for the Chinese people to adopt the anticipated and admirable dragon figure. This is shown by the categorisation of Chinese dragon metaphors, which mostly convey positive meanings.

A conceptual mapping model (refer to Figure 1) was constructed to illustrate the variations in how Chinese and English cultures use the dragon as a source domain to conceptualise a human target domain. It also attempts to explain how culture functions as an important kind of context in

shaping the two different metaphors that emerged. The findings demonstrate that the characteristics of the source domain (dragon) are mapped onto human beings, reflecting behaviours, appearances and intellectual competencies. In Chinese metaphors, dragons represent auspicious qualities such as power, wisdom and good fortune. Conversely, in English metaphors, dragons are predominantly viewed as evil, destructive beings.

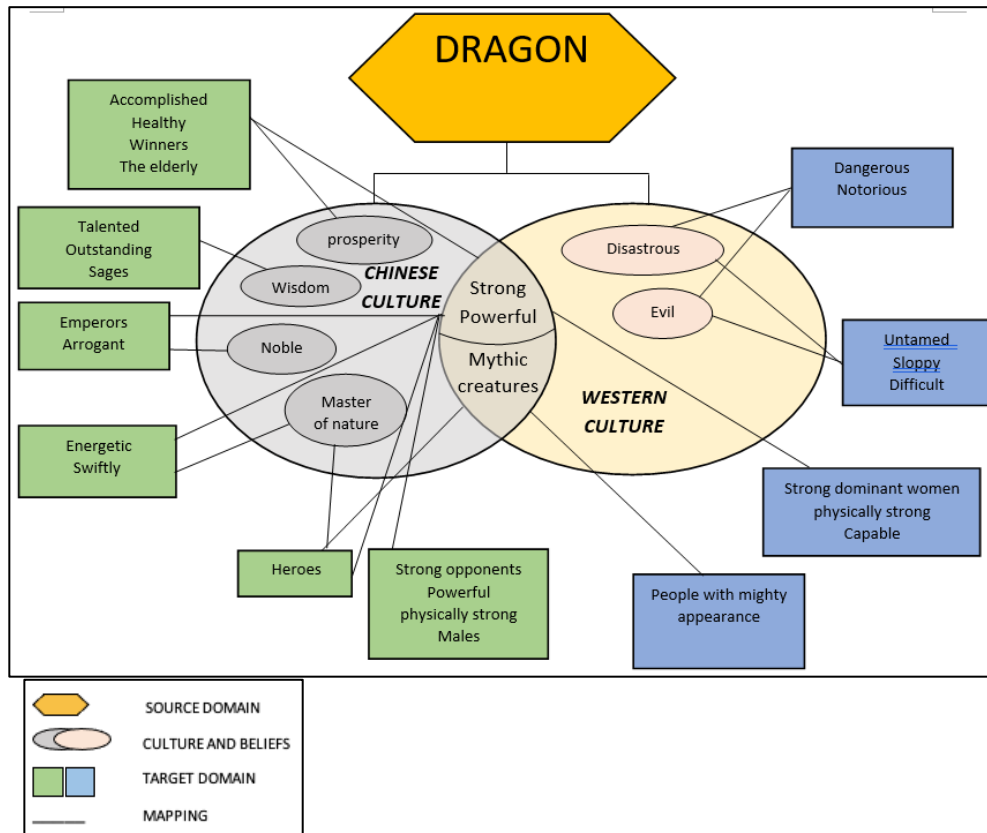


FIGURE 1. A cross-linguistic conceptual mapping model of dragon metaphors

The discussions based on the data have led to findings of dragon metaphorical expressions. The analysis of dragon metaphorical expressions in both English and Chinese reveals significant differences in their meanings, reflecting the distinct cultural backgrounds of each language. This research highlights the similarities and differences between dragon metaphors by examining the conceptual metaphors associated with dragons in both languages. The following key conclusions have emerged from the analysis.

Primarily, dragon metaphors are used to describe human traits and characteristics, indicating that both English and Chinese cultures recognise the conceptual metaphor of PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS. Specifically, this study revolves around the central conceptual metaphor PEOPLE ARE DRAGONS. The aspects of the source domain (dragon) that have been mapped onto human beings vary, encompassing the dragon's behaviours, appearance, and intellectual capacity.

In addition, the categorisation of dragon metaphors reveals a contrast between the two languages. In English, four out of nine categories convey positive meanings, such as strength and mythical qualities. However, five categories reflect negative traits, describing individuals as

“sloppy,” “difficult,” “notorious,” “untamed,” and “dangerous.” Historically, dragons in English culture have been associated with evil, often depicted as monstrous beings. For instance, the association of dragons with Satan in medieval literature has reinforced their negative connotations in Western societies, which are largely influenced by Christian symbolism. Consequently, dragons are viewed as vicious creatures, leading to predominantly negative metaphorical expressions.

In contrast, the analysis of Chinese dragon metaphors reveals that only one out of 16 categories carries a negative meaning, “arrogant”, while the remaining categories reflect positive traits. These include descriptors like “sages,” “emperors,” “winners,” “energetic,” “talented,” “strong,” “powerful,” “healthy,” “accomplished,” “outstanding,” “heroic,” and “swift.” This predominantly positive depiction suggests the cultural reverence for dragons in Chinese society, where they are considered auspicious and powerful beings. Historically, dragons have been revered as divine entities, embodying qualities that command respect and admiration.

The findings suggest that while both cultures acknowledge dragons as formidable figures, the meanings attributed to them diverge significantly. In English, dragons symbolise chaos and destruction, whereas in Chinese culture, they represent strength, prosperity, and auspiciousness. This divergence is reflected in the metaphorical expressions used within each language, illustrating how cultural values shape the conceptualisation of dragons.

These findings align with the literature review’s emphasis on the cultural significance of dragons in both Chinese and Western contexts. The stark contrast in metaphorical meanings reinforces the assertion that metaphors reflect deep-seated cultural beliefs and values. By examining these differences, this study contributes to a greater understanding of how cultural context influences language and metaphor, supporting the overarching thesis of fostering cross-cultural understanding.

As we participate in the exchange of ideas and cultures in this globalised world, we are increasingly exposed to diverse worldviews and perspectives. While these differences may pose challenges, embracing and respecting cultural diversity is essential for effective communication and collaboration. By recognising and understanding the complexities that shape language and metaphor, we can foster greater empathy and tolerance, ultimately bridging the gaps between cultures. This study’s findings serve as a reminder of the importance of cultural sensitivity and awareness in today’s interconnected world, where cross-cultural understanding is crucial for harmonious exchange and cooperation.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the analysis of dragon metaphors reveals not only the rich symbolic significance of dragons in both cultures but also highlights the importance of context in shaping metaphorical interpretations. This cross-linguistic study has examined the relationship between culture and linguistic expressions by analysing metaphors in the idioms and proverbs of two linguistically diverse languages: Chinese and English. The findings align with the conceptual metaphor HUMAN BEINGS ARE ANIMAL proposed by Lakoff and Turner (1989), reinforcing the idea that human traits are often understood through non-human attributes.

Metaphors play a pivotal role in shaping one’s worldview and perceptions of daily life. One’s thoughts, cultural backgrounds, and exposure to various allusions influence their understanding of the world. As cultural transmitters, metaphors reflect distinct social norms, values, thought patterns, living environments, and beliefs, enriching our understanding of why

linguistic expressions differ across cultures.

The globalisation of English, however, has begun to blur these distinctions. The widespread use of English has allowed culturally constructed expressions and concepts in English to find their way into the day-to-day use of speakers of World English and vice versa. As a result, contemporary English speakers may perceive entities such as dragons, traditionally associated with evil and malevolence, in a more positive light. This shift reflects the evolving dynamics of cultural exchange and linguistic adaptation in the globalised world.

Given the blurring of cultural distinctions, further investigation into linguistic phenomena related to the adaptation and assimilation of culturally specific expressions in English and other languages presents a valuable opportunity. As cultures interact and influence each other, traditional beliefs may shift, altering metaphorical meanings and expressions. By exploring how these linguistic changes manifest, researchers can gain insights into broader sociocultural shifts and dynamics in the increasingly globalised world.

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