

# A Comparative Study of Eating Metaphor Between English and Chinese

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**Abstract:**

This study conducts a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the eating metaphor in Chinese and English from the perspective of cognitive metaphors. In terms of frequency, the eating metaphor in Chinese is more abundant than in English. This study concludes that eating metaphors in English and Chinese have similarities and differences. The eating metaphor in English and Chinese both express the meaning of annihilation, and the eating metaphor in English and Chinese both express the meaning of suffering. There are also many differences between the eating metaphor in English and Chinese. The number of eating metaphor in Chinese is more than English, and there is no metaphor like "eating is dependence" in English, but it appears in Chinese. In addition, the metaphorical expression of "eating is consuming" rarely appears in Chinese, but it appears more frequently in English. By exploring different aspects of metaphors can help us further understand the differences between different cultures, deepen our understanding of each country's culture. In this way, it can promote cross-cultural communication.

**Keywords :** Metaphor; eating metaphor; comparative study; cognitive study

**1. Introduction**

The metaphor has been an essential topic of research in many scholarly disciplines. In the beginning, it is just a figure of speech, especially in literature. Then Lakoff (1986) recognize the metaphor as "figure of thought," and the study carried out by Lakoff expanded its traditional territory from rhetoric and literary criticism to the various field, including linguistics, semiotics, philosophy, psychology, neurology, and anthropology. "Metaphors are based on the embodied human experience" (Lakoff and Johnson,1999); in other words, our essential bodily experience is shared among all human beings. Since we all eat, the action of eating is vital in people's life. Therefore people tend to conceptualize the words in term of it, which, in turn, give rise to abundant metaphorical expression in language. We can also find many eating phrases in our daily life. However, few studies focus on eating metaphors. Therefore, this study tries to make a comparative study on eating metaphors in English and Chinese from the perspective of cognitive linguistics. The primary purpose of this paper is to find the differences and similarities between Chinese and English eating metaphors and make a further exploration of the reasons that cause the differences. As for the methodology, this study both use the qualitative study and quantitative study. This study picks up the British National Corpus (BNC) corpus and Chinese linguistic corpus(CIC) corpus as the database. The main methodology of this study is KWIC (keyword in context). This paper is mainly divided into five parts, the first part is the introduction, which mainly introduces the metaphor, eating metaphor, methodology and writing the aim of this paper; the second part is the literature review of the metaphor study, which focus on the study on metaphor especially on the eating metaphor; the third part is the methodology, which includes the research question, research instrument, and research procedure. This study is the combination of quantitative and qualitative study. The fourth part is about the result and discussion of the study. In this part, this paper will

make a discussion both Chinese and English metaphor and to summarize their differences and similarities. After finding the differences and similarities, this study will explore the reasons that cause these differences. The fifth part is the conclusion of the study. The last part is the reference of the whole study.

## 2. Literature Review

This study is mainly based on Lakoff's Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). In 1980, they published the book "*Metaphors We Live By*," which is the mark of the beginning of modern research on a metaphor from a cognitive perspective. According to Lakoff, metaphor is not a superficial phenomenon of language but a deep cognitive mechanism. It is not just a kind of rhetoric device, but a model of thinking, which guides people's behaviour. Conceptual metaphor is rooted in our bodily experiences, and eating metaphor is in nature, a kind of conceptual metaphor, and it is a primary cognitive method of a human being. To facilitate comparative analysis, Lakoff uses "mnemonics" to illustrate the mapping of conceptual metaphors, the formula of this can be expressed as + Target Domain is Source Domain + (Lakoff, 1984), for example, the conceptual metaphor, "life is a journey," here the "journey" is the source domain, and the "life" is target domain.

However, there is less attention paid to the study of eating metaphor. Although Lakoff and Johnson put forward that "IDEAS ARE FOOD" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980/2003, p46) and list some examples, but they focus on the domain of eating and food without a thorough study of it. In terms of domestic research, Yang (2004), in his paper, contrasted the eating metaphors in Chinese and English based on Hutchinson's Theory of Proposition Schema. He suggests that the different roles of eating in eastern and western cultures and the close relationship between culture, metaphor, and language. In this study, he stresses the vital relationship between different culture, metaphor, and language. However, he did not explain how Chinese people's conceptual systems influence the Chinese metaphor. Besides, there are some related studies (Li,2004; Lu,2001; Wang,2003) just focused on one aspect of eating words or explain them very briefly. AA systematic, detailed study is needed.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Research questions:

This study tries to answer the following questions:

- a. What are the differences and similarities between Chinese and English eating metaphors?
- b. What causes the differences between Chinese and English eating metaphors?

### 3.2 Research database

In this study, an analytic approach will be applied following the theoretical framework, and the methodology of this way is introspection supported by language data. This study both uses the quantitative study and qualitative study, as for the quantitative study, this study uses BNC and CLC

as the database and compare these two databases. The main methodology of this study is KWIC (keyword in context). As for the qualitative study, this study randomly picks up several examples from these two databases and analyzes these examples, respectively.

## 4. Results & Discussions

### 4.1 Quantitative analysis

This study both search "吃" and "eat" in Chinese Linguistic Corpus and British National Corpus by using KWIC (keyword in context). The details of the data can be seen in the table 4-1.

From the table, it is easier to see that this study indexed 127466 lines (Chinese) and 7225 lines (English) respectively. The frequency of “吃” at China Linguistic Corpus is 0.0219%, and the frequency of "Eat" in British National Corpus is 0.010%. From these data, it is clear to see that there are more words related to “eating” in Chinese. The number of “吃” is nearly two times the number of "eat" in English. There is an old saying in Chinese, "people depend on food", which is also deeply rooted in Chinese people's mind. With the rapid development of modern society and the economy, the spiritual needs of the "food" culture are increasing. Therefore, the number of "吃” is much higher in Chinese compared to English.

**Table 4-1 The data of “eat” and “吃” in CLC and BNC**

	Frequency	Precentage
Eat(BNC)	127466	0.0219%
吃(CLC)	7225	0.010%

### 4.2 Qualitative analysis

This article uses the software developed by Hardie A to select 500 lines from the BNC corpus randomly; in the meantime, this study also uses CLC's software to randomly selects 500 lines. After analyzing these lines, the types of eating metaphor in Chinese and the English are summarized. The specific results will be presented in the following parts.

#### 4.2.1 Eating metaphor in Chinese

According to Yang Chun sheng, the eating metaphor in Chinese can be sorted into the following groups: Eating is depending; Eating is gaining; Eating is suffering; +Eating is annihilating. In the following part, this study will explain these examples one by one.

##### a. Eating is depending

- (1)我想让自己休息一下，因此便没有急着找工作。
- (2)事后便有人说他把公家钱存进自己的死期帐户吃利息。
- (3)依山靠山 靠山吃山。
- (4)他是在吃父母的棺材本。

Here the source domain is “eat”, and the target domain is a source of livelihood. In Chinese, it is entirely reasonable to connect "eating" with depending. Despite these examples, there are also many related phrases in Chinese like “吃皇粮”, “吃大户”, , which means people depend on other things to make a living. It is mainly caused by Chinese culture. Many Chinese people think that parents have to take care of everything of their children even though they already grow up. In a word, parents tend to help their children do many things and are willing to let their children use their money, which makes many young people less independent. Besides, with the development of China, the high price of the house, and the pressure of the loan make many young people depend on their parents. Therefore, there appear many phrases that related to “eating is depending”.

b. Eating is to get something

- (1) 怕是你小子吃了回扣。(You must earn some benefit from this work)
- (2) 吃小灶.

Here the source domain is “eat”, the target domain is “get some benefits”. The words after "eat" refers to the benefits, especially some illegal benefits. There are also other examples like "吃香" and "吃红利”.

c. Eating is suffering

- (1) 吃亏是福
- (2) 吃一堑长一智, 你也算吃个教训

Here the source domain is “eat”, the target domain is “suffering”. Here the metaphorical mapping is similar to the “Eating is gaining”, but the word after “eat” refers to some bad things.

d. Eating is annihilating

- (1) 吃了敌人一个团
- (2) 吃了我的马

Here the source domain is “eat”, the target domain is “annihilating”. This metaphorical mapping is also similar to the previous two, refers to “annihilating something” From the examples, it is easier to see that this metaphor is often used in describing chess game or war. In Chinese chess, there is a term called “chi zi (eating other’s chess piece), which means one player uses his chess piece to take the place of other’s to win the game, just like the general use their army to annihilating others.

The word "eating" plays a vital role in daily life, especially in Chinese, so it is easy to use "eating" as a source domain and map it into many different aspects of life. Therefore, the number of eating metaphor in Chinese are continually emerging. In general, the eating metaphor in Chinese can be roughly divided into the following categories: eating is depending, eating is gaining, eating is suffering, and eating is annihilating

#### 4.2.2 The eating metaphor in English

According to the research data, compared with Chinese, there is less eating metaphor in English. At the same time, despite the word “eat”, there are a series of alternative words such as "take" and "have" to represent eating somethings. By searching and summarizing the corpus, the

eating metaphor in English is summarized as follows.

a. Eat is suffering

(1) She has eaten up jealousy

b. Eat is consuming

(1) All these birds are eating up our savings

(2) The woman will eat you up.

c. Eat is annoying

(1) who is eating him

(2) What is eating that guy? I asked him for the time, and he almost took my head of.

d. Eat is absorbing

(1) You call to eat your loss and switch the remaining money to other investment portfolios

While classifying the eating metaphor in English, this study also finds that the eating metaphors in English and Chinese appear to be same, but according to the Oxford Dictionary, the definition of "eat" in English is: "to put food in your mouth and chew it and swallow it for nourishment", and the English as mentioned above eating metaphor are related to this concept. Therefore, this eating metaphor in English is a further extension of the original meaning. As time went by, this eating metaphor is evolved into the meaning of the word "eat", and the metaphorical component is relatively weakened. Furthermore, the number of eating metaphors in English is relatively stable, which means that it seldom extends, but the eating metaphors in Chinese are increasing with the development of the times.

### **4.3 The comparison between Chinese and English metaphor**

According to the previous part, this paper finds that there are some similarities and differences in Chinese and English eating metaphors, and in the following section, this paper will explain these, respectively.

#### **4.3.1. The similarities between Chinese and English metaphor**

Although there are some differences in the cultures and living environments, human development experiences are roughly similar in many places. At the same time, when these commonalities are mapped into different target domains, many metaphors will be formed. First of all, the eating metaphor in English and Chinese can both express the meaning of annihilation. Because the word "eat" and "吃" both have the meaning of digesting and eating food, both have the meaning of eliminating them. However, the eating metaphor of the eradication in Chinese is relatively implicit, for example, in the chess example, it only indirectly expresses the meaning of eradication, but in English, the metaphorical meaning of eating is relatively more apparent. Even extinction phrases appear directly in English. This also reflects the differences between Chinese and Western cultures.

Second, the eating metaphor in English and Chinese both express the meaning of suffering.

For example, in Chinese, there are “吃瘪”, “吃苦受累”, and in English, there is also the expression "eat up someone 's jealousy, eat someone 's heart". Nevertheless, the expression of eating in English has gradually evolved into a fixed phrase usage, which has become a usage of the word “eat” itself. The metaphoric component is relatively reduced, but this situation is relatively not so evident in Chinese.

### **4.3.2 The differences between English and Chinese metaphor**

Although human beings share comm experiences, they also have many different experiences and different social and cultural backgrounds, in this way, many different metaphors will be generated in response to language.

#### **4.3.2.1 There is a vital difference in the number of eating metaphor in two languages**

The first difference between the eating metaphor in two languages is the quantity. According to the previous part, it is clear that the number of eating metaphors in Chinese is much larger than that in English. According to the research of this study, there are 12746 lines in Chinese, and there are only 7,225 lines in English, which shows the significant differences in quantity. The main reason for this situation is that

“hunger breeds discontentment” is deeply rooted in Chinese people ’s hearts. China has a longer-term farming civilization than Western countries. Therefore, the Chinese have a complicated feeling for the word “eat”. In China, there are also expressions like "Have you eaten yet"? What is more, with the further development of the economy, the material richness also further promote the development of the eating metaphor. However, western countries have entered the maritime civilization earlier, and "eating" does not occupy such a prominent position in western culture. Therefore, the eating metaphor in Chinese appears more frequently than English.

Apart from the overall difference in quantity, there are also some differences in detail.

#### **4.3.2.2 “Eating is dependent” only exists in Chinese**

+Eating is dependent+” only exists in Chinese, which is not found in English. In the above data, it can be seen in the previous part that there are many eating metaphors in Chinese express such meaning, such as“吃老本”, “吃棺材本”. With time goes by, the number of such eating metaphors are gradually increased. For instance, in recent years, the term "啃老" has been used to refer to people who completely rely on their parents financially. The main reason for this phenomenon is due to the different social environment. In Eastern countries, especially China, it is generally believed that parents should pay for everything for their children, and the money of the parents is the money of the children. Therefore, it is natural for children to rely on their parents. Especially after the reform and opening-up, China 's economy has developed rapidly, so do the housing prices. Many young people cannot buy a house or car or live independently in a big city without relying on their parents, and it is unrealistic. Therefore, they must rely on their parents. Parents feed their children when they grow up. After they grow up, these young people are still



being fed by their parents just as a child. As a result, many eating metaphors have emerged. However, in western culture, children's independence is emphasized, and children are independent after the age of 18. They should rely on their strengths to start a family and start a business. Parents do not need and should not interfere and feed their children, so there are fewer metaphors related to it.

#### 4.3.2.3 “Eating is consuming” only exists in English

The second is “+Eating is consuming” only exists in English. According to previous data, it can be seen that there is such a metaphor in English. The projection path of this metaphor is similar to eradication, but there is an additional layer of "consumption" meaning, it only consumes something, but it does not destroy things. This is what makes this metaphor different from previous metaphors. The difference between the two is best illustrated in the following example.

- (a) Covering news in the fields eats money. (+ Consuming is eating +)
- (b) The river is eating away at the bank. (+ Eroding is eating +)

Nevertheless, the meaning of the consuming is already involved in the definition of "eating" in Chinese, so this metaphorical meaning does not exist in Chinese.

## 5. Conclusion

This study conducts a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the eating metaphor in Chinese and English from the perspective of cognitive metaphors. In terms of frequency, the eating metaphor in Chinese is more abundant than in English. The frequency of eating metaphors is very different in two languages. After analysis, this study concludes that eating metaphors in English and Chinese have similarities and differences. First of all, the eating metaphor in English and Chinese both express the meaning of annihilation. Second, the eating metaphor in English and Chinese both express the meaning of suffering. Apart from the similarities between the eating metaphor in English and Chinese, there are also many differences. First of all, in terms of frequency, the number of eating metaphor in Chinese is more than English. This is due to the eating tradition of Chinese people. Chinese people regard "eating" as one of the most important things and use it for social greeting, and new metaphors of "eating" are constantly created with the development of the times. Therefore, there are more eating metaphors in Chinese than in English. Secondly, there is no metaphor that "eating is dependence" in English, but many metaphorical expressions of "eating are dependence" appear in Chinese. This is mainly due to the different relationships between children and parents in Chinese and Western culture. In Chinese culture, it is considered as a fundamental rule for parents to take care of their children. However, western people hold different ideas; they think parents do not have this duty. Besides, the metaphorical expression of "eating is consuming" rarely appears in Chinese, but appears more frequently in English. This is mainly because consumption in Chinese is one of the meanings of "eating"; therefore, It does not appear metaphorically. Metaphors exist in every aspect of our lives. This article only makes research on the aspect of "eating", and there are still many aspects left for further discussion and research. By



exploring different aspects of metaphors can help us further understand the differences between different cultures, deepen our understanding of each country's culture. In this way, it can promote cross-cultural communication.

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