

# A Contrastive Study on the Comparison of English and Chinese Color Metaphor “White” from the Perspective of Palmer’s Cultural Linguistics

Shangjun Guan

School of Foreign Languages, Nanning Normal University, Nanning 530299, China

## Abstract

Palmer first put forward the concept of “cultural linguistic” on the basis of cognitive linguistics, providing some theoretical framework for further exploring some culture-specific words and their backgrounds. Color words, simple as they are, are frequently used in our everyday life. The metaphor use of “white” can, to some extent, provide us with some specific cultural knowledge. This paper attempts to explore the cultural differences that contribute to the various metaphor use of “white” in both Chinese and English culture. By analyzing these similar and different use of metaphor “white”, this paper can provide illuminations and inspiration for co-related color words from the perspective of Palmer’s cultural linguistics.

## Keywords

Metaphor; “White”; Palmer’s Cultural Linguistics.

## 1. Introduction

Palmer, an American linguistic anthropologist, first put forward his concept in his book *Toward a Theory of Cultural linguistics* in 1996. In his book, he constitutes the theoretical framework of cultural linguistics. Owing to this theoretical framework was frequently applied in the field of translation, but seldom applied in the color metaphor. When it comes to color metaphors. The difference in the interpretation of color metaphors between variant languages shows a culture-specific trend, which may from time to time mislead foreign language learners. Therefore, Palmer’s cultural linguistics is fit for filling this gap, providing us the perspective to viewing such problems. This paper from the perspective of Palmer’s cultural linguistic, through the comparison and analysis of the origin and appearance of metaphor color “white” in the Chinese and English to interpret these phenomena, which reveals the present day the general characteristics of such metaphor color words, providing cultural perspective and corresponding understanding for the dialectical use of color word “white” in the Chinese-English culture. and finally provide some implications to the use of color metaphors.

## 2. Palmer’s Cultural Linguistics and Metaphor

Cultural linguistics refers to the relationship between language and culture. Palmer believes that Language is based on experiences, and certain experiences produce certain images; therefore, essentially speaking, cultural linguistics recognizes various phenomena based on cognition, explaining language phenomena. Palmer also argues that language relies on some already-existing images [1]. These already existing images are produced with metaphor. Metaphors need to rely on real images for the creation, conceptual metaphor is derived from the previous image. Besides, metaphor and imagery have been intertwined with each other after a long evolution of culture, new metaphor and imagery were produced, the combination has become a kind of new culture and language.

In this world, different living regions, living habits, and ways of thinking gradually form various cultures from time to time. Different cultures may have a different view on the metaphor use of words, especially the difference between China and English. Palmer (1996,293) believes that all cultural expressions reveal cognitive patterns in linguistic meaning. [2]

### 3. Similarities and Differences between Chinese and English Color Word “White” Metaphor

Color words are usually used in our everyday life. With highly development of society, color words are not merely used to describe color but used as a metaphor that describes deeper meanings. What’s more, color words function as simple words that exist in every culture, in different language cultures, the function of color words are almost the same, color words are functioned as adjectives to describe things. However, when it comes to the metaphor of color words in Chinese and English culture, they may have something in common, as well as something different.

#### 3.1. The Similarities between Chinese and English Color Word “White” Metaphor

Color word “white” metaphor both in Chinese and English, sometimes they may have something in common, which share something in common in the following aspects.

##### 3.1.1. Color Word White Metaphor Indicates Pure, Innocent, and Honesty

First and foremost, white color metaphor in both Chinese and English can express something is stainless and pure. As time goes by, the color word white metaphor is used to describe the character or merit of certain people--pure, innocent, as well as honest.

Lucy is a white girl. (Pure and innocent)  
“Tom is a very white boy. He never tells lies.” [3] (Honest)

As we can see above, in English, the color white metaphor can express the meaning of pure, innocent. It is the same true in Chinese, “她是一个纯洁无暇的人”, which means that “she is pure and innocent”. Another example of white metaphor can indicate the goodness of a kind of thing, which makes it different from others. In “white lie”, it is apparent that “white lies” are different from lies. As it is all to know, lies are always a negative word that shows one’s bad deeds. However, “white lies” shows the kindness and goodness of the lie, it is good to say the “white lies”.

What is more, in English culture, there is a term “white knight”, which is express someone who is helpful to you when you are in an emergency or need, while in Chinese, there is “白衣天使” to describe our doctors or nurses, who help us when we suffer from great illness. In this case, we can see that Chinese and English may have some color word “white” metaphor in common.

##### 3.1.2. Color Word White Metaphor Indicates Plastic Pollution

Another example of color metaphor white is “white pollution”, in this case, which is against the word’s original meaning. “White pollution” means that Waste plastics pollute the environment, as the same word “白色污染” in Chinese. In this sense, we can see that the metaphor “white” does not only represent the good things, but also the bad things. On the other hand, “white pollution” also indicates that with the advancement of modern society, we are more focused on protecting our living environment.

Due to indiscriminate throwing, it is very difficult for nature to degrade plastic products, and then the plastic products become the burden to the ecological environment and landscape. Also, it is the phenomenon that reflects on language.

### 3.1.3. Color Word White Metaphor Indicates Fear and Shock

White color metaphor in both Chinese and English can also indicate someone's mood. In Chinese, we usually use “脸色苍白” to indicate someone's mood, showing that he or she is in great fear or shock.

The girl turns white, because of a rat. (fear)

From the example above, we can see that the girl is fear of rats, so she “turns white”. In this example, the color metaphor white can be extended to display one's feelings and emotions.

### 3.1.4. Color Word White Metaphor Indicates Authoritative Power

In the U.S, the White House(白宫) being the residence and office of the President of the United States, is often used to refer to the President of the United States and his administration team. It is the same true with white paper, white paper(白皮书) means the paper that is published by the authoritative government, which means it is the official document, and it has legal force. To be more specific, a white paper is a document on major issues such as politics, economy, and diplomacy that the government and the National Assembly announce publicly.

## 3.2. The Difference between Chinese and English Color Word “White” Metaphor

Although there exists similar use of the color metaphor white between Chinese and English, there still exists the difference.

### 3.2.1. White Wedding

“White wedding” in English is frequently used in English, the color white can always be used to express the pure. It is universally acknowledged that a wedding, to most people, is very important. In western countries, the bride and groom wear white wedding dresses and gowns. So “white wedding” in English expresses the wedding as pure, holy, and solemn. However, in Chinese, it may have something different. In ancient China, there is a word “红白事”, “红事” in ancient Chinese means the wedding. Of course, the color red, in the eyes of the Chinese means the jubilation of a wedding, as well as the cheerful atmosphere. Besides, unlike English, the Chinese are not prefer white dresses, because“白事” in Chinese means having a funeral. So dressed in White does not mean good in Chinese sometimes. When you are dressed in white to attend a wedding may have the opposite effect.

### 3.2.2. Plain Boiled Water

In Chinese, from the perspective of word-formation, white sometimes does not necessarily relate to the color white. In Chinese, there is a word “白开水”, although there is “white” in this word, this word has nothing to do with its color. “白开水” in English means plain boiled water. As we all know, water is of great significance to our body, “白开水” is the same true that it is not the water that we can get by simply turning on the tap. It is because the Chinese more focus and concentrate on their health condition, they believe that boiled water is healthier, there are no additions in it.

### 3.2.3. Do Something in Vain

With the advancement of society and the fulfillment of various experiences, metaphor white in Chinese really shows its language culture. The metaphor white has begun to reach the field of the Internet. In Chinese culture, we can often see some words expressions like “白费力气”, and “白给”. Actually, these two words on the Internet may share the same meaning and it is a white metaphor that mapping from its origin domain to the domain of abstract things. White in Chinese can mean nothing, that is the understanding of “白费力气” and “白给”. When you do

something, and something you have tried your utmost, but it turned out to be a failure. So, these two words may have an ironic connotation.

### 3.2.4. White Elephant in Literature

A white elephant has originally described as a rare kind of elephant, white elephant is very rare and beautiful. In Hemingway's short story Hills like White Elephants, "white elephant" is used to indicate the condition of the female protagonist who has been pregnant. In ancient India, "white elephants" were noble animals that were worshipped as gods. However, white elephants are expensive to care for and raise because they eat so much food. Therefore, although the white elephant is a god in people's hearts, it becomes a great trouble and burden to take it. The novel just wants to use the "white elephant" to tell readers that the baby in the female protagonist is the most unwanted burden for this American man in the novel.

## 4. The Factors that Contribute to the Similar Use of Color Metaphor

From the above examples, we can see that the use of the color metaphor white is quite abundant both in Chinese and English. We can also grasp that there are similarities and differences in the use of the color metaphor white in Chinese and English. For Kecskes(2015,114), both language and context "are rooted in culture, and they both are 'carriers' of culture and both reflect culture but in a different way. A part of culture is encoded in the language. What is encoded in language is past experience with different contexts while actual situational context represents actual, present experience".[4] The factors that contribute to the similar use of color metaphor white can be divided into two parts--the common perceptual experiences and the common cultural experience.

### 4.1. The Common Perceptual Experiences

Color white is the basic color in our everyday life, we can see color white everywhere in our life. Color white is usually distinguished from other colors, and it cannot blend with other colors to generate another color. So, the color white can give us a sense of pure and holiness, so after experiencing these, we begin to map it to other domains that are closely related to our life. Common perceptual experiences may lead the people in Chinese and English to have the same projection of the metaphor to similar use of color metaphor white. Our common perceptual experiences (also called "natural kinds of experiences") are mainly from two aspects—our body(visual system, locomotive organ, emotion), Our interaction with the real and physical environment(movement, manipulation of objects).[5] Another example of perceptual experience is a metaphor of "time". Both in Chinese and English, there is the same metaphor used to describe the fast of time. In Chinese, there is "时光飞逝" and "How time flies" in English to describe the fast of time. Time is a natural thing, we can only describe and understand it through metaphor. To sum up, common perceptual experiences enable us to understand experience in one field through experience to another.

### 4.2. The Common Cultural Experiences

On the other hand, not only the common perceptual experiences can lead to the similar use of color metaphor white, but also the common cultural experience. When it comes to common cultural experiences, it is regarded as tightly connected with culture or custom. White both in Chinese and English is regarded as fair and hope. The following simple example can explain it. As we all know that a day can be divided into night and day. The night represents darkness, and the day represents light. We scare of the darkness, and we work in the daytime. As old sayings in Chinese "早出晚归" and "早起晚睡" can also prove it. It is a culture or custom that we usually work, or walk out in the daytime, it can be safe, and we avoid walking out at night, it represents darkness, and it is dangerous.

## 5. The Factors that Contribute to the Different Use of Color Metaphor

The use of the metaphor of colors varies from country to country, and there are some factors that contribute to the different use of color metaphors. The following four aspects will discuss the implications behind the color metaphor and culture.

### 5.1. Traditions and Customs

Traditions and customs can have an influence on the use of color metaphors. The metaphor of color in different cultures can be a metaphor for power. For example, in China, the power of an empire is closely connected with yellow. Chinese people worship yellow, first and foremost, because of the birthplace of the Yellow Emperor, the cradle of the Yellow River valley, and the Yellow River civilization. "Nuwa pinches people with loess" reflects the metaphorical relationship between human origin and color. The Yellow Emperor, the first emperor in China, was closely related to yellow.

### 5.2. Thought Pattern

Lakoff and Johnson (2003,7) believe that "the most important claim we have made so far is that metaphor is not just a matter of language, that is, of mere words. We shall argue that, on the contrary, human thought processes are largely metaphorical. This is what we mean when we say that the human conceptual system is metaphorically structured and defined".[6] It is true that our thought pattern, to some extent, can influence our use of color metaphor. Thought pattern is of great significance in the creation of metaphor, our human thought processes are mainly metaphorical, and different thought patterns may lead to different use of metaphor.

### 5.3. Environment

The environment can exert a major influence on the use of color. Compared to the power metaphor yellow, there are lots of "blue" words closely related to the Ocean. As we all know that the ancestor of the English people is Anglo-Saxon, who lived on an island that was surrounded or enclosed by the ocean. So, the environment of the Ocean greatly influences their color metaphor blue. For example, blue in the culture of England can be a metaphor of royal power. "Blue blood" in England means a person of royal blood. In addition, as time goes by, blue is then used to describe a distinguished person in "blue ribbon". In this case, we can grasp the fact that different environments in a different culture can lead to the different use of metaphors.

### 5.4. Philosophy and Religious Belief

Philosophy and religious belief are two dominant factors that greatly contribute to the use of metaphor. When it comes to religion and Philosophy, ancient Chinese philosophers like Confucius, Lao-tse, and Buddhism should be mentioned. In the long-run history of China, philosophy and religious beliefs have been exerting great influence on every Chinese. These famous philosophers emphasize the importance of morals, and the relationship between humans and nature, thus in China, because of the prevalence of philosophy and Buddhism beliefs which shaped Chinese's mind and gave rise to some metaphors that are co-related with nature. As for English, Christianity is the religious factor that influences the use of metaphor. Jesus has played an important role in western countries, the philosophy of Jesus is that people are born with sin, and only God can give salvation to people. So, love is the connection between God and people.

## 6. Conclusion

Metaphor has become a trend or a normal in the use of language, which means that metaphor is closely related to our everyday life. Consciously or unconsciously, we apply our experiences in this world to the use of language. And then, it is a phenomenon that we need to know some

experiences or cultural information that can analyze or understand the metaphors used in certain words or phrases. Especially color metaphor, color metaphor is quite important in the understanding of the culture of a language. So, this paper has made a study on the comparison of English and Chinese color metaphor “White” from the perspective of Palmer’s cultural linguistics. This paper has listed out some similar and different use of color white metaphors in Chinese and English and summarized some factors that contribute to the similar and different use of color white metaphors in Chinese and English. Even though this paper just focuses on one basic color to analyze the white color metaphor, we can learn the relationship between metaphor and culture. Thus, exploring the relationship between the use of metaphors in a certain language can help us learn the use of that language, help us know how the cultural elements behind the metaphor in language. From the perspective of Palmer’s cultural linguistics, it gives us the implication that language and culture complement each other. In another word, culture and metaphor in the language is like a circle; In this circle, cognition is the bridge that bridges metaphor uses in language and culture. In this case, if we need to master a language, we need to know the use of metaphors in that language. However, there are too many factors that contribute to the use of metaphor, so it is hard to fully interpret the use of metaphor in a language. In the field of cultural linguistics, we need to find out more culture-related factors to perfect our study on metaphors.

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