

A Cognitive Perspective of the Chinese and English Expressions for the Concept of “Present”

UNE PERSPECTIVE COGNITIVE DES EXPRESSIONS CHINOISE ET ANGLAISE POUR LE CONCEPT DE *PRÉSENT*

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Abstract: Human beings are the only species that can perceive the existence of time. However, the linguistic expressions for the concept of time are usually indirect. From a cognitive linguistic point of view, the concept of time is materialized via the TIME-AS-SPACE metaphor. However, each culture has its own conceptualization of time, and thus there are various cognitive models for a particular time concept. This paper tries to identify and analyze the Chinese and English expressions for the concept of “present”, so as to establish the cognitive models for this concept in Chinese culture and in English culture respectively.

Key words: cognitive model, time concept, present

Résumé: L'être humain est la seule espèce qui peut percevoir l'existence de temps. Cependant, pour le concept de temps, les expressions linguistiques sont normalement indirectes. Du point de vue linguistique cognitive, le concept de temps est matérialisé par la métaphore TEMPS-COMME-ESPACE. Cependant, chaque culture a sa propre conceptualisation de temps, donc il y a différents modèles cognitifs pour un particulier concept de temps. Cette mémoire essaie d'identifier et analyser les expressions chinoise et anglaise pour le concept de *présent*, afin d'établir les modèles cognitifs pour ce concept dans la culture chinoise et dans la culture anglaise respectivement.

Mots-Clés: modèle cognitif, concept de temps, présent

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INTRODUCTION

The most influential Christian thinker, St Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AD) once said: “Quid est ergo tempus? Si nemo ex me quaerat, scio; si quaerenti explicare velim, nescio.” (“What then is time? If no one asks me, I know: if I wish to explain it to one that asketh, I know not.”) (Confessions, Book 11, 11.14.17)¹. Indeed, time is the most fascinating phenomenon for human beings and for human beings only, since no other animals have the concept of time. Time is intriguing because everyone knows it exists, in one way or another, but no one can perceive time as they perceive other entities such as objects or temperature. Human beings are equipped with all kinds of specialized sensory device for various physical stimuli, such as eyes for visual stimuli and ears for audio stimuli. However, there is no such a specific organ on human body designed for the perception and measurement of time. “Stealthy, imperceptible, time makes its presence known by transforming our sense of it into sensation. For though we cannot see, touch, or hear time, we observe the regularity of what appears to be its passage in our seasons, in the orchestrated shift from dawn to dusk to dark, and in the aging of our bodies” (Evans, 2003, p. 3). Since time in itself is both intangible and imperceptible, we can only perceive its existence and flow through its tangible consequences. Time has drawn numerous scholars’ attentions through the history, and has been studied from various perspectives, i.e. physical, represented by Isaac Newton and Einstein; religious, represented by Buddha and St. Augustine; philosophical, represented by great minds from Plato all the way to Husserl and Heidegger. Linguists have also been quite interested in the issue of time, focusing on the linguistic notions of time, because “the manner in which temporal concepts are ELABORATED, which is to say structured by conceptual content from other (i.e., non-temporal) domains, provides important insights into the nature and structure of time” (Evans, 2003, p. 5). It is observed that “we ordinarily think and talk about time not in time’s own term, whatever these may be, but rather in precisely those terms which derive from the events...time structures — after all we talk about the ‘passage’ or the ‘flow’ of time and about being ‘located in’ time. In doing so we spatialize time” (Evans, 2003, p. 5).

As a famous line goes, “Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, and today is a gift. That’s why we call it--The Present.” John McTaggart Ellis McTaggart (1866 – 1925), a well-known British Idealist philosopher, studies time in his best-known work *The Unreality of Time* (1934). He defines “moment” as “a position in time”, and proposes two series for time: the series of positions running from the far past through the near past to the present, and then from the present to the near future and the far future as the A series; and the series of positions which runs from earlier to later as the B series. From his proposition it can be observed that (i) “present” is a critical point that divides time into two stretches of temporal flows running in opposite directions, viz. “past” and “future”, or metaphorically “yesterday” and “tomorrow” as in the famous line; (ii) “present” is a relative temporal point which is moving all the time along with the Observer (the definer of “present”). To illustrate this point, we can reflect on the fact that when we speak of “present”, it has passed behind us and has become a part of the vast “past”. No one can come up with a full account of what time is; further more, no one can explain what “present” is. In the intriguing field of the studies of time, the study of “present” is a most intriguing issue.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cognitive linguistics aims at exploring human's cognition and conceptual system through its external manifestation of language use. According to Evans (2003), temporal cognition is the aspect that concerns the mental function responsible for temporal (and temporally-framed) experience, as well as the organization and structuring of temporal concepts (= re-representations) at the conceptual level, i.e. within the conceptual system (p. 6). Evans (2003) also holds that human beings' temporal concepts are elaborated in terms of external sensory experience, and then expressed via language which can symbolize the information to which we have conscious access (pp. 6-35). Therefore, a claim follows that "to study linguistic meaning constitutes a study of the conceptual system (albeit in a form conventionalized for expression via language)" (Brisard, 1999; Heine, 1997; quoted in Evans, 2003, p. 6). Based on this thought, the study of expressions for "present" can reveal human beings' cognition of the concept of "present".

Lan (2003) introduces the classification of metaphors proposed by Lakoff & Johnson (1980), which distinguishes three kinds of metaphors, i.e. spatial metaphors, ontological metaphors and structural metaphors (Lan, 2003, p. 42). As for spatial metaphors, the source domain is space. "By mapping a spatial structure onto a non-spatial concept, spatial metaphors give the concept a spatial orientation" (Lan, 2003, p. 42). Since it is observed that temporal concepts are usually spatialized and expressed in the form of spatial metaphors (Evans 2003; Lan 2003; Yu 1998), it is fair to claim that the cognitive approach to the study of linguistic expressions of temporal concepts mainly deals with spatial metaphors.

Based on Lan (2003), in the large system of TIME-AS-SPACE metaphor, there are three models, i.e. linear model, cyclic model and spiral model. With the linear model it is observed that temporal concepts can be mapped onto space in both horizontal and vertical axes. As for the model of TIME PASSING IS MOTION ALONG HORIZONTAL AXIS, Lakoff & Johnson (1980) observe two special models, i.e. TIME PASSING IS MOTION OF AN OBJECT ALONG HORIZONTAL AXIS (Moving Time mapping) and TIME PASSING IS MOTION OF THE OBSERVER OVER A HORIZONTAL LANDSCAPE (Moving Ego mapping) (Lan, 2003, pp. 91-97).

Evans (2003) introduces the recent version of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), which distinguishes two kinds of metaphoric mapping, i.e. PRIMARY METAPHORS and COMPOUND METAPHORS, based on their degree of experiential grounding (p. 57). Evans (2003) goes to great lengths to argue that Moving Time mapping and Moving Ego mapping "in fact constitute instances of compound metaphors not primary metaphors" (p. 57). One major distinction between the two kinds of metaphors is that while primary metaphors are usually universal concepts across all cultures, compound metaphors are "constructed" from primary metaphors and are culture-specific (pp. 57-77). The conclusion that Moving Time and Moving Ego are compound metaphors entails that the comparison of lexical terms in Chinese and English languages for temporal concepts is academically worthwhile. Therefore, this paper tries to explore the lexical items for "present" in Chinese and English languages from a cognitive perspective, in order to identify the two cultures' cognition of "present", an intriguing critical point in the time flow.

CHINESE LEXICAL ITEMS FOR "PRESENT"

The most common word in Chinese that refers to "present" is *xianzai* "present". It is composed of two characters, *xian* and *zai*. The ancient character for *xian* is *jian* "to see"; obviously it is

from the Observer's perspective and is clearly an action taken in spatial dimensions. The character *zai* "at" is a spatial preposition pointing to the current location of the Observer in space. As for *xianzai*, a lexical item for atemporal concept, a spatial preposition is combined with a human sensory action in space to refer to a certain point in the temporal continuum.

There are several other words in Chinese that basically refer to "present". Yu (1998) lists 10 words referring to the concept of "present", including *xianzai*.

(1)

- a. *xian-zai* (present/existing/on hand-existing/on going), "now; at present"
- b. *xian-shi* (present/existing/on hand-time) "now; at present"
- c. *dang-qian* (just at-front) "at present, at the moment"
- d. *mu-qian* (eye-front) "at present, at the moment"
- e. *mu-xia* (eye-below) "now; at present; at the moment"
- f. *yan-xia* (eye-below) "at the moment; at present; now"
- g. *yan-qian* (eye-front) "at the moment; at present; now"
- h. *yan-dixia* (eye-underneath) "at the moment"
- i. *yan-mian-qian* (eye-face-front) "at the moment; at present; now"
- j. *jiao-xia* (foot-under) "at present; now" (p. 95)

According to Yu's (1998) observation, (1a) and (1b) are more or less the same, in that "the present time is conceptualized as co-present or co-existing with the Observer" (p. 95). It is worth noting that in some circumstances *xianzai* and *xianshi* can be abbreviated into *xian*, which, as explained above, originated from an action in space. Yu (1998) points out that in (1c), the temporal notion of "present" is conceptualized spatially as in front of the Observer. The spatial term *qian* "front" is employed to refer to a temporal concept. What's more, in all examples of (1d-j), "a spatial term is used in combination with a body-part noun to refer to the present time" (pp. 95-96). In sum, Yu (1998) comes to the conclusion that in all cases, the temporal concept of "present" is conceptualized metaphorically into the spatial domain, usually in the form of the combination of spatial terms and body-part nouns which are spatial in essence (p. 96).

In addition, Yu (1998) emphasizes the different senses of *qian* and *xia* when used to refer to "present" and "future". Since "present" is a co-existing point with the Observer, the spatial location must be quite close to the Observer; that's why *qian* "front" and *xia* "below/under", both of which emphasizing the immediacy, are used. When used to refer to the concept of "future", senses of *qian* and *xia* are both quite vague, pointing to the vast future, like in *qiantu* "prospects" and *xia-yidai* "the next generation". Apart from that, Yu (1998) also notices that the Chinese character *lai* "come" can be used to refer to both "past" as in *yilai* "since" and "future" as in *lainian* "coming year". The seemingly contradictory cases can be explained with Lakoff's (1980) distinction of Moving Time mapping and Moving Ego mapping. When *lai* "come" refers to "past", it belongs to Moving Ego mapping, "in which the moving Observer has come all the way from the past to the present" (p.105). On the other hand, when *lai* "come" refers to "future", it belongs to Moving Time mapping, "in which the future times are coming towards the stationary Observer" (p. 195).

However, there are two points Yu (1998) fails to make when studying the lexical examples for the concept of “present” in Chinese. First, just like *lai* “come”, *qian* “front” can also be used to refer to both “past” and “future”. Although in (1c,d,g,i), *qian* is used to point to the current moment and seem closer to the immediate “future”, other senses of *qian* make it capable of forming words describing “past”. For example, in *qiannian* “the year before last” and *qianxietian* “a few days ago”, the sense of “before/ago” of *qian* is activated. In the meantime, in *qiantu* “prospects” and *qianjing* “outlook”, *qian* has the sense of pointing to “future”. Yu (1998) does not explain the phenomenon of a certain lexical item having senses directing to both “past” and “future”. A tentative explanation by the author is as follows. Both senses can be explained by the “Moving Ego mapping” model, with foci on different referents. In the model of TIME PASSING IS MOTION OF THE OBSERVER OVER A HORIZONTAL LANDSCAPE (Moving Ego mapping), the Observer is advancing towards (also facing) the future. The horizontal landscape (temporal vector) can be marked with temporal scales increasing along the direction from “past” to “future”. Scales left behind by the advancing Observer have smaller numbers and mark events happening earlier than those to be covered by the Observer. The concept of “earlier” is lexicalized as *qian* in Chinese. Therefore, *qian* has the sense of pointing to “past”. At the same time, as the Observer faces the future when advancing, the scales to be covered are in front of the Observer’s eyes; therefore *qian* has the sense of pointing to “future”.

Secondly, while the use of spatial term *qian* to refer to temporal concept of “present” belongs to the horizontal axis, it is equally worth noting that the other spatial term used in the expressions for “present”, *xia*, belongs to the vertical axis. However, different from the horizontal axis, which is absolutely acclinic, the vertical axis is a declining line rightwards. Lan (2003) points out that “times are fixed locations arranged along a vertical landscape; an earlier time is above a later time” (p. 95). In other words, “an earlier time is SHANG and a later time is XIA” (p. 96). As for *xia* in expressions for “present”, it only has the sense of pointing to the future.

Taking the above-mentioned two points together, it can be claimed that the spatial terms, *qian* and *xia*, used in Chinese expressions for the concept of “present”, are both vectors. The term *qian* can point to both “past” and “future”, while *xia* can only point to “future”. From a cognitive perspective, with the evidence from the Chinese language, it can be stated that the Chinese cognition of the concept of “present” is a vector pointing to both directions, “past” and “future”, with the preference of “future”. A tentative figure for this cognitive model is as follows.



Figure 1. Chinese cognitive model of the concept of “present”

ENGLISH LEXICAL ITEMS FOR “PRESENT”

Several scholars have studied lexical items in English for temporal concepts (Alverson 1994;

Lakoff 1990, 1993, 1994), but few have ever laid emphasis on the specific expressions for the concept of “present” in English. Recalling McTaggart’s (1934) two-series distinction of time, the descriptions for relative temporality can not be counted into lexical items for “present”; thus seemingly eligible expressions for simultaneity such as “meanwhile” and several other similar expressions should be excluded. An incomplete list of expressions for the concept of “present” by the author includes the following lexical items:

(2)

- a. present
- b. current(ly)
- c. now
- d. at present
- e. at the moment
- f. at the present time
- g. at this point

It can be noticed that (2a-c) are single words referring to the point of “present”, and (2d-g) are phrases starting with the same preposition of “at”. Among definitions for the preposition “at” in *Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary (extended 4th ed.)*, two are worth quoting here: 1(a) (indicating a point in space); 2(a) (indicating a point in time) (p. 75). In the research of English prepositions from the cognitive perspective (Liu 2006; Wang 2007), the preposition “at” is widely recognized as a spatially zero-dimensional deixis. When mapped onto the temporal domain, it is used exclusively for extremely short moments. When referring to the concept of “present”, the temporal expressions in English language employ the spatially zero-dimensional deixis, revealing the English-language culture’s static cognition of the concept of “present”. For people from the English-language culture, the concept of “present” is a transitory moment co-existing with the Observer at that certain point in the space-time continuum, and it moves along with the Observer all the time. Compared with the nature of Chinese cognitive model of the concept of “present” as a bi-directional vector, the English model is a mere point with the nature of a scalar. A tentative figure for this cognitive model is as follows.



Figure 2. English cognitive model of the concept of “present”

CONCLUSION

Many scholars have studied time from different perspectives. Linguists are interested in time because human beings’ cognition of time is expressed via language. From the cross-linguistic study of the concept of time, specific cognition of time of people from different cultural backgrounds can be revealed. By focusing on the expressions for the concept of “present” in

Chinese and English and analyzing in detail the characteristics of their components from a cognitive perspective, it has been found that people from the Chinese-language background perceive “present” as a bi-directional vector pointing to both “past” and “future”, with the preference of “future”, while people from the English-language background perceive “present” as a static and scalar point, pointing to neither direction. Following this line, tentative cognitive models of the concept of “present” in Chinese and English cultural backgrounds are proposed. In addition, it is proved that the spatialization of the temporal concept of “present” is culture-specific, which further entails that the metaphors for temporal concepts are compound metaphors instead of primary concepts.

Notes:

Latin text quoted from: <http://test.stoa.org/hippo/text11.html#TB11C14S17>, accessed on June 24, 2008; English text quoted from <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/augustine/Pusey/book11>, accessed on June 24, 2008.

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