

A Study of Conceptual Metaphors in Xi Jinping's Discourse from an Ecological Metaphor Perspective

Qing Yang

School of Language and Literature, University of South China, Hengyang 421001, China

Abstract

This research, grounded in conceptual metaphor theory and viewed through the lens of ecological metaphor, explores the metaphorical construction and discourse logic in Xi Jinping's political language. After a brief review of the theoretical foundations of conceptual and ecological metaphors, the study analyzes three prominent themes with high metaphorical resonance in Xi's discourse. It reveals how ecological metaphors are employed to construct an organic system of discourse, highlighting the symbiotic relationships between humans and nature, and between the state and society. The findings demonstrate that ecological metaphors in Xi's discourse not only enhance the persuasive power of policy narratives but also reflect the humanistic concerns and systematic thinking embedded in Chinese political discourse. This study aims to provide a cognitive linguistic perspective for understanding the characteristics of Chinese political discourse.

Keywords

Ecological Metaphor, Conceptual Metaphor, Ecological Discourse, Xi Jinping's Discourse.

1. Introduction

This section reviews conceptual metaphors and ecological metaphors in detail.

1.1. Conceptual Metaphor

In traditional Western culture, there is little relationship between "meaning" and what people experience in their lives. The question is how people make sense of their language and experiences. "Drawing primarily on linguistic data, we discovered that much of our normal conceptual system is fundamentally metaphorical. And we have found ways to begin to identify the details of the metaphors that shape our perceptions, thoughts, and actions" [1].

The conceptual theory of metaphor is a theory that has dominated research on metaphors since it was proposed by Lakoff and Johnson in their book *Metaphors We Live By* in 1980. The main content of this theory can be summarised as follows: The nature of metaphor is conceptual; metaphor is a cognitive tool; metaphor is a systematic mapping of conceptual domains.

Since metaphors cannot be formed without a comparison between two conceptual domains, a conceptual metaphor can also be defined as a comparison between cognitive domains, as a comparison between a source domain and a target domain. This comparison can be expressed by the expression "source domain - target domain". Familiar things and experiences are called the "source domain" and unfamiliar things and experiences are called the "target domain". In addition, Cameron and Deignan stated that metaphors arise from the dynamics of language and thought and have both linguistic and conceptual features [2]. It should be noted that a conceptual metaphor is a comparison between domains in a conceptual system, a generalisation at the conceptual level, whereas a metaphorical expression refers to a superficial partial comparison between domains.

1.2. Ecological Metaphor

In recent years, however, our understanding of metaphor has taken a new direction: ecological metaphor. The idea that the meaning of a metaphor is determined by the speaker's experience of the world is central to conceptual theories of metaphor. However, little is known about how environmental objects influence the use of metaphorical and non-metaphorical devices [3].

Different scholars define and understand environmental metaphors in different ways, but they all generally regard metaphor as dynamic and argue that the study of metaphor should focus on the interaction between organism and environment. In contrast to traditional conceptual metaphors, ecological metaphors are not about the mind, but about experience and behaviour. The same point of view is found in active and embodied cognition, which examines the dichotomy between mind and embodiment and proposes a perspective of interaction between the organism and the environment in the cognitive process, based on the principle that cognition does not take place within the self, but is a product of interaction.

As an important area of cognitive research, metaphor naturally adopts this dynamic and ecological perspective, which allows us to view metaphor as arising in a dynamic and skilful interaction between the performer and the world, rather than as something that must be pre-constructed in the mind.

We can also say that metaphorical action, whether private or spiritual, is a performative act in the ecology of reality, and insofar as the metaphor "unfolds" in a concrete way, it manifests itself in concrete performance, which is not merely what we conceptual starting point, we could say that it is not what we thought of as a "conceptual starting point" [4]. We should not simply summarize metaphors as part of language or thought without separating ourselves from the specific ecological context and acknowledging the essentially performative nature of metaphors. In this respect, metaphor is always a matter of embodiment constrained by ecological conditions.

Gibbs suggests that metaphor is a dynamic and ecological performance that should be characterised as "embodied, active, integrated and extended" [4]. Here, "active" refers to real or imagined bodily actions, "integrated" refers to interaction through real-world objects and the environment, and "extended" means that metaphorical thinking extends to specific ecological contexts through brain-body interactions. According to this cognition, the cognitive phenomena studied by modern cognitive science "depend to varying degrees on the morphological, biological, and physiological features of the performer's body, the appropriately structured natural, technological, or social environment, and the performer's active and embodied interaction with that environment" [5], and the mind "constantly crosses the boundaries between brain, body and world" [6].

To enrich the ecological perspective on cognition and metaphor, Jensen and Greve propose the following four hypotheses [7]. The concept of metaphor is based on the notion of metaphor, a standard value that implies a duality of experience. In an ecological framework, cognition is generally seen as shaped by actions in the environment, and metaphors are seen as images of actions embedded in the way we do things in the world.

2. Conceptual Metaphorical Analysis

In this study, Xi Jinping's ecological discourse was selected as a corpus to be studied, from which three themes with high metaphorical resonance values were extracted for a detailed conceptual metaphorical study under the perspective of ecological metaphors.

2.1. The Theme of Debt

Lakoff & Johnson pointed out that metaphor is the way of human abstract thought formation and processing, that is, using one familiar thing to understand another unfamiliar thing [8].

With the advancement of human civilization, while the ability of human beings to conquer nature is increasing, the degree of destruction of nature is also becoming more and more serious, however, it is difficult for people to form a clear and complete understanding of the current situation of ecological damage, fragmentation, degradation and pollution, and its impact on the future will be produced. In real life, people often inevitably have debt relations with each other, borrowing can meet the needs of the moment, but the inability to repay will lead to bankruptcy, so people need to calculate the accounts, measure the ability to repay, and predict the risk. The conceptual metaphor of “ecological damage is debt” draws an analogy between debt and ecological damage (Table 1), highlighting the current state of ecological damage and emphasizing the impact that damage to the ecological balance will have on the future of humanity.

Table 1:

Source domain: Debt	Mapping	Target domain: Damage to the ecosystem
Overdraft account	→	Exceeding ecological thresholds
Discounting	→	Reduced ecological well-being of the public
Accounts	→	Impact of human activities on the ecological environment
Accounting	→	Measuring the gains and losses resulting from differences in handling the relationship between the ecological environment and economic development
Pay	→	The impacts of human activities on the ecosystem

For example, the Yangtze River carries more than 40% of China’s total economic output and feeds more than 40% of the population, yet the provinces and cities along the river had over-pursued the rapid growth of economic indicators, leading to the continuous deterioration of the ecological environment of the Yangtze River waters and the serious consequences of the sharp decline in aquatic biological resources, mapping the overdraft account in the debt of the source domain to ignore the limited environmental capacity of the Yangtze River Basin and the fragility of the ecological carrying capacity (Example 1.1). The position of the ecological environment in the index of happiness of the people’s life is becoming more and more prominent, and it is not possible to reduce the satisfaction of the people’s requirements for the environment due to economic and social development (Example 1.2). “Old debts, new debts” maps the damage that our country has done to the ecological environment and is still doing to the ecological environment (example 1.3). Borrowers will pay the price if they fail to repay their debts, so they need to settle their accounts. “Returning lakes to wetlands and forests to grasslands” refers to repairing the current situation of soil erosion, soil degradation, and face-source pollution through measures such as soil and water conservation, and ecological protection of rivers, lakes, and wetlands (Example 1.4). The mapping of “calculate the big account, calculate the long-term account, calculate the overall account, calculate the comprehensive account” to the target domain means that we have to sort out the systematic and long-term damage to the ecological environment, and comprehensively weigh the advantages and disadvantages (Example 1.5).

- Example 1.1 To promote the development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt, the prerequisite is to adhere to the ecological priority, put the restoration of the Yangtze River's ecological environment in an overriding position, and gradually solve the problem of the Yangtze River's ecological overdraft.
- Example 1.2 What is the situation when the economy has gone up and the people's sense of well-being has been greatly reduced and even strong discontent has come up?
- Example 1.3 Agricultural development should not only put an end to new ecological debts, but also gradually pay off old debts.
- Example 1.4 Hard measures should be taken to stop the continuation of reclamation and occupation of lakes and wetlands, and those lakes and wetlands that are in a position to be restored should be retired and returned to the lakes and wetlands.
- Example 1.5 China's development will never come at the expense of the environment.

2.2. The Theme of Disease

There are a lot of land and resource shortages, but the damage to the ecosystem caused by China's long-standing crude economic growth pattern due to historical reasons such as backwardness in education, science and technology, and the low quality of the labour force is mapped onto the "wounds and scars" in the source domain (Example 2.1), and the "pain" in Example 2.2 maps the difficulty of the process of industrial change in removing the old and bringing in the new. The "pain" in Example 2.2 maps the difficulty of removing the old from the new in the process of industrial change. The Chinese people, under the centralized and unified leadership of the Party Central Committee, are the most important actors in the process of treating diseases - the doctors. Chinese medicine can be called thousands of years of glorious Chinese civilization in the history of a piece of light in the autumn treasure, Chinese medicine attaches great importance to the unity of the human body itself, integrity, that is, the composition of the human body between the various components of the structure of the indivisible, in the function of mutual coordination, complement each other, in the pathology of the mutual influence. In the conceptual metaphor of "ecological environmental management is the treatment of disease", the holistic view of TCM maps out the idea of environmental management from the holistic nature of the ecosystem, taking into account the overall situation, applying measures in a holistic manner, and taking multiple measures simultaneously (Example 2.3), with specific therapeutic measures such as "physical examination, diagnosing the cause of the disease, identifying the root cause, and prescribing the right medicine". Specific treatment measures, such as "physical examination, diagnosis of the cause of the disease, identification of the root cause, and prescription of the right medicine," correspond to management measures such as "sorting out and grasping various types of ecological risks, tracing the root causes, and classifying and applying measures," emphasizing the coordination and unity of the ecosystem's various elements. In addition, "not treating the disease and treating the disease before it occurs" is a strategy for preventing disease and maintaining health that was put forward as early as in the Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine, i.e., preventing disease and treating it at the beginning of its onset. While the quality of China's ecological environment continues to improve, it is still faced with many historical problems (Example 2.4). Although the challenges, pressures and contradictions are enormous, environmental management must be carried out in an orderly and gradual manner (Example 2.5), and more importantly, compared with the restoration of ecosystems, we should pay attention to detecting the threshold of the environment's ability to support human socio-economic activities as a warning for nature, and place more emphasis on protecting the ecosystem (Example 2.6).

Table 2:

Source domain: Treatment of diseases	Mapping	Target domain: Ecological governance
Doctor	→	The centralized and unified leadership of the Party Central Committee of the Chinese People
Patient	→	Destroyed ecological environment
Symptoms	→	Ecological environment problems
Treatment options - Chinese medicine holistic view	→	Governance ideas - Systemic and holistic
Treatment measures	→	Governance measures
Disease prevention - treating the future	→	Environmental carrying capacity

Example 2.1 Healing ecological wounds together

Example 2.2 Humankind has experienced several leaps in agricultural and industrial civilizations, which have brought about a great development of social productivity, and at the same time accompanied by the pains of metamorphosis.

Example 2.3 To treat water with good governance distinguish between primary and secondary, cause and effect, and identify the crux of the problem.

Example 2.4 Promoting the Construction of Ecological Civilization There are still a lot of stubborn miasmas to be cured, and the situation is still very serious.

Example 2.5 We should not commit the disease of impatience, and we should not do things quickly, especially we should not engage in all kinds of development zones.

Example 2.6 Establish and improve the long-term mechanism for monitoring and early warning of the carrying capacity of resources and the environment, so as to “treat the disease before it gets worse.”

2.3. The Theme of Partner

The words “hand in hand, together, partner, help” construct the conceptual metaphor of “China and the rest of the world are partners”(Table 3). Friends in the source domain often have common goals, share responsibilities and obligations, help each other, share happiness, and go through thick and thin together, and when these characteristics are mapped to the target domain, they highlight that ecological degradation is a common crisis faced by the whole of humankind, and that only through solidarity and collaboration among all countries of the world can we unite our strengths in order to protect the Earth’s homeland in the face of global challenges, such as climate change.

Table 3:

Source domain: Partners	Mapping	Target domain: China and the world
Responsibilities and obligations	→	Shared responsibility for global ecological and environmental governance
Shared goals	→	Building an ecologically sound planet together
Mutual consultation	→	Joint planning of global solution framework
Mutual help	→	China actively helps developing countries to cope with climate change
Sharing	→	China actively shares its experience and achievements in ecological governance

The words “hand in hand, together, partner, share, promote” demonstrate China’s desire and determination to work with the rest of the world to protect the environment and safeguard the future and well-being of humankind. As the first large developing country in the world to carry out large-scale PM2.5 control, China has learnt from the experiences of other countries around the world and, on the basis of its experience in pollution control, has adopted a series of measures to protect the environment and protect human well-being (Example 3.1). For example, as the first large developing country in the world to carry out PM2.5 control on a large scale, China has explored and formed a Chinese model of “government-led, sectoral co-ordination, corporate responsibility and public participation” based on the experience of countries all over the world in controlling pollution and through its own practice, and China is willing to let its experience and achievements benefit the world. The words “share, help” highlight China’s image as a responsible big country that promotes and leads the establishment of a fair, reasonable and win-win cooperation in global climate governance (Example 3.2).

Example 3.1 Sharing the responsibility of the times and promoting global development.

Example 3.2 China will continue to shoulder its international obligations, carry out in-depth exchanges and cooperation in the field of ecological civilization with other countries in the world, promote the sharing of achievements, and work together to build an ecologically sound and beautiful home on Earth.

3. Conclusion

This study, from the perspective of ecological metaphor, explores the conceptual metaphors embedded in Xi-style discourse, aiming to uncover the underlying cognitive mechanisms and value orientations. Through a systematic analysis of metaphorical themes with high metaphorical resonance, it is found that the metaphors in Xi-style discourse are not only culturally specific and politically functional, but also demonstrate a deep integration of ecological thinking into discursive practices. These metaphors exhibit systematicity, multidimensionality, and strong contextual adaptability, thereby enhancing the cohesion and communicative power of the discourse. The introduction of ecological metaphors enriches the

analytical perspective of conceptual metaphor theory and offers theoretical support for understanding how ideas such as “man and nature” and “systemic symbiosis” are articulated in political discourse. Future research may further investigate the evolution of ecological metaphors across different discourse domains and their practical applications in national image construction and cultural communication, with a view to deepening the understanding of the ecological turn in contemporary Chinese discourse.

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