

# A Comparative Study of Conceptual Metaphors for Sadness in English and Chinese

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## Abstract

Metaphor is a key cognitive tool for understanding abstract concepts, with 'sadness' expressions in English and Chinese rich in conceptual metaphors. This study compares 'sadness' metaphors in both languages to reveal commonalities and differences. Traditionally seen as linguistic decoration, metaphors are now viewed, through cognitive linguistics, as fundamental to human thought. Lakoff and Johnson's work suggests metaphors map concrete domains onto abstract ones, shaping our worldview. Emotional metaphors, especially for 'sadness,' offer insights into cognitive patterns, cultural traditions, and thinking styles in English and Chinese. Commonalities include metaphors based on physical experience, such as 'SADNESS IS DOWN,' reflecting psychological heaviness. Metaphors rooted in natural phenomena, like 'SADNESS IS DARKNESS' and 'SADNESS IS COLD,' show shared perceptions of darkness and coldness evoking loneliness and despair. However, differences exist. Culturally, Chinese often uses 'gray' to symbolize sadness, while English associates 'blue' with melancholy. Seasonal imagery also varies, with 'autumn' linked to sadness in Chinese due to decay connotations, but to harvest in English. Cognitively, English expressions like 'heartbroken' emphasize inner turmoil, whereas Chinese phrases such as '肝肠寸断' highlight physical reactions to grief. These reflect cultural emphases: English on individual feelings, Chinese on bodily sensations influenced by traditional medicine. Differences stem from cultural traditions, religious beliefs, and thinking styles. China's poetic heritage contrasts with Western literature's inner world focus. Religious influences, like Christian divine punishment in English and Buddhist/Taoist ideas in Chinese, further shape 'sadness' metaphors. This study deepens understanding of emotional linguistic expressions and highlights cognitive and cultural divergences, contributing to cross-cultural communication and mutual understanding.

## Keywords

English and Chinese; sadness; conceptual metaphor; commonality; difference

## 1. Introduction

Metaphor, as a universal phenomenon across languages and cultures, has long transcended the scope of traditional rhetoric and become an important tool for human beings to cognise the world and express their thoughts. Traditionally, it has

been regarded as a means of linguistic decoration, used to modify rhetoric and enhance the effect of expression, and commonly found in literary works. However, with the rise of cognitive linguistics, scholars have a new understanding of metaphor. Lakoff and Johnson pointed out in their book *The Metaphors We Live By* that metaphor is not only a linguistic phenomenon, but also a basic way of human thinking and cognition. Our conceptual systems are largely metaphorical, and metaphors are ubiquitous in our daily lives, thinking, and actions, constructing our understanding of the world and influencing our perceptions, judgements, and communication. Among the many studies on metaphor, the conceptual metaphor of emotion has attracted much attention because it is closely related to the inner world of human beings. Emotion is the experience of human attitudes towards objective things and the corresponding behavioral responses, which is an important part of human experience and permeates every aspect of our lives. However, emotions themselves are abstract and elusive, and in order to express and understand these abstract emotions, people often resort to metaphors to link emotions with concrete, familiar things or concepts. This metaphorical expression makes emotions more concrete, vivid and easy to understand and convey.

As one of the basic human emotions, 'sadness' deeply reflects human feelings about negative experiences such as loss and frustration in life. In daily life, people express sadness in various ways, and the use of metaphors is especially common. Studying the conceptual metaphors of 'sadness' emotions in English and Chinese not only helps us to deeply understand the similarities and differences between the English and Chinese languages in expressing emotions, but also reveals the differences and commonalities between the English and Chinese peoples in their cognitive modes, cultural traditions and ways of thinking. Language is the carrier of culture, through the comparative analysis of 'sadness' emotional conceptual metaphor, we can gain insight into the unique understanding and expression of sadness in different cultural contexts, so as to promote the smooth progress of cross-cultural communication and enhance the mutual understanding and respect between different cultures.

## 2. Theoretical Basis

Conceptual metaphor theory was proposed by Rykov and Johnson in 1980 in *Metaphors We Live By*, which brings a new perspective to the study of metaphors. The theory holds that metaphor is not just linguistic rhetoric, but also a basic way of human thinking and cognition, a systematic mapping from a concrete and familiar source domain to an abstract and unfamiliar target domain. For example, 'time is money' maps the finite, spendable, and other attributes of 'money' to 'time' to produce expressions such as 'wasting time' and other expressions, a mapping based on physical and lived experience.

Conceptual metaphor mapping follows the principle of constancy, where the imagery schematic structure of the source domain is projected in a manner consistent

with the target domain. For example, 'sadness is down', the spatial imagery schema of 'down' is adapted to the emotional concept of 'sadness', so that people naturally use expressions such as 'emotionally depressed' and so on.

Conceptual metaphors are often used subconsciously, integrated into conceptual systems and linguistic conventions, and people are often unaware of their use, as in the case of 'falling into sadness'. In addition, metaphors are systematic in conceptual systems, and different conceptual metaphors are related to each other to build a conceptual cognitive system, such as the series of metaphors related to 'time is money', which help people grasp the complexity of the world.

### **3. Commonalities between English and Chinese Metaphors for the Emotional Concept of 'Sadness'**

#### **3.1. Metaphors Based on Physical Experience**

##### **3.1.1. Sadness is downward**

In both English and Chinese languages, there exists the conceptual metaphor of sadness in a downward direction, i.e. 'SADNESS IS DOWN'. In English, there are many related expressions, such as 'I'm feeling down', the word 'down' clearly indicates the downward direction, 'He is in low spirits', "low" also embodies the concept of downward, using a lower state of mind as a metaphor for sadness; 'The news made her heart sink' (The news made her heart sink), 'sink' indicates sinking, vividly depicting the heaviness of the heart when grieving, as if the heart is falling downwards. There are also a large number of similar expressions in Chinese, such as '情绪低落' '心情低落', which directly use the word "低落" to describe the emotional state when sadness is present, reflecting the downward direction;

The roots of this conceptual metaphor of downward direction to metaphorically describe sadness are closely related to human physical postures and psychological experiences. When people are in a positive emotional state such as joy and excitement, they tend to show an upward body posture, whereas when people feel sad, their body posture usually changes, and they unconsciously bow their heads and bend their backs, with their bodies showing a downward trend, and the whole person appears to be depressed. From the perspective of psychological experience, sadness often gives people a heavy, depressing feeling, as if there is a force pulling downwards, making it seem as if people are plunged into a low ebb and it is difficult for them to extricate themselves. This psychological heaviness and downward direction create a close connection in people's cognition, thus forming the conceptual metaphor of 'grief is down'.

##### **3.1.2. Sadness and Body Organ Feelings**

When human beings feel sadness, their body organs will produce corresponding physiological reactions, and these reactions are used as metaphors for sadness in

both English and Chinese languages, forming a metaphor based on the feelings of body organs. In English, there is 'have a sinking feeling in the stomach', 'a sinking feeling' originally indicated the feeling of an object sinking, and here it is used to describe the feeling in the stomach, vividly depicting the empty, heavy feeling in the stomach when you are sad, as if the stomach is falling downwards, suggesting inner turmoil and sadness 'She was choked with sorrow', 'choked' denotes choking and suffocating, describing the feeling of the throat being blocked when one is sad, showing graphically the effect of sadness on breathing and throat, and letting people feel the suppression and pain when one is sad.

There are also similar expressions in Chinese, such as 'the heart is blocked', which is used to describe the feeling in the heart, vividly reflecting the depression and depression in the heart when sadness occurs, and emphasizing the strong impact of sadness on the body organs. When people are in the mood of sadness, the body will automatically produce a series of physiological responses, which are an important part of human emotional experience. In the long-term process of language use and cognition, people associate these body organ feelings with sadness, forming a stable metaphorical expression, which enables abstract sadness to be vividly expressed through concrete body organ feelings.

### **3.2. Metaphors based on natural phenomena**

#### **3.2.1. Sadness is Darkness**

In both English and Chinese languages, there exists a metaphorical expression linking grief with darkness, i.e., 'SADNESS IS DARKNESS'. In English, there is 'the dark days of grief', using 'dark' to modify 'days', which figuratively depicts the bleakness of the days of grief; 'a dark mood', which is a direct metaphor for darkness, highlights the depression and heaviness of the mood of grief. There are similar expressions in Chinese, such as 'dark days', which directly uses 'darkness' to describe the time experienced during grief, giving a depressing and despairing feeling; 'his world was dark', emphasises how much grief affects people by using 'world' as a metaphor for darkness.

Darkness and sadness have strong similarity in psychological perception. From a visual point of view, darkness is a state of lack of light, which brings visual ambiguity and uncertainty and makes people feel uneasy and fearful. In terms of emotional experience, darkness is often associated with negative emotions such as loneliness and depression. In the darkness, people are more likely to feel lonely and isolated, and this sense of loneliness will further aggravate the emotion of sadness.

#### **3.2.2. Sadness is Cold**

The conceptual metaphor of using cold as a metaphor for sadness, i.e., SADNESS IS COLD, exists in both English and Chinese languages. In English, there is 'a cold feeling of sadness', which directly associates sadness with the feeling of cold and vividly

depicts the coldness inside the heart when one is sad; 'He was chilled with grief' (he was chilled with grief), 'chilled' indicates to make cold, to make chilling, figuratively expressing the cold feeling brought by grief; 'a cold sorrow', with 'cold' to modify 'cold' to 'a cold sorrow'. The use of 'cold' to modify 'sorrow' emphasises the icy cold quality of sorrow. There are also many similar expressions in Chinese, such as '心寒', which succinctly and clearly expresses the feeling of coldness inside the heart when one is sad.

From the viewpoint of the association between temperature perception and emotional experience, the feeling of cold often gives rise to uncomfortable and unpleasant emotions. When the body feels cold, it will unconsciously tighten its body, creating a defensive posture, a bodily response similar to the defence and self-protection mechanisms within people when they are sad. People also often feel vulnerable and need to protect themselves when they are sad, just as they need to find warmth and shelter in a cold environment.

#### **4. Differences between English and Chinese Metaphors for the Emotional Concept of 'Sadness'**

##### **4.1. Cultural Imagery Differences**

###### **4.1.1. Colour Imagery**

In terms of colour imagery, gray is often used as a metaphor for sadness in Chinese, and the idiom '万念俱灰' is a typical example. 'Grey' is not only a description of colour, but also a symbol of dashed hopes, despair and sadness. Grey gives people a bleak and gloomy visual impression, which is in line with the grayness of the heart in times of sadness. In Chinese culture, gray is often associated with negative emotions such as decay and loss, and the cultural connotations it carries make it uniquely expressive as a metaphor for sadness. When people encounter major setbacks, such as career failure, relationship breakdown, etc., and feel that life has lost its colour and hope, they will use the phrase 'all thoughts are gray' to describe their state of mind, and at this time, the metaphor of gray will visualize the abstract emotion of sadness, so that people can more intuitively feel the depth and breadth of sadness.

In English, although there is also the case of using colour as a metaphor for sadness, it is different from the use of gray in Chinese. In English, blue is often used as a metaphor for sadness, such as 'He is in a blue mood', 'blue Monday' and other expressions. It has become a typical colour imagery of sadness in English.

###### **4.1.2. Seasonal Imagery**

In Chinese culture, 'autumn' is often closely associated with sadness. The poem 'Autumn winds and rains make people sad' vividly depicts the fusion of autumn scenery and sadness. In autumn, the leaves of the trees wither away, and this natural scene

easily triggers people's feelings about the passing of life and time, thus generating sadness. In ancient Chinese poetry, there are countless works that use 'autumn' as a theme to express sadness. Ma Zhiyuan's 'Thoughts of Autumn in Tianjingsha' (天净沙·秋思), in which 'The thin horses in the west wind of the old road, the setting sun and the broken hearted people are at the end of the world' (古道西风瘦马，夕阳西下，断肠人在天涯), highlights the loneliness and sadness of the wanderer at the end of the world through the depiction of the old road in the sullen autumn, the westerly wind, the thin horses, and the scene of the setting sun.

In English, although 'autumn' also means autumn, there is a clear difference between the emotional metaphor it carries and the Chinese word '秋'. In Western culture, autumn is the season of harvest, in which people enjoy the joy of harvest, so 'autumn' is more often associated with tranquility, peace and the satisfaction of harvest. Although the use of 'autumn' to express sadness also occurs in some literary works, this usage is relatively rare and does not become a common cultural imagery as in Chinese. The emotional perception of 'autumn' in English is more influenced by the western agricultural culture and lifestyle, which stresses the harvest and abundance of autumn, rather than the decay and loss of autumn as in Chinese culture. This difference in cultural traditions has led to a marked difference in the use of 'autumn'/'autumn' as a metaphor for sadness in the English and Chinese languages.

## 4.2. Differences in cognitive perspective

### 4.2.1. Cognitive Focus on the Degree of Sadness

In English, 'heartbroken' is a typical word to express extreme sadness, which literally means 'heartbroken', visualising the feelings of the inner world as the breaking of the heart, emphasizing the strong impact and destruction of sadness on the heart, and this expression focuses on the emotional experience of the heart, showing the depth and intensity of grief from the level of the heart. When people experience major traumas such as the death of a loved one or the breakup of a love affair, they will use 'heartbroken' to express the pain as if their hearts have been torn apart. In Chinese, '肝肠寸断' is a common expression to emphasize the degree of grief. 'Liver and intestines' are closely related to emotions in Chinese medicine theory, and 'liver and intestines' uses hyperbole to compare the pain in the heart when grieving to the severe pain of a broken liver and intestines, from the point of view of the feelings of the internal organs. It shows the extreme intensity of grief from the point of view of how the internal organs feel. This expression not only reflects the body's physiological response to sadness, but also depicts it through the exaggeration of the visceral feelings.

When expressing the degree of sadness in both English and Chinese languages, one focuses on the inner emotional experience and uses 'heartbroken' to show the brokenness of the heart in a graphic way; the other starts from the visceral feeling and uses 'liver and guts' to highlight the physical reaction to the sadness. This difference

reflects the different emphasis of the two peoples in perceiving the degree of sadness. The English culture pays more attention to the expression of the individual's inner feelings; while the Chinese culture, influenced by traditional Chinese medicine theories and cultural concepts, is more inclined to express the degree of sadness from the overall feelings of the body and through the depiction of the feelings of the body organs .

## 5. Conclusion

Through an in-depth comparative analysis of the English-Chinese 'sadness' emotional conceptual metaphors, this study reveals the commonalities and differences between the two languages in terms of their expressions, cognitive modes, and the cultural connotations behind them, and at the same time analyses the deeper reasons for these similarities and differences.

In terms of commonality, both English and Chinese languages show similarities in the conceptual metaphors of 'sadness' emotion based on bodily experience, natural phenomena and container metaphors. From the perspective of bodily experience, there are expressions of 'sadness is down' as well as metaphors of sadness in terms of bodily organ feelings. Both 'I'm feeling down' and 'low mood' reflect the conceptual metaphor of 'sadness is down', which stems from the similarity between the physical posture and psychological experience of human sadness, where the body will unconsciously feel sadness. This stems from the similarity between the body posture and psychological experience when human beings are sad, in which the body will unconsciously present a downward posture, and the psychology will have a heavy and depressing feeling, as if it is at a low point. In the metaphor of sadness based on the feelings of body organs, the English phrase 'have a sinking feeling in the stomach' and the Chinese phrase '心里堵得慌' both express sadness through the feelings of body organs in sadness, reflecting the relationship between body reactions and emotions. emotion, reflecting the close connection between bodily reactions and emotional metaphors. Among the metaphors based on natural phenomena, the conceptual metaphors of 'the dark days of grief' and 'the cold days of grief' are found in both English and Chinese. Both 'the dark days of grief' and 'dark days' associate grief with darkness, and the visual and psychological perception of darkness is similar to the confusion, helplessness and depression of grief. 'a cold feeling of sadness' and "心寒" on the other hand link sadness with cold, and the cold temperature perception echoes the loneliness, desolation and defence of the heart when sadness occurs. In terms of the container metaphor, both English and Chinese see the human body as a container and sorrow as the substance inside the container. 'They were filled with sorrow' and "filled with sadness" both embody this metaphor, and their cognitive basis is related to the structure of the human body and the psychological experience, the physiological changes inside the body and the feeling of depression in sorrow, just like a container filled with heavy liquid .

However, there are also significant differences between the English and Chinese conceptual metaphors of 'sadness' emotion. In terms of cultural imagery, Chinese commonly uses gray as a metaphor for sadness, such as 'all thoughts are gray', and the bleakness and depression of gray matches with the despair and loss inside the heart when sadness occurs, which is closely related to the cognition and emotion of gray in Chinese culture. In English, blue is often used as a metaphor for sadness, such as 'He is in a blue mood', which is related to the homesickness and loneliness triggered by the colour blue in the history of western navigation. In terms of seasonal imagery, 'autumn' in Chinese is often associated with sadness, as in 'autumn winds and autumn rains are saddening'. The decay of everything in autumn can easily trigger people's feelings about the passing of life, thus generating sadness. In English, 'autumn' is more often associated with harvest and tranquillity, and although there are also cases of sadness, they are relatively rare.

From a cognitive point of view, when expressing the degree of sadness in English, 'heartbroken' focuses on the inner emotional experience and emphasises the brokenness of the heart; while 'liver and guts' in Chinese starts from the feeling of internal organs, and uses hyperbole to highlight the strong reaction of the body to sadness, reflecting the strong reaction of both English and Chinese to sadness. The Chinese word '肝肠寸断' focuses on visceral feelings and uses exaggeration to highlight the body's strong reaction to sadness, reflecting the different emphasis of the two peoples in perceiving the degree of sadness. When expressing the duration of sadness, English uses 'a lingering sadness' to emphasize the lingering sadness and the unwillingness to leave, while Chinese uses '绵绵的哀愁' to compare sadness to a continuous thread, highlighting the continuity and softness of sadness.

The causes of these differences mainly include culture and way of thinking. Among the cultural factors, historical and cultural traditions and religious belief differences play a key role. China's long poetic culture and unique way of expressing emotions make 'sadness' closely connected with many images, forming a unique metaphorical expression. Western literature focuses on the detailed portrayal of the inner world of the characters, which makes the metaphor of sadness more inclined to start from the perspective of the individual's inner experience and thinking about the world. In terms of religious beliefs, the concept of God's punishment in Christian culture influences the expression of grief metaphors in English, while traditional Chinese religious cultures, such as Buddhism's impermanence of suffering and Taoism's idea of adhering to nature, also have a unique influence on the expression of grief metaphors in Chinese.

The way of thinking, Chinese image thinking makes the metaphorical expression of sadness more vivid, graphic, and closely connected with concrete things, such as 'tears fall like rain', 'heart like a knife'; English abstract thinking makes the metaphorical expression of sadness pay more attention to logic and rational analysis, such as 'a sense of loss' "He is in a state of melancholy". Chinese holistic thinking

emphasises the connection between sorrow and the surrounding environment and situation, such as ‘touching the scene’, ‘feeling the flowers splash tears, hating the birds scared’; English individual thinking pays more attention to the individual's inner feelings and experience, such as ‘inner sorrow’, ‘She is struggling’. inner sorrow’ “She is struggling with her own grief”.

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