

An Exploration of Space and Time Metaphorical Expressions in Chinese and Italian

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Abstract

The research constitutes an initial examination of metaphorical expressions associated with temporal and spatial concepts in both the Chinese and Italian languages. Recognizing the profound influence of metaphor on cognitive constructs and linguistic representation, the study adopts a comparative analytical approach to uncover the metaphorical dimensions inherent in expressions related to time and space within these distinct linguistic frameworks. Through the examination of lexical and syntactic elements in both languages, the research aims to elucidate the subtle nuances and cultural variations that characterize the metaphorical richness of temporal and spatial discourse. By comparing Chinese and Italian linguistic structures, the study seeks to reveal commonalities and divergences in the metaphorical strategies used to express concepts related to space and time in these two languages. This comparative exploration not only contributes to a deeper understanding of the metaphorical nature embedded in Chinese and Italian discourse but also sheds light on the cultural and cognitive dimensions that shape these linguistic expressions. The findings of the study serve as a foundational exploration, paving the way for future in-depth investigations into the intricate interplay between language, metaphor, and cognition within the realms of temporal and spatial concepts in both the Chinese and Italian linguistic contexts.

Keywords: Chinese language, Italian language, metaphorical expressions, time metaphors, space metaphors, cognitive linguistics

1. Introduction

Space and time metaphorical expressions constitute pivotal concepts within cognitive linguistics, primarily due to their profound impact of human cognition and experiential understanding. The relationships individuals establish with time and space thus play a crucial role in the formation of conceptual frameworks. The metaphors associated with time and space elucidate how individuals employ language and conceptualizations related to these dimensions

to comprehend and articulate various abstract concepts. It serves as a cognitive strategy by drawing analogies from the familiar domains of time and space, so these metaphors serve as linguistic tools through which individuals navigate the complexities of cognitive processes, enabling the expression and comprehension of abstract notions. Consequently, the exploration of temporal and spatial metaphors contributes to a deeper understanding of the intricate interplay between language, cognition, and the

conceptualization of abstract ideas within the broader context of cognitive linguistics.

2. Theoretical Framework

In their work *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), Lakoff and Johnson assert that metaphor is not just a linguistic rhetorical device but also a cognitive and conceptual mode of thinking. Metaphors function as cognitive strategies aiding human understanding of the objective world and are pervasive in everyday language.

According to the Conceptual Metaphor Theory proposed by Lakoff and Johnson, metaphors involve the creation of new forms and meanings through pre-existing linguistic forms. This process relies on shared social experiences, bodily encounters, world knowledge, and conceptual systems to comprehend new phenomena. Conceptual metaphors represent semantic mappings between two distinct domains. At its core, metaphor resides in the cognitive process of expressing one concept through another, allowing the semantic content of words to better mirror the objective nature of the subject. Typically, metaphorical meanings cannot be directly derived from the literal sense of words. However, when certain attributes of the source domain are mapped onto the target domain, a partial understanding of the metaphorical meaning is achieved.

In the exploration of cognitive metaphors, various theoretical frameworks are referenced, including the Conceptual Blending Theory proposed by Turner and Fauconnier, Critical Metaphor Analysis by Chateris Black (2004), and the commonly used Source and Target domains (metaphor identification criteria) proposed by Kövecses (2010). Numerous scholars have contributed with various significant theoretical frameworks to the investigation of cognitive metaphors.

Given the nature of conceptual metaphors as products of language, society, thought, and culture, there is growing interest in understanding the unique features of cognitive metaphors in diverse languages and conducting comparative analyses across multilingual vocabularies. Conceptual metaphors can exhibit variations across different languages.

3. Space and Time Metaphorical Expressions

Drawing on foundational principles articulated by scholars like Lakoff and Johnson, who argue that metaphors are not mere linguistic tools but

fundamental cognitive processes, the temporal-spatial metaphorization of cognition underscores its pervasive influence beyond literary contexts. This cognitive mechanism involves the generation of new linguistic forms and meanings by leveraging existing societal experiences, bodily interactions, world knowledge, and conceptual systems.

The metaphors related to time and space extend beyond the realm of language, playing a crucial role in cognitive processes. They offer a framework for comprehending and articulating abstract concepts by utilizing familiar spatial and temporal notions, thereby mirroring the structure and orientation of human cognition.

In essence, delving into the temporal-spatial metaphorization of cognition contributes to a profound understanding of how language both shapes and mirrors thought processes. It unveils the intricate interplay between linguistic expressions, conceptual metaphors, and the cognitive foundations that underlie our comprehension of the world.

The foundational components of spatial metaphors typically encompass spatial orientation concepts such as “up, down, high, low, front, back, inside, outside.” Through these orientation concepts, abstract ideas related to these concepts can be effectively expressed.

4. Space and Time Metaphorical Expressions in Chinese and Italian

Time and space are universally shared concepts, yet daily habits, culture, and historical contexts introduce variations. Every language expresses time and space concepts through metaphors in a unique manner, reflecting distinct cultural understandings and perceptions of time and space. Therefore, concerning certain metaphors, we may find expressions in other languages that closely correspond since these metaphors generally describe similar ideas. However, subtle differences may exist in the types, details, meanings, and word choices in the conceptual mappings. Sometimes it is quite challenging to find perfect equivalents in language expressions describing space and time, but at the same time it is a very interesting way to get a better and deeper understanding of different cultures and way of thinking and perceiving the world.

In Chinese and Italian, temporal and spatial metaphors are commonly observed, manifesting in linguistic expressions, idioms, and customary phrases. These metaphors reflect how people's

perceptions of time and space influence language expression and cognitive processes. Beyond linguistic realms, these metaphors play a significant role in culture and thought processes, exerting a profound impact. While Chinese and Italian share some commonalities in the cognitive metaphorization of time and space, cultural differences and habits have a great impact, so there exist notable differences. For example:

1) “四面” (everywhere)

This example underscores specific cultural thoughts and concepts inherent in Chinese culture that cannot be expressed in the same manner in Italian. In Chinese culture, the four cardinal directions—north, south, east, and west—serve a significant orientational role. For instance, Chinese road signs include indications such as “东” (east), “西”(west), “南” (south) and “北” (north), whereas this specific directional signage is absent in Italian. Concurrently, these cardinal directions hold fundamental importance in ancient Daoist Fengshui practices. In Italian, expressions corresponding to the four cardinal directions in Chinese, are uniformly translated as “ovunque” (everywhere), “in tutte le direzioni” (in all directions) or “tutt’attorno” (all around). “四面” (everywhere) is indeed translated with the expression “da tutte le parti”. This can be observed also in the examples mentioned below: “四方” (per ogni dove), “四面八方” (da tutte le parti), “四” (tutt’attorno), “四围” (tutt’attorno) and “四周” (tutt’attorno).

2) “茶余饭后” (after tea and meals)

In Chinese culture, tea consumption holds paramount significance as a daily activity; however, in Italian culture, tea does not hold the same prominence and is not considered a primary beverage. The translation of this Chinese expression into Italian in the Chinese-Italian dictionary does not explicitly mention tea but simply refers to the moment after lunch. The expression “茶余饭后” is indeed directly translated with the adjective “postprandiale” (postprandial), denoting “after lunch.”

3) “四时八节” (the four seasons and the eight solar terms)

As the aforementioned examples, this one also illustrate significant cultural disparities between China and Italy. The expression “八节” originate from the Chinese lunar calendar. Consequently, “四时八节” in Italian is translated directly as

“tutto l’anno” (all year) to convey a concept that aligns more closely with the Italian cultural understanding of time.

In order to compare the way time and space metaphorical expressions are used in Chinese and Italian, in the following paragraphs this research explores the most significant metaphorical concepts related to time and space.

4.1 “Up” and “Down”

Spatial metaphors often manifest in up-down hierarchies. The expressions of spatial “up” and “down” relationships are commonly utilized to convey various abstract concepts, including metaphorical representations of states of well-being, quantity and scope. Moreover, expressions of this nature can be analyzed within the context of emotional metaphors, where “up” and “down” represent crucial components of this kind of metaphorical expressions as well.

Both Chinese and Italian employ spatial hierarchical relationships to articulate abstract concepts and different levels of hierarchy, such as employer (higher position) and employee (lower position), upper-level leadership and lower-level staff, superior and subordinate. Expressions of spatial hierarchy are also prevalent in both Chinese and Italian. In Italian it can be seen in words and expressions like “il capo” (the boss) and “il sottoposto” (the subordinate), while in Chinese it can be seen in words like “手下” (subordinate, underling) which can be translated as “sotto la guida, al comando; dipendente” and “属下” (subordinate) which can be translated as “subordinato”. This is clearly shown also in the following sentences in Italian and Chinese:

1) 他在我手下工作就得听我的。Lavora sotto di me, quindi mi deve ubbidire.

2) 我是他的手下。Sono un suo sottoposto.

3) 我曾两次败在她手下。Sono stato sconfitto due volte per mano sua.

4) 我是她的属下。Sono uno dei suoi subordinati.

4.2 “High” and “Low”

The concepts of high and low can be employed to reflect the quality status of objects, human virtues and moral states, as well as to mirror individuals’ emotional and mental conditions.

The highest part, summit, or peak is usually considered the pinnacle of attainable capabilities, the endpoint of a process, or the maximum goal

one aspires to achieve. For example: “到顶” (raggiungere il tetto, arrivare al massimo), “登顶” (arrivare in vetta), “登峰造极” (attingere la perfezione, raggiungere il massimo, di abilità, conoscenza, ecc., raggiungere la soglia della perfezione), “巅峰” (apice, climax), “顶峰” (vetta, culmine), “高峰” (picco).

In Italian expressions, the usage of these terms aligns closely with the same patterns. For instance, “cima” (peak), originally referring to the summit of a mountain, can also convey the maximum attainable value or level. The term “vetta” (peak) follows a similar pattern. For example, in the context of rankings, it means being in the first position or reaching the highest level attainable. In certain instances, such expressions are achieved by using synonyms related to height, such as “tetto” (ceiling) and “il massimo” (maximum). These metaphorical expressions are expressed in similar ways, so they are usually shared and comprehensible in both languages.

In Chinese expressions the concept of “高” (high) is also used to denote a societal status, an individual's level of knowledge, and their virtues. For example: “高人” (master, very able person), “高士” (eminent person, high-minded individual, man of noble character), “高手” (skilled person, expert). Italian translations of these expressions, however, do not explicitly mention the concept of “high” but rather employ alternative expressions, such as “persone influenti” (influential figures), “nobile” (noble), “dotto” (scholar), “Maestro” (master), and “talento indiscusso” (undisputed talent). Despite the absence of the direct translation of the concept of “high” in these expressions, it is noteworthy that in Italian, the adjective “alto” (high) can be used metaphorically too. It is employed to signify significant social status, as in “di alto rango” (of high rank), to convey noble character, as in “uomo di alto ingegno” (person of noble character), and to metaphorically denote difficulty, as in “sono concetti troppo alti per lui” (these are concepts too high for him).

“低” (low) functions as the antonym of “高,” (high) signifying the “lowest point.” For example: “谷底” (fondovalle; valore minimo, massimo punto di depressione; il livello più basso). This is clearly shown also in the following sentence:

1) 产品销售量大幅度下降, 目前已跌至谷底。La quantità del venduto è scesa di molto e

attualmente è al minimo.

4.3 “Before” and “After”

Spatial metaphors involve applying the concept of spatial direction to other domains.

The term “前” (before, ahead) embodies a positive, forward-looking attitude towards the future, reflecting an upward, proactive mental state that indicates confidence in and aspiration for the future. On the other hand, “后” (after, back) often expresses a conservative, backward, and negative life attitude. In practical language usage, “前” generally conveys a state of positivity, progress, excellence, and beauty, while “后” typically denotes a state of negativity, backwardness, mediocrity, and weakness.

Simultaneously, “前” denotes a public state, while “后” signifies a non-public, secretive, or undisclosed aspect, for example “后账” (undisclosed account), whose Italian translation is “contabilità in nero, conto nascosto”. This concept also exists in Italian, for instance: “fare qualcosa dietro le quinte” (to do something behind the scenes) signifies discreetly doing something without others' knowledge. In Italian, “sotto” (under) is also frequently used to express elements that need to be hidden or kept undisclosed. For example “esserci qualcosa sotto” (there's something underneath) suggest assumptions of someone trying to conceal facts or the detection of conspiracy, fraud, or deception. Phrases like “qui ci dev'essere sotto qualcosa” (there must be something underneath) and “qui c'è sotto qualche mistero” (there's definitely some mystery underneath) are also commonly employed.

Space metaphors also manifest as people's perception of the direction of time. Terms such as “前” (front) and “后” (back) are indeed utilized not only to express spatial relations but also temporal ones. Time is frequently metaphorically construed as space, wherein the past is often regarded as “behind us,” and the future as “in front of us”, so “前” (davanti) generally denotes advancement and the future, while “后” (dietro) signifies backwardness and the past. Chinese frequently employ directional terms to signify the temporal orientation. For instance, “过去” (past) and “未来” (future). This spatialized temporal metaphor is also manifested in language through expressions such as “前进” (move forward to the future) and “回顾” (look back at the past). Concepts of moving forward and backward are also

commonly utilized to denote the passage of time in various expressions, such as “前进到未来” (move forward to the future). Italian, although having very similar concepts, does not always emphasize directional differences. In Italian, expressions regarding the temporal orientation are often more direct, for example “前途” in Italian is simply translated as “futuro, prospettive”, “后代” is translated as “le future generazioni” and “后尘” as “scia, esempio, modello”.

Even though using different space and time expressions, both languages tend to utilize linear concepts to represent time, viewing it as an ordered sequence. In Chinese, vocabulary like “时间线” (timeline) is commonly used to denote the linear concept of time. Similarly, Italian also employs expressions that denote the linearity of time, such as “la linea del tempo” (timeline).

4.4 Time and Life as a Pathway

Direction and time are frequently employed in the same metaphorical expressions. Specifically, time is often perceived as linear, resembling a path that progresses either forward or backward, akin to a line stretching out. The concept of a timeline is a prevalent cognitive model where people envision time as a linear path, allowing them to organize and comprehend the sequential occurrence of events. Time, akin to a moving object, exists either in our present moment or beneath our feet, representing the current. Alternatively, time extends beyond us, moving from the present towards the future or returning from the present to the past. This conceptualization exists in both languages, although it is arguably more pronounced in Chinese than in Italian.

The concept of the pathway gives rise to numerous metaphorical expressions that encompass the passage of time, the flow of life, and, more broadly, the implications for all possibilities and choices in life, or the various roads and paths that can be taken in life. Consequently, life is a journey unfolding along a pathway and a timeline.

For example, in the Chinese language, “道路” not only carries the specific meaning of “road” but also conveys concrete meanings such as “career, direction, clue, manner, and form.” From this point of view, the metaphorical meanings in Italian and Chinese are remarkably similar. In both languages, the concepts of “road” and “path” can be understood both

literally and metaphorically. For example: “途程” (cammino), “途径” (via, canale, strada), “十字路口” (incrocio, bivio), 轨道 (rotaia; ordine, corso, retta via), 坦途 (cammino spianato). This is clearly shown also in the following sentences in Italian and Chinese:

- 1) 人类进化的途程。Il cammino dell'evoluzione umana.
- 2) 探索和平解决的途径。Esplorare la via di una soluzione pacifica.
- 3) 通过各种途径增进两国人民之间的友谊。Si è cercata ogni via per rafforzare l'amicizia fra i due popoli.
- 4) 处在十字路口儿。Trovare al bivio.
- 5) 攀登科学高峰, 既无捷径, 又无坦途。Non ci sono scorciatoie o strade dirette per le vette della scienza.

In the metaphorical sense, the concept of paths and roads can also be observed in expressions with a slightly negative connotation in both Chinese and Italian, such as taking the wrong path, heading in the wrong direction, or going against the current. For example “歧途” (strada sbagliata, cattiva strada), “误入歧途” (andare per la cattiva strada) and “死胡同” (vicolo cieco).

Evidently, in this last example, it is challenging to provide a translation that precisely corresponds to the Chinese expression, as the “胡同” (hutong) is a distinctive cultural element unique to Beijing. In Chinese, there is also a more generic synonym, namely “死路” (literally “dead road”), which bears a closer resemblance to the Italian expression. However, in Italian, we do not refer to “dead roads”; instead, the term “vicolo cieco” (blind alley) is used to convey the idea of a path that cannot be traversed any further or seen beyond, signifying a closed-off and impassable route.

In both Italian and Chinese, there exist expressions related to walking and footsteps, closely tied to metaphorical representations of “paths”. These expressions are employed to describe movements made along these pathways within the journey of life and time. For example:

- 1) 前后脚儿。L'uno dopo l'altro, in rapida successione.
- 2) 我们俩前后脚儿进的门。Siamo entrati l'uno dietro l'altro.
- 3) 寸步难行。Non poter avanzare di un passo, (fig.) essere incapaci di fare qualunque cosa.
- 4) 力争实现生产、税利和财政收入同步增长。

Sforzarsi di far crescere di pari passo la produzione, il prelievo fiscale e le entrate finanziarie.

The concept of spatial distance is also employed to convey the distance or proximity of some entities on the timeline. There are certain words and idiomatic expressions that convey the notion of spatial extension, such as “远大前程” (a vast future) in Chinese. Similarly, in Italian, comparable expressions exist, as exemplified by “un obiettivo lontano, ma raggiungibile” (a distant but attainable goal).

Both in Chinese and Italian, metaphors related to the concepts of paths and roads are applicable not only to time and life but can also extend to the realms of argumentation and contemplation. This is because thoughts can be seen as something in motion, developing along a path or logical thread. For example: “思路” (literally “thought thread”) which can be translated into “filo dei pensieri” and more often “flusso di pensiero”.

- 1) 打断思路 Interrompere il filo dei pensieri
- 2) 难以弄清他演说的思路。È difficile seguire il filo del suo discorso.
- 3) 她的思路很清楚。Il suo pensiero è chiaro.

Hence, to convey shifts in discourse, alterations in ideas, moments of hesitation, or a departure from the main theme, expressions evoking the concepts of deviation, indirectness, and meandering can be employed. For instance, in Chinese and Italian, the expressions “拐弯抹角” (go round in circles) and “fare giri di parole” suggest speaking or writing in a manner that is not straightforward or direct. It can be seen in the following examples as well:

- 1) 拐弯 Svoltare, cambiare idea
- 2) 他思想一时还拐不过弯儿来。Per il momento ancora non si decide a sentire ragioni.
- 3) 离题十万八千里。Completamente fuori tema.

4.5 Sky

Sometimes prolonged period of time might be metaphorically equated with a greater distance, while a brief period is associated with closer proximity. Therefore, in the analysis of metaphorical expressions related to space and time, we find it interesting to analyze those containing the word “天” (sky/heaven), particularly concerning the concept of broadness or expansiveness. It is noteworthy that in Italian expressions conveying the same meaning, the

term “cielo” (sky) is absent, and instead, the word “mondo” (world) is used. For example, “un mondo” (literally meaning “a world”) is employed as an adverb to signify a profound degree, as in the expression “Mi sono divertito un mondo” (literally meaning “I had fun a world,” conveying the idea of thoroughly enjoying oneself).

To convey the concept of vastness and breadth inherent in the character “天,” Italian also employs adjectives such as “lontano” (distant), “distante” (remote), and phrases like “da tutte le parti” (from all sides), and “ovunque” (everywhere). For example “天边” (in capo al mondo), “天南地北” (agli antipodi, lontano, distante; da tutte le parti; di tutto un pò), “天底下” (in terra, nel mondo), “海阔天空” (di discorso, immaginazione, ampio come il mare e il cielo; senza limiti o restrizioni), “天外” (lontanissimo), “顶天” (massimo, estremo), “天涯海角” (in capo al mondo, luoghi lontanissimi), “欢天喜地” (estremamente felice).

It is shown also in the following sentences:

- 1) 为了把她找回来，我天边儿也要去。Andrei in capo al mondo pur di riportarla indietro.
- 2) 他们哥儿俩天南地北，见一次面不容易。I due fratelli abitano agli antipodi e non riescono a vedersi spesso.
- 3) 他们俩原是老同学，现在天南地北，几十年没见过面。Erano compagni di scuola loro due ma sono stati lontani così a lungo che non si son visti per decenni.
- 4) 天底下哪儿有这种道理！Una cosa del genere non si è mai sentita.
- 5) 他们俩碰到一起，总是海阔天空地聊起来没个完。Loro due, quando si incontrano, cominciano a parlare per ore e ore.
6. 天外有天，人外有人。Non ci sono limiti alla conoscenza o alla capacità umana.
- 7) 哪怕是到天涯海角，我也要把他找回来。Lo ritroverò, dovessi andare in capo al mondo.
- 8) 一家人欢天喜地给爷爷过生日。Tutta la famiglia celebrò il compleanno del nonno in grande allegria.

An interesting example is “天价” (sky-high price), which can be translated into “prezzi alle stelle”. In Italian, to convey the idea of high prices, individuals directly use the expression “prezzi alle stelle” (literally “prices to the stars”), implying costs elevated to a level comparable to the height of the stars, or even reaching the

heavens. Therefore, despite the slight differences in the expressions between the two languages, their underlying logic remains the same. Example:

1) 艺术摄影开天价。 I prezzi delle fotografie artistiche sono alle stelle.

4.6 Duration of Time

In Italian and Chinese, expressions describing prolonged durations share similarities as well as differences, often utilizing expressions like a hundred years, a lifetime, a century, or a thousand years, or adjective like “lungo”, “duraturo” and “raro”:

- 1) 百年 cent'anni, un secolo, una vita
- 2) 百年好合 duratura armonia coniugale
- 3) 百年之后 fra cent'anni [dopo morto]
- 4) 百年大业 causa di importanza duratura
- 5) 祝你们百年好合。Ti auguro una vita lunga e armoniosa.
- 6) 百年不遇的大雪。Una nevicata come non si vedeva da cent'anni.
- 7) 千载难逢 estremamente raro
- 8) 千载一时 che si presenta una volta ogni mille anni
- 9) 十年九不遇 raro

“半天” is as well one of the Chinese expression for which an accurate direct Italian translation cannot be found. People tend to use expressions like “a lungo” and “un bel po'” or exaggerate by saying “una giornata intera” (an entire day) or “per tutto il giorno” (for the entire day). For example:

- 1) 他半天说不出话来。Rimase a lungo zitto.
- 2) 等了半天，他才来了。Dopo una lunga attesa finalmente arrivò.
- 3) 我给你解释了这么半天，你还不明白。Anche se sono stato a spiegartelo per tutto questo tempo non hai ancora capito.

In Italian and Chinese, there are notable differences also in expressions used to depict brief moments in time, stemming from distinct conceptualizations, such as: “寸阴” (attimo, istante), “旦夕” (questa mattina o questa sera; breve tempo) and “旦夕之间” (in breve tempo).

Simultaneously, there are also expressions like “一刻” (a moment) or “一瞬间” (a blink) that exist both in Chinese and Italian, serving as metaphors for extremely brief periods of time like “分秒” (second), which can be translated

into “secondo” or “singolo istante”, like in the following examples:

- 1) 分秒必争 non perdere un secondo, lottare contro il tempo
- 2) 时间不烧人，分秒赛黄金。Il tempo non perdona, ogni istante è prezioso come l'oro.

The duration of time can also be intricately linked to the distance in space, especially in Chinese. These expressions describe the size of geographical space rather than the magnitude of time, while the Italian translations for these expressions are “per sempre” (forever) and “eterno” (eternal).

- 1) 天长地久 Durare per sempre (spec. di amore) essere eterno come il cielo e la terra
- 2) 愿你们的爱情天长地久。Mi auguro che il vostro amore duri per sempre.
- 3) 海誓山盟 promessa d'amore eterno.

However, generally speaking, metaphors arising from the observation of natural events are usually easily comprehensible in both languages. The continuity and unstoppable nature of time, whether in Chinese or Italian, are metaphorically likened to the flowing river, “长河” (“long river”, translated as “flusso interminabile” and “lungo percorso”).

The Italian word “scorrere” (to flow) is used to depict the disappearance of time. For instance, “Il tempo scorre come un fiume inesorabile” translates to “Time flows like an inexorable river.” In Italian, there are also other metaphors expressing the passage and compression of time. Indeed, in addition to the verb “scorrere,” the Italian language employs “volare” (to fly) to describe the passage of time, especially when people are experiencing something enjoyable. Expressions like “il tempo vola” (time flies) and “il tempo vola quando ci si diverte” (time flies when one is having fun) illustrate this concept. Similarly, Chinese also utilizes vivid vocabulary to convey the passage of time, such as “光阴似箭” (time flies like an arrow), “时光荏苒” (time passes swiftly), and “风驰电掣” (swift as the wind and quick as lightning).

Because of the historical significance of agriculture in China, the succession of seasons holds great importance for this culture. For this reason, in Chinese many expressions used to describe the passage of time are often associated with seasons. As it can be seen in the aforementioned examples, this phenomenon is not present in the Italian language: “千秋” (mille

anni, millennio), “三秋” (tre anni), “寒暑” (estati e inverni, anni).

1) 一日不见, 如隔三秋。Un giorno senza vedersi, è lungo tre anni.

2) 经历了几十个寒暑。Trascorsero molti anni.

3) 经过十个寒暑才完成一部字典。Dopo ben dieci anni interi finalmente è terminata la stesura del dizionario.

4) 寒来暑往 passare del tempo.

To describe brief moments of time there are also expressions related to body parts which can be found in both languages and which are remarkably similar. For example, the expression “in uno schioccar di dita” (in the snap of fingers), describing the swift passage of time, exists in both languages: “弹指” (in uno schioccar di dita, in un batter d’occhio; in un istante).

In Chinese, there are instances where breathing is also used to depict the brevity of time, while in Italian, people often say “in un soffio” (in a whiff). Although Chinese and Italian don’t use the exact same words, the underlying logic is very similar:

1) 成败在呼吸之间。Alla riuscita manca un soffio.

In both languages there are many other peculiar expressions related to the body. For example, in Italian there is another expression involving a body part, “in un batter d’occhio” (in the blink of an eye), which corresponds directly to the Chinese idiom “一眨眼的功夫” (in the blink of an eye), while the Chinese idiom “俯仰之间” (literally “between bowing and looking up”) lacks a comparable counterpart in Italian instead.

4.7 Age

Many metaphorical expressions related to age show significant similarities differences between the two languages.

In Chinese, the phrase “花季” (flower season) symbolizes youth. In Italian there is a corresponding meaning, as the word “fiore” (flower) carries a metaphorical significance as “the best or chosen part”. In an abstract sense, it is employed in expressions like “il fiore degli anni, della vita” (the flower of years, of life) and “essere nel fiore dell’età” (literally “to be in the flower of age”), connoting the most beautiful period, namely, youth.

1) 十六岁花季少女 giovinetta sedicenne in fiore

2) 花季少年 giovinetto

However, this resemblance is not evident when it comes to expressions referring to old age. For example, in Chinese culture, reaching the age of 60 is often considered a significant milestone, and the term “花甲” is commonly used to refer to someone who has reached this age. It is derived from the combination of the characters 花 meaning “flower,” and 甲 meaning “armor” or “shell,” symbolizing the completion of a full life cycle. In Italian it is simply translated as “sessant’anni” (sixty years).

1) 年逾花甲 aver superato i sessant’anni, ultra sessantenne

2) 花甲之年 sessantesimo anno di età.

5. Future Directions and Conclusions

While Chinese and Italian exhibit specific differences in their expressions, both languages overall demonstrate the profound impact of temporal and spatial metaphors on cognition, illustrating how people’s perceptions of time and space are shaped by language. These differences also reflect influences from culture, history, and language structure. By comparing words and expressions used to express temporal and spatial concepts in these two languages, we indeed delve into the distinct and unique cognitions and understandings of human experience in both cultures, since all the differences in the spatial metaphorical expressions reflect the influence of cultural and cognitive patterns.

This analysis provides an interesting background and theoretical foundation for subsequent analysis and research which can be useful for a more comprehensively exploration of their implications for communication between two very different languages and cultures.

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