A Study on the Application of Metonymy in English Poetry

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Abstract: This paper takes English poetry as the object of study and examines the application of metonymy in English poetry. This paper focuses on the development of the definition of metonymy. According to the historical development of English poetry, this paper probes into the application of metonymy in the representative works of English poetry in different periods.

Keywords: Metonymy; Noumenon; Simile body; English poetry

1. Introduction

Aristotle, in his poetics, classifies metonymy as a type of metaphor, a figure of speech [1]. Metonymy was first recorded in the Wuyue Spring and Autumn Annals. The book "Metaphor We Live By" has epoch-making significance, and metonymy began to be regarded as a cognitive way for discussions in the field of linguistics [3]. The earliest English poetry dates back to the 5th century AD. This paper selects representative works of English poetry in Old English, Middle English, and Modern English, and explores the application of metonymy in these works.

2. The definition of metonymy

2.1. Definition of metonymy in rhetoric

According to the Online Etymology Dictionary, a metonymy is a figure of speech in which the name of one thing is replaced by another implied or closely related name [4]. The Encyclopedia Britannica similarly classifies metonymy as a figure of speech and defines it as the replacement of the name of an object or concept with a word that is closely related to or implied by the original word, as shown in Example 1 [5]. Example 1 uses the crown to refer to the king.

Example 1: The power of the crown was mortally weakened.

Metonymy can be translated into Chinese as *Zhuanyu*. Chen clearly defined metonymy for the first time in Rhetoric Fanfan as "even if the said thing has no resemblance to other things, if there is an inseparable relationship between the two, the author can also use the name of the related thing to replace the said thing, which is called borrowing" [6]. Wang further elaborated the definition of borrowing in a talk on the art of Chinese rhetoric [7]. He defined the things to be represented as "noumenon", the things to be borrowed as "borrowings", and the relationship between "noumenon" and "borrowings" as "relevance". "Noumenon", "borrowings", and "relevance" are the three elements that make up the derivation, as shown in Examples 2 and 3.

Example 2: Open the window facing the field, drink wine, and talk about mulberry and hemp. (Passing by an Old Friend's Farm, by Meng Haoran)

Example 3: People in the Luoyang alleys and lanes turn around; silk and bamboo sounds flutter into blue skies. (Song of the Golden Valley Garden, by Wei Yingwu)

In Example 2, the borrowed word "mulberry and hemp" refers to the word "farming." Mulberry refers to mulberry tree and hemp. Ancient people planted mulberry trees for sericulture and silk reeling, and hemp was planted to extract fiber and make clothing. Therefore, the two specific plants of mulberry and hemp refer to all crops, and all crops are further extended to refer to farming. The borrowed word "silk and bamboo" in Example 3 refers to "music." Silk and bamboo were important raw materials for making string and wind instruments respectively in ancient times, so it refers to music.

As a rhetorical device, borrowing can enhance the expression effect of language. In the rhetorical devices of borrowing, the use of "borrowing form" can enhance the figurative character of language expression and arouse readers' association. In the same way, it can also fully reflect the variation of language expression, so that the language expression is flexible, vivid, and humorous. In addition, it can also make the language expression more concise. This can achieve the language expression image with a prominent, lively, and vivid effect. Through the use of "borrowing" and the expression effect achieved by "borrowing", the characteristics of "ontology" can be effectively highlighted. Thus, it leaves a distinct and profound impression on the reader.

2.2. Definition of metonymy in cognitive linguistics

Lakoff and Johnson explored metonymy as a cognitive mode in the field of linguistics in the book Metaphors We Live By. Therefore, the understanding and research of metonymy is not only limited to traditional rhetoric but also extends to the field of cognitive linguistics.

Lakoff and Johnson put forward conceptual metonymy and argued that conceptual metonymy is the use of an entity to refer to another entity related to it, which mainly has the function of referring, as shown in Examples 4 and 5.

Example 4: The ham sandwich is waiting for his check.

Example 5: We need some good hands.

In Example 4, "the ham sandwich" is a food entity. In this example, the food entity "ham sandwich" refers to the person entity "the customer who ordered the ham sandwich", that is, the food metonymy character is used. In Example 5, "hands" refers to "people", and "hands", a part of the human body, refers to the whole entity of "person", that is, a part is used to refer to the whole.

Hernandez-Gomariz proposed metonymic triggers and metonymic constraints [8]. Wachowski points out that metonymy is a conceptual phenomenon, cognitive process, and adjacency [9]. Mate Toth provides a detailed classification of metonymy [10]. Littlemore argues that metonymy can realize a variety of communicative functions and achieve better communicative effects as shown in Example 6 [11].

Example 6: The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings.

In Example 6, the "stars" of physical existence refer to the abstract concept of "fate" or "destiny", meaning the physical entity refers to the abstract concept. In this example, metonymy is used to concretize the abstract concept, so that the reader can better understand the concept of fate by referring to the entity of the star.

3. The use of metonymy in English poetry

According to the evolution of the English language, Wang divides the development of British poetry into three stages: the Old English period (5th–12th century), the Middle English period (12th–15th century), and the Modern English period (15th century to the present) [12].

3.1. The application of metonymy to poetry in Old English

In the Old English period, heroic legends were the main themes of poems, such as Beowulf. Old English poetry used a variety of rhetorical devices, including metonymy, as shown in Example 7.

Example 7: Their ocean-keel boarding, they drove through the deep, and Daneland left. A sea-cloth was set, a sail with ropes, firm to the mast; the flood-timbers moaned; nor did wind over billows that wave-swimmer blow across from her course. (Beowulf [13])

Example 7 excerpts from the Old English epic Beowulf. Beowulf is a typical representative of Old English poetry and is regarded as the national epic of the Anglo-Saxons. There are a lot of metonymy used in this epic. In Example 7, the poet uses "ocean-keel" and "wave-swimmer" to refer to "the whole hull"; "sea-cloth" to refer to "sail"; and "flood-timbers" to "ship's plate." The metonymy in Example 7 makes the linguistic expression of the poem more vivid and can fully attract the reader's attention, and provides a new perspective for readers to better understand the "hull" and "hull part."

3.2. The application of metonymy in Middle English poetry

After the "Norman Conquest" in 1066, the French language had a great influence on the development of Middle English poetry. Middle English poetry produced a large number of narrative poems. The themes of poetry are chivalry, love, and morality. The works include Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and The Pearl. Metonymy is also used extensively in poetry of this period as shown in Example 8.

Example 8: At the foot of it sat a child, a courteous maiden, most gracious; her mantle was shining white; I knew her well; I had seen her before. (Pearl [14])

In Example 8, the poet uses "maiden" to refer to her "lost daughter"; and "white" to "pure". Through the use of metonymy, the poet makes the image of his daughter more vivid and concrete.

3.3. The application of metonymy in modern English poetry

English poetry in the modern English period has various themes, rich contents, and different styles. According to the course of time, English poetry can be divided into Renaissance, metaphysical poetry, Neoclassicism, Romanticism, realism, and modernism. Representative works include "The Flea", "Ode to a Nightingale", and "Easter, 1916". Metonymy in poetry of this period is even more numerous, as shown in Example 9.

Example 9:
To please a companion
Around the fire at the club,
Being certain that they and I
But lived where motley is worn:
All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.
(Easter, 1916 [15])

In Example 9, the poet uses "motley" to mean "motley of people." Through the use of metonymy, the poet provides the reader with a more three-dimensional image.

4. Conclusion

By introducing the definition of metonymy in traditional rhetoric and cognitive linguistics, this paper reviews the understanding and research process of metonymy definition. Taking English poetry as the research object, this paper discusses the application of metonymy in the representative works of English poetry in Old English, Middle English, and Modern English periods. Hence, this study provides a reference for the study of metonymy in poetry.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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