

UAI JOURNAL OF ARTS, HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES (UAJAHSS)



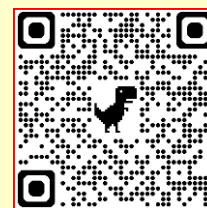
Abbreviated Key Title: UAI J Arts Humanit Soc Sci

ISSN: 3048-7692 (Online)

Journal Homepage: <https://uaipublisher.com/uaijahss/>

Volume- 3 Issue- 9 (September) 2026

Frequency: Monthly



Metaphorical Meanings of White in English and Chinese: A Cognitive Linguistic Contrast

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ABSTRACT

Background: Color terms provide a productive domain for examining how embodied perception and culture jointly shape figurative meaning. The basic color term white is especially suitable for cross-linguistic comparison because it has perceptually grounded meanings in both English and Chinese while also participating in culture-specific symbolic systems. *Aims:* This study identifies and compares the major metaphorical meanings of white in English and Chinese and explains the cognitive and cultural motivations underlying their convergence and divergence. *Methodology:* English expressions were drawn from the Cambridge Dictionary and Oxford Learner's Dictionary, and Chinese expressions were drawn from the CCL Modern Chinese Corpus of Peking University. Candidate expressions were screened with the Metaphor Identification Procedure and interpreted within Conceptual Metaphor Theory. The final dataset contains 22 English and 21 Chinese metaphorical instances, coded for source domain, target domain, evaluative meaning, and mapping mechanism, and then compared contrastively. *Results/Findings:* Both languages show mappings from brightness to cognitive clarity, spotlessness to moral purity, and blankness to emptiness or absence. Chinese further develops highly conventionalized mappings from white to death and mourning and from blankness to futility, whereas English develops distinctive mappings involving deception or concealment and legitimacy or authorized status. *Conclusion:* The findings support a dual account of color metaphor: shared embodied experience constrains recurrent cross-linguistic mappings, while culturally specific traditions and social practices selectively elaborate different target domains. The study also shows the value of applying explicit metaphor-identification criteria to contrastive color-term research.

KEY WORDS: Cognitive linguistics, Color metaphor, Conceptual metaphor, Cross-linguistic comparison, White.

1. Introduction

Metaphor is not limited to rhetorical ornamentation; it is a basic cognitive mechanism through which speakers understand abstract experience in terms of more concrete domains. Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) treats metaphor as a systematic mapping between a source domain and a target domain, with many mappings

grounded in recurrent bodily and perceptual experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1993; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). From this perspective, color terms are particularly revealing because color perception is concrete and embodied, whereas the meanings extended from color frequently concern abstract domains such as morality, cognition, emotion, social status, and institutional evaluation. Broader cognitive-linguistic work on categorization

likewise emphasizes the structured relation between perceptual salience and conceptual organization (Langacker, 1987, 2008; Taylor, 2003).

The color white is a strong candidate for cross-linguistic analysis. Research on basic color terms has shown that white belongs to the most fundamental layer of color categorization across languages (Berlin & Kay, 1969). Kay and McDaniell (1978) further connected basic color categories to properties of human vision, while prototype research demonstrated the cognitive salience of focal colors (Rosch, 1975). These findings provide an experiential basis for expecting some cross-linguistic convergence. Brightness, cleanliness, and the visual blankness of white are perceptual properties available to speakers across cultures, and these properties can motivate recurring metaphorical extensions.

At the same time, the figurative meaning of color cannot be explained by perception alone. CMT has consistently emphasized that culture can elaborate, suppress, or reorganize mappings that begin from shared experience (Kövecses, 2005, 2010). Research on English color terms has documented strong evaluative and figurative associations of white, including meanings related to purity, benevolence, institutional status, concealment, and conventional phraseology (Allan, 2009; Philip, 2011). Wierzbicka (1990) highlights the interaction between semantics, cognition, and culture in color meaning, while Hamilton (2016) shows that English color expressions may involve both metaphorical and metonymic processes. The distinction matters because a valid conceptual-metaphor analysis requires evidence of a cross-domain relation rather than simple association within one conceptual domain (Goossens, 1990).

Cognitive approaches to metaphor have also expanded beyond isolated lexical examples. Recent work has examined the operation of conceptual metaphors in literary discourse and in educational contexts, further demonstrating that metaphor is both a linguistic and a conceptual phenomenon (Dolores, 2024; Kimberley & Evangelia, 2023). Methodological advances are equally important: explicit identification procedures make it possible to distinguish literal and metaphorical uses more systematically and to improve the replicability of corpus-based metaphor research (Pragglejaz Group, 2007; Steen et al., 2010).

Chinese scholarship provides a complementary foundation for contrastive analysis. Early work on Chinese color terms established the status and historical development of basic color vocabulary, including *bái*, meaning white (Yao, 1988; Liu, 1990). Cognitive-linguistic frameworks for metaphor and categorization in Chinese were subsequently developed in monographs and theoretical studies (Lan, 2005; Shu, 2000; Wang, 2007; Zhao, 2001). More focused work has shown that Chinese *bái* combines shared meanings such as purity and clarity with culture-specific extensions involving futility, mourning, and social evaluation (Chen, 2007; Jin, 2012). Recent discussion of extended conceptual metaphor theory and the embodied basis of metaphor further reinforces the need to analyze both experiential grounding and culturally situated elaboration (Huang, 2024; Lin, 2024).

Despite this substantial background, three limitations remain salient. First, white is often treated as one item in broader surveys of color terms rather than as a focused system of metaphorical mappings. Second, English-Chinese comparisons frequently identify cultural differences without applying an explicit metaphor-identification procedure to the data. Third, the relation between shared embodied mappings and language-specific cultural elaboration is often

described impressionistically rather than organized by target domain and mapping mechanism. The present study addresses these issues through a focused comparison of metaphorical white in English and Chinese.

The study has three aims. It first identifies and classifies conventional metaphorical expressions containing English white and Chinese *bái*. It then compares the two systems to determine which target domains are shared and which are language-specific. Finally, it interprets the similarities and differences in terms of embodied experience and cultural motivation. The analysis is qualitative and contrastive rather than frequency-based; therefore, the retained examples are treated as evidence of attested mapping patterns rather than as estimates of population frequency.

2. Method and Materials

2.1 Research Design and Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a qualitative contrastive design within cognitive linguistics. CMT provides the principal analytical framework: a color expression is treated as metaphorical when a property associated with the source domain of whiteness is systematically projected onto a distinct abstract target domain. The analysis therefore focuses on the relation among source-domain properties, target-domain meanings, and the conceptual motivation linking them. Evaluative orientation (positive, negative, or context-dependent) is considered a descriptive feature, but target-domain mapping is the primary unit of comparison.

Because color expressions can also be metonymic, the analysis distinguishes cross-domain metaphor from within-domain association. Following the logic articulated in work on metaphor-metonymy interaction (Goossens, 1990) and in explicit metaphor-identification research (Pragglejaz Group, 2007; Steen et al., 2010), expressions were retained only when the contextual meaning of white or *bái* contrasted with a more basic chromatic or perceptual meaning and could be understood by comparison with that basic meaning.

2.2 Data Sources and Sampling

The English materials were collected from the Cambridge Dictionary and Oxford Learner's Dictionary. The Chinese materials were drawn from the CCL Modern Chinese Corpus of Peking University and include conventional expressions attested in idiomatic, literary, and everyday usage. The source dataset retained one representative example for each core expression, with one or two examples used only when necessary to capture a recurrent metaphorical context. After screening, the dataset comprised 22 English and 21 Chinese metaphorical instances.

Table 1. Data sources and sample

Language	Data source and retained sample
English	Cambridge Dictionary; Oxford Learner's Dictionary. 22 retained metaphorical instances.
Chinese	CCL Modern Chinese Corpus, Peking University. 21 retained metaphorical instances.

2.3 Metaphor Identification and Coding

The identification procedure followed four operational steps. First,

each candidate expression containing white or bái was read in context. Second, the contextual meaning of the color term was compared with its more basic meaning related to visible whiteness or a directly associated perceptual state. Third, the expression was retained as metaphorical when the contextual meaning contrasted with the basic meaning but could be interpreted through a cross-domain comparison. Fourth, the retained item was coded for source domain, target domain, metaphorical connotation, and mapping mechanism. This procedure follows the core logic of MIP (Pragglejaz Group, 2007) while using CMT to organize the resulting cross-domain mappings (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2010).

For English, representative retained expressions include white lie, whitewash, white flag, white elephant, white-collar, white knight, white hat, whitelist, white heat, white wedding, snow-white, white magic, lily-white, white-glove, and white paper. For Chinese, representative items include báimáng (work in vain), báifèi (waste effort), báishì (funeral affairs), qīngbái (moral innocence), jiébái (purity), zhēnxiàng dàbái (the truth becomes fully clear), tǎnbái (frankness), báishǒu qǐjiā (start from nothing), báijuàn (blank examination paper), báidīng (an uneducated commoner), and báitiáo (an informal IOU).

2.4 Contrastive Procedure

The contrastive analysis proceeded from individual expressions to recurring target-domain patterns. A mapping was treated as shared when both languages projected a comparable perceptual property of whiteness onto the same abstract domain, even if the lexical realizations were not direct translation equivalents. A mapping was treated as divergent when one language systematically elaborated a target domain that was not comparably developed in the other. The interpretation then considered whether the mapping was plausibly motivated by common embodied experience—such as brightness, cleanliness, or blankness—or by culture-specific symbolism, ritual practice, social convention, or lexical construction.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Metaphorical Meanings of White in English

The English data demonstrate that white is not restricted to a single positive symbolism. Instead, different perceptual and conventional properties of whiteness support a network of evaluative, institutional, social, and affective meanings. One important cluster maps cleanliness or visual purity onto moral goodness. White wedding associates whiteness with bridal purity; white magic contrasts morally approved magic with harmful magic; and lily-white can characterize innocence or moral blamelessness. These expressions are consistent with the broader English tendency to associate white with positive moral evaluation described in earlier color-term research (Allan, 2009; Philip, 2011).

A second English cluster extends white into legitimacy, authorization, and formality. White knight and white hat evaluate a rescuer or ethical actor positively, while whitelist marks approved or permitted status. White-tie and white-glove encode highly formal or meticulous social practices, and white paper denotes an authoritative policy document. The mapping is not reducible to literal color reference: a culturally positive image of whiteness is projected onto institutional standing, approved status, or formal social value. The specific lexical realizations differ in origin, but they converge on the broader evaluative potential of white as authorized, proper, or respectable.

English also develops clearly negative or ambivalent mappings. White lie and whitewash extend whiteness into deception or

concealment. In white lie, the negative act of lying is mitigated by the positive evaluation of intention; the expression therefore combines deception with a residue of harmlessness or benevolence. Whitewash is more strongly negative: the physical act of coating a surface with white material motivates the abstract meaning of covering faults, errors, or wrongdoing. This is a direct cross-domain mapping from physical concealment to informational or moral concealment.

Other expressions project white onto surrender, emptiness, social classification, or intensity. White flag conventionalizes a visible white signal as surrender or truce. White elephant, white night, white bread, and white ant illustrate various extensions involving uselessness, absence, blandness, sleeplessness, or internal erosion; although these expressions do not all share an identical historical pathway, they show that white can participate in meanings of reduced content or negative evaluation. White-collar and white-shoe organize social or professional status, while white heat and white with fury use physiological or temperature-related whiteness to mark an extreme state. The English system is therefore semantically heterogeneous: its conventional metaphors draw on physical whiteness, socially stabilized symbols, and lexicalized cultural associations.

3.2 Metaphorical Meanings of Bái in Chinese

The Chinese data likewise combine positive and negative mappings, but the most productive patterns differ from English. Positive mappings center on cognitive clarity, moral purity, frankness, and self-reliance. Míngbái (understand) and zhēnxiàng dàbái (the truth becomes fully clear) project brightness or visibility onto understanding and revelation. Qīngbái (morally innocent) and jiébái (spotless or pure) project visual cleanliness onto moral integrity. Tǎnbái (frank or confess openly) associates openness with exposure to clear view, while báishǒu qǐjiā (start a business from nothing) uses the image of empty or unstained hands to represent self-made achievement.

The most distinctive Chinese negative mapping concerns futility. A productive bái + verb pattern marks an action as yielding no effective result: báimáng (work in vain), báifèi (waste effort), báigàn (work for nothing), báishuō (speak in vain), and báipǎo (make a trip for nothing). These items map the blankness or absence associated with white onto the absence of an outcome. The importance of the pattern lies not only in individual lexical items but in its systematicity: bái functions productively as a marker that an action leaves no meaningful result.

A second culturally distinctive mapping associates white with death and mourning. Báishì (white affairs) denotes funeral matters, and báifā sòng hēifā (white hair sends off black hair) refers to the tragedy of elderly parents burying a younger child. These meanings are interpreted through traditional Chinese ritual practice and the symbolic network of the Five Elements and five colors, in which white is connected with decline, separation, and funerary convention. Unlike the positive ceremonial role of white in many English wedding and religious contexts, this Chinese mapping places white in a strongly negative ritual domain.

Chinese bái also extends from blankness to emptiness, lack, ignorance, and compromised value. Yǐqióng èrbái describes a condition of poverty and lack of development; báijuàn denotes a blank examination paper and can imply absence of achievement; báidīng and báimiàn shùshēng encode lack of status, education, or practical experience; and dǎ báitiáo refers to an informal written promise that lacks the value of actual payment. Báiqí (white flag)

parallels English in the conventionalized domain of surrender. These patterns show that the Chinese metaphorical system repeatedly exploits the perceptual notion of an unmarked or empty white surface.

3.3 Shared Mapping Patterns

Despite substantial lexical and cultural differences, three shared mappings emerge clearly. The first maps brightness or visibility onto cognitive clarity. English expressions such as in black and white and white paper participate in a broader cultural association between visible clarity and epistemic certainty, while Chinese míngbái and zhēnxiàng dàbái lexicalize the connection particularly transparently. The common conceptual logic is that seeing clearly provides a bodily model for knowing or understanding clearly.

The second shared mapping connects spotlessness with moral purity. English white wedding, white magic, and lily-white and Chinese qīngbái and jiébái all draw on the perceptual salience of stains against a white surface. Physical cleanliness becomes a model for the absence of moral contamination. This mapping is especially compatible with the CMT claim that abstract evaluation often recruits recurrent sensorimotor experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Lin, 2024).

The third shared mapping associates blankness with absence or reduced content. English white space and expressions such as white noise or white elephant participate in meanings of absence, low informational value, or uselessness. Chinese develops the same basic conceptual resource in kòngbái (blank), báijuàn, and the bái + verb futility pattern. The two languages do not lexicalize the mapping in identical ways, but both use the perceptual experience of an unmarked white field as a source for conceptualizing lack.

Table 2. Principal shared mappings

Shared mapping	Representative expressions
Brightness/visibility → cognitive clarity	English: in black and white, white paper; Chinese: míngbái, zhēnxiàng dàbái.
Spotlessness → moral purity	English: white wedding, white magic, lily-white; Chinese: qīngbái, jiébái.
Blankness → absence/lack	English: white space, white noise, white elephant; Chinese: báijuàn, yīqióng èrbái, báifèi.

These similarities are best interpreted as constrained convergence rather than direct lexical equivalence. Shared human perception provides recurrent experiential structures, but each language conventionalizes only some of the possible extensions. The result supports an account in which embodiment supplies common conceptual affordances while linguistic and cultural history determine which mappings become entrenched.

3.4 Divergent Mappings and Cultural Motivation

The most striking Chinese-specific divergence is WHITE IS DEATH/MOURNING. The mapping is not a simple consequence of seeing the color white; it depends on a culturally stabilized ritual and cosmological system. Funeral clothing and the symbolic association of white with decline and separation make white an appropriate

source domain for death-related concepts in Chinese. English lacks an equivalent conventional metaphorical network and more often places white in positive ceremonial settings such as weddings. This contrast demonstrates how the same perceptual category can acquire opposite evaluative roles through different ritual histories.

A second Chinese-specific development is WHITE IS FUTILITY. English also uses white for forms of emptiness, but it does not have a comparably productive construction in which white systematically modifies verbs to mean “without result.” Chinese bái + verb forms such as báigàn, báishuō, and báipǎo represent an elaboration of the more general blankness-to-absence mapping. The metaphor therefore has both an embodied base and a language-specific grammatical-lexical realization.

English, conversely, develops WHITE IS DECEPTION/ CONCEALMENT. White lie and whitewash show two related but evaluatively different forms of this mapping: one softens deception by attributing benign intention, while the other represents deliberate covering of faults. Chinese bái does not form a comparable conventional network around deception. The English pattern appears to exploit both the positive moral residue of white and the physical possibility of covering a surface with white material.

English also develops WHITE IS LEGITIMACY/AUTHORIZED STATUS in expressions such as whitelist, white hat, and white knight. The mapping projects positive cultural evaluation onto institutional approval or ethical standing. Chinese has no directly comparable white-based system; its institutional or evaluative extensions are more strongly organized around clarity, purity, futility, emptiness, and ritual symbolism. This difference again suggests selective cultural elaboration rather than a fundamentally different perceptual basis.

Table 3. Principal divergent mappings

Divergent mapping	Representative expressions and interpretation
Chinese: white → death/mourning	báishì; báifā sòng hēifā. Ritual and cosmological symbolism.
Chinese: white → futility	báifèi; báigàn; báishuō. Blankness → no effective result.
English: white → deception/concealment	white lie, whitewash. Positive intention or physical covering → obscured truth.
English: white → legitimacy/authorization	whitelist, white hat, white knight. Positive cultural evaluation → approved or ethical status.

Taken together, the shared and divergent mappings support a two-level explanation. At the experiential level, brightness, cleanliness, and blankness are available to both linguistic communities and motivate comparable conceptual structures. At the cultural level, religious traditions, funerary practices, social institutions, lexical constructions, and historical conventions determine which structures become productive. This interaction is consistent with theories that treat metaphor as embodied but culturally variable rather than either fully universal or wholly arbitrary (Kövecses, 2005; Chen, 2007; Huang, 2024).

The findings also have implications for cross-cultural communication and translation. A literal color match does not guarantee equivalent figurative meaning. Translators and language learners must identify the target domain activated by a color expression rather than transfer its source-domain image mechanically. Expressions such as white lie and báifèi, or white wedding and báishì, demonstrate that formally similar color vocabulary may encode different evaluative and cultural frames. A cognitive account can make these differences more transparent by specifying the underlying mapping rather than treating each phrase as an isolated idiom.

4. Conclusion

This study compared metaphorical meanings of English white and Chinese bái using a dataset of 22 English and 21 Chinese expressions drawn from dictionaries and the CCL corpus. Three major shared mappings were identified: brightness or visibility to cognitive clarity, spotlessness to moral purity, and blankness to absence or lack. These commonalities are grounded in broadly shared perceptual experience and therefore support the embodied component of Conceptual Metaphor Theory.

The analysis also identified systematic divergence. Chinese develops conventional mappings from white to death and mourning and a productive bái + verb construction expressing futility. English develops distinctive mappings from white to deception or concealment and to legitimacy or authorized status. These differences are not random lexical gaps. They represent selective elaborations of the symbolic and experiential potential of white under different cultural, ritual, and social conditions.

The study is subject to several limitations. The English and Chinese datasets are not fully symmetrical: the English examples are dictionary-based, whereas the Chinese examples come from a corpus. The analysis is qualitative and does not measure token frequency, genre distribution, or statistical productivity. It also focuses on conventionalized expressions and therefore does not capture creative or emerging uses of white in contemporary discourse. Finally, the study examines only one basic color term, so its conclusions should not be generalized automatically to the entire color system.

Future research should use comparable corpora in both languages, report frequency and distributional evidence, and test the reliability of metaphor coding with multiple annotators. It would also be useful to examine creative metaphor in literary, digital, and conversational data and to extend the same analytical procedure to other basic colors such as black, red, and blue. Such work could clarify which aspects of color metaphor are recurrent consequences of embodiment and which are products of particular cultural histories.

Acknowledgement

The author gratefully acknowledges the guidance of the supervisor, Zhao Xiaofei, as well as the support provided by teachers, friends, roommates, and family during the development of the original undergraduate thesis on which this article is based.

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