

## An Eco-linguistic Perspective to Look at “Add Oil”

Lan He<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Tan Kah Kee College, Xiamen University, Zhangzhou, Fujian, China

<sup>a</sup>974865868@qq.com

\*correspondence author

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**Abstract:** “Add oil” is commonly used in Chinese to express encouragement, incitement or support with the meaning “go” or “go for it!” Currently, “add oil” has been included in Oxford English Dictionary, which is a significant event of a bit surprise. Since the Olympic Games held in Beijing in 2008, some translators have expected “Jiayou” to make its way into the English language. This paper attempts to justify “add oil” by taking an eco-linguistic perspective and making an analysis of the metaphorical implications of this expression. “Add oil”, which is based on the metaphor “A human is a vehicle”, reflects Chinese nation’s attitude towards Nature when interacting with environment. Compared with “go” in English used to express encouragement, which is based on the metaphor “Life is a journey”, “add oil” exhibits oriental color and language diversity. Its addition to English is proof of protecting metaphorical diversity worldwide in language.

### 1. Introduction

“Add oil”, as a commonly used phrase in Chinese, was included in October 2018, in the latest version of Oxford English Dictionary, which is a significant event to those Chinese who are devoted to translation in hope of spreading Chinese culture to the world.

According to Oxford English Dictionary<sup>[1]</sup>, “add oil” is chiefly Hong Kong English to express encouragement, incitement, or support with the meaning “go on!” or “go for it!”. The editor of this dictionary has listed its definitive four sources. Originally it is found to be used in *Hong Kong Surgeon* III.xi.187, in 1964, by LI SHU-FAN who wrote, “At frequent intervals he would say jokingly to his assistant next to him, ‘Ka Yow! ‘ ‘Ka Yow!’ meaning ‘add oil!’ ‘add oil!’” To make the Chinese interjection *Ka Yow* understandable, a complementary expression “*add oil*” is given to the reader.

Also, *Strait Times* (Singapore) of 25 July 1980 reported, “add oil... The children cheered themselves hoarse, shouting ‘Jia Yu’ (Mandarin for ‘add oil’) to their team members.”

However, on a very thrilling occasion, this Chinese interjection going with its explanation appears redundant; therefore, the English alone has to do the job. That is the case in the *South China Morning Post* of November 2005, “When a mainland Chinese athlete stepped into the arena, some children mistakenly thought he represent Macau and started chanting: ‘Macau team, add oil!’”

It follows that on 7 June of the year 2016, China Daily (Hong Kong ed.) (Nexis) reported, “If we are serious about being Asia’s World City, we still have a lot of work to do. So add oil, everyone!”

Naturally, “add oil” represents rich Chinese culture and the subsequent use of it helps to promote Chinese culture to the world. Hence immediately after it has become an expression included in Oxford English Dictionary, “add oil” is found in *China Daily* (HK Edition) of November 2018, which reported, “With the blessings of President Xi Jinping, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region is poised to ‘add oil’ to its unique strengths in accelerating the nation’s new round of reform and opening-up, according to members of the SAR’s delegation to Beijing and political analysts in Hong Kong.”<sup>[2]</sup>

As a matter of fact, in 2008, when the Olympic games were held in Beijing, “Jiayou” or “Jia Yu” was frequently heard in the arenas, which captured the foreign spectators’ attention and they became

fascinated by this Chinese phrase. In the same year, in *Chinese Scientific & Technology Translators Journal*<sup>[3]</sup> published a paper which compares “Jiayou” with “go” and ends with high expectation that “Jiayou” would make its way into the English dictionary. Along with that, Zhao Jun<sup>[4]</sup>, a college English teacher in Beijing then, examines “add oil”, “let’s go”, “never give up” and “step up efforts cheer”, and reaches the conclusion that none of these translations can be the equivalent of “Jiayou” in the source language and what we Chinese may await is that Jiayou would be an addition to the English vocabulary in due time. It may be a bit surprising to the Chinese translation circle when “add oil” made it instead of “Jiayou”, partly because translators are giving overwhelming priority to the cultural gap and assume that the suits of kongfu and jiaozi can be followed.

There is no doubt that “Jiayou” sounds Chinese and carries within itself a strong Chinese element, but foreigners without much knowledge of Chinese culture can hardly make any sense of it, not to mention distinguishing its cultural implication from those of other borrowed words like Jiaozi. It will take a long time for English speakers to accept it and come to use it. On the contrary, “add oil” can not only be recognized with ease but also applauded with interests in the English world, as it exhibits clearly its cultural implication from an eco-linguistic perspective.

In this paper, focus is given on the eco-linguistic perspective to look at language and analyze the metaphorical implication “add oil” carries within itself to the English speaking world so as to help provide the reader with some eco-linguistic insights and arouse in the reader the consciousness of protecting language diversity in the context of worldwide cultural integration.

## **2. The Eco-linguistic Perspective to Study Language**

Since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, language studies have turned to the natural environment to search for new perspectives to broaden the field of applied linguistics. In 1970, the American scholar Einar Haugen first developed the concept “Language Ecology”, attempting to construct a cross-discipline, which has drawn the attention of the world linguists and now rapidly developed into what is called eco-linguistics.

### **2.1. Eco-linguistics and its Language Research**

According to Einar Haugen, language is not merely a closed structure with rules determining the value of its words. Instead, it is like a creature in Nature. Being part of the environment like a creature, language is inseparable from the ecology. The discipline of eco-linguistics studies the relationships between language and environment.

In 1990, famous linguist Halliday proclaimed at an international linguistic conference that the study of applied linguistics can take an ecological perspective. Combining the principles in ecology with the study of linguistics, we may discover an open language system interacting with environment, and all language expressions can be found to have corresponding sources in the real world and language construes the world<sup>[5]</sup>.

Currently, eco-linguists tend to take four orientations in accordance with their different understandings of environment<sup>[6]</sup>. The first type orients their research to symbolic ecology to reveal different language interactions in a given location; the second type pays attention to social cultural ecology in the hope of finding the shaping role of language on a society; the third type makes an effort to explore the interactions between language and human cognitive ecology in order to discover how the cognitive ability affects human adaptation to environment; and the fourth type is dedicated to studying language in the natural environment so as to detect the influence of language on natural ecology.

As an merging discipline, eco-linguistics does not have linguistic theories and research approaches of its own. Theories of other disciplines are frequently applied to further its development.

In this paper, we are in line with the third type, and metaphorical theory of cognitive linguistics is applied to the study of language in view of how language interacts with the environment.

### **2.2. Metaphorical Theory and Eco-linguistic Perspective**

Since Lakoff and Johnson put forward their theory on metaphors, metaphors have played a

prominent role in the studying of human cognitive ability and how human beings use language to interact with environment.

Metaphors are the mode human beings live by. In essence, they are the ways and results of the construal experiences accumulated by human beings during the long process of interacting with the real world. And metaphorical cognition is the mapping or interacting between two conceptual domains. One is called the source domain, and the other is the target domain. The source domain concept is generally well-known to human beings, while the target domain concept is usually abstract and needs to be understood. By mapping the structure and properties of the source domain concept onto the target domain concept, it is possible or easier for human beings to understand the abstract concept's properties.

It can be said that metaphor not only makes an abstract concept tangible, but also constitute this abstract concept. For example, we Chinese usually refer to the Yellow River as our mother river. Here a metaphor is contained. Through automatic mapping we recognize the properties of the Yellow River as rich in resources, great in feeding us, and needing our caring and love. Whenever we talk about this river, we are filled with respect and gratitude.

Consider this example from a eco-linguistic perspective. The concept of “mother” serves as a bond between human beings and the river. When human beings behave properly by this mother river, she would reward us with harvest. When we disregard our caring and love for her to an extreme degree, she would punish us severely without any mercy. Anyway, it is certain that this metaphor suggests our ancestors' reliance on the river. If humans are children and the river is a mother, the mother sacrifices much more, according to Chinese culture. This metaphorical situation is understandable because in ancient times, when the environment for our ancestors to survive was too tough, they had to rely on a kind mother for her generosity. This metaphor reflects the true feeling our ancestors harbored and how they interacted with Nature.

### **3. The Eco-linguistic Perspective to Look at “Add Oil”**

In order to realize the world and make a good living in the world, human beings have created metaphors, which in return partly shape our minds and visions when we continue to interact with the world. It is true that some culturally rooted metaphors are proof of what attitude a nation once held to its environment. To preserve such metaphors is to preserve metaphorical diversity in language. “Add oil” is such a case.

#### **3.1. “Add Oil” Contains a Metaphor**

If we take a more careful look at “add oil”, we may see that it is actually a metaphor concerning our ancestors' mind and vision in their interaction with environment.

In the expression of “add oil”, human beings are compared to a tank or a vehicle. As we all know, if we want the vehicle to operate, we have to “add oil” to provide its engine with power. The power of the engine determines how far a vehicle can run. Therefore, to interpret this metaphor, we should know that “vehicle” is the source domain concept and “human being” is the target domain concept. One of the most important conditions that makes the vehicle go faster or keep going is to “add oil”. This property is mapped onto the target domain concept and we see how a human being gets his power when he has no power left or when he needs to keep going.

This can be testified by the fact that in the difficult situation when Wenchuan earthquake happened, we wished people there to gain power to struggle against the disaster by saying “add oil, Wenchuan!”. Meanwhile, in the Olympic Games held in Beijing, we encouraged those athletes to go fast or keep going by saying “Add oil, China!” The reason why this expression can be used in both a difficult situation and a cheerful event is that a vehicle has no human feelings and it can be empowered just by adding oil.

In this sense, it may be concluded that the expression “add oil” is better than “Jiayou” in terms of preserving metaphorical diversity in language.

### 3.2. “Add Oil” Reflects a Nation’s Attitude towards Environment

To some translators, “add oil” may appear to be the result of literal translation of “Jiayou” and “Jiayou” itself contains a strong Chinese element. In other words, some researchers think that the expression “add oil” in English has lost its unique cultural taste. But from the eco-linguistic perspective the reverse is true.

As we have realized, “add oil” contains a metaphor and by metaphors a nation lives. This metaphor, which “add oil” is based on, records the Chinese nation’s attitude toward environment in its process of industrialization.

In the first place, this expression has “oil” as an uncountable noun which indicates human beings’ cognitive limits in the course of their civilization. Like water, air and coal, oil is regarded as natural resources that we are likely to take as much as possible. For an agricultural nation like China in the past, environment is not treasured but used without much conservation consciousness.

In the second place, as an encouragement to people who are fighting enormous difficulty or trying to reach a new height, “add oil” reflects our belief in Nature. Human beings cannot just rely on their own strength in extreme conditions. It is our cultural tradition that success involves three parties—Heaven, land and human. By Heaven, we may be blessed with the right time; and by land we may be bestowed on physical support. We think more highly of the power of Heaven and land than that of ourselves.

Here land is a synecdoche of Nature. As China has a long history of farming on land, land becomes a substitute of Nature and our language gives a leading role to land instead of to other resources like lake and or stone. And “oil”, as one of the most precious things drilled out from land, can be regarded as physical support from Nature.

In conclusion, “add oil”, on the one hand, reflects our nation’s lack of environmental conservation consciousness in the past; on the other hand, it reflects our belief in the power of Nature as well as in ourselves during our industrialization.

### 3.3. Metaphorical Diversity Exhibited by “Add Oil” and “Go”

“Go” once was considered a good English translation for “Jiayou” during the 2008 Olympic Games when an English journalist reported in the press “Zhongguo jiayou! Go China!” The spectators may cheer for the athletes by shouting either in Chinese “Zhongguo jiayou!” or in English “Go China!”

In the American movie *Forrest Gump*, the same occasion is given, when Gump was on a sport event. There to encourage the players, a streamer hung with the words GO ALABAMA. Similarly, in the 1998 French World Cup, we heard the song with a line “go go go! ale ale ale!”

However, “go” is based on a metaphor different from “add oil”. It is necessary to see the working mechanism of different metaphors in Chinese and English respectively that result in these two different expressions in different languages.

As English people have live in a geological environment far different, they have formed their unique metaphors in their language while interacting with their environment. Surrounded by sea, with trade flourishing, Britain has developed an open and changing national character to adapt to the changing world. So has their language.

In English language, a primary metaphor is “states are locations”<sup>[7]</sup>. From it derives a basic metaphor –life is a journey. According to this basic metaphor, all people are travelers on their life’s journey. They are all the time going to their destinations.

Unlike a human is a vehicle in Chinese, everyone is a traveler in English. If humans are just vehicles, they cannot be powerful or courageous enough by themselves. But, if humans are travelers, they are independent individuals. So a person may get power from Nature in Chinese language, while a traveler has his own power to make progress in English language. In this way, “go”, as an exclamation, is used to encourage people to try their best to move on, especially in fierce competitions.

“Add oil” and “go” are based on totally different metaphors. To clarify the metaphorical implications between them helps to promote cultural integration. The addition of “add oil” to the

English is a way to protect metaphorical diversity, or language diversity.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The addition of “add oil” to Oxford English Dictionary is an enjoyable event when the Chinese culture is going to the world. This expression has rich Chinese cultural implications from the eco-linguistic perspective.

According to eco-linguistics, “add oil”, based on the metaphor “A human is a vehicle”, which reflects our Chinese reliance on Nature for “oil” or power. On the other hand, it indicates our cognitive limits in lacking of environmental conservation consciousness. Interestingly, in English there has long existed the word “go” which can also be used to encourage people to make progress. But “go” is based on the metaphor “Life is a journey”. Two different metaphors reveal different nations’ different minds and visions during their interacting with environment.

This study of “add oil” from the eco-linguistic perspective would help to expand the consciousness of metaphorical diversity, and in the long run, to promote language diversity and environmental diversity.

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