Are women nothing more than their body parts?

Obscene and indecent metaphors used to describe women in a Hong Kong magazine

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There are many varieties of magazines available on the Hong Kong market, and magazines which cover news from the show business have always been very popular. It is interesting to find that the way of reporting adopted by some media is getting more and more outrageous, and the use of obscene metaphors were often found. Many of these metaphors were erotic and insulting in nature and are often used to describe women. This paper aims at looking into the issue by collecting data from one of the best-selling magazines in Hong Kong – Oriental Sunday. Examples of obscene metaphors were extracted from five issues of Oriental Sunday gathered over a period of six months. The discussion of this paper is focused on finding out the meaning of these frequently used obscene metaphors were, how they were used and what possible gender issues were involved.
1. Introduction

Hong Kong has always been a city of freedom in many aspects, and the media of Hong Kong enjoy a high degree of autonomy. The press digs into issues and reveals them to the public through magazines or newspapers. However, sometimes the press reports in a very radical way and it gives rise to the paparazzi culture. The paparazzi of Hong Kong often exaggerate the facts and defame some of the celebrities in order to boost the sale of their articles. This creates a vicious cycle of competition. Instead of plainly reporting the news in a professional way, the press tends to add a lot of funny and creative expressions in their writing to make their articles more entertaining. In this paper, the focus is on obscene and indecent metaphors used to describe women and their body parts. The literal meaning of the word *obscene* is “offensive, rude or shocking, usually because too obviously related to sex or showing sex” as defined by the Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary. In the same dictionary, the word *indecent* is defined as “morally offensive, especially in a sexual way”. Further to these meanings, a metaphor is considered “obscene” and “indecent” in this paper when it explicitly describes women and their body parts from a sexual or erotic perspective. Examples are extracted from five issues of a popular magazine, Oriental Sunday. It is a weekly magazine which concentrates on reporting news from the show business. The magazine is famous for its outrageous style of writing.

The problem of using indecent metaphors is especially serious in Hong Kong. This may be partly due to the flexibility of Cantonese. Spoken Cantonese is a bit different from Mandarin or written Chinese. Most of the time, Cantonese can make perfect sense even if there is only one morpheme. That means most of the Cantonese adjectives and nouns are formed by only one morpheme and still can be understood perfectly. However, in Mandarin or written Chinese, most of the nouns are formed by at least two morphemes in order to make complete sense. For example, the word “steak” in Cantonese is “扒 (pa)”, while it is called “肉排 (rou pai)” (two morphemes) in Mandarin. This single-morpheme characteristic of Cantonese nouns makes the language more flexible, and it is easily possible to combine two single-morpheme nouns to form a new noun that signifies a mixture of the two morphemes’ meanings. A good example can be seen in the analysis part where the writer of an article combined “扒”(steak) with “女”(girl) to form a new metaphorical noun “扒女” which describes undesirable girls. More details are explained below.
The press of Hong Kong makes good use of this flexibility of Cantonese to invent new adjectives and metaphors to describe people, especially women. We will look into some examples in the paragraphs below. Most of the indecent metaphors found are used to describe the body parts of women. Through analyzing the metaphors used, we can see how women are portrayed and conceptualized in this society. In short, this paper aims at identifying the most frequently used obscene metaphors that appeared in Oriental Sunday within a period of six months. We want to find out in what functions these metaphors are used and how their meanings are derived. Moreover, we will examine the relationship between the metaphors and the portrayals of women in this magazine.

2. What do sociolinguists say about this issue?

Metaphors have been described in the literary context as making a comparison by transferring a name of one thing to another. The use of simple metaphors is normal in all human communication.

“At its simplest, metaphors are seen as a tool for representing one entity or event in the terms of some other related entity without explicitly stating a likeness. Metaphors have sometimes been presented as a poetic device which can add interest, wit or complexity to a text. Metaphors are, more importantly, an extra resource that language offers to construct meanings” (Bloor and Bloor, 2007: 69).

This definition of metaphor is rather traditional and simple. According to this view, using metaphors is like adding spice to speech so that the expression would be more vivid. However, Lakoff (1994) argued that metaphors have something to do with our abstract thinking and can help us conceptualize our thoughts in the concrete domain.

“For most people, metaphors are a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish – a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language. Metaphors are pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 3)
According to Lakoff’s argument, we actually use metaphors every day without noticing it because our thinking system fundamentally depends on metaphors to conceptualize new things and abstract thoughts. Without the help of metaphors, we may fail to understand certain abstract notions. Metaphors are more than just a lively description, but also a way of conceptualization. As Lakoff states, “but as soon as one gets away from concrete physical experience and starts talking about abstractions or emotions, metaphorical understanding is the norm” (1994: 44). Yu (1998: 32) also points out that, “in terms of their nature, metaphors are fundamentally conceptual, not linguistic. Metaphorical language is merely a surface manifestation of conceptual metaphor.” Since metaphors are closely linked to our conceptual thinking, metaphors may provide some insights into how women are portrayed in the minds of the writers and how women are perceived by the readers through looking at the metaphors. If obscene metaphors are used to describe women and their body parts, it means that the thoughts the writers had in mind would be just as indecent as the metaphors they choose to use. Note that “obscene and indecent metaphors” here refer to talking about women’s body part explicitly and erotically.

2.1 Metaphor and culture

Sometimes metaphors can only be understood by a certain group of people in a specific time and space, because that group of people shares the same knowledge, ideas and concepts. It is certain that some metaphors are cultural specific and cannot be found in another culture due to the lack of the exact source concept. According to Wu (2008: 124), an exact source concept never exists in one culture the way it exists in another culture, or the prototypical source concept has basic cultural variation in different cultures. So there may be different interpretations of the source concept even if it exists elsewhere. For example, the white colour symbolizes death and sadness in the Chinese culture. The metaphor for a funeral is “白事儿” (bai shi) which means “a white affair”, and people who participate in funeral rites should dress in white. But in other cultures, white colour could mean pure, lightness and cold etc. People who do not know the Chinese culture could not imagine that “a white affair” is related to death because the common source concept is missing.

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis supports the view that the thoughts of a culture are determined by its language. In this case, one’s experiences and understanding of those experiences are constrained because they can only be expressed in the ways which one’s language allows.
“Differences between languages enforce differences in thought, the hypothesis claims; speakers of different languages are likely to view the world and its phenomena very differently; and there will not be enough shared ground between speakers of those different languages, so that translation becomes impossible” (Knowles and Moon, 2006: 87).

In many of the examples used in this paper, perfect translation is almost impossible because the concept and meaning of the metaphors simply cannot be expressed adequately in English as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis explains. Although literal translation can be done, the meaning cannot be completely conveyed.

2.2 Metaphor and readership

“Many writers construct propositions through figurative or metaphorical language, and readers have to make up their minds as to understand the meaning being conveyed to them. The most important point about metaphor in literature is that it can make the reader think. All writers have an image of the reader in mind when they construct their narrative, and we can refer to this image as the implied reader. Equally, readers have an image of the type of person the author is as we deconstruct the text” (Knowles and Moon, 2006: 131).

The target readership of Oriental Sunday is mainly women particularly housewives and teenage girls who want to know about the secrets and private life of celebrities. The purpose of the magazine is to satisfy the readers’ inquisitiveness, therefore the more outrageous the reporting and the language are, the more interesting the magazine seems to be to its readers. This can partly explain why so many obscene metaphors are used as gimmicks if this group of readers is what the writers had in mind when they were choosing their metaphors. Apart from all these, there is a question that is worth thinking about. Although the magazine contains many obscene metaphors which are potentially insulting to women, many women still enjoy reading it.

2.3 Women and media

Tunchman et al. (1978) found that advertisement, television, film, news, and other genres in Western nations, as well as those in Africa, Asia, and Latin America,
disproportionately emphasize women’s traditional domestic roles or treat them as sex objects. Similarly, Margaret Gallagher’s (1979) UNESCO-funded study (as cited in Byerly and Ross, 2006: 17) emphasized the underlying reason why women’s image will continue to concern women for decades to come: “The…media are potentially powerful agents of socialization and social change – presenting models, conferring status, suggesting appropriate behaviors, encouraging stereotypes”. Byerly and Ross (2006: 18) also express that, “popular media such as film, television, newspapers, and magazines continue to frame (in every sense of the word) women within a narrow repertoire of types that bear little or no relation to how real women live their real lives.” Since the media play such an important role in portraying women in society, once the indecent metaphors used to describe women become more and more common in everyday life, the image of women may be gradually framed as a sex object.

3. Methodology

Five issues of Oriental Sunday were collected as reference. They dated between 22nd July 2008 and 6th January 2009. Oriental Sunday is a weekly published magazine, and it has been one of the best-selling magazines on the Hong Kong market. Its major readership is women as it is clearly written on its cover that the magazine is the most popular women’s magazine in Hong Kong. The metaphors I extracted were mostly used to describe female artists. In the following examples, we can see that a lot of attention was paid to the figure of the female artists, especially their breasts. The coverage in the magazine was often off-balance and much of the focus was put on the appearances of female celebrities. The reporters usually neglected what really happened in the shows or press conferences and concentrated only on taking pictures and describing the shape and size of the female body figures. As a result, the indecent metaphors often become the focus.

4. Analysis

I have divided my findings into three types of metaphors: SEX IS VIOLENCE, WOMAN IS ANIMAL, and WOMAN IS FOOD. Other categories of metaphors were also found, but I am only focusing on these three in this paper. About forty obscene metaphors were
found in the five issues. More than twenty of them fell into the three categories mentioned above, and the rest was mainly erotic and described women’s body parts in an offensive way. The details of the figures can be seen in the graph below. However, only the most representative metaphors will be discussed in the following part. I will first translate the examples literally so as to keep their essence and original styles. Then in the second translation, modifications will be made to make the meaning of the metaphors more explicit.

![Graph showing the number of metaphors of each type]

Table 4.1: The number of metaphors of each type

### 4.1 Sex is Violence

According to Goatly (2007: 84), previous research found that in sexual metaphors men are usually constructed as the aggressors and their genitals would be the weapon. However, in the examples here, the seductive bodies of women were also described as weapons. Three metaphors are illustrated as examples below:

1. **如果唔係成個飛彈咁唔自然呀！**
   Or else it will be as unnatural as a flying bomb!
   Or else the bust will be as unnatural as a missile!

2. **女主角原本屬意擁有 34C 愛美神飛彈的黎姿**
   The female leading role was originally to be played by Gigi Lai who has a 34C-love-beauty-goddess-flying-bomb.
   The female leading role was originally to be played by Gigi Lai who has a 34C-missile-of-Venus.
3. **36F 超級導彈**，真係炸到人鼻血流唔停

   **36F-super-guided-bomb**, our noses cannot stop bleeding because of its explosion.

   **36F-super-guided-missile**, we cannot stop drooling because of its **explosiveness**.

As we can see here, if the bust of a woman is large, it is often described as a weapon – a missile. In that sense, the bust is destructive and can hunt a man down. Moreover, in examples 2 and 3, the size of the “missile” (the bust) was even precisely stated as though it was the model number of the weapon. Interestingly, example one was in fact uttered by a young female model. We may think that indecent metaphors are used by men to describe women, but now the use of indecent metaphors has been normalized to an extent that even a woman may use this metaphor to describe their own body parts. Once this trend of using indecent metaphors becomes the norm, people will tend to overlook the underlying fact that it will subtly limit women to the role of sex objects.

### 4.2 Woman is Animal

Some of the metaphors found in Oriental Sunday compared women with animals. This can be explained by the idea that a human is just one kind of animal, or that animals and humans have something in common. The attempts to reduce humans to animals, as we will see, may have some immoral consequences, especially when such a comparison stresses the competitive and aggressive struggle to pass on genes (Goatly, 2007: 157). In addition, describing women by using animal metaphors is degrading. It is to deny them human traits which animals do not have. As a consequence, women will lose the respect that they should receive. There are some examples to illustrate these points:

4. **34C 大乳牛**

   **34C big milk cow**

   A milk cow with a 34C bust

5. **聽到佢話狐狸精？係又點？**

   Heard her saying, “**Fox-goblin**? So what?”

   Heard her saying, “I am a **seducer**? So what?”
In example 4, the metaphor was used to describe a candidate who was competing in a beauty contest. This metaphor is very insulting in the sense that it overlooked all other traits the candidate had, and it only focused on the size of her bust. Only because she had a big bust, she was described as nothing more than a “milk cow”. The sole purpose of a milk cow is to provide milk, and all that matters is its udder. Using this metaphor is like transferring this meaning to the candidate: only the size of her bust matters. In example two, the metaphor is also very negative and can only be used to girls. Calling someone a “fox-goblin” is to say that she is seducing a man who already has a wife or a girlfriend. The origin of the metaphor can be traced back to some ancient Chinese myths like “聊齋” (liao zhai) and others in which foxes were often described as evil and cunning, and they could transform themselves into humans. Moreover, a female “fox-goblin” was often characterized with the inclination to seduce men. Eventually, the word “fox-goblin” carries the meaning of “evil, cunning and sluttish”.

Even when the same animal is used as a metaphor, the meaning can be very different in English and Chinese because metaphors are culture specific, and a common source concept is needed when creating and understanding a metaphor. For instance, the example of “milk cow” signifies a woman who has a big bust, but the metaphor does not exist in English. In English, describing a woman as a “cow” only means she is unpleasant, and “milk cow” is not found to be used in the same way. For the metaphor “fox” in English, it also carries the meaning of “a cunning person” but it does not mean a seducer.

**4.3 Woman is Food**

It is not difficult to explain why Chinese often relate sex to eating and humans to food. According to Lakoff, (sexual) desire is appetite within which the object of the appetite is a person, so that human is food (1987: 409). Goatly (2007: 90) summarizes Hiraga’s (1991) findings and there is a very good explanation about relating sex to food:

“…if we do not eat we die, whereas, if we have no sex, we simply fail to reproduce, and the human race eventually dies. Equating sex with eating might suggest that sex is essential for our life…More obviously, they suggest that the
sole purpose of the women is to satisfy the appetites of men, just as food is produced for the sole purpose of eating, with women, like food, passive in this process.”

Many food metaphors were found in Oriental Sunday and some of them are listed below:

6. 譬如他會在我面前說那個女仔好似豬扒
   For example he will say it in front of me that that girl is like pork chop.
   For example he will say it in front of me that that girl is ugly and undesirable.

7. 由扒女扒女扒女扒女變索女索女索女索女後
   After changing from a steak-girl to a sniff-girl
   After changing from an ugly girl to a hottie

8. 兩對渾圓迫爆的「肉球」輕易成為全場男子的焦點
   A pair of perfectly round and extremely compact meat balls easily became the focus of all the men.
   Her huge breast easily became the focus of all the men.

9. 不過大家目光並非在杯飲品度，反而全部集中在杯「E奶奶」上！
   But everyone’s eyes are not on the drink; on the contrary, they are all on her cup of “E milk”.
   Everyone is not looking at the drink that she is making, they are looking at her “E-cup sized bust”.

From what we can see in the examples above, women are described as all kinds of food and drinks based on what kind of figures they have. Calling a girl a “steak” or “pork chop” suggests that she is undesirable and that she is difficult to chew and digest (sexually) just like meat. The degree of sexual attractiveness of a girl has been replaced by the deliciousness of food in these two examples. And in examples 8 and 9, replacing women’s busts by food metaphors means that the body parts of women are just some food to satisfy men’s (sexual) appetites. In addition, using metaphors here can downplay the direct insult caused by criticizing the attractiveness of women as apparently they were only criticizing the “deliciousness of food”. For instance, somebody may say, “that piece of pork chop is difficult to chew” instead of “the girl over there is fat and ugly”. By doing so, one can avoid explicitly pointing out who is unattractive in which way and let the hearer do the interpretation. Although the
underlying meaning of the metaphor itself is still mortifying, it allows the speaker to escape from bearing the possible consequences of criticizing women’s appearances directly.

The examples I found were all for women, and indecent metaphors for men seldom occurred. As Goatly (2007: 90) states, “food metaphors constructing humans as desirable are disproportionately used of females.” Goatly also gives a few examples of food metaphors in English. I am quoting some of them here and compare them with the Cantonese ones I extracted from Oriental Sunday.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>cheesecake</th>
<th>half-naked, female, photographic models</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>tart</td>
<td>Sexually immoral/ attractive woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lollipop</td>
<td>Attractive young girl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>peach</td>
<td>Good, attractive girl</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2 Food metaphors in English / Source: Goatly (2007: 90)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>meat balls</th>
<th>busts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E/G milk</td>
<td>E/G-cup sized busts (huge busts)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pork chop</td>
<td>ugly/ sexually undesirable woman (often fat)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>steak girl</td>
<td>ugly/ sexually undesirable woman (often fat)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.3 Food metaphors in Cantonese (translated into English literally) / Source: Oriental Sunday

Looking at the tables above, we can see that the English metaphors are all something sweet in taste: they are desserts, candy and fruit. On the other hand, except for pork chop, the Cantonese metaphors are not proper food names. These names are formed deliberately to indirectly describe woman’s bust. For example, “E/G milk” is not a proper name for any existing food or drink. “E/G” here is only signifying the size of the busts. More obscene metaphors found in Oriental Sunday are listed below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>唸奶</th>
<th>Squeeze milk</th>
<th>When a woman wears a low-cut and tight outfit which pushes her busts together tightly, she will be described as “squeeze milk”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>巨奶/巨乳</td>
<td>Gigantic milk</td>
<td>Huge busts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>漏奶</td>
<td>Leak milk</td>
<td>The metaphor is used when the contours of the breasts are exposed because the size of the bra/bikini is too small to cover the whole breast</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A woman is said to “pour milk” when she wears a low-cut outfit and bends down so people can easily see some part of her busts.

Table 4.4 More Cantonese metaphors found in Oriental Sunday

From table 3, we can see that “milk” was frequently used to substitute women’s busts. These metaphors were used repeatedly in every issue of Oriental Sunday collected. “Milk” is the metaphor for “breasts” because women’s breasts would secrete milk when women are pregnant or after they have just had a baby, so “milk” is directly linked with women’s breasts. This idea is especially important in the Chinese culture because Chinese put a lot of emphasis on the maternity of women. Since women’s busts are the symbol of their femininity and maternity, it may seem natural for such metaphors to occur. However, Byerly and Ross (2006: 37) indicate that, “there are worrying trends, especially in the commodification of women’s bodies, where we are actually being reduced to less than the sum of our body parts.” Moreover, these Cantonese metaphors are definitely not for the purpose of being circumlocutory; one will never use these metaphors for politeness or indirectness because all the Cantonese metaphors listed above are very offensive and have a strong sense of teasing and degrading. If one wants to be circumlocutory and graceful, one should use the medical terms to name the body parts.

5. Conclusion

As we can see from the examples, the Cantonese metaphors contain a lot of newly invented elements characterized by a free formation of words. For instance, the examples under the section SEX IS VIOLENCE flexibly described a woman’s busts as “a missile”, “a missile of Venus” or “a super guided missile”, together with the size of the busts as if it is a model number of weapon. All of these indecent metaphors are becoming more and more common in the language used by the media, and the use of such metaphors has a very negative impact on the society since people may follow and adopt this way of describing and viewing women and their bodies. As Smith (1990) (as cited in Byerly and Ross, 2006: 37) points out,

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1 Interestingly, although maternity of women is very important in Chinese culture, breast feeding is very rare to be seen in public in Hong Kong.
“…the persistence and regularity of their (re)production provides easy passage into everyday discourse, subtly defining the contours and limits of the “proper” ways of looking and being female, thus maintaining gender inequalities without even being seen to do so.”

As metaphors are so closely linked to our conceptual thinking, not only will these obscene metaphors gradually change our way of viewing females, they will also deepen the gender inequality. Byerly and Ross also agree,

“…repetitive framing of woman as victim, woman as object, woman as body. This particular frame is routinized and normalized, endlessly recycled to protect the status quo – men on top, again, and women underneath, in every sense. Women remain always less than the sum of their body parts” (2006: 54).

The indecent metaphors which describe women erotically are more than simply a transferring of name from one entity to another, they also transfer the indecent thoughts to our minds when we are reading and using them. More importantly, the trend of using indecent metaphors may jeopardize the social status of women in the long run. The research of this paper is relatively small in scale, and it can only reveal a small part of the whole problem. However, it was shown that the situation is quite serious and efforts should be made to rectify this worrying trend in the Hong Kong press.

References


