

The Language of Lotus Sutra's Parable of Medicinal Herbs

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Abstract

The Lotus Sutra as a text has been translated into different languages. In the English language several versions of the Lotus Sutra exist today. As a Buddhist text, its English translations have a wider outreach reaching the Occidental beyond its Oriental origin. Based on Kumarajiva's translation of the Lotus Sutra, the English translations are reputed to have kept to its appeal and richness of its language. This paper looks at the discourse of the Parable of the Medicinal Herbs from the 2009 translation by Burton Watson. The corpus consists of the 216 lines of the verse format of the parable. A discourse analysis of the text revealed the extensive use of literary devices and binomials to deliver its teachings and the message of impartiality. It is through these language features that makes it linguistically appealing to its readers. I wish to caveat that this attempt to examine this rich and classical text is with the humble understanding that it will not lend itself to any single interpretation.

Introduction

The Lotus Sutra is one of the most important and influential of all the sutras or sacred scriptures of Mahayana Buddhism, revered by almost all branches of the Mahayana teachings, and over many centuries the object of intense veneration among Buddhist believers throughout China, Korea, Japan, and other regions of eastern Asia.

Burton Watson (1993, p. ix)

THE Kumarajiva translation of the Lotus Sutra is highly reputed and remains the version sorted out in both China and Japan. Based on this translation, the Lotus Sutra was translated many times over into the English language and each attempt is a work to produce the finest interpretation of its message and meaning. Two versions of Watson's translation were published in 1993 and 2009. This paper has chosen the

2009 publication as it is the latest. Watson's translation is also the working version selected by The Institute of Oriental Philosophy (IOP) of Japan and the Soka Gakkai Malaysia (SGM). The selected chapter, The Parable of the Medicinal Herbs, is one of the seven parables in the collection of the Lotus Sutra.

The Lotus Sutra consists of 28 chapters and it is unique that each chapter is presented in two formats—prose and verse. Each chapter begins with a prose that introduces the main thrust of the chapter and the content is then presented in a verse form. This unique dual format of presentation places the Lotus Sutra in a genre of its own.

Methodology

The source of this exploratory paper is the translation by Burton Watson (2009) entitled *The Lotus Sutra and Its Opening and Closing Sutras*. The focus of analysis will be the verses from Chapter Five (pp. 137 to 143). The stanzas have in total 216 lines. Each of the verses are numbered for ease of reference.

Analysis of the language features will look at the use of language features, namely, literary devices and binomials. The findings will be presented as the language used in:

A. The Didactic Overtones of the Parable of Medicinal Herbs

B. The Language of Impartiality in the Parable of Medicinal Herbs

Examples will be taken from the corpus to facilitate the illustration and discussion of the language features found.

Language Features—A Brief Introduction

This section provides an introduction to the main features found in this text. To begin with, the Parable is didactic in nature as it can be categorised as texts that offer instructional information with guidance in moral, religious, and ethical matters. The language features in the Parable can be divided into two groups: Literary devices and binomials.

A. Literary Devices

Imagery refers to the use of literary devices such as anaphora, epithets, hyperboles, similes, metaphors and descriptive words to give a dramatic effect so that readers can visualize through the mental picture created in their minds.

- I. **Anaphora** refers to the repetition of a word or phrase in succession at the beginning of several verses, clauses or paragraphs.
- II. **Epithets** are figures of speech used as descriptive devices. Adjectives are added to names of people and places to denote some special quality of these people and places with the aim to add color and vividness to the narrative.
- III. **Hyperboles** refer to specific words and phrases used to exaggerate a statement to produce a grander effect. Realistically, it may not be practical but is able to convey the emotion it tries to emphasize.
- IV. **Metaphors** are used to give new and different meanings to two things that are totally unrelated. The use helps to add stylistic colour and variety to the topic.
- V. **Similes** are a form of figurative with the use of the words 'as', 'such as' or 'like'.

Where the above devices are found in the text a mention of the device will be indicated to the right side of line concerned.

B. Binomials

Binomials refer to pairs of words, at times, even a string of words, that may be synonyms, complements or antonyms in terms of their semantic relations. They are referred by different labels such as doublets and conjoined lexical pairs. They are pervasive in many languages and have a preferred word order which may be 'read faster' in the order they tend to appear more frequently (Benor, S. & Levy, 2006). The order may be a result of semantic, phonological, and lexical factors of the languages in which they are found. Binomials are useful in the study of stylistics, phraseology, semantics in particular legal language and literary language.

Structurally, binomials are often connected by conjunctions such as "and", "or" and so forth (Sauer, 2015). However, at times they may appear without conjunctions and are marked with the use of a punctuation such as a comma. These are referred to as reduced binomials. In the Malay language, for instance, they do not have conjunctions at all such as '*suami isteri*' [husband wife] and may be referred to 'opposites' rather than antonyms (Asmah Hj. Omar - Personal Communications).

The following are examples taken from Chapter 5 to illustrate the different categories. The following coding is provided in square [] brackets next to the verse to indicate the category of binomials identified:

Antonym = [A]

Complementary = [C]

Synonym = [S]

(Note: Binomials are underlined to facilitate discussion. L refer to line they appear.)

1. Examples of synonyms are:

I bring fullness and satisfaction to the world, [S] (L.111)

The synonyms are joined with the conjunction and in the above example.

2. Examples of antonyms are:

of keen capacity, of dull capacity [A] (L.118)

The above are antonyms (*keen, dull*) and referred to as 'reduced binomials' as they are written without any conjunction and separated by a punctuation.

3. Examples of binomials with complementary semantic relations are:

that have gained growth and maturity [C] (L.198)

The pair of words above is complementary in semantic relation in which 'growth' will lead to 'maturity' and they belong to a related sub group.

The Language Features of the Parable of Medicinal Herbs

This paper will present the language features that illustrate the didactic tone of the parable followed by the language of impartiality. The discussion that follows will focus on the language aspect and will refrain from making any in-depth theological interpretations.

Examples from the corpus will be included to facilitate the discussion of the language features found. Findings show that literary devices and binomials are found to be in combination to deliver the message of this parable.

The literary devices and binomials will be highlighted (in bold and underlined, respectively) to facilitate the discussion. The language feature found will be noted on the right side of each sentence in each stanza.

A. The Didactic Overtones of the Parable of Medicinal Herbs

As a Buddhist text, the Lotus Sutra contains messages from the teachings of Shakyamuni (the Buddha Gautama) on wisdom and compassion. This is explained below:

The *Lotus Sutra* reveals Shakyamuni's vow, formulated in the distant past, to elevate the life state of all human beings to make them equal to himself, and shows that this vow was fulfilled when he preached this sutra. (<http://www.sgi-bel.org/en/history/the-lotus-sutra>)

Texts that offer instructional information with guidance in moral, religious, and ethical matters are considered to be didactic texts. The analysis shows this didactic feature is exhibited in The Parable of the Medicinal Herbs.

1. Buddha's Emergence

The appearance of the Buddha is reiterated in several parts of the Parable to give prominence to his emergence. The verse section of the Parable commences with the opening verse with the epithet 'The Dharma King' whose purpose is to preach the Law (Line 4). The Dharma King is synonymous with another name 'The Thus Come One' (Line 5).

Example 1

The Dharma King, destroyer of being,	
when he appears in the world	
accords with the desires of living beings,	
preaching the Law in a variety of ways.	
The Thus Come One, worthy of <u>honour and reverence</u> ,	[S]
is <u>profound and far-reaching</u> in wisdom.	[S]
	L.1-6

In Example 1 binomials in Line 5 which are synonyms (honour and reverence) and Line 6 (profound and far-reaching) call attention to the tribute and wisdom of The Thus Come One.

The metaphor 'cloud' is used to illustrate the appearance it is akin to (L.59). The metaphor is used to describe the coverage of the 'cloud' above the land he appeared on.

Example 2

The Buddha is like this

when he appears in the world,	Metaphor
comparable to a great cloud	'Cloud'
that covers all things everywhere ,	Hyperbole
	L. 57–60

The Parable compares the Buddha to a 'cloud' in many instances. In Example 3 the 'great cloud' is a protective layer that covers **everywhere** and the entirety of the ground below it (Line 60).

In the following example, the King of Sutras is akin to a beneficent cloud (L. 19) that cools the earth with its the rain. Binomials give a vivid description of what accompanies the cloud and what follows with the arrival of the cloud.

Example 3

This beneficent cloud is laden with moisture, the lightening gleams and flashes ,	[S]
and the sound of thunder reverberates afar, causing the multitude to rejoice.	
The sun's rays are <u>veiled and hidden</u> ,	[S]
a clear coolness comes over the land; masses of darkness <u>descend and spread</u> -	[C]
you can almost touch them.	
	L. 19–26

Accompanied by bright lightening that gleams and flashes (L. 20) and the resonating sound of the rolling thunders (L. 20–21) that reaches far, the cloud cools the earth below it. The hot sun's rays are 'veiled and hidden' (L. 23) and masses of dark clouds 'descend and spread' (L. 25) in the sky above and provide shade. The use of binomials gives a vivid description of this cloud and the coming of the King of Sutras. Thus, the Parable implies the significance of the coming and the effect of the presence by painting a picture of the cloud that covers, cools and protect the earth.

The following verse elaborates the wide coverage for the rain, a metaphor for the teaching or Dharma, is vast and comes 'down on all four sides' (Line 28) of the earth. The use of binomials emphasizes the vastness of the area it covers and the rain is not hindered by different terrains nor 'remote and secluded places' (Lines 31–32). Such is the coverage that makes it possible for different kinds of plants to flourish (Lines 33–36).

Example 4

The rain falls everywhere,	Metaphor
coming down on all four sides,	
its <u>flow and saturation</u> are measureless,	[C]
reaching to every area of the earth,	
to the <u>ravines and valleys</u> of the <u>mountains and streams</u> ,	[S]
to the <u>remote and secluded</u> places where grow	[S]
plants, bushes, medicinal herbs,	
trees large and small ,	[A]
a hundred grains, rice seedlings,	
sugar cane, grape vines.	

L. 27–36

2. Buddha's Proclamation

As part of its didactic nature, the voice of authority is in the self-proclamation in Line 69 of Example 5 below.

Example 5

I am the Thus Come One,	Epithet
most honoured of two-legged beings.	L. 69–70
I bring <u>fullness and satisfaction</u> to the world,	[S]
	L. 111

The first excerpt is a confirmation that the epithet ‘Thus Come One’ refers to the Buddha. In other parts of the parable, other epithets used are Dharma King (Line 1) and the World Honoured-One (Line 66). The proclamation of his status as the ‘most honoured’ among humans referred to as ‘two-legged beings’ in Line 70. Line 111 is another proclamation of the role intended for the Thus Come One.

In Lines 72 and 73 in the next example explains the purpose of Buddha's emergence. This is elaborated in the example below:

Example 6

I appear in the world	
like a great cloud	Simile
that showers moisture upon	
all the <u>dry and withered</u> living beings,	[S]
so that all are able to escape suffering,	
gain the joy of <u>peace and security</u> ,	[S]
the joys of this world	Anaphora
and the joy of nirvana .	

L. 72–79

In Example 6 above, the appearance is referred to by using a simile 'like a great cloud' (Line 73). Hence, the purpose of the cloud is to bring rain to invigorate beings that are 'dry and withered' and provide the opportunity to escape suffering (Line 76). The use of anaphora in Lines 78–79 emphasizes the benefits, namely, 'peace and security' in the form of the both types of happiness, namely, 'joy of this world' and 'the joy of nirvana' (Lines 78–79).

3. Declaration of the Oneness of the Dharma

The parable makes repeated declaration of the oneness of the Dharma. The metaphor 'rain' is repeatedly described as being 'single' in flavour to lend emphasis to the message. The declaration is found in the excerpts in the following example:

Example 7

What falls from the cloud
is water of a **single** flavour,

Descriptive
L. 41–42

the Law preached by the Buddha
is comparable to a great cloud which,
with a **single-flavoured rain**,
moistens human flowers
so that each is able to bear fruit.

L. 198–202

In Lines 89–91, the declaration is made in the first voice that confirms the oneness that may lead towards to emancipation referred to as the Nirvana:

Example 8

I preach the sweet dew of the pure Law.
This Law is of a **single** flavour,
that of emancipation, nirvana.

Metaphor

L. 89–91

Therefore, the repetition of the word 'single' in the above examples is intended to emphasize oneness as a feature of the teaching.

4. Declaration to Believers and Non-believers

The examples below illustrate the didactical message provided for believers and non-believers. The following lines describe the two

different groups of people:

Example 9

If those who are wise hear of it
 they can believe and understand it, [S]
 but those without wisdom will have doubts and regrets [S]
 and for all time will remain in error.

L. 9–12

The use of binomials describe believers are described as wise who ‘believe and understand’ the message (Line 10) as compared to the non-believers who will have ‘doubts and regrets’ (Line 11) and forever live in error.

5. Means to the Dharma and Buddhahood

This Parable provides instructional ways and means to gain the Dharma and achieve Buddhahood.

In Examples 10 and 11, all beings, both heavenly and human beings (Line 80), are addressed. They are reminded to observe and pay attention to the message being delivered. They are to practise in gradual stages (Lines 177–178).

Example 10

All you heavenly and human beings of this assembly, [A]
listen carefully and with one mind! [C]
 All of you should gather around [C]
 and observe the one of unexcelled honour.

L. 80–83

Example 11

by practicing **gradually and stage by stage**, [S]
 all beings can gain the fruits of the way.

L. 177–178

In Example 12 below, it is through ‘practice and learning’ (Line 215) that the state of Buddhahood can be certainly attained. The complementary binomials used shows that as one practices, one also learns in the process.

Example 12

What you are practicing

is the bodhisattva way,
 and as you gradually advance in practice and learning [C]
 you are all **certain to attain Buddhahood.**

L. 213–216

Different levels of Buddhahood that can be attained are explained in the verses that follow throughout the parable. In the following example, three groups of medicinal herbs are defined. This group is further divided into inferior (L. 126–127), middling (L. 128–135) and superior (L. 136–139).

Example 13

Shakra, Brahma and the other kings-
 these are the **inferior medicinal herbs.**
 Some understand the Law of no outflows,
 are able to attain nirvana,
 to acquire the six transcendental powers
 and gain in particular the three understandings,
 or live alone in mountain forests,
 constantly practicing meditation
 and gaining the enlightenment of pratyekabuddhas-
 these are the **middling medicinal herbs.**
 Still others seek the place of the World-Honoured One,
 convinced that they can become Buddhas,
 putting forth diligent effort and practicing meditation- [C]
 these are the **superior medicinal herbs.**

L. 126–139

Another group referred to are the small and big trees in terms of their devotion and referred to as sons of Buddha [Line 141]:

Example 14

Again there are **sons of the Buddha**
 who devote their minds solely to the Buddha way,
 constantly practicing mercy and compassion, [S]
 knowing that they themselves will attain Buddhahood,
certain of it and never doubting - [S]
 these I call **small trees.**

L. 141–146

Those who abide in peace in their transcendental powers, Analogy

turning the wheel of non-regression, saving innumerable millions	Hyperbole
of hundreds of thousands of living beings - bodhisattvas such as these	Hyperbole
I call large trees .	Metaphor
	L. 147–153

The use of hyperbole accentuates the many who are saved by ‘turning the wheel of non-regression’ (Line 148).

B. Language of Impartiality in the Parable of the Medicinal Herbs

The Parable highlights the message of the impartiality that is meant for all. Hence, no one is above the other and all are treated equally. This message is delivered in the language filled with imagery and the use of binomials. This is expressed throughout this parable in several parts as illustrated in this section.

1. To show impartiality of the Dharma for all

The Parable sends the message that the teaching is for all. This message appears in several parts of the Parable. In the following example, the word ‘equality’ describes the intended message is meant for all.

Example 15

The **equality** of the Buddha’s preaching
is like a rain of a single flavour,

L. 152–153

Example 15 contains the simile “like a rain of a single flavour” (L. 153) that refers to preaching of the Buddha.

The use of binomials made up of antonyms clearly illustrates this impartiality. Antonyms in Example 16 establish a wide range of people of different status, for instance, from the eminent and superior to those lowly and inferior as well as observers and violators of the law. The Dharma is neutral and open for all. Thus, all are given equal treatment.

Example 16

<u>Eminent and lowly, superior and inferior,</u>	[A]
<u>observers of precepts, violators of precepts,</u>	[A]
those <u>fully endowed</u> with proper demeanour,	[A]
those <u>not fully endowed,</u>	
those <u>of correct views, of erroneous views,</u>	[A]

of keen capacity, of dull capacity

L. 112–117

2. A Declaration of Being Equal and Impartial

A testimony in Example 17 declares that the Law is preached equally for all, be it to a single person or groups while Example 18 contains the declaration of being impartial to all and without any favouritism or personal intentions.

Example 17

I preach the Law equally;
as I would for a single person,
that same way I do for numerous persons,

L. 103–105

Example 18

I have **no mind to favour** this or that
to love one or hate another.
I am without greed or attachment
and without limitation or hindrance.

[A]

[A]

[S]

L. 99–102

Discussion

In examining the translation by Watson (2009), it was found that literary devices and binomials have been extensively used in this corpus. The Parable of Medicinal Herbs was examined for the language used as a didactic text with the aim to deliver the teachings of the Buddha. Five main thrusts of the parable have been identified, namely, to announce the coming of the Buddha and proclaim the purpose of his emergence, to declare the oneness of the teaching, to make a declaration on who believers and the benefits they can gain as opposed to non-believers and to explain the means towards the Dharma and to attain Buddhahood.

As a didactic text, the presence of 'cloud' and 'rain' as metaphors give a vivid picture on the extend of the teaching. The choice of these metaphors is easy for followers to imagine the intended message in terms of how the cloud protects the earth below it from the hot sun's rays and how the rain provides moisture and cools the earth. The imagery used is akin to the protection promised to the followers and the benefits they will receive.

The language of impartiality highlighted by the choice of literal

devices and binomials is intended to clarify that everyone is treated alike by the Buddha and that none is above the other. He is unbiased his teaching is open to all and the knowledge will be imparted equally without any show of favouritism.

In summary, findings show that binomials made up synonyms, antonyms and complementary semantic ones are found. The choice of binomials found in this parable helped to deliver the meaning and message on the coming of the Buddha and the way to Buddhahood. A pattern found in this set of corpus is that binomials made up of synonyms (refer to Example 4) tend to elaborate the specific characteristics of the metaphors used, that is, the cloud and rain. Synonyms give emphasis to the characteristic or quality that is being elaborated. Antonyms, on the other hand, describes the range of elements under discussion. For instance, in Example 16, those given equal treatment does not include only those who are superior nor does it exclude those who are inferior.

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Source of Text

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