

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ENGLISH AND CHINESE IDIOMS WITH FOOD NAMES*

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Abstract

The aim of present investigation is to uncover whether habitual collocations are semantically abstract as the dictionary definition through explorations of ten English idioms and their Chinese equivalents. The explanation of the idiom transparency is culturally based and the comparison of the metaphorical vehicles in both languages is also considered. At the present study it is found that idioms which stem from their won historical developments are culturally-determined. Objects which are more common to people's lives are often included into metaphorical expressions. The figurative interpretations are tightly connected with the conceptual structures or the shape of the sources. For idioms that are borrowed from the other language, modifications of metaphorical sources would be possible. Conceptually-unfamiliar sources would be adjusted to items accommodating identical conceptual structures in the borrowing language, and the replacements would be in the hyponymy relationship to their lending counterparts. Conversely, condition that the metaphorical sources are not unfamiliar or the conceptual structures used for creating the idiom are available in both lending and borrowing language, modification of vehicles is unnecessary.

1. Introduction

Metaphor is for most people a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish - a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language; moreover, metaphor is typically viewed as characteristic of language alone, a matter of words rather than thought or action. (Lakoff and Johnson 1980:3) Figurative expressions, however, are not merely bundles of word combinations. The metaphorical idiom is a phrase that ordinarily designates one thing is inferred to another, making an implicit comparison.

In this paper, I am going to inspect how cultures affect the coinage of idioms in Mandarin Chinese and English, examining how and why the metaphorical sources in idioms with the parallel implications would be different or alike. Why idioms with food names would be selected as materials for this investigation rather than others is mainly due to the prevalence of the foods around us. Many idioms unsurprisingly have been coined with the name of it, and the figurative interpretations of the idioms and the foods themselves share many conceptual similarities, which is the prior requirement to evoke the metaphorical expressions.

In the present study, ten English idioms with the Mandarin Chinese correspondents are included. For comparing the cultural differences and similarities of these two languages, first, I try to look for some English idioms with food names from the internet; next, their Mandarin Chinese idioms with similar connotations are searched. After inspections, only the English idioms that have the Mandarin Chinese semantically-related counterparts remain to be discussed. Those English idioms lacking Chinese correspondents and the ones that are too unfamiliar to most people are out of the consideration.

2. Literature Review

The idea of metaphorical mapping has been proposed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in the book titled *The Metaphors We Live By* published in 1980. The gist of their theory is that metaphors are matters of thoughts and not merely of the language; hence, they propose the term -- conceptual metaphor. From the standpoints of cognitive linguists, metaphor is principally a way to conceive one thing in terms of another and a conceptual domain can be any coherent organization of experiences. Conceptual constructions are significant to our developments of thoughts. "According to Lakoff (1980, 1999) and Lakoff (1987), the mind is inherently embodied and the pre-conceptual structures based upon bodily experiences give rise to conceptual structures (or "kinesthetic image schemas"), which in turn form literal, metonymical or metaphorical expressions and idioms." (cited from Jen, 2004) To put it differently, "the concept is metaphorically structured, the activity is metaphorically structured, and consequently, the language is metaphorically structured." (Lakoff and Johnson 1980:5) For Lakoff, non-metaphorical thinking is possible only while speakers are talking about physical reality. This conveys why figurative expressions abound in our daily conversations and why even the name of foods could be found in our words. People grasp elements in the surroundings around them to express their ideas in minds and of course the most common elements in their environments are materials easy be obtained.

The application of conceptual metaphor is to manipulate sets of mappings that are applied to a given source-target pairing. Lakoff (1987) claims that each metaphor has a source domain, a target domain and a source-to-target mapping, which are two main roles for the conceptual domains posited in conceptual metaphors. From the source domain, we draw metaphorical expressions to reach the "target domain" that we try to understand. The conceptual mapping is the systematic set of correspondences that exist between constituent elements of the source and the target domain. That is "this model links two levels in the hierarchy of beings to the extent that one is understood in terms of the other..." (Fontecha and Catalan 2003). When something X is mapped to Y, there must be something similar between X and Y. However, under different cultures, the similarity between entities may be judged differently. Cultural considerations play a crucial part while conceptual mapping is carried out.

Fei (2005) has compared pairs of fossilized expressions in Chinese and English in her work titled *Metaphor and Cross-culture Communication*. In the article, she followed Lakoff's spirit pointing out that "the traditional habits, people's mental status, the social surroundings, etc, all have some influence on

the structure of metaphor.” Even though people who speak different languages create metaphorical expressions with the similar connotation, both specialty and generality exist in structuring metaphors in different cultures. That is metaphors with the same frame may not always share the same implications in different languages. As our cultures are materials for structuring metaphors, we should not arbitrarily apply metaphors with the similar forms to interpret the metaphors in other languages. But, “when understanding metaphors in cross-cultural communication, people tend to transplant their own cognitive mode of a metaphor into another, which becomes the main reason of the misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication.” Fei (2005)

This study sticks to the crucial point that misunderstanding may occur during the cross-cultural interactions because English and Chinese employ different sources to present the same idea or these two languages may choose the same source to create idioms with unlike implications. However, there is no explicit explanation of the how selections of sources under each culture are done. How the source of idioms would be transferred during language borrowing is not tackled, either, which is very important to translation and cross-cultural interactions. In my investigation, Lakoff’s idea of conceptual mapping would also be followed to inspect why certain names of the foods are embraced to convey our particular ideas or represent elements in our lives. There should be something identical between the target and the names of the foods. How sources in one language are transferred into another language during borrowing would also be checked if there is any.

3. Analyses

In the following paragraphs, ten pairs of idioms are listed. Their metaphorical connotations and how those idioms are created in English and Chinese would be talked over. Each pair of idioms is semantically figurative in nature but the foods employed to represent the similar ideas in these two languages are not always consistent. The inconsistency in those figurative expressions would be explained in terms of the cultural points of views.

The origins of those Chinese idioms are cited from the online Mandarin Chinese Dictionary, which are launched by Taiwan’s Ministry of Education in 1998.

3.1 Connotation: preciousness

English idiom: apple of one’s eye

Chinese idiom: zhang shang ming zhu

The word “pupil” referring to the student is metonymically applied to denote the dark central portion of the eye within the iris because the tiny image of oneself can be seen while a person is looking into eyes of the other person. The adoption of the *apple* to represent the pupil should result from the fact that the apple is the most common globular object in people’s daily lives when the saying is created. The shape of the apple is at the first stage introduced as the source to depict the form of the pupil of the eye. Later owing to the preciousness

of our eye sight and the saying “keep me as the apple of the eye” in Deuteronomy of the Bible, the slang, “apple of one’s eye” emerges to infer that someone is considered to be important. The pupil is the target of the apple which subsequently gains the implication of the beloved. The apple refers to the cherished and the eye alludes to the person who treasures it. In Chinese “zhang shang ming zhu”, which is firstly found in “*Duan Ke Xing*“, has the connotation similar to “apple of one’s eye” in English. The pearl refers to the beloved and the palm represents the person who adores the treasure. In Lakoff’s term, the pearl and the palm are the sources and the beloved and the treasurer are the targets.

The generality of the apple in the West is much higher than it is in China where the apple has not been introduced until the 18th century. That is China is not the place where apples root and reasonably it would not be easy for the Chinese to metaphorically apply the name of it because of its exoticism under the Chinese culture. Consequently, it is much more possible for the westerners to accept the application of the apple in their language. On the contrary, under the Chinese culture, the pearl is regarded to be one of the most valuable jewels; consequently, it is taken to represent the ones who are appreciated. And, of course, it would be hard for English speakers to accept the name of the pearl for the concerned connotation owing to the lack of the conceptual structure of preciousness for pearl in the West.

3.2 Connotation: a situation or issue that is difficult, or risky to deal with

English idiom: hot potato

Chinese idiom: tang shou san yu

“A hot potato”, traced back to the mid-1800s, refers indirectly to an old expression, “drop like a hot potato”. The idiom alludes to the situation that the cooked potatoes retain considerable heat because of a great quantity of water inside them. The heat of the potatoes later figuratively infers to the thorny characteristics possessed by the unpleasant. While a similar figurative expression is also available in Chinese, the source is different. “Tang shou san yu” is the correspondent where “san yu” referring to the sweet potato is the source.

Although the sources are different in this pair of idioms, I would not consider “tang shou san yu” as the idiom originates from the Chinese itself. The Chinese should be borrowed from English. Firstly, the sweet potato is considered to be one of the important agricultural products in the Chinese society; the popularity of it should enable its name to be made metaphorical easily and widely. However, in addition to “tang shou san yu”, there is no figurative saying that is created with the name of it in Chinese. This phenomenon would not be reasonable because as long as the food is familiar to the language speaker, it should appear in their language commonly. The low application of “san yu” in Chinese makes me regard “tang shou san yu” to be an incidental application. Furthermore, owing to the high degree of similarity to “hot potato” in terms of its lexical components, the belief that “tang shou san yu” is borrowed from English is strengthened.

The different sources for the same connotation in English and Chinese seem to be an obstacle to considered them sharing the same origin; however, the motive for transferring the source should be triggered by the differences between the Chinese and English eating habit. In the western countries, the potato is the main starch in their daily diet and there exists many by-products of it. Nevertheless, potatoes in China are less prevalent. People in China have been eating sweet potatoes as their main staple since the 1500s long before the importing of potatoes around the 17th century. On account of the generality of sweet potatoes to the Chinese, it would be easier for Chinese speakers to manipulate this lexicon figuratively. To recap, the selection of sweet potato to replace the potato in the English idiom during the language borrowing process is by reason of the high generality of the sweet potato and the exoticism of the potato to the Chinese speakers.

Though the source in Chinese is modified after being borrowed, the selection for the replacement is not random. The distinct figurative sources in these two languages have a high resemblance. The potato and sweet potato are both the edible tuberous roots and similar in shapes. Because of the change of the source from potato to sweet potato, the acceptance of “tang shou san yu” is high to most Chinese speakers and the idiom is used extensively either in the oral or the written Chinese.

3.3 Connotation: idler

English idiom: couch potato

Chinese idiom: sha fa ma ling shu

The English phrase “couch potato” was first recorded in Los Angeles Times in 1979; the expression, after fourteen years, was included into the Oxford English Dictionary whose definition is a person who spends leisure time passively or sits around idly watching TV or videotapes. That why the “potato” is selected to depict the man in English rather than another vegetable cannot be correctly explained honestly. But it might be that the potato certainly looks inactive because of its color and shape. Later, the “couch potato” is negatively used to denote people who are out-of-shape and have the habit of chewing potato chips while watching the television. Originally, the potato in the idiom refers to the human being but it is now mistakenly interpreted as the food being eaten by the chunky on the sofa. In Chinese, on the other hand, there is no similar saying and therefore, the English expression “couch potato” is directly translated into Mandarin, turning into a calque; the saying is “sha fa ma ling shu.”

Compared with the “hot potato”, the transferring of the “couch potato” into Chinese is relatively late and has been catching on just in recent years. The potato at least compared to the sweet potato is surly less widespread to the Chinese but what is surprising is that the “potato” in the English idiom is remained in the Chinese correspondent. The preservation of once unfamiliar name of the food from the foreign language should be affected by our changing lifestyle. Indeed, the potato gets more and more acceptable in the East along with the spreading of the western dishes; French fries, chips potatoes are no longer so exotic to the Chinese anymore. The generality of the food in people’s

daily diets enhances the acceptance of its linguistic metaphorical application in their language.

However, the status of “sa fa ma ling shu” is still different from “tang shou san yu”, which is more widely received currently. Because of the less familiarity of potatoes and its time being introduced, the fossilization of “sa fa ma ling shu” is ongoing and it is still foreign to some Chinese speakers especially those who do not receive much information from the West. The application of the less unaccustomed lexicon metaphorically in one language takes longer whiles to be solidified. In English, through analogy, “couch potato” triggers other semantically-related idiom, such as “mouse/computer potato”; yet, this creation is still unavailable in Chinese. The absence shall result from the low acceptability of “couch potato” under the Chinese culture and thus, speakers are unable to control their derived idioms skillfully.

3.4 Connotation: to want more than one can deserve

English idiom: have your cake and eat it

Chinese idiom: yu yu xiong zhang bu ke jian de

The English phrase implies the situation that whenever something is eaten, it would be no longer in front of us. Metaphorically, to benefit twice is the connotation embedded in the action of eating and possessing the cake meanwhile. The Chinese idiom “yu yu xiong zhang bu ke jian de” is semantically similar to the English saying. It is the suggestion for making an either-or decision between two precious objects.

Here, fish (yu) and the bear palm (xiong zhang) are the sources of the valuables in Chinese since under the Chinese culture both the fish and bear palm are regarded as rare delicacies at least during the ancient time. However, in the western countries, the fish, for one thing, is not considered to be rare and, for the other, they do not enjoy eating the bear palms, either. The generality of fish along with the different diet habits in their culture make the “fish” and the “bear palm” to be less valued in the West. And of course, we Chinese would not employ the western “cake” in our metaphorical phrases because the western cake was not a traditional Chinese cuisine. But, to the westerner, the cake is very prevalent without any question and the application of the “cake” in their suggestive expression is quite suitable.

3.5 Connotation: a corrupt or evil person

English idiom: bad egg

Chinese idiom: huai dan

In Shakespeare’s day, the food “egg” has already been used to characterize people; for instance, “he is a good egg” means that he is a nice guy. The metaphorical transfer of a seemingly nice person that turns out to be the rascal took place around the mid 1800s. Contemporarily, the implication of “bad egg” is wider. The meaning of the phrase is veered and extended to describe people who seem to be decent but have no significant characteristics. Here, the shape of the egg is applied to refer to the most salient part of our bodies; that is our

heads. In Chinese, not until 1906 is there any record in the literature work where the “egg” is submitted to refer to the human being. In “*Lao Can You Ji*”, that “huai dan” is interpreted as the bad guy. Although “huai dan” (bad egg) is available in Chinese, we do not take “hau dan” (good egg) denoting nice people in Mandarin Chinese.

Here we found that both English and Chinese utilize the name of the egg to imply the same target. We could not but wonder that whether the Chinese expression is borrowed from English because the Chinese saying emerges much later than the English application of the “egg” in history. However, it is certainly hard to find any powerful evidence to prove that the Chinese expression does come from English because eggs are ubiquitous under every culture; it is not exclusive to the West. Also, that is the shape of the egg rather than its conceptual interpretations is taken to make this figurative usage. If “huai dan” is certainly introduced into Chinese from English, we should also take the saying “hau dan” to denote the nice people, too; nevertheless, the expression is, at least for most Mandarin Chinese speakers, not available. The English expression “good egg” is “huai ren” (nice person/people) in Mandarin, which is just a plain literal expression. On the whole, the high resemblance between the English and Chinese expression might be just an unexpected coincidence after all.

3.6 Connotation: to dwell pointlessly on past misfortunes

English idiom: to cry over spilled milk

Chinese idiom: fu shui nan shou

The creation of the English idiom is based on a tale in the late 1500s in Spain. In the expression, the unrecoverable misfortune is the target and the spilled milk, which could not be recollected, is the source. In Mandarin, there is also a similar expression and coincidentally it is also derived from a fable. The Chinese saying “fu shui nan shou” is translated as “spilled water is hard to be gathered up”. In the Chinese saying, the water is just like the spilled milk, denoting to the unrecoverable situations. That is the spilled water and milk is the source and the matter that cannot be recuperated is the target.

In the west, milk is much more popular than in China, where soy bean milk is regarded as the equivalent of the animal milk. On account of the different diet habits, the Chinese do not take “spilled milk” as the vehicle of the irreclaimable events but water is applied. Whereas the sources for the same target in Chinese and English are not identical, the milk and water share the same property; they are both liquid.

3.7 Connotation: extremely easy or simple

English idiom: easy as pie/piece of cake

Chinese idiom: yi ru fan zhang

“Easy as pie” originates from an aboriginal language in Australia around 1920. A Maori word “pai” means to be good. If someone is good at certain matters, it is easy for him to accomplish that work. While this Maori word is

borrowed, the English “pie” having the same pronunciation as “pai” is selected to replace the spelling of “pai”. So, the metaphorical meaning of the English “pie” is actually derived from “pai” in Maori and surely there should be little to do with the taste of pastry to which “pie” generally refers. The emergence of the English expression is a product of language contact. The common replacement of “easy as pie” with “piece of cake” may stem from the fact that the words “pie” and “cake” are often interchangeable in English. At this stage the “pai” in Maori is brushed aside. The conceptual structure of the cake is irrelevant in this expression.

In Chinese, “yi ru fan zhang” has the similar meaning as “easy as pie” or “piece of cake”. Its translation is “as easy as turning one's hand over”. The easy action of is applied to denote events that are easy to be achieved, where turning the hand is the source and the task that would be easy to be accomplished is the target. Here, English and Chinese clearly have different origins for a similar connotation.

3.8 Connotation: a score or record of naught

English idiom: duck/goose's egg

Chinese idiom: ya dan

The expression, “duck's egg” first appeared in 1863 figuratively referring to the zero on the scoreboard of the cricket contests. When the expression spreads to the United States, the source of the metaphor changes into the “goose egg” generally used in the baseball fields and identically indicates the number on the scoreboard. Presumably the selection of the duck and/or goose egg to represent the zero rather than a chicken's egg shall be owing to the size of the eggs. Either the duck's or goose's egg is more salient in shape. The conceptual structure of the eggs shall play no roles in this idiom. The situation is identical to the manipulation of the shape of the egg to indicate the head of the man. In Chinese, only “duck's egg” has the figurative interpretation; on the other hand, the “goose's egg” is not metaphorically available. The asymmetry should be down to the reason that the borrowing of the “duck's egg” into Chinese is earlier than the transformation of it in the American English. Once a saying is available and widely-accepted by most of the public, the creation of a new expression with the same connotation is not absolutely necessary because memorization needs efforts.

“Ya dan” is another example of the direct borrowing. The unfamiliarity of the duck's eggs to the Chinese people makes the Chinese idiom be regarded as a calque rather than culturally-originated. If the idiom indicating “zero score” roots from the Chinese history, the chicken's egg would more possibly be applied as the source because it is more common under Chinese culture and is also oval-shaped. However, the reality is not what to be expected. In Chinese, the duck's egg is applied metaphorically but not the chicken's egg. The preservation of English source in Chinese shall be on account of the essence for creating this English idiom where the shape of the egg rather than its conceptual structure of it is taken into consideration. In spite that it is less familiar under the Chinese culture, the duck's egg still remains in Chinese. Of

course the eggs are also oval-shaped in the East; therefore, it would be unessential to change the source here.

3.9 Connotation: to ruin something that is very profitable
English idiom: kill the goose that lays the golden eggs
Chinese idiom: sha ji qu luan

This English expression, already a proverb in the late 1400s, insinuates the destructiveness of greed. The greediness is mapped onto the action of killing the goose and the profitable is mapped onto the goose that could produce valuable eggs. “Sha ji qu luan” is the correspondent in Chinese. The translation of the Chinese saying is “to kill the chicken for taking its eggs”.

Again, there is no specific ancient record of “sha ji qu luan” in the Chinese literature and thus it is hard to say that this Chinese idiom is certainly derived from its own history. Dissimilar to “duck/goose’s egg”, the chicken’s egg is the source for the valuable. The difference sources in this pair of idioms should be as a result of the different conceptual structures of the goose egg between these two cultures. Goose eggs are considered to be offensively-smelled and are less welcome. Therefore, they are less beneficial than the chicken eggs. The higher economic value of the chicken egg makes it to be chosen as the source referring to the valuable in Chinese.

3.10 Connotation: to do something with over force to achieve the result
English idiom: take a sledgehammer to crack a nut
Chinese idiom: niu dao ge ji

The implication of the English idiom is generated by the comparison of the size of the sledgehammer and the nut; the former is much more massive in quantity than the latter. The sledgehammer and the nut are the sources for the given effort and the desired result respectively. In Chinese, the idiom with the similar connotation is available; yet, the sources for denoting the over-strength and the minor matter are dissimilar. “Niu dao ke ji” is the Chinese semantically-corresponding equivalent and whose direct translation is “using the knife for the cattle to cut the chicken.” Here, identically, the size of the knife for cutting the cattle and the one for the chicken are compared. The mass of the cattle is undoubtedly much larger than the chicken; using the knife for the cattle to cut the small chicken is unnecessary; thus, the connotation of achieving the result with larger efforts is obtained. Both in English and Chinese the size of the cutter and the object being cut are considered even though the idioms have different origins.

Owing to the prevalence of the hard-shelled nuts, the name of it is not novel in the western countries. It is not surprising that the familiar food is maneuvered to form a metaphorical idiom. In China, however, dried watermelon seeds, peanuts, and almonds are more popular. And, due to the unnecessary of using any instrument to break them, the action of cracking nuts is unquestionably uncommon to be carried out. Thus, the infrequency of the foods

and unfamiliarity of the action of the nut-breaking reduce the possibility to use related lexicons to create figurative expressions in Chinese. Instead, the action of cutting the chicken meat is applied in Chinese and surely the action is not uncommon.

4. Conclusions

From these Chinese and English idioms that stem from their own history, we could notice that different languages quite frequently take various elements as the sources to denote similar metaphorical targets. It is because under different cultures the conceptual structures for the same element could be diverse. Only if an object shares the same conceptual structure under the Chinese and English culture, the same source would appear inside idioms of both languages. This confirms to the major tenet of Lakoff's spirit that metaphors are matters of thought and not merely of language. Our words reveal our ideas and perspectives toward the world around us. However, even though the cultures in the West and East are not alike, it is not hard to find that certain pairs of idioms in English and Chinese apply analogous strategies to create similar figurative readings that the adopted sources are different; for example, the liquid is both used in Chinese and English to denote something cannot be regained. This shows the generality of the human beings besides our specialty.

Also, some Chinese figurative expressions here should be borrowed from English. Once an English idiom is slipped into Chinese, the conceptual structure and familiarity of the metaphorical source would be examined and it would be modified as long as the conceptual structure of the same element is different or unfamiliar under the Chinese culture. That is the unavailable metaphorical source would be slightly adjusted to another source that accommodates the same conceptual structure in Chinese. What is surprising is that the original sources in English and verified Chinese counterparts would always fall into the same kind. To put it differently, the figurative sources for the same target in the two languages are in the hyponymy relationship.

Moreover, whether a borrowed metaphorical source is acceptable to one group of speakers is also determined by the development of their society. The reason why "potato" of "hot potato" is modified into "sweet potato" but the "potato" remains still in the Chinese counterpart of the "couch potato" is mainly contributed to the growing acceptance of the "potato" under the present Chinese culture. Once the speakers are familiar to the source, there would be no need to change it during the language contact. Through observing the differences between idioms inside a language, we indeed observe the vividness of the language and the constant change of our thoughts, which are mirrored in our language usages.

In short, the results of the present investigation do not fully comply with the traditional perspective to idioms semantically. On the authority of the definition to idioms in the American Heritage Online Dictionary, the idiom is "a speech form or an expression of a given language that is peculiar to itself grammatically or cannot be understood from the individual meanings of its elements." However, along with the findings, we could note that semantic interpretations of the idioms are not radically opaque if the conceptual structures

of the metaphorical sources in the idioms are made clear. Videlicet, the literal meanings and the derived metaphorical interpretations are semantically-linked to a certain extent and the figurative expressions are culturally-determined.

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