

An Analysis on the Metaphor of English and Chinese Kinship Terms—a Comparative Study Based on Corpus

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Abstract: Kinship terms has both similarities and differences in English and Chinese cultures, which is also same with the metaphorical use of kinship terms. This paper applies the Conceptual Metaphor Theory to analyze the metaphorical use of kinship terms in English and Chinese. The reasons cause these similarities and differences will also be explored This paper aims to help the English and Chinese learners better use the kinship terms in communication in order to reduce the misunderstanding.

Keywords: Kinship terms; Metaphor; Comparative study; Corpus

1. Introduction

Kinship terms are used to addressing the family members with blood relation or relation by marriage. The metaphorical use of kinship terms is also quite common. Based on the corpora, this paper will focus on the metaphorical use of kinship terms in English and Chinese cultures with the Conceptual Metaphor Theory. In addition, the author will also explore the social cultural factors behind this usage. The corpora are Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and Center for Chinese Linguistics PKU (CCL). Through this research, people could have a better understanding of the metaphorical use of kinship terms and reduce the misunderstanding between these two cultures.

2. Research design

This paper employs the combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis. This paper uses the large-scale corpora. These two corpora have the similar material resources and capacity of the corpus. Besides, they are all native speaker corpora. So these two corpora are comparable considering the sources and content.

3. Quantitative analysis

After retrieving some key words of kinship terms, the author summarizes the results as in chart 1. The first column of data is the direct result of the query, the original frequency. The second column of data indicates the frequency in per million words, which means to standardize the frequency.

Chart 1:

English key words								
Key words	mother	Father	Son	Daughter	grandfather	grandson	Mother-in-law	Daughter-in-law
frequency	173239	154126	77559	56883	11965	2957	1492	685
Per Million	373.09	331.93	167.03	122.50	25.77	6.37	3.21	1.48
Chinese key words								
Key words	母	父	儿子	女儿	爷	孙子	婆婆	媳妇
frequency	65543	58960	25455	19689	22310	2610	2415	4152
Per Million	213.27	191.85	82.83	64.07	72.60	8.49	7.86	13.51

From the collected data, the kinship terms can be seen as high frequency words, especially mother and father. Mother and daughter-in-law appear relatively less than others. In addition, the frequencies of each word in English corpus are higher than that of Chinese.

4. Qualitative analysis

4.1 Similarities

This part will focus on the similarities of this kinship term. After retrieving in the corpora, the author summarizes the following kinds of metaphors.

(1) What derives something is its parent. Generally speaking, the root is mother while the founder is father. Children are born by parent so it can be said that parent is the root or causation of something.

(2) The whole is the mother of the parts. People always regard the kids in mothers' womb as one part of the mother. Additionally, the whole consists of parts. The entity or the whole is called mother while one part is called the offspring

The following illustration is selected from COCA and CCLPKU corpora randomly.

Entry 1: 需求是创新之母, 没有需求就没有市场, 就没有产品生产价值。

Entry 2: "Haste is the mother of failure," Herodotus warned the Persian King

From the above entries, it can be seen clearly that there are some similar metaphors in English and Chinese. Because there is “需求”, “haste” it produces “创新”, “failure”.

4.2 Social factors analysis

Because of the commonalities of human cognition and the similarities of the human condition, there are many similar metaphors in all cultures. Moreover, the family relationship is the inherent relationship of human being. As family is the cell of the society, family relationship is regarded as the basis of the world order. Therefore, it is an inevitable phenomenon that different languages share some same metaphors of the kinship terms.

4.3 Differences

In this part, the author would focus on the differences between the metaphor of English and Chinese kinship terms.

From chart 1, it can be found that some Chinese kinship terms exceed that of English to a large extent, like grandfather and daughter-in-law. In Chinese, one kinship term can be used by different family members, such as 媳妇, which can not only be addressed by her husband but also by her mother-in-law.

4.3.1 English kinship terms

Entry 1: While the ordinance's grandfather clause safeguarded the buildings' owners from the nominal cost of installing sprinklers

Entry 2: Its large lobby is appointed much like a traditional Yankee living room, with muted carpeting, upholstered wing chairs, and an antique grandfather clock.

“Grandfather clause” and “grandfather clock” are considered as set phrases. Stereotypically, grandfather is kind and old-fashioned. Hence, the clock and clause can be understood as out of date but not valueless in terms of the source domain, grandfather.

4.3.2 Chinese kinship terms

As language changes over time, the meaning also changes. The following Chinese kinship terms are widely used in people's daily life. Their metaphorical usages are even more common than their original meaning.

Entry 1: 所有的人都尽了全力, 不惜动用所能动用的关系, 求爷爷告奶奶的, 厚着脸皮向亲戚朋友借钱

Entry 2: 简佳也不想想, 就算她顾小西能做到知情不报, 按照丑媳妇终要见公婆的原理, 他们又怎么瞒得过去?

Entry 3: 把自己当外国人, 指手划脚, 而在外国人面前, 则自觉地把自已当孙子, 总想靠着巴结外国人得到点什么。

“爷爷”“孙子”in the above chart do not mean there is exact relationship between them. Grandfather, in Chinese, is often used to express arrogance or special treatment. On the contrary, grandson means the totally opposite meaning, humbling and low-down. “婆婆”“媳妇” in Chinese relationship is the most conflicting one. In traditional Chinese family, mother-in-law is on the top of pyramid of the family power while daughter-in-law locates in the lowest level. In English culture, mother-in-law seldomly intervene the things of daughter-in-law.

4.3.3 Social factors analysis

In this part, two main reasons will be probed into to explain the differences in the metaphors of English and Chinese kinship terms.

On one hand, these two cultures have different family types. In China, the dominant type is extended family while in the West the nuclear family. In an extended family, the relationships among family members are complex. In order to distinguish from each other, specific kinship terms are used, such as 姨, 姑, 舅母. So, the Chinese kinship terms are more abundant than that of English. In western countries, the relationship is much simpler and looser. So the focus of metaphors in two languages is not absolutely equivalent.

On the other hand, different social systems also influence the use of language. In ancient China, the social system is feudalism, which lasted for more than 2000 years in China. Under the feudalism, blood and marriage is main bond between people. In addition, patriarchal system, with a strict hierarchy, restricts people's behavior in all aspects. For instance, in the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, grandfather and grandson, mother and grandfather are on the superordinate level while the daughter and grandson are on the subordinate level. So the metaphors of grandfather and mother-in-law always express the meaning of arrogance. Oppositely, the metaphors of grandson and daughter-in-law convey the humble meaning. In English, the social system is capitalism, which stresses individual independence. They emphasize the equal status between each other.

5. Conclusion

This paper mainly explores the metaphorical use of kinship terms in English and Chinese with the Conceptual Metaphor Theory. Through retrieving in the corpora COCA and CCLPKU, the author summarizes the similarities and differences of the metaphorical use of kinship terms in English and Chinese. This paper limits to the most common or most frequently used kinship terms. Some other kinship terms need to be explored as well. As is known to all, 闺女, 女儿 and even 丫头 in Chinese can be equivalent to daughter in English. This point should arouse people's attention.

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