

A Comparative Analysis of “salt” in English and Chinese Idioms from Cognitive Metaphor

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Abstract: From the perspective of cognitive metaphor, the paper analyzes the different uses of «salt» in English and Chinese idioms from commonality and individuality, and analyzes the causes of this phenomenon from the aspects of Chinese and Western food culture and thinking patterns, revealing the dialectical relationship between cognitive metaphor, cultural psychology and thinking patterns.

Keywords: Cognitive metaphor; Salt; Idiom

1. Introduction

In the Oxford Advanced Modern English-Chinese Dictionary, idioms are explained in two ways: (1) idioms; idiomatic expressions; (2) particular expressions of a person's or nation's use of language. The idioms have two main characteristics: semantic unity and structural stability. Semantic unity means that the meaning of an idiom is not the sum of the meanings of the words it contains. For example, “break a leg (good luck)” has nothing to do with the original meaning of the words “break” and “leg” that make up the idiom. Structural stability means that the internal parts of the idiom are fixed and cannot be disassembled, swapped, or replaced at will.

Scholars in linguistics have already conducted useful explorations of the properties and meanings of idioms from the perspective of cognitive metaphor, but lack case studies. Therefore, this paper compares the different uses of “salt” in English and Chinese idioms from the perspective of cognitive metaphor, and analyzes the reasons for the differences from the perspective of Chinese and Western food culture, thinking patterns, and religion or beliefs to reveal the dialectical relationship.

2. Overview of Cognitive Metaphor Theory

Metaphors exist in our languages and thoughts, and metaphors are everywhere.^[1] It is a cognitive activity by which humans use their experiences in one domain to illustrate or understand experiences in another class of domains. It is essentially a tool for humans to perceive and form concepts for understanding the world around them.^[2] Due to the commonality of human cognitive patterns and the consensus among cultures, ethnic groups will use the same metaphorical concepts. However, each nationality differs due to its geographical environment, history and culture, folk customs, etc. The metaphor system also has its own characteristics. Therefore, this paper compares the English and Chinese idioms of “Salt” from the perspective of cognitive metaphors to find out the commonality and individuality of metaphorical concepts in Chinese and English language systems.

3. Commonality and individuality of the cognitive metaphors of the English-Chinese “salt” idiom

3.1 Commonalities in the cognitive metaphors of the English-Chinese “salt” idiom

Both the English word “salt” and the Chinese word “Yán” are a kind of seasoning. The Wechsler International English Dictionary defines “salt” as “a white, crystal-like compound, sodium chloride, used for seasoning and preserving food. The Modern Chinese Dictionary explains “salt” as “an inorganic compound composed of sodium chloride, of which there are four kinds: sea salt, pond salt, rock salt, and well salt. It is a colorless or white crystal with a salty taste, and is an important flavoring agent and preservative.” Therefore, in the idioms of both English and Chinese languages, “salt” plays the same flavoring function, and there are many idioms that reflect this function, such as

- (1) The best smell is bread, the best savor salt, the best love that of children.
- (2) Salt is the master of all flavors.
- (3) It is good to walk all over the world, but it is good to eat all the salt.

The above examples of English-Chinese idioms can be summarized into the conceptual metaphors of “salt has the function of seasoning” and “salt is important in seasoning”.

3.2 Individuality of the cognitive metaphors of the English-Chinese “salt” idiom

3.2.1 The cognitive metaphor of “salt” in Chinese

“Salt” not only refers to “salt, inorganic compound”, but also can be used as a metaphor for snow. In other words, “salt” is used as the source domain and “snow” as the target domain, and the image of salt is used to metaphorically refer to snow.

Due to the creation and development of the Internet, online media and social platforms, online buzzwords have appeared in all aspects of people’s online life. In online buzzwords, “salt” can be used not only as a noun, but also as an adjective or verb, representing other specific meanings.

3.2.2 The cognitive metaphor of “salt” in English

Salt was considered a rare condiment in ancient times, so it was used as part of military pay, called “salary money”. In English, the word “salary” means “salt money”.

Salt has always been regarded as a symbol of holiness, and is also used in Roman Catholicism for baptism, placed in holy water, and sprinkled into coffins to ward off evil spirits. Because of its rarity, the salt shaker was usually placed in the middle of a long banquet table in British high society, with distinguished guests sitting at the top of the shaker and ordinary guests at the bottom.

4. Cultural differences between “salt” and “salt”

4.1 Cultural differences in food

Due to the influence of the natural environment, national psychology and cultural mechanism, the food folk cultures of the East and the West have their own characteristics. For example, the whole Chinese cooking method as an art of harmonization.^[3] Chinese cooking lies in the harmonization of flavors. The key to “harmony” lies in “seasoning”, which is the fusion of various raw materials into a new substance. Seasoning in Chinese food is a reflection of the “doctrine of the mean”, that is, the importance of harmony. However, for Westerners, the role of diet is to maintain the health of life. They value the nutrition and calories of food, and taste plays a secondary role. In the West, although salt is often used in the use of seasonings, the amount of salt is moderate, not only for the pursuit of a certain taste, but also for health needs and diet. Although Western cuisine also has the meaning of the pursuit of color, flavor and taste, the most fundamental starting point is “nutrition”.

4.2 Differences in thinking patterns

Traditional Chinese culture is characterized by “Shangxiang”, focusing on figurative thinking. For example, when “salt” appears as a literal symbol, the recipient’s mind will show images related to “salt” rather than abstract concepts. Figurative thinking helps people process and remember information quickly and helps them grasp the relationship between things at a holistic level, but it lacks deep abstract thinking and internal logic. Western scientific thinking, on the other hand, relies on Western philosophy and is characterized by a metaphysical tradition and logocentrism. English uses words as entities from which the abstract nature of lexicality is abstracted and used to construct phrases and sentences, in contrast to the flexibility of Chinese lexicality.

5. Conclusion

The special meaning of an idiom cannot be directly deduced from the literal meaning, but must be bridged by establishing a mapping relationship between the literal and metaphorical meanings of the idiom through conceptual metaphors. The paper compares and contrasts “salt” in English and Chinese idioms from the perspective of cognitive metaphors to find the commonality and individuality of metaphorical concepts in Chinese and English language systems, and finds that the metaphorical systems of English and Chinese show the characteristics of co-existence, differences and similarities in the same, and analyzes the causes of this phenomenon from the perspectives of Chinese and Western food culture, thinking patterns and two aspects.

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