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A Cognitive Contrastive Study of English and Chinese Food Metaphors: A Case Study of Expressions Related to Chi/Eat

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Abstract

Food metaphor is one of the most fundamental conceptual metaphors in human cognition, whose formation is rooted in embodied experience and national culture. Taking Conceptual Metaphor Theory as the analytical framework, this paper selects the Chinese character chi (eat) and the English word eat as research objects. Based on general corpora and authentic translation cases, it compares the metaphorical similarities and differences between the two from three dimensions: semantic extension scope, mapping path, and cognitive perspective. It further explores the cultural motivations behind the differences and proposes targeted translation strategies. The study finds that English eat and Chinese chi share cognitive commonalities in domains such as "consumption and endurance", but differ significantly in the generalization degree of metaphors in domains like social relations and survival interests. The essence of such differences lies in the distinct status of food culture and divergent cognitive perspectives in Chinese and Western contexts. The findings can provide cognitive references for the translation of culture-loaded food-related expressions.

Keywords

Food Metaphors; English-Chinese Contrast; Chi / Eat

1. Introduction

From the perspective of cognitive metaphor, metaphor is not merely a rhetorical device at the linguistic level, but a core cognitive mode through which human beings construct abstract concepts with concrete embodied experience. As the most fundamental survival experience of human beings, diet serves as one of the most important source domains for metaphorical mapping, making food metaphors a typical entry point for contrastive studies of English and Chinese languages.

The prototypical meanings of Chinese chi and English eat both refer to the physiological act of chewing and swallowing food, sharing a common basis of embodied experience. However, shaped by different cultural traditions and

cognitive models of China and the West over time, the two differ remarkably in metaphorical extension paths, semantic coverage and cultural connotations. The Chinese chi has a highly generalized meaning, penetrating extensively into fields such as interest distribution, interpersonal interaction and social survival, forming a semantic network with distinctive local cultural characteristics. By contrast, the metaphorical extension of English eat is relatively concentrated, mostly revolving around physical consumption and emotional erosion, with significantly weaker social attributes and narrower generalization scope.

Existing studies mostly focus on semantic description within a single language or summary of superficial translation techniques for idioms. There is still a lack of systematic comparison of the metaphorical cognitive mechanisms between the two, and few studies explain the common metaphorical misalignment in translation practice from the root of cognition.

Taking Conceptual Metaphor Theory as the core framework and metaphorical expressions related to chi / eat as the research object, this paper aims to systematically sort out the distribution of metaphorical meanings and cross-domain mapping paths of the two, compare their cognitive similarities and differences, explore the deep-seated cultural motivations behind the differences, and further propose targeted translation strategies. This study can not only supplement micro empirical evidence of bilingual English-Chinese data for cross-lingual conceptual metaphor research and deepen the cognitive perspective of English-Chinese language contrast, but also provide cognitive references for the handling of culture-loaded food expressions in translation practice. It helps translators break away from the mindset of literal equivalence and improve the naturalness and cross-cultural communication effect of translations.

2. Contrast of Semantic Categories and Mapping of Chi / Eat Metaphors in English and Chinese

Cognitive metaphor holds that metaphor is not only a rhetorical device or linguistic phenomenon in literature, but a universal cognitive way for human beings to understand and express worldly experience. Approximately 70% of expressions in daily language derive from conceptual metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Cognitive metaphor argues that language is not a closed and autonomous system, but is based on the cognition of interaction between human beings and the objective world, as well as the user's understanding and beliefs about the world.

In essence, metaphor is cross-domain mapping between different cognitive domains: people refer to the familiar, tangible and concrete source domain to express the intangible, abstract and indefinable target domain, thus forming a cognitive mode of interrelated concepts. As Sun Yanbo points out, both English and Chinese speakers use metaphor to cognize and express the world — that is, to describe something difficult to articulate with a more familiar thing. The existence of metaphor also

demonstrates the creativity of language to a certain extent, as it enables human beings to vividly describe the colorful world with limited linguistic resources (pp. 181-183).

2.1. Anchoring of Prototypical Meaning: Core Semantics of Chi and Eat

Metaphorical semantic extension is not arbitrary lexical expansion, but a systematic cross-domain mapping process centered on prototypical meaning and formed on the basis of embodied experience. Chinese chi and English eat share the prototypical meaning of "oral intake, chewing and swallowing of food", and this common embodied experience constitutes the cognitive basis for their metaphorical extension. However, shaped by different cultural and cognitive models in China and the West, the two present distinct differences in mapping paths, coverage of target domains and semantic boundaries. This chapter sorts out the metaphorical semantic categories of the two languages respectively, Disassemble their internal mapping logic, and systematically compares their cognitive commonalities and core differences.

The metaphor of Chinese chi is highly generalized, covering five core target domains:

Interests and Survival Domain: Resources and interests are compared to food, and "acquiring resources = taking in food".

Examples: chi huangliang (live off the state payroll), chi huikou (take kickbacks), chi hongli (eat dividends, enjoy dividends), chi kongxiang (defraud the state of pay by fabricating staff names), chi laoben (live off one's past gains), chi daguofan (eat from the big pot, egalitarian distribution system).

Mapping logic: Diet is the primary prerequisite for human survival. Therefore, the process of obtaining social survival resources is analogized to the process of eating. Remuneration, benefits, welfare and other resources are all cognized as objects that can be "ingested".

Adversity and Endurance Domain: Negative events and losses are compared to unpalatable food, and "passive endurance = swallowing something unpleasant".

Examples: chi kui (eat losses, suffer losses), chi ku (eat bitterness, endure hardships), chi baizhang (eat a defeat, lose a battle), chi guansi (eat a lawsuit, get involved in a lawsuit), chi bimenteng (eat a closed door, be turned away).

Mapping logic: The psychological experience of passively enduring unfavorable situations is perceptually isomorphic with the physiological experience of passively accepting unpalatable food. Negative experiences such as losses, sufferings, failures and rejections are all incorporated into the cognitive framework of "being swallowed".

Emotion and Interpersonal Evaluation Domain: Emotions and others' attitudes are compared to food, and "perceiving emotions = tasting flavors".

Examples: chi cu (eat vinegar, be jealous), chi dingxinwan (eat a reassuring pill, feel

reassured), chi le baozi dan (eat a leopard's gall, be extremely bold).

Mapping logic: Abstract emotional and interpersonal experiences are analogized by the taste and somatosensory characteristics of diet, transforming imperceptible psychological states into concrete dietary perceptions.

Consumption and Depletion Domain: Resource loss is compared to food being eaten up, and "being consumed = being eaten".

Examples: chi neicun (eat memory, consume memory), chi liuliang (eat data, consume data traffic), chi dian (eat electricity, consume electricity), chi chengben (eat costs, incur high costs), chi gongfu (eat effort, take time and effort).

Mapping logic: The process of things being gradually depleted is morphologically similar to the process of food being gradually eaten up. This mapping is highly productive in modern Chinese, extending extensively to emerging fields such as technology and economy.

Behavior and Relationship Domain: Interpersonal interaction and behavior patterns are compared to eating patterns.

Examples: chi dushi (eat alone, hog all the benefits), chi li pa wai (eat inside and scratch outside, be ungrateful and side with outsiders), chi ruan bu chi ying (eat soft but not hard, yield to persuasion but not to coercion).

Mapping logic: Interest distribution and position selection in interpersonal interaction are analogized by eating behavior patterns, reflecting the penetration of dietary cognition into social behavior rules.

Compared with Chinese chi, the metaphorical extension of English eat is relatively concentrated, focusing more on physical attributes and individual experience with weaker social attributes, covering four core target domains:

Consumption and Erosion Domain: Damage and loss of things = food being gnawed away.

Examples: eat up time (耗费时间), eat into savings (消耗积蓄), acid eats metal (酸腐蚀金属), eat away at the soil (侵蚀土壤).

Mapping logic: It covers both the consumption of abstract resources and the corrosion and damage of physical entities, analogizing the process of gradual damage to things to the process of creatures gnawing at food.

Emotion and Psychological State Domain: Intense emotions = devouring forces.

Examples: be eaten up with jealousy (满心嫉妒), eat one's heart out (悲痛欲绝), eat one's words (收回前言、认错).

Mapping logic: Intense emotions are cognized as external devouring forces, where a person shifts from being the "eater" to the "devoured". Most expressions present the dominance of emotions over people in passive forms.

Interpersonal Interaction Domain: Overwhelming power = predatory devouring in the law of the jungle.

Examples: eat sb alive (严厉斥责；轻松击溃对手), eat crow (被迫认错、蒙受羞辱).

Mapping logic: The power balance in interpersonal relationships corresponds to the

predatory feeding logic in nature, describing one party's overwhelming suppression of the other or humiliation at the dignity level.

Daily Behavior Domain: Direct metonymy of dining scenarios.

Examples: eat out (下馆子), eat in (在家吃饭).

Mapping logic: Metonymic usage directly extended from dining scenarios, with a low degree of metaphor. It only refers to related life behaviors with the action of eating.

2.2. Cognitive Commonalities and Differences of Chi / Eat Metaphors in English and Chinese

The metaphors of the two share core laws based on common human embodied experience: First, the mapping in the consumption domain is highly consistent. Both analogize the gradual loss of time, money and resources to the process of food being eaten, reflecting the universal bodily cognition of "eating equals consumption". Second, the negative semantic tendency is consistent. The metaphorical meanings of both are dominated by negative expressions, mostly referring to negative experiences such as loss, pain and humiliation, which are directly related to the common physiological feeling of "discomfort caused by improper eating".

Influenced by cultural and cognitive models, there are three significant differences in metaphor construction between the two: First, the breadth of semantic generalization differs. The metaphor of Chinese chi covers almost all areas of life, including survival interests, social relations and emotional evaluation, with a far higher degree of generalization than English eat. Second, the cognitive perspectives differ. Chinese chi mostly adopts the active perspective of the subject, with human beings always as the agent of eating. English eat more often adopts the perspective of object action, where human beings are often the recipients of the action. Third, the strength of social attributes differs. The metaphor of Chinese chi is deeply bound to social structure and human relationship rules, carrying rich institutional and cultural connotations. The metaphor of English eat focuses more on individual experience, with relatively weak socio-cultural load.

3. Cultural Motivations for the Cognitive Differences between English and Chinese Food Metaphors

The metaphorical system in language is not an isolated linguistic phenomenon, but a projection and accumulation of the cognitive model of a specific national culture. The differences between Chinese chi and English eat in the degree of metaphorical generalization, cognitive perspective and social attributes are essentially rooted in the deep divergence between China and the West in the social status of food culture, cognitive thinking modes and historical and social contexts. The core motivations can be summarized into the following three aspects.

3.1. Differences in the Social Function Orientation of Food Culture

The fundamentally different positioning of the social function of diet between China and the West is the root cause of the difference in the breadth of metaphorical generalization.

Traditional Chinese society is based on agricultural civilization, and the concept that "food is the primary necessity of the people" has run through thousands of years of history. Diet has long gone beyond the functional category of meeting physiological needs, and become a core carrier for maintaining social relations, constructing human order and carrying ritual rules. From "dinner parties" for daily interpersonal exchanges, to "banquets" for workplace interest exchanges, to "feasts" for clan communities, dietary activities are always deeply bound to social rules, interest distribution and identity recognition. This "pan-dietary" social culture enables the cognitive framework of chi to naturally extend to all fields of social life. From salary benefits to interpersonal evaluation, from workplace rules to survival modes, all can be interpreted with the logic of eating, which ultimately endows Chinese chi with strong semantic generalization ability.

In contrast, diet in Western culture is more inclined to individual physiological needs and life rituals, with weaker social and instrumental attributes. Its social functions are mostly realized through other forms such as dialogue and rituals, and have not become the core bond of social relations. Therefore, the metaphor of English eat has not extended to fields such as social structure and interest distribution on a large scale, but mostly stays at the level of physical consumption and individual emotion, with relatively convergent semantic boundaries.

3.2. Differences in Cognitive Thinking Modes of Subject-Object Distinction

The divergence in cognitive perspective originates from the differences in traditional philosophical thinking modes between China and the West.

Traditional Chinese culture upholds the holistic cognitive view of "harmony between man and nature", always constructs the external world with human subjective experience as the core, and is accustomed to projecting human bodily experience and motion perception onto objective things, forming a subjective thinking mode of "measuring things by human standards". Reflected in food metaphors, human beings are always placed in the active position of eaters, and all kinds of abstract things are cognized as objects that can be actively "eaten" by people. Whether it is interests, hardships or emotions, they are described by people's active intake actions.

The Western philosophical tradition adheres to the cognitive logic of "subject-object dichotomy", emphasizing the independence of the objective world and the movement laws of things themselves, and is accustomed to describing the influence and effect of objects on the subject from the perspective of the object. Projected into food metaphors, this thinking mode presents a distinct object perspective: abstract

or concrete things such as emotions and corrosives become the agents, while human beings become the objects that are "devoured and eroded", forming a large number of passive and object-dominated metaphorical expressions with eat.

3.3. Differences in Cultural Accumulation of Historical and Social Contexts

The specific semantic orientation of food metaphors is often the linguistic sedimentation of specific historical and social systems.

A large number of social attribute metaphors of Chinese chi are directly related to China's unique historical and social context: chi huangliang and chi kongxiang correspond to the salary system of the traditional bureaucratic system; chi daguofan is derived from the distribution mode in the era of planned economy; chi huikou and chi ruanfan (eat soft rice, live off a woman) are the linguistic portrayals of a human-based society and identity attachment. These expressions are the solidification of specific social structures and institutional cultures in language.

The metaphors of English eat, by contrast, carry more of the value core of Western individualist culture. Expressions such as eat one's words and eat crow all revolve around individual dignity, reputation and the spirit of contract, reflecting the high importance attached to personal reputation and the cost of admitting mistakes in Western culture. Expressions such as eat sb alive reflect the competitive consciousness advocated by Western society and the survival logic of the law of the jungle. Different historical paths and social forms inject completely different cultural connotations into food metaphors, ultimately forming metaphorical semantic systems with their own characteristics in the two languages.

4. Translation Strategies for English and Chinese Food Metaphors from the Perspective of Cognitive Metaphor

As can be seen from the previous comparison, the difference between English and Chinese chi / eat metaphors is essentially the difference between cognitive frameworks and cultural logics. Therefore, the core difficulty of food metaphor translation lies not in the vocabulary itself, but in the misalignment of metaphorical mapping between the source language and the target language.

The rigid translation and mistranslation that often occur in traditional translation stem from translators' default of literal equivalence, which directly applies the dietary cognitive framework of the mother tongue to the target language, resulting in cognitive fracture of target language readers. From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, the translation of food metaphors should take "cognitive functional equivalence" as the core principle, flexibly select appropriate translation strategies according to the degree of overlap between the source language metaphor and the target language cognitive system, and strike a balance between accurate information, natural expression and cultural transmission. Combined with the cognitive

similarities and differences of English and Chinese food metaphors, three specific translation strategies can be summarized as follows.

4.1. Literal Retention Method: Preserving Source Domain Imagery in Scenarios of Overlapping Cognitive Mapping

On the premise of not violating the language habits of the target language, the dietary metaphorical imagery and expression form of the source language are completely retained to achieve triple equivalence of form, semantics and cognitive function. This kind of translation can not only retain the rhetorical style of the source language, but also conform to the cognitive experience of target language readers. It is the translation strategy with the lowest cognitive cost and the most direct expression effect.

4.2. Metaphor Conversion Method: Adapting to Target Language Framework in Scenarios of Misaligned Cognitive Mapping

Abandon the dietary source domain imagery of the source language and convert it into the idiomatic metaphorical source domain in the target language to ensure the equivalence of the target domain meaning and pragmatic function of the metaphor. Its core is "abandon form and preserve function", taking the cognitive habits of target language readers as the benchmark, replacing them with familiar metaphorical frameworks to achieve natural and smooth expression effects.

4.3. Free Translation with Explicitation Method: Restoring Core Semantics in Scenarios of Culture-Specific Metaphors

Completely strip the rhetorical form of metaphor and directly explicate the core conceptual meaning and actual reference behind the metaphor, taking the accuracy of information transmission as the top priority. This strategy is a reliable solution for dealing with highly culture-loaded metaphors in translation practice, which can avoid semantic distortion and reader misunderstanding caused by cultural differences.

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