



CSCanada

Studies in Literature and Language

Vol. 7, No. 2, 2013, pp. 40-44

DOI:10.3968/j.sll.1923156320130702.2793

ISSN 1923-1555[Print]

ISSN 1923-1563[Online]

www.cscanada.netwww.cscanada.org

A Contrastive Study of Lexical Motivation of Chinese and English

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Received 12 July 2013; accepted 9 October 2013

Abstract

The study of motivation has attracted growing attention from linguists; on the other hand, there still exist such questions as incorrect understanding of the relationship between motivation and arbitrariness and the absence of a unified criterion for classifying motivation. This paper will propose a sound classification and conduct a contrastive study of the lexical motivation of Chinese and English.

Key words: Lexical motivation; Arbitrariness; Classification

GUO Yi, TENG Jinghua (2013). A Contrastive Study of Lexical Motivation of Chinese and English. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 7(2), 40-44. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/j.sll.1923156320130702.2793>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.sll.1923156320130702.2793>

INTRODUCTION

Motivation is “the reason why a word has certain sense(s)” (Yan Xuequn, 1979). To be specific, motivation denotes (a) the association between the signifier and the signified; (b) the phonetic and/or semantic connection between existing linguistic symbols and newly coined symbols; and (c) the semantic connection between a linguistic symbol as a whole and its components.

The study on motivation is of great significance in modern linguistics, as a result of the fact that “Motivating links that make sense of the association between form and meaning units and between lexical senses, therefore, form an integral part of human lexicons” (Swanepoel, 1992).

The study on linguistic motivation can shed new light on the lexical system, reveal the law of development of language—the development of semantics, in particular, and can meet the needs in language teaching and dictionary compilation.

The study of motivation has attracted great attention from linguists, with their depth of study growing at the same time. The English linguist Ullmann is among the earliest researchers interested in lexical motivation. He classified lexical motivation into three types, namely, phonetic motivation, morphological motivation and semantic motivation. Moreover, through elaborate contrast between German, English and French, Ullmann concluded that German has the greatest lexical motivation, followed by English, and French is the least motivated language of the three. Zhang Zhiyi (1990) probed into the history and methodology of motivation study, dividing motivations into three types: natural motivation, conventional motivation, and combination of natural and conventional motivation. Swanepoel (1992) studied the application of motivation to dictionary compilation. Li Dong (1996) conducted a contrastive study between Chinese and English, concluding that Chinese has higher motivation than English and the study of Chinese lexical motivation will facilitate Chinese teaching. Wang Ailu and Si Fuzhen (2001 & 2002) made even greater contribution to the study of Chinese motivation by delving into the forms, classification and characteristics of Chinese motivation. Their study also serves as an indispensable reference to such fields of study as lexicology and semantics.

Despite the progress, many problems still exist in the study of lexical motivation. For instance, some scholars tend to deny the existence of motivation on the basis of the arbitrariness of language; a unified classification of motivation is yet to be established. This thesis is an attempt to solve the problems on the basis of the previous studies.

1. ARBITRARINESS VS. MOTIVATION

One important feature of language upheld by modern linguists is the arbitrariness of linguist symbols, i.e., there is no absolute relationship between the form and meaning of linguistic symbols, and the association between the two is a matter of convention. This principle can be best illustrated with the following two facts: a. The same thing is given different names in different languages; b. Even in the same language the relationship between the signifier and the signified is by no means simplistic one-to-one correspondence: a word can have more than one meaning (such as a *mouse* that signifies either a pest or an input device of a computer) or the same signifier can have two or more names (a pair of *glasses* is the same as a pair of *spectacles*). Some would prove the arbitrariness of linguistic symbols by quoting Shakespeare's famous line "A rose by any other name would smell just as sweet."

However, when it comes to individual words, some connection does exist between the form and meaning. Ullmann (1962, p.221) suggested that the existence in all languages of two types of words (namely transparent words and opaque words) "is in all probability a semantic universal." Here by transparent words are meant those words which have an intrinsic relationship between the form and sense. On the other hand opaque words are those whose meanings are arbitrarily fixed by social convention. One more fact has influenced our knowledge of motivation: the origin of some words which were formerly transparent has become untraceable with the development of language, so these words have become opaque words, such as the English neo-classical compounds.

There have existed two camps among linguists on the arbitrariness versus motivation debate: one group of linguists, represented by Meillet, Sapir, Bloomfield and Chomsky, denied motivation on the basis of arbitrariness; the other group rejected arbitrariness on the basis of motivation, with Givón and Lakoff as representatives. But in fact, it is incorrect to assume that arbitrariness and motivation are incompatible with each other. The first group of linguists have neglected the fact that arbitrariness is not absolute, and the arbitrary choices can only be made within the scope prescribed by motivation; the second group, on the other hand, have ignored the abstractness and generality of language (Wang Dechun, 2001).

Although Saussure raised the notion of arbitrariness in his *Course in General Linguistics*, he also noted that "Not all signs are absolutely arbitrary. In some cases, there are factors which allow us to recognise different degrees of arbitrariness, although never to discard the notion entirely. The sign may be motivated to a certain extent" (2001, p.130). Interestingly, Humboldt, who was regarded as a motivation advocate, noted that "in the influence exerted on him lies the regularity of language and its forms; in his own reaction, a principle of freedom" (1999, p.64). Also, he remarked this freedom has its own bounds. The

two linguists, though holding strikingly different views, both took the opposite side into consideration. Therefore, it may be concluded that arbitrariness and motivation are not opposed to and exclusive of each other; they are interdependent on each other and constitute a dialectical unity.

2. CLASSIFICATION OF LEXICAL MOTIVATION

Zhang Zhiyi (1990) divided lexical motivation into three type: natural motivation, conventional motivation and combination of natural and conventional motivation. This classification sheds much light on future studies on motivation but it fails to take into account the features of specific languages.

Xu Guanglie (1994) divided motivation into seven types on the basis of his investigation of Chinese words. This classification is more elaborate but as it focuses mainly on Chinese, it neglects morphological motivation.

Wang Ailu and Si Fuzhen divided Chinese lexical motivation into three types: phonetic-semantic motivation, sentence group motivation and cultural motivation. Among them, the first two belong to word-internal motivations while cultural motivation is word-external motivation. Moreover, they also made comprehensive classifications of Chinese compound words.

This paper will adopt a multi-tier classification. Lexical motivation can first be divided into word-internal and word-external motivations. Word-internal motivation can be further divided into 1) phonetic motivation, 2) morphological motivation, 3) semantic motivation and 4) graphic motivation which is unique to ideographic language. Word-external motivation refers chiefly to cultural motivation.

2.1 Phonetic Motivation

Phonetic motivation is the connection between the sound and meaning of a word; it enables comprehension of a word's meaning through observation of its phonetic form. Phonetic motivation falls into two sub-categories: primary onomatopoeia and secondary onomatopoeia.

Primary onomatopoeia is the direct imitation of an acoustic experience associated with a particular object. Both Chinese and English contain certain amount of such words. For example, the English words *cuckoo*, *meow*, *bow-bow* are imitations of the sounds uttered by the cuckoo, the cat and the dog; similarly, in Chinese there are 咕咕 (*gugu*), 喵喵 (*miaomiao*), 汪汪 (*wangwang*), corresponding to the three English onomatopoeias. Besides, there is another type of onomatopoeia, often termed as *secondary onomatopoeia*, which may cause association with a phoneme or a cluster of phonemes in the word. For instance, the initial cluster *sl-* is indicative of the condition that Bloomfield (1933, p.245) called

“smoothly wet”, such as in *slide*, *slippery*, *slimy*, *sluice*, *sludge*; the cluster *-ump* suggests “heaviness” and “clumsiness”, cf. *bump*, *dump*, *thump*, *plump*. Secondary onomatopoeias in Chinese are mostly inherited from ancient Chinese and they are mainly used in the writing, such as 潺潺 (*chanchan*, gurgling of water), 瑟瑟 (*sese*, rustling of leaves), and 琅琅 (*langlang*, tinkling of jade or metal).

Onomatopoeia in the two languages can be compared in terms of formation, usage and fidelity.

A. Formation

In both languages there are monosyllabic, disyllabic, trisyllabic and quadrisyllabic onomatopoeias, among which the disyllabic making up the largest percentage, followed by the monosyllabic. Despite these similarities, the two languages differ from each other in many other aspects of the formation of primary onomatopoeias. Note the following examples:

Monosyllabic: bang, splash, sough, toot, whiz; 砰, 哗, 唳, 咚, etc.

Disyllabic: rustle, gurgle, gobble, clatter; 唰唰, 哗哗, 咯咯, 吧嗒, 噼啪, etc.

Trisyllabic: pit-a-pat, yo-heave-ho; 哗啦啦, 轰隆隆, etc.

Quadrisyllabic: pitter-patter, jingle-jangle; 唧唧喳喳, 吱吱嘎嘎, 噼里啪啦, etc.

From the examples, we may notice that some Chinese disyllabic onomatopoeic terms are formed by repeating a syllable (be the syllable an onomatopoeia itself or merely a syllable), while some trisyllabic by repeating the latter syllable of a disyllabic term, and some quadrisyllabic by repeating both syllables of a disyllabic respectively. Likewise, in English there are also onomatopoeias formed through repetition of certain syllable(s), normally with slight modification to the vowel sound. For instance, *tick-tack*, *pitter-patter*, *pit-a-pat*, *flip-flap-flop*, etc.

B. Usage

Apart from the differences in formation, Chinese and English onomatopoeic terms are often used in different manners. Chinese primary onomatopoeias are mostly used as adverbials, either independently or in conjunction with “……的一声”, as in:

溪水哗哗地流。(The stream went gurgling on.)

砰的一声, 门关上了。(The door banged shut.)

In English, however, they function primarily as verbs or nouns. For example:

The children began to *clap* their hands.

The rock fell into the water *with a splash*.

2.2 Morphological Motivation

Words that have morphological motivation are mainly derivatives and compounds, as the meanings of both types of words can be inferred from their morphological composition. For example, the meanings of 孩子 (child, hai + suffix zi), 老虎 (tiger, prefix lao + hu), discover

(dis- + cover) can be very easy to perceive with adequate knowledge of affixation.

In English, there is a way of word formation contrary to derivation: back-formation, which means coining a word by excising part of the original word that is mistaken as a suffix, for example, *lie* is back-formed from *liar*, and *televise* from *television*.

Compound words can be broken up into two or more free morphemes, therefore, they are transparent, for example, 男孩 (*nanhai*, male-child, i.e., boy), 毛笔 (*maobi*, hair-pen, i.e., writing-brush), *firefighter*, *blackboard*.

Blendings in English are made up of two incomplete free morphemes and can be treated as a sub-type of compounds, such as *motel* (motorists + hotel), *hi-fi* (high + fidelity). But as their components have undergone simplification, blendings have weaker motivations than ordinary compounds.

There is another sub-type of compounds in English known as the neo-classical compounds, which are made up of two or more components taken from the “classical languages”, Latin and Greek. From the angle of morphology, they *are* compounds, but for those who have no knowledge of those languages, their motivations are unrecognizable, and therefore this group of words have become virtually “opaque”. Take the word *television*, which is composed from a Greek element “*tele*” indicating distance and a Latin element “*vision*” indicating sight. The same is true of many other technical terms.

Shortening covers a host of similar word-building methods such as initialism, acronym, clipping. For example:

人大 (*renda*, People’s Congress of China or Renmin University)

四书 (*sishu*, “the Four Classics” of the Confucian school);

radar (radio detecting and ranging);

fridge (refrigerator);

Ancient Chinese is a typical lexical language, one morpheme making up one word in most cases; as a result, there are very few words with morphological motivation in ancient Chinese. But with the disyllabicization of modern Chinese, the number of morphologically motivated words, compounds in particular is growing sharply. However, in English, there are far more derivations than compounds.

2.3 Semantic Motivation

Words with semantic motivation are formed by means of semantic extension or metaphor on the basis of the basic meaning. Specifically speaking, semantic motivation can be further divided into metaphor, substitution, analogy, allusion and euphemism.

Metaphor is to make an implicit comparison by designating an object with a word (or phrase) that ordinarily designates another. Some words of this type of motivation are:

虎口 (*hukou*, “the tiger’s mouth”, the jaws of death);
Rainbow (a bow that follows a rain);

Substitution consists of metonymy (the substitution of one word / phrase for another that is closely associated) and synecdoche (the substitution of the part for the whole or vice versa). For example:

青衣 (*qingyi*, “black gown”, the demure middle-aged or young female character type in Chinese operas, from the color of their costume);

Gray hair (old people);

Sail (referring to the ship);

Some words are coined by making analogies to existing words, and thus analogy is their motivation. For example:

国格 (*guoge*, national character and morals, analogical to人格 *reng*e, personality);

大姐大 (*dajieda*, a woman assuming the leading role in a group, analogical to 大哥大 *dageda*, big brother);

Telethon (a lengthy television program to raise funds for a charity, analogical to *marathon*);

Granny-sitting (the caring for an aged person in the absence of members of the family, analogical to *baby-sitting*);

As for allusion, both Chinese and English have a considerable amount of words stemming from literary or religious works. For example:

染指 (*ranzhi*, close to *to have a finger in the pie*, from *Zuozhuan*);

To grin like a Cheshire cat (from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*).

Furthermore, Chinese have a large number of words originating from Buddhism and Taoism, whereas English is particularly rich in words taken from the Bible and Greek and Roman mythology. For instance:

天人合一 (*tianren heyi*, harmony of heaven and man, from Taoism);

归西天 (*gui xitian*, to go west, from Buddhism);

Lily (a chaste person, from the Bible);

Titanic (having great stature or enormous strength, from Greek mythology).

2.4 Graphic Motivation

Considering the graphic form of words, we will notice that Ullmann’s classification of motivation is imperfect, for example, there is a definite connection between the graphic forms and meanings of many Chinese words. There may be three explanations for Ullmann’s negligence:

- The writing system came into being after speech; therefore, motivation is first of all the connection between sounds and meanings;

- Modern linguists regard speech more important than writing;

- Western linguists are usually confined to Indo-European languages, which are as a rule devoid of graphic motivation. In order to remedy Ullmann’s flaw, Xu Yulong (2002, p.123) put forward a fourth type of motivation: graphic motivation.

The most direct connection between the graphic form and meaning is seen in the pictograms (*xiangxing*), such as 山 (*shan*, mountain), 日 (*ri*, the sun), 月 (*yue*, the moon), 子 (*zi*, child), which are simplified images of the objects they denote. According to statistics conducted by some scholar in the Qing Dynasty, there are 242 pictograms in Chinese, and they constitute the etymons of Chinese characters. The simple ideograms, or, *zhishi*, are created by adding an emphatic sign to pictograms. For example, the words 本 (*ben*, root) and 刃 (*ren*, blade), originating from the pictograms 木 (*mu*, tree) and 刀 (*dao*, knife), with the addition of the emphatic strokes to the pictograph characters, designating *the underneath of a tree* and *the edge of a knife* respectively. Compound ideograms (*huiyi*) are created by combining two or more pictograms, for example, 从 (*cong*, a man follows another man, hence the meaning to follow); 益 (*yi*, water overflowing from a container, hence the meaning abundant). All the three methods of word-formation are based on the physical form of objects, and the biggest problem is they are not productive enough.

In addition to the above-mentioned three methods of word-formation, graphic elements also constitute partially the motivation of the pictophonetic characters (*xingsheng*). Take the group of words: 财 (wealth), 贷 (loan), 贿 (bribery), 赊 (buy or sell on credit), 贱 (cheap), diversified as they are in meaning as well as in pronunciation, they share one semantic component 贝 (shell, indicating money or wealth in Chinese); Therefore, they are all related to money in one way or other (Wang Li, 1980). Pictophonetic characters make up 70% of the characters included in *Shuowen Jiezi*, a dictionary compiled by Xu Shen in 100 AD. In modern Chinese, the percentage has further risen to 80-90%.

2.5 Word-External Motivation (Cultural Motivation)

Language is the carrier of culture and culture is the content of language. Culture with its development will exert great influence on the direction and path of thinking in such fields as mentality, morality and social system. Hence, cultural elements will be integrated into language and become a source of lexical motivation.

First, the social institutions and customs of a nation, including its way of life, marriage, kinships, naming, law and etiquette, can be an important source of lexical motivation. For example, *your Majesty*, *princess*, *one’s better half*, *match-maker*, etc. are all culturally motivated words.

National psychology merges into the lexicon in a more indirect way; however, it exerts greater influence on the latter. For example, red color signifies happiness, good luck, joy, etc. in China, hence the word 红运 (*hongyun*, good luck); white is used to denote lowliness during the period between the Han and Song dynasties, therefore the word 白丁 (*baiding*, literally “a man in white”) refers to a man without noble rank or title.

In addition, language users tend to avoid certain words out of superstition or taboo and they will replace the words with more pleasant and indirect ones. For example, both Chinese and English have ample terms for the word “die”, like 去世, 辞世, 归西, 寿终正寝; to pass away, to leave the world, to go west, etc. Euphemism is the motivation of this kind of words.

As a matter of fact, the distinction between different types of motivation is not always that clear-cut, and it is not uncommon that some words have more than one motivation, for instance, 名落孙山 (to fail in a competitive examination) is both an euphemism and an allusion; the English word *red-breast*: a compound and synecdoche, thus it has both morphological and semantic motivations.

CONCLUSION

The study on motivation has great significance so that scholars both at home and abroad have suggested applying related research results to language teaching and dictionary compilation, such as Swanepoel (1992) and Li Dong (1996). Yet advances in this field can only be made on the basis of thorough understanding of the dialectical relationship between arbitrariness and motivation and a unified criterion of classification.

Motivation study in China can be traced back to the Spring and Autumn Period. From *Shuowen Jiezi* compiled by Xu Shen to *A Dictionary of Word Families (Tongyuan Zidian)* by Wang Li and then to *Chinese Motivation Dictionary* by Wang Ailu, researchers are mostly confined in the scope of historical linguistics. Very few have touched upon the lexical motivation of modern Chinese, which will influence the accumulation and teaching of modern Chinese lexicon and at length influence the study on the lexical system of modern Chinese.

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