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# Analysis of Symbolic Meanings between Chinese and English Food Proverbs from the Perspective of Cultural Linguistics

Jianjun Wang

College of Foreign Languages, Inner Mongolia University, China

Jing Jia \*

College of Foreign Languages, Inner Mongolia University, China

**Abstract**—Each nation has its own characteristic food culture, and cultural inheritance requires language as its carrier. Therefore, proverbs, as part of the treasure of human language, definitely contain profound cultural details. On account of people's different perceptions of food, some relevant proverbs present different cultural connotations. This paper is to analyze symbolic meanings between Chinese food proverbs and English food proverbs from the perspective of cultural linguistics, and to explore the differences and similarities between Chinese culture and Western culture.

**Index Terms**—food proverbs, symbolic meaning, cultural linguistics, cultural comparison

## I. INTRODUCTION

Language is a cultural behavior exhibited by humans, and this behavior reflects not only people's understanding of the world but also people's understanding of themselves. That is to say, the existence of language cannot be separated from its cultural background, because everything existing is rational. Therefore, language is always to reflect a specific national culture and social psychology. "Under the ecological environment of humanity, it is impossible that language is a pure and transcendental thing. So, language is definitely the product influenced by its cultural environment. Only under its cultural background can people think about the form and content of language, as well as its existing state and evolving rule" (Su, 2006, p. 57). Proverb, as one of the forms of language, more intuitively presents people's understanding of practical experience. Owing to its concise sentence, rhythmic tone and vivid expression, proverb is mainly passed down from mouth to mouth. "It is a 'ready made expression' which people use to show their real life experience or their feelings" (Wu & Ma, 1998, p. 3). The material of proverb is various, so its content certainly is rich and colorful, such as enlightening philosophy, imparting knowledge, satirizing current situations and so on. What's more, the same proverb material also reflects different cultural connotations according to different national and regional environments. Therefore, when researching the characteristics of a specific proverb material, we should constantly pay attention to its national history, geography, local customs and belief. The paper is to comparatively analyze Chinese and English food proverbs from the perspective of cultural linguistics, and to explore the differences and similarities of symbolic meanings between Chinese culture and Western culture as well as their reasons. All of this is to reveal the humanity of language.

## II. THE LINGUISTIC VIEW OF CULTURAL LINGUISTICS

Cultural linguistics studies the relationship between language and culture. On the one hand, language contains the connotation of national culture, i.e., language is the carrier of culture; on the other hand, national culture has a great impact on the rise, development, and evolution of language, i.e., language is one of cultural styles. Therefore, "language is also not a 'carrier' independent on culture, and language itself is a special cultural phenomenon under the influence of cultural environment" (Su, 2006, p. 58). Humanity, one of the indispensable attributes of language, is to reveal national cultural elements in one area through researching the change of language. Besides, the relationship between humanity and cultural connotation is not one to one. The former is a universal phenomenon; the later is the concrete reflection of language in the concrete cultural aspect. We can say that a specific language element is always closely relating to its relevant cultural factor, so their relationship always shows a kind of orientation. Humanity exists in all aspects of language, so "in the east or in the west, language is a way of how a nation views the world. 'It sufficiently performs human characteristics in all human activities'; it is also 'a key to open the door of people's hearts.'" Therefore, humanity is the essential attribute of language" (Shen, 2003, p. 1).

## III. THE COMPARISON BETWEEN CHINESE AND ENGLISH FOOD PROVERBS

Basic necessities are the indispensable material prerequisite in people's production activities. Among them, food not only materially provides human with the basic energy requirements, but most importantly, it spiritually provides more intuitive language materials for people to create national culture. Therefore, there are many food proverbs in both languages. People use these food proverbs to express their feelings to the outside world. The following content is to explore the differences and similarities of symbolic meanings of food between Chinese and English proverbs.

#### A. *Some Food Materials with the Same Symbolic Meanings*

Each region and each nation have their own well-developed food culture, in which there are various food materials. Based on their experience to these materials, people have created splendid proverb culture with different forms and contents. In Chinese and English food proverbs, though people sometimes take different food materials as symbol, their symbolic meanings are coincidentally the same. In Chinese, “鱼和熊掌，不可兼得 (Yu He Xiong Zhang, Bu Ke Jian De)” which means that people cannot get Yu (fish) and Xiong Zhang (bear's paw) at the same time, so Yu (fish) and Xiong Zhang (bear's paw) show the relationship between gain and loss; while in English, there are “You cannot eat your cake and have it” and “You cannot sell the cow and sup the milk”, so people here usually use cake, cow and milk to show the same matter - gain or loss. As for the expression of warning, “The rotten apple injures its neighbors”, here apples symbolize a sort of surroundings, while Zhou (gruel) also shows the same meanings in Chinese proverb - “一颗老鼠屎，弄坏一锅粥 (Yi Ke Lao Shu Shi, Nong Huai Yi Guo Zhou)” which warns people against bad things. “One's meat is another one's poison” corresponds to “甲之熊掌，乙之砒霜 (Jia Zhi Xiong Zhang, Yi Zhi Pi Shuang)”, people respectively use meat and Xiong Zhang (bear's paw) to symbolize personal preference. Besides, in Chinese, Luo Bo (carrot) and Qing Cai (cabbage) in Chinese proverb - “萝卜青菜各有所爱 (Luo Bo Qing Cai Ge You Suo Ai)” also show the same symbolic meanings. In English, people use “A watched pot is long in boiling” to express “haste makes waste”, but Chinese people prefer to say “心急吃不了热豆腐 (Xin Ji Chi Bu Liao Re Dou Fu)”, and use the action of being eager to eat hot tofu (Re Dou Fu) to express the same meanings. When expressing an urgent request for something, Chinese and Western people also have different expressions. Chinese people would like to say “饥不择食 (Ji Bu Ze Shi)” which means that those who are suffering from hunger are not picky to his food he gets, so here Shi (food) symbolizes the thing people need anxiously. However, its counterpart - people from the Western world would like to say “A hungry ass eats any straw” or “To the hungry no bread is bad”. The two English proverbs almost express the same meanings as the Chinese one, though their symbols are totally different. So, straw and bread in English and Shi (food) in Chinese, they have the same symbolic meanings. Furthermore, there are also some proverbs which encourage people to do something they have never done before. For instance, Chinese people are used to a proverb - “要知道梨子的味道，就要亲口尝一尝 (Yao Zhi Dao Li Zi De Wei Dao, Jiu Yao Qin Kou Chang Yi Chang)” which advises those who want to know the taste of Li Zi (pear) to eat it by themselves, while Western people prefer to say “The proof of the pudding is in the eating”. So, people here also use different food materials - Li Zi (pear) and pudding to symbolize the same meanings that only by personally experiencing something can people really know how the thing is like. In Chinese and English proverbs, there are also some expressions with the same meanings drawn from the same food materials. That is to say, both sides use the same food materials to symbolize the same meanings. When saying the expression of seizing opportunity, people from both sides are more likely to use the ripe apples (Ping Guo) to symbolize opportunity. For instance, “When the apple is ripe it will fall” corresponds to “苹果尚绿且莫摘，待到熟时自然落 (Ping Guo Shang Lv Qie Mo Zhai, Dai Dao Shu Shi Zi Ran Luo)”. The two proverbs all express the importance of opportunity. Sugar cane (Gan Zhe) in both languages also has the same symbolic meanings. For instance, “甘蔗没有两头甜 (Gan Zhe Mei You Liang Tou Tian)” and “You can't expect both ends of a sugar cane are as sweet”, they all express one truth that it is hard to satisfy both sides. In addition, for some who cannot get something they really want but pretend not to like it, in Chinese they are usually described as “吃不到葡萄就说葡萄酸 (Chi Bu Dao Pu Tao Jiu Shuo Pu Tao Suan)” which corresponds to the English one - “The grapes are sour”. So, in both Chinese and Western worlds, Pu Tao (grape) here is endowed with the same symbolic meanings - something people want, at the same time, something people cannot get.

#### B. *Some Food Materials with the Different Symbolic Meanings*

For some nations, who live along the coast, fish is a kind of wealth. Especially in ancient times, fishing is one of the basic primitive survival means. People easily accumulate their life experience according to their understanding of fishing. However, such understanding is not always the same, so people from different nations endow fish with different symbolic meanings. In Chinese and English proverbs, such differences of course exist. In Chinese, there are some well-known proverbs about fish (Yu), for instance, “鱼得水而生 (Yu De Shui Er Sheng)” means that only in the water can Yu (fish) survive, “鱼怕离水，草怕见霜 (Yu Pa Li Shui, Cao Pa Jian Shuang)” means that Yu (fish) will die without water and straw will droop with the influence of frost, and “只有鱼吃水，没有水吃鱼 (Zhi You Yu Chi Shui, Mei You Shui Chi Yu)” means that it is Yu (fish) to drink water but not the other way round. They all emphasize on the natural attribute of fish so as to warn people against violating the objective law of things. However, fish in English proverbs more focuses on its humanity attribute. “Like a fish out of water” means people in trouble, and “fish” here symbolizes person; “Great fishes are caught in great waters” expresses big fortune usually on great occasions, so

“fishes” here symbolize fortune. There are also so many proverbs about egg in both languages. In English, “You cannot make an omelet without breaking eggs” and “You can’t hatch chickens from fried eggs” express the matter of gain and loss; “Don’t put all your eggs in one basket”, eggs here symbolize a kind of investment. Therefore, eggs in English proverbs are endowed with the special cultural connotations which are beyond their semantic meanings. While Chinese proverbs about egg (Ji Dan) still emphasize on its natural characteristics, for example, “鸡蛋里挑骨头 (Ji Dan Li Tiao Gu Tou)” means to find bones in eggs and “鸡蛋碰不过石头 (Ji Dan Peng Bu Guo Shi Tou)” means that eggs cannot bump against rocks. They use the characteristics of egg to imply the behavior and social experience in life respectively. As for the proverbs about liquor (Jiu), its symbolic meanings are also different. Chinese people think that “酒乱性，色迷人 (Jiu Luan Xing, Se Mi Ren)”, “酒朋饭友，没钱分手 (Jiu Peng Fan You, Mei Qian Fen Shou)” and “酒是穿肠毒药，色如刮骨钢刀 (Jiu Shi Chuan Chang Du Yao, Se Ru Gua Gu Gang Dao)”, they all express bad sides of liquor; while Western people think that “Old friends and old wine are best”, “New wine in old bottles” and “A good wine needs no bush”. Though in Chinese there are the same expressions as the last two English proverbs, namely “旧瓶装新酒 (Jiu Ping Zhuang Xin Jiu)” and “酒好不怕巷子深 (Jiu Hao Bu Pa Xiang Zi Shen)”, on most occasions, liquor is endowed with negative meanings in Chinese proverbs; on the contrary, wine connotes positive ones in English proverbs. When mentioning honey, people cultivated by different cultural elements naturally have different associations. In Chinese, honey usually reminds people of its sweet, but in proverbs, this kind of sweet is always accompanied with other food materials, such as You (cooking oil) and Suan (garlic), so there are “蜜多不甜，油多不香 (Mi Duo Bu Tian, You Duo Bu Xiang)” and “嘴里蜜罐子，心里蒜瓣子 (Zui Li Mi Guan Zi, Xin Li Suan Ban Zi)”. These two proverbs use the different flavors of Mi (honey), You (cooking oil) and Suan (garlic) to imply different principles. In English, besides its flavor, people also pay attention to its producers - bees. For example, “Bees that have honey in their mouths have stings in their tails” or “Honey is sweet, but the bee stings”. They use honey and stings to make a contrast in order to warn people not to only focus on the good sides of things but their dangerous aspects. Moreover, there are also some English proverbs relating honey with vinegar. For instance, “Flies are easier caught with honey than with vinegar” or “Honey catches more flies than vinegar”. Based on the characteristics of honey, Western people here emphasize on the importance of right means applied to right occasions. Thus, honey has to be endowed with different cultural colors according to its different associations. In Chinese, the character “果” rightly corresponds to the English word “fruit”, but their symbolic meanings are not always identical with each other when it has religious and local colors. People in the west are familiar with the saying: “Forbidden fruit is sweet”, so “forbidden fruit” here symbolizes something good that people can never get. However, it has different meanings in Uygur culture - one part of Chinese culture. For example, the proverb - “果实累累的树枝，总是低俯下身子 (Guo Shi Lei Lei De Shu Zhi, Zong Shi Di Fu Xia Shen Zi)” praises those who have good skills and knowledge are always humble and modest. So, “Guo Shi Lei Lei De Shu Zhi” here symbolizes competent people.

#### IV. CAUSES ANALYSIS

##### A. *The Causes of the Same Symbolic Meanings in Chinese and English Food Proverbs*

First, there are some similar characteristics in Chinese and English food materials. Most importantly, such characteristics are easily to be observed. That is to say, each food itself possesses multiple attributes, so only its common and obvious parts can lead to a cognitive basis which can connote the same symbolic meanings. Take sugar cane as an example: those who are familiar with it always firstly remember its sweet, then its ends which are the sweetest parts of it. This is the basis to further extend the same symbolic meanings. Second, from the perspective of humanity, people sometimes endow different food materials with the same symbolic meanings according to different customs. These symbolic meanings maybe show a kind of social behavior, some ideas, or other things. Putting it another way, there exist similar elements in both Chinese and Western social culture. For instance, when expressing the confusion of gain or loss, Chinese proverbs usually take fish and bear’s paw as their symbol, while English proverbs usually take cow and milk as their symbol. In ancient China, people well knew about fish and bear which were also viewed as their main food. However, milk has been always one of the common food in the west. Both sides use their familiar food to symbolize the same meanings.

##### B. *The Causes of the Different Symbolic Meanings in Chinese and English Food Proverbs*

The first is the differences of thinking ways and thinking habits in different nations. “It restricts every respect of national life, and also has a great impact on national language, like its morphology and syntax” (Chen, 1999, p. 205). In terms of vocabulary, the expression of Chinese proverbs is more visual and vivid, i.e., it is easily associated with the image of the food, like “鸡蛋碰石头 (Ji Dan Peng Shi Tou)”. So, the thinking ways of Han nationality are likely to visualize or embody their expressions. Compared with Chinese proverbs, the expression of English ones are more abstract. Syntax is the way of how language is expressed, so also influences its content. Chinese proverbs are accustomed to using short sentences and antithesis to express the meanings, such as “蜜多不甜，油多不香 (Mi Duo Bu Tian, You Duo Bu Xiang)” and “酒乱性，色迷人 (Jiu Luan Xing, Se Mi Ren)”. Besides, Chinese proverbs are usually explicit and concrete, while in English proverbs, people comparatively like to use simpler sentences whose meanings

are usually expressed clearly and thoroughly. Thus, this logical thinking of Western people can well explain why the symbolic meanings of their food proverbs are always abstract. The second is the differences of national spiritual lives. Due to different life habits and different cognitive perspectives, there occur different life views when people observe things around them. Western people would like to fry eggs, so there are many expressions in proverbs about fried eggs. As for liquor, more Chinese proverbs concentrate on its negative respects in order to warn people not to drink too much. However, English proverbs emphasize on wine's mellow flavor, so people use wine to symbolize good things. The third is the differences of national humanistic thoughts. The Han nationality very awes natural force and law in their productive process. On the contrary, the Western world advocates the concept of "man can conquer nature", and "considers people's logic thinking as the world's thinking" (Shen, 2003, p. 464). Thus, the expressions of Chinese proverbs are more likely to present the natural characteristics of food. English proverbs more focus on the humanity of food which is endowed with national cultural connotations. The last is the influences of religion and ethnic culture. From the perspective of history, religion is another important factor to influence people's faiths, perceptions and world views, i.e., religious culture can endow some food with its special meanings, like forbidden apple drawn from the religious story of Adam and Eve. There are 56 ethnic groups in China, and each of them has created characteristic ethnic culture in certain area, so their proverbs are one of reflections of their life attitudes. Conversely, on account of different local colors, people from different areas endow the things around them with different meanings.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

Through comparatively analyzing the symbolic meanings of Chinese and English food proverbs, the close relationship between language and culture is confirmed, i.e., "language cannot separate from its culture; culture also cannot separate from its language. Therefore, language and culture are interdependent" (You, 2003, p. 28). We can say that a language always bears its national culture; in the meantime, national culture influences the development and evolution of language. The exploration of language cannot be only limited in its symbolic communication, expression and application, but also need focus on its exploration of humanity. That is to say, to learn the function of language, we need put it under its cultural background. Therefore, to interpret language from the cultural linguistics provides people not only with a new thinking when learning a special social environment, but with a new field when further learning a language.

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**Jianjun Wang** was born in Inner Mongolia, China. He is currently a professor in Foreign Languages College, Inner Mongolia University, China. His research interests include translation and intercultural communication.

**Jing Jia** was born in Inner Mongolia, China. She is currently a postgraduate in Foreign Languages College, Inner Mongolia University, China. Her research interests include translation and intercultural communication. Email: 937872495@qq.com