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A Contrastive Study of English and Chinese
Numerical Idioms

英汉数字习语的对比研究

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Abstract

Numbers are used to represent quantity, which is a common phenomenon of all languages in the world. With the development of human society and technology, especially after the widespread usage of the digital technology in life, numbers have received unprecedented attention and favor. However, for a very long time, people studied numbers mainly in mathematics, neglecting that they are also part of language. Different nations, because of different cultural background, such as geographical environment, historical and social development, customs and religion, endow them with distinct cultural connotations. Numerical idioms, as the cream of language and the crystallization of human wisdom, carry even stronger ethnical, historical and regional colors; thus reflect the cultural differences of diverse nations more evidently.

This thesis is a contrastive study of English-Chinese numerical idioms. In the paper, idioms are referred to in a broad sense set phrases, common sayings, slangs, proverbs and aphorisms both in English and Chinese. Besides these, Chinese idioms have a type of unique members, called two part allegorical sayings. And the set phrases in Chinese are mainly in four-characters, which cannot be found in other languages. Numerical idioms are idioms embedded with numbers, including cardinal numbers, ordinal numbers and other words which have the connotations of numbers. This thesis, from the perspectives of cultural psychology, mythology and religions, makes a detailed analysis of the cultural connotations of 11 basic numbers both in English and Chinese, and tries to find out the factors influencing the connotations. It also discusses the semantic and rhetorical features of numbers in idioms. In the last chapter, a contrastive study of English-Chinese numerical idioms in form and meaning is made and the reasons why some idioms do not have corresponding expressions in the other language are explored.

Through the contrastive study, it is found that English and Chinese numerical idioms have both similarities and differences, but their differences are more evident

due to different cultures they are in. It is expected that this thesis, by making a contrastive study of English and Chinese numerical idioms, can be of some help in understanding their different cultures and achieving better cross-cultural communication. Moreover, it is expected to be of some contribution to the second language teaching and learning of English or Chinese.

Key words: numbers; idioms; numerical idioms; cultural connotations; contrastive study

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摘要

数字用于表示数目是所有语言中共有的现象。随着社会的进步,科技的发展,特别是数字技术在生活中的广泛应用,数字受到了前所未有的关注与青睐。但一直以来,人们对数字的研究多集中在数学领域,忽视了数字也是语言的一个有机组成部分。不同民族由于不同的自然环境、社会历史、文化心理、风俗习惯、宗教信仰等因素,赋予了它们截然不同的文化内涵。数字习语,作为语言的精华,人类智慧的结晶,更具备浓厚的民族、历史和地方色彩,从而更能反映出不同民族的文化个性。

本文以英语和汉语中的数字习语为研究对象。其中,习语是广义上的习语。英语中的习语包括固定词组、俗语、俚语、谚语、格言,而汉语的习语除了这些之外还包括歇后语,并且它的固定词组,在汉语中称之为成语,基本上都是由四个汉字组成。带有基数词、序数词及其它具有数字意义的词构成的习语就称为数字习语。本文从民族文化心理、神话、宗教三方面对英汉两种语言中 11 对数字的内涵意义进行了具体的探讨,分析了这些文化内涵产生的历史源头。同时探讨了数字在数字习语中的语义特征及修辞特色。最后重点对比分析了英汉数字习语在形式和意义上的异同及空缺现象,并分析了造成缺少对应习语的几种原因。

通过对比研究可以发现,由于逻辑思维、经历等的相似,英汉数字习语存在着某些相同之处,但由于文化背景的不同,两者间的差异更为明显。本文通过对英汉数字习语的对比研究,希望能帮助人们互相理解不同的文化,更好地进行跨文化交际,同时希望能为英汉两种语言的二语教学提供某些有意义的参考价值。

关键词: 数字; 习语; 数字习语; 文化内涵; 对比分析

Table of Contents

Abstract	I
Introduction	1
Chapter One Culture, Language and Idioms	6
1.1 Notion of Culture	6
1.2 Concept of Language	8
1.3 Definition of Idioms	9
1.3.1 English Idioms.....	10
1.3.1.1 Dictionaries' Definitions.....	10
1.3.1.2 Linguists' Definitions.....	11
1.3.2 Chinese Idioms.....	13
1.3.2.1 Dictionaries' Definitions.....	13
1.3.2.2 Linguists' Definitions.....	14
1.3.3 Conclusion of Definition.....	15
1.4 Relationship between Culture, Language and Idioms	15
1.4.1 Relationship between Culture and Language.....	15
1.4.2 Relationship between Language and Idioms.....	17
1.4.3 Relationship between Culture and Idioms.....	18
1.5 English and Chinese Languages with Their Respective Cultures	19
Chapter Two Numbers and Numerical Idioms	26
2.1 Basic Numbers	26
2.2 Numerical Idioms	27
2.2.1 Types of <u>Numerical</u> Idioms in Both Languages.....	28
2.2.1.1 Set Phrases.....	29
2.2.1.2 Common Sayings.....	30
2.2.1.3 Slangs.....	34
2.2.1.4 Proverbs.....	36

- 删除的内容: 2.1 Origin of Numbers.....
- 删除的内容: 2
- 删除的内容: 3
- 删除的内容: with Numbers
- 删除的内容:
- 删除的内容: with Numbers

2.2.1.5 Aphorisms.....	38	
2.2.2 Unique Chinese <u>Numerical Idioms</u>	40	删除的内容: s with Numbers
2.2.2.1 Two Part Allegorical Sayings.....	40	删除的内容: 3
2.2.2.2 Four-Character Set Phrases.....	42	删除的内容: 3
2.2.3 Origins of Numerical Idioms.....	45	删除的内容:
2.3 Semantic Features of Numbers in Idioms	47	删除的内容:
2.3.1 Literal Meaning.....	48	
2.3.2 Implicit Meaning.....	48	
2.4 Rhetorical Features of Numbers in Idioms	49	
2.4.1 Metonymy.....	50	
2.4.2 Euphemism.....	50	
2.4.3 Hyperbole.....	51	
2.4.4 Repetition.....	52	
2.4.5 Contrast.....	52	
Chapter Three Cultural Connotations of Numbers in <u>English and Chinese</u>	53	删除的内容: n
3.1 Cultural Connotations of Numbers in the Two Languages	53	删除的内容:
3.1.1 One vs. 一.....	53	
3.1.2 Two vs. 二.....	56	
3.1.3 Three vs. 三.....	57	
3.1.4 Four vs. 四.....	59	
3.1.5 Five vs. 五.....	61	
3.1.6 Six vs. 六.....	61	
3.1.7 Seven vs. 七.....	62	
3.1.8 Eight vs. 八.....	64	
3.1.9 Nine vs. 九.....	66	
3.1.10 Ten vs. 十.....	68	
3.1.11 Thirteen vs. 十三.....	69	
3.2 Factors Influencing the Cultural Connotations of Numbers	71	
3.2.1 Cultural Psychology.....	72	
3.2.2 Mythology.....	73	

3.2.3 Religions.....	74
3.3 Cultural Connotative Duality of Numbers	76
Chapter Four Contrastive Study of <u>English and Chinese Numerical</u>	
Idioms	78
4.1 Identity in both Form and Meaning	78
4.2 Non-identity in Form but <u>Identity</u> in Meaning	80
4.2.1 Identical Meaning with Non-identical Images but Identical Numbers.....	80
4.2.2 Identical Meaning with Identical Images but Non-identical Numbers.....	82
4.2.3 Identical Meaning with both Non-identical Images and Numbers.....	84
4.3 Identity in Form but Non-identity in Meaning	85
4.4 Vacancy in the Other Language	86
4.4.1 Idioms from History and Legend.....	87
4.4.2 Idioms from Religion.....	89
4.4.3 Idioms from Classical <u>Literary Works</u>	90
4.4.4 Idioms <u>with</u> Particular Cultural Connotations.....	91
Conclusion	94
References	96
Acknowledgements	101

删除的内容: Chinese and E

删除的内容: with Numbers

删除的内容: Identity

删除的内容: Literature

删除的内容: from

目 录

摘要.....	III
前言.....	1
第一章 文化，语言，习语.....	6
1.1 文化的概念.....	6
1.2 语言的概念.....	8
1.3 习语的定义.....	9
1.3.1 英语习语.....	10
1.3.1.1 字典定义.....	10
1.3.1.2 学者定义.....	11
1.3.2 汉语习语.....	13
1.3.2.1 字典定义.....	13
1.3.2.2 学者定义.....	14
1.3.3 小结.....	15
1.4 语言，文化，习语的关系.....	15
1.4.1 语言与文化的关系.....	15
1.4.2 语言与习语的关系.....	17
1.4.3 文化与习语的关系.....	18
1.5 英汉语言及它们的文化.....	19
第二章 数字和数字习语.....	26
2.1 基本数字.....	26
2.2 数字习语.....	27
2.2.1 英汉数字习语的分类.....	28
2.2.1.1 固定词组.....	29
2.2.1.2 俗语.....	30
2.2.1.3 俚语.....	34
2.2.1.4 谚语.....	36

删除的内容: 2.1 Origin of Numbers.....

删除的内容: 2

删除的内容: 3

删除的内容: with Numbers

删除的内容:

2.2.1.5 格言.....	38	
2.2.2 汉语特有的习语.....	40	删除的内容: s with Numbers
2.2.2.1 歇后语.....	40	删除的内容: 3
2.2.2.2 四字成语.....	42	删除的内容: 3
2.2.3 数字习语的来源.....	45	删除的内容:
2.3 数字在习语中的语义特征.....	47	删除的内容:
2.3.1 实指.....	48	
2.3.2 虚指.....	48	
2.4 数字在习语中的修辞特色.....	49	
2.4.1 转喻.....	50	
2.4.2 委婉.....	50	
2.4.3 夸张.....	51	
2.4.4 反复.....	52	
2.4.5 对比.....	52	
第三章 英汉数字的文化内涵.....	53	
3.1 英汉数字的文化内涵.....	53	删除的内容:
3.1.1 One 与 一.....	53	
3.1.2 Two 与 二.....	56	
3.1.3 Three 与 三.....	57	
3.1.4 Four 与 四.....	59	
3.1.5 Five 与 五.....	61	
3.1.6 Six 与 六.....	61	
3.1.7 Seven 与 七.....	62	
3.1.8 Eight 与 八.....	64	
3.1.9 Nine 与 九.....	66	
3.1.10 Ten 与 十.....	68	
3.1.11 Thirteen 与 十三.....	69	
3.2 影响数字文化内涵的因素.....	71	
3.2.1 民族文化心理.....	72	
3.2.2 神话.....	73	
3.2.3 宗教.....	74	

3.3 带双重文化内涵意义的数字.....	76
第四章 英汉数字习语对比.....	78
4.1 形式和意义都对应的习语.....	78
4.2 意义对应, 形式不对应的习语.....	80
4.2.1 数字相同, 形象不同, 意义对应的习语.....	80
4.2.2 数字不同, 形象相同, 意义对应的习语.....	82
4.2.3 数字不同, 形象不同, 意义对应的习语.....	84
4.3 形式不对应, 意义对应的习语.....	85
4.4 在另一语言中空缺的习语.....	86
4.4.1 来源于历史与神话的习语.....	87
4.4.2 来源于宗教的习语.....	89
4.4.3 来源于文学作品的习语.....	90
4.4.4 含有特定文化内涵的习语.....	91
结论.....	94
参考文献.....	96
致谢.....	101

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Introduction

Purpose of the Study

It is well known that language is a part of the culture of a people and the chief way by which the members of a society communicate. Therefore, language is considered both a part of culture and the medium through which the other parts of culture are expressed. Idioms, the cream of language, are one of the most important parts of language which are heavily loaded with native cultures, such as history, geography, religion, customs, thought patterns, etc. Hence, they reflect the cultural differences obviously and extensively.

Numbers are words to express quantity or amount. They are first created for counting and measuring, and are so important that they can be found in every language. But for a very long time, people had studied numbers mainly in mathematics, neglecting that they are also part of words and carry as strong connotations as the other words have in a language. In different cultures, they are endowed with different connotations. Thus comes a specific culture called numerical culture. English and Chinese, as two distinct cultures, endow them with diverse connotative meanings.

Idioms together with numbers make up a particular kind of idioms, called numerical idioms. This thesis, by making a contrastive study of English and Chinese numerical idioms, tries to find out the similarities and differences between the two languages and the reasons behind them. During the study, we've found that cultural factors, like national psychology, religion and mythology play very important roles in the differences of the two languages. The thesis, with the findings, I hope, can help cross-cultural communication between Chinese and English-speaking people more successful.

Present Situation of the Study

In English, the achievements in the study of idioms are great and countless, but as to the study of numerical idioms, it is comparatively few, let alone the contrastive study of English-Chinese numerical idioms.

In China, the achievements in the study of English idioms are also numerous; there are many studies in English numerical idioms as well, mainly in five perspectives: semantic perspective, such as Zhang Xinyou (1994), who explores the semantic features and grammatical functions; in grammatical perspective, Tang Hua (1998) studies the structure of English numerical idioms and their grammatical, semantic and rhetorical features; rhetorical perspective, like Wang Zhiwei (1999), who figures out that numbers can also function as rhetorics, such as metaphor, contrast, hyperbole; translational perspective, with Chen Linxia (1999) as an example; cultural perspective, like Xiong Yichun (2007), who explores the western cultural connotations and cultural psychology by means of some representative numbers in English numerical idioms. This thesis, based on the achievements of rhetorical and cultural perspectives, tries to make a deep contrastive study in the connotations of numerical idioms.

But the studies in Chinese numerical idioms are relatively few. There is only one small dictionary concerning numerical idioms published by Shanghai Dictionary Press in 2004, with about 2,700 entries. But it only gives explanations and examples of these idioms without their connotations. Moreover, the study of Chinese numerical idioms mainly focuses on translation, rhetoric and collocation. For instance, Qi Yan (1999) discusses the four strategies in translating Chinese numerical idioms into English; An Meizhen (2005) studies the meanings and rhetoric features of numbers in numerical idioms; Jia Jifeng (2004), by analyzing the structural patterns of numerical idioms, finds out the relations between patterns and meanings. This thesis, based on the studies in rhetoric and structural patterns, focuses on the connotations of numerical idioms in English and Chinese.

There are also some contrastive studies of English-Chinese numerical idioms

published in journals in China. They are, in cultural connotations, Yin Li and Han Xiaoling (2004), who, from some typical numbers, try to find the roots to different connotations in the two languages. In translation, Lan Hongjun (2002) thinks there are three strategies in translating numerical idioms between the two languages. Huang Chengfu (2006) discusses the rhetorical functions of English-Chinese numerical idioms. There are two theses on the contrastive study of English-Chinese numerical idioms. One is written by Xu Yali (2002), who holds that because of cultures, English and Chinese numerical idioms have similarities and differences in form and meaning. The other is by An Meihua (2008) who compares the structures of English-Chinese numerical idioms. This thesis, based on the achievements of their studies, tries to make a comprehensive study on the English-Chinese numerical idioms.

As the studies in English-Chinese numerical idioms are comparatively few both home and abroad, a further study in this field is necessary and of much value.

Theoretical Framework of the Study

Contrastive Linguistics

Contrastive linguistics is a branch of linguistics which studies two or more languages synchronically with the aim of discovering differences and similarities, especially differences and applying the findings to related area of study (Xu Yulong, 2000: 4). It has great significance to second language teaching and learning. Some scholars believe it is the most efficient way to learn a foreign language by comparing the target language with the source language. For instance, with a contrastive study of English-Chinese numerical idioms in forms and meanings, it is discovered that some idioms are identical in forms but different in connotations. By noticing this, when teaching Chinese students English idioms, such type of idioms should be paid special attention lest the students misunderstand them. Therefore, the contrastive study of languages is very necessary in foreign language teaching and learning. This thesis is written for this purpose.

Cultural Linguistics

Cultural linguistics refers to a branch of linguistics that explores the relationship between language, culture, and conceptualisation (Palmer, 1996). On one hand, it studies language from historical, social and cultural background, trying to find the influence of cultural factors to language; on the other hand, it studies culture by means of analyzing the structures and elements of language. The approach of cultural linguistics has been adopted in several areas of applied linguistic research, including intercultural communication and second language learning. In second language learning, the theories for cultural linguistics are of great guidance, as it is widely believed that the study of a language is the study of its culture; thus the better understanding of the culture could lead to better understanding of its language. So, with the cultural contrastive study of English and Chinese languages, it is easier and better for Chinese students to understand English language and culture, and this thesis is done by laying its foundation on the theories and achievements of cultural linguistics.

Cross-Cultural Communication

Cross-cultural communication is "a field of study that looks at how people from differing cultural backgrounds communicate, in similar and different ways among themselves, and how they endeavour to communicate across cultures" (wikipedia, Cross-cultural communication). Its aim is to produce some guidelines with which people from different cultures can better communicate with each other, as when two people from two different cultures communicate, they tend to interpret the other's words and behaviors from his very own culture which is very likely to lead to misunderstanding and make the communication a failure. The target of foreign language education is also to make people of different languages achieve successful communication. Thus, the theories for cross-cultural communication are of great practical value to foreign language teaching and learning. This thesis is also written in the hope of making some contribution to cross-cultural communication.

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