A Lexicological Study on Animal Fixed Expressions

Shelley Ching-yu Hsieh, Taipei, Taiwan

shelley@mail.ncku.edu.tw

1. Introduction

Compositionality is a universal characteristic of language (Brighton 2005: 13, cf. Wittgenstein 1953). Books were compiled for the purpose of clarifying this issue (e.g., Machery, Werning and Schurz 2005). Among linguists, the methodological status of compositionality in semantics has been intensively investigated (e.g., Partee 1984, Janssen 1986, 1997). This paper presents the research results of a project "*A Lexicological Study on Animal Fixed Expressions in Mandarin Chinese, Taiwanese, German and English*" (NSC 91-2411-H-218-003) financially supported by National Science Council in Taiwan. Four corpora are compiled during the research, they are, a Mandarin Chinese (MCh) animal fixed expressions (AEs), a German AEs, a Taiwanese mythical AEs and an English mythical AEs. The AEs in the corpora include: metaphors, similes, proverbs, sayings, frozen collocations, grammatically ill-formed collocations and routine formulae, all of which are fixed expressions (Alexander 1978, Carter 1987, Moon 1998), not ad-hoc terms or freely generated phrases, and contain at least one animal name that has metaphorical meaning. The Chinese corpus contains 2980 and the German corpus 2630 written and spoken AEs. The Taiwanese and English Corpora have 254 mythical AEs. The data are categorized by the animal names in alphabetical order in EXCEL. Different kinds of data relating to individual AEs were recorded in up to 12 separate fields.

This project aims to sketch a figure of how the AEs are derived from the vehicles (the animal names), to examine the primitive semantic features of the collected AEs, and then to map the metaphorical tenors (the meaning of the AEs) to the underlying conceit (the relation between the vehicle and the tenor). On the other hand, we observe the lexical change, the linguistic and social functions of the AEs and at the end the language ideologies.

2. The derivation of animal fixed expressions

Wierzbicka (1985:167) proposes that animal terms are developed from the animals' appearances, habits, and relations to people. Our data provide further information. Many AEs are arbitrary inventions (15% in MCh and 9% in German) and have nothing to do with the animals themselves. The arbitrary inventions of the AEs can be from fairy tales ($hu^2jia^3hu^3wei^1$ 狐假虎威), superstition (*Ich habe ein Vögelchen davon singen hören*), from transliteration ($xiong^2xiong^2$ 熊熊) or loan translation ($qian^1xi^1chong^2$ 千禧蟲), etc. They have their roots in traditional, rural society and language contact.

The meaning of a word contains a word's meaning, grammatical properties and our general cultural knowledge about the world (Wittgenstein 1978, Fillmore and Atkins 1992). The same animal appearance or behaviour can be perceived and interpreted differently by different peoples of various cultures. Fig. 1 sketches an image of how the animal words "live" in people's mind.
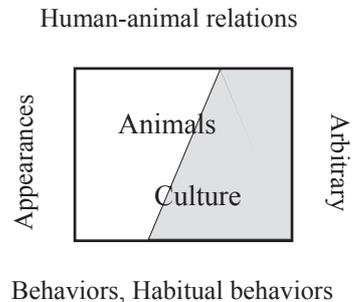

Fig. 1. The derivation of animal expressions

The corpora further indicate that Chinese tend to generate more AEs from animal appearances and apply them to the basic-need domain (see Table 1), e.g. that a snail carries a shell is observed by Chinese people, thus, $wu^2ke^2gua^1niu^2$ 無殼蝸牛 (no-shell-snail – people who are not capable of purchasing houses) is produced, to apply to the basic housing need. On the other hand, the Germans tend to generate more AEs from animal behaviours or habits and apply them to an emotional domain, in addition to applying to basic need domain. That a snail carries its shell is also observed by the Germans, but the behaviour that it withdraws into its shell when encountering danger is the underlying conceit of the AEs: *sich in sein Schneckenhaus zurückziehen* (self-in-one's-snail shell-withdraw) and *jemanden zur Schnecke machen* (someone-to-snail-make). They are composed to denote "to go into one's shell" and "to come down on someone like a ton of bricks", respectively. Table 1 counts the percentages of different types of underlying conceits and the share of metaphorical tenors in the MCh and German corpora.

[Please confer to table 1]

3. The primitive semantic features

Having been influenced by Labov's (1973) denotation conditions approach, Wierzbicka (1985) studied animal terms in the way of stating explication that contains many semantically complex words. Goddard (1998) then develops Wierzbicka's proposal and concludes that, for example, the *tiger* explication "contains many semantically complex words… they function as units" (p.247), and are "composed directly of 'primitive semantic features,'" (p.255). The linguistic evidence of these features is, e.g., *a game of cat and mouse*, *a cat-nap*, *catfight*, etc. (Goddard 1998:249).

The primitive semantic features of AEs are abstracted in this research. Here we take MCh and German *wolf*-AEs as examples. In MCh *wolf* stands for +malevolent and +cruelty. An arbitrary feature of *wolf* assigned by the speakers is +lecherous: se^4lang^2 色狼 (color-wolf – sexual maniac) and $lang^2wen^3$ 狼吻 (wolf-kiss – to be raped). According to *Jiyun* (The Book of Rhymes), the bei (狽) is an

animal of wolf genus. Wolf and bei often collaborate by walking or working together. The blending of *wolf* and *bei* is highlighted in MCh: *lang²bei⁴wei²jian¹* 狼狽為奸 (wolf-bei-do-evil – act in collusion with each other), *lang²bei⁴* 狼狽 (wolf-bei – embarrassed; in a difficult position) and so on.

The *wolf* in German stands for +greed and +malevolent. Even the adjective *wölfisch* (wolfish – greedy, cruel) was generated. The combination of *wolf* and *sheep* gave raise to several AEs: *Wer sich zum Schaf macht, den fressen die Wölfe* (who acts like a sheep will be eaten by wolves), *ein Wolf im Schafspelz* (the wolf in sheep's skin – the wolf in sheep's clothing), etc. In reality the predator is after the sheep because it is a simple prey. In the Bible and in fairy tales wolf and sheep appear side-by-side; their relationship represents the contrast [+good] vs. [+evil] or [+weak] vs. [+strong].

As wild animals are hard to tame, people deal with them in a respectful manner. Consequently there are no tiger-AEs referring to the human-animal relations. This is completely different from that of domestic animals. Table 2 lists the primitive semantic features of some vehicles. The percentages in the table indicate the more salient features. Those in brackets are out-of-date ones that can be found only in literature.

[Please confer to table 2]

4. Lexical change

Dragon-AEs occupy about 9% of the MCh corpus. While lexical meaning changes from concrete to abstract (Traugott 1995: 32), the lexemes contain *long* 龍 (dragon) develops in a different way: abstract > concrete, high > low. The semantic element *long* can now serve as a popular phonetic representation stands for the phonological unit [+liquids] + [-front vowels] + [+nasal consonant] due to the language contact, e.g., *sha¹long²* 沙龍 (sa<u>lon</u>) and *nai⁴long²* 耐龍 (ny<u>lon</u>). This is a new tendency for many Chinese characters when loaning words from other languages by the way of transliteration. Homonyms play a key role here. A transliteration can be so widely used that it becomes an affix underwent grammaticalization.

Grammaticalization is observed in animal name usage in both languages. They reinforce the meaning of their heads in the compounds or the phrases and serve as intensifiers, e.g., the *Affen* in *Affenschande* (monkey shame - absolute scandal) doesn't mean "monkey" and the *Bären* in *Bärenkälte* (bear-cold – big cold) doesn't refer to "bear". They lost or mitigated their own semantic function and work as grammatical units.

5. Vocabulary of values

The corpora show that about 80% of AEs are used to scorn or warn people. AEs are not used for bad purposes but rather due to the ignorance of animal's nature (Schenda 1998:13). In other words, the metaphorical vehicles that people adopted to produce AEs and people's knowledge of animals are often based on different cognitive levels. For example, zoological research (e.g., Grzimek 1988:20) reports that pigs are smart, but *ben⁴zhu¹* 笨豬 (dumb pig; idiot) is a popular AE.

As a matter of fact, AEs are our vocabulary of values; AEs express positive and negative sanctions in the societies. Praise and reprimand help the process of adaptation to the norms and rules of the society. For instance, when one is called a *falscher Hund* (a false dog – a false man; a liar), he should know that his behaviour is considered to be "false, underhanded, insidious" and should change his attitude accordingly. When being called a *gen¹pi⁴chong²* 跟屁蟲 (follow-butt-worm – bluebottle) one knows that it is improper to cling to someone like a leech.

6. Semantic, social functions and language ideology

Why do we need AEs? AEs possess semantic and sociolinguistic functions. One semantic function is that we need metaphorical vehicles to express our social norms and emotions. The animals live close to men and we are close biologically too. Human beings make good use of the names of other animal species and create AEs to express our values or criticisms in a poetic, entertaining and imaginative way. On the other hand, AEs are the terms to convey emotions. There are many secular benedictions and terms of endearments in the form of AEs. Secular benedictions satisfy peoples' superstition or help express their imagination. Endearments help convey emotions.

AEs also show the different ways of thinking and traditional philosophy of the peoples, e.g., the Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism in a Chinese speaking society and Christianity in Germany. AEs indicate that the MCh speakers tend to think group-centrically while the Germans think individualistically or egocentrically.

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Underlying Conceit	Percentage		Metaphorical tenor	Percentage	
	Chinese	German		Chinese	German
Appearance	27%	21%	basic need domain	25.8%	10.6%
			emotion	5.1%	8.4%
			amusement	5.4%	8.4%
			society	14.2%	9.0%
			work, sport, etc.	49.5%	63.6%
Behaviour	25%	27%	basic need domain	29.2%	10.9%
			emotion	11.1%	13.5%
			amusement	5.5%	4.3%
			society	11.1%	3.6%
			work, sport, etc.	43.2%	67.7%
Habit	18%	21%	basic need domain	22.2%	9.8%
			emotion	9.5%	14.5%
			amusement	5.1%	4.4%
			society	16.0%	5.7%
			work, sport, etc.	47.2%	65.1%
Human-Animal Relation	21%	20%			
Arbitrary	15%	9%			
Unknown	8%	12%			

Table 1. The underlying conceits and metaphorical tenors in MCh and German corpora

Vehicles	Mandarin Chinese	German
Tiger	strength/power 24.4%, danger 22.1%, wickedness 15.1%, cruelty 9.3%, leader 12.3%, courage/boldness 7.6%, greed 5.5%, big, great, swallowing, jumping, vitality, proud, significant, valuable, energetic, robust, awfully, auspicious, superstitious	strength/power 66.7%, courage, hunt, protector, rapidity, gasoline, (jealousy)
Wolf	malevolence 26.9%, cruelty 15.4%, lecherous, thankless, yammers, cunning	cruelty 27.8%, destruction 22.2%, malevolence 16.7%, hunger 16.7%, greed 16.7%, evil, strong, intensifier
Bird	gain 10.3%, loving couple 10.1%, messenger, girl, someone, something, unpleasant person, followers, penis, free, nice voice, timid, stupid, small, inexperienced, parroting, crazy, awkwardly, useless, determination, goal, (sun)	comic 11.1%, confidential messenger, free, goal, small, light weight, cute, eat little, rapidity, loosely, unsteady, mad, strange, confusing thought, merrily, sexual intercourse, defect, sacrifices
Fish	profit 17.1%, fecundity 12.2%, person in danger 7.3%, lover 5.6%, well, swim well, goal, work, chance, ability, someone, something, friend, society/group, message, innocent, joke, (acrobatics)	someone 13.7%, profit/purpose 11.8%, event 11.8%, cold-blooded, uncertainty, unreliability, (no intelligence)
Worm	damage 64%, laze 28%, inferiority 24%, small, insignificant, flattering, hungry, enthusiast, poisonous, disease, scatterbrain, (decomposition, other animal)	parasite 25%, small size 20%, defenselessness 20%, trouble 18%, defect 15%, danger 15%, bad conscience 9%, shape of a thread, restless, anger, poor, addiction, mad idea, mystery/secret, disturbing, (wriggling forward, grave)

Table 2. Primitive semantic features of some wild animal names in Mandarin Chinese and German