

The Application of Semantic Cognitive Mechanism of English Idioms in Idiom Teaching

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Abstract: This article takes the perspective of cognitive linguistics and applies the semantic cognitive mechanism of English idioms to analyze the motivation between the generation and meaning of idioms. It explores the teaching of English idioms based on motivation analysis and proposes several suggestions and strategies for idiom teaching, hoping to benefit English idiom teaching.

Keywords: Semantic cognitive mechanism; Metaphor; Metonymy; Conceptual integration; Idiom teaching

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1. Introduction

Idioms are an important component of various ethnic languages, carrying and condensing the essence of language representations from different countries and ethnic groups. Based on previous research and from the perspective of cognitive linguistics, this article defines the concept of English idioms from the dimensions of the number, structure, semantics, category, and culture of their constituent items as follows: English idioms are phrases, or sentences composed of two or more constituent items, with a conventional structure; semantics being the result of cognitive processing, evolving over a long period of time, have rich cultural connotations; and English idioms being superior concepts, include proverbs, allegorical sayings, proverbs, aphorisms, allusions, and some slang and other subordinate concepts.

The traditional view of language regards idioms as special linguistic phenomena independent of the human conceptual system. Nunberg ^[1] summarized them as follows: (1) the meaning of idioms is non-decomposable; (2) The sum of the constituent meanings does not equal the meaning of the idiom; (3) Idioms do not derive meaning from their constituent elements; (4) Idioms have solidification properties; (5) The meaning of the constituent item is not related to the meaning of the entire idiom. This language perspective has a negative impact on the teaching and research of idioms, which restricts the study and teaching of idioms. Teachers tend to treat idioms as a fixed structure for students to remember for a long time, without studying their cognitive reasoning. They believe that there is an arbitrary connection between the form and meaning of idioms, and the acquisition of idioms is to store them for long-term memory.

Cognitive linguistics provides a new path for the teaching and research of English idioms. Scholars have conducted research on the semantics and cognitive mechanisms of idioms based on cognitive linguistics ^[1-6]. The cognitive language view holds that idioms are products of conceptual systems and cognitive processing, and their semantics are analyzable and deducible, rather than arbitrary. The semantic generation of idioms has a cognitive basis for conceptual systems. Idioms are not simply language vocabulary but are generated based on human cognition of the world, and their essence is conceptual ^[7]. Cognitive linguistics provides a new paradigm for the study and teaching of idioms.

This article takes the perspective of cognitive linguistics and applies the semantic cognitive mechanism of English idioms to analyze the motivation between idiom generation and meaning. It applies the mechanisms of metaphor, metonymy, and conceptual integration of English idiom semantic generation to English idiom teaching and explores the teaching of English idioms based on motivation analysis.

2. Semantic cognitive mechanism of English idioms

In fact, the formation of word meanings plays an important role in the semantic generation of the entire idiom. The constituent words of idioms have semantic independence. The semantics of idioms are generated through the mechanisms of metaphor, metonymy, and conceptual integration to form the meanings of words. This mapping structure, due to long-term use, will solidify into human long-term memory and form a conventional concept, namely idiom semantics.

English idioms are the result of people's physical experience and cognitive processing of the objective world, as well as the conceptualization of the objective world. Therefore, English and Chinese idioms themselves are conceptual. The reason why the semantics of idioms are obscure and difficult to understand is because the semantics of idioms do not constitute the literal meaning of words, but rather the conceptual meaning. Kövecses and Szabo ^[7] pointed out that the semantics of idioms arise from conceptual systems rather than psychological lexicons. Lakoff and Johnson ^[8] also believed that metaphor (including metonymy) is a cognitive mechanism for the generation of idioms, which connects encyclopedic knowledge of conceptual domains with the meanings of idioms. The metaphorical mapping of idioms is based on people's physical experiences and encyclopedic knowledge of the objective world, which are reflected in people's conceptual systems.

Metaphor, metonymy, and conceptual integration mechanisms are important mechanisms for the semantic generation of English and Chinese idioms. The mapping structure, due to its long-term use, can solidify into people's long-term memory, forming metaphorical, metonymic, and integrated meanings. It has a conventional nature and can be retrieved at any time in long-term memory. The metaphorical, metonymic, and integrated meanings of idioms, which have long-term and extensive use among individuals, will be solidified into idiomatic semantics.

3. Application of semantic cognitive mechanisms in English idiom teaching

Firstly, **Figure 1** shows how the semantics of an English idiom are generated through a metaphorical mechanism:

Example 1: Beat/turn swords into plowshares

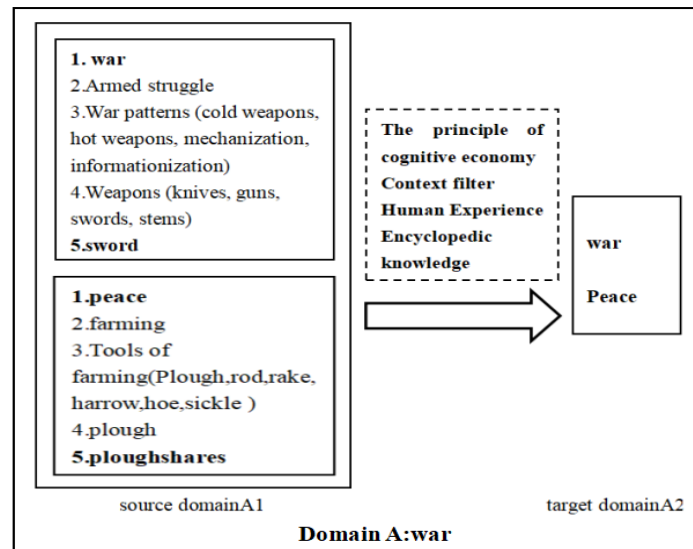


Figure 1. Metaphoric mechanism of “beat/turn swords into plowshares”

In the idiom “beat/turn swords into plowshares,” “plowshares” refer to the blades on the plow. The core of the semantic generation of the idiom “beat/turn swords into plowshares” is the mechanism of metonymy. In the semantic generation metonymy mechanism schema of “beat/turn swords into plowshares,” two instances of metonymy occur, with the element “swords” from the source domain projecting to the target domain containing an element of “fighting”; the element “plowshares” in the source domain is projected to a target domain with an element of “peace activities.” During the two metaphorical processes, both the source domain and the target domain belong to the same cognitive domain, which is a projection that occurs within the same cognitive domain. The core of the semantic generation of this idiom is the metonymy mechanism, in which the human brain uses a specific object to refer to the function of the object.

Example 2: A Pyrrhic Victory

“A Pyrrhic Victory” refers to the year 279 BC when King Pyrrhus of Epirus defeated the Romans but lost all of his finest officers and soldiers (Figure 2).

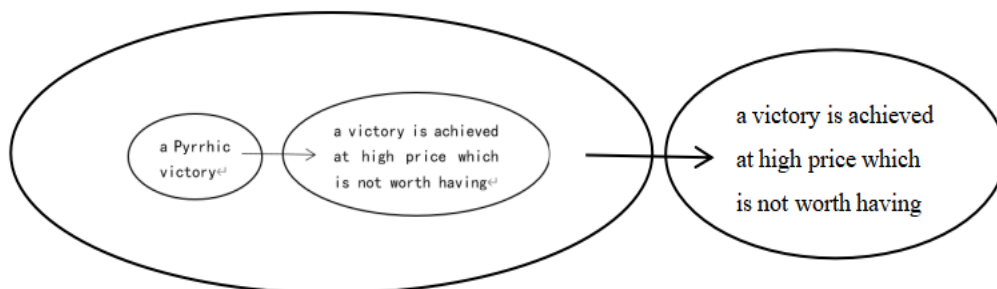


Figure 2. Metonymy mechanism of “A Pyrrhic Victory”

The core of the semantic generation of the idiom “a Pyrrhic Victory” is the mechanism of metonymy. In the semantic generation metonymy mechanism schema of “a Pyrrhic Victory,” the source domain contains an event element of “a Pyrrhic Victory.” At this point, a metonymy occurs in people’s minds, and the attribute feature “a Victory is achieved at a high price that is not worth having” of the event element “a Pyrrhic Victory” in the source domain is projected onto the target domain, giving it this attribute feature. The core of the

semantic generation of this idiom is the metonymy mechanism, which refers to the typical attributes reflected by a specific event in the human brain.

The origin domain of the above two idioms comes from the domain of war. Cognitive linguistics is based on experiential philosophy, which holds that the interaction between human experience and reality forms language cognition [9]. It is precisely because humanity has undergone the cruel baptism of war in history that when we look back on history, we can still feel the terror of war. Therefore, when referring to terrifying and urgent things, we naturally associate them with the domain of war that we have already perceived and are familiar with.

The root of metonymy is physical experience. The origin of the metonymy of war idioms is people’s physical experience in war, in contact with war, in understanding war, or in reviewing war. Thus, when referring to scary and urgent things, we use the domain of war. The occurrence of war domain metonymy in our minds is based on the proximity between the ontology (target domain) characteristics of things and the war domain (origin domain). When referring to scary and urgent things, we associate them with the war domain that we have already perceived and are familiar with, resulting in the projection of the target domain and the war domain elements (origin domain). The cognitive basis of metonymy is the proximity relationship between two entities. Metonymy occurs within the same cognitive domain, where one entity is used to replace another entity within the same cognitive domain; a way of thinking and process in which people perceive one subject through another. In the human brain, the cognitive process of using one subject to communicate with another within the same knowledge domain. The operational mechanism of metonymy in war domain idioms is also the same. The war domain idiom in this article refers to an idiom whose origin domain is the war domain, and its metonymic mechanism is consistent with all metonymic mechanisms.

Example 3: A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush

The semantic meaning of the idiom “a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush” is “it is better to be satisfied with what you have got than to lose it for trying to get something more or better,” and its semantic generation pattern is shown in **Figure 3**.

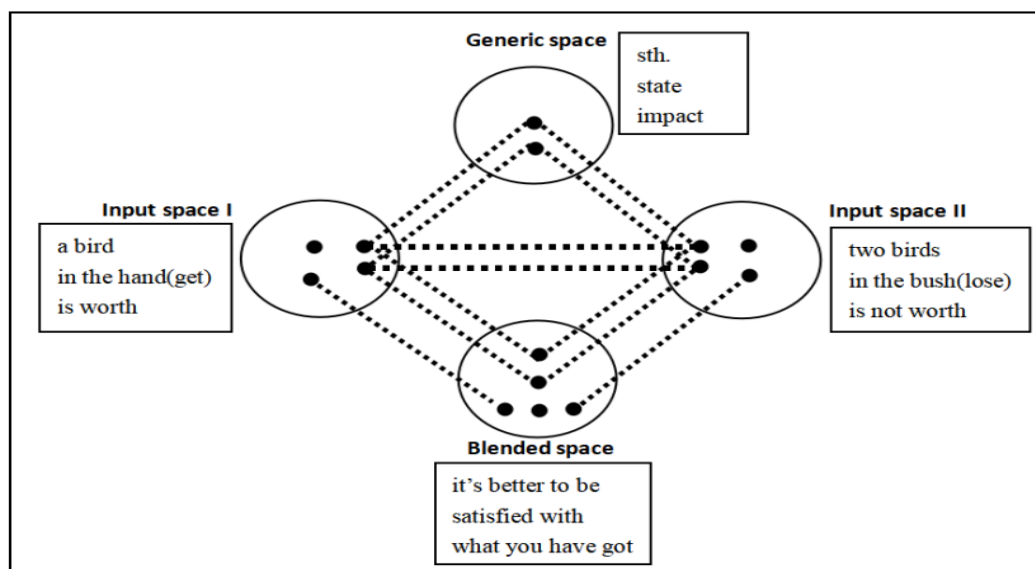


Figure 3. Integration mechanism of “a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush”

The core mechanism of semantic generation of the idiom “a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush” is the concept integration mechanism. In the semantic generation integration mechanism schema of “a bird in the

hand is both in the bush,” there are three elements in input space 1, one of which is the subject element “a bird” from the natural domain; one is the state element “in the hand (get)”; one is the influence element “is worth.” There are three elements in input space 2, one of which is the event set element “two birds” from the natural domain; one is the element of the state “in the bush (loss)”; one is the influence element “is not worth.” The common attribute features of input spaces 1 and 2 in the category space are “subject, state, and influence.” The components generated in the integrated space include “it is better to be satisfied with what you have got.”

The semantic generation of the idiom “a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush” is achieved through the integration mechanism of natural domain concepts. The natural domain idioms in this article refer to idioms whose input space comes from the natural domain, and their integration mechanism is consistent with the operation mechanism of all conceptual integration. Conceptual integration is a highly complex mental operation process that is achieved through three integration methods: composition, completion, and elaboration. These three cognitive operation methods project the conceptual content and structure within the integrated space into the input space, and there is a compression and competition relationship. At the beginning of life, humans first interact with everything in nature. In the natural world, the interaction between humans and the natural world generates various experiences, which form an encyclopedic knowledge of the natural world and concepts in human minds. The formation of the integration of natural domain concepts mainly comes from people’s sensory experiences in the natural world. The reason natural domain integration can be formed is that we have already understood things in nature through our experiences with nature, and formed clear concepts about them in our minds. It is said that the root cause of the integration of natural domain idioms is people’s physical experiences. Based on these experiences, people develop feelings, cognition, and concepts about things in nature.

4. Conclusion

The evolution of English idiom teaching fundamentally reflects a transformation in idiomatic cognition. Enhancing the understanding of idioms is essential for advancing their pedagogical approach. Historically, both the comprehension and teaching methodologies surrounding idioms have regarded them as fixed structures for learners to memorize over extended periods, neglecting an exploration of their cognitive motivations. This perspective erroneously posits an arbitrary relationship between the form and meaning of idioms, suggesting that acquisition merely involves long-term retention. In reality, the semantics of English idioms emerge from cognitive processing and have undergone dynamic evolution over time. The application of semantic cognitive mechanisms offers a novel paradigm for idiom teaching. The cognitive frameworks involving metaphor, metonymy, and conceptual integration provide learners with pathways to grasp the semantic meanings inherent in these expressions. Proficiencies in metaphorical reasoning, metonymic understanding, and conceptual integration are instrumental for English learners to systematically comprehend the semantic relationships among various meanings of idioms while learning based on underlying cognitive motivations. From a cognitive linguistics perspective, this paper employs the semantic cognitive mechanisms associated with English idioms to analyze the motivational dynamics between their generation and meaning while investigating instructional strategies grounded in motivation analysis.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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