A corpus based study on animal expressions in Mandarin Chinese and German
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Abstract

This study based on Mandarin Chinese and German Corpora to investigate animal fixed expressions. It aims to, first, apply Goddard’s (1998) approach of semantic molecules to explore semantic interaction. Second, It delves into cultural perspectives with focus on different mentalities and thoughts of the peoples. It is found that there is interconnection and interaction between semantic molecules and these animal names serve as semantic contributors in distinct semantic domains, e.g., cat for ‘woman’ in German. Furthermore, animal expressions demonstrate the different mentalities as well as the Chinese group-centric and Germans’ individualistic modes of thought.

1. Introduction

Degler (1989:xiii) brings up that there appears to be “so many animal phrases and expressions that a book listing them all would become a small dictionary.” However, animal expressions have not drawn much attention of the researchers and most of the research works on animal expressions lay emphasis on negative connotations. The present study gives a different view. We first apply Goddard’s (1998) approach of semantic molecules to expose the flourish animal expressions, e.g., cat and tiger, in our languages and to introduce positive connotations of these expressions. Secondly, different mentalities and modes of thought are revealed by comparing MCh (Mandarin Chinese) and German animal expressions.

2. Research framework

An AE (animal expression) is defined in this study as any MCh or German expression that encodes animal names with metaphorical meaning, without recourse to a separate definition of metaphor, or of metonymous blending. Most of the raw data of AEs are collected from Academia Sinica Ancient Chinese Corpus, Academia Sinica Balanced Corpus of Mandarin Chinese and the German Corpus Search, Management and Analysis System (COSMAS). The spoken AEs are observed and gathered from daily-
Wierzbicka (1985) studied animal terms in the way of stating explication that contains many semantically complex words. In her analysis, the topmost component ‘animal’ indicates that tiger is a life-form word derived from the animal tiger. Component (b) describes its habitat, (c) and (d) refer to its size and overall outer appearance, (e) says its characteristic behavior, and (f) specifies an animal-human relation. Goddard further develops Wierzbicka’s proposal and concludes that the tiger explication “contains many semantically complex words, such as: animal, jungle, cat, black, stripes, yellow, sharp, claws, teeth, kill, zoo, fierce, powerful, afraid…. they function as units (‘semantic molecules’)” (1998:247). The semantic molecules are “composed directly of ‘primitive semantic features,’” (1998:255) and can be supported from linguistic evidence such as: a game of cat and mouse, a cat-nap, catfight, etc.

The semantic molecules are extracted from the meaning of cat expressions, for example, chan² mao¹ 饞貓 (gluttonous-cat – gluttonous person) indicates that the cat in MCh carries the semantic molecule ‘gluttonous’. From jiao⁴ chun¹ mao¹ 叫春貓 (cry-lust-cat – one who is surging with lustful desire), we confine that cat conveys ‘shrill, lecherous’. Falsch wie eine Katze (as dishonest as a cat) shows that cat in German bears ‘false, dishonest’.

3. Cat Expressions and the semantic molecules

There is more than one semantic molecule in a Cat expression. The productivity of the salient semantic molecules is marked with percentages. Of the molecules, ‘weak’ is a salient one (27.3%) for the Chinese. That is, “weak” is the concept of the lexical item cat for Chinese and tends to generate more cat expressions in Mandarin Chinese. On the other hand, ‘unimportant (14%), false (8%), flattering (8%), small (6%)’ are conceptualized in a German speaker’s mind and a good number of cat expressions connote these semantic molecules. Meanwhile, although German tomcat is not very productive in comparison with German cat (see Table 1), more than half German tomcat expressions process ‘hangover’ just as monkey and ox in German do.

In Table 1, it is obviously that cat carries a lot more molecules in German than in Mandarin Chinese and cat is a lot more productive in German. This has to do with the feline animal itself, since this animal is the vehicle of the lexical item cat. While cat is the most popular pet in Germany, it is considered an unlucky animal by Chinese, and in Chinese superstition, unlucky objects should not be uttered out loud, instead the euphemism is preferred (Sung 1979, Li 1991, Chen 1987, Wang 2000).

Table 1. The semantic molecules of cat in Mandarin Chinese and in German

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Languages</th>
<th>Vehicles</th>
<th>Semantic molecules</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mandarin Chinese</td>
<td>mao 貓 (cat)</td>
<td>animal, hunting, shrill, weak (27.3%), false, lecherous, gluttonous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>Katze (cat)</td>
<td>animal, eyes, tail, head, tongue, black, soft, wet, small (6%), female, common, unimportant (14%), lazy, licking, superficial (8%), flattering (8%), false, quick, shrill, pugnacious, off-key, ill tempered, hunting, pursuers, jumping, short, careful, clean, habitual, unknown matter, nothing, worthless, unlucky, uncertain, cowardly, absurdly, intolerable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>Kater (tomcat)</td>
<td>animal, black, hangover (55.6%), depressed, crazy, unlucky</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Exactly the opposite of cat molecules, the corpora indicate that tiger has richer semantic molecules in German than in MCh. The semantic molecules of tiger are listed in Table 2. Only MCh generates tiger molecules from the appearance of the tiger, such as ‘mouth, teeth, skin, stripe’. Again, this is the opposite case of cat discussed in the last section; only German cat produces ‘tails, eyes, tongue’. In German, cat molecules are fully developed while tiger molecules are not. On the contrary, the tiger molecules in MCh are fully developed whereas the cat molecules are limited. This can be revealed from the productivity of the molecules along with the quantity of the expressions as shown in Table 1. The reason for less tiger expressions in German is probably because Europe lacks a native tiger species. Tiger is sometimes called ‘das asiatische Raubtier (the Asian carnivore)’ in German and this animal is promoted to the public when the presence of a city zoo.

Table 2. The semantic molecules of tiger in Mandarin Chinese and in German

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Languages</th>
<th>Vehicles</th>
<th>Semantic molecules</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mandarin Chinese</td>
<td>虎 (tiger)</td>
<td>animal, mane, head, mouth, teeth, skin, stripe, burrow, big, huge, great, swallowing, jumping, courageous (5.7%), vitality, proud, powerful (24.4%), important, significant, valuable, energetic, robust, greedy (5.4%), hungry, dangerous (22.1%), violent, fractional, cruel (15.1%), rumor, awful, auspicious, superstitious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>Tiger</td>
<td>animal, powerful (66.7%), courageous, hunting, protector, gasoline</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Discussion

Three findings are generated from the above:

The interconnection and interaction of semantic molecules

When we examine the derivation of the AEs, they are developed from the appearance, the behavior, the habit of the animal or the relations between humans and animals based on culture. The semantic molecules are interconnected since they are developed from the same animal and therefore have the same core. The molecules then interact in a variety of AEs that adopt the same animal name. These AEs automatically carry almost all the molecules within one expression but with one or two molecules salient, e.g. the tiger expression 躲虎藏龍 (crouch-tiger-hide-dragon – remarkable talent who has not been discovered) carries almost all semantic molecules of tiger ‘animal, strong, great, courageous, vitality, proud, powerful, important, significant’ with it as connotation, but ‘strong, powerful, valuable’ are salient molecules that denotes it. Katzenwäsche (cat’s wash – a lick and a promise) holds the semantic molecules of cat in German ‘animal, head, tongue, wet, lazy, licking, quick, clean, habitual, superficial’, but ‘quick, superficial’ are salient ones that stand for the expression.

Semantic molecules and semantic domains

The semantic molecules of cat and tiger reveal the nature of distinct responsibilities of semantic domains. Take German Katze (cat) as an example. Many semantic molecules of German cat are covered under ‘moody’ and ‘small’. For example, ‘ill tempered, jumping, uncertain, absurdly, intolerable’ are either hyponyms or synonyms of MOODY, and ‘common, insignificant, short, quick’ can be that of SMALL. Consequently, the Katze falls into the domains MOODY, SMALL. This makes Katze a “perfect” semantic contributor for the subject ‘woman’. Many Katze expressions refer to women, such as Kätzchen (little cat – an endearment for a woman), falsch wie eine Katze (a woman who is as false as a cat) and Schmusekatze (flattering cat – an endearment for a woman).
Likewise, the MCh tiger molecules ‘courageous, vitality, proud, significant, energetic’ are covered by the domain BIG, STRONG. Big and strong can be POWERFUL or conversely DANGEROUS depending on the need. We therefore have tiger expressions like biao1xing2da4han4 彪形大汉 (young tiger-big-man – husky fellow), hu3dan3 虎膽 (tiger-gut – great braveness) and sheng1long2huo3hu3 生龍活虎 (living-dragon-lively-tiger – full of vigor), etc. However, this domain is ascribed to males and cannot be applied to females. When it is, the meaning is shifted to ‘a terrible woman’, as in mu3lao3hu3 母老虎 (female-tiger – tigress; fractious women) and hu3gu1po2 虎姑婆 (tiger-aunt – evil woman), highlighting the negative tiger molecules.

**Endearments and secular benedictions**

The Cat expression Kätzchen gives a clue about German endearments. Many other endearments in terms of other animal names are observed in the German corpus, as shown in Table 3. The large amount of German endearments also reveals the traditional gender roles in German society. The endearments that are applied to women are derived either from a domestic animal (lamb), pets (cat, rabbit), a culture follower (animals that live in close proximity to humans such as mouse) or small and light birds (swallow, dove), whereas, those for men are derived from a wild animal, the bear. This first shows the human nature that men are physically stronger than women. Secondly, traditionally women were responsible for the household while men were considered to be in charge of outdoor work. As Scollon (1993) points out AEs are widely used because they have their roots in a traditional and rural society. The images fossilized in fixed expressions (Moon 1998:35). Fixed expressions record history. As the traditional notion is fading in modern society, language continues to file it. Although the society is changing, men remain physically stronger than women. This affords social settings for the use of these AEs.

An opposite issue is the secular benediction. There are a large amount of them in the form of MCh tiger as well as other animal expressions, however none found in related German Cat expressions and rarely found in other German AEs. zhi3xian4 yuan1yang1bu2xian4xian1 只羡鴛鴦不羡仙 (only-envy-mandarin-ducks-not-envy-god – happy is he who is content, to act according to one’s ability) is used to bliss a newlywed. Peng2cheng2wan4li3 鵬程萬里 (roc-route-ten-thousand-miles – make a roc’s flight of 10,000 li; have a bright future) and hong2tu2da4zhan3 鴻圖大展 (swan goose-hope-big-spread – a congratulatory speech to people who start business) can pass on good wishes for the graduates’ future or the opening of a business. Jin1gui1xu4 金龜婿 (golden-turtle-son-in-law) is used to praise a great son-in-law and qi2lin2song4 麒麟送子 (Qilin4 delivers sons) is a felicitation for the family with a newborn son.

Table 3. Endearment in the form of animal names in German

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objects</th>
<th>German endearments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Children</strong></td>
<td>Frosch/Fröschlein (frog/little frog), Mäuschen/Mausi (little mouse), Schäfchen (little sheep), Spatze/Spätzchen (swallow/little swallow), Würmchen (little worm)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Women</strong></td>
<td>Lammi/Lämchen (lamb/little lamb), Schmusekatze (flattering she-cat), Kätzchen (little cat), Hase/Hasi/Häschen (rabbit/little rabbit), Mäuschen/Mausi (little mouse), Spätzchen (little swallow), Täubchen (little dove), Vögelchen (little bird)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Men</strong></td>
<td>Bärchen (little bear), Knuddelbär (haggling-bear), Brummär (growling bear)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. Closing remark

Let us now turn to examine the endearments and secular benedictions from a pragmatic viewpoint and explicate my ultimate discussion. An endearment like Kätzchen is used between pairs. It is a one on one personal term, while secular benedictions in MCh, like wo⁴ hu³ cang² long² (crouch-tiger-hide-dragon – with hidden dragons and crouching tigers; a place with undiscovered talent), is applied either to one person or more often to a group of objects. There are a good number of group-oriented secular benedictions in MCh and many endearments (one on one expression) in German, but not vice versa. This gives a hint to the different modes of thinking between MCh speakers and Germans: the MCh speakers tend to think group-centrically while the Germans think individualistically or egocentrically.

This is supported by other observations in the corpora. MCh speakers use an animal name to represent all the family members to create AEs while Germans point out every single subject of the animal family, e.g., there are Ochse (ox), Bulle (papal bull), Büffel (buffalo), Stier (bull), Kuh (cow), Kalb (calf) expressions for the cattle family in German, while the lexeme niu 牛 (cattle) is used to represent the whole cattle family in MCh. Another example, the corpora indicate that there are 11.78% MCh AEs that compound two, three or more animal names in an expression, but there are only 1.93% in German. In other words, more than 98% of German AEs encode single and individual vehicle when many MCh AEs are coined with a group of (two or more) vehicles in an expression. For instance, hu³ bei⁴ xiong² yao¹ 虎背熊腰 (tiger-back-bear- waist – stalwart men; backs like tigers and loins like bears) makes reference to a strong physique by referring to two separate parts of the body, using two metaphorical vehicles. Tang² bu³ chan² huang² que⁴ hou⁴ 螳螂捕蝉 黄雀在后 (praying mantis-catch-cicadas oriole-is-behind – the mantis stalks the cicada, unaware of the oriole behind; to covet gains ahead without being aware of danger behind) makes the whole idea of the dangerous situation. The interaction and collaboration of the semantic molecules reveal the social function of mutuality and reciprocity (Mauss 1954) in the MCh speaker’s holistic mode of thinking.

Also social behaviors of both cultures give light to the different modes of thinking. In Germany, the proper way of greeting a group of people is to say hello to every individual. It is the same when giving a farewell. MCh speakers tend to perform the greeting and farewell once and for all. When recording the date in MCh, minguo jiushiyi nian ba yue ershi ri xingqiyi ‘民國九十二年九月十日星期二 (2003, Sept. 10th, Tuesday – Tuesday, 10th Sept., 2003)’ use the year-month-day order, leading with the larger time span. Day-month-year order is written in German ‘Montag, 20.08.2002’: the individual part is indicated first. The same format as above is used when writing addresses. MCh speakers write in the order of city-road-lane-number with the larger area mentioned first, e.g., taipei shi da ling lu 30 xiang 10 (Taipei City, Da-ling Road, 30 Lane, 10 Number – Number 10, Lane 30, Da-ling Road, Taipei City), while the Germans use the opposite format. Numbers are counted in Germany like ‘ein und zwanzig (one and twenty – twenty one)’ with the unit in lead. The same number is counted as ershiyi 二十一 (twenty one) in MCh. Language use and social attitudes indicate the distinct ideologies.

References


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