

# A Comparative Analysis of English and Chinese Idioms— From the Perspective of Conceptual Metaphor of “Happiness”

Xiuzhi Li

School of Adult Education, Dezhou University, Dezhou 253023, China  
Email: lcdxlxz@163.com

**Abstract**—A comparative analysis of English and Chinese idioms is made from the perspective of conceptual metaphor of “happiness”. By comparison, similar and different metaphors and metaphoric idioms in conceptualizing “happiness” are detected at first. Moreover, the reasons for the differences and similarities mentioned above derive from different thinking modes and cultural models.

**Index Terms**—English and Chinese idioms, conceptual metaphor of “happiness”, comparative analysis

## I. INTRODUCTION

According to traditional view, idioms are treated as a whole semantically speaking and they can not be separated and synthesized. Therefore, idioms are looked on as a special kind of linguistic phenomenon. Many previous studies of idioms fail to recognize their metaphorical roots because scholars tend to detect only a few of these conventional phrases, such as *rain cats and dogs*. Cognitive view of metaphors shed new light on idiom learning and teaching, which holds that metaphors are not only poetical or rhetorical embellishments, but “in essence, a means of understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980: 42). As a kind of thinking mode, metaphors are so pervasive in our daily life that we are almost not aware of its existence. This is also true with many idioms. As researches go deeper and deeper, scholars find that many idioms are partly analyzable and motivated by conceptual metaphors.

Emotions, as one of the most pervasive human experience, are conceptualized and expressed in metaphorical ways as well. Conceptual metaphor plays an important role in conceptualizing emotions. However, the previous studies of conceptualizing emotions neglected the studies of linguistic expressions, especially idioms to a certain extent. Besides, studies of idioms expressing emotions are mainly based on the English linguistic data, therefore, the comparative studies of English and Chinese idioms expressing emotions are comparatively rare. Thus, the dissertation tries to make a case study by comparing the English and Chinese idioms expressing emotions. It aims at testifying the common applicability and cultural particularity of the theories in the conceptualization of emotions and idiomatic expressions in English and Chinese. Moreover the reasons for the commonness and differences between them are to be found out so as to provide some suggestions for English and Chinese idiom teaching and learning.

## II. COMMONNESS OF ENGLISH AND CHINESE IDIOMS IN CONCEPTUALIZATION OF HAPPINESS

Happiness is one of the basic human emotions. According to the explanation of general psychology, happiness is the pleasure and comfort felt by individuals when the objectives they long for have been achieved and the stress been released. In addition, when people’s wishes are fulfilled in unexpected time and occasions, it will also bring them the experience of happiness (Ye Yiqian, 1997: 348).

### A. Orientational Metaphor of Happiness

In English the metaphors expressing “happiness” are mostly related to space and orientation: the erect posture of body is used to express happiness, thus the conceptual metaphor HAPPINESS IS UP. By comparison, we found that there exists the same orientational metaphor HAPPINESS IS UP in Chinese. Further, many such idiomatic expressions can be found in both English and Chinese.

#### HAPPINESS IS UP

- (1) We had to *cheer* him up.
- (2) He’s been *in high spirits* all day.
- (3) I left the island *with a light heart*.
- (4) Edward is not very cheerful; he needs a holiday to *boost* him up.
- (5) I *feel elated* at beating him.
- (6) *xing gao cai lie* (in high spirits)
- (7) *xing zhi bo bo* (tails up)
- (8) *shen cai fei yang* (filled with spirits)

(9) *qing xu gao zhang* (in high spirits)

In the above examples, the words “up”, “high”, “light”, and “elate” in English and “gao” (high), “bo bo” (high), “fei” (fly) and “gao” (high) in Chinese are all related to the concept “up”. Furthermore, *elate* comes from Latin word *elat*, which means “raised”. We can see clearly that all of the words are used to show the happy feeling.

These idiomatic expressions are in fact based on our bodily experience. The upright posture is typically in accordance with positive emotional state, while the opposite drooping posture is consistent with a negative one. Just because of the same experiences of the two peoples, there exist the same orientational metaphors of happiness emotion in spite of their different races, colors and beliefs. Therefore, both in English and Chinese, we use the same orientational metaphor to structure the concept of happiness. This can be explained by Chinese linguist Wang Yin (2005: 50), who stated that during the development of human cognition, the space is the first we experience, including place, orientation and movement. We use our body to experience the space concept. These two aspects are the origin of human concepts and language. In other words, human’s cognition is based on the understanding of human himself and space, following the rule of far-near, concrete-abstract and from body and space to other conceptual domains. According to Wang Yin, in the course of human’s perception and experience, body and space are the main foundation of forming other conceptions including abstract concepts, playing a very important part in the formation of human’s cognition.

B. *Structural Metaphor of Happiness*

Happiness in English is expressed in terms of light or brightness as well. This structural metaphor HAPPINESS IS LIGHT (BRIGHTNESS) also works in conceptualization of happiness in Chinese. Now, let’s turn to the idioms motivated by this structural metaphor in English and Chinese.

## HAPPINESS IS LIGHT (BRIGHTNESS)

- (1) Her face *lighted up* when she received the letter from her boy friend.
- (2) His eyes *gleamed with pleasure*.
- (3) The child has *brought sunshine into* the old couple’s life.
- (4) She *brightened up* seeing his lost child.
- (5) She was *radiant with joy*.
- (6) *xiao zhu yan kai* (be all smiles)
- (7) *rong guang huan fa* (one’s face is glowing)
- (8) *xi xing yu se* (happiness showed in one’s facial color)

Without doubt, the italic idioms in English are all closely related to light. Besides, the words “guang” and “yan” in Chinese really means both “color” and “face”, or rather “happy glowing face”. Again these expressions are based on our bodily experience: when a person is happy, his or her face and eyes often become brighter. So, the light seems to derive from the internal energy characteristics of a happy person.

We all know that when one becomes happy, one’s complexion and eyes turn brighter. The brightness is a kind of physiological response to happiness; therefore it can be metaphorically employed to describe the happy emotion.

C. *Ontological Metaphor of Happiness*

Container metaphors are the typical ones of ontological metaphors. In English and Chinese, there is the same container metaphor HAPPINESS IS A FLUID IN A CONTAINER. The container image is adopted to describe the happiness emotion. Our body or heart is usually viewed as a container, while the emotion of happiness is regarded as a fluid in a container. By comparison, we find that there are some idiomatic expressions motivated by this metaphor both in English and Chinese. However, there are fewer idioms in Chinese than in English motivated by this container metaphor.

## HAPPINESS IS A FLUID IN A CONTAINER

- (1) Seeing his funny look, all of the students *burst into laughter*.
- (2) Joy *welled up* inside him.
- (3) The good news *filled* him *with joy*.
- (4) We were *full of joy*.
- (5) He *brimmed over with* happiness.
- (6) His heart is *overflowing with* joy.
- (7) *xin man yi zu* (on top of the world)

From the above examples, we can see that the words “into”, “well up”, “fill”, “full”, “brim”, “overflow” in English and “man” (full) in Chinese are all closely related to the concept “container”. Besides, they are all employed to describe the happy emotion. In these examples above, either the body or heart is regarded as the container, in which happiness is viewed as a kind of substance. So according to the common knowledge, happiness (substance) can be put into one’s body or head (container); happiness can fill the body or head; happiness can overflow or brim with so much happiness in one’s body or head that it can not hold so much happiness.

To sum up, the similarities between English and Chinese in conceptualizing the happiness lies in the fact that human beings share the same body experience in spite of the differences in race, nation, and living conditions of English and Chinese people.

### III. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ENGLISH AND CHINESE IDIOMS IN CONCEPTUALIZATION OF HAPPINESS

To a large extent, conceptual metaphors depend on the commonness of human being's thinking mode. However, like common metaphors, sometimes they take on the obvious characteristics of national culture. That is nationality (Zhang Guangming, 2002: 165). Through the careful comparison and analysis, the following major differences concerning happiness metaphors are observed.

#### A. *Being Happy is Being off the Ground Particular in English*

The conceptual metaphor of upward orientation: BEING HAPPY IS BEING OFF THE GROUND is specific in English. "A strong correlation can be found between HAPPINESS IS UP and the metaphor of upward orientation BEING HAPPY IS BEING OFF THE GROUND" (Kövecses, 1991: 35). Many English idioms to show the conceptual metaphor are listed as follows.

##### BEING HAPPY IS BEING OFF THE GROUND

- (1) The old woman was *in the seventh heaven* at meeting her long-lost son.
- (2) Mary was *up in the air* because John asked her to the party.
- (3) Hearing the news that he had passed the exam, he *walked on air*.
- (4) She was *on cloud nine (seven)*.
- (5) At present everything is going smoothly and I feel *on top of the world*.
- (6) They were *riding high*.
- (7) They were *in the clouds*.

"Off the ground" is a kind of physiological reactions when we are happy. As we all know, when one gets happy, he will naturally jump for joy; therefore, there exist so many English idioms associated with "off the ground" applied to describe happiness. There is another reason for this conceptual metaphor. As Kövecses (1991) observes, this metaphor may be partially connected with birds, which are usually regarded as a symbol of freedom and thus related to happiness.

In contrast with English, In Chinese, BEING OFF GROUND is usually viewed as a symbol of proudness, conceit and being out of control. Therefore, the conceptual metaphor has a negative sense. Take the following idiomatic expressions in Chinese for example:

- (1) *yun li wu li* (in the clouds)
- (2) *piao piao ran* (be floating; too complacent due to proudness)
- (3) *jiao ta shi di* (be earnest and down-to-earth)

By "*yun li wu li*" and "*piao piao ran*", we mean a person is so complacent that he loses his senses. In Chinese, we cherish the quality of modesty and prudence as virtues. So we usually say "*zuo ren yao jiao ta shi di*" (As a person, we should be earnest and down-to-earth) and "*bu yao de yi wang xing*" (don't let complacency turn one's head) in Chinese.

The above difference in metaphorical expressions results from different thinking modes and value concepts of English and Chinese people. Most western countries are located in the open ocean environment which results in people's extroverted character. While China is traditionally a continental country which leads to people's introverted character. The different characters are reflected by languages. Because the language itself is a kind of cultural force and cultural mode, people acquire this language from childhood, and the cultural symbols including all the cultural concepts, values, norms and customs are molded into their own thought and behavior. Seen from the above, we can find that the thinking modes and value concepts are part of cultures. So the extroverted and introverted thinking molds belong to culture and the values of different nations are inevitably reflected in their language. The Chinese people are relatively reserved and tend to suppress their feelings. Therefore in Chinese "BEING OFF THE GROUND" is viewed as the symbol of proudness, self-satisfaction and complacency which bears a derogatory sense. So this value concept is not welcome and applicable to Chinese mold of culture. By contrast, English people are rather frank and direct in manner. They tend to express their feelings directly and completely. So there is the conceptual metaphor BEING HAPPY IS BEING OFF THE GROUND in English.

#### B. *Happiness is the Flower in One's Heart Particular in Chinese*

Chinese also has some that are not applicable in English. An example is HAPPINESS IS THE FLOWER IN ONE'S HEART. However, there is just one idiom found in Chinese.

- (1) *xin hua nu fang* (flowers blossoming wildly in one's heart; rather happy)

In the above example, flowers are mapped onto happiness, with "blooming" or "blossoming" suggesting its increasing intensity. This metaphorical concept is rooted in the Chinese culture in which flowers, particularly 'big red flowers' (da hong hua), are traditionally symbols of happiness. From a cultural perspective, this flower metaphor reflects the more introverted character of Chinese: reactions to happiness in the heart are highlighted. This serves as a contrast with the English BEING HAPPY IS BEING OFF THE GROUND metaphor that characterizes a more extroverted character.

#### C. *Container Differences*

Despite the fact that both English and Chinese has the same container metaphor in conceptualizing the happiness, the selection of containers still varies from English to Chinese. In English, the container is mainly human's body as examples (1)—(5) at section II. C shows, while in Chinese it usually refers to heart inside human's body as showed by

the idiomatic expression in example (7) at section II. C. There is no denying that in English the heart can also be used as a container in depicting happiness just as the idiom in example (6) at section II. C, but such kind of phenomenon is rarely seen. In Chinese, besides human's body and the heart, other body parts such as bosom or chest can be specified as the container of happiness as illustrated by Chinese idiom "*xin man yi zu*" (on top of the world) and non-idiomatic expressions "*xin zhong chong man xi yue*" (one's heart is full of happiness), "*man huai huan xi*" (one's bosom is filled with happiness), and "*man qiang xi yue*" (one's chest is full of happiness).

To sum up, Chinese tends to use more body parts such as heart, chest and bosom etc as the container of happiness than English does. While English prefers to use the whole body to describe happiness. The minor difference can be accounted for by the different national characters. English people are extroverted in character in contrast with introverted in Chinese. So, when the body is the container in English, the fluid of happiness that overflows is more readily seen. When the heart is the container in Chinese, whatever overflows it is still inside the body, for the heart is an internal organ.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The thesis made a comparative study of English and Chinese idioms expressing "happiness" emotion from the perspective of conceptual metaphor theory. It is found in English and Chinese "happiness" emotion is basically conceptualized by the metaphorical process. By analysing the data collected, we find that similar emotional conceptual metaphors of "happiness" exist both in English and in Chinese, and besides, every conceptual metaphor has many similar metaphoric idioms. However, due to the different thinking modes and cultures between English and Chinese, there exist some differences in the conceptualization of "happiness" emotion and the expressive ways. As a result, when we learn a language, we should take the culture study into account.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we Live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- [2] Ye, Yiqian. (1997). *General psychology*. Shanghai: Shanghai East China Normal University Press.
- [3] Zhang, Guangming. (2002). *Comparison of English and Chinese rhetoric thought and translation*. Beijing: Beijing Yiwun Press.
- [4] Kövecses, Zoltán. (1991). Happiness: A definitional effort. *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity*, 6, 29-46.
- [5] Cameron, L. & Low, G. (2001). *Metaphor Researching and Applying Metaphor*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- [6] Fernando Chitra. (2000). *Idioms and Idiomaticity*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- [7] Holland, D. & Quinn, N. (1987). *Cultural Models in Language and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [8] Kövecses, Zoltán. (1990). *Emotion Concepts*. New York: Springer.
- [9] Johnson, Mark. (1987). *The Body in the Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- [10] Levin, Samuel R. (1977). *The Semantics of Metaphor*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

**Xiuzhi Li** was born in Dezhou, China in 1972. She received her M. A degree in English Language and Literature from Liaocheng University, China in 2009.

She is currently a lecturer in the School of Adult Education, Dezhou University, Dezhou, China. Her research interests include foreign language teaching and research and cognitive linguistics.