

A Metaphorical Study on Chinese Neologisms

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Abstract—In cognitive linguistics, metaphor is a way of thinking and an important means to perceive or conceptualize the world. It is also an economic and efficient way to create new words. With the development of the society, many neologisms spring up and are widely used by people. This paper aims at examining these Chinese neologisms from the perspective of metaphor by interpreting some examples. The findings indicate that Chinese neologisms have their semantic motivations and the interpretation of them is the result of operation of human cognition mechanism, which involves the metaphorical and metonymic thinking of human beings. This study provides a new way and perspective to study Chinese neologisms, which can also be used to study neologisms in other languages as well.

Index Terms—Chinese neologisms, metaphor, metonymy, cognitive interpretation

I. INTRODUCTION

With the rapid development of the society and the globalization of the world, new things and phenomena emerge constantly. Language, as a tool for human to express thoughts and exchange ideas, is also changing accordingly. As the most active and sensitive element of a language, vocabulary changes much faster and more notably than the other elements of the language, which attracts wide attention of linguistic researchers.

During the past 10 years, lots of new words and expressions have popped up in Chinese, which reflect and witness the fast development in every aspect of Chinese society. These Chinese neologisms provide us with a new way to observe and perceive the development of the society, the changes of the culture, and the psychology of the language users. Chen Yuan (1999), a famous Chinese sociolinguist, holds the opinion that Chinese neologisms are the pioneers to reflect social life and its changes in China.

In the process of neologism formation, metaphor plays an important role. This paper attempts to probe into how metaphor governs the production and understanding of Chinese neologisms and also gives an explanation of some of them with the theory of metaphor, which is very helpful for English learners to understand the new words, and promotes the intercultural communication as well.

II. BASIC INFORMATION ABOUT CHINESE NEOLOGISMS

A. Definition

What is neologism? Many scholars and linguistics from both home and abroad hold different opinions about it. A famous British scholar Peter Newmark (2001) defines “neologism” in his *A Textbook of Translation* as “newly coined lexical units or existing lexical units that acquire a new sense” (p.140). According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary* (7th ed.), neologisms are described as “a new word or expression or a new meaning of a word” (2009, p.1341). The *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* defines neologisms as “a new word or expression, or a new meaning for an older word” (2002, p.951). Wang Tiekun (1992) points out that “neologisms refer to newly created or borrowed words from other languages, from the national language of dialect words, archaisms and industry language, and also refer to existing words with new meanings and new usages” (p.16). Liu Shuxin (1990) holds the opinion that a word, which not only created, but also achieved universal acceptance and widely used by people, having its position in the vocabulary system, can be called neologism.

Based on the above definitions of neologisms, Chinese neologisms can be defined as the follows: Chinese neologisms refer to the newly-created Chinese words, or the words borrowed from other language, or the old Chinese words with new meanings, which can express the new things, new concepts, new ideas, new experiences, or new problems in Chinese society and culture. Besides, Chinese neologisms should abide by the laws of Chinese formation and should be universally accepted and widely used by a group of people.

The Chinese neologisms in this paper are mainly selected from *China's Language Life Condition Report* issued by China National Education Ministry from 2006 to 2013 on its website.

B. Classification

Chinese neologisms can be classified according to different criteria.

1. Classification According to Sources

Generally speaking, Chinese neologisms come into being from three main sources. Firstly, some Chinese neologisms are created to describe new things and new concepts, such as “打车神器”, “多代住房”, “断网恐惧症”, etc. Secondly,

some Chinese neologisms develop new meanings from their old words, such as “正能量”, “土豪”, “单细胞动物”, etc. Thirdly, some Chinese neologisms are borrowed from other languages, such as “阿尔法男”, from “alpha male”, “慕课”, from “MOOC”, etc.

2. Classification According to Contents

Chinese neologisms can also be classified according to their contents. With the development of Chinese society, China has witnessed dramatic changes in many fields, ranging from politics, economy to education, entertainment, and so on. As a result, a large number of Chinese neologisms have come from these fields. Based on this, Chinese neologisms can be mainly classified as new words concerning politics and economy, such as “制度笼子”, “微博外交”, “过渡性贷款”, etc.; new words concerning science and technology, such as “云服务”, “微世界”; new words concerning our social life, such as “橡皮婚姻”, “半塘夫妻”, “低碳旅游”, etc. Of course, Chinese neologisms also have come out from other fields besides the three mentioned above.

3. Classification According to Formative Patterns

According to their formative patterns, Chinese neologisms can be mainly classified into five types, including affixations, compounds, conversions, abbreviations and overlappings (Xu Hongxin, 2008, p.8).

C. Features

Chinese neologisms have some typical characteristics, which can be summarized as newness, dynamicness, popularization, synchronicity, etc. Newness is the most basic characteristic of Chinese neologisms, which can be understood literally. Here “new” refers to the newly-created, or borrowed words, which can not be found in old vocabulary system, or the old words with new meanings. Dynamicness refers to the constant development of neologisms, which is a dynamic, not stable process. Popularization means that neologisms are created for practical use, which are popular in people’s daily life and can gain widespread acceptance. Synchronicity is to say that neologisms are the products of a specific period, which reflects the changes of society, often with a strong brand of the times.

III. MOTIVATIONS OF CHINESE NEOLOGISMS

In *Course in General Linguistics*, the originator of modern linguistics Saussure proposes the arbitrariness of linguistic notations and he also proposes that the arbitrariness only exists in the simple linguistic notations and all the synthetic symbols have motivation (Zhao Hong, 2011, p.69). Zhang Yongyan (1981) mentions that, “the motivation of a word means the reason or evidence to express a certain meaning by a certain pronunciation” (p.9). The UK semanticist Ullmann, under the premise of admitting the arbitrariness of linguistic notations, also affirms that there should be some words with motivations among each kind of language and divides the language motivation into three categories: phonetic motivation, morphological motivation and semantic motivation (Ullmann, 1962, p.81-93).

Phonetic motivation is realized in the relation between phonetic form and its meaning. By studying the Chinese neologisms in recent ten years, it is discovered that many new words with phonetic motivations are created by homophonic word formation. Homophonic neologisms refer to the new words created by the use of homophones with similar pronunciation but different meanings. For example, the currently popular bicycle slogan “骑乐无穷” (其乐无穷) has a vivid and striking effect. In recent years, many new words have been created because of the price soaring of vegetables, such as “姜你军” (将你军), “火箭蛋” (火箭弹), “豆你玩” (逗你玩), “蒜你狠” (算你狠), “皇瓜” (黄瓜), “向前葱” (向前冲), etc., which all have achieved a vivid and humorous effect, reflecting the psychological state of the helpless citizens facing the high price vegetables. Some homophonic Chinese neologisms come from English, for example, “怕死客” (PSK, which is a short name of “Personal Survival Kit” in English), “拜客” (getting from the homophonic word “bike” in English, which is an activity of focusing on the cycling trip in Guangzhou city sponsored by a group of young people in Guangzhou).

Morphological motivation of words refers to the morphological formation of the words. There are many ways for the creation of new words in Chinese, but the most important one is to create new words by compounding and derivation. According to Zhang Jian’s research, we can know that “about 80% of Chinese vocabulary is compound words” (Zhang Jian, 2009, p.20), such as “影子傀儡”, “世袭招聘”, “谷歌眼镜”, etc. There are also many new derivative words in Chinese, such as neologisms including “族”: “半漂族”, “傍傍族”, “闭关族”, “草族”, etc.

Semantic motivation is a kind of psychological association, referring to the relation between rational meaning and associative meaning with the methods of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and analogy. For example, “啃椅族” refers to the couples or students who stay for a long time only ordering two cups of drink in shopping mall or fast food restaurant to enjoy air conditioner; “奶瓶男” refers to the adult men with immature mentality; “灰色收入” refers to the income getting from other ways such as part-time income and stock bonus except from salary.

As we can see, Chinese neologisms have their own motivations, and most of them are closely related to Chinese culture and society.

IV. THE COGNITIVE VIEW OF METAPHOR

Metaphor, ubiquitous in both literature and in everyday conversation, seems closely associated with rhetoric. However, much research in cognitive linguistics has demonstrated that metaphor is not merely a figure of speech, but is a specific mental mapping that influences a good deal of how people think, reason, and imagine in everyday life (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff & Turner, 1989, etc.). A significant landmark of this period was the publication of *Metaphor We Live By* by Lakoff and Johnson in 1980, which proposes a more integrated way not only for the understanding of language but for the comprehension of human mind.

In this book, Lakoff and Johnson argue that metaphor is not only a linguistic phenomenon, but also a cognitive phenomenon, and more important, a way of thinking. The essence of metaphor is to understand something abstract by virtue of something concrete, which is a mental mapping from source domain to target domain based on the similarity between the two things. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) offer their cognitive view of metaphor: metaphors are not just a way of expressing idea by means of language, but a way of thinking about things, so that metaphor should be understood as “conceptual metaphor”. In their view, metaphor is related to a much broader domain, thinking that metaphors are “grounded in our constant interaction with our physical and cultural environments” (p.119) and as they say, “metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” (p.3).

Taylor (1989) also thinks that metaphor is a means whereby ever more abstract and intangible areas of experience can be conceptualized in terms of the familiar and concrete (p.132). Ungerer & Schmid (1996) hold the similar view that “metaphors are powerful cognitive tools for our conceptualization of abstract categories” (p.114).

From the above discussed, it can be seen that metaphor is a powerful and effective way to construct or understand an abstract category. In cognitive linguistics, metaphor is a concept in a broad sense, including similes, synecdoches, metonymies, personifications, and even proverbs as well.

V. A METAPHORICAL INTERPRETATION OF CHINESE NEOLOGISMS

This part is to give a detailed interpretation of three typical types of Chinese neologisms from the perspectives of metaphor with some examples.

A. Neologisms with the Structure “n.+n.”

In Chinese, many neologisms are featured with the structure “noun+noun”, such as, “胶囊旅馆”, “弹簧年龄”, “沙发土豆”, “鸵鸟爱情”, etc. Here, two examples of this type will be interpreted in detail.

Example 1: “橡皮人” (plasticine man)

In “橡皮人”, “橡皮” (plasticine) should be interpreted metaphorically, which is the source domain, while “人” (man) is the target domain. By metaphorical mapping, the typical features of “plasticine”, such as “no nerve, no life, no pain, no reaction”, etc. will be projected to “man”, then through the cognitive association of the reader or hearer, “橡皮人” can be understood, referring to the white collar workers who are numb to life, have no dreams, interests or goals and feel little pain or joy. Similarly, we can understand “橡皮婚姻”, in which the typical features of “plasticine” are mapped into “marriage”, meaning that the marriage almost dies due to the lack of love, vitality and passion.

Example 2: “鸵鸟爱情” (ostrich love)

“鸵鸟爱情” refers to some people who always turn a blind eye to the problems in their marriages. Like ostriches, they stick their heads in the sand, thinking that they are perfectly safe. The typical feature of “ostriches”, i.e. burying their head in the sand when in danger, is mapped into “persons” by metaphor, so as to give “persons” this feature. Thus, “鸵鸟爱情” can be understood based on the similarity between the two.

B. Neologisms with Quasi-affixes

In recent years, many Chinese neologisms have been produced with quasi-affixes, including quasi-prefixes, such as “裸-”, “被-”, “微-”, “神-”, and quasi-suffixes, such as “-族”, “-奴”, “-门”, “-哥”, “-客”, etc. Due to its powerful productivity, affixation is always the key formative patterns in Chinese neologisms. Here two examples with quasi-affixes will be given to illustrate how this kind of neologisms is interpreted within the framework of metaphor.

Example 3: “白奴” (white-collar slave)

“白奴” is the short form of “白领奴隶” (white-collar slave), which should be interpreted in two steps. Step 1: “奴” (slave). As a single word, *Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary* (7th edition) defines it as “a person

who is legally owned by another person and is forced to work for them” (2009: 1886). Sun Jia (2013) thinks that as a single word, “奴” reflects “the controlling relationship between people”, while as a quasi-suffix, “-奴” refers to “the controlling relationship between person and thing”. Bases on the similarity — “a controlling relationship” of the two, a single word “奴” has metaphorically developed its generalized meaning and become a quasi-suffix “-奴”, referring to “a group of people who are under great economic or mental pressure in their life” (p.76-77). Step 2: “白”, i.e. “白领” (white-collar). The interpretation of this word involves our metonymic thinking, i.e. using THE PART FOR THE WHOLE. “Metonymy serves some of the same purposes that metaphor does”, and “metonymic concepts (like THE PART FOR THE WHOLE) are part of the ordinary, everyday way we think and act as well as talk” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p.37). Here, “white collar” is used metonymically to refer to those people working in an office. By analyzing this neologism in this way, we can understand “白奴” as those people who work in offices but are under huge financial pressure and have to work as hard as slaves to lighten the financial burden. As it shows, the cognition and interpretation of “白奴” is the result of cooperation of metaphorical and metonymic thinking of human beings.

Example 4: “水母族” (jellyfish clan)

This is a compound word with a quasi-suffix “-族”, which should also be interpreted in two steps. Firstly, “族” originally means “people in an extended family”, but now it refers to “a group of people with some common features” by metaphor due to the similarities between its original meaning and extended meaning. Secondly, “水母” (jellyfish) is a kind of large planktons in the ocean, whose body mainly consists of water. Here, some people, especially job hunters, are compared to jellyfish, metaphorically meaning that these people’s certifications and resumes are filled with empty words and false contents while providing little real information. So finally “水母族” can be interpreted as “people who largely falsify their qualifications and resumes for career success”. It is evident that the semantic cognition of this neologism also involves our metaphorical thinking.

C. Homophonic Neologisms

Homophonic neologisms are the new words created due to the phonetic similarity between the original words and the new words, which is also the result of metaphorical thinking of human beings. Here, two examples will be given to illustrate how this kind of neologisms is interpreted.

Example 5: “杯具” (tragedy)

This neologism first appeared in such a sentence “人生就像茶几,上面摆满了杯具”, which is said to be an imitation of “人生是一袭华美的袍,上面爬满了虱子” written by Zhang Ailing, a famous female writer in China. “杯具” (cup) is the homophonic expression of “悲剧” (tragedy). In this context, “茶几” (tea table), as a source domain, is projected to the target domain “人生” (life), which activates a series of corresponding relationship between the two concepts, such as “茶几上的杯具—人生中的悲剧”, “茶几上的洗具—人生中的喜剧”, “茶几上的茶具—人生中的人与人之间的差距”, etc. Life is full of tragedy, comedy, inequality, etc., just like a tea table, on which lay the cups, tea, tea sets, etc. This is the similar association these neologisms trigger in our mind about “tea table” and “life”.

Example 6: “鸭梨” (pressure)

It seems that “鸭梨” (pear) has nothing to do with “压力” (pressure), but they are mentioned in the same breath because the two words are associated by people due to their similar pronunciation. The process of regarding “压力” as “鸭梨” is in fact the process of mapping from the concrete domain to the abstract domain, making the pressure more easily to understand — just like biting off a pear, it is easy to deal with the pressure in our life. Having such a mentality, you will not feel upset when facing pressure. Instead, you will have the confidence to meet the challenge in your life. So, even if you shout out “鸭梨好大” (pressure is so great) or “鸭梨山大” (pressure is so great, like a mountain), you’re sure that everything is under control and nothing is to worry about. In this sense, the creation of the word “鸭梨” reflects people’s wisdom of eliminating the pressure in their life and work.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper is intended to interpret Chinese neologisms from the perspective of metaphor. After studying the three types of Chinese neologisms: neologisms with the structure “n+n”, neologisms with quasi-affixes, and homophonic neologisms, it can be found that Chinese neologisms have their semantic motivations and the interpretation of them is

the result of operation of human cognition mechanism, which involves the metaphorical and metonymic thinking of human beings.

Although Chinese neologisms are novel and unique, the construction of their meanings is still subject to the law of cognition of human beings, which reflects human's initiative and creativity when perceiving the world. In this tentative study, examples given may not be enough for us to have a full view of all the Chinese neologisms, but it offers a new perspective and method of studying the new words in Chinese, which can also be used to study neologisms in other languages as well.

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