

Review Article

A Study on Chinese and Western Thinking Patterns by Contrast of Chinese and English Idioms

Leyang, Wang¹, Zhaoxia, Liu^{2*}¹Professor in School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, NO 689 Road, North District, Baoding, Hebei, China²Graduate Student in School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, NO 689 Road, North District, Baoding, Hebei, China**Article History**

Received: 06.03.2022

Accepted: 13.04.2022

Published: 19.04.2022

Journal homepage:<https://www.easpublisher.com>**Quick Response Code**

Abstract: The overall research review on English-Chinese contrastive studies suggests there has been an extensive description of the distinction between Chinese and Western thinking patterns in the absence of extra demonstrations. Therefore, it is found necessary to carry out a delicate study on reflections of Chinese and Western thought pattern differences in light of the E-C idioms. In this study, two kinds of thinking patterns are contrasted from the following three aspects: concrete and abstract thoughts, subjective and objective thoughts, as well as synthetic and analytical thoughts, via the explanation and analysis of idioms collected in the *A Concise Dictionary of English Proverbs and Idioms*. The paper thus not only provides evidence for the different thinking patterns between China and West, but also helps language learners to gain a deeper comprehension and mastery of features of both languages.

Keywords: Thinking Patterns, Idioms, Contrastive Studies, Language Features, Chinese, English.

Copyright © 2022 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution **4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0)** which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

1. INTRODUCTION

For a language learner, the investigation of a contrastive analysis between Chinese and Western thinking patterns is the solid foundation to learn languages well and to apply the contrastive linguistic knowledge into related learning processes. In addition, the contrastive study also plays an essential role in the field of translation. Moreover, this kind of study, to some extent, will provide implication for the promotion of effective classroom teaching.

The English-Chinese contrastive studies from 1980 to 2021 have been carried on from three different perspectives: linguistic typology, cognitive linguistics, and language contact and influence (Zhihong Shao, 2010). And the research methods adopted can be classified into five types: combination of micro and macro, combination of description and interpretation, combination of individuality and commonness, combination of diachrony and synchrony, and combination of qualitative and quantitative. However, there are some problems hanging in this area (Zhihong Shao, 2010). For instance, the related investigation from cognitive linguistics is limited; furthermore, with regard to the combination of description and interpretation, the

interpreting degree of English and Chinese is not enough.

Recently, attention is focused on the contrastive research from cognitive linguistics. Whether the contrastive result is about the expression of lexical aspect, phrasal aspect or syntactical aspect and so on, they are the surface representations; whereas the deep reason underneath the various surface feature, like different thinking patterns, is worthy of exploration.

Regardless of the focus on the color words, euphemism, metaphor or certain essay, most studies carry an extensive investigation on Chinese and Western thinking patterns without a focal point, making the characterization lack of pertinence. In this study, the author tends to show the differences between Chinese and Western thinking patterns by the case study of E-C idioms collected in *A Concise Dictionary of English Proverbs and Idioms* (Wenbo Chen, 2005).

The reason why the paper chooses proverbs and idioms as the research objective lies in the characters of proverbs and idioms themselves. Although idioms are short and concise without teeming information about Chinese and English, they convey

*Corresponding Author: Zhaoxia, Liu

Graduate Student in School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, NO 689 Road, North District, Baoding, Hebei, China

plentiful connotations, and usually give people some life wisdom and philosophical enlightenment. To sum up, they are not only the language phenomenon showing the linguistic feature, but also the products of human cognition as the society develops. They come from the living and production experience of working people, and have accumulated lots of life experience and civilization as the quintessence of human wisdom. What should be paid attention to is that under different thinking patterns, Chinese and English languages reveal certain distinctions on idioms. Therefore, some findings of this paper can also be used in lexical and syntactical research, to name only a few.

2. Relation between Language and Thought

No one would disagree with the claim that language and thought closely interact with each other. However, there exists disagreement around the debate of thought forming. One is known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, including strong and weak versions in terms of the force of language on thought. Within the strong version, linguistic determinism, language and its structure limit and determine human knowledge or thought, such as categorization, memory, and perception. This concept makes the assumption that language both reflects and limits human mentality and its ability to make cross-cultural communication. Whereas the weak version, linguistic relativity, argues that structure and usage of a language influence the human cognition. On the contrast, there are “language of thought” theories proposed by Jerry Fodor, which supports that mental representation has a linguistic structure, in other words, thoughts occur in a formal mental language.

There is no final conclusion and arguments on the correlation between language and thought until the appearance of some evidence to prove it. But what can be convinced is that languages may indeed have an influence on human thinking patterns. As mentioned by Dezhang Chen (2011) in *Contrastive Linguistics between Chinese and English*, “language is the carrier and tool or medium of thinking, so all languages reflect the way their users think.”

All the individuals using different kinds of languages in the same universe share the same objective world and have more or less similar physical feelings, thus contributing to the similarities in different languages; but incredibly, the case that some interpretations by virtue of languages differ among different languages does exist as human beings add their own perception, reflection, deliberation, processing and recreation by their brain subjectively in the interpretation of the objective world. Therefore, some different language representations to some extent can be explained by different thinking patterns accordingly.

3. Differences between Chinese and Western thinking patterns

Thinking patterns are described as a person’s usual way of thinking or a habitual mental process. Thinking pattern is defined as the mode of spiritual product, resulting from the mutual force of thinking form, thinking approach and thinking procedure (Shuneng Lian, 2002).

It is self-evident that every nation has different philosophical system, economic system and geographic distribution, which lead to the various thinking modes so that the thoughts affect the language representations, because language is the carrier of thought in individuals’ minds. As is known to us, Western languages mostly belong to the Indo-European language family, and Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family, so it seems likely that there are some differences between English and Chinese.

Lei Fu (1957), the famous translator in China believes that there are some basic differences between Easterners and Westerners in terms of thinking styles: the Chinese people emphasize synthesis, induction, and implication, while Westerners attach importance to analysis, subtleties, twists, and details with precise descriptions for fear of incompleteness. Yuxin Jia (2003) insists that Eastern thinking is well-known for its intuitive integrity and harmonious dialectic, whereas Western thinking is characterized by logic, analysis, and linearity in that Westerners are good at analysis and logical reasoning, so the thinking mode is linear; while the Orientals are better at holistic, they are full of imagination and rely on intuition, so it can be said to be a circular thinking mode.

Apart from the above opinions on distinctions between both nations, there are seven various correspondingly types of thinking patterns to be summed up on the basis of previous studies on the research of Eastern and Western different thinking modes: concrete versus abstract thinking, subjective versus objective thinking, synthetic versus analytical thinking, dynamic versus static thinking, spiral versus linear thinking, intuitive versus scientific thinking, inductive versus deductive thinking and so on.

In this paper, the first three different thinking patterns between Chinese and Westerners are investigated in the light of the analysis on E-C idioms collected in the dictionary.

4. Reflections of Both Thinking Patterns on E-C Idioms

4.1 Concrete vs Abstract Thoughts

The concrete thought is defined by the American Heritage Medical Dictionary (2007) as a kind of thinking pattern “characterized by a predominance of actual objects and events and the absence of concepts

and generalizations.” This kind of traditional thinking mode can be dated back to the period when classical Chinese characters were created. Classical Chinese characters reflect that people then tended to think by means of images of objects in front of their eyes.

Abstract thinking is defined as “thinking characterized by the ability to use concepts and to make and understand generalizations, such as properties or pattern shared by a variety of specific items or events.” (2007). The Westerners are skilled in making logical arguments and presenting abstract features about the objective world via indirectly and generally processing information by the application of concepts, judgments and reasoning to understand the nature and connection of things.

Under the guidance of concrete thinking pattern, Chinese people are prone to use more imagery or specific words but English is rich in more explanatory words.

Example 1:

ENGLISH: Calamity is man’s true touchstone.

CHINESE: 患难识人，泥泞知马。

In this idiom, the words “calamity” and “touchstone” are relatively abstract because of a lack of demonstration of what kind of trouble individuals are facing with. Thus, in order to convey the meaning underlying the English idiom, the Chinese version not only express the primary meaning but also use the specific images vividly like “muddy land ” and “the horse” to deepen the impression of implication of this idiom on individuals.

Example 2:

ENGLISH: What’s done cannot be undone.

CHINESE: 木已成舟。

Example 2 has something in common with Example 1 in that the English idiom contains general and abstract terms instead of explaining the particular event done or undone; while Chinese translates it by virtue of the manufacturing procedure of a wooden boat, a specific visible accomplishment of an event, rather than the abstract words “done” or “undone”.

Example 3:

ENGLISH: The end crowns the work.

CHINESE: 下棋千着全看最后一着。(或编筐织篓，全在收口。)

Within the third example, the English idiom only uses one abstract verb “crowns”, which means “be the culminating event” to stress the essential influence of “the end” on “the work”. In contrast, the Chinese version follows the Chinese traditional concrete thinking manner to liken the importance of the final step’s contribution to the whole event to the important

last step in the chess game or to the closing up step in the process of knitting baskets.

Example 4:

ENGLISH: There is a crook in the lot of everyone.

CHINESE: 月无常圆，花无常开。

As indicated in the fourth example, the English idiom makes use of the noun “crook”, which means “a bent or curved part of something or the place where something bends inwards”. There is no any mention of a specific or concrete thing which has a crook within this English idiom. Compared to the English version, for sake of communicating the meaning that everyone has difficulties or suffers in one’s life, the Chinese version adopts the images around human beings, such as the moon that sometimes wanes and the flower that sometimes withers and falls, rendering a scene in front of us.

4.2 Subjective vs Objective Thoughts

Subjective thinking is solely based on an individual’s perspective, feeling and thoughts. A fundamental feature of Chinese traditional thinking is centered on the ontology, namely taking oneself rather than nature as the center of the universe. Human beings are regarded as the scale of all things. However, the objective thinking is based on a set of logical, goal-oriented standards. The philosophical Westerners advocate the dichotomy of subject-object thinking, taking nature as the object of cognition, regarding the subject as the “bystander”. This thinking tendency inevitably gets rid of subjective intention and leads to objective consciousness with logic and reason.

The stress on subjectification and objectification respectively gives rise to the different characteristics of both languages: Chinese tends to describe objective things from the perspective of oneself, more often making use of personal subjects, whereas English uses impersonal subjects and passive patterns more frequently.

Example 5:

ENGLISH: Fine features make fine birds.

CHINESE: 佛要金装，人要衣装。

As is shown in the fifth example, although the connotative meaning of the two idioms in both languages is similar and both emphasize the significance of dressing up, for it shapes one’s appearance and makes a difference. But the subject of this English idiom is “features”, a noun representing an object in nature and the Chinese version utilizes “Buddha” and “a person” as the subjects in a sentence.

Example 6:

ENGLISH: Many hands make light work.

CHINESE: 众人拾柴火焰高。

The same can be said of the sixth example. Both sentences illustrate the same idea that the teamwork is essential to complete a task. In the English idiom, the subject is “many hands”, which attaches importance to which organ of human precisely does the action of “making light work” because of their pursuit for objectivity. Nonetheless, in Chinese edition, no translators care about or emphasize the precise organ but focus on the performers of this action: individuals, due to their center on human themselves.

Example 7:

ENGLISH: A merry heart makes a cheerful countenance.

CHINESE: 人逢喜事精神爽。

In the seventh example, the English idiom expresses the ease of mind by using the noun phrase “a merry heart”, the emotion producer of a body, as the subject of this sentence, while the Chinese version follows its traditional expression and the subject of the sentence remains “the person”. As mentioned before, the Westerners prefer to explore the operation with their reason but Chinese focus on their own subjective emotions and feelings as human beings.

Example 8:

ENGLISH: A horse stumbles that has four legs.

CHINESE: 人有失足, 马有失蹄。

Within the eighth example, the two idioms in English and Chinese emphasize the inevitability of making mistakes occasionally. The subject of the English version is “a horse”-- a kind of animal in the objective world. This is because that the Westerners make judgments from spectators’ perspective instead of human themselves. However, the Chinese version not only uses the “stumbling horse” as the subject, but also makes use of the personal subject-- to illustrate the significance of subjective behaviors as a human, because of Chinese traditional human-centered principle.

4.3 Synthetic vs Analytical Thoughts

The adjective “synthetic” describes the state of combining all parts into a complex whole, while “analytical” illustrates the ability to deconstruct information into smaller parts and explore how they work together to produce large-scale effects.

Chinese traditional philosophy believes that the world is an interdependent unity composed of different entities. This Synthetic thinking regards man and nature, and individual and society as an indivisible whole. They adhere to the model of “the harmony between man and nature”. However, Westerners pay more attention to grasping the essence of things in the process of argumentation and deduction in strict accordance with logical analysis, which can be traced

back to Aristotle, the ancient Greek philosopher, and his logical syllogism.

The various synthetic and analytical thinking patterns apparently exert an impact on focus and word order of both languages. At the syntactic level, Chinese sentences give out the evaluation and most important information at last and one can comprehend them with the help of background information given at first and context. This is because Chinese are experts in constructing information by means of comprehensive and synthetic thinking. By contrast, English sentences often put significant information like assessment and conclusion straightforwardly and there is a compact construction by use of all kinds of words like logical conjunctions and prepositions. The reason why the word order of English sentences distinguishes from Chinese is that Westerners possessing analytical thinking incline to deconstruct the information in the present via their rational and deductive thinking. The examples collected from above dictionary are as follows:

Example 9:

ENGLISH: He dances well to whom fortune pipes.

CHINESE: 时来百事顺。

In the ninth example, the English idiom means that all goes well only when the man is lucky. And the two simple clauses contained in the English version forms a kind of causal relationship, that is to say, “to whom fortune pipes” is the cause or precondition of the event “he dances well”. The use of the conjunction “when” and attributive clause “to whom fortune pipes” are the external presentations of inner analytical thinking. At the same time, the Chinese version implies the logical relations underlying the sentences instead of using conjunctions like English version. One can experience the chronological or causal relation on the basis of the context and the related background through a comprehensive and synthetic thinking.

Example 10:

ENGLISH: When Greek meets Greek, then comes the tug of war.

CHINESE: 棋逢对手, 将遇良才。

The tenth example also exhibits the typical features of two thinking patterns: the English idiom indicates the time sequence between the two clauses by the “when” and “then” analysis; nevertheless, the Chinese version doesn’t contain the conjunctions like English, so the comprehension has to be based on the context. Although the time order within the Chinese one is not expressed definitely like the English version, it can also be inferred that the time of “neck and neck” is the encounter of adversary in the case of chess game or the occasion of encountering between the general and excellent person.

Example 11:

ENGLISH: You may know by a handful the whole sack.

CHINESE: 管中窥豹，可见一斑。

In this example, the implication of English idiom can be caught with more precise surface construction connected by the preposition “by”, so the result of “know the whole sack” depends on the application of this manner “a handful”. Compared to English version, there is no explicit adverbial of manner in the Chinese version in that Chinese are good at the comprehensive thinking and they can get the whole logical relation from these Chinese characters, probably with the help of life experience or common knowledge.

5. CONCLUSION

After the detailed analysis of three categories of two different thinking patterns and careful case study of embodiment in the idioms, a tentative conclusion can be drawn that there is a close connection between language and thinking patterns and this study help English learners to have a better comprehension of English idioms.

Generally speaking, for those English learners, the distinctions between Chinese and Westerner thinking thoughts should be taken account of to achieve

effectiveness and outcome of English language teaching, learning and readable rendition.

REFERENCES

- Dezhang, C. (2011). *Contrastive Linguistics Between Chinese and English* [M]. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2.
- Editors of the American Heritage Medical Dictionary. (2007). *The American Heritage Medical Dictionary (Reprinted.)* [M]. Harcourt: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Lei, F. (1957). Some experience in Translation[J]. Beijing: *Journal of Literature and Art*, (5).
- Shuneng, L. (2002). Modes of Thinking: Chinese and Western [J]. Dalian, Liaoning Province: *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*, (02):40-46, 63-64.
- Wenbo Chen. (2005). *A Concise Dictionary of English Proverbs and Idioms* [M]. Beijing: World Affairs Press.
- Yuxin, J. (2003). *Intercultural Communication* [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 98-100.
- Zhihong, S. (2010). A Survey of the Microlinguistic English-Chinese Contrastive Studies During the Past Three Decades (1977 ~ 2007) [J]. Sichuan: *Journal of Sichuan International Studies University*, 26(05):47-52.

Cite This Article: Leyang, Wang & Zhaoxia, Liu (2022). A Study on Chinese and Western Thinking Patterns by Contrast of Chinese and English Idioms. *EAS J Humanit Cult Stud*, 4(2), 56-60.