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Researching Metaphor in Chinese

3.1 Introduction

Characteristics specific to the Chinese writing system and to the structure of the language may have an impact on the identification and interpretation of metaphor in Chinese.

This book focuses on metaphor in Chinese written texts, rather than oral speech, so it deals with not only the use of words as metaphors, but also the use of Chinese characters as ways of representing words. As Chinese writing has a logographic system, it can give visual clues to the interpretation of metaphor when people read news. For example, the shape of the character ‘日’ may link the word ｒｉ with the meaning ‘sun’. This is impossible in oral speech. Also, metaphorical connections between images represented by Chinese characters and meanings can be evoked in different ways in Chinese writing: either by ‘radicals’ of characters (i.e. the meaning indicators of Chinese characters, which are used as classifiers of characters in Chinese dictionaries) or by a morpheme of a compound word.

It is noteworthy that here metaphor is taken in its broader sense, which includes simile (i.e. the comparison of two things/ideas through connectives such as ‘like’ and ‘as’) and metonymy (i.e. the substitution of one thing/idea with another based on contiguity between these two things/ideas). The difference between simile and metaphor is largely determined by the presence of an explicit comparison: if A is like/as B, then this is regarded as simile; if A is B, then this is taken as metaphor. However, the simile markers ｘｉａｎｇ (像, like/as) and ｒｕ (如, like/as) are absent in Chinese compound words such as ｊｕｈｏｎｇ (橘红, orange-red). The proper interpretation of this word should be rendered as ‘as red as an orange’ rather than ‘red is orange’. Therefore, simile is included as metaphor in this study because of the visual absence of the simile
markers. In addition, metonymy is included as metaphor as there are metaphors that have a very strong metonymic basis. For instance, Yu (2002) points out that some expressions for emotion in Chinese such as ยงหงส์ ดู ชั่น ใบ เหมย (ยงหงส์ ใบ เหมย, raise-head-stretch-brows > ‘hold one’s head high; feeling proud and elated’) are originally metonymic as they describe emotions in terms of bodily movements. He argues that once these expressions become conventionalised, they are used metaphorically regardless of emotional symptoms or gestures.

The ensuing section starts with a discussion of Chinese characters, and then discusses Chinese compounds.

3.2 Metaphor and Chinese characters

There is a popular belief that complex Chinese characters arose from connections which early Chinese people made between things and characters in terms of similarities in their shape or image. Almost all characters can be broken in two parts, a radical (the semantic component) and the remainder (sometimes, a phonetic indicator). The connection between the radical and the meaning of the whole word is sometimes clear, sometimes not.

In some researchers’ view (Nie 2005; Yong & Peng 2008; Zhan 2008), picto-phonetic characters account for the majority of all Chinese characters. For example, the character ‘妈’ (mā, ‘mother’) consists of the picto-radical ‘女’ (nu, ‘woman’) and the phonetic element ‘马’ (mǎ). In those picto-phonetic characters, radicals suggest the area of meaning to which characters of the same radicals belong. Therefore, they are products of the originator’s metaphorical cognition, as they resemble physical things in the world. Hiraga (2005: 201–204) also demonstrates that the interplay of metaphor and iconicity, to some extent, is influential on the formation of Chinese characters. As radicals in characters can evoke cognitive mappings of certain properties of the things they resemble onto characters containing the same radicals, the interpretation of these characters that have the same radicals may be achieved by using the same cognitive mechanism. In addition, even today radicals are key visual indicators of meaning for Chinese people when they learn and read Chinese.

Therefore, the structure of Chinese characters deserves consideration when classifying metaphors into different source domains. For example, as shown in Figure 3.1, the lexemes 爆 (爆 ‘explode’) and 热 (热 ‘hot’), which are picto-phonetic characters, may be put into the domain of fire, since they share the same radical ‘火’ (fire), which is represented as ‘火’ in