

The Contrastive Study of the Phenomena of Lexical Coincidence, Parallel and Gap between English and Chinese from Culture Respective

Liu Meiyun ¹

Abstract

This paper discusses the phenomena of lexical coincidence, parallel and gap between English and Chinese to awaken Chinese learners' awareness of the similarities and the differences, especially the differences in word use between English and Chinese. The study will help Chinese learners with word-acquisition and shed light on word-choice in real life communication to avoid communicative failures that are caused by literal transfer of Chinese words and expressions into English.

Key words : lexical coincidence, parallel and gap

I. Motives of the study

After Chinese learners of English have mastered English grammar, basic reading and writing skills, one of the greatest difficulties they are faced with is how to use the words correctly in real life communications. Many learners have found that word-choice in speaking, writing and translation is often a

perplexing matter, consequently they tend to transfer lexical items from Chinese literally into English, resulting in inappropriate or even awkward expressions. The following are some inappropriate sentences from the students' compositions in the author's class. (1) I want to tell you a thing that the fire is gong to burn the eyebrows. (2). Some people always spent their money

¹ Foreign Languages Department of Northwest Polytechnical University, Xian, Shaanxi, PRC



like water. (3) He is a horse which may spoil the whole group. etc. In fact, the first sentence should be "I want to tell you a matter of the utmost urgency". The second sentence means "Some people always spent their money like dirt." The third should be "He is a black sheep." The errors committed here by the students are due to the literal transfer from the Chinese expressions to English. That is to say, Chinese learners sometimes tend to ignore the fact that not every word in Chinese has a ready equivalence in English. Likewise, incomplete knowledge of the difference between the words and expressions in the two languages also has a negative effect on translation and oral communication.

So, which word should be used to express a particular idea appropriately Are there always equivalent expressions in English that can be literally transferred from Chinese English What especially deserves attention to in word- learning and accumulation so that it can be used correctly later

To solve these problems, the author has tried the method of comparative and contrastive study between English and Chinese in lexicology, especially the contrastive study of the phenomena of lexical coincidence, parallels and gaps between English and Chinese, which actually can shed light on vocabulary learning and actual use.

II. Lexical Coincidence, Parallel and Gap between English and Chinese

Since English and Chinese people have different living experiences and various

understandings towards the objective world, there are many differences between the Chinese and English languages in how they choose words to express the same ideas. However, we are all human beings living in the physical world, and the natural living conditions are basically the same or similar. Therefore, there are some similarities in word-choice between English and Chinese. As a result, there are the phenomena of lexical coincidence, parallel and gap.

1. Coincidence

When English and Chinese happen to use the same words for the same things or ideas, the feature is called coincidence or overlap. For example, in both Chinese and English, "snow" is described as white and "gold" as yellow. Foxes denote "cunning." Another example is the Chinese word tou (头) and the English word "head". Both tou (头) and "head" refer to "the part of the body which contains the eyes, ears, nose, and mouth, and the brain", e.g. goutou (狗头)- the head of a dog. Besides the basic meaning, the extended meanings of the two words are coincident as well.

(1) Both words refer to someone who is in control of a place or an organization, etc., a ruler or leader", e.g. 政府首脑-the head of government, 公司头头-the head of the company.

(2) Both words refer to a part at the top of an object, e.g. 针头-the head of a pin, 钉头-the head of a nail, 锤头-the head of a hammer, 斧头-the head of an axe.



(3) Both words have the same meaning in some phrases, e.g. 从头到脚 -from head to foot, 出人头地 -over the heads of others, etc.

Another example is the comparison between Chinese word "Xin (心) and English word "heart". They are also coincident semantically.

倾心 -to give one's heart to
 放心 -to set one's heart at ease
 灰心 -to lose heart
 关心 -to take to heart
 伤心 -to break one's heart
 心对心 -heart to heart
 善心的 -kind-hearted
 黑心的 -black-hearted
 硬心肠的 -hard-hearted
 从心底里 -from the bottom of one's heart
 全心全意 -heart and soul

More examples are as follows:

Walls have ears 隔墙有耳
 castles in the air 空中阁楼
 to add fuel to the fire 火上浇油
 constant droppings wears the stone
 滴水穿石
 burn one's boat 破釜沉舟
 as light as a feather 轻如鸿毛
 beat the drum for 为... 擂鼓助威
 dig one's own grave 自掘坟墓
 lead by the nose 牵着鼻子走
 at the crossroads 处于十字路口
 pour cold water on 给泼冷水
 stab in the back 在背后插刀子
 stir up hornet's nest 捅了蚂蜂窝

2. Lexical Parallel

By parallel, we mean in Chinese and En-

glish, people use different words to express the same idea. Owing to different life experience and living environment people often link different associative meanings to the same things. That is to say, different nations usually use different metaphors to express the same thoughts. To Arabs, a camel symbolizes power and strength. To Hindus, the cow is sacred. To Chinese, the ox represents the positive value of hard work. In both Chinese and English, and indeed in many other languages as well, we say "as sly as a fox" , but in Africa, "tortoises can be sly". In English, people say "There is no smoke without fire," but in Chinese "There is no wave without wind. (无风不起浪)". An English "look for a needle in the hay " while a Chinese "look for a needle in the sea 大海捞针 ".

The following are more examples:

As timid as a rabbit 胆小如鼠(as timid as a rat)
 like a duck to water 如鱼得水 (like a fish to water)
 goose bumps 鸡皮疙瘩 (chicken bumps)
 look for grass on the top of the oak 缘木求鱼 (look for fish on the top of the tree)
 after death, the doctor 亡羊补牢 (lock the stable door after the sheep is eaten by wolves)
 Tread upon eggs 如履薄冰 (tread upon ice)
 to kill two eagles with one arrow -剑双雕 (to kill two birds with one stone)

3. Lexical gap

Some expressions used in one language are excluded from another language because



the people who speak that language do not have corresponding experience in the practical world. This phenomenon is known as lexical gap, which is very common among languages. It may be caused by people's different life experiences and living conditions, different customs; different religions and different understandings about the objective world.

(1). Lexical gaps caused by different living conditions and life experiences.

Since Britain is an island country, sailing is a common activity. Accordingly, there are many expressions originating from it.

- to know the ropes
- to tide over
- to sink or swim
- to go with the stream
- all at sea
- plain sailing
- to keep one's head above water
- still waters run deep.
- a small leak will sink a great ship.
- to rest one's oar

China, on the other hand, has been an agricultural country for thousands of years so that there are many idioms and proverbs originated from agricultural activities as the follows:

- 斩草除根 (root the weeds-eradicate sth totally)
- 瑞雪兆丰年报 (favorable snow is a sign of a prosperous coming year)
- 拔苗助长 (pull up the plant to help it grow quickly---spoil things by excessive enthusiasm)

顺藤摸瓜 (find melons through the vine--- find out the truth through the clue)

瓜熟蒂落 (when a melon is ripe, it falls off its stem---things will be easily settled when conditions are favorable)

瓜田李下 (in a melon patch or under a plum tree---in suspicious circumstances or surroundings)

枯木逢春 (spring comes to the withered tree---get a new hope of life)

树大招风 (tall trees catch the wind---a person in a higher position is easily attacked)

"Food" has over many centuries been people's great concern, so much so that asking about whether one has eaten has become a rather common way to start a conversation or to greet a friend. A lot of vocabulary concerning "food" has built-in cultural values, which do not seem to be shared by English. For example:

饭桶 (food barrel) --- Fathead 饭碗 (meal bowl)---- means of living

吃得开 (one who can eat everywhere)--- popular

不吃香 (not good to eat)---unpopular

Such expressions have no ready corresponding English equivalences.

(2) Lexical gaps caused by different customs

There are many cultural differences between Chinese and English. The Chinese regards an "owl" as an unlucky symbol. However, in English, there is an expression "as wise as an owl".



In Chinese tradition, people do not "kiss good-bye", "kiss good-night", "blow somebody a kiss", or the like. The word "kiss" is used only in very limited situations. Thus, the meanings which reside in the English expressions above are not readily comprehensible to the ordinary Chinese completely unexposed to the western way of life.

(3) Lexical gap caused by the differences in social systems, religions and values

Different customs and traditions tend to have different values which are reflected in language. For example, the Chinese have 红白喜事 (red white happy ceremonies), which refers to such events as producing children, celebrating birthdays and weddings, as well as holding funerals. It may seem peculiar to the English to regard funerals as "happy events". But in the Chinese tradition this is the case.

There are many religious expressions in English and Chinese. Buddhism was introduced into China about 2,000 years ago. Thus we Chinese have 借花献佛 (present Buddha with borrowed flowers-borrow something to make a gift of it); 闲时不烧香, 临时抱佛脚 (never burn incense when all is well but clasp Buddha's feet when in distress-make a hasty last minute effort); 半路出家 (become a monk or nun late in one's life-switch to a job one is not trained for); 当一天和尚撞一天钟 (a monk strikes the bell only when he is on duty-kill the time) and so on. But in western countries, especially in the USA and Britain, many people are Christians, so that there are "God helps those

who help themselves", "a multitude of sins", to "not know someone from Adam" and "baptism of fire."

(4) Lexical gaps caused by culture uniqueness.

This means that some behavior or expressions are unique to only one country and it is hard to find equivalence in other languages. For some Chinese terms, we cannot find equivalents in English. For example: 唱红脸 (play the role of a hero in an opera-pretend to be generous and kind); 老油条 (long-time deep-fried dough sticks-a ruffraff or a worldly-wise person); 炒冷饭 (heat leftover rice-say or do the same old thing); 跑龙套 (play a minor role in a play-an unimportant job); 拍马屁 (pat a horse's bottom-flatter sb). In English, there are also some expressions without equivalents in Chinese, such as: "a skeleton in the closet," "take French leave", "a black sheep," "a white lie," "a frog in my throat," "a bee in his bonnet," and so on.

III. Conclusion

From what have been discussed above, we can draw the conclusion that an awareness of lexical coincidence, parallel and gap is quite significant for English learners. First, English learners can not always transfer the words of mother tongue literally to the target language, otherwise errors will occur. Secondly, words are culture-oriented, so English learners should consciously learn the idiomatic expressions that the native speakers use. In translation, if there is no ready equivalence, one



should resort to free translation instead of literal word- to- word transfer from one's mother tongue to the target language.

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