

Intentional Interpretation of the Semantic Structure of Chinese Idioms from the Perspective of Philosophy of Mind

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Abstract—With the concept of intentionality in the philosophy of mind, this paper puts forward three principles of intentional explanation of the semantic structure of Chinese idioms such as the dominance principle of intentionality, the priority principle of intention content and the principle of intentional attitude influencing intentional content. Then the Intentional interpretative framework is constructed to explain that the formation of the semantic structure of Chinese idioms is essentially the process that dominated by the intentionality, the semantic structure is generated through the explanation of the intentional content by the intentional attitude. In this process, different intentional content is produced by the explanation of different intentional attitude, so as to realize the transformation of the semantic structure from the literal meaning to the metaphoric meaning.

Keywords—semantic structure of Chinese idioms; intentional content; intentional attitude; intentional explanation

I. INTRODUCTION

Idiom is an important part of Chinese vocabulary, on which the studies has a long history and rich achievements. It is precisely because of the seemingly simple expression of Chinese idioms, but actually rich connotation, the study of the meaning of idioms has always been concerned by scholars.

However, the traditional study of Chinese idioms usually focuses on the static analysis of the meaning of idioms, which is divided into two aspects: synchronic study and diachronic study.

From the point of view of synchronicity, Ma Guofan (1985) and Liu Jiexiu (1985) believe that the meaning of idioms can be divided into literal meaning, comparative meaning and extended meaning. Liu Shuxin (1982) pointed out that the meaning of idioms has surface meaning and deep meaning. Wang Dechun (1983, 1990) pointed out that there are three types of meaning of idioms: historical, potential and limited. Sun Weizhang (1989) divided it into semantic meaning, etymological meaning and lexical meaning according to the synchronic use. These three meanings appear in the diachronic development process of idioms, which have influence and effect on the synchronic meaning of idioms.

However, for the synchronic meaning, the semantic meaning, etymological meaning and lexical meaning are not in the same plane. Although the analysis is from different perspective, the concept of double layer of idiom semantic structure is acknowledged: "the important feature of idiom, by virtue of which it can be distinguished from all fixed languages, is the double layer of meaning" (Liu Shuxin, 1982).

It can be found that the semantic structure of idiom is not formed overnight, and there are different meanings in the process of its formation, forming a complex semantic structure. Shi Shi (1979) classifies idioms into etymological, original and present meanings according to the diachronic changes. The etymology is the origin of idiom meaning. The original meaning is the meaning of the idiom meaning "before change", which is equivalent to the literal meaning, surface meaning, historical meaning or semantic meaning. The present meaning is the meaning of the idiom meaning "after change", which is basically equivalent to the metaphorical meaning or extended meaning, deep meaning, potential meaning or lexical meaning.

The above research has two basic characteristics: one is the recognition of the semantic structure of idiom multifaceted; Secondly, they only focus on the static description of the semantic structure of idiom without trying to explain its development and change. With the development of cognitive science, in a dynamic research, some scholars put forward from the perspective of cognitive idioms the conversion between the semantic structure double meaning — literal meaning and figurative meaning-is primarily driven by conceptual metaphor and conceptual metonymy, and conducted a series of psychological experiment and event potential technology demonstration (Zhang Hui 2003 a, 2003 b; Xu Shenghuan 2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2009, 2012a, 2012b; Zhu Fengyun and Zhang Hui 2007; Zhang Hui and Ji Feng 2008; Jiang Chengsheng and Liao Dingzhong 2009; Zhang Yu et al. 2012 Zhang Hui et al. 2012; Cai Hui et al. 2013; Yu Lili, 2014, etc.) Although these studies from the perspective of cognition, to a certain extent, explains the dynamic formation mechanism of the idiom semantic structure, but factors related to the creators and users of idioms have been rarely considered, namely what factors, in what way to promote and influence the

creator and users of idioms from the literal meaning to the figurative meaning by metaphor and metonymy has not been answered.

In this paper, cognitive factors, emotional factors and social and cultural factors related to cognitive subject are considered more, that is, awareness activities of cognitive subject are considered as a breakthrough to solve this problem. Therefore, this paper attempts to build an intentional interpretation framework, and further explains the formation of the multifaceted semantic structure of idioms by examining the consciousness activities of cognitive subjects when they make the transformation from literal meaning to comparative meaning.

II. INTENTIONALITY AND ITS RELATION TO LANGUAGE RESEARCH

A. *An Overview of Intentionality*

The concept of intentionality is related to consciousness, which can be seen as "I in the first person, the sense of something in the present experience and its conscious awareness. In a word, the nature of consciousness is awareness." (Li Hengwei, 2011:98) For the relationship between intentionality and consciousness, "intentionality is the essential attribute of consciousness. Consciousness is always 'consciousness about something', it always means that something 'connects with the imagined object in different ways', and consciousness 'relates to something', 'content' and 'own' are all said in the meaning of intentionality (Husserl, 1969:168-176).

An activity of consciousness starts from intentionality, which runs through the whole process of consciousness activity. Therefore, intentionality can be said to be the core content of consciousness activity. Intentionality, a tool of consciousness activity, can also be interpreted as consciousness in the general solution of things and events, reflected in the course of the so-called "selfish" tendency of choice. It is the attention, filtering, selecting, characterization to the object, which appears in the psychological state of consciousness and has the function of judgment, evaluation and characterization at the same time (Xu Shenghuan, 2013:174).

From the perspective of psychological process, intentionality arises from the conscious activity of assigning, selecting and positioning "attention" when giving attention to the object. Under certain conditions, consciousness activities will allocate attention, choose and position in the control of certain ideas, which is intentionality. Xu Shenghuan (2013) believes that intentionality reflects a concept of "egoism", which is a natural attribute of human psychology, namely a kind of self-consciousness formed in the long-term evolution and development of human beings. It is embodied in various scenarios and attempts to adopt the form and means that can "get close to" ego. "Close to" means "from immediate and immediate state of mind to acquired cultural customs and habits, from material interests to thoughts and feelings" (Xu Shenghuan, 2013:174).

B. *Intentionality and Language Studies*

The relationship between intentionality and language lies in that intentionality is the basic feature and basis of speech act. Searle (2006) believes that there is some isomorphism between speech act and intention state. Meaning is not only a derivational form of intentionality, but also intentionality determines the possibility and limit of meaning to some extent. Intentionality, as a basic feature of speech act, is reflected in the speaker's intention to convey by language expression in the process of speech act. Second, speech acts can only occur when people make sounds or write symbols for the purpose of conveying a specific intention. It can be said that the meaning of language is the derivation of intentionality. Therefore, we must consider intentionality in the study of linguistic meaning.

On the basis of cognition, language meaning consists of two parts: sentence meaning and speaker meaning. The former refers to the meaning of the language component, while the latter refers to the intention that the speaker hopes to convey (Searle, 2006:134). The speaker's speech acts are guided by intentionality, which is translated into language expressions. The meaning of these expressions also contains its own meaning and the meaning derived from the speaker's intentionality.

Therefore, the use of language can be regarded as a kind of conscious activity, which plays a leading role in the process of language application (Xu Shenghuan, 2012a, 2012b). Human needs are the basic motivation of human's conscious activities, which are the intention or purpose of language activities, which are usually formed before the beginning of a specific language activity. Intentionality in language activities means that the speaker chooses the content and form of language that is most suitable for the current context according to the intention or purpose. Therefore, one of the core contents of conscious activity is intentionality, which is the beginning and ultimate goal of all language activities (Xu Shenghuan, 2013).

III. THE INTENTIONAL INTERPRETATION FRAMEWORK OF THE SEMANTIC STRUCTURE OF CHINESE IDIOMS

A. *The Multifaceted Semantic Structure of Chinese Idioms*

In the study of the meaning of Chinese idioms, some scholars divide them into three types according to the degree of constitutional structure of semantic structure in idioms: one type is highly structured idiom, that is, the constitutional component has limited meaning, but it has meaning independence to a higher degree, such as "yang jing xu rui". On the other hand, the underlying meaning of the component is based on the overall meaning of the idiom, which does not exist in the context of this idiom. The third type is low-constitutional idiom. The meaning of the idiom cannot be originated from the meaning of modern language. It needs the analysis of etymology, such as "ke zhou qiu jian". This classification, based on the degree of combination of word meanings, is of great significance to the study of the interaction between literal meaning and figurative meaning in the understanding of idioms (Zhang Hui 2003; Wen Xu

and Ding Fangfang 2016). Therefore, this paper divides the formation process of idiom semantic structure into two stages: literal meaning and figurative meaning.

The literal meaning of idiom is formed by the combination of the meaning of the component part and the meaning within combined relation between parts (Sun Weizhang, 1989). In most cases, the literal meaning of an idiom is not its conventional meaning of an idiom.

The figurative meaning of idiom is obtained through the action of some cognitive mechanism on the basis of literal meaning in the forming process of idiom. Here are a few examples of the connection between the literal and figurative meanings of idioms:

"Wan bi gui zhao" from "History as a Mirror": "Xiangru returned to the king of Qin by cheating on him. He took back the treasure and sent it to him. The king of Qin thought it was a good man, but he did not die. Lin Xiangru will be returned from the state of Qin to the capital city of Zhao. It was later used as a metaphor to refer to the returning to the original owner.

"Zheng ren mai lv" is a fable from the pre-Qin period. It comes from "Han Feizi's 'wai chu shuo zuo shang'": A person live in Zheng wanted to buy a pair of shoes one day. When he got to the market, he found that he had forgotten to measure his feet. He had already got his shoes, but he said, 'I forgot to get the measurement of my feet!' Then he went back to get the piece of paper where the size had been written. When he came back, the market was dissolved. The onlooker said, "why not try it?" "It is better to be trusted measurement." People in the state of Zheng couldn't buy shoes because he believed too much in size. And its metaphorical meaning is to stick to rules and dogma.

The formation of the semantic structure of Chinese idioms usually involves the process of generating metaphorical meaning from the original literal meaning of these four-character expressions and solidifying into the conventional meaning of idiom.

B. Intentional Interpretation

With the "pragmatic turn" of philosophy, the research focus of philosophy changed from epistemology to language. The meaning, essence, understanding and communication of language become the focus of attention. In this context, the research of intentionality should be extended from the semantic level to the psychological phenomenon of language, taking language use into account. Therefore, textual study is no longer limited to semantic analysis, but should include the analysis of psychological intentionality (Yin Jie 2003).

Intentional interpretation is "the interpretation of the studied problem with the understanding of the intentionality of the subject" (Xu Shenghuan, Liao Qiaoyun 2013). In the process of the interpretation of the scientific research, intention should not be ignored, due to "the explanation inevitably involves people's beliefs and understanding, and the understanding, faith, and intention decide what purpose the people want to achieve" (Guo Guichun 2004:50), and "concept, such as meaning and understanding, directly

related to the understanding and interpretational activities, essentially on the premise of mental intentionality and given by mental intentionality" (ibid: 53).

Xu Shenghuan and Liao Qiaoyun (2013) put forward that intentionality includes two dimensions: one is the content of intentionality, which refers to the content of conscious activities and the language expressions related to the content; the second is the attitude of intention, which is the attitude when the language is expressed. The relationship between these two dimensions is that the intentional attitude is essentially an intentional interpretation of the content of intention in a specific context. Intentional interpretation can be used in the process of understanding all language expressions, because all language expressions can be understood as the interpretation of certain content with a certain attitude. Therefore, the content of intention and the attitude of intention are unified in the interpretation of the intentionality of language expression.

C. Intentional Interpretation Framework

The multifaceted and intentionality of semantic structure of Chinese idioms has been explained. In this section, we will further explore the intentionality of the formation of the semantic structure of Chinese idioms, that is, to set up an interpretational framework dominated by two dimensions of intentionality to derive the formation motivation of the multifaceted semantic structure of Chinese idioms. In order to make a clearer explanation of the semantic structure of Chinese idioms, the following three principals are proposed:

- principle of intentional domination
- principle of content priority
- principle of the effect of intention and attitude on the content of intention

Principle (1) indicates that intentionality is the beginning of language activities, and should also be the starting point and necessary condition for the formation of idiom semantic structure, which should be throughout. The reason why it is the starting point is that any idiom comes from a specific intentionality of language users, that is, people may want to show a truth, explain a view point, tell an event and story, or describe a situation, and then choose different language expressions to express it.

For example, when someone wants to make sense, he may consider using a parable to illustrate, but when this fable story are familiar with most people, he will probably use just four words to sum up the contents of this fable. This four-character word is a symbol for the fable, which is an idiom through cognitive enhancement., such as "ke zhou qiu jian", "zheng ren mai lv", etc.; When a certain historical event is frequently mentioned, people tend to choose its key words to be expressed in a concise way, such as "wan bi gui zhao", "wo xin chang dan", "zhi lu wei ma" and so on. When describing a situation, the combination of four words is often the choice, such as "yang jing xu rui"; it is also common to look for inspiration in the previous language texts (such as poetry), such as "shui luo shi chu", "bu ju yi ge", and "xin you ling xi".

In Principle (2), the priority of intentional content refers to that no matter what form language users choose, what they express is the content of people's conscious activities, that is, what they really want others to know and understand. In the long period of the formation and development of idioms, the content of intention is not static. For example, "zhi lu wei ma" is from the historical records of the first emperor of Qin. The formation of this idiom starts with Sima Qian's intention to record a historical event, and the content of intention is the content of the story. Then, as the story continues to be told, people begin to choose more concise, with four words woven into an expression to reflect the same intended content.

For example, in "Sui, Tang and five dynasties · the Book of Jin", or in "the Book of the later Han", "zhi lu wei ma" is directly used to represent the historical event. Later, when someone has an intention to express "reversing black and white and confusing the public", he thinks of the historical event of "pointing the deer for the horse" and starts to use the expression "zhi lu wei ma" to reflect the new content of intention. With the use and recognition of this completely different intentional content by more and more people, the replacement of old and new intentional content is gradually produced.

Then, it is necessary to consider Principle (3) to explain exactly what factors have changed the original intentional

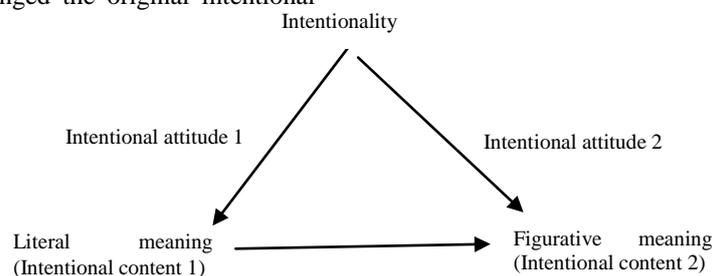


Fig. 1. Intentional interpretation framework for the formation of multi-faced idiom semantic structure.

The formation of the semantic structure of Chinese idiom is in essence the interpretation of the content of intention, and the semantic structure of idiom generated under the guidance of intentionality. In this process, beginning with a specific intentionality, language users' intention attitude 1 in a specific context is interpreted as intentional content 1, which forms the literal meaning of the idiom. As the intentionality of language users changes, their intentional attitude 1 changes to intentional attitude 2, which changes the interpretation of the intentional content stated by the same idiomatic language expression, thus producing intentional content 2, namely the metaphorical meaning of the idiom.

IV. CONCLUSION

Under the action of intentionality, the semantic structure of idiom goes through the process from literal meaning to metaphorical meaning. In essence, this is a process of conscious activity. The change of intentionality inevitably changes the intentional attitude in the activities of consciousness, and the change of intentional attitude inevitably affects its interpretation of the content of intention.

content. In the framework of intentional interpretation, language expression can be understood as the interpretation of intentional content in a certain context. In other words, even if the language expression remains unchanged, the change of attitude will affect the interpretation of the content of intention. For instance, the idiom "shui lu shi chu" comes from a book named "zui wong ting ji" by Ouyang Xiu. The author takes the intention of describing the natural scenery as the starting point. At this time, the intention content in the activity of consciousness is "when the tide goes down, the rocks on the bottom will appear" and the language expression "shui lu shi chu". However, when later generations use the expression "shui lu shi chu", its intentionality was changed from describing the natural scene to telling a kind of situation. With the change of the situation of intentionality, Intentional attitude made a new interpretation of the original intentional content of the expression "shui lu shi chu", that is, "the truth of the matter came to light".

On the basis of these three principles, we try to build an intentional interpretation framework for the formation of multi-faced idiom semantic structure, as shown in the following "Fig. 1":

In this process, the semantic structure of idiom interprets different expressions of the same language through different attitudes, generating different contents of intention, thus realizing the transformation of idiom semantic structure from literal meaning to figurative meaning.

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