

ENGLISH

英汉习语对比

— A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ENGLISH AND CHINESE IDIOMS —

郁福敏 郭珊琰 编著



上海交通大学出版社

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前 言

有关英、汉习语的词典和书籍在国内外已经出版了许多,有的专讲词义和用法,有的专门探讨习语的典故和来历,有的从语法角度来分析习语的结构,也有的从翻译角度来探讨习语的翻译技巧。这些词典和书籍无疑对学英语帮助很大。但对于长期受中国传统文化熏陶的中国读者来说,如果能把英汉习语的共性和个性进行比较研究,那一定会有助于对英语习语的理解,从而进一步正确使用英语习语。笔者就是在这方面做出一种新的探索。

本书从以下几个方面对英汉习语进行比较研究:

- (1) 英汉习语的范围和形式。
- (2) 英汉习语的特点及习语的发展演变。
- (3) 英汉习语的结构及其功用。
- (4) 英汉习语内容比较。
- (5) 英汉习语的来源,及其民族性、典故性。
- (6) 英汉习语的修辞、音韵和风格。

本书的宗旨是为了向读者提供有关英汉习语的丰富的背景知识,从而加深对英语习语的理解。其次帮助读者在不同的场合及上下文中恰当地使用英语习语。此外,通过对英汉习语的比较研究,可以进一步探讨英汉两种语言之间的习语交流问题。

为了正确理解英语习语,读者必须了解以下几个内容:

- (1) 习语是一种固定的惯用词组,有时不受语法和逻辑规律的约束,而且习语的各个组成部分不能随意省略或更改。
- (2) 随着社会的发展,习语也处于一种新陈代谢的过程。有时旧的习语会获得新义。陈旧的习语逐渐被淘汰,新的习语不断地涌

现,就像新鲜的血液一样给语言带来了新生。

(3) 有时好的习语意义往往比较含蓄。这是因为它们采用了各种修辞手法,使得习语更加形象化了。有些习语具有典故,取材于神话、历史及其他一些古典著作,这样习语的意思离本义更远了,所以使用时不要望文生义,以免闹笑话。

以上这些内容不但能提高读者对习语和语言的学习兴趣,而且能帮助读者加深对英语的理解,正确掌握习语的意义,同时也为实际应用习语铺平了道路。

本书又从以下几个方面来帮助读者正确使用英语习语:

(1) 首先要了解习语的语法结构和语法功用。尽管在现代英语里,有些英语习语的用法比较随便,但绝大多数的英语习语的语法功用毕竟还是比较固定的。

(2) 不少英语习语具有多义性,在不同的场合或上下文中具有不同的含义,这对读者正确理解和应用习语带来了不少困难。

(3) 不少英语习语带有感情色彩,或褒义或贬义,其次习语还具有阶级性,在使用过程中必须加以注意。

(4) 习语还具有各种风格,如果使用得不恰当也会闹笑话。

此外,读者须注意,习语毕竟是一种约定俗成的套语,滥用习语不仅会适得其反,而且会破坏作者的创造性。

随着中西文化交流,不少英语习语已被吸收到汉语习语中,同样,中文习语也会被英语所吸收。笔者希望能为促进英汉语言之间的习语交流做一些贡献,希望读者能对本书提出宝贵的意见,愿它能起到“抛砖引玉”的作用,为今后出版更多更好的英汉习语对比研究的书籍开创一条新的道路。

编 者

1999年5月于深圳

Foreword

A Comparative Study of English and Chinese Idioms is the brainchild of Mr. Yu Fu Min's strenuous and successful efforts that have spanned more than ten years ever since the time when he worked on it as a dissertation for his master's degree in English linguistics and literature at the Shanghai Foreign Languages Institute by the end of the 70's through the 80's while he was in charge of the adult education for the Foreign Trade Group Corporation in Shenzhen, and furthermore, at this very moment, on the eve of his departure for abroad for a long-term business commitment, he is still working hard to give his invaluable book a finishing touch.

I was privileged to read his manuscript and was instantly stunned by the exhaustive dimensions of his scholastic endeavor. Almost every aspect of the field has been explored: origins and developments, national traits, rhetorical and linguistic assessments, with numerous examples arranged in a neat array to illustrate his pertinent points. Mr. Yu Fu Min has indeed brought to his writings the insight of a linguist and the sensitivity of a stylist to give the reading public a sweep of viewing English and Chinese idioms compared in a historical as well as contemporary perspective.

And then I was granted the honor of writing a foreword for this book. In order to establish a frame of reference for this study. I asked a close friend of mine, currently a doctoral candidate in the librarian science at the State University of Ohio, to do me a favor by collecting all the relevant data on this specific subject through the computer network that covers all the sources of information

available in the U. S. A. and Canada.

The feedback reached me yesterday. My friend in Ohio had certainly responded with a thorough-going survey into the above-mentioned field. But little did any significant information show up, which, more eloquently than anything else, proves that Mr. Yu has stepped into an academic vacuum so that his research initiative is strikingly fresh and unparalleled. On this book has blazed a new trail on the English and Chinese idioms in terms of a comparative study.

It is my conviction that this book will certainly whet the intellectual interest of those with a bilingual asset for a higher appreciation and a freer application of the time-honored linguistic phenomenon called "idioms".

Raymond J. C. Fan
(Professor of English)

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I. Introduction

Refined and sanctified by long usage idioms have been described as the crystallization of language, without idioms our language would become dull and dry, whereas an appropriate use of them in our speech and writing will add to the strength and vividness of our language. For one thing most idioms, though composed of few words, contain an extremely profound and rich meaning; for another most idioms carry a vivid image. For example:

Know thyself: It is important to know one's own limitation.

(cf. the Chinese equivalent idiom: 人贵有自知之明 *rén guì yǒu zì zhī zhī míng*; Self-knowledge is wisdom.)

Grasp all, lose all: In greedily trying to get everything or too much, you will, or may, fail to get anything, and lose what you already have.

(cf. Chinese equivalent 贪多必失 *tān duō bì shī*).

吃一堑,长一智 (*chī yī qiàn, zhǎng yī zhì*): **A fall into the pit, a gain in your wit.**

These examples all show that idioms are concise and comprehensive, and can convey more philosophic meaning in life than the few words carry in themselves. The following examples show how idioms convey their ideas by means of images and figures of speech.

e. g. **a fly in the ointment:** anything, especially a little thing, that reduces or destroys the value or usefulness of something else.

(cf. 白璧微瑕 *bái bì wēi xiá*; a flaw in white jade — a slight blemish.)

(to be) **in the same boat:** to have the same dangers to face.

(cf. 风雨同舟 *fēng yǔ tóng zhōu*; in the same storm-tossed boat — to stand together through thick and thin.)

中流砥柱 (zhōng liú dǐ zhù): firm rock in midstream —
mainstay. (cf. **a tower of strength.**)

In the above examples, because of their rich association, the images and figures of speech play an important role in defining the meaning of these idioms.

Moreover, the use of alliteration, rhyme, repetition, rhythm and intonation makes idioms sound more pleasant to the ear, so that it becomes easier for the common people to learn them by heart and spread them far and wide.

e. g. wear and tear; No pains, no gains.
as fit as a fiddle; Many men many minds.
again and again; measure for measure;
to call a spade a spade.

三三两两 (sān sān liǎng liǎng): in twos and threes; by twos and threes.

勤勤恳恳 (qín qín kěn kěn): diligent and conscientious; earnestly and assiduously.

种瓜得瓜, 种豆得豆 (zhòng guā dé guā, zhòng dòu dé dòu):
Plant melons and you get melons, sow beans and you get
beans — **As you sow, so will you reap.**

It is these special features of idioms that add much to the expressive and emotional power of a language. Men of letters, in modern or ancient times, in China or elsewhere, all excel in using idioms. There are no end of idiomatic expressions in the literary works of famous English writers, such as Dryden, Addison, Swift, Sterne and Lamb, etc. Indeed idioms are also widely used in scientific and political articles and other kinds of writings as well. They reflect the homely philosophy, humour and character of the people, and also show how the wit and wisdom of the poets and other writers have passed into the thought of their people. So a good grasp of the meaning and the use of idioms is essential for students of a foreign language if they wish to read and appreciate original works fully.

Idioms add to the students' knowledge of the language, but it is by no means easy for them to master the idiomatic aspect of a language, as

idioms are generally used figuratively and have an implied meaning. To understand them thoroughly and use them appropriately is really a hard nut for them to crack. Take the expression “**to go Dutch** (with someone)” for example. Instead of going to the Netherland(Holland), it means to share expenses; (as in “Charles and Kate always go Dutch at the restaurant.”). Likewise the meanings of the following idioms differ essentially from the normal meanings to be gathered from the component words:

(to) **do up brown**: (to) perform a task with thoroughness.

a nice kettle of fish: a state of confusion.

once in a blue moon: rarely or never.

(have) **a finger in every pie**: (have) a part in everything that is going on (cf. Chinese equivalent 染指: rǎn zhǐ; take a share of sth. one is not entitled to; encroach on.)

The same thing happens in Chinese idioms.

e. g. 落花流水(luò huā liú shuǐ): The real meaning of this expression is “(to be) shattered to pieces; badly beaten; utterly routed”. But in the literal meaning the words “落花” mean “fallen flowers”, whereas “流水” mean “flowing water”; this expression describes a late spring scene which is like fallen flowers carried away by the flowing water. Formerly in literature this idiom used to be regarded as a shortened form of the poetic citation “落花有意,流水无情”(luò huā yǒu yì, liú shuǐ wú qíng): Shedding petals, the waterside flower pines for love, while the heartless brook babbles on -- i. e. an unrequited love; in a figurative sense, it means “One’s love has failed to call forth an echo in the other’s heart. One side is willing but the other is not”. Anyway it seems to have nothing to do with the current meaning of a troop “being utterly routed.”

Another example “麻木不仁”(má mù bù rén), its original meaning denotes the paralysis of one’s limbs. Now it is used only in a figurative sense to suggest somebody’s dullness or indifference in response to the outside world.

Another thing which puzzles students a great deal is that many good idioms often appear to violate grammatical rules or logic.

The following idioms appear to violate the normal grammatical rules which students have learnt;

on the move; on the go; in the know; One good turn deserves another. (verbs used as nouns.)

ins and outs; (the plurals of prepositions.)

at sixes and sevens; (the plurals of numerals.)

look, stock and barrel; thoroughly. (a group of nouns used as adverb.)

know-how; knowledge of methods. (verbal phrase used as a noun.)

Diamond cut diamond. (Subject does not coordinate with verb.) **Money makes the mare to go.** (“To” should be omitted when used as an object complement after the verb “make”).

In the following idioms however, the logic is at fault, i. e. we cannot take their meaning literally;

to have one’s heart in one’s mouth;

to cry one’s eyes out;

as fit as a fiddle.

Similarly many Chinese idioms violate the grammatical rules of modern standard Chinese as most of them are written in classical Chinese which is often quite different in structure from the modern vernacular. Thus “莫名其妙”(mò míng qí miào) would be “莫名它的妙” in the vernacular, and “三心二意”(sān xīn èr yì) be “三个心两个意”. But the flavour of the idioms would certainly be lost if they were to be rewritten in this way.

Again, the following Chinese idioms cannot be taken in at their face value as they are logically impossible.

e. g. 三头六臂(sān tóu liù bì): (with) three heads and six arms — super-human powers.

装蒜(zhuāng suàn): to play the part of garlic — to feign ignorance.

蹩脚(bié jiǎo): to sprain one's ankle — inferior.

Since there is much common ground covered by English and Chinese idioms, as we can see from the above examples, a comparative study of the idioms in these two languages will certainly provide students with a better understanding of English idioms. A basic knowledge of the common characteristics in the origin and development of idioms in the two languages will arouse their interest not only in the study of idioms, but also in the language study as a whole; while a comparison between the structure and function of English and Chinese idioms will help them to use English idioms appropriately and avoid their misuse. Thus for teachers of English as a second language, a comparative study of English and Chinese idioms plays an effective pedagogical role and will improve their work in teaching. When one comes across some seemingly synonymous idioms and want to use them properly, the stylistic features of these idioms will help to teach him how to use them appropriately in different circumstances and contexts. Take the following two sets of apparently synonymous idioms for example:

(1) **to breathe one's last; to go to glory** (British usage); **to quit the scene; to pass away**; these idioms all mean "to die". But they are solemn and archaic in style, and quite formal, often used in poetry or other literary works.

(2) **to kick the bucket; to hop over the perch; to turn up one's toes**; though these have the same meaning as the first group, the idioms in the second group are witty and humorous in style, and are all slangy and vulgar, never used in formal writing except for the sake of humour.

A knowledge of the way in which figures of speech are used in the idioms of the two languages will also help teachers to improve their students' writing skill. The national characteristics of both English and Chinese idioms, as well as their commendatory, derogatory or neutral senses will contribute greatly to an accurate translation from one language into the other.

In this book a comparative study of English and Chinese idioms is to be made on aspects such as structure, semantics, rhetoric,

phonology, style and etymology, so as to provide a kind of skeleton framework to enable teachers and students to obtain a fairly comprehensive idea of English and Chinese idioms in the fields mentioned above. However more flesh and blood is waiting for them to clothe this skeleton. As a Chinese idiom has put it: “抛砖引玉”(pao zhuan yin yu): to cast a brick to attract jade -- to offer a few commonplace remarks by way of introduction so that others may come up with valuable opinions. (cf. The English equivalent idiom: **to set a sprat to catch a herring (or a mackerel, a whale)**.) We sincerely hope this humble book of ours will pave the way for other worthier studies on this subject to come into light.

To end this introduction here are a few words about the books on idioms, so far as we have been able to ascertain, published both at home and abroad. These books may be divided into four categories according to the different needs of the users.

(1) In the first group of books and dictionaries, the idioms are arranged in alphabetic order with detailed explanations of meaning and appropriate use. Some are monolingual, others bilingual.

V. H. Collins: “A Book of English Idioms” London, 1956.

V. H. Collins: “A Second Book of English Idioms” London, 1958.

V. H. Collins: “A Dictionary of American Idioms” New York, 1975.

鲁歌:《汉语常用成语手册》, 1978

王勤:《谚语,歇后语概论》, 1980

胡子丹:《国际汉英成语大辞典》, 1979

厦门大学外文系:《英语成语词典》, 1972

北京外国语学院英语系:《汉英词典》, 1980

(2) In the second group of books, the idioms are listed according to an etymological classification, such as animal idioms (zoosemy), canine idioms, somatic idioms, idioms about sea life, military life, sports, games, law, etc.

Linton Stone: “Current English Idioms” London, 1975.

Linton Stone: “Modern English Idioms” London, 1978.

A. Johnson: "Common English Proverbs".

林青明:《英文习语手册》(香港万里书店),1978

连畔:《英文格言菁华》(香港万里书店)

(3) The third group deals in some parts with the techniques used in the bilingual translation of English idioms into Chinese or vice versa.

张培基:《习语汉译英研究》,1979

张其春:《翻译之艺术》(台湾开明书店印行)

钱歌川:《翻译的技巧》(台湾开明书店印行),1972

(4) The fourth group is concerned with lexicology. These books devote at least a chapter or two on the origin, structure and function of the idioms listed.

N. Rayevskaya: "English Lexicology" Moscow, 1975.

R. S. Ginzburg: "A Course in Modern English Lexicology" (pp. 87-119) Moscow, 1966.

Logan Pearsall Smith: "Words and Idioms" London, 1948.

Ivor H. Evans: "Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable" London, 1975.

A. Alekhina: "Semantic Groups in English Phraseology" Moscow, 1978.

庞然:《英文成语的结构和运用》(香港万里书店),1978

华中师范学院中文系现代汉语教研室,《现代汉语词汇知识》,1973

高文达:《词汇知识》,1980

All these books and dictionaries on English and Chinese idioms are informative and instructive. But none of them makes a comprehensive comparative study of idioms in both English and Chinese. Since there is much in common between the idioms of the two languages, it is inevitable, sooner or later, that a more thorough comparative study of English and Chinese idioms will be made; from which will arise a new subject, leading to a fifth category of books on idioms which will play an equally important role in the study of the English language. This is a first attempt at such a study.

II. Idioms Defined and Their Range and Forms

It is quite difficult to give a clear-cut definition to the word “idiom”, for it possesses several meanings which might cause us some confusion. It may mean the language of a people or a country, as in “the French idiom”; or a dialect as in “the Cantonese idiom”; or a linguistic usage which defies grammatical analysis as in the following sentences: “It’s **me**.” “**Who** are you waiting for?” “the **youngest** of her two daughters”. Last, but not the least, it means **“an accepted phrase, construction, or expression contrary to the usual patterns of the language or having a meaning different from the language or having a meaning different from the literal.”** (Webster’s New World Dictionary of the American Language, 2nd college edition, 1972). It is this last definition that most suits the purpose of our discussion. The Chinese equivalent for “idiom” is “熟语”(shú yǔ). It means a kind of a set phrase or sentence, which, like a stock expression, is often quoted by the common people. From the above definitions we can extract two basic criteria on which to decide whether an expression is an idiom or not:

(1) An idiom must be well-established and accepted through common practice. In general, no element in the idiom can be changed without destroying the sense as a whole. Thus we can only say “**to play the first fiddle**” not “to play the first violin”; “**to be at liberty**” not “to be at freedom”. Take the phrase “**to get in touch with**” for example, which means “to make contact, or communicate with”. It can’t be varied; it is not possible to say “to get quickly in touch with”, “to get in constant touch with”, etc. But in the similar phrase “**to keep in touch with**”, one may say “**to keep closely in touch with**”, or “**to keep in constant touch with**”. It seems only good usage can give a

satisfactory account for all these idiomatic expressions.

Similarly in Chinese we can only say:

“四分五裂”(sì fēn wú liè) not “五裂四分”;

“无的放矢”(wú dì fàng shǐ) not “无的放箭”(jiàn);

although “矢” and “箭” both mean “arrow”.

(2) An idiom usually has an implied meaning. It cannot be interpreted only according to its literal meaning. When taken literally the phrases “the man in the street”, “in the clouds” and “cats and dogs” are not idioms. In a figurative sense, “**the man in the street**” implies the average person, who represents general opinion, (cf. Chinese equivalents: 小市民 xiǎo shì mǐn; 小人物 xiǎo rén wù; 市井小民 shì jǐng xiǎo mǐn; 凡夫俗子 fán fu sú zi; which all mean, more or less, common people; philistine.); “**to have one’s head in the clouds**”: be not paying attention to, be in a dreamlike state, (cf. Chinese equivalent: 如坠五里雾中 rú zhuì wú lǐ wù zhōng; as if lost in a thick fog, utterly mystified.); whereas “**to rain cats and dogs**”: to rain very heavily, (cf. 倾盆大雨 qīng pén dà yǔ; heavy downpour).

It is convenient to classify English and Chinese idioms as follows:

English idioms, in a broad sense, include idiomatic phrases, proverbial sayings and a number of slang expressions. Whereas Chinese idioms can be roughly divided into 成语(chéng yǔ): set phrases, 俗语(sú yǔ): common sayings, 谚语(yàn yǔ): proverbs, 歇后语(xiē hòu yǔ): a two-part allegorical saying, and some vulgar expressions which we call 粗俗语(cū sú yǔ). This is of course only a rough classification, for there must be some overlap among them.

Now we can examine each sub-classification individually:

1. English Idioms

1) Idiomatic phrases

Idiomatic phrases can be further classified into the following three units according to the degree of closeness within the components of an idiomatic phrase. (1) phraseological collocations (2) phraseological unities (3) phraseological fusion. (See R. S. Ginzburg: “A Course in