

The Metaphors and Cultural Psychology of the Chinese Character "Chi"

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Abstract: The word "吃([chi] eat)" has been widely used in Chinese and it has thus derived rich connotations and complex metaphors. Taking "吃([chi] eat)" and its related phrases as the research object, this paper classifies its metaphorical types into six categories based on its eight senses recorded in the dictionary. For each type of metaphor, the derivation from the original meaning to the extended meaning is explained and the connotation is stated and further described with detailed examples. Because the formation of language is inseparable from the influence of culture, this paper also analyzes the cultural psychological factors behind the metaphors of "吃([chi] eat)" from the perspectives of its importance, delicacy, and richness. Closely combined with Chinese history and geographical conditions, a unique explanation for its wide use and great importance is thus provided.

Keywords: Chinese character, metaphor, cultural psychology

1. Introduction

Linguist Sapir believes that the vocabulary of a language more or less faithfully reflects the culture it serves.[1] In addition to being a simple instrumental communication symbol, language is endowed with rich social marks and cultural factors due to its deep participation in human life and other reasons, thus reflecting the styles, habits, theories, morals and other characteristics of different nations, and showing the cultural psychology of each nation with its characteristics.

Chinese is no exception. As far as language content is concerned, from the ancient book *Classic of Mountains and Rivers* to today's popular short videos, food, or "吃([chi] eat)", is always a long-standing theme. This is also reflected in the language itself: the job is called "饭碗(rice bowl)" while the dismissal is called "炒鱿鱼(stir-fried squid)". There are also many phrases with the word "吃([chi] eat)" directly in use. One of the most well-known ones is using "你吃了吗?(Have you eaten yet?)" to greet others.

This paper will make a study of the character "吃([chi] eat)" and the phrases with it, trying to summarize the metaphorical types or rules of them and analyze the related cultural psychology behind them.

2. Theoretical Basis

Cultural psychology mainly refers to the overall psychological tendency formed by people in the same cultural group under the influence of internal and external social environment, physical environment and interpersonal relationships. It mainly includes the universal value standard, behavior habits, way of thinking, aesthetic taste and folk style of a country or nation. It is a relatively stable and universal psychological habit accumulated by generations of a nation, which not only affects people in history, but also affects people in reality.

There are many externalization forms of cultural psychological influence, and language is one of them. Every language contains a nation's living habits, cultural traditions and rich cultural connotations. This cultural connotation is often expressed in the form of linguistic metaphor. Metaphor involves the contrast of two concepts, one of which interprets the other. Abstract experience is often described with concrete experience.[2]

The experiential theory of cognitive linguistics holds that meaning comes from our sensorimotor experiences. And the meaning of this experience is expanded to form abstract conceptualization and reasoning.[3] Lakoff once gave a definition of natural experience: Natural experience is the result of the interaction between our body and the external world as well as our interaction with different people in the same culture.[4]

"吃([chi] eat)" is one of the most basic natural experiences of human beings. This natural experience that occurs repeatedly every day is solidified into an experience mode, which has a strong cognitive power, and a large number of metaphorical thinking comes from the experience of repeated occurrence mode.[5,6] In Chinese, "吃([chi] eat)" is a word with even richer cultural connotations that far exceed the meaning of the action itself.

3. Metaphors of "Chi"

吃([chi] eat), pronounced: chī, first appeared in the Warring States script.[7] The word "吃([chi] eat)" is widely used. According to the BCC corpus of Beijing Language and Culture University, the word "吃([chi] eat)" has a total of 1229,653 pieces of data in modern Chinese and 164,927 pieces of data in ancient Chinese. Under the entry of "吃([chi] eat)", *Modern Chinese Dictionary* records 84 phrases, 9 proverbs, 20 allegories, 20 quips and 20 idioms.

At present, in the seventh edition of *Modern Chinese Dictionary*, the word "吃([chi] eat)" has eight senses: ①to put food in the mouth and swallow it after chewing (including sucking and drinking); ②to live by something; ③to absorb (liquid); ④to annihilate (mostly used in military and chess games); ⑤to bear or endure; ⑥to suffer; ⑦to expend; ⑧a preposition used to mark the passive voice (mostly seen in early vernacular).

We can classify the metaphorical types of the word "吃([chi] eat)" on the basis of its senses as follows. Among them, the sense ⑧ hardly appears in the practical application of present modern Chinese, so it will not be discussed here.

3.1. Type 1: Metaphors Related to Food

In this type, because the meaning of the word "吃([chi] eat)" itself has not changed, its metaphorical meaning is mainly brought by its collocation words. Its collocation words can be mainly divided into two categories, one is the food itself, and the other is the external conditions of the food, such as the corresponding cooking utensils and tableware. These words first have their own association and change of meaning, and then complete the metaphorical process with the word "吃([chi] eat)".

3.1.1. Collocation 1: "Chi"+ Food

As for food itself, there are mainly three kinds of associations: shape, nature and function.

3.1.1.1. Association of Shape

This type of food tends to be specific, with some kind of prominent shape characteristic. The most common example is "吃鸭蛋(eat duck eggs)". In this phrase, because the shape of the egg is similar to the number 0, it gives rise to the association of "getting a zero", which is used to indicate failing an exam. Similarly, because of the similarity between the 烧饼(Chinese style baked roll) and the target, soldiers jokingly called missing the target "吃烧饼"; Because of the resemblance between the bullet and the black date, "吃黑枣(eat the black date)" is used to refer to being shot.

3.1.1.2. Association of Nature

This type of objects can be divided into concrete and abstract categories. In the concrete category, the object is often a specific thing that has a certain outstanding quality, such as hardness, size, taste, etc. For example, tofu can be compared with women's soft bodies, so "吃豆腐(eat tofu)" to mean taking advantage of women; The sour taste of vinegar is compared to the sour feeling in the human heart, so "吃醋(eat vinegar)" is used to express jealousy. In the abstract category, one form is directly adding adjectives related to food properties, such as taste, color. Here are some typical examples: "吃香(eat something fragrant)" means popular; "吃香的喝辣的(eat something fragrant and drink something spicy)" means living a very good life. These are based on the fact that "fragrant" and "spicy" are popular tastes. The other form is to add food with certain modifiers, which often have a certain allusion or cultural background. For example, in ancient China, there was a beautiful woman who would offer a bowl of soup to the suitor she did not like to indicate refusal. Therefore, "吃闭门羹(have a soup that indicates refusal)" means being rejected or getting the brush-off.

3.1.1.3. Association of Function

This kind of food will bring certain special effects after use, so its function has been amplified and produced a metaphor. This kind of food is mostly drugs. For example, "吃定心丸(take a reassuring pill)" means that the mind or emotions have settled down. "吃迷魂汤(have a deluding soup)" means being deluded. "吃后悔药(take a regret medicine)" means taking remedial measures because of regret.

3.1.2. Collocation 2: "Chi"+ External Conditions of Food

In terms of the external conditions of food, there are three categories: container, place and quantity.

3.1.2.1. Association of Container

Containers for holding food are either cookware or tableware. Cookware is generally related to the quality and quantity of food made by it. For example, cooking on a small stove makes it easier to produce delicate and delicious food, so "吃小灶(eat a small stove)" means eating well. Tableware is mainly related to the corresponding food served in it. For example, at some places in Sichuan, people use a large single bowl to serve wine, so "吃单碗(eat a single bowl)" means drinking.

3.1.2.2. Association of Place

After the word "吃([chi] eat)", we can directly add a specific place to indicate eating in that place. This is a special omitted structure. For example, "吃食堂(eat canteen)" means eating in the canteen and "吃馆子(eat restaurant)" means eating in the restaurant. In addition to the specific place, the word "吃([chi] eat)" can also be directly followed by an abstract noun indicating location. For example, the Chinese phrase "四方(four directions)" can be used to refer to all directions, thus the literal meaning of "吃四方(eat four directions)" can be understood as "being able to have food to eat in all directions". For Chinese, having food to eat either means that a friend is willing to invite you to dinner, or that a person can earn money to buy food wherever he is. So, "吃四方(eat four directions)" is used to indicate that someone can make friends or can exert talent everywhere.

3.1.2.3. Association of Quantity

To some extent, the amount of food can reflect the corresponding occasion and atmosphere, so the combination of "吃([chi] eat)" and numbers is also metaphorical. For example, there was once a tradition in Southwest China that nine dishes were served at important banquets. In order to meet the demand, these nine dishes were all served in large bowls. So "吃九大碗(eat nine big bowls)" is often used to express eating at a banquet in Southwest China.

3.2. Type 2: Metaphors for Living by Something

The purpose of "吃([chi] eat)" is actually to obtain energy from food to support the need for survival. When the object is expanded from food to other sources such as energy or money, the meaning of "吃([chi] eat)" is also expanded to "live by something." In this case, the "吃([chi] eat)" phrases become a description of an occupation or lifestyle, since the acquisition of wealth is primarily doing a job. For example, when teachers write with chalk in class, chalk dust will fall. So, "吃粉笔灰(eat chalk dust)" is used to refer to the teaching profession. In addition to relying on people's own work to get paid, social relief is also a part of the source of income. So the form of "吃([chi] eat)" followed by a policy is also widely used. For example, "吃低保(eat the basic living allowance)" means to accept the policy of basic living allowance. In general, this type mainly shows the access to resources.

3.3. Type 3: Metaphors for Absorption

This type of phrase and usage is relatively rare. Typical usage is "这张纸不吃墨水(this paper does not eat ink)", meaning that the paper absorbs little ink. In this usage, the act of human or animal feeding is generalized and abstracted as the engulfing of one substance by another. For example, the phrase "吃墨水(eat ink)" is an analogy between the behavior of paper absorbing ink and that of humans eating food. In addition, the act of engulfing can be further deduced to the spiritual level. This means a thought receives and absorbs another thought, that is, "grasping" and "understanding" another thought. Therefore, in Chinese, "吃不准(eat uncertainly)" means "understanding uncertainly".

3.4. Type 4: Metaphors for Annihilation

After the person eats the food, the food disappears. If this behavior is projected onto the battlefield, it can be compared to that the army is annihilated. "吃([chi] eat)" thus derives the metaphor of "annihilation." This metaphor is often used on the chessboard or on the battlefield, such as "吃你的马(eat your horse)" or "吃掉一个团(eat a regiment)" to indicate defeat or annihilation of an opponent.

3.5. Type 5: Metaphors for Endurance

Because the senses ⑤ and ⑥ have overlapping meanings in practical applications, they are discussed as one type. In this type, the focus shifts from the act of eating to the consequences of eating. When food is eaten, the person is forced to accept the effects of the food. The meaning of "bear" is thus derived. This type of expression is mainly negative, because the positive effects of food are often not focused on while the negative effects will be. So, when the focus is shifted to the outcome, it is already implied that it is more likely to be negative. For example, "吃亏(eat grief)" and "吃瘪(eat depletion)" are both expressions of frustration. Other common combinations are for punishment or bad treatment. For example, "吃官司(eat lawsuit)" means to go to court with somebody, "吃警告(eat warning)" means to receive a warning, "吃耳光(eat slap)" means to be slapped.

3.6. Type 6: Metaphors for Consumption

The process of food being absorbed is the process of food from existence to absence, resulting in the meaning of "consumption". It refers to both material, energy and mental consumption, such as "吃力(eat strength)" to express the consumption of a lot of energy and strength.

3.7. Summary

For the above types of metaphors, it can be found that the emphases of their meaning extension are different. Type 1 focuses on the object of "吃([chi] eat)". Therefore, its metaphorical meaning is mainly expressed by its collocation of food-related words. Type 2 focuses on the purpose of "吃([chi] eat)", which is survival. Type 3 focuses on the act of "吃([chi] eat)" itself. Types 4, 5, and 6 all focus on the results of "吃([chi] eat)". Among them, types 4 and 6 focus on the change of the object after the action of "吃([chi] eat)" but are different in degree, while type 5 focuses on the subject's change, which is negative most of the time.

4. Cultural Psychology of "Chi"

English linguist Palmer once said that language is the most adequate expression of human characteristics of all human activities.[8] This argument emphasizes the inseparable symbiotic relationship between language and culture. The wide use of the word "吃([chi] eat)" and its rich metaphorical connotation are naturally related to its nation's cultural psychology. This language phenomenon is closely related to the importance, delicacy and richness of "吃([chi] eat)" of the Chinese nation.

4.1. Importance of "Chi": Psychology of Farming Culture

Ancient China was a typical agricultural society. In the era of low productivity, most people's lives were tied to the arable land, and to have enough food and clothing was their biggest wish. However, the flood and drought disasters brought by the dominant monsoon climate in China could directly affect the yield of farmers' cultivated land. This always led to food insecurity, thus bringing the crisis of survival. What's more, the underdeveloped commodity economy and poverty made people's entertainment relatively monotonous. So, when they met important festivals or happy events, they just made some delicious food as a celebration. Therefore, the importance of "吃([chi] eat)" was self-evident in ancient China. Such cultural psychology was further consolidated in the difficult years after the founding of New China and spread to the present day.

4.2. Delicacy of "Chi": Concept of the System of Rites and Music

As an important part of Chinese history and culture, the system of rites and music has a great impact on the construction of Chinese cultural psychology. In the Zhou Dynasty, the diet system had strict levels and standards. Most people could only eat coarse food and low-quality inferior meat. Precious meat products like fish, cattle, and sheep would only appear on large banquets. This situation was not changed until the Spring and Autumn War period when the system of rites and music collapsed. From that time, the meat that used to be enjoyed only by the superior began to slowly appear on the tables of ordinary people. However, the idea that fine food is associated with higher status can no longer be completely erased. In this case, people's pursuit of delicacy and quality of food is also to show their wealth and nobility. Although food is no longer a status symbol, the Chinese people's pursuit of food has been engraved in their minds.

4.3. Richness of "Chi": Diversity of Regional Culture

China is a vast country with undulating terrain. The climate and geographical conditions in different regions are also different. These conditions not only lead to the growth of different crops, but also affect the taste and food orientation of people in different regions. Different cooking methods and rich food types thus come into being. The most representative classification of food is the "Eight Great Cuisines", which is a general term for eight local cuisines in China. The rich types of Chinese food greatly broaden the possibility of Chinese people's food experience, making the behavior of "吃 ([chi] eat)" more repeatable and effective than that of other countries and nations, and also making Chinese people more willing to develop and experience in the field of food. The openness and tolerance to the diet also make the connotation of the word "吃 ([chi] eat)" continue to expand.

5. Conclusion

The Chinese word "吃 ([chi] eat)" and its related phrases have rich connotations. Based on its lexicographical meaning, its metaphorical types can be roughly divided into six categories. Among these six categories, there are two different forms of metaphors. In the first category, because the word "吃 ([chi] eat)" retains its original meaning, metaphorical meaning is brought by the association of collocation words after the word "吃 ([chi] eat)". However, the remaining five categories are all centered on changes in the meaning of the word "吃 ([chi] eat)" itself. The rich connotation of "eat" is closely related to the cultural psychology behind it. The unique political system, geographical conditions and economic conditions of ancient China all promoted the formation of this cultural psychology, making the Chinese character "吃 ([chi] eat)" a unique Chinese-style expression.

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