

The Activation Mode of Chinese Plant Idioms

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Abstract: Idiomatic phrases are an important part of Chinese vocabulary, with characteristics of being vivid, popular, and interesting. It often uses words related to daily life to form words, such as plants. This article takes Chinese plant idioms as the research object, and collects 329 pieces of corpus. From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, we explore the activation modes of Chinese plant idioms. According to the number of activations of Chinese plant idioms, it is divided into two categories: single activation and superimposed activation. The number of superimposed activations is more than that of single activation, which we believe is related to the principle of semantic evolution. From the perspective of activation modes, they are divided into similarity activation and "whole-part" associative activation, among which plant idioms involving similarity activation account for the vast majority. We hold that similarity plays a greater role in activation.

Keywords: Cognitive Linguistics; Plant Idioms; Activation

1. Introduction

Chinese plant idioms refer to the parts of Chinese idioms that contain plant words. This paper explores the activation of plant idioms involving metaphorical metaphors. Lakoff & Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) suggest that the essence of metaphor is to understand and experience a certain kind of thing through another kind of thing[1]. Lakoff & Turner argued that metonymy is different from metaphor in that there is no mapping across cognitive domains, and that what it primarily has is a referential function[2]. Linguistic metaphor originates from language communication[3]. Jianming Lu suggests that at the initial stage, metaphor and metonymy are more suitable to assume for the problem of "activation of one cognitive domain by the

other", and the activation relation between the two cognitive domains can also be called the "association relation". The activation relationship between two cognitive domains can also be called the "association relation"[4]. Objective things are inherently interconnected, and in the cognitive framework formed by the sensory system to perceive objective things, the cognitive domains, which are the components of the cognitive framework, are also interconnected with each other. The economic principle within the language and the changes in the social environment outside the language both promote and affect the occurrence of metaphor and metonymy of plant vocabulary[5]. For expressive needs, one does not directly invoke the cognitive domain formed by one's perception of thing A but activates that cognitive domain with another cognitive domain B.

When we look at Chinese plant idioms from the perspective of "activation", metaphor and metonymy are more inclined to be a continuum, which can explain some idioms that lie in the middle of metaphor and metonymy. There are two types of activation: "single activation" and "superimposed activation". The single activation is the activation that occurs one time, which is divided into similarity activation, "whole-part" association activation, and "cause-effect" reasoning association activation. "reasoning associative activation. Similarity refers to some kind of similar or comparable feature or characteristic between two cognitive domains[6]. Similarity activation means that because two things have some similarity, when saying something, instead of saying how it is directly, people prefer to use another thing to activate people's awareness of this thing. This type of activation corresponds to metaphor in cognitive linguistics. "Whole-part associative activation refers to the association of a part of something with the whole of something, or the association of the whole of something with the part of something. This type of activation corresponds to metonymy in cognitive

linguistics. As for "cause-effect" associative activation, Lu's paper didn't give a clear definition. In this paper, we believe that in idioms, "cause-effect" associative activation means that there is a causal relationship between the idiom and the actual meaning it activates. In idiomatic expressions, "cause-effect" associative activation refers to the causal relationship between the idiomatic expression and the actual meaning it activates.

2. Single Activation

In this paper, the corpus comes from Wen Duanzheng's 2011 publication *Chinese Idiomatic Expressions Dictionary* [7], *Chinese Idiomatic Expressions Dictionary: Popularization Book* [8], and the 2012 publication *10,000 idiomatic expressions* [9]. 329 Chinese plant idioms obtained from the closed-ended search are analyzed. In the single-activated corpus, there are only plant idioms in which similarity activation occurs, and we subdivided them into different subcategories for interpretation according to the activation reasons.

2.1 External Feature Similarity Activation

People recognize things through different senses. Various external features of plants such as size, color, smell, taste, etc. are areas that are often activated. Such as:

e.g. not a delicious fruit

The taste of the fruit affects the eating experience. "Not a delicious fruit" activates the meaning of "not good" due to the external characteristic of "taste". Fruit that is unpleasant to eat can be unbearable for the diner and projected onto someone, a difficult person can be unbearable for the opponent. Therefore, the idiom can also activate the meaning of "a hard person to handle". This type of plant idiom does not make up a large proportion of the corpus. There is also "the one who eats raw onion" activated by the similarity of odor features, and "the one who can't hide a single sesame seed in his heart" activated by the similarity of size features, and so on.

2.2 Action-behavior Similarity Activation

There are quite a few plant idioms that are activated by action behavior, such as:

e.g. pull out a radish

The act of pulling a radish out of the ground is similar to the act of getting rid of someone.

When people want to say "get rid of or knock down someone", they can use "pull out a radish" to compare this behavior instead of saying it directly. The use of "pulling out a radish" activates people's awareness of the act of "getting rid of or knocking down someone". Other plant idioms of this kind include "pulling up a vine to cover a gourd without dates" and "pulling up a vine to cover a gourd". In addition, some plant idioms undergo activation through a certain trait that the action behavior has, and in this paper, we also classify such idioms as activated based on the similarity of the action behavior, for example: *e.g. cutting watermelon with a sharp knife*. The action of cutting watermelon with a sharp knife has the trait of sharpness and dryness, which is activated by the similarity with the swift action of people in solving problems.

2.3 Attribute Value Similarity Activation

Some plants have values or some kind of attribute characteristics, such as growth habits, cultural attributes, some kind of functional properties, etc., which can also become activated areas. Such as:

e.g. wheat straw has a fiery temper

Wheat straw is the stalks of mature wheat after the grain is removed, it is flammable. People who have a big temper and are easy to be impulsive will lose their temper when something is mentioned, just like the wheat straw that catches fire when it is touched, so the attribute of "dry and easy to be burned" of the wheat straw activates the association of someone who is hot-tempered.

Such plant idioms are also activated by cultural attributes, such as "Peach and plums fill the world" which means "have students all over the world", and by value attributes, such as "Straw man, can eat but can't work" which means "A idiots who only knows how to eat and doesn't know how to work". In addition, we consider phonetic similarity in Chinese as a type of attribute similarity activation. The idiomatic expressions such as "eat onion, garlic, not ginger", which are activated by phonetic similarity, are also categorized into this category.

3. Superposition Activation

Superimposed activation refers to the occurrence of multiple activation. Lu's paper only made a preliminary exploration of this

type of activation, and then Wenru Li discussed this type of activation according to the number of activation into two superimposed activation and multiple superimposed activation in his master's thesis[10]. According to the actual situation of Chinese plant idioms, we will classify the superimposed activation into three categories: superimposed similarity activation, superimposed "whole-part" associative activation, and similarity activation + "whole-part" associative activation. "Three categories of superimposed activation will be discussed.

3.1 Superimposed Similarity Activation

The superimposed similarity activation category of plant idioms utilizes two or more similarity activations. For example:

e.g. Bloom without bearing fruit

This example is an idiomatic term that includes the activation of similarity between two action behaviors. A plant "bears fruit" is similar to a woman giving birth. Correspondingly, the plant "blossom" activates the act of a woman getting married, so "Bloom without bearing fruit" superimposes the activation of the act of a woman getting married and not giving birth to a child.

e.g. Standing up like a white gourd, lying down like a gourd

This example contains two activation of similarity of external features. The short height of a white gourd activates the perception that someone is short. The fruit of the gourd is enlarged, which activates the perception that someone is fat, an activation of external feature similarity in the cognitive domain.

e.g. love the dog tail grass and reject the good quality seedlings

The idiom contains two activation of attribute-value similarity. In an agrarian society dominated by rice cultivation, dog tail grass is of low value and can be detrimental to the growth of seedlings. It activates the perception of a "bad person or thing". The good quality seedlings is the high value of rice, which activates the awareness of "good people or things". The idiomatic expression means "to love the bad and discard the good".

There are also idioms with superimposed similarity activation that contain different kinds of similarity activation. For example, "eat bitter melon as sweet melon", "bitter melon" activates "bitter tiredness" because of

its bitter flavor characteristics, and "sweet melon" activates "happiness, blessing". "activate "happiness, blessing". The activation of the behavior "treating suffering as happiness" by "eating bitter melon as sweet melon" consists of two activations of external feature similarity and one activation of action-behavior similarity.

3.2 Superimposed "Whole-part" Associative Activation

Superimposed "whole-part" associative activation Plant idioms utilize two or more "whole-part" associative activations. For example, "biting the roots of vegetables" refers someone who is so poor that the only way to survive is to eat the roots of vegetables, which is enough to show the poverty. "biting the roots of vegetables" belongs to the part of "food" in the life of poverty, and this part refers to the whole situation of "living a poor and hard life". There are two "whole-part" associations activated in this passage. Another example:

e.g. having grown up on a diet of the five cereals and coarse cereals

Five cereals usually including rice, millet, jasmine, wheat, and beans; coarse cereals refers to grains other than rice and wheat, such as corn, sorghum, and sweet potatoes. The term "the five cereals and coarse cereals" refers to "food crops" in general. In our food culture, food cannot be separated from these food crops, so "the five cereals and coarse cereals" also refer to the "normal environment". The part of the idiom "the five cereals and coarse cereals" is activated by two "part-whole" associations. The behavior and experience of "growing up eating the five cereals and coarse cereals" is an aspect and part of the experience of "growing up in a normal environment", which is superimposed on the "whole-part" association activation.

3.3 Similarity + "Whole-part" Association Activation

These are plant idioms that have both similarity activation and "whole-part" activation. For example:

e.g. an elm's knot get the hang of it

The "elm's knot" is the hard root of the elm tree, which is difficult to split with a knife. This hard texture activates the realization of a "stubborn and inflexible mind", which is a

kind of similarity activation originating from the external characteristics of the plant. Using "inflexible brain" as a metaphor for an "inflexible person", a part of a thing activates people's awareness of the whole thing with that part, which belongs to the "whole-part" associative activation. This is a "whole-part" association activation. This idiom belongs to the superimposed activation of one similarity activation plus one "whole-part" association activation. Another example:

e.g. 10 : not eating ripe grapes, instead eating sour ones

Ripe grapes are generally sweet, and sweet flavors generally bring happiness and good feelings. Here, the word "ripe grapes" is used to refer to "good times", expanding from the sweet experience of taste to the sweet feeling of life. "Sour ones" means "sour grapes", which are unripe grapes. Sour flavor gives people a stimulating experience. Here, it extends from taste to bad life experience, referring to "bad days". The idiomatic expression means "choose to have a bad day instead of having good day".

e.g. playing with the lamp wick as the golden cudgel

The soft and fragile character of the lamp wick, which is of low value as a weapon, activates the awareness of people with poor abilities and is an activation of attribute-value similarity. The "golden cudgel" is the weapon of the Monkey King in the Chinese ancient novel *Journey to the West*, and it is a hard iron pole. Here, the "golden cudgel" firstly reminds people of its user, the Monkey King, which belongs to the whole-part activation of "activating the person who uses a special tool with a special tool", and then "activating the person who uses a special tool with a special tool". It belongs to the whole-part activation of "activating the person who uses the tool with a special tool", and then "activating the person with high skills" by "the Monkey King", which belongs to the whole-part activation of "activating the generalized term with a specific term". ". The act of "playing with a lamplighter pole as a golden cudgel" is similar to the act of "using a person of poor ability as a person of high ability", so the activation of this idiomatic expression is a superposition of two similarity activations and two "whole-part" activations. Therefore, the activation of this idiomatic expression is a superposition of two similarity

activations and two "whole-part" activations.

4. Conclusion

The specific activation modes are shown in the Table 1.

Table 1. Statistics on Activation Modes of Chinese Plant Idioms

Activation mode			Number
Single Activation	Similarity Activation	External Feature Similarity Activation	10
		Action-behavior Similarity Activation	62
		Attribute Value Similarity Activation	37
Superposition Activation	Superimposed Similarity Activation		198
	Superimposed "Whole-part" Associative Activation		12
	Similarity + "Whole-part" Association Activation		10

As can be seen from the Table 1, there are 109 plant idioms in the corpus that undergo single activation, accounting for 33.13%. Among them, there are fewer examples of activation based on extrinsic feature similarity. This is followed by idioms activated based on attribute-value similarity, with a total of 37. The highest number was the idioms activated based on similarity of action behavior with 62. The total number of overlay-activated plant idioms is 220, accounting for 66.87%. Among them, the highest number of overlay similarity-activated plant idioms was 198.

In terms of the number of activations, there were more superimposed activations of plant idioms than single activations. We believe that the reason for this is that the actual meaning of plant idioms tends to be more complex. When a word or phrase is created, its meaning is not fixed. In the process of using plant idioms, their semantics will continue to develop and extend. For example, the derivation of the lexical meaning of plant terms in the ancient times was dominated by the derivation of plant categories to other semantic categories, which was unbalanced, and the mechanism of occurrence was mainly metaphor and metonymy. When one meaning of plant idioms is recognized, a new meaning will be activated based on this meaning. Thus, the semantics of

plant idioms are constantly developing.

In terms of mode of activation, more plant idioms were activated by similarity than by "whole-part" associations. We believe that this is because similarity plays a greater role than correlation in the semantic derivation of idioms. Similarity links the plant domain to many other cognitive domains, whereas relevance refers to something by its salient features, and serves to refer to it. In terms of semantic derivation, "whole-part" associative activation thinking is more limited. As a result, similarity-activated plant idioms are more widely available.

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