A Cognitive Contrastive Study on the Generation Mechanism of Euphemisms in Chinese and English

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ABSTRACT

This paper, from the perspective of cognitive linguistics, integrates frame semantics and cognitive reference point theory to construct a "frame-reference point" analysis model, systematically exploring the differences in generation mechanisms between Chinese and English euphemisms. It is found that English euphemisms are primarily rooted in the cognitive framework of "individual agency", tending to choose reference points that "externalize" and "technologize" issues; whereas Chinese euphemisms rely heavily on the cognitive framework of "interpersonal relationships and harmony", preferring reference points that "relationalize" and "moralize" issues. This difference reflects the deep cultural cognitive patterns between China and the West in terms of individualism and collectivism, social mobility, and face perception.

Keywords: *Euphemism, Framework, Cultural cognition.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Euphemism, as a common linguistic phenomenon, serves not only as a polite strategy in communication but also as an important window into national thinking and cultural cognition [1]. In the context of increasingly frequent cross-cultural exchanges, a deep understanding of the differences between Chinese and English euphemisms holds significant theoretical and practical value. This paper combines frame semantics with the cognitive reference point theory to establish a two-tier analysis model, termed the "cultural cognition framework composite concept understanding process". This integrated model not only describes the superficial differences between Chinese and English euphemisms but also delves into the underlying cultural cognitive roots, offering a fresh perspective for the interface research of language, psychology, and culture.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL BASIS

2.1 Overview of Euphemism Research

Research on traditional euphemisms mainly unfolds along two paths: from a pragmatic perspective, it focuses on the communicative functions of euphemisms in maintaining face and adhering to politeness principles, such as the four "cooperative principles" proposed by linguist Grice, on which Leech further proposed the politeness principle, primarily serving social activities; from a sociolinguistic perspective, it emphasizes examining their functions, such as taboo avoidance, elegance pursuit, politeness, concealment[2] etc., reflecting social taboos and values, and focusing on the influence of social culture and values on people's social activities.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

2.2.1 Cognitive Reference Point Theory

Langacker's cognitive reference point theory reveals the basic mode of human cognition: establishing psychological connections with the target by activating a prominent reference point for salience. The theory encompasses four core elements: conceptualizer, reference point, psychological pathway, and target, comprehensively describing the dynamic process of conceptual understanding.

2.2.2 Frame Semantics

Frame semantics was first proposed by Fillmore in the 1970s. Its core essence is that the understanding of word meaning relies on activating the corresponding semantic frames, conceptual structures related to specific contexts, and background knowledge systems. Simply put, as an important spatial carrier of individual life, the social environment plays a significant role in promoting our brain's cognition.

2.2.3 Conceptual Metaphor and Conceptual Metonymy

Metaphor and metonymy are important ways to generate euphemisms [3]. Conceptual metaphor refers to the fixed mapping of a relatively easy-to-understand source domain to a more difficult-to-understand target domain, aiding people in better understanding new things. Conceptual metonymy, on the other hand, establishes a connection between the source and target domains through the proximity or relevance between things [4]. Compared to conceptual metaphor, conceptual metonymy is more fundamental and stable.

2.2.4 Theoretical Integration

This article creatively combines four theories: based on the background system of cultural cognition provided by frame semantics, it explains "why it can be understood in this way"; secondly, through the specific cognitive reference point theory, it describes the detailed process of concept operation, explaining "how understanding is formed"; and then, through conceptual metaphor and metonymy as "means", it achieves the generation of euphemisms.

3. CONSTRUCTION AND OPERATION OF THE "FRAMEWORK-REFERENCE POINT" INTEGRATED ANALYSIS MODEL

3.1 Core Logic of the Model

Cognitive framework serves as the "underlying cultural logic" for the generation of euphemisms, determining which type of alternative framework the speaker will prioritize activating. Cognitive reference point, on the other hand, represents the "specific operational points". Within a specific framework, the transformation from negative concepts to euphemistic expressions is achieved by selecting logical cognitive reference points.

3.2 Model Operation Process

After the initial frame is identified, an alternative frame is activated through the cognitive domain and the purpose of euphemistic expression. Finally, an appropriate cognitive reference point is selected within the alternative frame, and the language is reorganized to derive a euphemistic expression. For instance, in Chinese society, the initial cognitive frame of "old age" is "decline in physiological functions", which is directly expressed as negative perceptions such as "old" and "sluggish". Based on the emphasis on "morality and ethics" in Chinese collectivist culture, an alternative frame of "high status in family hierarchy, family as the core" is activated, and the cognitive reference point "status in family hierarchy and wisdom" is selected. The language is then reorganized into "respectful terms for status in family hierarchy".

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Socio-cultural Factors Influencing the Formation of Euphemisms

4.1.1 Historical Perspective

Foreign euphemisms often employ the passive tense, based on the principle of "separating the person as a whole from the event". The hierarchical society and authoritative discourse tradition in Europe, coupled with the requirement of "objective and impersonal" in Latin written language, have led to the long-term use of the passive voice in official documents, laws, and scientific texts, such as "orders were given, it has been decided that..." The grammatical characteristics of languages like English also make it easy to construct passive structures, which possess the functions of "objectivity, formality, and appropriateness," ultimately making them a fixed means of euphemistic expression. In China, on the other hand, it has long been a "patriarchal family-based agricultural society, where individual values are subordinate to the collective. As Xiaotong Fei said, 'In Western society, what is fought for is rights, while in our society, it is about building relationships and maintaining friendships' [5]. In terms of social harmony, traditional Chinese culture emphasizes 'ritual' and 'harmony is precious,' and euphemisms often adjust from the perspective of

entry and emotional coloring to 'extend the meaning of the characteristics possessed by the parties involved.

4.1.2 Cognitive View

American newspaper columnist Earl Wilson wrote, "The holiday is a time when companies let their employees leave for a period of time, reminding them that the company can still operate without them.[6]" The European and American workplaces are bound by "contracts", emphasizing "objective decision-making" and "rationality", and focusing on individual performance rather than personal emotional connections. The Chinese workplace is deeply influenced by the "hierarchical pattern", where career development is intertwined with personal emotions, and "harmonious relationships" are an important foundation for career development. Therefore, in the workplace, euphemisms in European and American countries focus more on technical abilities; euphemisms in the Chinese workplace are mostly "relationship-oriented", aimed at maintaining face and long-term relationships.

4.1.3 Social Change

With the development of society, people's perception of the value of certain expressions has gradually changed. In the professional field, in traditional society, we use direct occupational titles with hierarchical significance; in modern society, with the enhancement of personal dignity awareness and the emphasis on professional equality, euphemistic expressions for occupational titles have emerged; in the economic status field, people's privacy awareness has increased, making them more sensitive to wealth disparities; in the physical characteristics field, the "youthification" culture prevails in modern society, and the "age anxiety" brought about by aging has intensified. In Chinese, the term "silver-haired group" is used to refer to the elderly, while in English, "senior citizens" is used. This is a linguistic softening resulting from society's acceptance of age diversity. These changes in various fields reflect the gradual shift of language from "functional expression" to "humanistic care", exploring more of the charm of language.

4.2 Comparative Analysis of Euphemisms Related to Economic Conditions

English euphemisms primarily activate the framework of "individual agency and social mobility". When discussing unemployment or joblessness, people perceive this situation as a temporary outcome that can be changed. When referring to "unemployment", the first state that comes to mind is "no income", which carries a negative or discriminatory connotation. Therefore, conceptualizers transform this framework into "a certain stage in life", using the "temporariness" within it as a reference point to search for similar concepts such as "transitional period". By constructing a "psychological pathway", they metonymically shift "unemployment" to "a journey in life", achieving the intended purpose of the conceptualizer.

"Poverty" can trigger a cognitive framework of "lower quality of life". Conceptualizers, from another perspective, transform the static outcome into a dynamic challenge, shifting to the framework of "life facing challenges". Using a passive form, poverty is defined as "financially challenged". "Normalcy" and "challenges" in life are widely experienced and understood by people. Therefore, economic difficulties are defined as "abnormalcy", with "economic normalcy" as the cognitive reference point, building a psychological pathway of "being challenged", transforming "negative evaluation" into "neutral cognition". Economic difficulties can be overcome obstacles within the framework of personal struggle.

Traditional Chinese euphemisms reflect the Han nationality's advocacy of the golden mean and the principle of harmony. They inherently serve a function conducive to harmony. Chinese euphemisms rely on the framework of "social harmony". This framework emphasizes the overall interests and stability of social relations. For instance, "economic difficulties" may trigger the framework element of "saving less". Through sequential metonymy, it refers to the overall state of "not having much savings" as "not having enough funds for consumption", implicitly expressed as "I've been a bit short of cash recently", without specifically revealing the economic situation, thus preserving the dignity of both parties. "Economic difficulties" can also be transformed from the situational framework of "frugality" to the conceptual framework of "poverty" as a "noble quality". Using the moral attribute "purity" as a reference point, it links poverty with loftiness and

self-discipline, transforming material deprivation into a testament to spiritual quality within the traditional moral framework.

4.3 Comparative Analysis of Euphemisms Related to Physical Characteristics

English exhibits a framework tendency towards "individual autonomy and value maintenance". This framework emphasizes personal uniqueness and self-worth. By extracting suitable elements from this framework, such as "vertically challenged", which reconsiders height deficiency as a "challenge" to overcome, the choice of reference points underscores the emphasis on individual capabilities. In Western culture, words related to "old" often carry negative connotations, suggesting aging, obsolescence, or inactivity. Therefore, when addressing the elderly, attribute metonymy is employed where a prominent attribute of an object is used to represent the object itself. This shifts the framework from "physical characteristics" to "life experience". Leveraging the reference point of "higher qualifications" within the latter framework, the euphemism "senior citizens" is formed to avoid the potential negative implications of the word "old", thereby maintaining individual dignity and value.

Chinese reflects the characteristics of the "harmonious relationship and overall evaluation" framework. This framework emphasizes harmonious coexistence in social relationships. Different eras have diverse euphemisms. In terms of body shape, in the past, when life was not considered affluent, "fat" was seen as a symbol of affluence. Nowadays, with improved living standards, people admire a slim and healthy body shape, and when "fat" is mentioned, people tend to associate it with the cognitive framework of "bulging body". In order to facilitate friendly interaction and reduce offense, based on the traditional Chinese culture where "fat" is seen as a sign of "affluence", we choose "blessing" as a more acceptable reference point within this framework, reconstructing it as "plump figure" or "blessed", transforming body shape changes into a manifestation of blessings through conceptual metaphor. In terms of age, in China, the word "old" represents respect and is a symbol of experience and status. However, with the further development of the times and the increasing trend of aging, people gradually avoid using the word "old". Instead, they use metonymy to replace "age" with "experience and respect", often referring to people as "elders, predecessors, and wise elders", using social status instead of physiological characteristics to maintain harmonious relationships.

4.4 Comparative Analysis of Euphemisms Related to Professional Identity

English tends to adopt a "professional and technical" framework, which reconstructs social evaluation by enhancing the technical content of occupations. For example, "sanitation engineer" first imagines the work framework, then focuses on the "technical" aspect according to needs, activating the replacement framework of "technical worker", with "engineer" as the reference point in this framework. By connecting two different cognitive domains and placing emphasis on the technical aspect, sensitive and negative words are avoided. In the framework of professional division of labor, career prestige is enhanced through category transfer; "domestic engineer" also professionalizes domestic work through a technical reference point.

Chinese occupational euphemisms include three major construction patterns: tailoring, omitting one or two words, such as "Mr. Wang"; social status, such as "cook" and "designer"; and synonym substitution, using "gentleman from the beam" instead of "thief". Chinese emphasizes the "relational ethicalization" framework, paying more attention to interpersonal relationships and regulating occupational cognition through moral evaluation and relational positioning. For example, "sanitation worker" first appears in the "cleaning" framework, and then shifts from the process to the result in the "protecting the environment" framework. With "hygiene" and "environment" as moral reference points, attribute metonymy endows professional ethics with meaning, and the cognitive framework shifts from "cleaning" to "protecting the environment", drawing attention to the prominent and noble quality of protecting the environment. When addressing a nanny, the relative term "auntie" is used as a reference point in the "family framework". Through relational metaphor, the "employment framework" is transformed into a "quasi-kinship framework", blurring the employment relationship, narrowing the psychological distance, and facilitating better work execution.

The comparison of three types of euphemisms reveals systematic differences: the generation of English euphemisms relies on an individualistic cultural cognitive framework, with a preference for

choosing reference points that tend to "externalize," "technologize," and "temporarize" sensitive issues, often employing vague expressions and passive voice, such as "physically challenged," to downplay the individual's involvement in the event and reduce sensitivity; Chinese euphemisms, on the other hand, are based on a collectivistic cultural cognitive framework, with a preference for choosing reference points that tend to "relationalize," "moralize," and "holisticize" issues, often using concrete things and "behaviors" as references, such as extending "economic difficulties" to the consumption behavior of "being a bit short on cash," to reduce direct conflict. The core is to alleviate the embarrassment and conflict of the issue through social relationships or collective cognition. With the development of the times, euphemisms have gradually incorporated profound wisdom, reflecting fairness, justice, and Internet characteristics, such as "rightsize," "996," "fishing," "third country," and so on. Through the interaction and substitution among "cause-behavior-result," different cognitive frameworks can be transformed, finding appropriate reference points to reduce sensitive, negative, and offensive expressions. These differences and changes profoundly reflect the cultural cognitive mode differences and diverse development between China and the West in self-cognition, social interaction, value judgment, and other aspects.

5. CONCLUSION

Research indicates that euphemism is not merely a linguistic embellishment technique, but also a mirror image of cultural cognitive patterns. Language is formed through the formation of concepts in the brain based on sensory input, ultimately leading to the emergence of language. Cultural cognitive models are based on one's own experiences, knowledge, and knowledge structure. Therefore, the formation of euphemism is rooted in cultural cognition, and it is further shaped by one's own transformation, selection, and reconstruction within different cultural cognitive frameworks. Through discussion and research, we can conclude that English euphemism reconstructs issues with individual agency at its core, generated through the reconstruction logic of "transforming problems into goals that can be changed by individuals." Chinese euphemism resolves conflicts through relational ethics, transforming problems into expressions that are "acceptable and recognized under collective cognition." This difference has profound cultural cognitive roots.

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