

# A Comparative Study on Conceptual Metaphors between English and Chinese Dog Idioms

Ruixue WU<sup>1</sup> and Prof. Xueai ZHAO<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Foreign Studies, Northwestern Polytechnical University,  
Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, China 710129  
E-mail: [1120896634@qq.com](mailto:1120896634@qq.com)

<sup>2</sup> School of Foreign Studies, Northwestern Polytechnical University,  
Xi'an, China  
E-mail: [xazhao@nwpu.edu.cn](mailto:xazhao@nwpu.edu.cn)

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding Author:

## Abstract

*Based on the Conceptual Metaphor proposed by Lakoff and Johnson, this paper makes a comparative analysis of English and Chinese dog idioms, expecting to discover the similarities and differences between these two languages. The results show that the two kinds of idioms share the same conceptual metaphor, that is, PEOPLE ARE DOGS; and the distributions of positive and negative metaphorical meanings in these two languages are uneven. The findings not only enrich the scope of application of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, but also benefit the learning of relevant English or Chinese knowledge and cross-cultural communication.*

**Keywords:** Conceptual Metaphor Theory; dog idioms; cross-cultural communication

## 1. Introduction

In the traditional study of metaphor, most scholars regard metaphor as a linguistic phenomenon. In their point of view, metaphor is a device of the poetic imagination and rhetorical flourish - a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980: 3). The study of traditional metaphor often focuses on its formation and rhetoric function, regarding metaphor as a kind of ornament in language used in a special

way at a special time and in a special place. However, cognitive studies of metaphor are viewed it as a cognitive phenomenon and a way for human to understand and to conceptualize the world. In the book *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson have made a detailed and thorough inspection of metaphor, examining it meticulously and creatively from such perspectives as human mode of thinking, categorization and language symbols. The most important is that they have coined a new concept of “conceptual metaphor”, advocating that metaphor is pervasive, with characteristics of systematicity and cultural unity.

Animals are always recognized as special friends of human beings, for humans are animals by nature and animals occupy a very important position in human life. With gradual and increasing understanding of animals’ appearance and habits, people constantly invent descriptions of the animal world that inspire further more thinking, imagination and association. As has been found, there is a certain resemblance between animals’ appearances, habits, characteristics and some phenomena in human society, which has led people to reflect on the similarities between them. One natural outcome of such reflections is that people create many idioms connecting the human world and the animal world. And through these linguistic expressions, people describe the phenomena in the human world as well as express their experiences and understandings of daily life.

This paper intends to make a comparative analysis of English and Chinese dog idioms based on the Conceptual Metaphor Theory. Through a systematic comparative study, the author tries to find the similarities and differences of the conceptual metaphors in these two kinds of dog idioms.

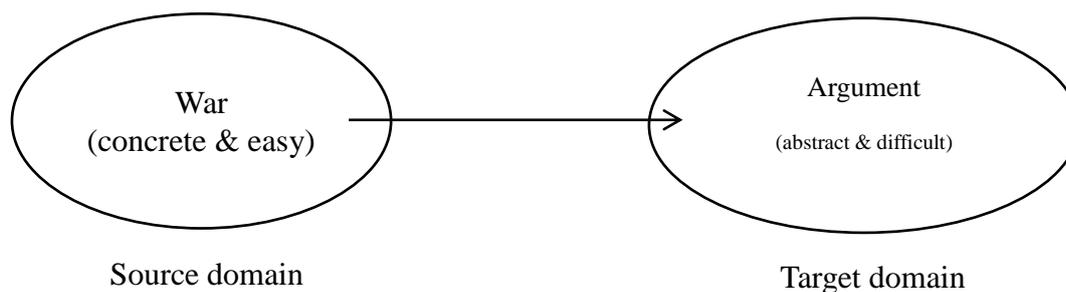
## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Conceptual Metaphor Theory

The idea of “conceptual metaphor” was first proposed in *Metaphors We Live by* and fully described in *The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor*. The main idea is that conceptual metaphor is “a cross-domain mapping in the conceptual system” (Lakoff, 1993: 223). It is conceived of as a belief structure (e.g. “argument is war”) existing in people’s conceptual system, and is a cross-domain mapping which links the concrete source domain (“war”) to the abstract target domain (“argument”) (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

In this theory, metaphors are not mere poetical or rhetorical embellishments; instead, they are part of everyday speech that affects the ways we perceive, think, and act. They are pervasive in everyday language. Metaphor is a figure of the mind, a way of thinking, and the mapping is a tool to comprehend new things. Most importantly, they are conceptual and part of long-term memory in people’s conceptual system.

Through “cross-domain mapping”, a series of linguistic metaphors are produced, which is a good way for vocabulary expansion. Take the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR for example, the mapping is illustrated in the following figure.



**Figure 1. The mapping process of “argument is war”**

Based on this conceptual metaphor, we find the following sentences.

Your claims are *indefensible*.

He *attacked* every weak point in my argument.

His criticisms were *right on target*.

I've never *won* an argument with him.

You disagree? Okay, *shoot!*

He *shot down* all of my arguments. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:4)

The words in italic that appear in the previous sentences, for example, “indefensible”, “attack”, “win” and “shoot”, are associated with the conceptual metaphor “ARGUMENT IS WAR”. These words are generally used in their concrete meanings in the source domain of “war”; but after a systematic mapping, they are now used in their abstract meanings in the target domain of “argument” in the form of linguistic metaphors. A conceptual metaphor can be seen as a bridge, which links the lexical meanings between the two conceptual domains. Based on this theory, this paper explores the similarities and differences of conceptual metaphors of English and Chinese dog idioms.

## 2.2 Previous Studies of Dog Idioms

Idioms have always aroused great interest among linguists. Substantial studies of idioms have been carried out from the semantic perspective or within the field of lexicology. Much work has been done, however, materials about dog idioms written by foreign scholars are rare to be found.

For Chinese scholars, they have already made their contributions to studies in this field. On one hand, many metaphorical studies of dog idioms are confined to one specific language. For example, Yu Xiaoni (2007) concludes that the traditional Chinese culture is an important source of dog idioms in the Chinese language after making a detailed analysis of dog idioms in Chinese. Zhao Qian (2010) states the metaphorical meanings of dog idioms in English. On the other hand, some comparative studies have been carried out, concentrating on the meaning of dog idioms. For instance, Zhan Pei (2000) and Li Hao (2008) studied the different meanings of dog idioms in English and Chinese. Also, there are some studies focus on dog idioms in language other than Chinese and English. For example, Pan Yanhong (2005) studies the dog idioms of English and Zhuang from the perspective of conceptual metaphor. Liu Jiannan (2007) conducts a comparative study of dog words in Chinese and Japanese from the perspective of pragmatics.

This paper makes a comparative study on the conceptual metaphors between English and Chinese dog

idioms, in order to discover their similarities and differences and try to improve their cross-cultural communication.

### **3 Research Design**

#### **3.1 Research Questions**

- (1) What are the conceptual metaphors of dog idioms in English and Chinese?
- (2) What are the similarities and differences between the conceptual metaphors of the dog idioms in English and Chinese?
- (3) Do these similarities and differences improve or impede the communication between Chinese and English-speaking people?

#### **3.2 Research Subjects**

All the dog idioms in this paper are selected from two websites. The English idioms are chosen from the Free Dictionary, and the Chinese idioms are selected from the Chinese Idioms Online Dictionary. After searching, the numbers of dog idioms in English and Chinese are 150 and 135 separately. To ensure the accuracy of the research, 50 idioms are selected randomly from each website. Therefore, there are total 100 idioms in the research - 50 in English, and 50 in Chinese. All the idioms are analyzed and grouped based on their conceptual metaphors.

#### **3.3 Research Procedure**

Qualitative analyses are made based on the data collected in order to provide answers to the two research questions raised earlier in the paper. To be specific, English and Chinese dog idioms are carefully picked out, calculated and then analyzed in order to answer the first research question. Results from the analysis of the conceptual metaphors of dog idioms are then used to answer the second research question about the similarities and differences in the conceptual metaphors of the dog idioms in English and Chinese. Based on answers of the first two questions, the third one will be explained.

### **4. Findings and Discussion**

In this part, after analyzing the examples of the dog idioms in the two languages, the author gives a detailed description based on the metaphorical meanings of the pairs “dog” and “gou” (狗, “dog” expressed in Chinese) elicited from the dictionaries. Then the similarities and differences of the metaphorical meanings will be given.

As we have mentioned before, human beings have an intimate relationship with other animals. People not only affect these animals' life, but also are affected by them. The most important is that people create many idioms connecting the human world and the animal world. Such kind of human impressions of animals is well reflected in various languages. The common conceptual metaphor is PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS, such as “pig is stupid”, “mule is stubborn” and so on. These idioms map the properties of the source domain (animals) onto the target domain (people).

Dog, as the most significant friend of human, occupies an important position to express people's

behaviors or characteristics. Therefore, in this paper, the source domain of PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS metaphor is specified as *dog* to produce the PEOPLE ARE DOGS metaphor, through which *people* is conceptualized in terms of *dog* by cross-domain mappings.

#### 4.1 The Conceptual Metaphors in English Dog Idioms

With a careful examination of the dog idioms, it is found that the central metaphor PEOPLE ARE DOGS has some sub-classes, which will be illustrated below with their own metaphorical expressions. The results are sorted as follows.

##### 1) OUTSTANDING PEOPLE ARE DOGS

- Top dog ( a person who is in charge )
- Hot dog ( the best skiing athlete )
- The dog's bollocks ( excellent )
- Clever dog ( clever person )
- Dog in a doublet ( a brave person )
- A good dog deserves a good bone ( people who have made contributions shall be rewarded )
- The best dog leap the stile first ( let the most capable person deal with the most difficult things )

##### 2) EXPERIENCED PEOPLE ARE DOGS

- Sea dog ( experienced sailor )
- Be dog at a thing ( have much experience at a thing )
- Old dog for a hard road ( experience is invaluable )
- An old dog barks not in vain ( When an old dog barks, he must convey his warning )
- An old dog bites sore ( old dogs is skilled at biting )

##### 3) FAITHFUL PEOPLE ARE DOGS

- As faithful as a dog ( a faithful person )
- Die dog for someone ( do everything as is told for somebody )
- Work like a dog ( work very hard )
- Come like a dog with a whistle ( a person who is ready at service at being called )

##### 4) HAPPY PEOPLE ARE DOGS

- A dog with two tails ( very happy )
- A gay dog ( a happy guy )
- The dog wags its tail ( a person who is delighted )

##### 5) MISERABLE PEOPLE ARE DOGS

- Dog(eared ( ragged and shabby )
- Dog's life ( hard and unpleasant life )
- Dog's dinner ( a poor job )
- Sick as a dog ( people who are seriously ill )
- Dog(poor ( extremely poor )
- Die like a dog ( to die in shameful circumstances )
- Treat sb. worse than a dog ( be critical or cruel to a person )

- A lame dog ( people who are in trouble )
- 6) BLUFF AND BLUSTER PEOPLE ARE DOGS
- Put on the dog ( to behave as if one is more important than one is )
  - Barking dogs seldom bite ( someone who makes threats all the time seldom carries out the threats )
  - Dogs bark before they bite ( people roar viciously before taking evil actions )
  - Great barkers are not biters ( a bragger seldom takes action )
  - Dogs that bark at distance bite not at hand ( swashbuckling people are not dangerous )
  - His bark is worse than his bite ( bullies generally prefer bluster to fighting )
  - Every dog is valiant at his own door ( every dog is strong and brave at his own home )
- 7) GREDDY PEOPLE ARE DOGS
- The dog that licks ashes trust not with meal ( gluttonous person cannot be trusted to attend to the money )
  - The dog(house is no place to keep a sausage ( a greedy person will squander what he possesses )
  - Dogs that put up many hares kill none ( people who want to do everything at once will fail to do it )
  - Hang a dog on a crab(tree, and he'll never have verjuice ( once being punished, greedy people would restrain themselves )
  - Dogs gnaw bones because they cannot swallow them ( greedy people would like to take everything that they have access to )
- 8) IMMORAL PEOPLE ARE DOGS
- The gardener's dog ( a person who stops others enjoying something he cannot use or does not want )
  - Dog that fetches will carry ( a talebearer will tell tales of you, as well as to you )
  - A dog that's bemired tries to bemire others ( people who engage in evildoing try to make others fall into the same way )
  - The mad dog bites his master ( a person returns evil for good )
- 9) STUBBORN PEOPLE ARE DOGS
- Dog returns to its vomit ( repeat bad and revolting conduct )
  - You cannot teach an old dog new tricks ( someone who is used to doing things in a certain way cannot change it )
  - An old dog cannot alter its way of barking ( old people find it difficult to learn to live in accordance with new ideas )
  - The scalded dog fears cold water ( once a dog is hurt by hot water, it fears even cold water )
- 10) INFERIOR PEOPLE ARE DOGS
- Under dog ( the loser in fight, the inferior in strength )
  - Dog's body ( a person with low social status )
  - Try it on the dog ( carry experiment on unimportant person to testify its feasibility )

The above idioms in English are all metaphorical expressions about dogs, which are created and used to describe humans vividly. It is in this sense that we say dogs' attributes and behaviors form a source domain, while human themselves, or more specifically, human characteristics, form the target domain. English people choose to understand the abstract and difficult concept of PEOPLE in terms of the concrete and easy concept DOG. This leads to the formation of a central conceptual metaphor PEOPLE ARE DOGS in their conceptual

system. This conceptual metaphor exists for such a long time and works so automatically that people rarely notice its existence. It has already been a kind of way of thinking in people's mind.

After a careful examination of data, ten sub-classes are summarized, four of which convey positive meanings while the other six express negative meanings. However, there is a great vast of difference between the amount of idioms in positive and negative meanings. The number of positive expressions is totally 18, with meaning related to outstanding, experienced, faithful and happy. While the number of negative expressions is 32 in total, with reflecting the seamy side of human nature, such as greedy and immoral.

#### 4.2 The Conceptual Metaphors in Chinese Dog Idioms

The same as English, Chinese have also made a careful observation of dog's characteristics and behaviors, and created many idioms to convey their own feelings vividly. Therefore, the concrete source domain DOG naturally maps onto abstract target domain PEOPLE, and forms the central conceptual metaphor PEOPLE ARE DOGS. After a careful analysis of the data, it is found that there are nine sub-classes underlying the central metaphor. The results are listed as follows.

##### 1) FAITHFUL PEOPLE ARE DOGS

狗吠非主 ( the dog barks at the man who is not his master )

嫁鸡随鸡嫁狗随狗 ( to follow the person who you marry )

狗不嫌家贫 ( dogs show no aversion to poor families )

好狗护三邻 ( a good dog protects neighborhoods )

##### 2) ILL-BEHAVED PEOPLE ARE DOGS

狗彘不食 ( person who is sordid )

狼心狗肺 ( beastly, completely without conscience )

狗彘不食其余 ( person who is sordid )

狗彘不若 ( a lewd man who holds no moral principles )

狼心狗行 ( mean and having no sense of shame )

行同狗彘 ( a person who is immoral )

猪卑狗险 ( a contemptible person )

椎埋屠狗 ( do evil things )

猪狗不如 ( the person is worse than pigs and dogs )

鸡肠狗肚 ( person who is vicious )

藏弓烹狗 ( heroes are killed after the ruler is in power )

牛黄狗宝 ( person who is goddamned )

人面狗心 ( a beast in human face )

蝇营狗苟 ( shamelessly seek personal gains )

狗走狐淫 ( person who is despicable and mean )

帮狗吃食 ( help bad people to do evil things )

狗咬狗 ( evildoers fight against evildoers )

##### 3) SNOBBISH PEOPLE ARE DOGS

淮王鸡狗 ( to obtain power because of fawning others )

狗眼看人 ( a dog looks down upon human beings---be damned snobbish )

狗仗人势 ( bullying others because of master's power and position )

狗仗官势 ( bullying others because of their power and position )

狗腿子 ( henchman )

狗颠屁股 ( a person who follows powerful man like a dog shaking his ass )

打人骂狗 ( bullying others because of their power and position )

#### 4) DEGENERATED PEOPLE ARE DOGS

狐朋狗友 ( disreputable gang, rabble )

狐群狗党 ( a bunch of petty politicians )

猪朋狗友 ( fair(weath friend )

狗马声色 ( sensuality )

人模狗样 ( pretending to be what one is not )

#### 5) PILFERED PEOPLE ARE DOGS

鸡鸣狗盗 ( small tricks )

鼠窃狗盗 ( petty theft )

偷鸡摸狗 ( do things stealthily )

偷鸡戏狗 ( just hang out without doing job )

斗鸡走狗 ( idle and boredom games )

#### 6) INFERIOR PEOPLE ARE DOGS

饭牛屠狗 ( people who does menial job )

泥猪疥狗 ( humble or indecent person )

狗肉不上桌 ( common or menial things do not appear in decent times )

癞狗扶不上墙 ( a mangy cur that won't let itself be helped over a wall )

#### 7) IMMORAL PEOPLE ARE DOGS

狗嘴吐不出象牙 ( garbage mouth )

狗血淋头 ( to bite one's head off )

狗咬吕洞宾 ( to mistake a good man for a bad one )

#### 8) ILLUSORY PEOPLE ARE DOGS

土龙刍狗 ( be unworthy of the name or the title )

挂羊头卖狗肉 ( after praising the wine they sell us vinegar )

卖狗悬羊 ( to deceive others )

#### 9) PANICKY PEOPLE ARE DOGS

狗急跳墙 ( a cornered person will do something desperate )

鸡飞狗跳 ( general turmoil )

Sorted by their meanings, there are 9 groups of dog idioms in Chinese, only one of which convey positive meaning while the other eight are all related to negative aspects. The quantity gap of idioms in positive and negative meanings is much more greater than that of English dog idioms. Only 4 pieces of idioms belong to bright side, and the other 46 all convey the dark side of human.

### 4.3 Similarities and Differences

The two languages all use the dog idioms from cognitive perspectives, that is, they understand and describe people in terms of dogs. To be specific, they use the same central conceptual metaphor, PEOPLE ARE DOGS. Another similarity between the metaphorical use of dog idioms in the two languages is that they are both used to convey positive meaning and negative meaning. Also, the two languages share some same concrete meanings, such as “faithful”, “immoral” and “inferior”.

Of course, there exists differences between the use of dog idioms in English and Chinese. The most significant one is the uneven distribution of positive metaphorical meaning and negative metaphorical meaning in two languages. As what have been mentioned before, there are 10 sub-classes found in English dog idioms while 9 sub-classes in Chinese. However, in English idioms, only 4 groups are used to convey positive meanings and the quantity of this is 18, only 36%. In Chinese idioms, this trend is even more obvious. Only one of the nine sub-classes conveys positive metaphorical meaning, and the number of this group is 4, only 8%.

Concrete meanings conveyed by the dog idioms in these two languages also have apparent differences. Meanings as “outstanding”, “experienced”, “happy”, “miserable”, “bluff and bluster”, “greedy” and “stubborn” are only found in English dog idioms while meanings as “ill-behaved”, “snobbish”, “degenerated”, “pilfered”, “illusory” and “panicky” only appear in Chinese metaphorical idioms.

### 5. Conclusion

In this paper, after the analysis of the conceptual metaphors of dog idioms in English and Chinese, the author has found some distinctive similarities and differences between them and then conclusions are listed as follows.

Firstly, dog idioms are used from the cognitive perspective to describe humans’ characteristics, that is to say, the two languages both take PEOPLE ARE DOGS as their conceptual metaphor. Secondly, there exists sub-classes underlying the central conceptual metaphor in both two languages, which convey positive and negative meanings. And the negative meaning is in majority. Thirdly, the distributions of positive metaphorical meaning and negative metaphorical meaning in two languages are uneven. The quantity ratio between positive and negative meaning is 18 to 32 in English dog idioms, and that in Chinese dog idioms is 4 to 46.

The present study may provide a new model for comparative study on English and Chinese dog idioms, which may inspire other authors in the future. Moreover, Chinese and English-speaking people may misunderstand each other because of these differences. This research can help them realize the significance of dog idioms in English and Chinese, which may be helpful to the second language learners in their acquisition of animal idioms in the target language.

However, there are still some difficulties not been tackled yet. Idioms chosen from two websites may not cover all the English and Chinese idioms. Only 100 idioms are selected as samples, which are not board enough. If conditions permit, more idioms can be collected as the whole data. Therefore, it is hoped that future researchers can examine more data to verify the conclusions of the present study.

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