

Metaphor in Hakka Proverbial Expressions: Specificity and Genericity of Cultural Constraints

Huei-ling Lai & Chiou-shing Yeh
National Chengchi University

Lakoff and Johnson (1989) point out that like poems, proverbs provide human beings with guidance to understand and conduct their lives. They propose that the GREAT CHAIN METAPHOR, a combination of the Nature of Things, the Great Chain, the GENERIC IS SPECIFIC metaphor and the Maxim of Quantity, allows us to employ the same conceptual apparatus as of ordinary language for successful interpretations of proverbs. Such a perspective proves effective in understanding Hakka proverbial expressions as the specific-level schemas evoked by an entire expression are construed globally as conveying the generic-level information about the nature of human beings (Lai 2008). In addition, the interpretation carries an effect of exhortation—a directive to behave rationally like human beings rather than instinctively like lower-order forms of being described by the expression.

While the conceptual power of poetic metaphor is quite well-taken in interpreting proverbial expressions, two crucial issues need to be more carefully examined. First, the linguistic elements composing the proverbs play an important role in shaping the specific-level schemas to begin with. With two parallel chunks, Hakka proverbial expressions, like adverbial constructions without overt linking elements, carry asymmetric functions, with one chunk indicating a cause, a condition, a concession, or a contrast for the other. Intriguingly, the metaphoric interpretations in the target domain mirror those in the source domain. The perception and conception of such asymmetric correlations need to be more rigorously explicated. Second, specific cultural practices triggered by the linguistic chunks also play an important role in drawing the generic-level information about the nature of human beings. In particular, to achieve the pragmatic-social function of exhortation, the specific cultural knowledge grounded in the proverbial expression needs to be more lucidly spelled out. For instance, in 一儕比得一儕山歌比得採茶 (*rhid4sa5bi2-ded4rhid4sa5, san1go1bi2-ded4cai2ca5*), the insignificant comparison between ‘folk-song’ and ‘tea-picking’ used as an analogy to the inadequate comparison between people manifests two unique features of Hakka culture. Similarly, in 正月松二月杉三月種竹條條生 (*zhang1ngied8ciung5ngi5ngied8cam7sam1ngied8zhung3zhug4tiau5-tiau5sang1*), the proper months to grow pines, firs, and bamboos are based on the lunar calendar. Furthermore, in 做無一湯匙愛食一碗公 (*zo3mo5rhid4tong1shi5oi3shid8rhid4von2gung1*) the quantified measure expressions are based on deeming rice as Hakka’s main dishes. A body of 80 classifier or measure word proverbial expressions taken from NCCU Hakka corpus is to be analyzed. A finer-grained investigation into the linguistic and cultural essence associated with such a Hakka genre not only provides a more solid ground for its successful interpretations but also strengthens the explanatory power of the conceptual metaphor theories.

References

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