

A Cognitive Study on Verbal and Gestural Metaphors in Chinese Finger-Guessing Drinking Game

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By adopting a fieldwork method, this paper gives detailed analyses of verbal and gestural metaphors in the finger-guessing drinking game. The game is a traditional ritual performed in Chinese festivals. The basic rules are almost the same in different regions in China as follows: the game is played by two participants each round, each calling any number from one to ten while showing their fingers with numbers either the same as or different from their callings. The gestures for numbers are always metaphorical. In order to make it more interesting, the participants do not just call the numbers alone, but will generally choose some metaphorical expressions of good wishes which carry the numbers. For example, the verbal expression of “eight horses” represents great speed. At the same time, the gesture for “eight” looks like a container in which the fortune is accumulated. The game is performed by two people each round. The one who calls the number equaling the summation of both participants’ shown fingers wins the game.

With a comparison between verbal and gestural metaphors in the game, this article concludes that most of the verbal metaphors are based on common human experience, while gestural metaphors are based on the principles of iconicity and cognitive economy. Both are in conformity with the fundamental hypothesis of conceptual metaphor theory first proposed by Lakoff & Johnson (1980). To interpret the metaphors in such context, it is indispensable to examine the cultural background in which they exist (Kövecses 2005). Culture exerts different influence on verbal metaphors and gestural metaphors in two ways: (1) Gestural metaphors have much greater differences than verbal ones in different areas. For example, there are about three different gestures of expressing eight, while only one in verbal expression. Two elucidations may be responsible for this: a) the authorities in different eras imposed more restrictions to unify the spoken and written language than the gesture; b) gesture is based on iconicity, which is a more subjective concept. (2) Different cultures have their own forms and meanings in gestures. For example, the gesture “three” is the same as “OK” in western culture but it stands for different meanings. The circled index and thumb finger, which resembles a coin, a typical metonymy for good fortune.

The paper takes the traditional conceptual metaphor theory as its basis, introduces cultural cognition into its study, which not only further verifies the theory, but also enhances its viability to a greater extent. As a social custom unique in China, the finger-guessing game provides an insight into how cognition, customs and the real world can be embodied.

Key words: metaphor; Finger-Guessing Drinking Game; cognition; culture; embodiment

References

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