

A Cognitive Interpretation of Chinese Neologism *Foxi*

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Abstract: More and more neologisms are created with the change of world situation and the development of economy. The creation of neologisms is the result of human cognition. The paper tries to interpret Chinese neologism *foxi* (Buddha-like) from three perspectives of cognitive linguistics: conceptual metaphor, conceptual blending and prototype theory. This cognitive interpretation will help language learners to have a better understanding of the cognitive mechanisms of neologisms.

1. Introduction

Neologisms have to be created to name new things and express new ideas with the development of society and the emergence of new technology. There are three major ways to the creation of neologisms: the coinage of new words, new meanings of old words, borrowings from other languages. *Foxi* is an example to illustrate the method of expressing new ideas with using old words. It first appeared in a Japanese magazine in 2014, which was used to refer to those men who were indulged in their interests or work and unwilling to spend time with the opposite sex. When translated into English, *foxi* is similar to Buddha-like, which means whatever will be, will be. In Dec. 2017, a popular WeChat article used the term *foxi qingnian* (Buddha-like youth) to describe China's post-1990s generation who keep a casual and calm mindset toward life and career under mounting social pressure. They do not mind if they have something or not and for them there is no need to pursue or win anything[1]. From then on, *foxi* becomes a prevalent word used by Chinese people. The popularity of *foxi* is the product of human cognition. This paper tends to interpret *foxi* from the perspective of cognitive linguistics aiming at providing language learners with a good appreciation of the cognitive mechanisms of creating neologisms.

2. Interpretation of *foxi* from the perspective of cognitive linguistics

Cognitive linguistics is a relatively modern branch of linguistics. It was founded by George Lakoff and Ronald Langacker. Lakoff coined the term "cognitive linguistics" in 1987 in his book "Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things"[2]. It is an interdisciplinary branch of linguistics, combining knowledge and research from both psychology and linguistics. It describes how language interacts with cognition, how language forms our thoughts, and the evolution of language parallels with the change in the common mindset across time[3]. The main concern of cognitive linguistics is conceptual metaphor, prototypicality, cognitive model, mental space, etc. It offers us a new angle to view meaning in terms of conceptualization in mental spaces.

2.1 From the perspective of conceptual metaphor

Metaphor is a tool of perception and conceptualization for human beings by which people can understand their surrounding world. Language and thought is virtually metaphorical [4]. Metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature [5]. In cognitive linguistics, conceptual metaphor refers to the understanding of one idea through systematic cognitive mapping from one domain of experience called source domain to another abstract domain of experience called target domain. The source domain and the target domain are two things that are basically different but have something in common in some significant way.

Foxi, a neologism to name a kind of attitude towards life in a metaphorical way, was created by combining the old words *fo* and *xi* together. When the literal meanings of words cannot meet the needs of new expressions, people turn to metaphors for help. Neologism *foxi* (Buddha-like) doesn't mean one is the follower of Buddhism, its metaphorical meaning points to a way of life that is guided by the basics of Buddhism. The Basics of *fo* (Buddhism) are as follows: life is suffering, which means we often have a vague feeling that things are not entirely satisfactory. We imagine that there is a "self" or "I" that exists independently and separately from all other phenomena. Our reaction to this misunderstanding about our separateness in the world leads to either attachment or hatred to the people or things around us. If attachment is a condition of finding life unsatisfactory, it is reasonable that non-attachment is a condition conducive to satisfaction with life. Buddha taught that it is possible not to suffer by relinquishing the delusion and ignorance that fuel the attachment and the hatred that make life so unsatisfying.

In the first-tier cities in China like Peking, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen today, the soaring housing price makes life tougher for the young people who live there. Young urban professionals are under great pressure in their pursuit of a better life. Most often they fail to get what they want. If they are overwhelmed by a feeling of frustration all day long, life to them is nothing but torture. Therefore they decide to have a I-don't-care attitude towards the ups and downs in their life. Somebody found a resemblance between Buddhist doctrine and the behavior of maintaining calm by giving up attachment and desire. Through this association, people build an organic connection between pre-existing concept (Buddhism doctrine) and new concept (an I-don't-care attitude toward life). Thus *foxi* came into being.

For the young people, being *foxi* (Buddha-like) involves adopting a peaceful state of mind and standing aloof from worldly gain and success. They do what they like or what they think is right without caring about how others think about or judge them. This mindset can offer relief and a release of negative emotions built up in the face of hardship. The neologism of *foxi* vividly depicts young people's mindset in the competing society.

2.2 From the perspective of conceptual blending

Conceptual blending theory is developed on the basis of mental space theory and conceptual metaphor theory. It reveals the cognitive process of people's thinking by constructing meaning in the multiple mental spaces. A mental space is a small conceptual packet assembled for purposes of thought and action. Conceptual blending, also called conceptual integration, a theory of cognition developed by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner[6], is a process of conceptual mapping and integration that pervades human thought. A conceptual integration network is a mental space network that contains one or more "blended mental spaces."

Conceptual blending is a complex mental process. The network is composed of four mental spaces: one generic space, two input spaces, and one blended space (see Fig. 1). Input space covers information from independent cognitive domains connected by cross-space mapping. Generic space accepts the semantic structure projection from the input spaces which are usually more abstract and shared by both the two inputs and producing its own emergent structure and mapping into each of the input spaces. Blended space is a new mental space which contains information projected from both input spaces, not only drawing on the input spaces, but also characterized by a new, emergent conceptual structure in which set-up differs from those of the two input spaces.

The compound *foxi* (Buddha-like) is a blend of elements from *fo* and *xi*, two input spaces in our mental space. In input 1, we have a frame of *fo*: the founder of Indian Buddhism. In China, it refers to religious figures, such as "Sakyamuni Buddha", "Amitabha Buddha", "Yaoshi Buddha" and so on; or something related to the Buddha, such as the Buddha statue, Buddhism, Buddhist sutra, etc. In input 2, *xi* means belonging to or relating to something. The generic space is set up, which contains the abstract structure that the two input spaces have: characteristics relating to Buddha. Through process of selection as a cognitive operation, *foxi* becomes a new blended space which contains information projected from two input spaces: a space structured by parts of the conceptual domain. In a neural binding, the two conceptual entities are seen as being the same entity.

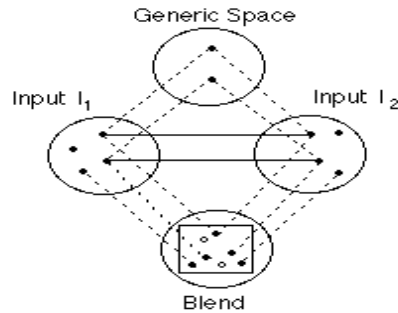


Fig. 1: a basic blending network (Fauconnier and Turner, 1998)

2.3 From the perspective of prototype theory

The prototype can be understood as a schematic representation of the conceptual core of a category. Prototype theory is a mode of graded categorization in cognitive science, where some members of a category are more central than others. It was put forward by Eleanor Rosch and her co-workers [7]. She described that prototype was the important way to categorizing. As Rosch says, human categorization is not the arbitrary product of historical accident. Prototype can be defined as best and salient examples of a category, clearest cases of category membership, most representative of things included in a class or central and typical members [8]. Prototypical categories are linked by a network of overlapping similarities, namely family resemblances instead of common properties. In general, their semantic structures take the form of a radial set of clustered and overlapping resemblances.

Some of English new words are characterized by family resemblances. *Foxi* is a prototype. Ever since it appeared, a series of words were derived from it such as *foxi qingnian* (Buddha-like youth), *foxi fensi* (Buddha-like fans), *foxi zhiyuan* (Buddha-like staff), *foxi lianren* (Buddha-like lover), *foxi fumu* (Buddha-like parents), *foxi gouwu* (Buddha-like shopping), etc.. Their meanings are as follows:

(1) *Foxi qingnian*: young people who pursue a peaceful and calm lifestyle in a fast-paced urban life. They have tried hard to do something. Realizing that not every try can lead to a good result, they just take it easy to be in a pacified mood.

(2) *Foxi fensi*: fans who do not play call for idols or quarrel with other fans for the sake of their beloved ones, and look at the ups and downs of the idolatry career calmly.

(3) *Foxi zhiyuan*: staffs who lose enthusiasm for work. They just take the workload for granted. They act like puppets manipulated by the boss. They don't mind if the boss praises them or criticizes them.

(4) *Foxi lianren*: lovers who do not treat the other half as the only true love in the world. They do not take their relationship seriously. If the two people feel comfortable together, they just date with each other. After a breakup, they usually say goodbye and walk away rather than cry or drink alone.

(5) *Foxi fumu*: parents who have low expectations of their children. They are not strict with their children. They give room for their children's self-development rather than force their children to do things they dislike.

(6) *Foxi gouwu*: consumers who shop online. If they can solve their own problems, they never seek advice from the seller. If they buy fake and shoddy products, they do not bother to return the products to the seller.

These expressions are compounds with *foxi* as a component member in the word formation. *Foxi* and other component are blended together to form a new concept. They share the central meaning as doing something in a Buddha-like way. These expressions form a family. Each family member is similar to each other both in their formation and their semantic meaning with the prototype *foxi*. *Foxi* is of vital importance in helping compose new words. Other expressions are formed which are associated with it. This illustrates that the production of a new word is a mental phenomenon through

which we organize our understanding of the world to form meaningful concept and conceptual structure with the help of old words.

3. Summary

From the above analysis of the formation of *foxi*, we see there is a cognitive motivation for the construction process of English neologisms. The obtainment of new meanings is based on human beings' cognition of the world and their life-long experiences. Generally speaking, the relationship between the form and the word is arbitrary and conventional, but for those neologisms formed from the old words, there do exist some motivations like morphological motivation and semantic motivation. In the ever-changing world, rapid progress in science and technology and radical changes in human life style and thinking pattern stimulate human beings to create quite a lot of new words for daily communication. The objective world is reflected in people's mind to form sensation, perception and representation. And then they are generalized and abstracted during the process of categorization or conceptualization to form new concepts. During this process, based on the prototype theory and world knowledge, etc., people construct new concepts by means of metaphor, conceptual blending, which, as important cognitive mechanisms, have a great significance in the construction of neologisms.

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