

# English Idioms Interpretation in Perspective of Cognitive Semantics

HUO Ying, SONG Yan  
Northeastern University, Shenyang, China

Cognitive semantics expounds English idioms from a cognitive perspective, which is different from traditional semantics. It puts forward the rationale of idioms rather than arbitrary language forms, focusing on the important role of metaphors in idiom comprehension. Cognitive semantics helps learners to better understand, memorize, and use English idioms.

*Keywords:* cognition, cognitive semantics, English idioms, metaphors, meaning

## Introduction

In English language learning, because the meaning of idioms can not be generally inferred from the individual vocabulary these idioms have, the idiom acquisition has always been the key difficulty. With the rise and development of cognitive semantics, more and more English linguists are exploring cognitive methods, which are very different from traditional semantics, to promote the acquisition of English idioms, and solve this difficult problem in second language learning. Cognitive semantics was born in the early 1980s, which is a linguistic school formed on the basis of reflection on the previous semantic theory (Zhang, 2004, p. 73). Originated in the 20th century from the philosophy of experience, cognitive semantics proposed that English idioms are conceptual and systemic products, closely related to human cognition. The production of idioms is generally rational, having intimate relation with politics, history, folk customs, geoculture, and religious beliefs.

## English Idioms Interpretation via Cognitive Semantics

### Difficulties in Acquiring English Idioms

English idioms are rationally motivated and can be divided into rational and irrational idioms. Rational idiom builds its meaning on the the various parts that make up the idiom; on the contrary, irrational idiom can not be inferred and understood simply from words of the idiom. This difference is the key point and difficulty in English idioms learning.

Irrational idioms have semantic integrity, which means their meanings are not the combination of meanings of the words that make up the idioms. For example, the meaning of “blow one’s stack” is not a combination of the meaning of “blow”, “one’s”, and “stack”. At the same time, English idioms are structurally stable, which means they have tight structure. Once this structure is formed, it will be gradually recognized by people and frequently used in daily life. It will be integrated into the national culture as time goes. For example:

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HUO Ying, MSc, lecturer, Foreign Studies College, Northeastern University, Shenyang, China.  
SONG Yan, MSc, lecturer, Foreign Studies College, Northeastern University, Shenyang, China.

the idiom “keep at arm’s length” will not change its meaning with the change of time, space, and objects in use, and its meaning and usage will remain the same.

### **Use Cognitive Semantics to Interpret English Idiom and Promote Its Acquisition**

**The Novelty of Cognitive Semantics.** Traditional semantics simply perceives English idiom as simple linguistic phenomenon. It is believed that rational thinking is the brain’s operation of abstract symbols, which acquire meaning through the connection with the real world. This real world exists objectively and is independent of the human brain’s cognition (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 73).

First of all, unlike traditional semantic views, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and other cognitive linguists focused more on empirical perception. Human beings first knew the objective world through real perception. Special cognitive mechanisms give humans the ability to connect language with the outside world, making the entity into a generally accepted abstract concept, and then endowing a specific meaning. Secondly, psychological factors are also crucial, so cognitive semantics adopts the encyclopedic semantic analysis. Different semantics of the same expression is affected by the level of encyclopedic knowledge possessed by language users. For different combinations of language recipients, different semantic results will be obtained. Therefore, semantics is related to users’ cultural knowledge. Thirdly, the image-schema is the basic structure of human cognition. This image exists before the concept in the human brain. Due to the external force acting on the human brain, it evolves into different symbols and abstracts and finally functions in daily activities in a cognitive manner. Therefore, perception, psychology, and iconicity determine the novelty of cognitive semantics. In addition, the key point that distinguishes it from traditional semantics is the view of metaphor. Lakoff (1987) proposed an idealized cognitive model (ICM for short), which includes a metaphorical model to explain non-objective phenomena. Metaphor, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) explained in *The Metaphor on Which We Live*, is a hyperlinguistic phenomenon, a poetic imagination, but not a general linguistic phenomenon (Lu, 2004). Through metaphor people can map a concrete concept to another abstract concept, so that cognition can be realized. The formation of metaphor, or metaphORIZATION, is a structural mapping between two conceptual domains and cognitive domain, from the source domain to the target domain (Zhong, 2004, p. 470).

### **Interpretation of English Idioms From the Perspective of Cognitive Semantics**

**Idioms are conceptual products in cognitive semantics.** Traditional semantics negates the relationship between idioms and human conceptual systems, and considers idioms to be an isolated linguistic phenomenon. Cognitive semantics makes up for this deficiency, emphasizing that the production of meaning is the human brain’s perception of things under certain conditions. This experience is based on the encyclopedic knowledge and cultural level of the user or recipient, and is embodied in the conceptual system of human brain. When humans perceive and understand the world, they use mental activities to conceptualize and encode the external reality they experience (Zhao, 2003, p. 488). Cognitive semantics helps learners understand that idioms are conceptual products, find connections between idioms, and facilitate their systematic learning. Take “fire” idioms as an example. In human conceptual system, fire is the light emitted by the burning objects. The expression “to play with fire” reflects the action of playing with fire. The original meaning of the idiom “set on fire” is to make objects burn. This “fire” has the same meaning as the previous expression. Therefore, the concept of the word “fire” is related to flame, and “fire” idioms are all related to the phenomenon of flame.

**Idioms are the product of human cognition in cognitive semantics.** Cognitive semantics believes that all truths are products of cognition, and there is no objective truth independent of cognition. The metaphorical

view illustrates the rational development of phenomena, meaning, and language form, explains the relationship between subjective experience and objective conditions, and highlights the unique cognitive ability of human beings. Traditional semantics believes that the connection between language form and language meaning is arbitrary, but cognitive semantics refutes this view. When people understand the world, they must first establish meaning, because meaning is the subject's recognition and comprehension of the relationship between man and the world and the result of the human body's rational cognition (Lan, 1999, p. 487). The correspondence between symbols and linguistic meaning depends on subjective cognition, and the interaction of image, and conceptual system. Idioms are derived from people's understanding of the objective world. Again take "fire" idioms as an example. Some idioms do not contain the word "fire". But in the process of cognition, human beings find that these idioms are more or less related to fire, for example, "to spark off" showing the instant of ignition, and "to snuff off" meaning the moment when the fire goes out. These two idioms have nothing to do with fire in form, but are related to "fire" in cognitive field. Through thinking and unremitting exploration, human beings pursue hidden connections between things, and give meaning to language through mental activity and experience perception.

**Idioms are rational in cognitive semantics.** The ration of idioms means that each component's meaning of the idiom is related to the meaning of the idiom itself. Some components of the idiom can be modified. In "make a through break", break can be modified by "through". So the formation of idiom is rational, not arbitrary.

**Idioms are considered metaphorical in cognitive semantics.** Most of irrational idioms in English are from metaphor, a commonly used rhetorical method, using well-known things or phenomena to explain things or phenomena unfamiliar to people, or using tangible and concrete things to describe and depict intangible abstract things. Lakoff (1987) once said that the human cognitive system itself is a metaphorical system (Lakoff, 1987, p. 173). Specifically, the irrational English idiom is "dead metaphor" defined by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), which is a conventional structure and expression that no longer requires conscious reasoning. Language learners can use metaphors to learn English idioms faster and easier through semantic cognitive approaches.

Since idioms have special meanings, especially for irrational ones, cognitive semantics believes that people need to use a certain cognitive mechanism to understand their meaning and use them flexibly. Such cognitive mechanisms include metaphors. The metaphor concept proposed by Lakoff (1987) includes source and target domains. People often refer to a known, objectively existing, and specific source domain to explain or reflect another unfamiliar abstract target domain, and to realize the interrelated cognition between different conceptual phenomena, so that idioms are metaphorical. Lan (1999) believes that the operation of the metaphorical concept system is automatic, unconscious, and frequent, and is not easy to be noticed. Some metaphoric concepts have a broad universality, and others show more cultural characteristics. We still use "fire" idioms as an example to illustrate this feature. The extended meaning of idiom "to play with fire" is to take unnecessary risks. The source domain of "fire" is used to interpret the target domain of "danger", conveying the deep metaphorical concept that it is dangerous like fire. The idiom "take fire" means that something makes people interested, in which the physical domain of "fire" is used to interpret the abstract domain of "interest". This metaphor could be that interest is taking fire. Metaphor is like a bridge, connecting two conceptual domains that are isolated but similar in nature, projecting the target domain through the source domain to realize cognition.

### Conclusion

Idiom teaching is an important part of English learning, and cognitive semantics provides a new perspective for this. Through the cognitive mechanism, it is easier to understand the formation of idiom, and the relationship between its components and meaning, in order to promote the understanding of idioms. Especially based on metaphorical characteristics, the learning of English idioms should take cultural comprehension as the starting point. Only by grasping the evolution law of idiom can learners find the best idiom learning methods to avoid mechanical memory.

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