

COMPARATIVE ERROR ANALYSIS OF UKRAINIAN STUDENTS USING CHINESE IDIOMS

This article conducts a comparative analysis of both the content and structure of idioms in Chinese and Ukrainian languages in order to facilitate the study of Chinese idioms for international students. On that basis, the types of errors in practical uses, which the Ukrainian students may make in terms of the written and spelling forms, idiom structure, in semantical and grammatical understandings, are analyzed and summarized.

Keywords: Chinese, Ukrainian, idioms, errors, international students.

1. Introduction

Until very recently, the comparison of idiomatic phraseology in the Chinese and Ukrainian languages has not received significant linguistic attention. Consequently, no proper analysis of the Chinese and Ukrainian idioms has been developed and made available to the users of these languages so far. This area is considered to be a new field of research, and the material discussed in this research will help foreign students, especially Ukrainian ones to understand the Chinese idioms better, as well as improve their language skills. We believe that availability of such information will contribute to the fostering of the students' profound understanding of the differences and similarities between these complex and vibrant languages.

2. Comparative Characteristics of Chinese and Ukrainian Idioms

The origins and structure of idioms are closely associated with the geographic locations where they originated from. They are tightly linked with local traditions, customs, history, and culture of that region. Both languages are very rich in idiomatic materials: in Ukrainian idiom vocabulary by Udovychenko G. there are more than 2200 idioms, while there are thousands of Chinese idioms. In our research, we will start to analyze the structure and the plot of the idioms in each language.

2.1 Structural Comparison of Chinese and Ukrainian Idioms

To improve our understanding of the meaning of idioms, let's look at the structural analysis of both the language itself and its idioms. As we know, a simple picture constitutes the basis of the Chinese language. This picture forms the Chinese character, the Chinese character further forms the word, and a collection of words forms the sentence [1, 5]. One Chinese idiom can denote one sentence, or, frequently, it can contain a whole story. This is the reason that the structure of Chinese idioms is characterized with some degree of variety. The Chinese idioms usually consist of four Chinese characters. There are seven common structural types of Chinese idioms. They are grouped as follows:

1) ABCD: 一箭双雕 (yi jian shuang diao, hit two hawks with one arrow) = kill two birds with one stone; 三言两语 (san yan liang yu, in two words or three) = in a few words; 祸不单行 (huo bu dan xing, troubles never come singly) = misfortunes never come alone; 隔墙有耳 (ge qiang you er, walls have ears) = Pitchers have ears, beware of eavesdroppers.

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2) AABB: 战战兢兢 (zhan zhan jing jing, run scared) = tread on eggs, be scared; 家家户户 (jia jia hu hu, each and every family) = in every home; 期期艾艾 (qi qi ai ai) = stammer; 马马虎虎 (ma ma hu hu) = careless, just so-so.

3) ABAB: 悠哉悠哉 (you zai you zai, leisurely) = free from restraint; 彼此彼此 (bi ci bi ci, each other, one another) = be the same, so do you.

4) AABC: 喋喋不休 (die die bu xiu, talk endlessly) = chatter without stop, gabble on and on; 寥寥无几 (liao liao wu ji, very few left, scanty) = can be counted on the fingers of one's hand.

5) ABCC: 喜气洋洋 (xi qi yang yang, full of joy) = walk on air; 想入非非 (xiang ru fei fei, have a maggot in one's head) = have a head full of bees; 得意洋洋 (de yi yang yang, walk on air) = be on the high ropes.

6) ABAC: 一心一意 (yi xin yi yi, undivided attention) = heart and soul; 不伦不类 (bu lun bu lei, nondescript) = neither fish nor fowl; 半信半疑 (ban xin ban yi, half in doubt) = uncertain.

7) ABCB: 人云亦云 (ren yun yi yun, say what others say) = follow the herd; 种瓜得瓜 (zhong gua de gua, reap what we sow) = as a man sows, so he shall reap; 拔帜易帜 (ba zhi yi zhi, take off someone's banner) = take someone's place, replace someone.

From the above examples, we can see that the first type (ABCD) consists of four different characters, types 2 (AABB) and 3 (ABAB) consist of two characters, types 4 (AABC), 5 (ABCC), 6 (ABAC) and 7 (ABCB) consist of three different characters, respectively, which form different structures based on the location of these characters in the construction.

In contrast, due to the Ukrainian language specifics, there is no limitation in the number of words or the structure of the idiom constructions in this language. That is the primary reason that the structure of Ukrainian idioms significantly diverse. The following examples demonstrate the vivid diversity of the Ukrainian idioms [2; 3].

• AA: *Дуб дубом* (oak tree like an oak tree) = stupid. *Дуб* and *дубом* (Oak tree) are two variants of a noun.

• AB: *Сліпий дощ* (blind rain) = the rain that falls when the sun is not covered with clouds, also mushroom or fruitful rain. *Сліпий* (blind) is an adjective, and *дощ* (rain) is a noun; *Чути носом* (to hear with own one's nose) = to have a feeling of something happening, usually a bad feeling. *Чути* (to hear) is a verb, and *носом* (nose) is a noun.

• ABA: *Зуб за зуб* (tooth for a tooth). This is a calque of Hebrew in reference to Exodus 21:23-25: "And if any mischief follow, then thou shalt give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe" (King James Version)¹. This idiom means that an injury caused to one person will be compensated with inflicting of an identical injury to the offender. *Зуб*(tooth) is a noun, and *за* (for) is a preposition.

• ABC: *Одного поля ягода* (berry of the same field) = kindred spirits or of the same kidney, i.e. people of the same "family", behavior or caliber. *Одного* (one) is a numeral, *поля* (field) is a noun, and *ягода* (berry) is a noun; *Одну пісню співати* (one song to sing, to sing the same song) = to do / say the same thing, to have the same thoughts. *Одну* (one) is a numeral, *пісню* (song) is a noun, and *співати* (sing) is a verb.

• ABCD: *Одна нога тут, друга там* (one leg is here, another is there) = very fast in actions. *Одна* (one) is a number, *нога* (leg) is a noun, *тут* (here) and *там* (there) are adverbs, and *друга* (another) is an adjective.

- АВАС: *Hi риба, ni м'ясо* (neither fish nor meat) = to be not good in doing something or represent nothing special. *Hi...ni...* (neither... nor...) is a conjunction, *риба* (fish) and *м'ясо* (meat) are nouns.

The above examples demonstrate that Ukrainian idioms do not have a steady sentence structure, but rather, the structure is very flexible. Most of Ukrainian idioms consist of two words and these words are usually represented by verbs or nouns. In addition to disparities, we can notice a lot of similarities, when comparing the Ukrainian and Chinese idioms. Specifically, certain idioms have the same structure as well as the same meaning in both languages, e.g., the АВАС pattern: Ukrainian *Hi шість, ni п'ять* (neither six nor five) vs. Chinese 不三不四 (bu san bu si, neither three nor four), both meaning dubious or nondescript; Ukrainian *Ділити і радість і горе* (to share happiness and sadness) vs. Chinese 同甘共苦 (tong gan gong ku).

2.2 Content Comparison of Chinese and Ukrainian Idioms

An idiom is an expression consisting of a combination of words that has a figurative meaning. The figurative meaning is comprehended in regard to a common use of the expression that is separated from the literal meaning or definition of the words of which it is made. Idioms are numerous and they occur frequently in all languages. An idiom demonstrates a distinctive part of the life of local people in the particular region. Chinese and Ukrainian idioms have significant differences in structure as well as in content. The content differences include general thought process, meaning, life style, customs, traditions, historical background, culture, beliefs and religion.

Idioms usually depict the significant historical events and relics of a certain period of time [4, 61]. Chinese idioms of this type are very rich in content, e.g.:

三顧茅廬 (san gu mao lu, make three calls at the thatched cottage of Zhuge Liang) = to invite somebody talented repeatedly for an important post; 濫竽充數 (lan yu chong shu, pass oneself off as one of the players in an ensemble, being there just to make up the team) = hold a post without qualifications or act as a stopgap; 掩耳盜鈴 (yan er dao ling, the cat shuts its eyes when stealing cream) = deceive oneself as in ostrich policy.

Idioms in the Ukrainian language are mostly based on cultural, everyday life and traditions, but not so much on historical facts. However, certain idioms offer historic references as well, such as “*пропав, як Швед під Полтавою*” meaning literally “disappeared as a Swedish warrior near Poltava (a city in Ukraine).” This idiom refers to the historical battle between the Swedish and Russian armies in 1709, during the Northern War of 1700 – 1721. A Swedish army attempted to attack the city of Poltava, but was defeated and quickly left their positions. This Ukrainian idiom has an equivalent in Chinese, 一敗塗地 (yi bai tu di, go to pigs and whistles), meaning “fail completely, with nothing left.”

The differences in geographic locality, continent, climate, fauna and flora etc., manifest themselves in the variations of the idiom meanings. For instance, in Chinese language there are a lot of idioms referring to bamboo. Some examples include 胸有成竹 (xiong you cheng zhu, have a well-painted bamboo in one's mind) = have a well thought-out plan or have a card up one's sleeve; 雨后春笋 (yu hou chun sun, (like) bamboo shoots (springing up) after a spring rain) = like mushrooms after rain. In ancient China, bamboo played a vital role in daily life. On the contrary, continental Europe including Ukraine is not known to have any native species of bamboo. Consequently, no Ukrainian idioms refer to this plant. Because Ukraine is rich in forests, many local idioms are associated with wood. Take, for example, *чим далше в ліс*,

тим більше дров (the farther you go in the forest, the more wood you will find) means the more you learn, the more ahead to be learned; *хто в ліс, хто по дрова* (someone goes to the forest, someone goes to pick up wood) means everybody has his or her own interests and goals.

Ukrainian idioms are widely used in spoken language, and that's why the word order is very flexible. A number of Ukrainian idioms can be translated with one word, for example: *як кіт наплакав* = *мало*, meaning *as cat's tears = little*; *крутиться як білка в колесі* = *зайнятий*, *to spin like a squirrel in the wheel = busy*; and *вітер у кишенях свистить* = *бідний*, means *the wind in the pocket whistling = poor*.

Religion played an important role in the history and development of each nation. Ukraine is a Christian country, whereas Taoism and Buddhism have greatly affected the Chinese culture. Certainly, the religion and beliefs had influenced the development of idioms to a great extent. In Ukraine, the religious vocabulary, idioms, proverbs and other sayings that are linked to religion and beliefs are called "Біблеїзми" (Bible terminology / expressions).

The following are some of the Ukrainian Bible expressions: before mentioned *Зуб за зуб* (tooth for a tooth); *альфа і омега* (alpha and omega, the beginning and the end); *берегти, як зіницю ока* (to protect as an eye); *сіть землі* (the salt of the Earth) etc. Buddhism appeared in China at the end of Xi Han Dynasty (East Han), and the following idioms were created: 半路出家 (ban lu chu jia, become a monk and run late in life) = switch to a job one was not trained for; 一面之緣 (yi mian zhi yuan, happen to have met somebody once) = the pleasure of having met once; 自作自受 (zi zuo zi shou, stew in one's own juice) = suffer from one's own actions.

3. Types of Errors

Due to the differences between the Chinese and Ukrainian culture and the profound meaning of the idioms in both languages, it is difficult for the foreign students to completely understand the meaning of these idioms, and to learn how to use them correctly. Students from around the world are very likely to make mistakes and produce biased conception or confusion in using Chinese idioms. The following are the main types of errors international students have produced [5, 208].

3.1 Writing and Spelling Errors

Generally, the inner morpheme of the Chinese idioms cannot be replaced or shifted, especially in writing:

(1) 无论我遇到什么问题，她总会*心甘情愿（心甘情愿）地来帮我。

No matter what kind of problem I meet, she always helps me without any hesitation.

心甘情愿 (xin gan qing yuan, heart and mind always say yes, be most willing to...) is wrongly written as *心甘情愿.

(2) 晓峰是一个玩世不恭的家伙，而他弟弟却*知书达里（知书达礼）。

Xiao Feng is a playboy, but his brother is very polite.

知书达礼 (zhi shu da li, highly cultured and steeped in propriety, educated and reasonable) is misspelled as *知书达里.

There are some spelling errors in the above Chinese idioms which may be caused by two reasons: first, the students might be confused with the words that are spelled similarly as in the first example; second, the homonyms can also puzzle the students as in the second example.

¹ See definition at http://en.wiktionary.org/w/index.php?title=%D7%A2%D7%99%D7%9F_%D7%AA%D7%97%D7%AA_%D7%A2%D7%99%D7%9F&action=edit&redlink=1

3.2 Structural Errors

As we discussed above, the majority of the Chinese idioms are composed of four characters; no more characters can be added, or it may destroy the structure.

(3) 不管你怎么说他, 他还是*痛不改前非(不痛改前非)。

No matter what you are thinking about him, he won't change.

痛改前非 (tong gai qian fei, repent thoroughly of one's misdeeds or make a clean break with one's past errors) can by no means be negated with an adverb 不 (bu, no or not) within the structure itself. But rather, it can have the negative adverb preceding it.

(4) 他总是*小心而翼翼(小心翼翼)地做事。

He's always cautious of doing things.

*小心而翼翼 is mistaken for 小心翼翼 (xiao xin yi yi, with great care or be very scrupulous). 而 (er, and) could not be inserted into the idiom.

The examples above show the errors caused by breaking the structure of the idioms. Stable structure is a notable characteristic of the Chinese idioms. In general, the structural composition and format of the Chinese idioms are fixed. They cannot be changed or replaced. Therefore, Ukrainian students should pay particular attention to this fact to avoid incorrect construction of the idioms.

1.3 Semantic Understanding Errors

The Chinese idioms used as fixed phrases can be regarded as one word in function. The idiom is used correctly only when the person clearly understands the entire meaning of the idiom. However, due to the intricate meaning of the Chinese idioms, it is difficult to understand and sometimes students may produce a totally different context. Consequently, Ukrainian and other foreign students should be aware and should carefully examine the meaning of Chinese idioms, to avoid making the following semantic comprehension errors.

3.3.1 Rational Semantic Understanding Errors

The complete comprehension of the Chinese idioms is derived from the aspects of original meaning, extended meaning and figurative meaning. The Chinese idioms have formed a particular individualized meaning based on the history and origins of each idiom. This means that specific inferences have been added to the original meaning. However, this inference is also what makes it an idiom. Without the inference, it can only be regarded as the ordinary phrase. Therefore, even when the original meaning is to be uttered, an idiom should not be interpreted just literally.

As a rule, the Chinese idioms can be neither interpreted nor defined literally (one can neither understand, nor explain the idioms literally). However, Ukrainian students tend to make such mistakes in the aspect of rational semantic understanding of the Chinese idioms. Usually, they attempt to simplify an idiom's interpretation without real understanding of the context. This results in a deviation from the actual semantics, or even in a distorted meaning, based on an understanding of part of the morphemes composing the idiom.

(5) 我们今天去帮同学搬家, 忙得*七上八下(热火朝天)。

Today we went to help our classmate to relocate his dormitory, and we were excitedly busy. 热火朝天 (re huo chao tian, be in full swing or buzzing (bustling) with activity) is used to depict the busy activities. But 七上八下 (qi shang ba xia, be agitated or very anxious) can only describe inner feelings.

(6) 去年的洪水冲来了*宽宏大量(不计其数)的泥土。

Last year's flood brought much mud.

不计其数 (bu ji qi shu, uncountable or incalculable) is an adjective meaning numerous, and can not be replaced with 宽宏大量 (kuan hong da liang, magnanimous or greatly tolerant) which denotes a person's gentle and noble character.

In the fifth example, the idiom “seven up eight down” (七上八下) means an upset state of mind. A literal interpretation as “up and down” will not make sense in its sentential context.

In the sixth example, the idiom “generous-minded” (宽宏大量) describes a magnanimous characteristic. The foreign students should refrain from translating “kindness” as “a large number” and thus wrongly interpreting the idiom as “a lot of”.

3.3.2 Denotative Semantic Understanding Errors

A long history constitutes the source of the Chinese idioms, and these idioms therefore represent a strong national consciousness orientation. Consequently, they have distinct considerations and nuances in their core. Due to the differences in the cultural background, the foreigners may fail to comprehend these idioms, let alone using them appropriately. Clarifications and explanations are to be sought if necessary.

(7) 我们做事一定要*求全责备 (尽善尽美)。

Whatever we do, we should do it perfectly.

The appreciative 尽善尽美 (jin shan jin mei, reach the extent of perfection) is misused as the derogatory 求全责备 (qiu quan ze bei, rigorously demand perfection from or even find fault with someone).

Pursue perfection (尽善尽美) represents a strict requirement for a perfection or high quality in everything. The idiom 求全责备, however, has some derogatory meaning and is often used to criticize demanding behaviors. Therefore, they are subtly different in their denotative senses.

3.4 Syntactical Application Errors

According to the role idioms play in a sentence, they can be divided into substantive idioms and predicative idioms. Generally speaking, the substantive idioms usually act as the subject, object and sometimes attribute. As to the predicative idioms, they are made up of verb and adjective idioms. Therefore they usually act as predicate, adverbial modifier, complement or attribute.

(8) 老师教导我们在生活中遇到不明白的事情时, 去找比我们年长的人, 他们*老马识途 (见多识广), 他们会有答案。

The teacher instructs us when we have some problems that are hard to solve, we have to consult somebody experienced, who will help us out.

见多识广 (jian duo shi guang, have great experience) is an appropriate option when describing people with insight to solutions. While “old horse knows the way” (老马识途) refers to those who are aged and experienced, and can lead people forward. The idiom 老马识途 is of subject-predicate structure and shows a specified situation. Note that in the example #8, when misunderstood, this idiom refers to an experienced person, which equals to “the horse that knows the way” and changes the connotation completely. In the wrongly used example, 他们 (they) and 老马 (old horse) both act as subjects of the sentence, thus breaking the grammatical rule.

(9) 村长对我们村的事*家喻户晓 (如数家珍), 但是前几天去世了。

The village head knew everything about our village, but he died a few days ago.

如数家珍 (ru shu jia zhen, as if enumerating one's family valuables) usually describes someone who is “very familiar with one's subject” or “knows everything within his scope.” 家

喻户晓 (jia yu hu xiao, every family knows that) means a specific person or an event that is well known by the masses, with the syntactic subject (person or thing) omitted. This idiom is of subject-predicate structure and can be interpreted in alignment with its component words. It is important to remember one of the attributes of the sentence in the Chinese language, namely, the subject can act as a performer as well as an object. The subject in this idiom 如数家珍 is a performer, and thus fits into the example with 村长 (cun zhang, village head) as the subject / performer.

If not explained clearly in the dictionary, the syntactic subject might be used, by some students, as the logical object (agent) as shown in the example #9 (*村长家喻户晓, The village head was well known). However, the real meaning is “the village head knew very well”. Some idioms are of verb structure when used to describe certain situation. The misunderstanding of this construction as an adjective structure may cause this type of error. With the lack of instruction, the students may add some adverbs of degree when using idioms.

(10) 我叔叔帮我雕刻的木马*非常栩栩如生。

The wooden horse my uncle made for me looks vividly alive.

栩栩如生 (xu xu ru sheng, true to life or as vivid as life) itself contains the degree constituent of “very”. It is used to describe the vividness and verisimilitude of images. Additionally, this idiom is of verb structure, which describes the highest level of a work of art. However, as demonstrated further in the example #10, an adverb of degree, “very” (非常), should not be placed in front of the idiom.

4. Application and Managing Mistakes

Besides the above-mentioned errors committed in real life, students who learn Chinese as their foreign language also have a chance of misinterpreting the intrinsic meaning of idioms, which we call application and managing mistakes.

(11) 在武汉你可以和朋友*同舟共济 (一起坐船) 欣赏美景。

You can enjoy the nice view with friends by boat / ship over the Yangtze River in Wuhan.

同舟共济 (tong zhou gong ji, to sail in one boat to bridge difficulties), in modern Chinese, is used only to mean “fighting against hardships together”. In other words, as of the idiom, we use only the sense of 共济 (gong ji, fight together) but reject the meaning of 同舟 (tong zhou, in the same boat).

In the example #11, the profound meaning of the idiom has not been presented in the right way. It only uses the literal meaning of the idiom: “in the same boat”. Having removed the emphasis of necessity to help each other when faced the difficulty, the students’ understanding of the idiom will focus mostly on the meaning of taking boat and having fun, which is incorrect. There will not be any awareness of the potential danger either, and the context of the idiom is literally lost in the translation.

(12) 作为新来的领导, 责任很多, 所以他常常*亡羊补牢 (一丝不苟)。

As a new leader, he has to be responsible for everything, so he is very conscientious in doing his work.

Repair the sheepfold after the sheep is missing (亡羊补牢, wang yang bu lao) means it will be effective if mistakes are timely rectified. In this example, the focus is on a lot of responsibilities, not on a lot of problems (mistakes). In this sense, the idiom interpretation of 亡羊补牢 does not agree with the context. Instead, 一丝不苟 (yi si bu gou, be scrupulous about every detail) is the right choice.

The types of errors discussed above are very common for the students studying Chinese around the world, including the Ukrainians. Awareness of these types of errors and how to

address them will help the students succeed in understanding the vibrant Chinese language, and using the Chinese idioms correctly.

5. Conclusion

After precise idiom research and comparison in Ukrainian and Chinese, and through analysis of the errors made by foreign students while learning Chinese, we can see the extensive and profound cultural background of Chinese idioms, the rich content of each idiom, and especially the difficulties of using them. All these will motivate the foreign students to take more interest in studying Chinese, especially idioms. It is believed that this article will help the lovers of Chinese language, especially Ukrainian students interested in Chinese idioms, to better understand the Chinese language, and to contribute their share to the development of educational and cultural relationships between the two countries.

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Стаття надійшла до редакції 14.08.14

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В даній статті розглядаються, аналізуються і підводяться підсумки щодо вживання ідіом в письмовій і усній формах, ідіоматичних структурах, семантичному і граматичному розуміннях. Сподіваюсь, ця стаття стане в нагоді всім, хто вибрав вивчення такої непростой, але в той же час такої загадкової і милозвучної мови, як китайська.

Ключові слова: китайська і українська мови, ідіоми, помилки, іноземні студенти.

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В данной статье рассматриваются, анализируются и подводятся итоги по употреблению идиом в письменной и устной формах, идиоматических структурах, семантическом и грамматическом смыслах. Надеюсь, эта статья поможет всем, кто выбрал изучение такого непростого, но в то же время такого загадочного языка, как китайский.

Ключевые слова: китайский, украинский, идиомы, ошибки, иностранные студенты.