

Conceptual Metaphor and The Literal–Real Meaning Relationship in Chinese Habitual Expressions: A Corpus-Based Study

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Abstract: This paper investigates the semantic relationship between literal and real meaning in Chinese habitual expressions (xiguanyongyu 习惯用语) from a cognitive-semantic perspective. Drawing on conceptual metaphor theory, the study demonstrates that the transition from literal to real meaning is not arbitrary but systematically motivated by embodied human experience. Using authentic dialogue extracted from a contemporary Chinese television series as corpus data, the article analyzes three representative expressions — 不冷不热 (bù lěng bù rè), 脸往哪儿搁 (liǎn wǎng nǎr gē), and 你看你 (nǐ kàn nǐ) — showing how the temperature → attitude, face → reputation, and perception → evaluation mappings underlie their semantic extension. The study further shows that once conventionalized, the core (rational) meaning and the additional (emotive-pragmatic) meaning of such units are processed jointly, as an integrated semantic complex, rather than sequentially. The findings contribute to cognitive phraseology and offer practical implications for Chinese-as-a-foreign-language pedagogy and translation.

Keywords: Xiguanyongyu, Chinese habitual expressions, conceptual metaphor, literal meaning, real meaning, cognitive semantics, corpus linguistics, idiomaticity.

Introduction: Habitual expressions (xiguanyongyu 习惯用语) constitute a productive yet comparatively under-researched layer of Chinese phraseology, distinct from the more extensively studied chengyu and guanyongyu categories. A central theoretical question in the study of such units concerns the relationship between their literal, compositional meaning and the conventionalized, non-compositional meaning they carry in actual discourse. This paper addresses that question through the lens of cognitive semantics, arguing that the shift from literal to real meaning is systematically grounded in conceptual metaphor rather than being idiosyncratic or arbitrary.

The analysis is based on dialogue extracted from 去有

风的地方 (Meet Yourself, dir. Ding Ziguang, Hunan TV / Mango TV, 2023), a contemporary Chinese television drama, which provides naturalistic examples of xiguanyongyu as used in colloquial, face-to-face interaction.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Within cognitive semantics, meaning is understood as neither purely objective nor purely subjective, but as grounded in embodied human experience [1]. Abstract concepts are frequently structured through conceptual metaphor — the systematic understanding of one domain of experience in terms of another. Applied to phraseology, this framework predicts that the extension from a fixed expression's literal meaning to its real (idiomatic) meaning should not be random: it

should be traceable to a recurrent embodied source domain, such as temperature, the body, or physical perception.

This prediction is directly relevant to *xiguanyongyu*. As these units originate in everyday spoken interaction, their idiomatic meanings are expected to retain visible traces of the concrete, physically grounded scenarios from which they arose.

ANALYSIS

1. Temperature as a source domain: 不冷不热

Consider 不冷不热 (*bù lěng bù rè*), literally “neither cold nor hot”:

(1) 今天的天气不冷不热，很舒服。 *jīntiān de tiānqì bù lěng bù rè, hěn shūfú* — “Today's weather is neither hot nor cold, very pleasant.”

(2) 他对这件事的态度一直不冷不热。 *tā duì zhè jiàn shì de tàidu yīzhí bù lěng bù rè* — “His attitude toward this matter has always been indifferent.” [2]

In (1) the expression is used in its literal, compositional sense, describing ambient temperature. In (2), the same string denotes an indifferent, emotionally detached interpersonal attitude. The mapping TEMPERATURE → EMOTIONAL ATTITUDE is independently well attested cross-linguistically (cf. English “warm welcome”, “cold shoulder”) and grounded in the correlation, learned through everyday embodied experience, between physical warmth and social closeness. Crucially, the component order is non-arbitrary: 冷 (*lěng*, ‘cold’) and 热 (*rè*, ‘hot’) reflect a culturally entrenched experiential template, and the same mapping recurs productively in modern spoken Chinese, as in the corpus example 用不着我来泼冷水 (*yòngbuzháo wǒ lái pō lěngshuǐ*, lit. ‘no need for me to pour cold water’, i.e. to dampen someone's enthusiasm) [3].

2. The body as a source domain: 脸往哪儿搁

A second pattern is illustrated by 脸往哪儿搁 (*liǎn wǎng nǎr gē*), literally “where to put [one's] face”:

(3) 他一时愣住了，不知道脸往哪儿搁。 *tā yīshí lèng zhù le, bù zhīdào liǎn wǎng nǎr gē* — “He froze for a moment, not knowing where to put his face [i.e., utterly embarrassed].” [4]

Here “face” (脸) metonymically stands for social reputation — a conceptual link so entrenched in Chinese culture that it also underlies the semantically related, and structurally complementary, expression 丢脸 (*diūliǎn*, ‘to lose face’), attested in the corpus as 而且还在班里丢了那么大的脸 (‘and on top of that, lost so much face in front of the class’) [5]. While 脸往哪儿搁 encodes the resulting state of not knowing how to cope with the loss of face (via a spatial interrogative construction), 丢脸 encodes the event of losing it (via a transitive verb-object construction) — two grammatically distinct but conceptually convergent realizations of the same FACE → REPUTATION metonymy.

3. Perception as evaluation: 你看你

A third, grammaticalization-oriented pattern is seen in 你看你 (*nǐ kàn nǐ*), literally “you look at you”:

(4) 你看你，早晨刚穿的衣服，没一会儿就弄得这么脏。 *nǐ kàn nǐ, zǎochén gāng chuān de yīfu, méi yīhuìr jiù nòng de zhème zāng* — “Look at you — the clothes you just put on this morning, and already so dirty.” [6]

Unlike temperature or face, the source domain here is the physical act of visual perception (看, *kàn*, ‘to look’), which is metaphorically extended to the abstract act of evaluation or mild reproach. Crucially, Raymond Gibbs has shown experimentally that the figurative sense of such conventionalized expressions is frequently retrieved by speakers as fast as — or faster than — their literal counterpart, because repeated use renders the figurative reading directly accessible rather than derived compositionally on-line [7]. Table 1 summarizes the three mappings discussed above.

Table 1. Conceptual mappings underlying selected *xiguanyongyu*

Expression	Literal meaning	Real meaning	Conceptual mapping
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不冷不热 (bù lěng bù rè)	<i>"neither cold nor hot"</i>	indifferent, detached attitude	TEMPERATURE → EMOTIONAL ATTITUDE
脸往哪儿搁 (liǎn wǎng nǎr gē)	<i>"where to put one's face"</i>	embarrassment, loss of dignity	FACE → SOCIAL REPUTATION
你看你 (nǐ kàn nǐ)	<i>"you look at you"</i>	mild reproach / criticism	VISUAL PERCEPTION → EVALUATION

THE INTEGRATION OF CORE AND ADDITIONAL MEANING

Once an expression has undergone the literal-to-real meaning shift illustrated above, a further question arises: how do its rational (core) and additional (emotive-pragmatic) meanings relate to one another in actual use? The corpus expression 够受的 (gòu shòu de, lit. 'enough to endure') is instructive here. Across four corpus tokens, its core meaning — 'an unbearably difficult situation' — remains constant, while its additional meaning shifts contextually between complaint (看见了您·我觉得好多了!我这一天呀·真是够受的!), defensive sympathy (人家女孩子出来作事就够受的了·你还欺负她?), and mock-threatening irony (够他受的!) [8]. This pattern suggests that, contrary to a simple two-stage processing model, native speakers do not access core and additional meaning sequentially; rather, the two are apprehended as a single, integrated semantic complex, with the additional meaning modulated by contextual and prosodic cues while the core meaning anchors the expression's referential stability.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that the semantic extension of Chinese habitual expressions from literal to real meaning is systematically motivated by conceptual metaphor and metonymy grounded in embodied experience — temperature, the body, and visual perception being three productive source domains. Once conventionalized, an expression's core and additional meanings are not processed as sequential layers but as a jointly activated semantic complex, with the additional (emotive-pragmatic) meaning remaining flexible across contexts while the core meaning

provides referential stability. These findings extend cognitive-linguistic accounts of idiomaticity to an under-studied class of Chinese fixed expressions and carry practical implications for Chinese-as-a-foreign-language instruction and for translation practice, where rendering the pragmatic — and not merely the propositional — content of such units is essential for communicative adequacy.

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