

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Idioms, believed to be unanalyzable, have long been neglected in the mainstream of generative grammar. On the contrary, idioms, proved to be analyzable, receive more intensive attention in the field of cognitive linguistics. In this chapter, traditional view and cognitive view of idioms are introduced and compared in order to explain why cognitive approaches are adopted for the analysis of heart idioms. Then, motivation and purpose of this research are provided following the discussion of idioms in the traditional and cognitive views.

1.1 Defining Idioms

Idioms make perfect examples of figurative language, in that the overall meaning of an idiom can not be predicted from the composition of the literal meanings of the constituent parts. Although certain syntactic and semantic characteristics have been identified about what idioms are, a concise definition for idioms has not been proposed. As a matter of fact, Nunberg et al. (1994) point out that

idioms can not be defined by any single criterion. They, therefore, propose six criteria for identifying idioms: (1) conventionality, which basically states that the meanings of idioms can not be entirely predicted, (2) inflexibility, which states that idioms have more fixed syntactic constructions (e.g., **the breeze was shot*), (3) figuration, which states that idioms typically involve metaphors (e.g., *take the bull by the horns*), metonymies (e.g., *count heads*) and other kinds of figuration, (4) proverbiality, which states that idioms are often used to talk about a recurrent situation of particular social interest (e.g., *spill the beans*), (5) informality, which represents colloquial registers, and (6) affect, which states that idioms imply some evaluation toward the things they denote. Among these, conventionality is considered to be the only criterion that applies to all idioms. As a result, unpredictability has been the very focus when idioms are treated in generative grammar.

1.2 Traditional View of Idioms

Traditionally, idioms are believed to be unpredictable or noncompositional (Chafe 1970, Chomsky 1965; 1980, Fraser 1970, Katz 1973). That is, having learned the meaning and syntactic property of each word of an idiom, we are still unable to capture the overall meaning of that idiom. Kövecses & Szabó (1996) represent this traditional view of idioms by a diagram, which is adapted slightly and represented in

Table 1.1:

Table 1.1. Traditional view of idioms

special idiomatic meaning – ‘die’
the meaning of the linguistic forms – ‘kick’, ‘the’, ‘bucket’
linguistic forms and their syntactic properties – <i>kick the bucket</i> (no passive, etc.)

Table 1.1 shows that the special idiomatic meaning ‘die’ seems to have no relationship with the literal meaning and syntactic properties of the idiom *kick the bucket*.

Owing to the above factor, idioms are basically treated as larger items in the lexicon that are independent of any human conceptual system (Carter and McCarthy 1988:19). Just as words are characterized by their syntactic and semantic properties one by one in the lexicon, so idioms can be characterized in the same way. This leads to the assumption that idioms are independent of each other conceptually. However, certain issues are found from such a point of view. For one thing, for most concepts, more than one idiom can be found to express the same or similar concepts. For instance, *hit the ceiling*, *flip your lid*, and *spit fire* are all used to express the same concept – anger. For another thing, some kind of similarity in mental images can be found in the various idioms that express the same or similar concepts. Gibbs (1990; 1995) has summarized the result of his mental image experiments on idioms, which will be presented in the next section.

The traditional approaches to idioms mainly take the perspective of syntax; however, a full account for the characteristics of idioms would also require the explanations from the perspective of semantics. In the next section, cognitive approaches to idioms, mainly proposed by Geeraerts (1995), Gibbs (1990; 1995), Kövecses & Szabó (1996), Nunberg et al. (1994) will be presented.

1.3 Cognitive View of Idioms

Although it is commonly accepted that there is no complete predictability for the meanings of idioms, a substantial amount of research has supported that most idioms are analyzable and have meanings that are at least partly motivated (Geeraerts 1995, Gibbs 1990; 1995, Kövecses & Szabó 1996, Nunberg et al. 1994). Nunberg et al. (1994) divide idioms into two categories: (1) idiomatically combining expressions whose constituent parts carry identifiable parts of their idiomatic meanings, and (2) idiomatic phrases whose idiomatic meanings can not be derived from their parts. A classical example of idiomatic phrases is the widely discussed idiom *kick the bucket*, whose figurative meaning, 'die', can not be motivated and obtained from the combination of *kick*, *the*, and *bucket* literally. Except for idioms such as *kick the bucket*, most idioms belong to idiomatically combining expressions. Take *spill the beans* as an example. Unlike *kick the bucket*, whose figurative interpretation can not

be decomposed to match the constituent parts, *spill the beans*, which means ‘divulge the information’, can be analyzed by looking at the action of *spill* as the action of divulging and *beans* as the information. It may be obscure how *spill* and *beans* link to their figurative interpretations. Even so, this idiom is still regarded as idiomatically combining expressions. According to Nunberg et al. (1994: 497), “saying an expression is an idiomatic combination (i.e. idiomatically combining expression) doesn’t require us to explain why each of its parts has the figurative interpretation it does, so long as we can establish a correspondence between it and the relevant element of the idiomatic denotation.”

In fact, most idioms are motivated by cognitive-semantic mechanisms such as metaphors, metonymies and conventional knowledge. For instance, anger idioms like *blow your stack*, *flip your lid*, and *hit the ceiling* are widely explored by the conceptual metaphors behind these idioms (Gibbs 1990; 1995). It seems that the conceptual metaphor ANGER IS HEATED FLUID IN A CONTAINER activates the linguistic realizations of the anger emotion. Gibbs (1990) conducts a psychological experiment to prove the existence of such a conceptual metaphor by asking subjects to form a mental image for anger idioms. Gibbs (1990: 434) states:

When imagining Anger idioms people know that pressure (that is, stress or frustration) causes the

action, that one has little control over the pressure once it builds, its violent release is done unintentionally (for example, the blowing of the stack) and that once the release has taken place (i.e., once the ceiling has been hit, the lid flipped, the stack blown), it is difficult to reverse the action. Each of these responses are based on people's conceptions of heated fluid or vapor building up and escaping from containers (ones that our participants most frequently reported to be the size of a person's head). We see that the metaphorical mapping of a source domain (for example, heated fluid in a container) into target domains (for example, the anger emotion) motivates why people have consistent mental images, and specific knowledge about these images, for different idioms about anger.

Other than the mental image experiment, other psychological experiments conducted by Gibbs (1990; 1995) also prove that the figurative meanings of most idioms are by no means arbitrary.

1.4 Motivation and Purpose

While anger is one of the common emotions we often experience and talk about in our daily life, other emotions such as love, hatred, happiness, jealousy and many others are pervasive in our languages as well. Where do all these emotions come from? Human hearts are considered to be the site where human emotions exist. This concept can be observed from many heart idioms like *a lonely heart*, *a broken heart*, *make one's heart bleed*, etc. In addition to emotions, personalities are also frequently referred to by the means of human hearts (e.g., *heart of stone*, *a big heart*, etc.). The purpose of this study is to account for the figurative meanings of the many idiomatic expressions related to human hearts by investigating what cognitive-semantic

mechanisms exist behind these heart idioms and how those cognitive-semantic mechanisms interact to give rise to their figurative meanings. Another focus of this research is to discover what principles govern the selection of those cognitive-semantic mechanisms behind heart idioms.

The following chapter will review one relevant study conducted by Niemeier (2003), and provide the categorization of heart idioms collected for this research. Chapter 3 will introduce the theoretical frameworks of this research, including the contemporary theory of metaphor by Lakoff (1993), a cognitive view toward metonymy by Kövecses & Radden (1998), and models of how metaphor can interact with metonymy by Ruiz de Mendoza (2003). Chapter 4 will present the cognitive-semantic analysis of heart idioms. Finally, Chapter 5 will conclude this research.