

The Contrastive Analysis of “Laugh” Verbs in English and Chinese

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Abstract

“Laugh” verbs rank almost first when people express their emotions. There are many “laugh” verbs in English, for learners with a relatively low proficiency level, it is quite difficult to choose the appropriate one to describe their states of mind. Due to their subtle differences, it is more difficult for learners to grasp their usage and meanings. This present paper aims to analyze the differences of some widely used “laugh” verbs through componential analysis.

Keywords: “Laugh” verbs; componential analysis; semantic features.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Among words that express states of mind, “laughing” is one of the most widely used one. There are many verbs expressing laughter, such as beam, cackle, chortle, chuckle, giggle, grin, guffaw, ridicule, roar, simper, smirk, sneer, snicker, snigger, titter, etc. in English. In Chinese, there are 莞尔, 痴笑, 傻笑, 暗笑, 讥笑, 嫣然, 冷笑, 苦笑, 嬉笑, 憨笑, 奸笑, 赔笑, 狂笑, 哄笑, 狞笑, 咯咯笑, etc. Although there are some similarities within both of the two groups, many disparities do exist. It is the disparities that make learning these words difficult. Thus, it is very necessary to know how and in what degree these words are different. This research aims at analyzing the differences of these words through componential analysis, hoping that it can be of some assistance to English learners on their vocabulary learning.

Some scholars have carried out research on Chinese laugh verbs. Guided by prototype theory, Wang Wanqiu 1 selected representative monosyllabic verbs of mock from the pre-Qin Days to Sui Dynasty, such as “哂”, “讥”, “嗤” and “嘲”, and found the general feature of the word-series in the historical context after description and analysis from the syntactic point of view. Zhou Fanfan 2 listed 66 Chinese laugh verbs in his dissertation, which mainly carried out semantic research on “laugh” verbs from the perspective of semantic features, and paid attention to explore the relationship between different semantic features. Other scholars have also conducted comparative studies between English and Chinese

despite the small number. For example, Qin Tianying 3 analyzed and compared the semantic components of “微笑”, “痴笑”, “傻笑”, etc. in Chinese and “beam”, “grin”, “sneer”, etc. in English. However, the number of verbs chosen in these studies and the semantic range are both not comprehensive enough. This study will offer a comprehensive analysis of laugh verbs in English and Chinese.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Shu Dingfang 4, Hjelmslev first employed componential analysis. Componential analysis, also known as semantic feature analysis, is a kind of semantic analysis method, which has emerged with the application of structuralism in language research. It is a method of analyzing the meanings of a word on the basis of its sense components. The philosophical origin of componential analysis can be traced back to atomism proposed by philosophers such as Democritus of ancient Greece. By the 17th century, German philosopher Leibniz had reconfirmed the atomism, believing that everything in the world is made of atom. In the late 1920s, Trubetzkoy and the Prague school took in the elements of atomism in western philosophy and segmented the phonemes of language, which analyzes each phoneme into several distinctive features. For example, phoneme /D/ and /T/ are both alveolar stops in English, and they can be distinguished through their voices.

In the mid-20th century, different scholars had different opinions on who being the first to apply the

phoneme theory of the Prague School to semantic componential analysis. But there is consensus. One thing that many academics agree on is that the direct source of componential analysis comes from Trubetzkoy 5 6. The direct object of componential analysis is the kinship terms and almost every item can be analyzed by using limited semantic components. For example, the word ‘bull’ can be decomposed into three semantic components. The first semantic meaning is ‘bovine’ which can differentiate it from animals like stallions and rams; The second one is ‘fully adult’ which can be used to make a difference from a calf and bullock; And the third is ‘male’ that forms a contrast between it and ‘cow’ 7.

In the 1960s, with the rise of Transformational Generative Grammar, Katz and Fodor 8 borrowed the method of componential analysis to explore the semantic features of words when they studied Transformational Grammar, which soon attracted the attention of modern semantists. They proposed that semantic components, like “bovine”, “adult” and “male”, belong to substantive universals in language. By the 1970s, British linguist Leech made detailed analysis and elaboration. He pointed out that componential analysis means that the comparison and combination of meanings that people have recognized are necessary and sufficient to explain the relevant corpus 9.

Componential analysis does much help to the vocabulary research of human languages. In the first place, it can explain the semantic relationship among words, such as synonyms, antonyms and hyponym. Furthermore, it can test whether the meaning of a phrase or a sentence is acceptable. Lastly, it is endowed with the ability to explain the relationships between sentences, such as entailment, synonymy and contradiction. However, there are also some drawbacks

of this method. Firstly, one of the features of componential analysis is binary opposition which views the world as an either-this-or-that problem, but the disparity between things, like tree and bush and scream and squeal, is not that evident. Secondly, another point of componential analysis that has been widely criticized is its subjective imagination. It easily confuses things themselves with their characteristics. Thirdly, abstract concepts and some relationships cannot be analyzed by componential analysis. For example, there is no other elements in “red”, “yellow” and “blue” than the “color” element. Besides, the relationship between parent and child cannot be distinguished by the same semantic component. Finally, there is no sufficient evidence for it to take which value. For example, in bachelor/spinster, there is no evidence that whether [+male] or [-female] should be used.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 The Componential Analysis of “Laugh” Verbs in English

There are many verbs that express “laugh” in English, such as beam, chortle, chuckle, giggle, grin, sneer, etc. These words all have the semantic meaning of the ways and reasons when people laugh at the object, and laugh is the “core” of the shared semantic meaning of these meanings. Referring to *Oxford Advances Learner’s Dictionary* (the 7th edition) 10, this research analyzes the semantic meanings of these verbs. These words have not only a shared semantic meaning of “laugh”, but also different peripheral semantic components, such as the ways, the attitudes and the reasons. It is the peripheral semantic components that distinguish these words from each other. To analyze the semantic meanings and differences, twelve most widely used “laugh” verbs are enumerated in the following graph, with the hope that it can be of some assistance to learners.

Table-1: Componential Analysis of English “Laugh” Verbs

Verb	Core semantic meaning	Degree of sound	Way	Attitude	Reason
beam	+laugh	-voice	-open mouth	+happy	+politeness
cackle	+laugh	+loud voice	+open mouth	+happy	+funny
chortle	+laugh	+loud voice	+open mouth	+happy	+amused/satisfaction
chuckle	+laugh	+low/-voice	+open mouth	+happy	+satisfied
giggle	+laugh	+ low voice	+open mouth	+happy	+nervous/amused
grin	+laugh	-voice	+open mouth	+happy	+satisfied
guffaw	+laugh	+loud voice	+open mouth	+happy	+amused
ridicule	+laugh	-/+voice	-/+open mouth	+happy	+discriminatory
roar	+laugh	+voice	+open mouth	+happy	+amused
simper	+laugh	-voice	-open mouth	+happy	+affected
smirk	+laugh	-voice	-open mouth	+happy	+conceited
sneer	+laugh	-voice	-open mouth	+happy	+mock
snicker	+laugh	+low voice	+open mouth	+happy	+queer/funny
snigger	+laugh	+ low voice	+open mouth	+happy	+queer/funny
titter	+laugh	-voice	+open mouth	+happy	+embarrassed

According to the above analysis, it can be easily seen that some differences can be observed. People have different attitudes and laugh for various

reasons depending on different things. From the chart, it is known that the word “beam” means that people laugh with their mouth closed and that they laugh because

they are a bit happy. Its meaning and usage is equivalent to “莞尔” and “微笑” in Chinese. “Cackle” means laughing in a loud voice with the mouth open, usually in an unpleasant way. It is often used when people see something very funny and they burst into uncontrollable laughter. “Chortle” refers to laughing loudly with pleasure because people are amused by something good or funny. It can also be used to describe someone who laughs at other people’s misfortune. “Chuckle” signifies laughing inwardly with the mouth slightly open, often because of pleasure and satisfaction. People “giggle” in a low voice, during which they burst into shallow, continual, acute and uncontrollable laughter. The reason for this kind of laughter is pleasure. When people “grin”, they open their mouths and show their teeth, and there is usually no voice. “Guffaw” means to laugh boisterously, especially at something or someone stupid, and the emotion is quite strong when people guffaw. “Ridicule” means to laugh in an unkind way that makes people look silly. When people ridicule at other people, they are contemptuous and have discriminatory views on other people, with their mouths open or closed and with or without making a sound. People “simper” in a silly or annoying way by not making any sound and with the mouth closed, they are affected when “simpering” is shown on the faces. Sometimes the word “simper” is also used when they ingratiate other people. Being a way to show people are pleased with themselves, people “smirk” when what they know is unknown to other people, especially when they gloat over disasters. People “sneer” at others when they are contemptuous of someone or something out of mockery. They think something is strange or funny when such an expression emerges on people’s faces. To sneer at others, it is with the upper lip curled that people express their scorn, which shows an irreverent attitude.

In despite of the fact that some of them can be used interchangeably in some cases, their minute disparities have the final say over which one is appropriate under certain conditions. For example,

“chortle” and “giggle” both mean “咯咯笑” in Chinese, but they have different semantic meanings and they are used in different contexts. “Chortle” means to laugh loudly with pleasure or because you are amused, while “giggle” means to laugh in a silly way because you are amused, embarrassed or nervous. When the focus is “amused”, “chortle” can supplant “giggle” and vice versa, but when “in a silly way” is emphasized, “giggle” is the only choice.

In addition, when people laugh for the same reason, there can be different degrees of sound, ways and attitudes. For example, people beam, cackle, chortle, chuckle, grin and guffaw when they are happy and amused, but there are different ways and degrees of sound and they have different attitudes toward what makes them laugh. Here “beam” and “grin” are taken as examples. People “beam” and “grin” because they are happy and satisfied. What differentiates “beam” from “grin” is that the ways to express these two expressions are different. It is with the mouth open and the teeth seen that people grin, which in meaning is equivalent to the Chinese word “微笑” and “莞尔”. While people beam with the mouth closed and the lips curled, and it is equivalent to “咧着嘴笑” in Chinese. Besides, people also beam when they want to show greetings to others, but they seldom grin to show greetings.

3.2 The Componential Analysis of “Laugh” Verbs in Chinese

There are many words expressing “laugh” in Chinese, like 莞尔, 痴笑, 傻笑, 讥笑, 嫣然, 冷笑, 苦笑, 奸笑, 赔笑, 狂笑, 哄笑, 憨笑, 咯咯笑, etc. Similar to the laugh verbs in English, these Chinese words also have the semantic meaning of the ways and reasons shown when people laugh at the object, and laugh is the “core” of the shared semantic meaning of these meanings. Pertaining to *Contemporary Chinese Dictionary* (6th edition) 11, the semantic meanings of these verbs will be analyzed.

Table-2: Componential Analysis of Chinese “Laugh” Verbs

verb	Core semantic meaning	Degree of sound	Way	Attitude	Reason
痴笑	+笑	+/- 声音	+张嘴	+高兴	+幻想
憨笑	+笑	+声音	+张嘴	+高兴	+难为情
哄笑	+笑	+声音	+张嘴	+高兴	+有趣
讥笑	+笑	-声音	-张嘴	+高兴	+嘲讽
奸笑	+笑	+/- 声音	+/- 张嘴	+高兴	+得逞
苦笑	+笑	-声音	-张嘴	-高兴	+不愉快
狂笑	+笑	+声音	+张嘴	+高兴	+放纵开怀
冷笑	+笑	+/- 声音	-张嘴	-高兴	+不满/不屑
狞笑	+笑	+声音	+张嘴	-高兴	+愤怒
赔笑	+笑	-声音	-张嘴	-高兴	+赔罪
傻笑	+笑	+/- 声音	+张嘴	+高兴	+无意义
莞尔	+笑	-声音	-张嘴	+高兴	+满足

Similar to the previous analysis of English words, Chinese “laugh” verbs also have the core semantic meaning and peripheral semantic meanings. People “莞尔” because they are glad and contented, and the way they express their happiness is to keep silent and their closed mouths curled. By making continual sound, people “痴笑” with their mouths open because they are happy. It is often used when people are lost in reveries. When people open their mouths and “傻笑”, they can make a sound or not, but this kind of laugh is meaningless. They are a bit cute and stupid when they have such an expression on their faces. “憨笑” means people laugh foolishly and naively when they are pleased or embarrassed. People “讥笑” because they are disdainful and dismissive when they satirize someone or something. People “冷笑” when reluctance, disdain and anger overcome them. They often close their mouths when they do this. “苦笑” is a kind of forced smile, which shows bitterness and harshness, and people 苦笑 because something unpleasant happens to them. There is usually some sound when people “奸笑”, and they are malignant and cherish malicious intentions. “赔笑” is used to describe the expression shown on the faces of people who want to appease someone else’s anger. When people 赔笑, they are often sincere and nervous. “狂笑” means laugh wantonly, and people open their mouths and make a loud voice when they are conquered by wild glee. “哄笑” signifies that many people laugh together boisterously because something funny and amusing starts them all off laugh. It emphasizes on laughing together noisily. Finally, “狞笑” refers to a way of smiling hideously. By making a loud sound, people “狞笑” because they are furious.

In Chinese, there are also some words that express similar meanings, sometimes one can be replaced by another, but usually not. For example, “傻笑”, “痴笑” and “憨笑” are often considered as synonyms, but there are some disparities among these three verbs. People may or may not utter sounds when they “痴笑” and “傻笑”, but they must make a sound when they “憨笑”. Additionally, there are different reasons for them. The most widely seen reason for 痴笑 is that people are thinking about pleasant things

unlikely to happen in their daydreaming. The reason for 傻笑 is that people are happy but they look cute and stupid when they laugh in this way. And the reason for 憨笑 is that simple and honest people feel happy and embarrassed when praised. These words denote similar states, but they have different peripheral semantic meanings and different focuses.

3.3 The Comparison of Semantic Meanings between English and Chinese

After analysis on these two groups of “laugh” verbs, both similarities and differences can be directly observed. The similarities will be discussed first. Both the English and the Chinese “laugh” verbs have a shared core semantic meaning, be it “laugh” or “笑”. It is the peripheral semantic meanings that decide the differences of sense among words. Pertaining to different meanings, these words are used in various contexts. Then here comes the differences. English and Chinese do not correspond to each other: some words cannot find their corresponding words in another language.

“Simper” means to smile in a silly and annoying way, in Chinese we have “傻笑”, “痴笑” and “憨笑”, which more or less all have the sense of “silly”, but all of them cannot express the meaning as “simper” does. Also, the English word “grin” means laughing with teeth shown, but in Chinese there does not exist a corresponding word. In Chinese, there is “咧着嘴笑”, which perfectly conveys what “grin” means, but the only defect is that it is not a word.

Similarly, in Chinese we have some words that do not have corresponding ones in English. For instance, we have “赔笑” in Chinese, which means to smile at others to mollify anger or delight them. If in English we want to express the same meaning, we have to say people “put on the mask of smiling in order to pacify other people’s anger”, but it is a verb phrase rather than a verb. Besides, the Chinese word “苦笑” means an unhappy and forced laugh. Providing that the same meaning is conveyed, we have to say people give “a wry smile in distress”, although it expresses exactly the same meaning, it is not a word.

Table-3: Results of Contrastive Analysis of “Laugh” Verbs in English and Chinese

Type	Amount	Mood		Sound Production			Way		
		Happy	Unhappy	Vocal	Silence	Both	Open	Closed	Both
English 15	Number	15	0	7	6	2	10	4	1
	Proportion	100%	0%	46.7%	40.0%	13.3%	66.7%	26.7%	0.06%
Chinese 12	Number	8	4	4	4	4	6	5	1
	Proportion	66.7%	33.3%	33.3%	33.3%	33.3%	50%	41.7%	0.83%

From the above chart, it can be easily observed that in English all the laugh verbs express a happy attitude of the doer, and that in Chinese only two thirds of these verbs show a happy attitude and one third show an unhappy attitude of the doer. In English, more than half of these laugh verbs are expressed through vocalization, while in Chinese only one third are expressed in this way. In English two thirds of these expressions are expressed by opening the mouth, while in Chinese there is only half expressed in this way. There is no denying the fact that both the Chinese character “笑” and the English word “laugh” denote happiness in their literal meaning, despite the fact that they do have some disparities in the attitudes of the doer. The reasons for which such disparity is caused are as follows.

On the one hand, the places where information is carried between English and Chinese verbs are different. In Chinese information is given in the exterior part of the language, while in English the message is given in the interior part of the language. The Chinese word “笑” can mean 笑(laugh) in all different manners, which are distinguished and expressed by different words in English 11, while in Chinese these verbs are expressed by the same structure: “manner+笑”. Beam, grin, smirk, cackle, sneer, etc. can all be translated into such a structure. People knowing “笑” can understand the information upon seeing these Chinese laugh verbs, but people unable to speak English cannot understand the message on seeing these English laugh verbs.

On the other hand, the different thinking modes cause disparities between English and Chinese laugh verbs. Due to different philosophical views, different spirits of national culture are formed. In China people believe in the harmony between man and nature, so Chinese people develop a culture of ethics and morality; while English people are upholders of binary system, so English people form a culture of technology and reason. This results in the difference of thinking modes between the two countries. Chinese people prefer comprehensive thinking while English speakers prefer analytical thinking. To people preferring comprehensive thinking, the Chinese language, also known as the ideograms, has strong motivation and implicit meaning. Besides, Chinese usually fails to fully express what it intends to express. Consequently, under this circumstance, Chinese speakers rely highly on the context to understand what is communicated through this language. However, to people preferring analytical thinking, the English language, also called phonograms, is weak in motivation and straightforward in meaning. Generally, in English the meaning is successfully expressed through sentences. Compared with Chinese,

it relies less on the context, so people get the sense mainly from the language.

4. CONCLUSION

There is no denying the fact that English and Chinese do share many similarities, but it is the disparities that make learning English a difficult task. This paper makes comparative analysis between English and Chinese “laugh” verbs, and the conclusion is that it is the different thinking modes that result in differences between English and Chinese laugh verbs. We may also conclude that it is because of different thinking modes that English is differentiated from Chinese or other languages. Through analysis like this study, the accuracy in the expression of “laugh” verbs in learning and teaching, and the appropriateness of words chosen in translation can be improved. In the meantime, it attracts the attention of learners of English and Chinese on different expressions in different languages.

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