Plant Fixed Expressions in Mandarin Chinese and English: A Cross-cultural Study on ‘trees’

南台科技大学应用英语系副教授 谢菁玉
南台科技大学应用英语系研究生 邱菀伶
Shelley@mail.stut.edu.tw

中文摘要
本文深入探索汉语与英语植物语料库中的植物固定语式，运用框架语义学(frame semantics)为理论基础，来揭示这两种语言文化的不同概念。我们首先分析关于“树”概念的组织结构，再探究汉语与英语内植物固定语式的基底喻意(underlying conceits)，以及喻体(vehicles)和固定语式语义之间的关系，最后再检视常用的植物喻体，用以进一步求证研究结果。“树”的语言框架显示：汉语将“树”比为人，换言之，“树”已被拟人化；但是，英语的植物固定语式中充满了“实用主义”的思维。从两种语言前十名最通用的植物喻体中，我们看到它们都强调植物的可用性和可食性，但这个现象在英语的排行榜中特别明显。我们因此确定以英语为母语者的实用主义观。另一方面，汉语的植物喻体大多使用较普遍的植物名，例如：树、草、和花，相反的，英语的植物喻体则多出现植物的各部分，如：叶、根、茎等。这些和其它证据显示汉语的群体观，以及英语的个人观。植物固定语式内所涵的文化特徵确认了上述结论。

关键字：植物固定语式，语意框架，跨文化语言学，文化特徵
Plant Fixed Expressions in Mandarin Chinese and English: 
A Cross-cultural Study on ‘trees’

Associate professor      Shelley Ching-yu Hsieh
Graduate student         Yuan-Ling Chiu
Southern Taiwan University of Technology
shelley@mail.stut.edu.tw

Abstract

This paper delves into fixed expressions that contain plant names in Mandarin Chinese and English corpora with the aim of revealing different cultural concepts of both languages in the light of frame semantics. First, we examine the compositionality of the concepts of trees. Second, popular vehicles (plant names) and underlying conceits (the associations between vehicles and meanings) of plant fixed expressions in the given languages will be explored. The linguistic frames of trees show that Mandarin Chinese perceives trees as human beings, viz. a prospect of personification, whereas English is functional in its tree fixed expressions. The usability and edibility of plants are accentuated in the top ten lists of popular plant vehicles in both languages. It is a lot stronger, however, in the English list than in the Chinese one. This confirms that English focuses on function. On the other hand, Chinese vehicles fall mainly into general terms like tree, grass, and flower, while English vehicles provide more divisions of plant such as leaf, root, stem, etc. This suggests the holistic perspective in Chinese and individual perspective in English. Cultural features implied in plant fixed expressions further support these findings.

Keywords: plant fixed expressions, botanical fixed expressions, frame semantics, cross-cultural linguistics, cultural features
Introduction

Plant names like ‘tree’ and ‘flower’ do not only refer to plants themselves. Plant names are ideal candidates to outline our concepts and be used in our languages. In Lakoff and Turner’s conceptual metaphor PEOPLE ARE PLANTS, people are viewed as plants in connection with the life cycle: "[People] are viewed as that part of the plant that burgeons and then withers or declines" (1989:6). This is examined in the poems of writers such as Shakespeare and Emily Dickinson. The stages of plants, as well as parts of plants in their annual cycle, correspond to the periods of life—bud to youth, full leaf to maturity, and withered leaf to old age. The differences of two systems, plant and human (or human society and human activity), are conceived as isomorphic, although one is situated in nature, and the other in culture.

Language provides a code enabling humans to express isomorphic properties between nature and culture. Culture is encoded in idiomatic expressions that mirror and shape the way we think. Just as Kramsch (1998:91) indicates that “different languages predispose their speakers to view reality in different ways through the different metaphors they use,” Vervaeke and Kennedy's research (1996:278-79) on Metaphors and Thought says that “… a core concept of people controls and guides our selection and generation of metaphors to suit the fleeting purposes of the moment.”

This study presents a semantic analysis of a range of botanical fixed expressions (BFEs) in Mandarin Chinese and English, such as grow on trees ‘be plentiful or easily obtained’ and cao-mei-zu 草莓族 ‘strawberry-clan = describing how the new generation of young people cannot withstand pressure, like how strawberries cannot be squashed’. We first apply Fillmore and Aktins’s (1992) frame theory to tree\(^1\) fixed expressions in order to reveal the cultural concepts of the botanical name in Mandarin Chinese and English. Then we recognize popular vehicles (plant names) to explore which plant names are rooted in the given languages. Finally, we look into underlying conceits (the relations between the vehicles and the meanings of the BFEs) to confirm the findings.

Literature Review

The relationship of language and culture in language study is currently one of the most investigated issues, because language involves the way we think, the way we behave and the way we cope with society and the world (Kramsch 1998:79). “The culture of everyday practices draws

\(^1\) Italicised letters show technical status.
on the culture of shared history and traditions” (Kramsch 1998:7).

The names of life forms like animals and plants drew linguists’ attention because “[the] importance of the use of animal and plant names characterizes the relationship between the segments of human society” (Radcliffe-Brown 1929 in Lévi-Strauss 1963:1). Radcliffe-Brown once (in 1929) believed that people attached a built-in importance to plants for the reason that they were supposed to rouse man’s spontaneous interest as food. As a matter of fact, plants are vivid and memorable and thus offer concrete image banks for languages to generate fixed expressions able to capture and compose mankind’s fleeting moments into words.

There are various foci when studying BFEs. Röhrich (1991) focuses on etymological epics and the development of BFEs. Beuchert (1995) probes into the German symbolism of plant metaphors. Liu and Qin (2001) compare Mandarin Chinese and English BFEs to promote better communication between these two peoples.

Treatises that delve into plant concepts in human cognition are worth noticing. Li (1959) recounts historical events and folklore that mold the Chinese concept of trees. Chen and Gu (1999) design experiments to explore children’s cognition of prototypical plants. Wen (1986), Meng (2001) and many others study Shijing (The Book of Odes) and reveal the standard of living as well as historical cultural life in the Zhou Dynasty.

Atran (1990:217) states “totemism, myth, religion and other speculative activities of the mind do constitute well-defined cognitive domains”. Nerlich, Clarke and Dingwall (2000:225) study The Use of Stock Characters and Word Play in Two Debates about Bioengineering and say that there are various reasons to describe plants and features of farming to describe humans.

Despite all this research, how BFEs display human concepts and cultures remains unexplored.

**Research framework**

This section defines some terms that we use and launches the theoretical framework of the present study.

*Mandarin Chinese* (hereafter MCh) refers to the official languages in Taiwan and in China.\(^2\) *English* refers to the official languages in Great Britain and the United States. Most of our raw data are collected from *Academia Sinica Ancient Chinese Corpus, Academia Sinica Balanced Corpus of Mandarin Chinese*, *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) and *Merriam-Webster OnLine*. The spoken

---

\(^2\) There are linguistic differences between both regions, through a large overlapping of the language variants, see for example, Qiu (1990), Yao (1992) and Tang (2001). So are British English and American English.
BFEs were observed and gathered from conversations with native speakers over the past two years. The raw data were then categorized in according to vehicles and compiled in alphabetical order in EXCEL for analysis.

Fixed expressions are what we wanted to analyze. In recent research of word usage, linguists have turned their attention to multiword units (Carter 1998, Moon 1998). Fixed expression (Alexander 1978, 1979; Carter 1987, 1998) is a string of words behaving as a unitary lexical item. Various terms are used to describe fixed expressions, such as freezes, binomials and frozen locutions (Pinker and Birdsong 1979, McCarthy 1990, Landsberg 1995, Moon 1998). According to Moon (1998:2), fixed expressions include metaphors, similes, proverbs, sayings, frozen collocations, grammatically ill-formed collocations and routine formulae.

The present study examines the fixed expressions that contain at least a plant name in which the plant name has a metaphorical connotation. For example, in shu-da-chao-feng 樹大招風 ‘a big tree attracts the wind = a prestigious person is vulnerable to attacks’, the shu 樹 ‘tree’ metaphorically indicates ‘a prestigious person’. In as fresh as a daisy (very bright and cheerful), the daisy denotes ‘energy’. Trees are essential vegetation as Brown (1977:317) describes, “if a language has only one botanical life-form word… this term can be roughly glossed as ‘tree’”. Also Laughlin (1975:29) expresses that “if a species that would normally be classed as a ‘plant’… grows with great vigor, it may be identified as a ‘tree’.” We will have a close look at trees in both languages before we further examine other vehicles.

Compositionality is “the degree to which the phrasal meaning can be analyzed in terms of the contributions of the idiom parts” (Nunberg, Sag and Wasow 1994:498). Nunberg, Sag and Wasow (1994) ascertain the semantic compositionality of idioms or fixed expressions. One given example is the English idiomatic expression spill the beans. Language users know or learn that spill the beans means ‘divulge the information’ through the compositionality of this expression. “We can assume that spill denotes the relation of divulging and beans the information that is divulged, even if we cannot say why beans should have been used in this expression…” (Nunberg, Sag and Wasow 1994:497). The availability of these meanings for each component relies on the presence of another lexical item.

Nunberg, Sag and Wasow (1994:511) also specify “noncompositional flexibility in German” which adds a credit to German noncompositional idioms. Most German idiomatic expressions are as compositional as English idiomatic expressions, only that German has a syntactic flexibility that

---

3 One of the examples given is ins Gras beissen (in-grass-bite = die), whose meaning cannot be analyzed from the parts of the idiom. The entire VP binds the meaning.
when an idiomatic expression (e.g., *ins Gras Beissen*) is noncompositional, it is marked with or given a liberty (Pollard 1984, Reape 1996) in which object fronting and verb-second process are allowed. The present study will also deal with noncompositional expressions; the meaning of the entire expression will then be counted for disclosing cognition that is depicted in BFEs.

Fillmore and Aktins’ (1992) frame semantics is adopted in this study. Frame semantics links to people’s comprehension process, that is, to how we understand meanings in context. Lexical meaning, grammatical characteristics “both with information about related words and with our general cultural knowledge about the world” (Goddard 1998:69) work together in the comprehension process. The next section explicates this account.

**Linguistic frames of trees**

Fillmore and Aktins (1992) propose that the meaning of a word can only be understood against a background frame of experience, beliefs, or practices that “motivate the concept that the word encodes”. They give this set of verbs as an example: *buy, sell, charge, pay, cost* and *spend*. To understand any of these verbs needs the understanding of a complete ‘commercial transaction frame’:

> in which one person acquires control or possession of something from a second person, by agreement, as a result of surrendering to that person a sum of money. The needed background requires an understanding of property ownership, a money economy, implicit contract, and a great deal more. (Fillmore and Atkins 1992:78)

In other words, this frame is a complex yet compact linguistic base for words such as *buy, sell, charge*... in the given society. People who don’t have this linguistic frame in mind, won’t understand the meaning of *buying and selling*. Tarzan, for example, would have such difficulty.

Likewise, to understand the vehicle *tree*, in MCh *shu* and in English *tree*, requires a complete ‘linguistic tree frame’ in speakers’ minds.

**The Tree in Mandarin Chinese**

Chinese *shu* 樹 (tree) is the general term for woody plants. Chinese culture, from ancient times till now, has developed a concept frame of *shu*. To have a complete picture of MCh *shu*, we call for the incorporation of the following linguistic *shu* frame:
Shu 樹 (tree) represents plants. It is the fountain of life, benefit and wealth. It is also a base. Shu is used most commonly to represent people, young men, children, brother or husband and wife. Shu can also stand for an artifact, an institution, an event or a difficult circumstance. The nature that trees root onto the ground makes shu a pronominal subject of any display and is often used as a verb meaning to plant or to set up.

This linguistic frame is rooted in native speakers’ minds and it is expressed in various shu (tree) fixed expressions. We give one example for each concept in this frame as follows: Shu 樹 (tree) represents plants (shu-yi 樹藝 ‘tree-skill = to sow and cultivate’). It is the fountain of life (bu-si-shu 不死樹 ‘no-die-tree = the immortal tree in legends, which can bring longevity to those who eat it’), benefit (gian-ren-zaishu-ren-cheng-liang 前人栽樹 後人乘涼 ‘front-person-plant-tree-back-person-relax = to benefit from the efforts of one’s predecessors’) and wealth (gin-shi-yao-qian-shu,jian-shi-ju-bao-pen 勤是搖錢樹 儉是聚寶盆 ‘diligent-is-shake-money-tree-frugal-is-assemble-treasure-basin = hardworking is a money-spinning-tree, being frugal is a treasure-collecting-bowl; one must be hardworking and frugal at the same time to be able to accumulate wealth’). It is also a base (lao-shu-pan-gen 老樹盤根 ‘old-tree-twist-roots = roots of an old tree are intertwined in the soil; sold foundation’). Shu is used most commonly to represent people (chun-shu-mu-yun 春樹暮雲 ‘spring-tree-dusk-cloud = remembrance of a friend far-away’), young men (yu-shu 玉樹 ‘jade-tree = praises the fine complexion or decent traits of a youth’), children (shu-yu-jing-er-feng-bu-zhi, zi-yu-yang-er-qin-bai 子欲養而親不待 ‘a son’s regret at not being able to serve parents in their old age’), brother (san-zhu-shu 三珠樹 ‘three-pearl-tree = a laudatory name for brothers’) or husband and wife (lian-zhi-shu 連枝樹 ‘connected-branch-tree = a married couple much in love with each other’). Shu can also stand for an artifact (chiang-yun-wei-shu 江雲渭樹 ‘chiang-yun-wei [name of a river]-tree = parting a solid, deeply-rooted, close and affectionate friendship’), an institution (shu-dao-hu-sun-san 樹倒猢猻散 ‘tree-topple-macaque-disperse = monkeys disperse when tree falls; associated members run away when a family breaks apart or an institution loses power’), an event (feng-bu-yao shu-bu-dong 風不搖樹不動 ‘wind-no-shake-tree-no-move = the tree will not move without the wind; everything has its cause’) or a difficult circumstance (huang-lian-shu-xiz-tan-qin 黃連樹下彈琴 ‘Chinese
goldthread-tree-below -play-string instrument = to find happiness amidst predicament’). The nature that trees root onto the ground makes shu a pronominal subject of any display (huo-shu-yin-hua 火樹銀花 ‘bonfires display or brilliantly lighted garden’) and is often used as a verb meaning to plant (shu-li 樹立 ‘tree-stand = to establish, to set up’) or to set up (shu-bei-li-chuan 樹碑立傳 ‘tree-stele-stand-pass = carve someone's achievements and merits on a stele; write a biography of someone's life’).

Shu as one kind of plant can be used to represent plants, such as shu-yi 樹藝 ‘tree-skill = to sow and cultivate’. This is an example of metonymy, i.e., a part for whole substitution. Metonymy is an essential mechanism of metaphor in MCh so that Huang (1994) recognizes Chinese as a metonymic language.

A tree blooms and grows fruits that support mankind to live. This brings shu a denotation—source. Already in Guangya 廣雅 (A.D. 227–232)⁴ states that ‘shu ben ye 樹本也’ meaning a tree is a source. This denotation is particularly expressed as fountain of life, benefit and wealth as exemplified above.

The interaction between tree and wind is highlighted in the following BFEs. When we look into them, Chinese culture and philosophy are exposed. shu-yu-jing-er-feng-bu-zhi zi-yu-yang-er-qin-bu-dai 樹欲靜而風不止 子欲養而親不待 ‘tree-desire-stillness yet-wind-not-stop son-desires-raise yet-parents-not-remain = a son's regret at not being able to serve parents in their old age’, feng-shu-zhi-gan 風樹之感 ‘wind-tree-of-feeling = expresses the sadness of offspring at not being able to take care of one's parents after they are deceased’, feng-bu-yao shu-bu-dong 風不搖 樹不動 ‘wind-no-shake-tree-no-move = the tree will not move without the wind; everything has its cause’ and shu-da-zhao-feng 樹大招風 ‘tree-big-beckons-wind = those more reputed are more often the target of slanders.’ They expose Chinese cultural teaching, such as the importance of filial piety and the importance of being modest, and Chinese philosophy, such as ‘a thing has its cause’. Such cultural features will be discussed later.

Shu as a verb occupies more than 31% of collected Chinese tree expressions. This verb was already popular in ancient Chinese, as read in Shihjing 詩經 (The Book of Poetry and Songs, B.C. 1000-500), Fangyan 方言 (Vernacular Language, B.C. 5-A.D.18), Guangyun 廣韻 (Common Sounds, A.D.601), etc. This sense of shu ‘to plant’ is inherited and has become one of the core meanings in Modern Chinese. Expressions show rich in Chinese traditions. The following

---

⁴ Guangya is an encyclopaedic dictionary.
expressions indicate that people learn to play the percentages and strive for one’s career in the Chinese culture: *xie-peng-shu-dang* 挟朋樹黨 ‘hold-friend-tree-party = collaborating with the same type of people to form a clique’, *shu-de-wu-zi* 樹德務滋 ‘tree-virtue-affairs-grow = to advocate and practice virtue and moral conduct’, *shu-bei-li-chuan* 樹碑立傳 ‘tree-stele-stand-pass = carve someone's achievements and merits on a stele; write a biography of someone's life’, *shu-gong-li-ye* 樹功立業 ‘tree-merit-establish-business = to accomplish great deeds’, *shu-di* 樹敵 ‘tree-enemy = to make an enemy of someone, to alienate others’, *jian-shu* 建樹 ‘establish tree = to make a contribution (permanent results); plant seeds of (hatred, love, etc.)’, *zhong-shen-zhi-jì* 終身之計 ‘lifelong-plan-might as well-tree-person = to cultivate in talented people is the top priority in life, for it will give the most in return for your investment’, *du-shu-yì-ge* 獨樹一格 ‘solo-tree-one-square = being unique in style and taste’, *shu-en* 樹恩 ‘tree-favor = to create favors that morally oblige gratitude; to consolidate relationships by bestowing favors’, *shu-li* 樹立 ‘tree-stand = to establish’, *biao-shu* 樹樹 ‘mark-tree = setting a standard’.

*Shu* as a verb also brings up the fact that Chinese emphasize interpersonal relationships, as in *xie-peng-shu-dang* 挟朋樹黨 ‘hold-friend-tree-party = collaborating with the same type of people to form a clique’. This *shu* expression records a historical event about Zhu Bing 朱屏, who collaborated with his bad friends and abuses his power tyrannically during the Liang dynasty (see *Lian Shu* 梁書, History of Liang dynasty).

Some features of trees are profiled and some are given semantic elaboration and emphasized, however some are ignored in the language. A MCh speaker’s attention is drawn most by a tree that stands and grows up like a person. This is the personal pronominal function of Chinese *shu*. The personification of *shu* also hints at a variety of Chinese traditional teaching. No matter whether the teaching is about friendship, love between husband and wife, showing respect to other people or a man’s reputation, all involve an interpersonal relationship.

The conceptual metaphor PEOPLE ARE PLANTS recognized by Lakoff and Turner (1989) can well be applied to MCh as PEOPLE ARE TREES. “Tree” here denotes specifically young and successful people, a kind of “growing” mankind. In other words, Chinese feelings about a young man or a capable man conform to their feelings about a growing tree. Not only are men and trees both living creatures, their other shared feature of ‘stand in full-length’ is not even common among the other important creatures—animals. Nature provides a ready source for our minds and concepts.

---

5 *Guangyun* is a book about Phonology of Ancient Chinese.
The creature ‘plant’ is used automatically and unconsciously at the conceptual level of mankind and is conventionalized in everyday expressions. There are also rich tree fixed expressions in English. However, they reveal a very different concept and linguistic frame in the English speaker’s mind. Let us now turn to examine English tree.

The Tree in English

The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology notes that a tree is “a perennial plant having a woody stem and of considerable height and size; piece of wood” (Hoad 1996). Do tree fixed expressions echo this recording? The linguistic frame for English tree is:

English tree represents wood. Tree is a source of life and knowledge. Most often is tree a diagram in academic field or computing domain where the spreading of branches on a tree is spotlighted. From the same grounding tree can be a frame for shoes, a house and a pivot. Trees root in the ground and are therefore a well-ordered set, or, on the contrary, mean “much too fixed” and convey negative meaning.

This linguistic frame is rooted in native speakers’ minds and is expressed in various English tree fixed expressions. Likewise, we give one example for each concept in the frame: English tree represents wood (tree ‘any large piece of timber’). Tree is a source of life (grow on trees ‘be plentiful or easily obtained’) and knowledge (tree of knowledge ‘[in the Bible] the tree in the Garden of Eden bearing the forbidden fruit which Adam and Eve disobediently ate’). Most often, tree is a diagram in an academic field (phrase-structure tree ‘A tree diagram which shows the division of a form’) or computing domain (optimal binary search tree ‘A binary search tree constructed to be of maximum expected efficiency for a given probability distribution of search data’) where the spreading of branches on a tree (tree diagram ‘any branching diagram in which different branches are connected only at a point of origin, and all are connected, directly or indirectly, to one node which is the origin of the whole’) is spotlighted. From the same grounding, tree can be a frame for shoes (shoe tree ‘a shaped block inserted into a shoe when it is not being worn to keep it in shape’), a house (roof-tree ‘the ridge piece of a roof’, tree house ‘a small building, platform, or shelter built among the branches of a tree’) and a pivot (as the twig is bent, so is the tree inclined ‘How you prune your tree during its first few years will affect its shape, strength, and life span; A poor start to a child’s education will lead to an unfavorable future’). A tree roots in the ground and is therefore a well-ordered set (search tree ‘a binary tree in which the data values stored...
at the nodes of the tree belong to a well-ordered set, and the value stored at any nonterminal node’),
or on the contrary, mean “much too fixed” (You cannot shift an old tree without it dying ‘spoken by
a Man who is loath to leave a place in his advanced years, in which he has long lived’) and convey
negative meaning (up a gum tree ‘in a predicament; in great difficulties’).

The etymological statement of tree accentuates a tree’s size and height. English tree fixed
expressions do not pick up the size but develop the height, e.g., at the top of the tree (in the highest
position). The etymological record tells that the tree is a piece of wood in Old English. This is also
illustrated in modern English fixed expressions, such as tree ‘any large piece of timber’. In
comparison with MCh, the mechanism of metonymy doesn’t operate in English. The opposite is the
case, that is to say, in English, tree (whole) is used in lieu of a cut-off piece of it (part). English tree
can be used to represent wood, and also branch. The importance of ‘parts’ in English will be further
discussed shortly.

The Christian religion and the Bible have influenced English speakers for more than 1500
years. Tree of knowledge and tree of life are found in Genesis 2:9 and 3:22, respectively. Trees thus
signify foundations of knowledge and life in English culture. Religious effect shows also in MCh
BFEs, but Buddhism is preached as in qi-shu-you-yuan 祇樹有緣 (god-tree-has-fate = to be
destined to encounter and to be affiliated with the Buddha dharma) and jian-shu dao-shan 劍樹刀
山 (knife-mountain-sword-tree = treacherous and hazardous conditions) is a view in hell described
in sutras.

Tree of Knowledge not only signifies a religious culture but also the importance of knowledge
or scientific knowledge in an English speaking society. We mentioned that MCh has a conceptual
metaphor PEOPLE ARE TREES. English fixed expressions do not agree with it. English tree
expressions express the conceptual metaphor SCIENTIFIC DIAGRAMS ARE TREES. This is
noted in the definition of a tree in one English etymological dictionary (Merriam-Webster) where a
tree is a woody perennial plant “having a single usually elongate main stem generally with few or
no branches on its lower part.” Said otherwise, a tree is concerned with its fixed single stem and
stretching branches, just as every tree graph has. Many of our collected data give evidence of this,
such as tree search ‘any method of searching a body of data structured as a tree’, tree network ‘a
network topology’ and syntax tree ‘parse tree’.

The scenario of a tree’s growth is focused in English tree fixed expressions. The scenario is
conceptualized in an English speaker’s mind: a tree first has a fixed base then branches over a space.
However, in MCh, the way that a tree stands stably in the ground is not underscored, though this
tree is “growing” in a MCh speaker’s mind as well. People may observe the nature of the growing of a tree from the same standpoint, but develop different concepts and expressions. English tree and MCh shu map onto different conceptual domains.

The same grounding that trees span on a fixed spot and extend also support fixed expressions in which trees convey either ‘frame’, ‘ridge’ or ‘a well-ordered set’ such as shoe tree (see more examples in the linguistic frame). Having a steady base and further development are valued in English culture. Maintaining vitality is essential, otherwise ‘an ordered set’ can turn out to be too much fixed and carry negative connotations, as shown in the expression You cannot shift an old tree without it dying ‘spoken by a Man who has to leave a place in his advanced years, in which he has long lived.’ The collocation ‘old’ assists the meaning of this expression. The collocations of tree fixed expressions as well as other fixed expressions play important roles in collaborating and reaching the meanings of fixed expressions.

Plants in languages

This section delves into other plant vehicles in MCh and English to see if the personification of shu in MCh and the pragmatism of tree in English work any further in other BFEs. We first investigate how both peoples associate the plant names with specific fixed expressions, and then list the favorite plant vehicles of Chinese and English.

Underlying conceits

People observe and perceive the world and generate fixed expressions. The observation and fixed expression is linked by association. For instance, English speakers look at a tree and perceive it as having a fixed single stem with stretching branches, just as every tree graph does. Syntax tree 'parse tree' is thus derived. This association, i.e., underlying conceit, in syntax tree is the branch span on a fixed spot. Underlying conceits link the real world and the expressions. They are also a mixture of human culture and cognition. Lakoff and Turner (1989:205-6) explain a proverb: Ants on a millstone whichever way they walk, they go around with it 'describes humans and their destinies' and assert that "the choice of ants and a millstone is by no means arbitrary." There is a certain correspondence or relation between an ant and a millstone to make this proverb meaningful: The virtual sizes of the huge millstone and the small ant, the motions of ants on the shape of the millstone, etc., all call out the meaning of the proverb. In other words, humans are like ants walking on a millstone: they can never escape destiny. The underlying conceit that joins the real world and
the proverb is the size and the shape of the vehicles, viz. *ants* and *millstone*.

The underlying conceits of plants and fixed expressions inevitably connect to human concepts, society, and culture. A variety of BFEs in both MCh and English associate with two underlying conceits: (a) the edibility and usability of plants, and (b) customs or historical events. They are illustrated as below.

The edibility and usability of plants has generated much attention. Plants are important suppliers of nourishment for other living creatures; people, therefore, describe much about this function of plants in languages, e.g., *jiao-cai-gen* 嚼菜根 'chew-vegetable-root = to eat old-leaf vegetable' means metaphorically 'to bear hardships' because old leaves are not tasty at all. Someone who has to eat old leaves is pictured as bearing hardships. The English BFE *a bite at the cherry* catches the juiciness and taste of a cherry to mean 'an attempt or opportunity to do something'.

The underlying conceits associated with peculiar customs or historical events can be traced back to history and tradition. In ancient China, cane was used as an implement of punishment at school. Though it is not used for this purpose any more, *teng-tiao* 藤條 'cane' still has an implication of punishment in MCh. It is remembered of the school history. The English BFE *carrot and stick* means 'promising to reward or punish someone at the same time'. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms*, this fixed expression is generated from the idea of handing over a carrot to a donkey in order to encourage it to move forward, or otherwise using a stick to beat it if it won't move. This combination has been used since long ago. A quotation from *New Scientist* (30 May 1998, 53/3) says that "and if your powers of persuasion prove insufficient, here's a carrot and stick policy."

In addition, in Chinese the underlying conceits that associate most vehicles and the meanings of the expressions are:

1. Growth characteristics and cultivation: e.g., the BFE *gua-tian-li-xia* 瓜田李下 'melon-patch-plum-under' means literally 'to do up the shoes in a melon-patch and to put on a hat under a plum tree'. Since melons grow on the ground, when one bends down on a melon-patch, he may touch the ripened melons. As palms grow on a tree, if someone lifts up his arms under a plum tree, he shall reach a luscious plum. For these reasons and associations, the BFE is used to warn people not to be found in a suspicious position. The underlying conceit uses the growing characteristics of melons and plums.

2. Odor: the fragrances of flowers have caused many BFEs to come into being, such as *niao-yu-hua-xiang* 鳥語花香 'bird-language-flower-fragrant = birds' twitter and...
fragrance of flowers, an idyllic scene', *jia-hua-na-you- ye-hua-xiang* 家花那有野花香 'home-flower-how-wild- flower-fragrant = a indoor flower is not as fragrant as a wild flower; women outside (or mistresses) are more attractive than wives at home' and *ru-zhi-lan-zhi-shi* 入芝蘭之室 'enter the room that has irises and orchids = pervading uplifting character of a moral gentleman'.

(3). Outer features of plants: e.g., the human brain has a round shape just like a melon. We therefore have *nao-dai-gua* 脳袋瓜 'brain-bag-melon' in MCh to mean a brain. *Xiang-gu-tou* 香菇頭 'mushroom-head' is a hairstyle. When someone has it, he looks like wearing the cap of a mushroom.

In English, most underlying conceits stem from:

(i). Divisions of the plants: there are a variety of English BFEs that have found their existence in parts of a plant, e.g., *from stem to stern* 'from the front to the back, especially of a ship' and *put down roots* 'begin to lead a settled life in a particular place' where stem and root are cited. This category of underlying conceit reveals an important perception of English speakers and will be elaborated in the next section.

(ii) Usability of plants: For instance, *dead wood* and *seed-thought*. Wood is useful for construction or burning. *Dead wood* implies that dead wood is as useless as an unproductive person. When thoughts are compared to seeds, the usability of a seed is highlighted – a seed gives life and produces crops; therefore, *seed-thought* means fruitful or suggestive thought. *Full of beans* means feeling energetic or in high spirits. The underlying conceit of this expression refers to the good condition of a horse because beans are used as wonderful horse feed.

(iii) From Scripture or the classics: e.g., *manna ash* is a biblical quote from Exodus 16:31 meaning the food that God granted to the Israelites when they wandered in the desert. Also the above-mentioned *tree of knowledge* and *tree of life* are from Scripture. Expressions such as *sour grapes*, from a famous Aesop's fable, was said by the fox when he couldn't reach the high hanging grapes.

To summarize, most Chinese underlying conceits connect with the growth characteristics, the cultivation, the odor of plants or flowers, and the outer features of the plants, whereas those of English tend to correlate their BFEs to the divisions of the plants, the usability of the plants, and also the use of quotations from Scripture or the classics. This is not to say that no MCh BFEs are
cited from Chinese classics and no English BFEs are associated with the growth characteristics or the odor of a plant. The higher percentage of collected data supports the above statement.

From the examination of underlying conceits, we see that Chinese speakers perceive the outer appearance of the plants and compile "sensible or visual" Chinese expressions—those related to plants' outer features and odor. English speakers pay attention to the division of plants and lay emphasis on pragmatism by adopting more usability of the plants in their BFEs. This confirms the findings in analyzing tree linguistic frames.

**Favorite vehicles**

People observe and perceive plants from different standpoints, and, as a result, also use different plant vehicles to produce their expressions. We list the plant metaphorical vehicles that are most productive in MCh (Table 1) and in English (Table 2). Each vehicle "grows" in the speakers' minds differently.

The favorite plant vehicles in English disclose more information than those in MCh. When comparing Table 1 and Table 2, the individualism and pragmatism in English are brought to light.

Two clues in Table 1 indicate the individualism in English. First, while in Table 2 the general terms for the whole plant like grass and tree are in the top of the list, many plant divisions, such as leaf, stock, root, stem, straw and thorn are ranked top in the English list. Secondly, the individual plants, e.g., rose and reed are in the top ten of the English list. In fact, apple and onion are also ranked high at twelve and fifteen, respectively. The Chinese Table, on the other hand, has only one plant division, the thorn in the list. English individualism not only shows in Tables 1 and 2, where the favorite plant vehicles are listed, but in the above discussion about tree fixed expressions, more individual cultural concerns show in English, while interpersonal relationships are emphasized in a Chinese society. The concluding section focuses on this finding.

As has been said, the utility of plants is encoded in plant fixed expressions and is used to express our concepts. The plants that have economical and consuming functions are given in Table 2: wood, tea, straw and fruit. Also rose is an example of this kind because it functions as a permanently appreciating flower. Meanwhile, the utility of plants is less expressed in the Chinese list; only fruit and rice are in the table and they are far down in the ranking than those in Table 2.

These two Tables also adumbrate two important cultural plants in the respective languages, namely, the rose in English and the willow in Chinese. Let us compare how these two cultural plants are portrayed in the respective languages. Shakespeare’s verse "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other word would smell as sweet." in Romeo and Juliet (II, ii, 43-44) keeps the
odor of a rose everlastingly. *Rose* is a long lasted symbol of love in Western culture. It is presented to express love and respect, or love and desire. The *rose* is mostly attributed to femininity. "The red rose belongs with Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love and lust. The white rose symbolizes the pure, innocent and unselfish love of Mother Mary" (Heij 2004). Its thorns gave more negative connotation in MCh than in English. English *Rose* fixed expressions incorporate the semantic features "nice event or object, achievement, completion, romance, optimism and cheer".

Chinese writers and poets love to write about the willow. The willow has also been popularly used in ceremonies and sacrificial rites since Chinese ancient times. According to Chang (2001) and Tsai (2003), the willow buds in the early onset of spring and is seen as a symbol of spring. Their tenacious vitality is viewed as the intention of gods. Poets adore *willow* also for its graceful and elegant image that is associated with willow's hanging strips that are seemingly natural and at ease in their own ways. The famous writer Wu Liu 五柳先生 (Mr. Five-Willows, Tao Yuanming, A.D. 365-427) himself and his poetry will never be forgotten. *Willow* is also used to express parting sentiments, because the phonetic value of *liu* 柳 (willow) sounds like *liu* 留 (stay) and thus denotes a willingness to keep the one who is leaving and a reluctance to let go.

The difference between people's adoration of the rose in English society and the affection for the willow in Chinese society can be seen in the modern electronic world—World Wide Web sites. When we get online and search the top plant names in MCh (柳, http://www.yam.com/) and English (rose, http://www.google.com/). The Chinese top twenty websites display those of literature, searching love, religion, apart from those of place names, surnames and names of institutions. Meanwhile, English websites present more of rose cultivation, rose picture appreciation, searching love, first names and names of institutions. Topics of the websites, let alone profit-making concerns, demonstrate Chinese people's spiritual pursuit, alongside English speakers' practical engagements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>Plant vehicles</th>
<th>Sum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><em>hua</em> 花 (flower)</td>
<td>389</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><em>cao</em> 草 (grass)</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td><em>gen</em> 根 (root)</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><em>mu</em> 木 (wood/tree)</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td><em>lin</em> 林 (woods)</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td><em>ci</em> 刺 (thorn)</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td><em>guo</em> 果 (fruit)</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td><em>shu</em> 树 (tree)</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td><em>zhi</em> 枝 (branch)</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td><em>mi</em> 米 (rice)</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Favorite plant vehicles in English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>Plant vehicles</th>
<th>Sum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>wood</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>leaf</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>stock</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>rose</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>root</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>tea</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>tree</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>flower</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>stem</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>reed</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion

The real world provides a starting point for plant fixed expressions by offering metaphorical vehicles to languages, but the choice of salient features, and the meaning and implication attached to those specific features vary from language to language (Nesi 1995:276). The discussion about underlying conceits and popular vehicles enhance our observation of tree frames. From the linguistic frames of MCh shu and English tree, we know that Chinese and English speakers observe and perceive trees from different standpoints and compose different concepts in their minds. The examination of trees in MCh and English suggests that MCh speakers encode shu personally with the association that a shu stands and grows up like a person does. The cultural features revealed from the meanings of BFEs further prove this personification. The Chinese people emphasize interpersonal relationships, such as filial piety and being modest to other people. Their life philosophy stresses that ‘a thing has its cause’ and that one must ‘play the percentages’, etc. Spiritual pursuit is emphasized in this society.

In an English speaking community, people hold the belief that each individual shall have a steady base from which to further develop. This notion of individualism permeates every aspect of their lives. English speakers are more concrete and practical on every subject and place importance on scientific knowledge. In the meantime, MCh speakers call upon the realm of the supernatural to help explain, define, and formulate their opinions of the real world. This way of thinking paves a way and allows them to associate plants with humans.

By comparison, popular plant vehicles in English also stress individualism in the English
speaker’s mind. Many plant divisions are adopted to produce English BFEs whereas MCh has only a few. Most English plant vehicles in the top ten list are either edible or are useful in everyday life. This confirms that pragmatism is stressed more in an English speaking society than in a Chinese one.

Whether personification, individualism or pragmatism, the role of plant names in languages is substantial. Lévi-Strauss (1963) believes that plants are nature’s material for mankind’s languages and assumes "their ability to serve as symbols expressing contrasts and oppositions" (1963:2). Investigating and understanding BFEs is an essential endeavor of exploring conceptual frames of how we provide a code that enables man to express isomorphic properties between nature and culture and how we attempt to grapple with the world. It is a focal point in the research of language and culture.

References


Qiu Zhi-pu (ed.). 1990. Dalu he Taiwan Ciyu Chabie Cidian (Dictionary of Mainland and Taiwan University Press.
Chinese). Nanjing Daxue, Nanjing.


