Intelligence and Cognitive Psychology Through Idiomatic Prism

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Abstract: The article presents the vision of intelligence and national psychology through the prism of psychological analysis of idiom with ‘head’ component. I analyze idioms, belonging to 4 idiomatic systems: (Chinese, Japanese, British, American and Russian). With the help of on-line electronic linguistic corpuses (Chinese corpus), KOTONOHA (Japanese corpus), BNC (British National Corpus), COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English) I analyze intelligence and psychology on the basis of idiom frequency indexes.

Key words: Intelligence • Idiom • Cognition • Psychological analysis • Corpus linguistics • Frequency

INTRODUCTION

Among modern challenges the threat of terrorism takes the alarming first place. 11 September 2001(9/11) events made experts all over the world think over the rules of functioning in conditions of global dependency. ‘The security and intelligence authorities are charged with the protection of the public’ [1].

Understanding of cognitive mechanisms behind national intelligences is of vital importance. Psychologists define intelligence in many ways. I entirely support the propositions, provided by Mark M. Lowenthal in his article ‘A Disputation on Intelligence Reform and Analysis: My 18 Theses’ [2]. His main idea, relevant to this article is as follows: ‘The core function of intelligence analysis is the ability to think interesting thoughts, to see beyond the apparent facts, to bring to bear expertise and to write the results in a clear and compelling fashion’ [2].

According to my proposition it is possible to decipher interesting national psychological ideas from idioms and produce intelligence analysis this way. Modern psycholinguistics describes idioms as emotional elements, decoded by left and right hemispheres. “Emotional words trigger activation in other areas of the LH, such as the amygdala, orbitofrontal cortex and posterior cingulate gyrus, as well. These regions have been claimed to be part of the limbic system (Fig. 1), which plays a key role in emotion processing” [3]. “The data from a large body of research based on behavioral, electrophysiological and neuroimaging methodologies appear to converge in indicating that both hemispheres are involved in the processing of words with emotional meaning, albeit in different and probably complementary, ways.” [3].

On the material of Chinese, Japanese, British, American and Russian idioms with ‘head’ component we build the picture of intelligence and national psychology. We proceed from the idea that ‘head’ is the container of intelligence. So, the article I make an attempt to examine this container using the data from on-line linguistic corpuses.

Chinese Idioms: My analysis of the Chinese idiomatic system includes the analysis of 4-character idioms. “In Chinese lexical system Chinese idioms are a typical unit. As an individual type in the domain of idioms, most Chinese idioms have some unique qualities. One of the design features of most Chinese idioms on the dimension of form characteristics is the four-character form the Chinese lexicon provides an exact number of the characters in such a unit. According to the statistics given in Zhou [4], up to 95.57% entries in Dictionary of Chinese Idioms are four characters. The uniformity in form regulates to a large extent some other linguistic characteristics of Chinese idioms, specifically phonological and semantic distribution. Compatible with the rhythmical arrangement and prosodic features represented by the two-plus-two syllables, a great number of Chinese idioms consist of double substructures, mostly parallel with each other [5]. Branded with a distinct national style, Chinese idioms mirror the esthetic pursuit of symmetry deeply embedded in oriental thinking” [6].

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For analyzing Chinese idioms frequencies I used Chinese corpus at Leeds University. I provide each idiom with the frequency index, illustrating its usage frequency in the Internet and business Chinese. The most frequent idioms are viewed as the best examples of intelligences strategies, common to Chinese.

Áng2 shou3 ting3 xiông1-'with one`s head up and one`s breast put a front'-very proud of oneself [the Internet-230; business Chinese-90]. Dâi1 tóu2 dâi1 não3-'silly head, silly brains'-silly [the Internet-148; business Chinese-28]. Bào4 tóu2 shu3 cuân4-'to run away like a rat holding one`s head with hands'-to run away in panic [the Internet-105; business Chinese-20]. Huí2 tóu2 shi4 ān4-'to turn one`s head and find oneself on a safe bank'-to Japanese. Each Japanese idiom is given with an index of frequency and the years of usage in writing. There is not a clear-cut distinction between the Internet communication and other types of communication as in Chinese corpus, but all idioms used in 2000-2008 were mentioned in Yahoo blogs.

\[\text{Atama ga aru}-\text{to have a head}-\text{to be clever}\] [46 contexts. From 1890 to 2008. Male contexts-40, female contexts-6]. \[\text{Atama ga nai}-\text{not to have a head}-\text{silly}\] [9 contexts. From 1920 to 2008. Male contexts-40, female contexts-6]. \[\text{Atama ga tarinai}-\text{the head is not enough}-\text{silly}\] [3 contexts. From 1920 to 1950. Male contexts-3, female contexts-1]. \[\text{Atama ga hataraku}-\text{the head works}-\text{clever, intelligent}\] [28 contexts. From 1890 to 2008. Male contexts-18, female contexts-9]. \[\text{Atama ga katai}-\text{the head is firm}-\text{silly}\] [30 contexts. From 1930 to 2008. 11 contexts are during 2000-08. Male contexts-11, female contexts-8]. \[\text{Atama ga takai}-\text{the head is high}-\text{haughty}\] [12 contexts. From 1920 to 2008. 7 contexts are during 2000-08. Male
glib phrases (it’s a country where pretty much anything can go ‘pear-shaped’, particularly when it’s ‘cheap as chips’), repeated interminably for a couple of years until some intangible social code decides they’re ‘past their sell-by date’… urban Britain is particularly inventive, it’s multicultural streets generating a new tongue for the 21st century with the unstoppable rise of Jafaican. Despite the name, experts claim it’s not actually an affectation but a shift in language born of multicultural mingling in post-war Britain, most notably with the mix of Jamaican, West African and Bangladeshi cultures. Such has been Jafaican’s growth that today you’ll find youngsters from Tower Hamlets to Torquay calling each other ‘blud’ and discussing whether those ‘skets’ is butters’ [7].

It’s a common knowledge English is not a homogeneous nowadays. ‘In any discussion of nationalism, identity, or current affairs, language is never ‘innocent’. The choice of words reveals the underlying outlook of the speaker. So for example the word ‘foreign’ in English is much more hostile …than the German ausländer. Latent British xenophobia is revealed in the offensive tabloid expression ‘Johnny Foreigner’. … to Welsh is to cheat or renege; to Scotch is to thwart, to squash, to prevent; an Irish lanyard is an untidy rope. In other words the names of the three ‘subsidiary’ nations in the British Isles have negative connotations in the language of the dominate one. Thus national prejudice is encoded in the English language’ [8]. ‘Language, accent, vocabulary and idioms of speech form important regional differences. For example, Welsh, a version of which was spoken in Britain when the Romans invaded in 55 BC, is one of the oldest languages in the British Isles. Tens of thousands of people still speak Welsh, adult educational institutions run language courses and since 1970 education in Wales, or Cymru, has been bilingual… Also, Gaelic, another variant of the ancient Celtic languages, is still spoken by some people in Ireland, Scotland and, to a lesser extent, the Isle of Man. Accent and idiom vary enormously throughout Britain, although since the 1990s there has been concern expressed over the spread of ‘estuary English’: an outer London accent and dialect characterized by features of pronunciation such as lisped ‘r’s and by words such as ‘basically’[8-12].

In our study we decided to combine British and American variants. Idioms are analyzed by checking frequencies using BNC (British National Corpora) and COCA (Corpora of Contemporary American). This type of analysis is very important as it helps demonstrate to which variety of modern English, British or American, this or that idiom belongs. ‘The Corpus of Contemporary
American English (450 million words) is more than four times as large as the British National Corpus (100 million words). As a result, it often provides data for low-frequency constructions that are not available from the BNC. … COCA and the BNC complement each other nicely and they are only large, well-balanced corpora of English that are publicly-available. The BNC has better coverage of informal, everyday conversation, while COCA is much larger and more recent, which has important implications for the quantity and quality of the data overall’ (Corpus of Contemporary American).

To bang one's head against a brick wall—be doggedly attempting the impossible and suffering in the process [BNC-1; COCA-7 (2002-1990)]. To be hanging over someone's head (of something unpleasant)—to threaten to affect someone at any moment [BNC-7; COCA-40 (2012-1990)]. To be on someone's head—to be on someone's sole responsibility [BNC-2; COCA-4 (2012-1990)]. To bite someone's head off—to reply sharply and brusquely to someone [BNC-4; COCA-17 (2012-1990)].

Idioms with the highest frequencies. To put their/our/your heads together—to consult and work together [BNC-19; COCA-99 (2012-1990)]. To lose one's head—to lose self-control; panic [BNC-31; COCA-91 (2012-1990)]. Head over heels—turning over completely in forward motion, madly [BNC-38; COCA-208 (2012-1990)].

From the analyses I see that American and British idioms with the ‘head’ component tend to follow common trends. The process of ‘losing one’s head’ is viewed as a negative trend. So, intelligence is also very important in these cultures.

CONCLUSION

The research has 2 important conclusions: 1) the idea of ‘intelligence’ is very important to all cultures under analysis from psycholinguistics point of view; 2) idioms with ‘head’ component manifest a trend, common to all cultures under analysis. Intelligence is viewed as a major value, losing of which is detrimental to one’s wellbeing. These common trends testify to equality of nations and cognitive mechanisms of all nations under analysis.

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