The Cognitive Rationale for the Saying “Put the Heart in the Belly”

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Metaphor and metonymy play an important role in the formation of the common saying “put the heart in the belly”. The human organs “heart” and “belly” function as container metaphors. The heart and the thought emotions produced by it are transfigured in the cognitive framework of “container and function”, and the conceptual thought emotions of goals are transferred with the remarkable “heart”. The belly and stomach exist metonymy in the cognitive framework of “container and content”, with a significant “belly” refer to non-significant target concept “stomach”; “belly” naturally becomes the most typical container of the human body. And “heart” becomes a typical member of the belly as an abstract thought and emotion; “belly” and “heart” become each other’s typical symbol; the more typical it is, the psychological connection it will be easier to establish between them. So people almost ignore the logic of this saying.

Keywords: heart, belly, metaphor, metonymy

Introduction

In daily life, when we make others be rest assured, we generally say “put the heart in the belly” instead of “putting the heart in the chest”, why? Obviously, the crux of the problem lies in whether “reassuring” is inclined to “put it in the belly” or to “put it in the chest” to express. By retrieving the People’s Network Corpus, we collected 41 of the 3,505 examples like “put it in the belly” which express the meaning of being rest assured, while none of the 278 examples like “put it in the chest” which express the meaning of that. What causes this tendency? What is the meaning of “heart” here? What is the relationship between the heart, the chest, and the belly? Why is there a relationship of accommodate and be accommodated between “belly” and “heart”?

We think it’s mainly related to people’s cognition. “From a near sense, from oneself, from a distance from something”, people always learn other things from themselves. As the subject of cognition, human cognition is fundamentally shaped by embodied experience (Gibbs & Gibbs, 2005, p. 3). This experience is based on the human mind. Lakoff and Johnson (1999, p. 3) pointed out The Embodied Mind. Concepts, reasoning, and language, which are important components of the mind, are “all based on physical experience and cognitive processing” (Wang, 2007, p. 2). It can be seen that language comes from people’s cognition; from the cognitive point of view, we can explore the initial cognitive motivation of language symbols to a certain extent. So we try to explain the three questions from the perspective of cognitive linguistics.
The Meaning of “Heart”

After searching the related materials from Chinese basic ancient corpus, the Chinese full-text search system (the fourth edition), we found that the similar expression of the saying is first seen in the *ErCheng’s Legacy* authored by Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi, compiled by Zhu Xi in the Song Dynasty, for instance:

(1) Yao and Shun” be known for thousands of years, his thoughts and spirits are still there, the heart should be in the cavity”. (*ErCheng’s Legacy*, Number 7)

In Example 1 “heart” does not refer to the “heart” of human organs, but refers to the thought and spirit of the sage.

Zhu Xi’s other book, *Zhu Zi Yu Lei*, also has the same expression, “heart” expressed the mind, such as:

(2) Q: The heart should be in the cavity. Where in the heart when you think about things? A: The body is here, the heart should be here. (*Zhu Zi Yu Lei*, Number 96)

In Example 2 “heart” refers to the mind of thought.

In Ming Dynasty, the archetype of the saying “put the heart into the belly” appeared, expressing the meaning of being rest assured and “heart” refers to the heart of fearing here. Such as:

(3) Tan Shaowen’s back now, and that’s when he puts his heart in his belly. (*Qi Lu Deng*, Number 46)

In the Republic of China, “broke the belly to change the heart” or “dug heart from the broken belly” means the operation of heart change. The heart is an organ of the human body, which is different from that of “put the heart in the belly”. It can be used as a side evidence of “heart in the stomach”, indicating the inherent cognition of “heart in the belly” in people’s mind, although not within the scope of our research. Such as:

(4) If it’s really to dig heart to break the belly, I’m afraid that he is reluctant to it. (*A Dream of Red Mansions*, Number 63)

In modern, “put the heart in the belly” referred to rest assured. It’s not only applied to daily dialogue and other spoken languages, but also applied to some other written languages. “Heart” mainly means concerning, such as:

(5) Eat the product we produce here and put the heart in the belly. (*People’s Daily*, August 4, 2016)

(6) They all said that there are no side effects, let me put my heart in my belly. (*Xinjing News*, January 18, 2019)

In short, the “heart” of “put the heart in the belly” has been become abstract conceptualized. It no longer refers to the human organ, but refers to the organ produced abstract thoughts and emotions. The heart and emotion are closely related in the cognitive framework of “container and function”. The activation of the conceptual mind is accompanied by the activation of conceptual emotion. The heart is cognitively significant because the heartbeat is perceived and touched, while the emotion cannot. Therefore, people use a significant
heart to refer to the goal concept of emotion. It initially developed from the upper categories of “mind, thought” to the other lower categories of fearing, concerning, and so on. It’s just in line with the semantic evolution of “put the heart in the belly” from “bringing mind back” to “resting assured”.

The Relationship Between “Heart”, “Chest”, and “Belly”

Physical Spatial Relations

Heart, chest, and belly are important organs of the human body. Because the heart is in the chest, if taking the chest as a container, the heart is the object of the container. There is a relationship of including and being included between them. The chest is between the neck and the abdomen, so the “heart” included in the chest is also between the neck and abdomen. The “heart” and “belly” neighbored in the physical space, such as Figure 1. That is to say, the above of “heart” is the throat; the below of “heart” is the belly; such a physical spatial relationship becomes the formation of a realistic basis of the common saying “heart is about to jump out of the throat/throat eye” and “put the heart in the belly”.

Mental Spatial Relations

Does the “cavity” of “put heart in the cavity” refer to chest or abdominal cavity? The Chinese Dictionary gives the interpretation of the “cavity” in this sentence:

【cavity】❶ chest and abdomen; body.

Then looking at the interpretation of “chest and abdomen” in the Chinese Dictionary:

【xiong fu】❶ chest and abdomen; trusted subordinate.

“Xiong fu” has become a word in the pre-qin period. There is a strong correlation between “chest” and “abdomen” in people’s cognition, which is determined by the common sense that the abdomen is under the chest. Physical space distance is close to the psychological space distance, and then attracted each other, combined with each other, and eventually solidified into a side-by-side compound word. As the Iconicity Theory states, “Entities are close in the cognition or conceptions are also close in their linguistic forms in time and space”.

When “xiong fu” means trusted subordinate, “chest” denoting “heart”, it shows the psychological space distance between “heart” and “chest” is much smaller than that between the “heart” and “belly” in people’s cognition, so the former’s semantic correlation is much higher than the latter’s. We confirmed our conclusion by
testing the semantic correlation between heart, chest, and belly in 1,220 languages around the world using the Cross-Language Semantic Web Database (CLICS), just as Figure 2.

Figure 2. Semantic correlation between the heart, chest, and belly in CLICS.

The semantic correlation between them is in line with the objective truth. Just as that the physical distance between “heart” and “chest” is less smaller than that between “heart” and “belly” in reality. The adjacent relationship between “heart” and “abdomen” in physical space widens people’s psychological space compared to that between “heart” and “chest”. This space distance caused gap providing a downward placement of the accommodation for the “heart” beating uneasiness, and even to jump out of the throat.

In addition, if we take the heart as a mass point gathered on the center of gravity, the higher the mass point is, the greater the potential energy of gravity is. In other conditions unchanged, the energy of higher mass point is greater than that of the lower mass point. As is known, the greater the more unstable and the lower the more stable. So in order to make the unstable heart in a stable state, you have to be decentralized, that is, put in the belly; then “put the heart into the belly” is logical.

The Accommodating Relationship Between “Belly” and “Heart”

“Put the heart in the belly” indicates that belly has the basic function of accommodating the abstract conceptual domain of “heart”. This basic function derives from the semantic properties of the human organ itself.
Semantic Properties and Functions of the Belly

“Abdomen” means the area below the chest of the torso in the pre-qin period. There is already a usage of the original meaning in Oracle. “Du” appeared in the Qin and Han Dynasties representing the concept of human or animal belly. In Song Dynasty “Du Zi” appeared, not only the part of the below of chest and the above of leg but also the stomach it indicates. “The below of chest and the above of leg” indicates the spatial and bounded nature of the belly. The stomach indicates the capacity and specificity of the belly. So we summarize the semantic nature of “belly” as follows:

[+spatiality] [+boundness] [+capacity] [+specificity]

Of the above four attributes, it is clear that “capacity” is the basic function of the belly. The capacity of abstract concepts is derived from the expansion of specific foods. Although the stomach is a direct organ to contain food, the stomach is internal, invisible, and the belly is prominent and visible. The prominent, visible are much more significant than the inner, invisible. In the “container-content” of the cognitive framework, the activation of the concept “belly” will be accompanied by activation of the concept of stomach, so people often regard “stomach” as “belly”. Then the belly will naturally have the function of accommodating food.

Typical Container “Belly” and Typical Member “Heart”

The human body itself is a container, and the chest and belly can certainly be seen as containers. But the chest is an intrinsic, invisible, and untouchable container, which is not significant in the psychology of perception, while the belly is external, visible, touchable, and even audible such as growling of the belly and ventriloquism etc. Multiple sensory overlays further highlight the significance of the belly, so that the “belly” is more attractive, more easily identifiable, processed, and remembered, and more likely to be typical in human containers.

As a typical container of the human body, the stomach has become a “universal container” in people’s cognition, and the ancients even regarded the belly as a typical thought organ, giving it a profound atmosphere of thought and culture, so the accommodations of belly are complicated.

Conclusion

Through the investigation, the semantic category of containment and its proportion were generally expressed as follow: food (43.1%), emotional attitude (23.85%), ideology (13.39%), language knowledge (9.2%), personality (7.53%), and mental state (2.93%). The proportion of abstract concept accounts for 56.9%. It can be seen that things representing abstract concept are typical members of the containment. The “heart” of “put the heart in the belly” is a typical member of the containments as abstract emotion naturally. Thus the belly is a typical container. “Belly” and “heart” become each other’s typical symbol; the more typical the easier it is to establish psychological connection between them, so people almost ignore the logic of this saying, and thus widely spread.

References