An Analysis of Iconicity and Metaphor in Chinese Characters
——The Chinese Character Heart and the Radical

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The Chinese character is a combination of sound, visual image and meaning. It can be classified into single characters and compound characters. Compound words consist of two parts, one for sound and one for meaning. The Chinese character is ideographic, which means it can represent meaning without referring to the sound. In the Han Dynasty, Xu Shen summarized six methods of creating characters in his Shuo-wen chieh-tzu (Xu, Ji 2001): pictogram, simple indicative, compound indicatives, phonosemantic compound characters, borrowed characters and derived characters. Pictograms are the basic way of creating Chinese characters, so that almost all words can find their origin in iconicity.

Iconicity is the opposite of arbitrariness; its role in language has been studied to challenge the idea put forward by Saussure that language is solely defined by the arbitrariness of the sign. C.S.Peirce divided signs into icon, index, and symbol. He further divided icons into image, diagram and metaphor. (Peirce, Buchler 2011) An image icon "sounds like" or "looks like" the meaning, and it is the simple imitation of meaning; a diagrammatic icon is a sign whose form and meaning share a similar structure or relationship; a metaphorical icon is one in which meaning is expressed through metaphor.

The concept of heart has permeated both the morphology and semantics of the Chinese language. Heart, written as "心" (xīn) in Chinese, is a single character. It also works as a radical and forms many other words. The character "心" is imagistic, because it iconically portrays the heart. In words consisting of the "心" radical, we also find some which exhibit diagrammatic iconicity. For example, the character "意" (yì) (‘expression’) is composed of "音" (yīn) (‘voice’) and "心" (‘heart’), which suggests that meaning is obtained after one has observed another's appearance and voice by heart. The word busy is written as "忙" (máng) in Chinese. It has two parts, "忄" (a form of "心" that is used when "心" works as a radical) and "亡" (wáng) (‘dead’). It can be seen that this word is metaphoric because it contains a metaphor that one can be ‘busy to death’.

Previous studies mainly focused on iconicity at the phonetic and syntactic level, but this paper aims to reveal the iconicity in the Chinese written system based on the HEART: its radical and its character. It reports on a comprehensive study of people's rich cognitive understanding of HEART by analyzing different characters composed of the heart radical, and it discusses the role that the concept of Heart plays in the Chinese language -- for example, the creation of new metaphoric characters. Finally, this paper wants to say that language is motivated to some extent and a large part of it comes from people's experience.

Key words: Iconicity, Chinese Character, Metaphor, Heart, Radical

References