Four-word Idioms Containing Opposites in Mandarin[1]

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the occurrences of opposites in Mandarin four-word idioms. We used the Revised Ministry of Education Online Dictionary to search for a total of 12 combinations of opposites in four-word idioms based on 32 opposites. These idioms were analyzed in terms of their dictionary definitions, combinations, and internal structure. Based on the definitions and the POS information on the components in the online dictionary, as well as the combinations of opposites, we collected 910 types of idioms. Our analysis used quantitative method to analyze not only idioms but idioms containing opposites, and our study is one of the few studies that have utilized this approach.

1. Introduction

There have been multiple studies on Mandarin idioms, but those that have inspected contrasting words in idioms have seldom been carried out in the past. Wang, Wu, Li, Huang, and Hui (2010: 501) [1], one of the few studies that conducted a corpus-based analysis of the co-occurrence of Chinese opposites, proved that little research on the issue of Chinese antonymy has been performed in the past[2]: "We searched 'antonymy' and 'corpus|corpora' as keywords in the CNKI, an e-resource containing all Chinese journals, but no matches were retrieved. Therefore there is a need for further analysis of Chinese antonymy in this way." Our goal was to examine opposites in Mandarin four-character constructions and the same

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[2] We used "opposites" as a more general term instead of "antonyms" in this paper, but we kept Wang et al.'s (2010) [1] term in the literature review.

observation was found—little research has been conducted on this topic. Our search in several major databases (e.g., EBSCOHost, ProQuest, CNKI, Google Scholar, etc.) using the keywords 'corpus' AND 'four-character idiom'/'idiom'/成語 (*chengyu*) AND 'antonym'/ 'opposites' returned hardly any satisfactory results. This indicated that either the research of Mandarin opposites has evoked less interest or opposites have not been looked at because they are too straightforward.

In this paper, we will show how a study on Mandarin opposites can be interesting and is worth running. The aim of the study was to investigate idiomatic four-character lexical constructions containing opposites in Mandarin (hereafter, four-word idioms). The present study intended to answer the following questions presented in (1) below:

(1) (a) What are the patterns of the opposites in Mandarin four-word idioms?

(b) What kinds of meanings are carried by the opposites in the four-word idioms?

The occurrence of paired opposites in the structure of four-character idioms is an issue worth looking into in depth. The meaning changes and effects due to the construction of the paired opposites are also worthy of closer observation. In what follows, we will review past literature on antonyms/opposites and Chinese four-word idioms.

2. Literature Review

There has been much discussion on opposites in past literature, but mostly regarding their constructions. It is also important to know that opposites are not always in opposition. Pioneered by Jones (2002) [2], Jones, Murphy, Paradis, and Willners (2007 [3], 2012 [4]), and Murphy, Paradis, Willners, and Jones (2009) [5], a new view of antonyms was postulated—antonyms can be identified by a certain construction in the corpus (e.g., *big and small; rich and poor*) as well as comparatively (*he was more feminine than masculine*) (Jones [2002] [2] used antonyms instead of opposites).

As for Chinese idioms, Wu (1992:10-12 [6]; 1995:65 [7]) defined Chinese idioms (成語)

as "an old expression that has prevailed in society for a long period of time" and "[t]he meanings of most idioms can be deducible from their constituents. With some of the idioms, integrated meanings are unlikely to be directly inferred from their constituents" (p. 10-11).

謝健雄 (2006) [8] analyzed the number of syntactic combinations in《超活用成語大辭典》by 遲嘯川 and 許易人 (2002) [9] and found that four-word combinations constituted 98.6% in that dictionary, while the remaining four-word combinations were longer expressions. In Wang et al. (2010) [1], they investigated the formations of Chinese antonym pairs and phrases using several fixed frames and found six significant patterns in Chinese, which are shown in Table 1 below. We added the examples from 陳曉燕 (2004) [10] and 韓漢雄 (1993) [11], which Wang et al. (2010) [1] cited in their paper but with no examples.

Table 1: Patterns of Chinese antonyms

Features of Patterns	Patterns	Examples
Interleaved with a second antonym pair	X+Y+!X+!Y	送舊迎新 陽奉陰違
Two juxtaposed antonym pairs	X+!X+Y+!Y	悲歡離合 浮沉起落
Interleaved with synonymous words	X+Y1+!X+Y2	生離死別 冷嘲熱諷 南腔北調
Followed by a fixed phrase	X+!X+m+n	悲喜交集 賞罰分明
Interleaved with grammatical particles	半/忽/亦+X+半/忽/亦+!X	半信半疑 忽冷忽熱 亦喜亦憂
Repetition of antonym pairs	X+X+!X+!X	吞吞吐吐 進進出出 斷斷續續

Note: An exclamation mark marks the opposite meaning.

Wang et al. (2010) [1] also examined 371 antonyms proposed by 譚達人 (1989) [12], which were extracted "partly from dictionaries and partly intuitively" (p. 502). Examples of these antonyms include 褒貶, 東西, 多少, 教學, 來往, 冷熱, 利害, 兄弟, etc. (p. 502). Wang et al. (2010) [1] first checked whether these antonyms appeared in reverse order (e.g., *貶褒) in the Corpus of the Center of Chinese Linguistics (CCCL, Peking University), but none of them were reversed. Nonetheless, examples such as 怯勇 and 瘦胖 could be

reversed (p. 503). They then delimited the X and Y elements in Table 1 to be 東西, 南北, 上下, 左右, 前後, 遠近, 裡外, and 內外. Next, they used the frame "a+X+b+!X+c, in which, a, b and c denotes one Chinese character and !X is the opposite of X" (p. 503). This frame contains two pairs, namely, "a+X+b+!X and X+b+!X+c" (p. 503), in which the "a+X+b+!X" pair is called the B1 Pair and the "X+b+!X+c pair" is called the B2 Pair (cf. Jones, 2002) [2]. This part of the results returned examples such as 宮裡宮外 and 對裡對外 (as few examples were provided, these two were the ones Wang et al. [2010] [1]used to discuss incorrectly tagged examples). This pattern of antonyms, as shown in a lexical construction, was close to the ones targeted by the current study. Nonetheless, our analysis was more refined, which will be elaborated in the methodology section.

Apart from the research above, studies that have focused on Chinese four-word idioms only are far too many to be cited individually. Those that dealt especially with opposites are sparse, while some were conducted in a less systematic way, but many provided random mentions of examples. Qiu (2015: 84) [13] examined the existence of numbers in Chinese four-character idioms, such as (a) 同語素類疊 (e.g., 七早八早 and 賊頭賊腦); (b) 異語素鑲嵌－ (e.g., 一問一答); and (c) 數字式套語 [~A~B], [A~B~], [A~A~] (e.g., 挑三揀四, 一時半刻, 一心一意). Although the study was not corpus-based, it provided a useful categorization of idioms with numbers. Another research on numbers in Mandarin was by Nall (2009) [14]. Both Nall (2009) [14] and Wu (1992 [6]; 1995 [7]) summarized the semantic relations of Mandarin idioms provided by Ma (1978) [15]. These relations are (a) Synonymic Relation (百伶百俐、七拉八扯, Nall, 2009: 93) [14]; (b) Contrast Relation (一出一入、一死一生, Nall, 2009: 95) [14]; (c) Sequential Relation (三思而行、重九登高, Nall, 2009: 95) [14]; (d) Purposive Relation (懲一警百、五斗解酲, Nall, 2009: 96) [14]; and (e) Causative Relation (一謙四益、一言喪邦, Nall, 2009: 96).

When opposites serve as an element in four-word idioms, they can appear in various orders, and their order might affect the internal structure, the part-of-speech (POS), or even

the meanings. In our study, we intended to find all possible combinations of opposites in four-word idioms. We also looked at their sequence, syntactic role, morphological structure, and whether they carried the same meanings in different positions.

3. Methodology

The current version of 教育部重編國語辭典修訂本[3] is an officially edited national reference dictionary and it allows searches for different combinations. By entering a dot (.) in this online reference dictionary, we retrieved different four-word idiom combinations containing opposites, such as "真假..", "假真..", ".真假.", ".假真.", "..真假", "..假真", "真.假.", "假.真.", ".真.假", ".假.真", "真..假", "假..真", etc., which are instances of four-word idioms that contained opposites. This dictionary also provides the definitions, word origins, and example sentences for some of the words.[4] As for the Sinica Corpus, which contains six different categories (literature, living, social, science, philosophy, and art) from 1981 to 2007, with a total of 19,247 articles,[5] we only used POS-tagging from the Sinica Corpus to determine the POS of each "word" in the four-word idioms. For instance, when we tagged 忽冷忽熱, we used the Sinica Corpus to check the POS of 忽, and the adverb tag "D" was found (thus, "DADA").

Jones (2002: 29) [2] suggested that "the best one can do is to investigate a wide range of pairs which a majority of speakers might recognise as being 'good opposites'." Following this, we looked for "good opposites" by generating a list of opposites with a group of trained language researchers. The list was then verified by dictionaries and online lexical resources.

As Jones (2002: 26-27) [2] indicated that "no single definition of antonymy has been universally agreed upon", from the list of opposites, we selected 32 to be observed.

Table 2: Thirty-two selected opposites

天地	有無	始終	明暗	尊卑	前後	是非	內外	強弱	粗細	表裡
生死	上下	高低	多少	繁簡	長短	男女	陰陽	盛衰	動靜	左右
異同	冷熱	輕重	真假	逆順	軟硬	虛實	裡外	大小	增減	

The actual procedures comprised two stages. The first stage was to search for four-word idioms that contained opposites, record the dictionary definitions (辭典定義), and then observe whether there were idioms that appeared with different word orders (字序調換) and POS-tagging (詞類標記). At this stage, this study also examined the correspondence between word meanings and whether positive words usually appeared before negative words.

4. Results and Discussion

The number and types of idioms retrieved from the dictionary are summarized in Table 3 below. From a total of 3,017 four-word idioms, 910 constituted 30.16% of the total instances.

Table 3: Thirty-two selected opposites and the number and types of idioms found

Opposites	Freq.	%	Opposites	Freq.	%	Opposites	Freq.	%
天地	**182**	**20.00**	異同	24	2.64	表裡	8	0.88
生死	**71**	**7.80**	始終	23	2.53	真假	7	0.77
前後	**67**	**7.36**	高低	22	2.42	冷熱	6	0.66
長短	**66**	**7.25**	內外	19	2.09	尊卑	4	0.44
大小	**58**	**6.37**	陰陽	17	1.87	軟硬	4	0.44
有無	**48**	**5.27**	裡外	16	1.76	繁簡	3	0.33
上下	**46**	**5.05**	明暗	16	1.76	粗細	3	0.33
是非	**44**	**4.84**	強弱	15	1.65	逆順	3	0.33
男女	38	4.18	多少	15	1.65	增減	2	0.22
輕重	33	3.63	盛衰	12	1.32	動靜	2	0.22
左右	25	2.75	虛實	11	1.21			
Total							**910**	**100**

In Table 3, 天地 was the most frequently found opposite collected from the dictionary, followed by 生死, 前後, and 長短. We found that the first eight pairs of opposites formed 63.96% of the total 910 idioms, indicating that 天地, 生死, 前後, 長短, and 大小 constituted a majority of the four-word idioms among all types.

We also calculated the proportions of four-word idioms that showed a changed order of AB and whether there was a semantic change. Only 15.6% had a word order change and the remaining 84.2% had the same word order that we expected them to appear in (i.e., AB). Among the word order change, only a small number appeared in the form 上情下達 and 下情上達; a majority was in 花明柳暗 and 柳暗花明, although we preferred to see the former type. In Table 4 below, because of the latter type of word changes, it was not surprising that only a small number of idioms (2.2%) had meaning changes, while 97.8% kept their original idiom meanings. Apart from those that changed with their components, as in 花明柳暗 and 柳暗花明, those that had repeated words did not change in meaning, such as 不生不死.

Table 4: Analysis of word orders of opposites and semantic changes

有無字序調換	成語數量	有無語意改變	成語數量
有字序調換	144 (15.8%)	有語意改變	20 (2.2%)
無字序調換	766 (84.2%)	無語意改變	890 (97.8%)
總計	**910 (100%)**	總計	**910 (100%)**

More than 84.2% of the four-word idioms were more fixed; and even if the remaining 15.8% had word order changes, their meanings were often not affected because they changed with their neighboring components, such as 花明柳暗 and 柳暗花明. Only a small number of opposites changed and had contrastive meanings, as in 上情下達 and 下情上達. We then analyzed the AB patterns (成語格式) of each opposite pair (13 patterns in total):

Table 5: AB patterns of the four-word idioms containing opposites

成語格式	例子	成語數量	成語格式	例子	成語數量
?A?B	大題小作	337 (37.0%)	??BA	飛流短長	10 (1.1%)
A?B?	明查暗訪	206 (22.6%)	AABB	裡裡外外	10 (1.1%)

?B?A	視死如生	111 (12.2%)	B??A	無奇不有	6 (0.7%)
AB??	左右逢源	94 (10.3%)	A??B	盛極必衰	5 (0.5%)
B?A?	弱肉強食	68 (7.5%)	?AB?	半大小子	4 (0.4%)
??AB	別有天地	45 (4.9%)	?BA?	絕地天通	1 (0.1%)
BA??	終始如一	13 (1.4%)	總筆數		**910** (100%)

As can be seen in Table 5 above, when we calculated all the AB word orders, we found a total of 701 (77%) instances among the 910 idioms. This shows that our AB word order instinct was matched a majority of the time in the database, indicating that an AB order was expected. In other words, we mentally stored the opposites in an AB word order (e.g., 天地 instead of 地天; 明暗 instead of 暗明) and they appeared almost 77% in a similar word order in the idioms. The BA word order accounted for about 23% of the remaining idioms. In Table 5, the "?A?B" pattern appears to be the most frequent pattern, followed by the "A?B?" pattern, as a result of the POS of the idioms. There were 71 POS patterns in total (POS patterns with frequency fewer than seven are not shown):

Table 6: Distributions of four-word idiom types in terms of POS patterns (Type Freq. ≥ 7)

POS	Example	Freq.	%	POS	Example	Freq.	%
VNVN	想前顧後	301	33.08	AAAA	長長短短	11	1.21
NANA	天差地遠	112	12.31	VAVA	知高識低	10	1.10
ANAN	千生萬死	86	9.45	NNVN	左右開弓	9	0.99
NVNV	天造地設	74	8.13	NNDA	表裡相合	8	0.88
NNNN	天涯地角	50	5.49	VVVV	有屈無伸[6]	8	0.88
DVDV	後擁前推	28	3.08	ANDV	小題大作	7	0.77
NNVV	生死存亡	25	2.75	DVNN	不顧前後	7	0.77
VVNN	撥弄是非	17	1.87	NNAN	天地萬物	7	0.77
DADA	半大不小	16	1.76	AVAV	冷譏熱嘲	7	0.77
NNDV	是非不分	13	1.43				

This analysis helped us anticipate the kind of structure that would appear under each pattern and the kind of POS patterns denoted by each.

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[6] 有 has a tag of "V_2" (a verb) in the Sinica Corpus.

5. Conclusion and Future Research

Mandarin four-word idioms have a long history, and many studies have focused on them. However, idioms with opposites have seldom been studied. The few cases that were studied were not analyzed in the way they were in our study. In this paper, we addressed the following: (a) the internal structure of four-word idioms that contain opposites; (b) the order of opposites in the four-word idioms; and (c) the most frequently found patterns of opposites in four-word idioms. Moreover, we analyzed the possibility of word order changes and how the word order changes affected the meanings, if at all. We also analyzed the POS of each component in the four-word idioms. All this information is useful in teaching idioms and when considering whether idioms should be collected in dictionaries. We also found which pairs of opposites are more prominent in Mandarin as well as all about these opposites.

As noted in this paper, our methodology has limitations. We overcame the limitations by decision-making, which may have affected some of the results, but they were weighted throughout by minimizing the problems these decisions caused regarding the complete results. Thus, more studies are needed. The frequency of idioms in a corpus was the original focus of this study, but the frequency of the idioms was lower than expected and not all combinations could be found in the corpus. In the future, this will need to be overcome by finding a suitable corpus for the study of idiom frequency.

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