



## A Comparative Analysis of the Meanings of the Chinese character “头” and the English word “head”—Taking Referential Meanings, Figurative Meanings and Extended meanings as Examples

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**Abstract:** Although the basic meaning of the Chinese character “头” corresponds to the basic meaning of the English word “head”, they belong to different cultures. Therefore, in addition to the basic meanings, their meanings are quite different. This article intends to analyze the meanings of the Chinese character “头” and the English word “head” through the comparison of referential meanings, figurative meanings and extended meanings, and then figures out their semantic differences. This article finds that: firstly, the Chinese character “头” and the English word “head” have a close relationship of inclusion in referential meanings, and the Chinese character “头” refers to more extensive and abstract things. Secondly, the differences in figurative meanings are more reflected in the differences between Chinese and Western cultures. Finally, as for the extended meanings, the Chinese character “头” can be used as different parts of speech, and then has a rich meaning, while the extended meaning of the English word “head” is obviously related to its basic meaning, and its extended meanings also revolve around its basic meaning. Through above findings, the cultural differences between Chinese and Western can be further explored, which helps both Chinese and English learners to acquire the target language better and it is also of great practical significance for cross-cultural communicators.

**Keywords:** referential meanings, figurative meanings, extended meanings.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the contrastive study between English and Chinese, scholars make a comparative analysis of the Chinese character “头” and the English word “head” from cognitive metaphor and polysemy. The most basic indication range of the Chinese word “头” and the English word “head” is the category of “body part”, both of which have multi meanings. From this point of view, the two in the category of “body parts” expressed very rich, such as hair, brain, head, etc. Li & Wen [1] took the Chinese character “头” and the English word “head” as the corpus, and analyzed the cognitive thinking structure and presentation mode

of polysemy extension from the perspective of cognitive metonymy and metaphor. The research finds that the extension of meanings mainly depends on the cognitive thinking structure of metonymy and metaphor, namely, the proximity thinking feature of metonymy and the similarity thinking feature of metaphor. Metonymy is the basis of metaphor, and they have a continuum relationship, but the role that the metaphorical thinking plays is greater than metonymy's. Metonymy is like a chain, while metaphor is radiative. As a compound word of polysemy, the English word “head” plays a more important role in the process of forming “head”

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compound words than metaphor, because its semantic changes are related to human metaphor and metonymy thinking [2].

In addition, the upsurge and development of cognitive linguistics make it possible for people to deeply explore the internal cognitive mechanism in the process of word meaning categorization, and further study the Chinese character “头” and the English word “head” from the perspective of metaphor, to explore the underlying reasons, that is, the understanding of metaphorical expression is largely subject to the washback effect of national cultural model. As a result, the metaphors of the Chinese character “头” and the English word “head” also have individual differences [3]. Yongxian Luo [4] took the English word “head” as the research object, and proved that from the perspective of concept and cognition, it could help people better understand how the potential universal features and cultural factors interact in language and cognition. However, the above research on the Chinese character “头” and the English word “head” is relatively mature, but few scholars have made a comparative analysis of the meanings of the Chinese character “头” and the English word “head”. This article intends to make a comparative analysis of the meanings of the Chinese character “头” and the English word “head”, taking referential meanings, figurative meanings and figurative meanings as examples, in order to help people better understand the meanings of the Chinese character “头” and the English word “head”, especially the differences between them, and help people be more accurate in the choice of words and sentences.

## REFERENTIAL MEANINGS

### The Same Referential Meanings

According to definition of the dictionary, referential meaning refers to the rational meaning of a word, which not only forms an abstract concept, but also provides people with the referential meaning of the concept. The referential meaning of words is the core and the most basic meaning of words. Firstly, the Chinese character “头” and the English word “head” have the same referential meanings. In the sixth edition of the *Contemporary Chinese Dictionary* [5], the first definition of the head is: “the part of the uppermost part of the human body or the foremost part of an animal with the mouth, nose, eyes, etc.” In some Chinese words, such as “头顶(top of the head)”, “头颅(head skull)”, “头皮(scalp)”, “头破血流(with one’s head broken and bleeding)”, “头疼(have a headache)”, “白头偕老(of husband and wife live together for an entire lifetime)”, “抱头痛哭(hold one’s head and cry one’s heart out)”, “点头哈腰(humble oneself in serving a master)” all have the referential meaning of the

Chinese character “头”. In the fourth edition of the *Long Men Dictionary of Contemporary English* [6], the first definition of the English word “head” is: “the top part of your body that has your face at the front and is supported by your neck”. In some English phrases, such as “turn your head”, “shake your head”, “cock your head”, “bald head”, “head injury”, the English word “head” has the same referential meanings as the Chinese character “头”. Therefore, it is not difficult to find that the basic meaning of the Chinese character “头” and the English word “head” correspond to the referential meanings in the two dictionaries.

Secondly, when the Chinese character “头” and the English word “head” refer to the meaning of “leader”, they also have the same referential meanings. In the sixth edition of the *Contemporary Chinese Dictionary* [5], one of the definitions of the Chinese character “头” is: “头领, 为首的人 (chieftain; leader; head)”. For example, in those words “头头儿 (head ;chief; lead; boss)”, “头头脑脑(big shot; big wig)”, “头领(chieftain; leader; head)”, “头面人物 (prominent/leading figure; big shot; wig; bigwig)”, “头目(head of a gang; chieftain; ringleader) ” and so on, the Chinese character “头” refers to the same meaning, namely “leader”. But it is worth noting that “头头儿 (head; chief; lead; boss)” and “头目 (head of a gang; chieftain; ringleader) ” have derogatory meanings in Chinese. In the fourth edition of the *Long Men Dictionary of Contemporary English* [6], one of the definitions of the English word “head” is: “person in charge”. In English, people often use the word “head” to express “leader”. In addition, it is also often used for “head teacher, head waiter/chef/gardener, etc.” From the above analysis, it can be seen that although English and Chinese belong to different languages, they still have some similarities in referential meanings.

### Different Referential Meanings

Besides the same referential meanings, the Chinese character “头” and the English word “head” show more differences in referential meanings. First, in the sixth edition of the *Contemporary Chinese Dictionary* [5] and the *General Dictionary of Contemporary Chinese* [7], the Chinese character “头” can refer to “第一(first)”, so the Chinese character “头” in those words “头班车(first bus), 头彩(first prize in lottery), 头等(first-class; first-rate), 头号(number one; size one), 头婚(marriage for the first; first marriage), 头年(first year), 头生(of a woman give a birth for the first time), 头天(yesterday; previous day; first day)” all refer to the meaning “first”. While in English, the English word “head” does not express the meaning “first”. In the fourth edition of the *Long Men Dictionary of Contemporary*

English [6], the English word “head” means “at top: to be at the top of a list or a group of people or things”. In the sentence “This movie heads the list of Oscar nominations.” the English word “head” means “at top”. The difference between the Chinese character “头” and the English word “head” is that the Chinese character “头” refers to things from the perspective of order, while the English word “head” refers to things from the perspective of orientation. And the Chinese character “头” has no emotional color when it expresses the meaning “order”, while the English word “head” is covered with a layer of “honor” with emotional color which also reflects the differences between Chinese and Western cognition. Second, in the *General Dictionary of Contemporary Chinese*[7], the Chinese character “头” can refer to the residual part of the object, which means “残余部分 (remnant; end)”, such as “布头(cloth end)”, “蜡头 (candle end)”, “烟头(cigarette end)”, “铅笔头(pencil end)”, etc. Although the English word “head” can also refer to “end; top”, and the referential meaning “top” is the same as the Chinese character “头”, that is, in the fourth edition of the *Long Men Dictionary of Contemporary English* [6], the English word “head” refers to “front”, it cannot refer to the remaining part or end of the article. From this point of view, the Chinese character “头” and the English word “head” are almost a kind of inclusive relationship, and it seems that the things referred to by the Chinese character “头” are also more extensive and abstract. Besides, the Chinese character “头” can also be used as a noun to refer “aspect; side”, such as “分头寻找 (search in different directions)”, “两头讨好 (try to please both sides)” and so on, but there is no corresponding referential meanings in English. From the above analysis, it is clear that there may be only slight differences in the different referential meanings of the Chinese character “头” and the English word “head”, but some of them are totally unequal.

### FIGURATIVE MEANINGS

Figurative meaning, by definition, is the metaphorical, idiomatic, or ironic sense of a word or expression, in contrast to its literal meaning. Since the Chinese character “头” and the English word “head” have undergone diachronic development, they have different figurative meanings. This article mainly compares the different figurative meanings of the Chinese character “头” and the English word “head” from their fixed collocation. The corpus mainly comes from the *New Century Chinese-English dictionary* [8] and the Chinese idiom website [9] and the fourth edition of the *Long Men Dictionary of Contemporary English* [6].

First of all, part of the figurative meanings of the Chinese character “头” comes from its most basic meaning, that is, “the part of the uppermost part of the human body or the foremost part of an animal with the mouth, nose, eyes, etc.” And this feature of the Chinese character “头” can be reflected in the following four character idioms, such as “三头六臂 (those who has superpower)”, “龙头蛇尾(dwindle away to nothing after an initial display of greatness)”, “马角乌头(things don’t work out)”, “马面牛头(all kinds of vicious people)”, “没头苍蝇 (those people who do things aimlessly)”, “佛头加秽 (putting bad things on good things and sully good things)”, “描头画角(imitating deliberately, nothing new)” and so on. And from above examples, it is obviously that the meaning of the Chinese character “头” has lost its basic referential meaning. It mainly forms a complete figurative meaning of idiom with other words. However, the figurative meanings of the English word “head” are quite different from that of the Chinese character “头” in four character idioms, such as “keep your head above water(to deal with a difficult situation, especially on in which you have financial problems, and just manage to survive)”, “over somebody’s head (too difficult or complicated for somebody to understand)”, “bite somebody’s head off(to shout at somebody in an angry way, especially without reason)”, “give somebody’s their head(to allow somebody to do what they want without trying to stop them)” and so on. From the fourth edition of the *Long Men Dictionary of Contemporary English* [6], it can be found that all the collocations with the English word “head” have no similar figurative meanings with the Chinese character “头”. And just as mentioned before, such as “bite somebody’s head off(to shout at somebody in an angry way, especially without reason)”, “give somebody’s their head(to allow somebody to do what they want without trying to stop them)”, the figurative meanings of the English word “head” is more reflected the cultural factors. Although the figurative meanings of the English word “head” and the Chinese character “头” are developed from their basic meaning, there are great differences between them.

In addition, it should be pointed out that the figurative meanings of the Chinese character “头” develop from its meaning “top; end”, such as “百尺竿头 (a high official position and fame, or a high achievement in learning and career)”, “百丈竿头 (Taoism to reach a high level)”, “初露头角 (begin to show one’s ability)”, “床头金尽 (running out money and living out money)” and so on. It is obvious that the basic meaning of the Chinese character “头” has almost disappeared in its figurative meanings. As for the English word “head”, there is no figurative

meaning “in the first place” in its fixed collocation in the fourth edition of the *Long Men Dictionary of Contemporary English* [6]. Moreover, there is only the figurative meaning of its basic meaning, such as “a big head” mentioned above. It can be seen that the Chinese character “头” is much abundant than the English word “head” in the evolution and development of its figurative meanings.

## EXTENDED MEANINGS

### The Same Extended Meanings

The meaning of a word extend and develop through usage, thus acquiring extended meanings, such as shifting meanings or metaphorical meanings (also known as associated meaning, implied meaning or connotative meaning) [10]. The Chinese character “头” and the English word “head” have the same extended meanings. First of all, both the Chinese character “头” and the English word “head” can be extended from the part of body to represent a “person”. For example, in Chinese there is the four character idiom “人头攒动 (be seething with people)”, and in English “show one’s head” also means “someone’s appearance”. Therefore, both the Chinese character “头” and the English word “head” are extended to the concept of “human being”. Secondly, both the Chinese character “头” and the English word “head” can be extended as measure word. In Chinese, there are expressions such as “一头牛 (a head of cattle)”, “两头猪 (two pigs)” and so on [11]. In English, there are also expressions such as “a head of cattle”. Therefore, they are similar when extended to the meaning of measure word.

### Different Extended Meanings

The differences between the Chinese character “头” and the English word “head” in extended meanings are also obvious. First of all, the Chinese character “头” can be extended to the noun, meaning “aspect; side”, which can be expressed “他们是一头的 (they are on the same side)”, or “心挂两头 (the heart is linked to two aspects)”. Secondly, the Chinese character “头” can also be extended as an adjective, used in front of “年 (year)” or “天”, meaning “previous; last”, such as “头年” (last year), “头天” (last day; yesterday). Finally, the Chinese character “头” can be extended to a preposition, which means “临; 接近 (before; prior to)”. For example, in the sentence “他每天头七点就到 (He comes before seven o’clock every day.)”, the Chinese character “头” is used as preposition. From the extended meanings of the Chinese character “头”, it can be seen that the extended meaning of the Chinese character “头” is particularly rich, which can be extended to different parts of speech, its semantics are also different, and it has little

relationship with the original interpretation of the Chinese character “头”.

However, the English word “head” is different from the Chinese character “头”. The English word “head” can be further extended to the meanings of “intelligence”, “thinking ability” and so on. This is because “intelligence” and “thinking ability” are closely related to the function of the brain, such as “put something into somebody’s head”, “get your head round something”. What’s more, the English word “头” can also be extended to verbs, which means “go towards...”, for example, “This ship was heading for Cuba.” However, the Chinese character “头” has no extended meanings of verbs. To sum up, the extended meanings of the English word “head” are obviously related to its basic meaning, and its extended meanings also revolve around its basic meaning.

## CONCLUSION

Through the above comparative analysis of the Chinese character “头” and the English word “head”, it can be seen that the referential meanings, figurative meanings and extended meanings of the two have similarities, but more embody the differences. Besides, the basic definitions of the Chinese character “头” and the English word “head” are basically the same, which shows that the initial cognition of the word “head” has similarity between Chinese and Westerners. But Chinese and Western cultures are the products of two modes of thinking, with the evolution of history, the Chinese character “头” and the English word “head” have been given a variety of figurative meanings and extended meanings. Through the comparative analysis of the Chinese character “头” and the English word “head”, readers may have a better understanding of the differences between the Chinese character “头” and the English word “head” in the choice of words in Chinese and Western cultures, which can help Chinese learners and English learners learn the target language better to a certain extent.

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