Book Review


The title of the book, and in particular the powerful metaphor “Migrating Meanings”, raises the reader’s expectations that the authors intend to examine the ways in which meanings travel between languages and cultures and, in this regard, how languages and cultures influence each other. When reading the introduction, it becomes evident that, while adopting a comparative view, the main objectives of the work are the in-depth analysis of a small set of (cultural) keywords in diverse European languages and Chinese. Based on their own mastery of languages, the authors focus on the four key political notions of people, citizen, individual and Europe and their meanings in English and Chinese, with further comparisons being made on a smaller scale with French, German, Spanish and Czech. While the discussion of these four key concepts is particularly detailed in the case of English (in its major varieties of British and American English) and, less extensively, for Chinese, the other languages only provide ancillary information with some not being considered when analysing each of the four keywords (e.g. Spanish only appears in the analysis of individual).

The book is structured around the above key concepts, with substantial chapters being devoted to people, citizen, individual and Europe in this order. The length of the book (close to 400 pages) is a sign of the detail and breadth that the authors are striving towards when explaining the culturally-specific meanings of these terms. By applying a general framework of linguistic anthropology and ethnolinguistics, the findings of their investigation are relevant for cultural semantics and lexical comparative linguistics and for the translation of these keywords across the languages discussed. Thus, readers interested in Contrastive Cultural Linguistics, Contrastive Semantics and Lexicology as well as Translation Studies will find the book an inspiring read.
Chapters detailing the keywords are based on the same structure, each beginning with an analysis of the dictionary definitions for British English (Oxford English Dictionary) and American English (Merriam-Webster). This is followed by evidence of usage taken from a range of corpora, first for English, and then shorter comparisons are made with some of the other European languages. A substantial section on Chinese conceptualisations is provided at the end of each chapter. In addition, each chapter offers some further perspectives such as a discussion on *people* in Nigel Farage's discourse on Brexit, reflections on *citizen* in relation to Native Americans, Afro-Americans and Scottish people, aspects of philosophical thought and references to literary uses, particularly with regard to the terms *citizen* and *individual*, as well as examining the metaphorical construals of the key term *Europe*.

This kaleidoscopic approach raises questions about the sources the authors have used to analyse the culturally-specific semantic nature of the selected key concepts. In addition to major dictionaries for each of the languages, encyclopedias and dictionaries of quotations, they have consulted other sources such as political and philosophical texts, novels, poems, songs, films and online media. The most important sources are major corpora such as the British National Corpus (BNC), the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and the Leipzig Wortschatz. They also created some smaller corpora of their own, for example, the nine million word “MyHistIdeas” Corpus which is made up of a selection of philosophical texts including works by Locke, Hume, Smith, and Mill, among others. The reader, however, is not enlightened about the exact composition of these self-constructed corpora. In general, the authors claim that they have considered between 1000 to 1200 instances of each of the keywords from this range of sources to bolster their observations.

From a corpus linguistic point of view, the authors’ attempts to consider a range of different sources is laudable; however, not all their choices would appear to be suitable for analysing the current meanings and uses of the keywords. As the authors also acknowledge, the BNC is outdated when it comes to tracing the meanings of *citizen* and *Europe*, in particular, as these concepts have drastically evolved from the beginning of the 1990s, at which point coverage of the BNC stops. It is thus slightly contradictory that the authors, nevertheless, rely on the BNC to make comparisons with the Corpus of Contemporary American English, which covers political-cultural developments up to 2015. Using the Sketch Engine suite of corpora, for example, would have offered opportunities to complement the corpus-based evidence for the individual analyses, thus enhancing their comparability.

When reading the individual chapters, the current reviewer was left with a mixed impression. On the one hand, the authors provide engaging and well-documented descriptions of how each keyword meaning has developed...
throughout the history of philosophical and political thought. This is complemented by skillfully weaving together cogent examples from different domains of discourse such as entries in dictionaries and encyclopedias, political texts, literary works, philosophical works and current debates as represented in the media. On the other hand, the examples that were taken from the different corpora have a somewhat eclectic feel to them, as no detailed categorisation or quantification is given for the types of meaning that were found in the instances that were considered for each keyword. This lack of a more comprehensive and structured analysis of the data makes it difficult for the reader to retrace the authors' findings, and thus creates the impression that the analysis is, to some extent, impressionistic and intuitive. At the same time, the authors draw conclusions from their data which they assume to be generally valid.

In the chapter on people, for example, the discussion of the British context leads the authors to observe that, in general, the concept “does not seem to be particularly dynamic in the English worldview” (p. 37). Evidence from American English, on the other hand, shows that “throughout the American examples ‘the people’ seems to function as a far more democratic concept than its English equivalent” (p. 41). Furthermore, the authors stress that in Britain the collocation of the “common people” influences the meaning construal of people more strongly than in the US, and they conclude that “in English, the people is elsewhere: in Wales, Ireland, or in Scotland. Not only that, but when it comes to defining the English, it is these minority forms of English that seem to be preoccupied with the task of defining who the English people are, what they do and what they want” (p. 54). The British picture is contrasted with the meaning of ‘people’ (i.e. peuple) in French where it appears to be a much more dynamic concept, since people are described as agents standing up for democratic principles and actively forging their own destiny. The Chinese equivalent rénmín is set in its historical context with a focus on Máo's political appropriation of the term, and the authors highlight metaphoric construals of the concept in political rhetoric, such as the parenthood metaphor.

The chapter on citizen begins with the cogent observation that the concept of ‘citizen’ is inherently based on the image schema of containment (referred to as a “container metaphor” by the authors, p. 115), i.e. a citizen is understood to be a person who belongs to a certain sociocultural and geographical location, and there is a sense of boundary and being either inside or outside that contained space. The general findings for English emphasise that the container for a citizen tends to be located at the national level in American English, whereas in British English the city appears to be the more prototypical container for a citizen. When studying philosophical works, the translational equivalents of the English term citizen emerge as being of a broader semantic scope and more politically loaded in French (citoyens, citoyennes), German
Historically, this can be explained by the status of the English people as subjects of a sovereign versus citizens as a democratic force as manifested during the French revolution. The section on Chinese offers an inspiring discussion about the relevant translational equivalents of English *citizen* from the late Qing dynasty onwards. The three Chinese terms *guómín*, *shímín* and *gōngmín* largely correspond to the national, urban and public meanings of English *citizen*.

When writing about the *individual*, the authors acknowledge the complex issues behind defining this concept and its overlap in English with the adjectival form, which made the corpus analysis more difficult. Despite that, the authors provide a top-down approach to the meaning analysis of *individual* and strive to “organize, provisionally at least, the meanings and values attributed to the term ‘individualism’ into two broad overarching categories: individualism as a virtue and ideal, and individualism as a vice condemned on moral grounds” (p. 205). Based on these two general meanings, brief comparisons are made to other European languages (Czech, German, Spanish and French). The use of German *Einzelperson* as a putative translational equivalent is not a particularly felicitous choice for this purpose. Looking for instances where *der/die Einzelne* were used would have enriched the results obtained for the concept of ‘individual’ in German.

In contrast to the previous chapters, the analysis of *Europe* draws extensively on previous findings relating to the metaphorical conception of Europe (cf. Musolff, 2001; 2004; 2016; Kimmel, 2009). The frequently used metaphors of Europe describing it as a person/agent, a vehicle, an edifice and a machine are exemplified and presented as constitutive to the conception of Europe from within. The section on the Chinese conception of Europe highlights that borrowed terms (e.g. the European Union) represent an outsider’s perspective of Europe as a powerful economic and political entity. In addition, the concept of Europeanisation, i.e. Europe as a cultural and political force, emerges as an important notion in Chinese socio-political discourse.

The extensive chapters on each of the keywords are followed by a brief conclusion that reiterates the main objectives of the book and puts emphasis on the importance of close cultural semantic analysis of key concepts in specific languages when attempting to gain a deeper understanding of their speakers’ worldviews. A glossary of important concepts relevant to the analysis is a welcome addition to the book and compensates for a very brief index.

The book is reasonably well edited, with just a few instances where function words are accidentally omitted from the text. However, it was rather surprising to find repeated reference to the *COCA* as a “Corpus of Colloquial American English” (p. 1, p. 40, p. 342) and to find the subsection title “Deutche Bürger”
spelt in this manner (p. 152). The current reviewer is not qualified to comment on the typographic adequacy of the Chinese text segments in the book.

All in all, the authors can be congratulated on their achievement of providing an in-depth cultural semantic analysis of four keywords across English and Chinese, with further comparisons being made with other major European languages. The authors successfully manage to bring together evidence from different textual sources and trace the semantic development of these terms throughout the modern history of ideas. As mentioned above, a downside of their approach emerges from the quest to generalise aspects of meaning from the corpora as shared, culturally-specific traits without providing a structured analysis that is quantified, which would allow the reader to see the evidence more clearly grounded in the data.

References


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