



CHINESE IDIOMS: SYNTACTIC FORMS AND CULTURAL VALUE

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Abstract

Chinese idioms possess Chinese cultural values. This study aims at finding out the cultural reflection of Chinese idioms by analyzing their syntactic form. Apart from the Indonesian language, most Chinese idioms (成语 *chéngyǔ*) consist of four characters. In general, idioms have various forms, such as compounds, phrases, and clauses. These forms can also be found in Chinese idioms. However, it is difficult to determine the syntactic form of several idioms, in other words, some idioms are syntactically opaque. In addition, we will also examine idioms that are syntactically transparent along with the degree of the compositionality of their meaning. Therefore, there are two types of idioms: syntactically transparent idioms and syntactically opaque idioms. Moreover, idioms are also related to their own metaphorical sense. Metaphorical idioms show the user's language realm in expressing a situation, an action, or an event that is referred to. To find whether a metaphor exists in an idiom, we examine its contribution of the constituent meaning to its whole meaning. The idioms used in this research are four-character idioms, which are taken from the "Chinese Internet Corpus", which is the most popular online corpus. The selected idioms from the online corpus will be verified using the "Xinhua Idiom Dictionary".

Subject Area linguistics, syntax

Keywords:

Chinese idioms, compositionality, syntactic opacity, metaphors

1 Introduction

Linguists have different opinions regarding the syntactical hierarchy of idioms. For instance, there is an opinion that identifies the form of an idiom as a phrase (Cruse, 2000:72; Langacker, 1986:79). However, Kridalaksana explains that idioms can be in form of compounds, compositions, phrases, clauses, and even sentences (2007:107). In Chinese, Shi (1979:8) asserts that Chinese idioms are a unit of phrases. However, Wu (1995:65) is of the opinion that Chinese idioms can be in the form of phrases or short sentences. Therefore, the syntactic form of Chinese idioms in both phrases and short sentences.

In addition, idioms are also syntactically opaque, (Wood, 1986:67) which makes it difficult to determine their form. This study found that syntactically opaque idioms are compound words. However, this does not imply that all idioms with compound words are syntactically opaque. In the Mandarin language, syntactically opaque idioms have several characteristics that are related to the Chinese culture, or the Chinese people.

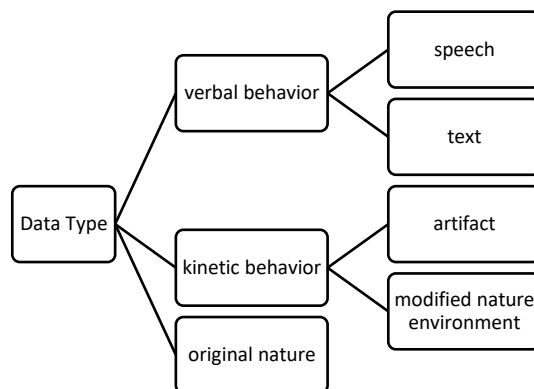


Fig.1. Data Type Classification

According to Masinambow, speech is one of the information sources that provide an understanding of culture (Rahyono, 2003:49). Cultural power is classified into several forms, as follows: (i) idioms are part of the speech. In a speech, an idiom is usually used in Indirect Speech Acts (ISA). ISAs are normally performed by saying something that has a different meaning other than its expected literal meaning. This corresponds with the characteristics of idioms, that have a different meaning other than their literal meaning.

Although the syntactic opacity on idioms makes it difficult to understand their meaning of idioms, they are still used in speech. This study will focus on the syntactic idiom opacity, and how it is related to the culture of its users. The research questions will be as follow: 1) What are the syntactic hierarchies of Chinese idioms? 2) What syntactic hierarchies and structural patterns of idioms are syntactically legible? 3) From the characteristics of idioms, what are the functions of syntactically opaque idioms for speech acts? 4) What is the culture reflection contained in syntactically opaque idioms in accordance with its syntactic form? Through these questions, this study decodes the cultural value of idioms and analyzes their syntactic characteristics.

2 Literature Review

Wood (1986:69) explains that, in English, syntactic opacity is far less common compared to semantic oddity. This opacity gives the impression of the uniqueness of an idiom. When there are no coherent syntagmatic patterns, it is not possible to construct paradigmatic arrangements for potential inhabitants of syntagmatic sites.

Opacity can be defined as complexity (Roberts, 2007:233). If an idiom is understood as a complex expression (Cruse, 2000; Wood, 1986), then the idiom is also opaque. Wood (1986) also relates the syntactic opacity of idiom structures to the non-compositionality of their meanings. According to Nunberg (1978 in Glucksberg, 2001:73), the compositionality of meaning is divided into three levels, which are: fully compositional, partially compositional, and non-compositional. A non-compositional idiom is an idiom in which its meaning cannot be understood by literal meaning. A partial compositional idiom is an idiom in which its thing meaning can be understood by one of its constituents. A compositional idiom is an idiom in which its idiomatic meaning can be understood through its literal meaning.

Several studies on the Chinese idioms shown in a literary works include those of Ding (2018; Ma (2015); Xue, Cai, & Han (2015). Xue, et.al (2015) states that Chinese idioms carry rich cultural connotation. The article analyzes Chinese idiom translation from its cultural perspective. They also state that Chinese idioms have a special linguistic form. Ma (2015) analyzes the cultural elements influencing similarities and dissimilarities of animal images in English and Chinese animal idioms. By combining animal idioms with cultural elements together, people can convey information effectively and accurately. Meanwhile, Ding (2018) describes the main typology of the cultural aspect

under conventional figurative language, idioms in particular, and describes the connection between figurative idioms and culture. The literal reading of the idiom refers to cultural concepts of mythology or folk belief, passed on throughout centuries.

3 Methodology/Materials

The data used in this research are idioms that consist of several variants of syntactic forms, such as words, phrases, clauses, and sentences. Therefore, the qualitative procedures that rely on text and image data have unique steps in data analysis and derive from different research strategies (Creswell, 2009:258). In addition, qualitative research focuses on the process that occurs. Qualitative researchers are particularly interested in understanding how something comes about (Creswell, 2009:293). Thus, this research uses qualitative methods.

Most Chinese idioms are consists of four characters (Shi, 1978, Cheng, 1999 quoted from Widowatie, 2003). Therefore, this study uses data in the form of Chinese idioms consisting of four characters. The corpus used in this study is a word-based corpus, developed in 2000, and has a frequency list. The corpus according to the criteria of 'Chinese Internet Corpus' <http://corpus.leeds.ac.uk/frqc/internet-zh.num>. The highest frequency of idiom in the corpus is verified by checking into the Chinese Language Idiom Dictionary. The idiom form is determined by performing a syntactic function analysis of each constituent that forms an idiom. Through the data collecting and processing, we found that there are 164 idioms. This study focuses on idioms that have the most frequent appearances. The idioms contained in these corpora are sorted from the most frequent occurrences. Thus, the data used in this study are the top 82 idioms. Of these 82 idioms, 17 idioms are an idiom syntactically opaque. The amount is considered to represent this research.

Data in the form of idioms are processed based on two linguistic dimensions: syntax and semantics. In addition, syntactic opacity analysis is also performed. Syntactic opacity is believed by Wood (1986), to occur because of the non-compositional idiom. Thus, the determination of the degree of syntactic opacity in Chinese idioms is necessary. The analytical technique to find out whether idioms are sentences, compounds, clauses, or phrases is by using the direct constituent analysis (Kridalaksana, 2002: 41), and by looking at the syntactic function of each constituent. The constituency analysis is conducted to find out the syntagmatic relation to the constituents in an idiom.

Furthermore, the analysis is performed in the field of semantics. Analysis in this field aims to determine the degree of compositionality of Chinese idioms. This study uses the division of degree of idiom compositionality by Nunberg (in Glucksberg, 2001: 73-74), i.e. fully compositional idiom, partially compositional idiom, and non-compositional idiom. The determination of this degree is implemented because the Chinese idiom is not only non-compositional.

After having a certain degree of compositionality and syntactic opacity in the idiom, the next step is to determine the existence of metaphors in idioms. This step is done by examining the representation of the literal meaning of an idiom with its idiomatic meaning. The analysis to find out the metaphor in this idiom is done by determining the source and the target domain contained in the metaphorical idiom. By looking at the source domain and the target domain in an idiom, the search for messages conveyed by speakers through the context of the idiom usage can be done. The same technique is also applied to non-metaphoric idioms, without specifying the source and the target domain.

4 Results and Findings

4.1 Syntactic Hierarchy of Chinese Idioms

The Chinese idiom consists of three forms: compound words, phrases, and clauses. This compound idiom has the characteristic of the constituent absence that acts as the head. Constituents in compound idioms are lexed that combine to form compound words. The phrase idiom is an idiom

in which one of its constituents acts as the head, while the other constituent is the modifier. Clause idioms are idioms in which the constituents are functionally related, i.e. subject, predicate, object, complement, and description.

Compound form idioms are shown in the example below.

- (1) A B₁ A B₂
 自 言 自 语
 zì yán zì yǔ
 alone talk alone talk
 Pron. V Pron. V
 'talk to oneself'

The 自言自语 zìyánzìyǔ is an idiom containing the AB₁AB₂ pattern. The first constituent (A) is the same character, or in other words, the repetition of the character 自 zì 'itself'. The second constituent are 言 yán 'talk' and 语 yǔ 'talk', which can be joined into the compound word of 言语 yányǔ 'talk'. Thus, the first and third characters can be assigned as a code A, while the second and fourth characters are given codes B₁ and B₂ because it is a compound words. Thus, the structural pattern of this idiom is AB₁AB₂. In addition to these forms, there are also other forms of idiom, namely AABB, ABBA, and ABCB. The explanation of the structural pattern is explained more deeply in the next discussion.

Idioms with the syntactic form of a phrase are divided by parent. Idioms of verb-shaped phrases are shown by the following idiom.

- (2) 恍然 大 悟
 huǎngrán dà wù
 suddenly very realize
 Adv. Adv V
 'suddenly realize what has happened'

Idiom 恍然大悟 huǎngrándàwù consists of three constituents, namely 恍然 huǎngrán 'suddenly', 大 dà 'very', and 悟 wù 'waking up'. The first and second constituents 恍然 huǎngrán 'suddenly' and 大 dà 'very' are adverbs that explain the verbs 悟 wù 'awaken'. Thus, this idiom is a subordinate idiom with the verb as the head. The chart below shows the constituency relationship in the 恍然大悟 huǎngrándàwù.

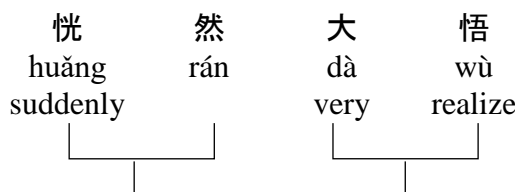


Fig.2. Constituency Relationship on Idiom 恍然大悟 huǎngrándàwù

Phrasal idioms with a noun as the head can be seen in the following idiom.

- (3) 不 动 声色
 bù dòng shēngsè
 not move sound and expression
 Adv. V N
 'unmove sound and expression'

Idiom 不动声色 *bùdòngshēngsè* has three constituents, namely 不 *bù* 'no', 动 *dòng* 'move', and 声色 *shēngsè* 'sound and expression'. The constituents 不 *bù* and 动 *dòng* can be merged into 不动 *bùdòng* 'unmove', and become a verb phrase. The verb phrase describes the adjective 声色 *shēngsè* 'sounds and expressions'. If 不动 *bùdòng* 'unmove' is combined with 声色 *shēngsè* 'sound and expression', then its literal meaning becomes 'unmove sound and expression'. Thus, the 声色 *shēngsè* 'sound and expression' occupies the position of the head, so that the 不动声色 *bùdòngshēngsè* is a subordinate idiom with the noun as the head. Here is a chart showing the subordinate relationship.

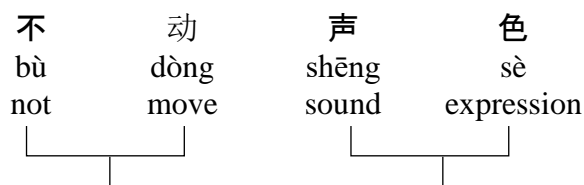


Fig.3. Constituency Relationship on Idiom 不动声色 *bùdòngshēngsè*

In the data, there is no phrasal idiom that has an adjective as the head. In addition to phrase form, there is also a Chinese idiom that has a clause form. Clause idioms can be seen in the following idiom.

- (4) 与 众 不同
yǔ zhòng bù tóng
 with crowd different
 Prep. N. Adj
 'different from common run'

The idiom consists of the characters 与 *yǔ* 'with', 众 *zhòng* 'mass', 不 *bù* 'no', and 同 *tóng* 'the same'. The character 与 *yǔ* 'with' is the preposition, whereas 众 *zhòng* 'mass' is the pronoun. These two characters can be combined into the prepositional phrase 与众 *yǔzhòng* 'with mass'. The third and fourth characters of 不 *bù* 'not' and 同 *tóng* 'same' can be combined into the adjective phrase 不同 *bùtóng* 'not same'. As one entity, the prepositional phrases 与众 *yǔzhòng* 'with mass' functions as S (subject), while the adjective phrase 不同 *bùtóng* 'different' as P (predicate), thus forming the SP structure. If the meanings of the two phrases are combined, then this idiom literally means 'different from masses'. The relationship between the constituents of this idiom is shown in the chart below.

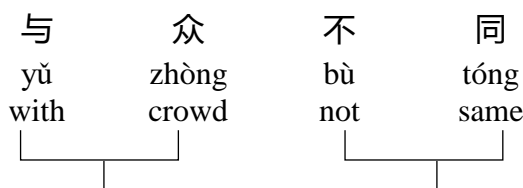


Fig.4. Constituency Relationship on Idiom 与众不同 *yǔzhòngbùtóng*

4.2 Structural Pattern on Opaque Idiom

In a syntactically opaque idiom, the meaning of the idiom tends to be difficult to understand. This is due to syntactic opacity related to the non-compositionality of its meaning. If the syntactic structure is opaque, then the meaning of the idiom tends to be non-compositional. However, this relation does not apply on the contrary. Idioms that are syntactically opaque, do not necessarily have a non-compositional meaning. In idioms in the form of compound words, this can be seen as the syntactically opaque and transparent idiom.

The provision of structural patterns in idioms in the form of compound words is inspired by the pattern proposed by Stellard (2011). This pattern is determined by the relation of the meaning of the idiom constituents. The structural pattern of idiom in compound form consists of three patterns, namely ABAB, AABB, ABBA, and ABCB. ABBA and ABCB patterns are not included in Stellard's four structural patterns. However, among the four idiom patterns in the compound word form, only one pattern has the same structure, which is AABB. Three other structural patterns, ABAB, ABBA, and ABCB have an opaque syntactic structure.

4.2.1 Structural Pattern of ABAB

This study found variations in the ABAB pattern, so that, it required modification in the provision of the ABAB structural pattern code on idiom. This is done to clarify the semantic and syntactic relationships of each character in the idiom and to determine the number of constituents in the idiom. Idioms that have compound words as constituents will be coded as 1 and 2 to indicate the relationship and sequence. If the idiom's constituents are repetitions, similar words, synonyms, or antonyms, then the code will not be given numbers. Here is the formula.

1) **The pattern of AB₁AB₂** is a structural pattern that indicates the existence of a compound word represented by codes B₁ and B₂, whereas the two words represented by code A have a synonymous, antonymous, repetitive, or similar relationship. Here is an AB₁AB₂ patterned idiom.

(5)	A	B ₁	A	B ₂
	自	言	自	语
	zì	yán	zì	yǔ
	alone	talk	alone	talk
	Pron.	V	Pron.	V
	'talk to oneself'			

Idiom 自言自语 zìyánzìyǔ is an idiom containing AB₁AB₂ pattern. The first constituent is the same character, or in other words, the repetition of the character 自 zì "itself". The second constituents are 言 yán 'talk' and 语 yǔ 'talk', which can be joined into the compound word of 言语 yányǔ 'talk'. Thus, the first and third characters can be assigned as code A, while the second and fourth characters are given codes B₁ and B₂ because it is a compound words. Thus, the structural pattern of this idiom is AB₁AB₂.

These idioms are grouped into non-metaphorical idioms. Each constituent in the idiom has a role in contributing its meaning to the overall meaning of the idiom, which is 'self-talk'. Thus, the meaning of this idiom can be understood by interpreting its constituents.

In addition to these idioms, structural patterns are also presented in this idiom.

(6)	A	B ₁	A	B ₂
	五	颜	六	色
	wǔ	yán	liù	sè
	five	color	six	color
	Num.	Adj.	Num.	Adj.
	'colorful'			

The 五颜六色 wǔyánliùsè idiom consists of three constituents, namely 五 wǔ 'lima', 六 liù 'six', and 颜色 yánsè 'color'. The 颜色 yánsè 'color' constituent is a compound word inserted by the six-

letter 'six' constituent which is a fellow numeral with the constituent 六 liù 'six'. Thus, the structural pattern of this idiom is AB₁AB₂.

The constituent 颜色 yánsè 'color' contributes its meaning to the meaning of the whole idiom as 'various colors'. Unlike the constituents of 颜色 yánsè 'color', the constituents of 五 wǔ 'lima' and 六 liù 'six' do not contribute their meaning to the overall meaning of the idiom. The placement of numbers 5 and 6 in this idiom is done in order from smaller to larger. Similar to the Indonesian language, in Chinese, the two-digit pronunciation is performed in a sequence that indicates the uncertainty of the amount, i.e. five or six. If associated with other constituent meanings, it can be understood that the number five or six is used to indicate the diversity of colors.

2) **The pattern of A₁B₁A₂B₂** is a structural pattern that shows two compound words. The first compound word is represented by the codes A₁ and A₂, while the second compound word is represented by the codes B₁ and B₂. The idiom pattern is shown in the following idiom.

(7)	A ₁	B ₁	A ₂	B ₂
	翻	来	覆	去
	fān	lái	fù	qù
	turn over	come	cover	go
	V	V	V	V
	'toss and turn; repeatedly'			

The first constituent is 翻 fān 'reversing' and 覆 fù 'reversing' has a synonymous relationship. These two words can be combined into the compound word of 翻覆 fānfù 'reversing'. The second constituent are 来 lái 'coming' and 去 qù 'going', which have an antonymic relationship. However, these two characters can also be combined into the compound word of 来去 láiqù 'repeatedly' or 'again'. Thus, the first and third constituents can be assigned as a code A, while both characters are given codes B₁ and B₂. Thus, this idiom has a structural AB₁AB₂ pattern. Therefore, it can be understood that 来去 láiqù 'repeatedly' is a constituent that contributes its meaning to its idiomatic meaning. This idiom also has a metaphor. *Flipping* can be done more than once. An action that is taken more than once is what makes the action is performed *again and again*.

4.2.2 Structural Pattern ABBA

In addition to the structural patterns ABAB and AABB, there is also a structural pattern of compound words ABBA. This structural pattern is not included in the four structural patterns by Stellard (2011). In this ABBA pattern, one of the constituents is inserted by another constituent. However, unlike ABAB's structural pattern, the inserting constituents are not intercepted by other constituents. Here is an idiom with ABBA structural pattern.

(8)	A	B	B	A
	乱	七	八	糟
	luàn	qī	bā	zāo
	in a mess	seven	eight	rotten
	Adj.	Num.	Num.	Adj.
	'in awful mess'			

The idiom consists of three constituents, the compound 乱糟 luànzāo 'mess' which is inserted by two other constituents, 七 qī 'seven' and 八 bā 'eight'. The compound word of 乱糟 luànzāo is inserted by the constituents 七 qī and 八 bā. It is

known that 七 qī and 八 bā cannot be joined into a compound word. However, the idiom composition contains the combination of numbers that has the meaning of 'mess'. If the compound word of 乱糟

luànzāo contains the meaning of 'mess', and the combination of numbers 七 qī 'seven' and 八 bā 'eight' also mean as 'mess', then this idiom undergoes a repetition of the constituent which generates meaning. Therefore, the meaning is not metaphorical.

Similar structural pattern can also be found in the following idiom.

(9)	A	B	B	A
	不	以	为	然
	bù	yǐ	wéi	rán
	not		think	right
	Adv.		V	Adj.
	'to disapprove'			

Unlike the previous idiom, this idiom consists of two constituents which are compound words of 以为 yǐwéi 'believe' dan 不然 bùrán 'not so'. The word 不然 bùrán is usually placed in front of a sentence to show unbelief sense. The meaning of the word relates to the compound word of 以为 yǐwéi 'believe'. The combined meanings of these two constituents become 'distrustful' or 'unsure'. Since both constituents contribute their meaning to the overall meaning of the idiom, it is understandable that the idiom does not contain metaphors.

From the two constituents of the two ABBA patterned idiom, there is at least one compound word that occupies position A. The constituent is inserted by another constituent that may be a compound word or word within the same word class. This sequence and insertion lead to an opaque syntactic structure. Both constituents have similar meanings.

4.2.3 Structural Pattern of ABCB

The ABCB pattern is a structural pattern indicating the existence of one compound word represented by code B and B, whereas the two words represented by code A have no synonymous, antonymic, or repetitive relationship, or similarity to the constituents represented in code C.

(9)	A	B ₁	C	B ₂
	大	吃	一	惊
	dà	chī	yī	jīng
	big	eat	one	startled
	'be greatly surprised'			

The idiom indicates that this idiom consists of three constituents, namely 大 dà 'besar', 吃惊 chījīng 'shocked', and 一 yī 'one'. When it is examined from the meaning of each constituent, the 'shocked' 吃惊 chījīng constituent is the constituent of the compound word that contributes its meaning to the overall meaning. Other constituents are not contributing their meaning to the overall meaning of the idiom. The 大 dà 'big' and the 一 yī 'one' are constituents that are not contributing meaning to the overall meaning of the idiom. The 大 dà constituent is not only significant but also deep degree. If the meaning is combined with the meaning of the 吃惊 chījīng 'surprised' constituent, then its meaning becomes 'deeply shocked', or in other words, 'very surprised'. The 一 yī 'one' constituent means 'one', or if it is placed in front of the verb, then its meaning becomes 'once'. Thus, it can be seen that 大 dà 'besar' and 一 yī 'one' are not synonyms, antonyms, or similar terms.

4.3 Idiom Characteristics with Syntactic Opaqueness

Some of the syntactic forms of idiom, which are syntactically opaque, are coordinative phrases. In contrast with Wood (1986) who explains that the opaqueness of idiom syntax is related to the compositionality of its meaning, the Chinese idiom does not. In a transparently syntactic idiom, the meaning can be non-compositional, partly compositional, or fully compositional. It is similar to an opaquely syntactic idiom. Idioms that have an opaque structure are idioms in the form of compounds. Neither phrase idioms nor clauses that are found are structurally opaque. However, not all idiom-shaped compound words have an opaquely syntactic structure. The following are characteristics of idioms that have opaqueness constraints.

1. Chinese Idioms with a structured opaque can only be found in idioms of compound words.
2. Chinese Idioms can be structured opaque only if one of the constituents in the form of compound words, or a pair of synonymous characters is inserted by other constituents.
3. The constituent in charge of inserting is a compound word, a pair of reduplicated characters, a pair of similar word-class characters, a pair of synonymous characters, or a pair of antonymous related characters.
4. The meaning can be compositional and non-compositional.
5. In a compositional meaning, idiom does not contain metaphors.
6. In a compositional and non-compositional meaning, some idioms contain metaphors.

The table below shows the relation between compositionality, opaque structure, and metaphor existence in idioms.

Table 1. Relation between compositionality, opaque structure, and metaphor existence in idioms.

Opacity/ Compositionality	Fully Compositional	Partially Compositional	Non- compositional
Opaque	Nonmetaphorical	Metaphorical, Non-metaphorical	Metaphorical
Transparent	Non-metaphorical	Metaphorical, Non-metaphorical	Metaphorical

4.4 Cultural Representation of Syntactically Opaque Idioms

There are three important elements in the Chinese idiom, which are compositionality, syntactic opacity, and metaphorical elements. To show its usefulness in speech, an idiom is at least noncompositional, opaque syntactically, containing metaphors, or a combination of those characteristics. In speech acts, an idiom that has these characteristics is certainly useful to cover the true meaning of the idiom with the literal meaning.

Syntactic opaqueness in idioms shows the wordplay performed by Chinese speakers. The word-playing technique is the insertion of compound words, or a pair of synonymous characters by other constituents, which can be compound words, a pair of reduplicate characters, a pair of similar word characters, a pair of synonymous characters, or a pair of antonymous related characters.

In insertion by reduplicated constituents, it is known that the wordplay is performed on the basis of meaning and sound. In insertion by synonymous, antonymous, or similar characters, the wordplay is based on its meaning. However, there are also compositional idioms, syntactically transparent, and one which does not contain metaphors. Such idiom has other uses in the speech.

The culture of Chinese society is inseparable from Confucianism and other thoughts. One of the teachings promoted in Confucianism is concerning good behavior. Pye (1972) explains that good behavior is closely related to the five values of Confucian teaching. These five values are virtue (仁

rén), justice (义 yì), modesty or ritual (礼 lǐ), wisdom (知 zhī), and loyalty (信 xìn). These five values are the guidance of humans in behaving in society. Generally, the metaphorical idiom shows humans to have good behavior in socializing.

5 Conclusion

From the discussion above, it can be concluded that the syntactic hierarchy of Chinese idioms is compound words, phrases, and clauses. All idioms that have syntactic opaqueness are compound words. However, not all idioms in the form of compound words have an opaque structure. Only compound word idioms with ABAB, ABBA, and ABCB structure patterns have a syntactical opacity structure.

A Chinese idiom can be expressed in an opaque structure if at least one of its constituents is a compound word or a pair of synonymous characters inserted by another constituent. The constituents that are inserted have distinctiveness in the form of reduplication, a combination of numbers, and pairs of antonymous or synonymous characters. Constituents of reduplication show the same sound. Constituents in the form of a pair of synonymous or antonymous characters show the relation of meaning between characters that can be attributed.

Based on the existence of the metaphor, this opaque idiom structure can be divided into two types, namely metaphorical idiom and nonmetaphorical idiom. The cultural value of the metaphorical idiom can be known from the metaphor used to indicate the meaning of an idiom. The cultural value of a non-metaphorical idiom can be traced from a word play performed by a speaker to indicate the meaning of an idiom.

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