

Comparison and Appreciation of the Extended Meanings of Basic Taste Words in Chinese and English

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Keywords: Taste words, Extended meaning, Sweet, Bitter, Sour, Salty

Abstract: Language is the cultural carrier of a nation . Because of the similarity of the objective world, there are same taste words in Chinese and English. And the divergences make the different extended meanings of the four basic tastes (sour, sweet, bitter and salty) in the two languages in the evolution process . Based on the conceptual metaphor theory, this paper analyzes the similarities and differences of the extended meanings of these four basic taste words by comparing the specific definitions and entries in English and Chinese dictionaries, and summarizes the reasons, so as to further understand the differences between Chinese and English languages and cultures, and the commonness and individuality in thinking level.

1. Introduction

Both Chinese and English have highly similar taste words, and the extended meanings of the four basic tastes (sour, sweet, bitter and salty) are influenced by various factors in the evolution process, resulting in many similarities and differences. Language is the cultural carrier and a tool to express thinking and emotion of an ethnic group. Through the comparative analysis of the extended meanings of these basic taste words, we can further understand the differences between Chinese and English languages and the commonness and individuality of the two nations in thinking level, which is conducive to eliminating the barriers and promoting the smooth progress of cross-cultural communication.

2. Overview of Conceptual Metaphor Theory

In traditional linguistics, metaphor is regarded as a rhetorical device, a deviation from normal language. However, cognitive linguistics, which has gradually developed since 1970s, regards metaphor as a way of thinking and a powerful cognitive tool. In 1980, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson published “Metaphors We Live By”, marked the beginning of cognitive metaphor research. In this book, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson summed up the conceptual metaphor theory.

Conceptual metaphor, a cognitive model, is embodied in people's language, thoughts and actions. Its basic function is the projection from one cognitive domain to another. It mainly expresses strange and abstract things through the familiar and concrete cognition in a field. Specifically, the metaphorization of taste is the projection from the cognitive domain of taste to the domain of other sensory. The key feature of metaphorical expression is that it can reflect the essence of everyday things. It is a cross domain mapping from the source domain to the target domain, forming a series of ontology or epistemological correspondence between the source and target domain.

Based on the theory of conceptual metaphor, this paper intends to analyze the extended meanings of basic taste words in Chinese and English, so as to reveal the generality and individuality of metaphorical projection of basic taste words in different cultures.

3. Comparative Analysis of Extended Meanings of Basic Taste Words

Language is the cultural carrier of a nation. Taste vocabulary is used to express how people respond to the stimulation of taste buds. The Chinese definition of “taste” is the sensation produced when the tongue contacts with liquid or substances dissolved in liquid. Sweet, sour, bitter, and salty are the four basic tastes (“Modern Chinese Dictionary” 5th Edition). The definition of taste in English is: the sense you have that allows you to recognize different foods and drinks when you put them in your mouth (“Oxford Advanced English-Chinese Dictionary” 7th edition).

Both Chinese and English have systematic taste vocabulary. Based on the “taste buds” of the tongue, people have basically the same tastes, such as sour, sweet, bitter, spicy, salty, and astringent. But everyone's sense of taste is not exactly the same, and its extended meaning is even more different. This difference is more obvious among different ethnic groups and regions, and it more clearly reflects the national characteristics. From the perspective of the extended meaning of taste words, Chinese and English languages have many similarities and differences. This article mainly studies the comparative analysis of the extended meaning of basic taste words (sour; sweet; bitter; salt) in Chinese and English languages.

3.1 Comparative Analysis of the Extended Meaning of “Sweet”

(1) Basic meaning

Sweet: taste like sugar and honey, as opposed to “bitter”. (“Modern Chinese Dictionary” 5th Edition)

Sweet: Containing, or tasting as if it contains, a lot of sugar. (“Oxford Advanced English-Chinese Dictionary” 7th edition)

(2) Comparative analysis of similarities of extended meanings

1) Projection in the visual field is used to express beautiful visual feelings.

① The children laugh so sweetly. (“Modern Chinese Dictionary” 5th Edition)

② You look sweet in this photograph. (“Oxford Advanced English-Chinese Dictionary” 7th Edition)

“Sweet” refers to flavors like sugar and honey. “Smile” and “face” originally belong to visual feeling. Here, the taste feeling “sweet” is used to describe the visual object “smile” and “face”, which makes it have the characteristics of “sweet”, and also gives people a beautiful and pleasant visual feeling.

2) Projection in the field of hearing is used to express pleasant and beautiful auditory feeling.

① His sweet song always lingers in my ears.

② She has a very sweet singing voice. (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English 4th Edition)

Singing and sound belong to the category of hearing. The “sweet” feeling of taste is mapped to the auditory domain, which is used to describe the pleasant sound, so as to express the joyful and beautiful auditory feeling.

3) Projection in the olfactory domain is used to express pleasant olfactory feelings

① Just getting into the room, there is a thin sweet fragrance, which intoxicate Baoyu's senses. (Chapter 5 of a Dream of Red Mansions)

② The air was sweet with incense. (Oxford Advanced English-Chinese Dictionary, 7th Edition)

The semantic meaning of “sweet” is mapped to fragrance. In both Chinese and English, taste and smell are closely related.

4) Projection in the psychological field is used to express happy and beautiful psychological feelings

When people enjoy happiness, the inner pleasant feeling is similar to the psychological feeling produced when the taste organ is stimulated by sweet taste. Therefore, “sweet” has the meaning of beauty, happiness and joy.

① The young students often have such sweet dreams: to find a decent job in the future.

② Life is happy and sweet. (“Modern Chinese Dictionary” 5th Edition)

③ To give love a little space, love will still be as sweet as honey.

④ I can’t tell you how sweet this victory is. (“Oxford Advanced English-Chinese Dictionary” 7th edition)

⑤ Good night, Becky. Sweet dreams. (“Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English” 4th Edition)

⑥ It was sweet to hear people praise me so much.

“sweet” can be used to describe the beauty of love, of dreams, and of life.

(3) Comparative analysis of the differences of extended meanings

1) “sweet” in Chinese is usually used to describe girls or children, to express sweet appearance or nice temperament. But in English, “sweet” is not only used to do so, but also to describe cute animals or delicate art, etc., and there is no similar usage in Chinese.

Example: We stayed in a sweet little hotel on the seafront. (“Oxford Advanced English-Chinese Dictionary” 7th edition)

2) Unlike the metaphorical meaning of “sweet” in English, “sweet” in Chinese can be metaphorically used as benefit. Such as: This batch of goods made him taste the sweetness.

3) When “sweet” expresses too much good feelings, the meaning will change from positive to negative in Chinese. At this time, “sweet” uses to please someone or deceive others. There isn’t such usage in English. For example:

After the fall of Wuhan, the sweet words of Japan...like, the so-called conditions for pullout of the armed forces from Central China and South China are the insidious policies. Whoever can’t understand the trick is prepared to die. (Mao Zedong “Oppose Capitulationist Activity”)

4) “Sweet” in English can refer to people with close relationships, such as Don’t you worry, my sweet. (“Oxford Advanced English-Chinese Dictionary” 7th edition), but there is no such usage in Chinese.

5) “sweet” in English has several special extended meanings, which means not salty, not sour, or fresh. For example: “sweet water” means “fresh water”, “sweet air” means “fresh air”; “sweet milk” means “fresh milk”. There is no similar usage in Chinese.

3.2 Comparative Analysis of the Extended Meaning of “Bitter”

(1) Basic meaning

Bitter: taste like bile or coptis, opposed to sweet. (“Modern Chinese Dictionary” 5th Edition)

Bitter: have a strong unpleasant taste, not sweet. (“Oxford Advanced English-Chinese Dictionary” 7th edition).

Bitter: having a sharp strong taste like black coffee without sugar. (“Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English” 4th edition).

(2) Comparative analysis of similarities of extended meanings

1) Projection in the visual field to express sad visual feelings

① Cheng Dad's face was frowning, he had to respond to those villagers. (The Forty-seventh Chapter of “The Scholars”)

② He looked bitter, angry and bewildered.

“Bitter” is a taste like bile or coptis. In English, bitter is also the taste of coffee, a taste people don't like. A worried, unhappy smile is just a wry smile with a wrinkled face. “Laughter” is a visual experience, and the taste experience “bitter” is projected onto the vision, giving it the characteristic of bitterness, an unpleasant visual experience.

2) Projection in the tactile field to express severe cold.

① The sharp edge of the sword comes from sharpening, and the fragrance of plum blossom comes from the bitter cold.

② The bitter cold of the Midwestern winters. (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 4th Edition)

People's feeling of cold should be a kind of tactile sensation, but they use “bitter” to express the severe cold. It shows that the same taste stimulus often makes people from different ethnic groups have the same psychological associations. The coincidence of unpleasant stimuli on taste and unpleasant tactile sensations shows the similarity of the logical thinking.

3) Projection in the psychological realm to express inner pain, worries, depression and unhappiness.

① The sorrow of being unemployed looms over everyone's heart.

② For the painfulness, there is no one to talk to. (“Modern Chinese Dictionary” 5th Edition)

③ Losing the match was a bitter disappointment for the team. (“Oxford Advanced English-Chinese Dictionary” 7th edition)

④ The knowledge that his friends no longer trusted him was a bitter pill to swallow. (“Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English” 4th Edition)

⑤ He became bitter and disillusioned as he grew older.

Bitterness brings people pain and sadness. When people encounter misfortune, setbacks and adversity, they often use “bitter” to express their mental sorrow. There is a certain similarity between the grief or sadness in one's heart and the bitterness tasted. Therefore, “bitter” in both Chinese and English is used to refer to mental anguish.

(3) Comparative analysis of different points of extended meaning.

1) “Bitter” in Chinese means that things are difficult to do and require a certain amount of thought or energy. For example, language is not easy to learn, you have to work hard. There is no such usage in English.

2) “Bitter” in Chinese means “poor, not rich”, such as: His life is very difficult. In English, “bitter” does not have the extended meaning of “poverty”, and can only be expressed by “poverty”, “poor”, etc.

3) “Bitter” in English has the meaning of resentment, hatred, dissatisfaction, and sarcasm. Such as:

① She is very bitter about losing her job. (“Oxford Advanced English-Chinese Dictionary” 7th edition)

② The countries are still bitter enemies. “Longman Contemporary Advanced English Dictionary (English-English·English-English)” 4th edition.

③ The government faces bitter opposition to these policies.

In addition, “bitter” in English can be used as an adverb, means violently, severely, and painfully. Such as: It is a bitter cold night.

4) On the whole, the meanings of “bitter” in Chinese are richer and broader than in English.

3.3 Comparative Appreciation of the Extended Meaning of “Sour”

(1) Basic meaning

Sour: It smells or tastes like vinegar. (“Modern Chinese Dictionary” 5th Edition)

Sour: having a taste like that of a lemon or of fruit that is not ready to eat. (“Oxford Advanced English-Chinese Dictionary” 7th edition)

Sour: having a sharp acid taste, like the taste of a lemon or a fruit that is not ready to be eaten. (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 4th Edition)

(2) Comparative analysis of common points of extended meaning

1) Projection in the psychological field to express jealousy, grief, and sadness

The original meaning of “sour” refers to the sensation when people taste or smell something like vinegar. When human beings are in grief, sadness, and jealousy, they will have similar feelings. Just because of this similarity, “sour” is projected to the mind, it refers to the extended meaning of “grief, sadness, jealousy”, such as:

① That's just sour grapes in my heart, which makes my tears flow down. (“Modern Chinese Dictionary” 5th Edition)

② She felt a little bit sour when she heard that she was not praised. (“Modern Chinese

Dictionary” 5th Edition)

③ The meeting ended on a sour note with several people walking out. (“Oxford Advanced English-Chinese Dictionary” 7th edition).

④ He said he didn’t want the job anyway, but that’s just sour grapes. (“Oxford Advanced English-Chinese Dictionary” 7th edition)

In the Tang Dynasty of China, Fang Xuanling, an important minister of Li Shimin, whose wife opposed him to get a concubinage. And Li Shimin gave her a jar of poisoned wine (in fact, a jar of vinegar) to force her to submit. After receiving the decree, she took the jar and drank it. Since then, the term “jealous jar” has spread. In English, “Sour grapes” comes from Aesop's Fables, which means things belittled because they are not available. People don't care about sour grapes, but describe what they can't get as sour grapes to express that things are as bad as sour grapes. Later, people gradually used sour grapes as a metaphor for jealousy. Although both Chinese and English use sour taste as a metaphor for jealousy. However, “sour” is often used in English to express jealousy. In Chinese, “jealous”, “sour”, etc. all indicate jealousy.

2) Projection in the field of hearing and vision, it is used to describe a person's temper, meanness, melancholy expression and bad spirit.

① “Look at those people, who are they?” Widow Zhuang said bitterly, “ the monkey! The administrator! The director!”

② He likes to show off, and he can say something sourly. (“Modern Chinese Dictionary” 5th Edition)

③ “Who asked you?” he said sourly. (“Oxford Advanced English-Chinese Dictionary” 7th edition)

④ Eliza was tall and thin, with a rather sour face. (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 4th edition)

“Discourse” and “expression” belong to the field of hearing and vision respectively. Here, the taste word “sour” is used, which project the sense of taste to the auditory and visual domains, making them have the characteristics of “sour”.

3) In both Chinese and English, “sour” can be used to refer to things going bad, getting worse, or developing in a bad direction.

① Food becomes sour easily in summer.

② Their relationship soon went sour. (“Oxford Advanced English-Chinese Dictionary” 7th Edition)

③ The disagreement over trade tariffs has soured relations between the two countries. (“Oxford Advanced English-Chinese Dictionary” 7th edition)

(3) Comparative analysis of the differences of extended meanings

1) “sour” in Chinese can be used to ridicule the pedantic or pretentious manners of literati's words and behavior. Such as: poor and sour, sour scholars, etc. to describe scholars' pedantic and embarrassment in life.

2) “sour” in Chinese can be used to express economic constraints, not being rich, etc. For example, his life is too shabby. Common similar words include “poor sour”, “poor sour life”, “shabby face” and so on. However, “sour” in English does not have the same or similar metaphorical meaning, but uses “shabby” to express similar meanings.

3) The Chinese “sour” can mean pain and numbness in many parts of the body, such as

① Backache

② After walking for a day, my calf is a little sore. (“Modern Chinese Dictionary” 5th Edition)

English uses “sore” and “numb” to express body soreness.

③ In English “sour” can be used to describe the wet and cold weather, such as: we had a sour winter. While in Chinese “sour” does not describe the weather.

3.4 Comparative Analysis of the Extended Meaning of “Salt”

(1) Basic meaning

Salty: taste like salt (“Modern Chinese Dictionary” 5th edition).

Salty: containing or tasting of salt. (“Oxford Advanced English-Chinese Dictionary” 7th edition)

(2) Comparative analysis of similarities in extended meaning

“salty” is the first of all tastes. As the Chinese saying goes, “It is good to eat salt all over the world”. Any delicious food will not be good without salt. In both Chinese and English languages, the basic meaning of “salt” refers to the taste of salt. It can be said that the basic meanings of the two languages are completely the same. However, both in Chinese and English, the words related with salty are not rich, except for some common words, such as “pickle”, “salty food” and “salty flavor”, which have little similar extended meaning. This may prove that the word families in the taste word system are unbalanced in word formation and meaning derivation.

(3) Comparative analysis of the differences of extended meanings

① In the extended meaning of Chinese, “salty” is generally only used with other taste words, which refers to complicated experiences or complex feelings. For example, using “sweet and bitterness” as a metaphor for various experiences in life such as happiness and pain. There is no such usage in English.

② In Chinese, “salty” can be used as a metaphor for doing nothing, or having nothing to say. For example, this little boy is also picky, and tries to tell something. (“Dream of Red Mansions” Chapter 58)

③ The “salty” in Chinese culture means “full”, such as: it is suitable for all ages.

4) In English, “salty” can be extended to “vulgar”, “indecent” This is something does not exist in Chinese. Such as:

① He couldn’t see her salty humor in the situation. (Wordba online dictionary)

4. Reasons for the Similarities and Differences of Extended Meanings between Chinese and English Basic Taste Words

From the above analysis, we can see that the extended meanings of the four basic taste words in Chinese and English are quite identical, but there are also some differences. This kind of extended meanings originate from people's daily life experience and also root in concrete social culture. However, the similarities and differences also reflect the commonness and dissimilarities of the eastern and western nations in ideological level.

(1) The similarity of the objective world determines the commonness of the extended meaning of words.

cognition is gradually developed from our understanding towards the world. We use our bodies, especially our five senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste) to perceive the world, and taste plays an important role in the cognitive process of human beings. We express our perception of world, our understand of ourselves through taste. Different ethnic groups and countries are in an objective world with great similarity. Therefore, these basic taste words have many commonalities in the evolution of extended meanings in Chinese and English in the process of perception.

(2) Differences in the objective world determine differences in the extended meanings of words.

The uniqueness in different regions of different ethnic groups and countries formed unique culture, and thus produced certain differences in the word meaning evolution.

(3) Due to the differences in regional environment, social background, humanistic history, thinking habits and languages between the East and the West, the influences on vocabulary are different. In the process of perception, we can understand space, things and events from the same angle. And also to recognize the different features and parts from different angles and to lexicalize them. Therefore, in addition to the above commonness, the basic taste words in Chinese and English also have some unique extended meanings.

(4) Chinese and English have different understanding towards the source vocabulary, which

resulted in different extended meanings.

The extended meaning in words is projected from the original vocabulary. However, the different understanding of the basic meanings of words leads to different extended meanings of the same words.

5. Conclusion

By comparing the definitions and entries in Chinese and English dictionaries, this paper reveals the similarities and differences of the extended meanings of the four basic taste words in Chinese and English, and summarizes the reasons for them. From which, we can find that the extended meanings of these basic taste words are similar in Chinese and English. This also reflects that there are a lot of similarities and differences between the East and the West in thinking model. Therefore, we should pay attention to the similarities and differences between Chinese and English when conducting cross-cultural communication, so as to further understand the similarities and differences between the eastern and western thinking models, to have better cultural exchanges and to eliminate communication obstacles!

Acknowledgment

Research project of teaching reform in higher education of Hunan province: Research on Compilation Methods and Strategies of English Vocabulary Books from the Perspective of Cognitive (No.618)

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