

On the Semantic Restrictions of Monosyllabic Sensory Adjectives in Metaphorical Expressions: Evidence from Mandarin Chinese

Xiaolin Zhang

Graduate Student, Hiroshima University

happy linda529@hotmail.com

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There are some restrictions on the metaphorical use of monosyllabic sensory adjectives in Mandarin Chinese (Yu 2004, Tang 2010). For instance, although when the monosyllabic adjective “*tian*” (sweet) is used as predicate, “**Ta de xiaorong tian.*” (His smile is sweet) is unacceptable; if it is replaced with a disyllabic adjective like “*tian-tian de*” (sweet-sweet AUX)”, which conveys virtually the same meaning, “*Ta de xiaorong tian-tian de.*” (His smile is sweet-sweet AUX) becomes perfectly acceptable. In addition, although when the monosyllabic adjective “*tian*” (sweet) is used to modify a noun as in “**tian (de) xiaorong*” (sweet smile), the expression is unacceptable, when a disyllabic adjective is used, as in “*tian-tian de xiaorong*” (sweet-sweet AUX smile), the expression becomes acceptable. In this research, we propose that these restrictions above are based on some semantic grounds, not on phonological ones. Metaphors are semantic phenomena. Thus, it is natural to investigate the semantic difference between monosyllabic and disyllabic words. In fact, the phonological restrictions above eventually turn out to be just epiphenomena. Actually syllable structures are strongly related to category hierarchy. Thus, the restriction on metaphorical use of monosyllabic adjectives can be that of basic level adjectives. In fact, we conclude that basic level adjectives cannot be used metaphorically because they lack invoking *conceived time* (Langacker 1990) as part of conceptual content. This conclusion raises another question; why does only Mandarin have the restriction on metaphorical expressions while other languages do not? We can answer it by positing a polysemous structure based on synecdoche, which is pervasive in category hierarchies. For example, a Japanese word “*sake*” designates as a synecdoche both *alcohol* (higher or basic level) and *rice wine* (lower level) in a category hierarchy. Thus, we can posit the existence of *sake*¹ (alcohol) and *sake*² (rice wine) in Japanese vocabulary. Languages express distinct level categories in one form. Therefore, we can safely assume *sweet*¹/*sweet*² in English or *ama*¹/*ama*² (sweet) in Japanese at different levels of category hierarchy. And we propose that only the lower level *sweet*² and *ama*² can be used for metaphorical expressions in these languages, as “*tian-tian*” can in Mandarin. In short, while lower level adjectives with conceived time in conceptual content can be used as metaphorical, basic level adjectives cannot be used as metaphorical. Although some languages appear to have no such restrictions on metaphorical use, they are merely implicit.

Reference

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