

# Pleasing to the Mouth or Pleasant Personality: A corpus-based study of conceptualization of desserts in online Chinese food reviews

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Description of flavours of desserts often involves a rich range of vocabulary. As food, desserts are special in that their main purpose is to make people happy rather than to nourish the body. This is perhaps the reason why, in English and many other languages, words expressing sensuality and sexuality are dominant when used to describe good desserts (cf. Jurafsky, 2014). Does this apply to languages where explicit sensual expressions are not encouraged? This paper investigates the real-life language describing tastes of desserts in Mandarin Chinese, extracting data from *Dazhong Dianping*<sup>1</sup>, the most popular restaurant review website in China. Using the *Sketch Engine* (Kilgarriff *et al.*, 2004) as the primary tool, this paper mainly addressed the following three research questions: a) What words are frequently used to describe taste and flavour of desserts in Mandarin Chinese and what are the linguistic characteristics of these words? b) How sensory vocabulary and sensory modalities interrelate, i.e., what kind of synaesthetic metaphors<sup>2</sup> are used when describing tastes and flavours of desserts in Mandarin Chinese? c) How desserts are represented and conceptualized in Chinese culture through the vocabulary used to describe desserts in Mandarin Chinese?

First, it is found that vocabulary describing 口感 (*kǒugǎn*, 'mouthfeel') is much more relevant than those for 味道 (*wèidào*, 'taste/smell/flavour') or 口味 (*kǒuwèi*, 'one's taste/flavour'), as evidenced by the hundreds of 'mouthfeel' words identified. Most of these terms are adjectives and people tend to combine 'preferred' morphemes to make up compound words to describe their 'preferable' taste and flavour, such as three morphemes 甜 (*tián*, 'sweet'), 香 (*xiāng*, 'fragrant/delicious') and 滑 (*huá*, 'smooth') in the compound words 香甜 (*xiāngtián*, 'delicious and sweet'), 甜滑 (*tiánhuá*, 'sweet and smooth') and 香滑 (*xiānghuá*, 'delicious and smooth'). In addition, compared to the overwhelmingly positive words of describing desserts, negative words are rare when describing taste in Chinese.

Secondly, concerning the interrelationship among five senses, the majority of 'mouthfeel' terms are tactile (sense of touch) in nature, which shall be considered as synaesthetic metaphors to depict taste sense. In addition, visual items including 薄 (*báo*, 'mild'), 清澈 (*qīngchè*, 'clear'), 蓬鬆 (*péngsōng*, 'fluffy'), 濃密 (*nóngmì*, 'thick/dense'), 乾淨 (*gānjìng*, 'clean') and etc., and auditory terms involving onomatopoeic words both suggest that flavour perception is multisensory. It integrates all the five sensory modalities, although to varying degrees.

Moreover, these 'mouthfeel' words often collocate with words connoting pleasant personality, especially in terms of warm social interactions, such as 調皮 (*tiáopí*, naughty), 浮誇 (*fúkuā*, boastful) and 硬朗 (*yìnglǎng*, tough). These adjectives stem from impressions of personalities gained through social interactional contact. Thus, personifying delicious desserts as pleasant characters using such positive adjectives illustrates that, in Chinese culture, language emanating from social interactional experience, rather than feeling of physical bodily pleasure only, is also used to describe desserts.

In summary, due to its intensional rather than physical telicity, description of desserts shows significant cultural variations. On the one hand, the preferred words still retain the same telic purpose, i.e., to please the mouth; on the other hand, instead of using expressions conveying intensional bodily pleasure (sensuality/sexuality), Chinese focus both on the parochial bodily experience (pleasing the mouth) as well as the social-interactional (pleasant personality) to describe desserts.

## References

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<sup>1</sup> Accessed at <http://www.dianping.com/>.

<sup>2</sup> 'Synaesthetic metaphor' refers to the conception in one sensory modality could be modified by the conception from other sensory domains (see, e.g. Ullmann, 1957; Williams, 1976). For example, *sharp* [TOUCH/SOURCE] *taste* [TASTE/TARGET] - 'sharp' is a synaesthetic metaphor to modify TASTE, and the synaesthetic directionality is from TOUCH to TASTE.