

The Chinese PAINLESS: A Corpus-based Analysis

Siaw-Fong Chung, Meng-Chieh Lin, and Chu-Wan Chen
National Chengchi University
sfchung@nccu.edu.tw, 104161007@nccu.edu.tw, missys3592@gmail.com

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Metaphorical extensions often happen in the language over time. Metaphor research in the past largely focused on the metaphorical mapping of domain information (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and often on the nouns or verbs being mapped, but in many cases, metaphorical extensions could occur subtly in other parts-of-speech. Lyons (1977: 550) said that metaphorical extension of a sense “is no more predictable by rule than is the creation of a new compound lexeme.” Extensions in the modifiers or adjectives are often less noticed than those in the nouns or verbs. Furthermore, metaphorical extensions do not often have parallel development. For example, in this study, we found that *wútòng* ‘painless’ (無痛) could extend figuratively to modify money, investment, and learning, while the opposite of it *tòng* (痛) or *tòngkǔ* ‘pain’ cannot ‘un-negate’ the painless meaning in *wútòng* (無痛).

In this paper, we analyzed the word *wútòng* (無痛) that appeared in the United Daily News (UDN) (聯合知識庫). The data (342 instances) were collected in the recent 10 years (2008-2018). We also looked at the definitions: *Wútòng* means ‘painless’ or ‘analgesia,’ in which the latter is a medical term that means ‘the loss of the ability to feel pain while conscious’ (taken from <https://tw.ichacha.net/%E7%84%A1%E7%97%9B.html>). Similar to its English-equivalent medical term, *wútòng* in Chinese is also often used in medical field. Many examples are related to the reduction of physical pain, with uses such as *wútòngjì* (無痛劑) ‘soothing agent’, *wútòng báiyá* (無痛拔牙) ‘a painless extraction of teeth’, *wútòng fēnmiǎn* (無痛分娩) ‘painless labor’, etc. While some examples referring to the characteristic of the noun being modified were also seen (e.g., *wútòngxìng huángdǎn* (無痛性黃疸) ‘painless jaundice’, *wútòngxìng qīngtān* (無痛性輕癱) ‘painless paresis’, etc.), some other examples refer to the mental state of ‘feelingless’ *wútòng wúgǎn* (無痛無感) and some are disease names (先天性無痛無汗症) (CIPA). Among these, ‘feelingless’ has developed into ‘ignorant’ meaning. (「當時甚至覺得，就算一覺起來對方突然消失了，也無痛無感。」).

Although the literal disease-related meanings still dominate about 80% of the data, the figurative use has changed from mental state to the following uses (1).

- (1) (a) 無形中引導他們自然的運用美語，通過無痛式學習 ‘painless learning’
- (b) 這種排隊法絲毫無痛，反而成為記憶中美好的經歷。 ‘a method of queuing that is painless’
- (c) 至於 3 G 用戶無痛升級，以及 4 G 流量優惠，也是兩家業者競爭利器。 ‘painless upgrade’
- (d) 楊士範說，目前已有第三方公司設計「無痛轉換」程式，但軟體來源不明確，仍有風險，建議 M S N 用戶不到「最後一刻」，不要輕易轉換到 Skype。 ‘A transformation (computer) program that is painless’

These uses are unrelated to pain, but to ‘difficulty’ – in other words, the sentences mean ‘without any difficulty’ or ‘with the lowest possible trouble’ (張仲杰表示，能無痛改善交通最好，但以北市的人車密度來看)。

As mentioned, these findings show that ‘pain’ is a trouble. What people need in today’s world is something that can be adopted ‘painlessly’ or ‘troublelessly’ or ‘without any difficulty’. If we put these meanings back to the disease-related uses, one could also mean that child-birth, extraction of teeth, etc. are becoming more ‘friendly’ and ‘troubleless’, a connotation that encourages the society to accept them.

References

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