

BODILY SENSATION AND EMBODIMENT: A CORPUS-BASED STUDY OF GUSTATORY VOCABULARY IN MANDARIN CHINESE

Yin Zhong¹ Chu-Ren Huang¹ Sicong Dong²


¹ *The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong*

² *Harbin Institute of Technology, Shenzhen, Shenzhen*

ABSTRACT

Embodiment has been the tenet of several linguistic theories accounting for how language conceptualizes cognitive and bodily experiences. Studies on linguistic synesthesia and sensory lexicon strengthened the embodiment account by showing that the mapping patterns amongst sense modalities likewise exhibited a tendency from the more embodied to the less embodied. This paper reports a corpus-based study of gustatory vocabulary in Mandarin Chinese to explore the interaction between embodied senses and conceptual embodiment. We first observed that the perception of *là* 辣 ‘spicy’ and *má* 麻 ‘numbing’ was chemesthesis derived from a chemical reaction from the body. In addition, the concept of taste was found capable of being depicted by variegated non-taste lexical items from less embodied sensory domains. This study posits that gustatory properties as abstract cognitive categories are likely to be derived from more embodied senses, yet when the quality of gustatory sensation is the focus, less embodied senses can be adopted to modify it. Corroborated with other recent studies, this study underlines and clarifies the role of embodiment as a versatile

Acknowledgments This research work is supported by Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation Research Grant sponsored by the National Taiwan Normal University and the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (Project No.: RG012-D-16).

Sicong Dong (董思聰; corresponding author) [dongsicong@hit.edu.cn]; T2-711B, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Harbin Institute of Technology, Shenzhen, Nanshan, Shenzhen, Guangdong, China;  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2446-9730>

tool of linguistic conceptualization among multiple conceptual layers instead of being a fixed set of conceptual objects to select from.

KEYWORDS

Embodiment Mandarin gustatory vocabulary Linguistic synesthesia
Sensory modality

1. INTRODUCTION

Human beings live by five senses to experience the world, namely, *visual*, *auditory*, *gustatory*, *olfactory*, and *tactile* sensations, or more commonly known as *vision*, *hearing*, *taste*, *smell*, and *touch* senses.¹ These five sense modalities are established as both the traditional and the scientifically conventionalized categories of basic human perception. How human beings perceive the world through the five physiological senses and how such perceptions are encoded in human language have received constant scrutiny, yet they have not been studied with the same intensity. Previous linguistic studies were voluminous on vision, notably on color terms (e.g., Berlin and Kay 1969; Wierzbicka 1990; Kay 2009). This can be attributed to the dominance of vision in Western culture (e.g., Classen 1997; Levinson and Majid 2014), as well as among perceptual qualities (e.g., Strik Lievers and Winter 2018). To bring in a slightly different perspective, this paper primarily investigates how gustatory sensation, or taste, is expressed in Mandarin Chinese, and its relationship with other senses. We attempt to present a more distinctive and fine-grained picture of how Chinese people discuss gustatory perception and its related concepts with support from corpus data.

Tastes of food are traditionally categorized into *wǔ-wèi* 五味 ‘five tastes; five flavors’ in Chinese culture: *sweet*, *sour*, *bitter*, *spicy*, and *salty*, as exemplified in the classic text *Lüshi Chunqiu* 吕氏春秋 (Lü 2010, 279)²:

五味三材…调和之事，必以甘酸苦辛咸…

Wǔ wèi sān cái...tiáo hé zhī shì, bì yǐ gān suān kǔ xīn xián...

‘For the five tastes and the three ingredients...for the task of harmonizing and blending, one must use sweet, sour, bitter, spicy, and salty...’

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感官体验与具身认知
——基于语料库的汉语味觉词汇研究

钟隐¹ 黄居仁¹ 董思聪²

¹香港理工大学 ²哈尔滨工业大学(深圳)

摘要

具身认知(Embodiment)是研究人类语言概念表征的重要途径。前人对语言中的通感(linguistic synesthesia)及感官词汇的实证研究发现感官之间会因感官体验(bodily sensation)程度的不同呈现不同的映射规律。一般来说感官体验度较高(more embodied)的感官(如触觉、味觉)会更趋向于映射至体验度较低(less embodied)的感官(如视觉、听觉等)。本文基于语料库对汉语味觉词汇进行详尽考察,并对感官体验与具身认知问题展开讨论。我们主要分析两种现象:1)从生理学角度看不属于味觉感知的“辣”和“麻”长期被汉语母语者视为味觉;2)汉语母语者在描述食物味道时,会使用大量不属于味觉的其他感官词汇,而这些词汇有些更是来自感官体验度较低的感官。本文提出,味觉作为较为抽象的认知范畴,可借助感官体验度较高的词汇对其进行描述;但当人们需要强调味觉特性时,体验度较低的感官词汇同样也可对味觉加以表达。本文的分析进一步说明了具身认知对语言概念化研究的多重功能。

关键词

具身认知 汉语味觉词汇 通感 感官体验