

A Contrastive Analysis of Synaesthesia Between Sensorial Adjectives in English and Chinese

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ABSTRACT

Synaesthesia is both a physiological and psychological phenomenon and a language and cultural phenomenon. Synaesthesia semantic phenomenon abounds in both Chinese and English vocabulary. This paper aims at elaborating the accidental similarities, distinguished differences and the lacking of counterparts phenomenon in synaesthesia vocabulary in Chinese and English. This is of great significance because it can shed some light on the translation of sensorial adjectives and facilitate cultural exchanges.

Keywords: *synaesthesia, sensorial adjectives, transfer, culture*

I. INTRODUCTION

"Synaesthesia" is a word derived from the Greek words "syn" meaning "together" and "aesthesia" meaning "perception". With regard to language, it is a type of metaphor which entails a transfer between the respective domains of the different senses. Examples include: "Loud color" (where an attribute of the auditory domain is transferred to the visual domain), "sweet voice" (which involves a transfer of a gustatory sensation to the auditory domain) and "cold smell" (where a word for touch is used to describe the smell).

The synaesthetic metaphor prevails in poetic and ordinary language across different cultures. It can be as original and creative as in John Donne's "loud perfume" and Mo Yan's "dark red sounds (暗红色的声音)". It can also be so entrenched ("热闹", "冷静" in Chinese and "sweet voice" in English) that it escapes our extraordinary attention. The following part will give you a contrastive analysis of synaesthesia between sensorial adjectives in Chinese and English.

II. THE EXPLANATION OF SYNAESTHESIA PHENOMENON

A. Definitions

There are two paths to the study pertaining to synaesthesia. The first employs scientific approaches while the second follows from theories of metaphor. Consistent with the differentiation of the two paths is the distinction made by Martino and Marks (2001) between strong synaesthesia and weak synaesthesia. Strong synaesthesia is the real co-sensation. For example, one hears sounds and, besides that,

experiences accompanying color sensations. Weak synaesthesia describes milder forms of intersensory associations and connections revealed through art and language.

B. Examples

What this paper concerns most is the weak synaesthesia in linguistics. For example: in poetic language, sentences as the following appear frequently.

- The cold smell of potato mould.....(Seamus Heaney "Digging")
- Big Trumpet Liu was blowing the trumpet toward the sky, its dark red sounds hitting the sorghum stalks, making them tremble with rustles.

刘大号对着天空吹喇叭，暗红色的声音碰的高粱棵子索索打抖。(Mo Yan "Red Sorghum" 莫言—红高粱)

In the sentences such phrases as "cold smell" and "dark red sounds" give the whole sentences a sense of originality. What is special about them is that words for touch (cold) or vision (dark red) are used to describe smell or hearing. Critics contend that is where creativity characteristic of poetic language arises. In ordinary language, we have similar expressions, for example, "甜言蜜语" in Chinese and "sweet music" in English. These expressions are so entrenched that we hardly realize their difference from expressions like "sweet food".

The phenomenon described above is weak synaesthesia revealed through language. It involves the transfer of attributes of one sensory domain to another. In linguistics, it is called "synaesthetic metaphor" instead of "weak synaesthesia" which is a terminology

in science. This phenomenon, the synaesthetic metaphor, is the one that interests the author and the one that the author is going to deal with in the thesis, especially the differences and similarities between English and Chinese from the point view of sensorial adjectives.

III. THE SIMILARITIES BETWEEN SENSORIAL ADJECTIVES IN ENGLISH AND CHINESE

Synaesthesia is a physiological process which is reflected by psychological process and this psychological process leaves some hints in human being's languages and forms a general linguistic phenomenon. Synaesthesia, as a special linguistic phenomenon, is based on conditioned reflex, for example, the conditioned reflexes aroused by coldness, hotness, or the touch of edge tools won't be different from individuals to individuals or from nations to nations. In vocabulary of different languages, synaesthesia to a great extent reflects this common physiological character. This aspect can be vividly manifested in the accidental similarities between sensorial adjectives in English and Chinese.

A. Example A

Taking smell as an example, "Her name is fragrant with good deeds." (她做了好事而芳名远扬). It is based on the common physiological mechanisms of sensorial organs that each nation has the same sensorial mentality and psychological reflection, therefore, they have the same thinking mode and value orientation. There are words "fragrant" (芳名) and "flagrant" (臭名) in both English and Chinese and it's the examples of attributes for smell are used to describe vision and hearing which means appraisal and hatred respectively.

B. Example B

What is more, the gestation and experiences like "sweet", "sour", "bitter", and "spicy" can remind people of happy or unpleasant feelings of hearing or vision and psychological state. "Sweet music" (悦耳的音乐) and "sweet words" (甜言蜜语) are both the examples of words for gustation (sweet) are used to describe hearing, meaning good words. "Sweet words" (甜言蜜语) has derogatory meaning like dishonest words in both English and Chinese which reflects the common features of logical mind between the two nations. "The smell of wet clothing is sour." (湿衣服的气味是酸的) is a sentence of the transfer between gustation and smell which means unpleasant experience. Touch also experiences the transfer. Touch is the lowest level sensorial domain, but skin is the contact organ which can gain more concrete and vivid feelings, so touch is always transferred to describe hearing, vision and smell. For example, an acute tone (高音调) involves a transfer of touch domain to auditory domain, acute stench (刺鼻

的恶臭) is a transfer of touch sensation to smell domain. Also, "light" is used to describe touch sensation and the literal meaning is "not heavy", but in "light meal" (清淡食物), the derived meaning is "not greasy". In "light blue/green" (淡蓝/绿), it involves a transfer of touch domain to visual domain. In addition, the feeling of temperature sensation in touch has a natural associative relation with visual and auditory domain, which is also reflected in language. For example, cold/warm colors (冷/暖色); cold words (冷言冷语); icy look (冷冰冰的神色); warm regard (温和, 亲切的目光); warm congratulations (热烈的祝贺).

There are also many other examples of similarities:

Light soup (清汤); a cold face (冷冰冰的脸);

A sharp sight (敏锐的视觉); a sharp whistle (尖厉的哨声)

Piercing cry (刺耳的叫声); a light breathing (微弱的呼吸声);

Sharp smell (刺鼻的气味); a hot debate (热烈的辩论);

A bitter smile (苦笑); a bitter smell (苦味儿)

bitter cold (苦寒); sweet voice (甜蜜的声音)

It is easily seen from the examples that the synaesthesia between sensorial adjectives is vivid. These similarities enable us to achieve a equivalent translation between the two languages.

IV. THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SENSORIAL ADJECTIVES IN ENGLISH AND CHINESE

Although synaesthetic phenomenon to a great extent depends on mankind's common physiological mechanisms and displays a general commonness, at the same time, synaesthesia is also a cognitive mode. Because of the differences of cultural traditions, customs, social principles, values and thinking modes, every nation has its own characteristics, which results in the fact that people of different societies have different cognitions of the objective world. Synaesthesia is based on associative mechanism and the associations of outside stimulus from people of different nations are not always the same.

A. Example A

Taking gestation domain for example, "sour", "bitter", and "spicy" express an unpleasant stimulus and the associations of this kind of experience are also unpleasant. But the concrete associations are sometimes different. "酸溜溜的" in "一副酸溜溜的脸", "几句酸溜溜的话" is the illustration of transfer of gestation domain to visual domain, which means jealousy. This kind of expression has something to do with Chinese old story "Chicu" (吃醋). In English, there is also "a sour face"

which means an irritated face because western people's association of "sour" always means angry and miserable. Also, "to have a sour look" (狠狠地瞪一眼) or (讥讽的神色). If "sour" is transferred to auditory sensation, it means harsh sounds, "A sour note" (刺耳的音符) is this kind of expression. There is not this kind of usage in Chinese. When "sour" is transferred to touch domain, it means cold and wet in English, for example, "a sour winter" (湿冷的冬天), but in Chinese it means "寒酸的" which is used to describe the poor scholar. When "sour" is transferred to touch sensation in Chinese, it is always used to describe pain, for example, "酸痛", "心酸", "酸疼", "辛酸的泪" and so on. But in English, there is no expression like "sour tears". Transferred to auditory domain, "sour" also has the meaning of sadness in Chinese, for example, "嘶酸雏雁失群夜, 断绝胡儿恋母声" (李欣《听董大弹胡茄声》) which is also different from English.

B. Example B

Taking another word "bitter" as an example, when Chinese "苦" (bitter) is transferred to touch sensation, it is used to describe the painful feeling of body or mind, for example, "痛苦", "苦闷", "苦恼". Transferred to auditory domain, Chinese "苦" (bitter) expresses the idea of "thorny", for example, "苦言" in "苦言相劝". But in English, bitter (苦) can be used to describe hatred and dissatisfaction. Transferred to auditory domain, it means dissatisfaction, for example, bitter words (怨恨的话), Bitter complaints (愤愤不平的怨言). Transferred to touch domain, it means "piercing", for example, bitter hatred (刺骨的仇恨). And "a bitter dispute" (剧烈的争论) is an example of transfer to visual sensation.

These differences in synaesthetic phenomenon has enriched different cultures and languages and give each of them their own special features, however, they also hinder the cross-cultural understanding. Therefore, in communication and translation, we should bear these differences in mind.

V. THE LACK OF COUNTERPARTS PHENOMENON

It is well known that language and culture coexist on the specific national soil. The sub-culture and regional customs of different nations will undoubtedly influence the language communication and leave deep brand to languages. Therefore, to the same sensation, people of some nations can have special associations which don't exist in other nations. We still take smell as an example, "sweet" (甜) is regarded as the counterpart of "bitter" (苦) and is used to express happiness, however, in English, it can also be used to describe a kind of stable state, soft vision. For example, a sweet car (行驶平稳的汽车), sweet colors (柔和的色彩). But in Chinese, there isn't this kind of usages.

There are also some other examples of the lack of counterparts' phenomenon:

Salty remarks (尖锐的评论),

Salty criticism (尖刻的批评)

Delicious perfume (芬芳的香味),

A delicious story (一则有趣的故事)

Although the aspect explained in this part is not the main trend, it still needs our attention because without the awareness of these differences, many cross-cultural misunderstanding will arise.

VI. CONCLUSION

The meaning transfer of sensorial adjectives in different languages is the fruit of synaesthesia association. The physiological similarities and cultural differences result in the fact that there are accidental similarities, distinguished differences and specialties in the meaning transfer between English and Chinese. Therefore, in the process of translation and vocabulary teaching, we should consider the cultural differences of different nations except applying synaesthesia. If the subtle relations can be handled successfully; it will be beneficial to both cultural communication and vocabulary teaching.

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