

Contact-induced change in sememe structure—a case study of the taste term *salty* in Chinese dialects

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Language contact triggers changes not only in phonological and syntactic level, but also in lexical level. As often reported, loan words from the source language could expand of the lexicon in the recipient language. However, lexical borrowing between dialects may not expand the lexicon, but could bring impact on the sememe structure of cognates. In this article, we would like to show the relationship between language and the world by investigating the sememe structures of the same cognate in dialects and propose dialect-contact induced change in the sememe structure.

Xián (salty) in Old Chinese originally means the taste of salt, but this cognate has developed different extended and metaphorical meanings among dialects, due to the influence from the speakers' residing regions or the people and culture the dialect speakers encountered. Based on an investigation of *Xián* among 34 Chinese dialects, we found that most of the dialects retain the meanings related to salty taste and developed extended meaning referring to salted food.

However, in coastal dialects like Wu, Southern Min, and Yue, a negative connotation has been developed. In Southern Min dialects, *Xián* has developed a metaphorical meaning, *stingy*.

伊做人真鹹。

I tsò-lâng tsin kiâm.

he do person truly salty-

“He is a stingy person.”

In Yue dialects, *Xián* has acquired a connotation of obscene. 鹹豬手”salty pig hand” means a guy who likes to sexually harass females. In Wu dialects, *Xián* is related to prostitute. 鹹肉店 ”salty meat store” refers to a cathouse. Both in Southern Min and Yue dialects, the same cognates can denote foreign people and items, such as 鹹水 ”salty water”. These metaphorical meaning, seldom reported in other in-land dialects, may result from the speakers life experience, such as much sweat due to the humid climate and the easy-access to the foreign cultures. Therefore, the sememe structures of Southern Min, Wu, Yue dialects are different from those of the in-land dialects.

Sememe could also be borrowed in a dialect contact context.

Xián in Southern Min also develops a meaning of strong flavor and a further metaphorical meaning, lascivious. Taiwan Mandarin has borrowed both of the meanings from Southern Min, With the extensive culture contact with Hong Kong, Taiwan Mandarin also borrowed the meaning of obscene from Yue dialect. It is evident that dialect contact may bring a change in the sememe structure of a cognate.

Keywords: language contact, taste term, sememe structure, metaphorical meaning