

# All that glitters is not gold

Prototypical semantic change in shiny Literary Chinese ideophones

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20/3/2018

## Abstract

This innovative study shows that literary Chinese ideophones in the lexical field of LIGHT are highly dynamic in their polysemous semantic structure as it developed through time. Four case studies demonstrate that a levelled approach with attention to diachronic prototype semantics reveal different aspects of the nature of ideophones and their meanings: the meanings tend to be concentrated in prototypical bundles with extensions to fuzzy edges. Different homophonous lexical items may influence each other in terms of their semantic preference. Type and token frequency effects influence the entrenchment of certain meanings. Prototypicality is shown to be transient, from the semasiological perspective as well as from the onomasiological perspective. Furthermore, the four levels of Mental Spaces, Frames, ICMs or Domains, and Image Schemas are unifiable into one bigger framework furthers a comprehensive understanding of the semantics of LIGHT ideophones, but can be expanded to other semantic fields as well.

## 1 Introduction

In the last twenty to thirty years, scholarly attention for ideophones and sound symbolism has slowly left the margins of linguistic study (Joseph 1997) as multiple researchers of language-specific studies put their findings together, resulting in conference proceedings like Sound Symbolism (Hinton, Nichols & Ohala 1994) and Ideophones (Voeltz & Kilian-Hatz 2001), in an attempt to readdress the Saussurean dictum of the arbitrariness of the sign. While this study attempts to continue this scholarly aspiration of discovering non-arbitrary elements in language, it will show that there is much flexibility and dynamicity in the meaning side of such sound-symbolic items, like ideophones. This will be done by first briefly surveying the state of the field (section 2.1), introducing a cognitive folk model of symbolic assemblies consisting of [sound/writing/meaning] (section 2.2), and narrowing down the scope to LIGHT ideophones based on phonaestheme research and data this study inherited from a phonological pre-study (sections 2.3 and 2.4). Next, some methodological points will be made: first, how three Cognitive Linguistic perspectives on the meaning of ideophones may be unified into a four-level model inspired by recent advances in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (section 3.1). Second, how diachronic prototype semantics will further our understanding of the semantics of LIGHT ideophones (section 3.2). These two perspectives essentially form the research question (section 3.3) that drives this research: what does a leveled approach with attention to polysemy and prototypicality reveal about the nature of ideophones? The answer will be revealed in four corpus-based case studies (section 4), after which some discussion with the relevant literature will be made (section 5) and a conclusion (section 6).

## 2 The background for this study

### 2.1 A brief survey of the state of the field of ideophone research

Linguistic non-arbitrariness, sound symbolism, can be understood as a direct iconic link between the phonological pole and the semantic pole of a symbolic assembly, in Langackerian terms (Langacker 1987; 1988; 1991a; 2000; 1991b; 2008). But what are ideophones? The earliest definition follows Clement Doke: “A vivid representation of an idea in sound. A word, often onomatopoetic, which describes a predicate, qualificative or adverb in respect to manner, colour, sound, smell, action, state or intensity” (Doke 1935:118). A more recent definition, by Mark Dingemanse, defines them as “marked words that depict sensory imagery” (Dingemanse 2011:25). While the former definition has the advantage of being applicable to the language group it was found in (Bantu languages), it lacked the cross-linguistic applicability Dingemanse’s definition attempts to provide. We accept Dingemanse’s definition as a cross-linguistic comparative concept (Haspelmath 2010a), while at the same time recognizing the need for more language-specific categorical description (Haspelmath 2007; 2010b). In terms of Chinese (or Sinitic languages), an exact definition is still lacking, but certain prominent features seem to exist in what is considered ideophonic. Let us discuss these different markedness strategies.

From a morphological perspective, these words often display full reduplication or partial reduplication, e.g. 汪汪 wang~wang ‘woof-woof’, and 忐忑 tan~te ‘perturbed, disturbed’, traditionally described in terms of either letters (respectively AA for full reduplication and AB for partial reduplication) or in terms ‘reduplicative characters’ (diezi 疊字), ‘alliteration’ (shuangsheng 雙聲), or ‘reduplicative rhyme’ (dieyun 疊韻, as in the case of 蹉跎 cuotuo ‘wasting time’). It should also be mentioned that Chinese perspectives on this issue usually place a large emphasis on the so-called ABB construction, where a (seemingly) random word collocates with an ideophone to create an even bigger ideophone, such as liang-jingjing 亮晶晶 ‘glittering, sparkling’ in Mandarin, or kim-siaksiak 金燦燦 ‘golden’ in Southern Min (Taiwanese). In more formal treatments of Chinese phonology and morphology, the semantics and pragmatics of these constructions are downplayed, as can be seen in a recent reference grammar of Chinese (Huang & Shi 2016), where virtually no attention is devoted to the diachronic evolution that led to the synchronic constructions that appear in Modern Chinese. However, it must be admitted that morphologically there has been much research devoted to this question, which can be built on in future research.

So, what other ways of markedness have been observed in ideophones? Apart from phonological investigations of tone (Mok 2001; Chang 2009), the field is still very young for Chinese languages. In many other languages, however, the experiential nature of ideophones has been put to the fore. For example, the multimodality of Quichua ideophones is argued to be so important to the nature of the usage of this word category that traditional dictionaries, let alone a simple glossing, are unable to do their semantics and pragmatics justice (Nuckolls 1996; 2016; 2017). The multimodality in question refers to the accompanying gesture, which appears quite naturally when they are ‘performed’ in spoken natural (non-elicited) language, without however being necessary nor sufficient for the ideophone’s semantics. In other words, there is a high tendency for gesture and the ideophone to co-occur, but it need not be that way.

Similarly, multimodal foregrounding can also be observed in Japanese ideophones. Dingemanse & Akita

(2016) showed in their study of earthquake victims interviewed by the Japanese television broadcasting company NHK how apart from gesture, intonational foregrounding also plays a huge role in the performance and markedness of ideophones. For example, they observed deviations from the normal pitch range-ideophones being spoken either with a higher or lower pitch than the rest of the clause. Also extra intonational pauses seemed to separate the ideophone from the clause, presumably to allow some time for the listener to mentally simulate or experience the semantics conveyed by the ideophone in this context. Other foregrounding mechanisms mentioned by Dingemanse & Akita in this study are phonational in nature, e.g. the use of breathy, creaky, whispering and even growling voice.

In summary, these morphological, gestural, intonational, and phonational markedness seem to feature prominently in the categorization of lexemes as ideophones. A recent development for Japanese and Korean ideophone systems is attributing scores according to different parameters to lexemes, in order to study their ‘canonicity’ (Kwon 2015; 2017), similar to how transitivity has been treated in the past (Thompson & Hopper 2001). However, an investigation into the applicability of these criteria to Chinese ideophones has not been undertaken yet.

Now, after briefly sketching the state of the field, we must turn to the current study object, which is diachronic in nature. It was necessary to discuss the multimodality of ideophones in order to understand what is lost when performing this kind of research: study of (contemporary) synchronic linguistic data allows the researcher to gather material, like video or even audio recordings, that might show how certain phrases and constructions are marked in ways mentioned above. This is not available in diachronic research. However, with Chinese we are in a relatively good position-the availability of large historical corpora, native traditions of lexicography, and a writing system that, even through stages of reanalysis, contains much semantic information beneficial for our understanding of ideophones and their development through time. In our phonological analysis below, we will discuss the case study of ideophones that are situated in the semantic domain of LIGHT. There are two reasons for choosing this semantic domain, which will have consequences for assumptions made in this research.

## 2.2 A cognitive folk model

The first reason is rather coincidental in nature: a few weeks ago we attended a musical concert titled *xingguang yiyi* 星光熠熠 ‘starlight shining bright’. However, after an informal questionnaire, it turned out that not everybody was able to read this 熠熠 out loud as *yìyì* [ji⁵⁵ ji⁵⁵], but that some people faultily guessed the pronunciation of this word was *zhézhé* [ʈʂʰɿ¹ ʈʂʰɿ¹]. It struck us as very revealing that the people participating in this very informal study were able to recognize this word *yiyi* 熠熠 as an ideophone, with the right semantics, but that the entrenchment of its pronunciation was not of the same degree as its semantics. To us, it seemed further evidence of how symbolic assemblies, as they were construed in Langacker’s work on Cognitive Grammar (Langacker 1987), with their phonological poles and semantic poles, as the only three units by which language can be analyzed perhaps do not account for the full system as it is experienced in China. That is to say, for spoken language, this framework appears to us as one of the best out there, with a strong explanatory power. However, recently more voices have been calling out to also consider the written language when discussing grammar (Iwasaki 2015). With respect to Chinese, this integration has been argued for by e.g. Packard (2001:306), and with regards to Chinese and Japanese ideophones, it has been argued by Lu (2006) that a better semiotic model should connect , and into a . Building on this model, we have shown before that it could explain