

All that glitters is not gold

Keywords: Diachronic prototype semantics; ideophones; historical linguistics; lexical semantics

Subfield: subfield

Ideophones, cross-linguistically defined as “marked words that depict sensory imagery” (Dingemanse 2012), have been receiving renewed interest in the last two decades in Chinese and other Sinitic languages (Sun 1999; Mok 2001; Meng 2012; Wu 2014; Van Hoey 2015; Van Hoey & Lu 2016). However, most of these studies have focused on the synchronic formal aspects of these words, namely (partial) reduplication, or *ABB*-like schemas. It is rarely discussed on how these ideophones were used in terms of contexts. This innovative study explores the semantics of Chinese ideophones from a diachronic perspective, aiming to reveal the relations between the contexts and ideophones, and to trace the semantic change of a particular group of ideophone, the shiny ideophones.

Using the *Scripta Sinica* corpus (Academia Sinica 中央研究院 2018) as our data source, we show that literary Chinese ideophones in the lexical field of LIGHT are highly dynamic in their polysemous semantic structure as they developed through time. Four case studies demonstrate that a levelled approach with attention to diachronic prototype semantics (Geeraerts 1997) reveal different aspects of the nature of ideophones and their meanings:

1. The meanings of the investigated ideophones tend to be concentrated in prototypical bundles with extensions to fuzzy edges.
2. Different homophonous lexical items may influence each other in terms of their semantic preference. As an example, see the two variants for *yaoyao* 耀耀 and 耀耀 in figure 1.
3. Type and token frequency effects influence the entrenchment of certain meanings.
4. 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 - argued to be present in metaphor structure as well (Kövecses 2017) - are unifiable into one bigger framework that confirms the place of ideophones between culture and cognition. This study furthers a comprehensive understanding of the semantics of LIGHT ideophones that can be expanded to other semantic fields. It is only through the long history of Chinese literary works, that we can trace back, and find evidence for the symbolic nature of ideophonic lexicalization.

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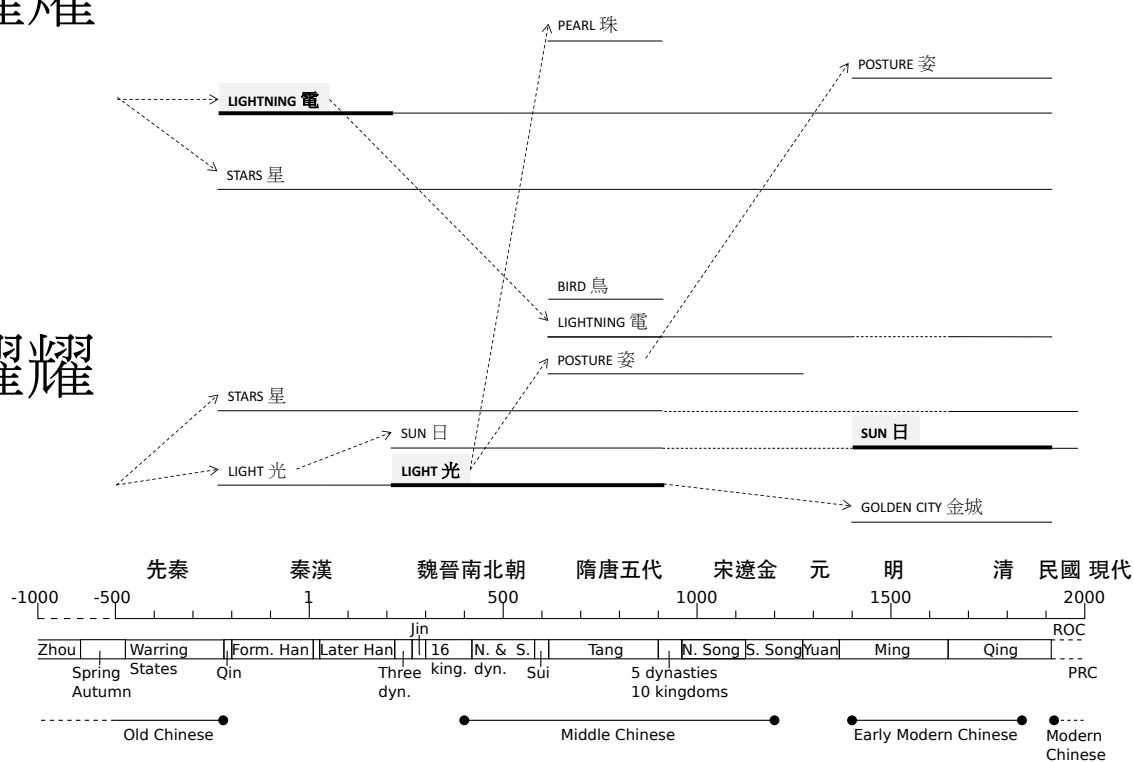


Figure 1: yaoyao 耀耀 and yaoyao 耀耀

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