

Being Assiduous: Do We Have BITTERNESS or PAIN?

The Synaesthetic and Conceptual Metaphors of BITTERNESS and PAIN in Chinese and English

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Abstract. This paper examines both synaesthetic and conceptual metaphors of BITTERNESS and PAIN in Chinese and English. In terms of synaesthetic metaphor, BITTERNESS is more versatile than PAIN, as the former can be transferred to more sensory domains than the latter. Regardless of the sensory domains, the synaesthetic metaphor basically inherits the negative polarity in both Chinese and English. Regarding conceptual metaphor, both BITTERNESS and PAIN exhibit noticeable cross-linguistic differences. Specifically, EFFORT IS BITTERNESS and INTENSITY IS PAIN are attested in Chinese, while EFFORT IS PAIN and INTENSITY IS BITTERNESS are in operation in English. Whenever EFFORT is targeted, the expression at issue obliterates the negative sense of BITTER and PAIN, probably because the concept of “effort” is cross-culturally positive.

Keywords: BITTERNESS · PAIN · Synaesthesia · Metaphor · Chinese · English

1 Introduction

This paper examines the semantic networks of BITTERNESS and PAIN in Chinese and English. In Chinese, these two concepts are expressed by *ku* ‘bitterness; bitter’ and *tong* ‘pain; painful’, respectively. Moreover, these two morphemes can be juxtaposed to form compounds as *kutong* ‘bitterness-pain’ and *tongku* ‘pain-bitterness’, which are synonymous to each other.

Cross-linguistically true is the fact that both BITTERNESS and PAIN are sensory words, which are repulsive, unpleasant and thus negative in meaning. Specifically, BITTERNESS is gustatory whereas PAIN is tactile. Albeit being specific in a particular sense domain, both BITTERNESS and PAIN exhibit cross-sensory domain mappings in the sense that their original sensory meanings can be transferred to other sensory domains, such as olfactory, auditory, tactile and mental domains.

In addition to involving synesthetic metaphors, BITTERNESS and PAIN are attested to refer to degree intensification (adverbs) and effort-marking expressions (adjectives or adverbs). These two uses are subsumed under conceptual metaphor in the current study. In particular, four types of conceptual metaphors are identified, viz.,

EFFORT IS BITTERNESS, INTENSITY IS PAIN, EFFORT IS PAIN, and INTENSITY IS BITTERNESS. The former two are at work in Chinese while the latter two in English.

In section 2, we will conduct the synaesthetic study of BITTERNESS and PAIN. In section 3, we will further explore how BITTERNESS and PAIN are metaphorically used out of the sensory domains. And we conclude the paper in section 4.

2 Synaesthetic Metaphor for BITTERNESS and PAIN

2.1 Synaesthetic Metaphors for BITTERNESS and PAIN in Chinese

As mentioned in section 1, *ku* ‘bitterness; bitter’ is gustatory and *tong* ‘pain; painful’ is tactile in terms of their sensory information encoded therein.

Despite their specific sensory domains, they can modify words which belong to other sensory domains, as illustrated in Table 1 below:

Table 1. *Ku* ‘bitterness; bitter’ and its synaesthesia

gustatory	olfactory	auditory-mental	mental
<i>ku-cha</i> ‘bit-ter-tea’, <i>ku-wei</i> ‘bitter-taste’	<i>ku-wei</i> ‘bitter-smell’	<i>ku-yan</i> ‘bitter-words; unpleasant words’	<i>ku-men</i> ‘bitter-stuffy; depressed’, <i>ku-zhong-zuo-le</i> ‘bitter-in-do-happiness; enjoy in the mist of sorrow’
negative	negative	negative	negative

Table 2. *Tong* ‘pain; painful’ and its synaesthesia

tactile	mental
<i>ya-tong</i> ‘teeth-pain’	<i>tong-xin</i> ‘pain-heart; distressed’
negative	negative

As shown in Table 1, *ku* ‘bitterness; bitter’ belonging to the gustatory domain can modify *wei* ‘smell’, which is olfactory. Moreover, *ku* ‘bitterness; bitter’ can collate with the word *yan* ‘speech’ and this collocation emphasizes the unpleasant feature of the speech. This is an example involving gustatory-to-auditory synaesthetic mapping, as *yan* ‘speech’ is of auditory by nature. Since emotional repulsiveness, i.e., unpleasant feeling, is also induced in *ku-yan* ‘unpleasant words’, the mental domain is also involved. In this sense, *ku-yan* ‘unpleasant words’ exemplifies a three-phase synaesthetic mapping, viz., gustatory-auditory-mental mapping.

In fact, without the transitional stage, the gustatory *ku* ‘bitterness; bitter’ can also be directly transferred to the mental domain to refer to the unpleasant feelings, such as depression, dejection, distress or sorrow. This is exemplified by the words like *ku-men* ‘bitter-stuffy; depressed’ or *ku-zhong-zuo-le* ‘bitter-in-do-happiness; enjoy in the

mist of sorrow’. Common to those synaesthetic expressions in different sensory domains is the negative or repulsive sense, which originates in the original gustatory domain.

It is worth pointing out that, in synaesthetic metaphors, the negative sense should be understood as bodily or mental experience, which is almost spontaneous and instinctive. In other words, the negativity is experiential rather than evaluative. This distinction between experiential and evaluative emotion is by no means trivial. For example, in the expression of *liang-yao-ku-kou* ‘good-medicine-bitter-mouth; a good medicine tastes bitter’, *ku* ‘bitterness; bitter’ is positive in the evaluative sense, as the medicine with bitter taste is supposed to have the healing function. It is bitter or negative only in the experiential sense. So is the word *ku-yan* ‘bitter-words’, which is experientially unpleasant but might be evaluatively positive when serving as good advice or admonishment to a person. This is actually attested in *Zhanguo Ce* of Classical Chinese, in which there is a saying *ku-yan, yao ye* ‘bitter words, medicine; unpleasant words serve as medicine’. Furthermore, we can say that *ku-zhong-zuo-le* ‘bitter-in-do-happiness; enjoy in the mist of sorrow’ is a kind of positive attitude towards life. To sum up, the experiential polarity determined by physiologically-based spontaneous response differs from the evaluative polarity arrived at by resorting to a socio-cultural value system. The polarity shown in the tables refers to the experiential polarity, as synaesthesia as cross-sensory-domain mapping is closely related to one’s physiological and mental responses.

The tactile word *tong* ‘pain; painful’ can refer to both physical pain (tactile) and psychological suffering (mental). On a par with *ku* ‘bitterness; bitter’, *tong* ‘pain; painful’ is experientially negative in both the tactile and mental domains. Unlike *ku* ‘bitterness; bitter’, *tong* ‘pain; painful’ is more restricted in its range of cross-domain mapping.

2.2 Synaesthetic Metaphors for BITTERNESS and PAIN in English

In this section, we present the synaesthetic uses of bitterness/bitter and pain/painful in English, as in Table 3 and 4, respectively.

Table 3. Bitterness and its synaesthesia

gustatory	auditory- mental	tactile- mental	mental
<i>bitter lemon</i>	<i>bitter words</i> (sarcastic or unpleasant words)	<i>bitter blow; bitterly cold</i>	<i>bitter memo- ry, bitter experience</i>
negative	negative	negative	negative

Table 4. *Pain* and its synaesthesia

tactile	mental
<i>back pain</i>	<i>pain of defeat, pain of imprisonment, the pain of loneliness</i>
negative	negative

The word *bitter* describes a gustatory sense, as shown in the expression of *bitter lemon*. This gustatory meaning can be mapped to the auditory domain, as in *bitter words*. However, the meaning of *bitter words* cannot be authentically auditory but necessarily activates mental perception. In other words, *bitter* in *bitter words* does not describe the sound quality *per se*. Instead of that, the phrase *bitter words* refers to sarcastic and unpleasant words that may emotionally hurt the hearer. Moreover, it is interesting to note that the meaning of *bitter* can also be transferred to the tactile domain, as exemplified in *bitter blow*, which indicates a heavy blow. More often than not, this *bitter blow* transcends the actual tactile meaning and refers to the heavy and undesirable impact in the mental domain. Therefore, *bitter blow* instantiates the gustatory-tactile-mental mapping. However, such a mapping is not attested in Chinese *ku* ‘bitterness; bitter’. Other than the auditory and tactile domains, the mental domain can also be the target domain of *bitter* in English, without any intermediate transfer, as illustrated in *bitter memory* and *bitter experience*. In all these uses, the experiential negativity is shared.

Regarding *pain*, it is originally tactile and it can be mapped to the mental domain to describe the unpleasant state of mind.

2.3 Synaesthetic Metaphors: Similarities and Differences Between Chinese and English

In terms of the synaesthetic metaphors of BITTERNESS and PAIN in Chinese and English, they exhibit great similarities between Chinese and English. Firstly, the gustatory BITTERNESS, compared to the tactile PAIN is more versatile in terms of the range of target domains.

Secondly, all the synaesthetic examples of BITTERNESS and PAIN basically inherit their experiential polarity, i.e., negativity, which is rooted in their respective source domains.

There are, however, differences in the synaesthetic mapping between Chinese and English, in particular regard to BITTERNESS. Specifically, *ku* ‘bitterness; bitter’ in Chinese can be transferred to the olfactory domain to describe a kind of smell, whereas this mapping is not attested in English. On the other hand, *bitter* in English can be mapped to the tactile domain as in *bitter blow*, which has no Chinese counterpart.

Having examined the synesthetic metaphors of BITTERNESS and PAIN, we move to the conceptual metaphors in both Chinese and English.

3 Conceptual Metaphor for BITTERNESS and PAIN

BITTERNESS and PAIN, in both Chinese and English, are not restricted to synaesthetic metaphor. Rather, they may transcend their sensory meanings to modify non-sensory actions or concepts. To distinguish this type of metaphor from synaesthetic metaphor, we adopt the term of conceptual metaphor, of which the data are presented below:

3.1 Conceptual Metaphors for BITTERNESS and PAIN in Chinese

3.1.1 Data Presentation

We firstly present the data of *ku* 'bitterness; bitter' in Chinese, as in (1) – (4). They do not involve any cross domain mapping among the six sense domains. Rather, *ku* 'bitterness; bitter' in the examples refers to efforts put forward by an Agent.

- (1) *chi de ku zhong ku, fang wei ren shang ren*
eat can bitter in bitter then be person up person
'If you are able to take the bitterest of the bitter, you would be the best among people.'
- (2) *chi ku nai lao de pinde*
eat bitter endure tiredness DE virtue
'the virtue of being able to endure the hardships'
- (3) *xia ku gongfu*
put bitter effort
'take great effort'
- (4) *ku lian wudao*
bitter practice dance
'painstakingly practice dancing'

We now turn to the examples of *tong* 'pain; painful' in Chinese, which are presented in (5)-(9). It is interesting to note that most of examples take [*tong*-V(P)] form. More importantly, the original meaning of PAIN is bleached in the following examples and *tong* actually serves as an intensifier to strengthen the degree of the physical or mental actions.

- (5) *tong-chi*
pain-rebuke
'bitterly rebuke'
- (6) *tong-gai-qian-fei*
pain-correct-before-mistake
'earnestly repent and correct one's mistakes'
- (7) *tong-da*
pain-beat
'bitter relentlessly'
- (8) *tong-hui/xi*
pain-regret/regret
'deeply regret'

- (9) *tong*-hen
 pain-hate
 ‘bitterly resent’

The above examples of both *ku* ‘bitterness; bitter’ and *tong* ‘pain; painful’ are similar in that they are not really sensory, even though they may collocate with words that belong to one of the six sense domains. For example, *chi-ku* ‘eat-bitterness; assiduous’ is apparently gustatory, as the verb *chi* ‘eat’ is a gustatory verb. However, the meaning “being assiduous, effort-making” has nothing to do with the taste. In the case of *tong* ‘pain; painful’, it can collocate with the verbs within the auditory domain, such as *chi* ‘rebuke’, the verbs within the tactile domain, such as *da* ‘beat’ and the verbs within the mental domain, such as *hui* ‘regret’ and *hen* ‘hate’. However, the original sense of PAIN is not detectable in the words cited in (5)-(9). Rather, *tong* ‘pain; painful’ functions as an intensifier for the verbs that follow it.

To sum up, both *ku* ‘bitterness; bitter’ in (1)-(4) and *tong* ‘pain; painful’ in (5)-(9) are not synaesthetic metaphorical expressions. In what follows, we will analyze them as conceptual metaphors.

3.1.2 Data Analyses

Regarding *ku* ‘bitterness; bitter’ as presented in (1) to (4), they involve the meaning of “effort”. This forms a sharp contrast with the sensory usages discussed in section 2, as the “effort”-encoded uses are volitional, while sensory meanings can hardly be conceived to be volitional. The volitionality can be tested by the examples in (10) and (11), in which volitional verbs *yuanyi* ‘be willing’ and *jueding* ‘decide’ are applied.

- (10) Ni **yuanyi** chi-gu ma?
 you willing eat-bitter Q
 ‘Are you willing to take effort?’
- (11) Wo **jueding** xia ku gongfu xuexi.
 I decide put bitter effort study
 ‘I decide to put efforts in my studies.’

It is thus clear that the sense of “effort” is encoded in the uses of *ku* ‘bitterness; bitter’ in (1)-(4). We therefore conclude that BITTERNESS can be used to convey EFFORT in Chinese, as presented in (12).

- (12) The conceptual metaphor of *ku* ‘bitterness; bitter’:
EFFORT IS BITTERNESS.

In terms of *tong* ‘pain; painful’ in (5)-(9), it intensifies the degree of the actions or mental states encoded in the post-*tong* verb or verb phrase.

- (13) The conceptual metaphor of *tong* ‘pain; painful’:
INTENSITY IS PAIN.

Having presented the conceptual metaphors of *ku* ‘bitterness; bitter’ and *tong* ‘pain; painful’, we delve into the polarity issue in these metaphors. In particular, we will explore whether the original polarity is retained or not in the conceptual metaphors.

3.1.3 Polarity: Retained or not?

As discussed in section 2, the polarity originally encoded in *ku* ‘bitterness; bitter’ and *tong* ‘pain; painful’ is basically retained in the synaesthetic metaphors. However, this feature cannot be extended to conceptual metaphors presented in section 3.2.

We have already mentioned that both *ku* ‘bitterness; bitter’ and *tong* ‘pain; painful’ are experientially negative in polarity. However, it is obvious that the examples in (1) to (4) are positive in polarity. This makes good sense, if we consider the fact that *ku* ‘bitterness; bitter’ involves the conceptual metaphor of EFFORT IS BITTERNESS. Since “effort” is something recommendable and applaudable, it naturally renders the expressions which embody this metaphor positive in polarity. In other words, the positive quality of “effort” in the conceptual metaphor EFFORT IS BITTERNESS overwrites the negative polarity of “bitterness”.

As regards to the conceptual metaphor INTENSITY IS PAIN, as exemplified in (5)-(9), those words are not necessarily positive or negative. For example, *kong-gai-qian-fei* ‘earnestly repent and correct one’s mistakes’ is evaluatively positive while *tong-hen* ‘bitterly resent’ negative. However, close examination shows that the verb or verb phrase that follows *tong* ‘pain; painful’ are very unlikely to be a positive action or mental state. For example, the verb *zan* ‘praise’ or the mental verb *xiang* ‘miss’ can hardly be modified by the intensifier *tong* ‘pain; painful’, as shown in (14)-(15).

- (14) #*tong-zan*
 pain-praise
 ‘greatly encourage’
- (15) #*tong-xiang*
 pain-miss
 ‘miss intensively’

The acceptability contrast between (5)-(9) on the one hand and (14)-(15) on the other hand indicates that *tong* ‘pain; painful’, as an intensifier, is the least compatible, if possible at all, with positive actions or states. Put differently, the conceptual metaphor INTENSITY IS PAIN retains the negative polarity of *tong* ‘pain; painful’ to a certain degree.

3.2 Bitterness and Pain for Their Conceptual Metaphors in English

On a par with Chinese, *bitterness* and *pain* in English are not confined to synaesthetic metaphor, even though they are originally sensory. Both *bitterness* and *pain* are attested to be used metaphorically out of the sensory domains. They are termed as conceptual metaphors. The data are presented and analyzed in 3.2.1 and 3.2.2.

3.2.1 Data Presentation

The English word *bitter*, including its adverb form *bitterly*, can be used to intensify an action or emotion. They are exemplified in (16) and (18).

- (16) bitter campaign/argument/opposition/dispute
 (17) bitter resentment
 (18) bitterly fight/attack/argue

The examples in (16) illustrate that *bitter* intensifies the actions in the form of de-verbal nouns, while (17) exemplifies the intensification of an emotion. As further shown in (18), when the actions take the verb form, they can be intensified by the adverb *bitterly*.

As for the English word *pain*, let us read the examples in (19) to (25).

(19) No pain, no gain!

(20) Successful are those who are willing to take pains.

(21) We must take pains to do meticulous work among the masses.

(22) They take pains over writing and send them here for us to read.

(23) I had taken great pains with my appearance.

(24) If you want to succeed in the work, you must take pains about it.

(25) They take pains to hire people whose personalities predispose them to serve customers well.

The above examples describe the efforts required in various kinds of work.

3.2.2 Data Analyses

All the examples presented in 3.2.1 show that *bitter* and *pain* in English can give rise to non-synaesthetic metaphor mappings. Specifically, “intensity” can be encoded by bitterness, leading to INTENSITY IS BITTERNESS metaphor. By contrast, “effort” can be expressed by the word *pain*, reflecting the metaphor of EFFORT IS PAIN. They are presented in (26) and (27).

(26) The conceptual metaphor of *bitter*:

INTENSITY IS BITTERNESS.

(27) The conceptual metaphor of *pain*:

EFFORT IS PAIN.

3.2.3 Polarity: Retained or not?

The question to address in this section is whether the negative polarity is retained or not in the conceptual metaphors. We find that the collocation between *bitter* and a word with positive meaning is very unlikely. This is illustrated in (28) and (29), in which *praise* and *love* are incompatible with the intensifier *bitter*.

(28) #bitter praise

(29) #bitter love

The contrast between (16)-(18) on the one hand and (28)-(29) on the other hand reveals the fact that the negative meaning of the gustatory *bitter* is somehow inherited by the intensifier *bitter*.

When it comes to the examples of *pain* in (19)-(25), it is clear that the positive meaning is conveyed. This positivity is actually made explicit by some positive words, such as *gain*, *successful*, *meticulous*, *succeed* etc. in those examples. Therefore, it is quite safe to conclude that in the case of EFFORT IS PAIN, the negative sense of *pain* is obliterated.

4 Conclusions

This paper examines both the synaesthetic and conceptual metaphors of BITTERNESS and PAIN in Chinese and English.

In terms of synaesthetic metaphors, BITTERNESS and PAIN show great parallelism between Chinese and English. Firstly, BITTERNESS is more versatile than PAIN with regard to the range of their cross-sensory mapping in both Chinese and English. Secondly, the negative sense is basically retained in the synaesthetic metaphor in both Chinese and English. The only noticeable difference lies in the actual domains BITTERNESS can transfer to. Specifically, BITTERNESS in Chinese can transfer to olfactory domain, while it cannot do so in English. On the other hand, BITTERNESS in English allows gustatory-to-tactile mapping, which seems to be unattested in Chinese. Regarding the synesthetic metaphor of PAIN, no significant contrast is found between Chinese and English.

Regarding conceptual metaphors of BITTERNESS and PAIN, the contrasts are shown in table 5.

Table 5. The conceptual metaphors of BITTERNESS and PAIN

	BITTERNESS	PAIN
Chinese	EFFORT	INTENSITY (negative)
English	INTENSITY (negative)	EFFORT

In Chinese, EFFORT IS BITTERNESS and INTENSITY IS PAIN are attested, whereas in English, EFFORT IS PAIN and INTENSITY IS BITTERNESS are proven. Interestingly enough, they switch the mappings in such a neat way in Chinese and English.

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