

Polysemous Features of Words of Perception in English, Chinese and Korean—A Case Study of

mouth, 嘴/口 and 입 *

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Abstract—Typologically, English, Chinese and Korean belong to three different types of language. English is inflectional, Chinese is isolating and Korean is agglutinative. Therefore, words of perception in these three languages show some different semantic features. But due to similar physical features and physiological phenomenon, people speaking English, Chinese or Korean language use the same word of perception to express the same meaning or feeling. This paper makes a comparative case study of *mouth*, 嘴/口 and 입, which have rich polysemous features. Their meanings are extended from “the part of human body” to the concrete “entrance” or “person” and then to the abstract “speech act” or “way of speaking”. The meaning extension shows semantic symmetry and asymmetry both interlingually and intralingually in the expressions not only with *mouth*, 嘴/口 and 입 and other words of perception in three languages.

Index Terms—perception, *mouth*, 嘴/口 and 입, polysemy, meaning extension, motivation

I. INTRODUCTION

Polysemy is the capacity for a sign (such as a word, phrase, or symbol) to have multiple meanings (that is, multiple senses or sememes and thus multiple senses), usually related by contiguity of meaning within a semantic field. Fillmore and Atkins' (2000) definition stipulates three elements: (i) the various senses of a polysemous word have a central origin, (ii) the links between these senses form a network, and (iii) understanding the 'inner' one contributes to understanding of the 'outer' one.

Perception is the organization, identification and interpretation of sensory information in order to represent and understand the environment (Schacter, 2011). All perception involves signals in the nervous system, which in turn result from physical or chemical stimulation of the sense organs (Goldstein, 2014), such as mouth, eyes, nose, ears, etc. The words of these sensory organs are usually polysemous in many languages. For example, the meaning of *eye* in English, Chinese and Korean is extended metaphorically or metonymically from visual organ to concrete concept like person or object and to abstract concept like perception, attitudes or emotions.

As one of the sense organs, mouth is an important for mankind in that it is used not only to make speech sounds, but also to eat. There are many expressions with *mouth* in English, Chinese and Korean, which have something in common and something different in meanings. For example, *sweet mouth* has equivalents in both Chinese and Korean, which are 嘴甜 and 입이 달다 respectfully, but it means different in these three languages. It means being good at praising people and telling them things they like to hear in English, Chinese and Korean, but it means more in Korean by denoting having good appetite. Its antonym *bitter mouth* only indicates physiological phenomenon of experiencing a bitter taste in the mouth due to the abnormal condition in digestive system, respiratory system or cardiovascular system in English and Chinese, but it means more in Korean by denoting having no appetite. More examples are Chinese 嘴短 and its Korean equivalent 입이 짧다 (literally short mouth), and Chinese 口重 and its Korean equivalent 입이 무겁다 (literally heavy mouth), which have different meanings in these two languages but no equivalents in English.

This paper makes a comparative analysis of the polysemous features of *mouth*, 嘴/口 and 입 in terms of semantic symmetry and asymmetry on the basis of the componential analysis of these three words, and four kinds of motivation of polysemous features of the words of perception.

II. SEMANTIC TYPES OF MOUTH, 嘴/口 AND 입

* This research was supported by “The 12th Five-Year” Project of Social Sciences granted by The Education Department of Jilin Province (2013-60): *Typological Analysis of HBV in Chinese, Korean and English* and by the Academy of Korean Studies Grant (AKS-10R-42): *Typological Analysis of Korean HBV in Comparative Perspective*

There are a lot of compounds, phrases, slang and idioms composed of *mouth*, 嘴/口 and 입 in English, Chinese and Korean, which indicates the polysemous features of this set of words. Physiologically mouth functions not only as an “entrance (of food)”, but also an “exit (of speech sounds)”, which accounts for the extension of its basic meaning to “the entrance of a cave, volcano, etc.” or “speech or speech act”.

A. Basic Semantic Contents of *mouth*, 嘴/口 and 입

According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary* (2005) and *Collins COBUILD Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary* (2011), *Chinese Comprehensive Dictionary* (2010) and *Contemporary Chinese Dictionary* (2012), *Unabridged Korean Dictionary* (1992), *Standard Korean Dictionary* (1999) and *Neungyule Korean-English Dictionary* (2006), *mouth*, 嘴/口 and 입 are defined as the part of face, that is the opening in the face used for speaking, eating, etc. or the area where the lips are or the space behind lips where teeth and tongue are. They share the following semantic features:

[+part of face] [+organ for speaking] [+organ for eating]

B. Extended Semantic Contents of *mouth*, 嘴/口 and 입

1. [+entrance/exit]: Functions of *mouth* as [+organ for speaking] and [+organ for eating] enable *mouth*, and 嘴/口 to refer to entrance or opening of something, e.g. *the mouth of a cave*, 港口 (port). This meaning is expressed by 입구 in Korean, in which the second character, meaning mouth, is a Chinese character, that is, a loan character from Chinese.

2. [+amount]: Since *mouth* is an organ for “entrance”, *mouth*, 嘴/口 and 입 can be used metaphorically to describe the amount of food or drink that you put in the mouth or breath take at one time, e.g. *take a mouthful of soup*, 喝一大口水 (take a mouthful of water), 밥을 한입 떠 먹다 (take a mouthful of rice).

3. [+person]: [+organ for eating] of *mouth*, 嘴/口 and 입 is extended in a way of synecdoche, wherein a specific part of something is used to refer to the whole, to mean a person who eats, that is from part of a person to a person who needs feeding, e.g. *hungry mouths*, 八口之家 (family of 8 members), 입이 많다 (many people). When *mouth* collocates with numerals, it means different in these three languages. 五口 in Chinese means not only five persons, but also five mouthful of some food. Its Korean equivalent 다섯 입 only means five mouthful of some food, and its English equivalent *five mouths* means five persons.

Mouth can be used to describe a person who speaks on behalf of another person or group of people. It is the result of the combination of [+speech] and [+person] of *mouth*, e.g. *mouthpiece*. This meaning is expressed with 喉舌 in Chinese, which is a compound of *throat* and *tongue*.

4. [+speech]: Speech act is conducted by *mouth*, therefore *mouth*, 嘴/口 and 입 is extended to have the meaning of someone speaks in a particular kind of way or that someone says particular kinds of things, which is derived from [+exit] extended from [+organ for speaking] of *mouth*, e.g. *loudmouth*, 口才 (eloquence), 입이 거칠다 (foul-mouthed).

5. [+speak]: When *mouth* is used as a verb, it either refers to the act of forming words with lips without making any sound or saying something without believing it or without understanding it, e.g. *mouth a goodbye*, *mouth the value of family*, etc.

6. [+anything shaped or functioning like a mouth]: Chinese character 嘴 for *mouth* used to mean hair and horn on owl's head, and later it meant an organ of birds and insects for eating. A beak often reminds of being hard, sharp or protruding, therefore, 嘴 is extended to mean the protruding part of something, e.g. 烟嘴 (cigarette holder), 茶壶嘴 (the spout of a teapot), 山嘴 (the spur of a hill or mountain). Another Chinese character 口 for *mouth* is extended to refer to the open end of a container-like things, e.g. 枪口 (the open end of a gun), 碗口 (the rim of a bowl), 信箱口 (the slit of a letter box).

7. [+taste]: 입 can be used to mean one's appetite or taste, which is extended from its [+organ for eating]. 입에 맞다 (be agreeable to one's taste), 입이 짧다 (have a small appetite) are some examples.

III. ANALYSIS OF POLYSEMIOUS FEATURES OF *MOUTH*, 嘴/口, 입

Mouth, 嘴/口 and 입 is rich in collocation, wherein they are seen not only as a media of association, but also the perspectives and focuses of association. They express the same concept or different ones. Cross-cultural communication and integration as well as the commonness in physical structures and physiological phenomena of human beings account for the fact that *mouth*, a part of human body, has become a general perspective of association and is used

widely in different languages. But different ways of thinking and cognitive styles influenced by living environment and habits may result in some different associations in different cultures. Polysemous features of *mouth*, 嘴/口, 입 will be analysed in terms of semantic symmetry and semantic asymmetry.

A. Semantic Symmetry

According to Chinese linguist Shen (1999), linguistically symmetry and asymmetry are very common in phonetics, word formation, syntax, semantics and pragmatics, and symmetry is prerequisite for asymmetry. Interlingually and intralingually, both semantic symmetry and semantic asymmetry exist in the expressions with words of perception in English, Chinese and Korean. Semantic symmetry refers to the exact or similar match in form and meaning between two words or phrases interlingually or intralingually. Semantic asymmetry refers to the opposite linguistic phenomenon.

Firstly, semantic symmetry occurs interlingually. As shown above, *mouth* in English, Chinese and Korean can be used to express the same meaning, such as a person, speech, etc. There also exist some similar collocations of *mouth*, 嘴/口 and 입 that express the same meaning, which is extended from their basic meaning of [+organ for speaking] and [+organ for eating] via metaphor or metonymy. For example, the collocation of *mouth* and *many* in three languages indicates there are a lot of people who need food. Another example is the collocation of *mouth* and *foam*, that is *foam at the mouth*, 口吐白沫 and 입가에 거품을 물다. They are all used to describe an angry person whose mouth is full of foam which is about to run forth or is running forth. Actually it is a normal physiological phenomenon that saliva is spit from the mouth in a state of foam, which also takes place when someone is angry. That is to say, psychological state can result physiological reaction. Therefore, the symptom is mapped from physiological domain to psychological domain. More examples are *keep one's mouth shut*, 守口如瓶 and 입을 다물다 which describe speech acts, indicating someone does not talk about it, especially because it is a secret with the collocation of *mouth* and *shut*, *stop one's mouth*, 堵嘴 and 입을 막다 which have the meaning of stopping someone to talk with the collocation of *mouth* and *stop*, *open one's mouth*, 开口 and 입을 열다/떼다 which means beginning to talk with the collocation of *mouth* and *open*. Semantic feature [+organ for speaking] of *mouth*, 嘴/口 and 입 make it possible to collocate with the words describing the action of mouth like *open*, *close* or *shut* to indicate whether to talk or not. Similar examples are the collocation of *mouth* and some adjectives, such as *foul-mouthed*, 嘴脏, 입이 더럽다, etc.

Speech acts can also be described with the “speed” of mouth in English, Chinese and Korean. It might be because those who are talkative are likely to speak faster and visa versa. For example, *quick mouth*, 嘴快 and 입이 빠르다 are used to indicate that someone cannot help telling what he knows or saying at once or in advance. *Tongue* is also used in English to express the meaning, e.g. *have a loose tongue*. Only in English exists the opposite expression *slow mouth* which indicates someone is not good at talking.

Secondly, semantic symmetry occurs intralingually. In Korean, some speech acts can be described by the collocation of *mouth* and *heavy* or its antonym *light*, e.g. 입이 무겁다 (literally means mouth is heavy) and 입이 가볍다 (literally means mouth is light). The former is used when a person is not talkative or very careful in talk and the latter is used in an opposite situation. They are considered to be symmetry both in form and meaning. We can find their equivalents in Chinese, 口重 and 口轻, which are symmetry in form but partially symmetry in meaning. They are symmetry when they describe a person's fondness of food. If a person is 口重, he/she is fond of salty food, otherwise he/she is 口轻. They are asymmetry wherein the former is also used to mean what one says is too serious to accept. Different expressions, 嘴稳 (literally steady mouth) or 嘴紧 (literally tight mouth), are used to mean a person is very careful in talk. This kind of meaning is expressed in English by the collocation of *mouth* and *tight* just like Chinese and the opposite meaning by *bigmouth*, which is also expressed by the derivatives of *mouth*, such as *mouthy* or *mouther*. More examples are *sweet/bitter mouth* and their Chinese and Korean equivalents, 嘴甜/苦 and 입이 달다/쓰다.

B. Semantic Asymmetry

Firstly, semantic asymmetry occurs interlingually. Mouth is the busiest part of human body and one of parts that has the richest expressions. People of different cultures can wear the same facial expression, but it might be expressed in different ways. When a person is very happy, he/she usually keeps the mouth open, though different in degrees or manners. Korean has various expressions for it, such as 입이 가로 터지다 (literally the mouth is broken), 입을 다물지 못하다 (literally the mouth cannot be shut), 입이 다 찢어지다 (literally the mouth is torn). Chinese equivalent is 合不拢嘴 (literally the mouth cannot be shut). Collocation of *mouth* and *ear* is also used in Korean to express the same meaning, e.g. 입이 귀에 걸리다 (literally the mouth hangs on the ears) or 입이 귀밑까지 찢어지다 (literally the mouth is torn till the ears). Only ear is involved in this action in English, e.g. *grin from ear to*

ear. Another example is that *foul mouth*, 嘴脏 and 입이 더럽다 are overlapped both in form and meaning in three languages but only the first one has *clean mouth* as its opposite meaning.

In English, Chinese and Korean, mouth can “co-work” with other parts of human body. Sometimes the same meaning is expressed by the collocation of *mouth* and different parts of human body in three languages. When describing a person who thinks in one way and behave in another, we can use 口是心非 (literally the mouth says yes and heart says no) in Chinese which is the collocation of *mouth* and *heart*. 입다르고 배다르다 (literally the mouth acts in one way and belly acts in another) is used in Korean which is the collocation of *mouth* and *belly*, while *two-faced* is used in English. Another example is that the collocation of *mouth* and *glue* is used in Chinese and Korean to describe a person who has only just enough money to buy food, e.g. 糊口, 입에 풀칠하다, which is expressed by *live from hand to mouth* in English.

Secondly, semantic asymmetry occurs intralingually. “Length” of mouth is used in Chinese to describe a person’s speech acts, e.g. 嘴长 (literally long mouth), 嘴短 (literally short mouth). The former has the meaning of making mischief but the latter doesn’t mean the opposite. Instead it means being unable to speak justly and forcefully. Only “short” of mouth is used in Korean but it describes a person’s diet habits, e.g. 입이 짧다 (literally short mouth), which means being fastidious about one's food, but there is no collocation of *mouth* and *long*. There is no collocation of *mouth* and *short/long* in English.

IV. MOTIVATION OF POLYSEMOUS FEATURES OF WORDS OF PERCEPTION

Polysemy is the result of the development and extension of lexical meanings with the people’s deeper understanding of the relationship between the objective reality and its phenomena. With the development of the society, new things, new concepts and new ideas came into being, which are closely related to the old ones in some aspects, such as features, characteristics, functions or forms. Therefore, old words have been used to denote new things and new concepts by means of associating or analogizing something related or similar, which not only enriched the lexical contents and usages but also promoted lexical productivity. Lexical meanings of words of perception are extended from organs of human body to the concrete objects which shape, function or locate similarly to these organs and then to the abstract concepts or ideas related to these organs psychologically or functionally.

A. Various Functions and Importance of Organs of Perception

The process of perception begins with an object in the real world. By means of light, sound or another physical process, the object stimulates the body's sensory organs. These sensory organs transform the input energy into neural activity. These neural signals are transmitted to the brain and processed. These sensory organs are used to see, to smell, to taste, to hear and to touch. Therefore the words of these organs are used to describe the related actions or abilities or people. For example, *a private eye, sharp tongue, have a nose for, big mouth, a good ear*, 耳目, 眼光, 귀가 어둡다, 눈이 낮다.

B. Physiological Reaction

55% of feelings or thoughts of people are usually expressed with the help of gestures and actions made by different parts of human body (Gao, 1990). Stimulated by outside stimuli, such as seeing, hearing or smelling something, sensory organs will make some reactions, such as opening eyes widely, nose-twitched, tongue-tied, ears-burning, etc., which may followed by psychological reactions, such as changes in mood of pleasure, anger, sorrow or joy. All kinds of these changes can be described by the words of perceptions in all the languages. Sometimes a certain feeling may result in the physiological reactions of different sensory organs, though at different degrees, e.g. when someone is surprised, his/her mouth will open wide or eyes open wide or tongue is tied. Therefore, different words of perception are used to describe the emotions in different languages or on the different occasions in the same language. For example, *cast sheep's eyes, down in the mouth, earbashing, make a long nose at*, 耳红面赤, 瞠目结舌, 눈이 뒤집혔다, 눈이 동그래지다. These all prove that organs of perception represent one’s inner world.

C. Thinking Modes of Human Beings

Human beings are good at abstracting or abstraction, which is a conceptual process by which general rules and concepts are derived from the usage and classification of specific examples, literal signifiers, first principles, or other methods. This kind of process and way of thinking motivate the evolution of lexical meanings of words of perception. Concrete things are compared to the organs of perception according to their shape, size, location or functions, and then abstract feelings or attitudes are compared to the organs of perception by means of metaphors or metonymy. For example, *a blue eye*→*a sharp eye*, *a tongue twister*→*silver tongue*, *blow one's nose*→*keep your nose clean*, *ear lobe*→*play by ear*, *mouthwash*→*loudmouth*, 舌尖→舌战, 眼睛→眼界, 귀걸이→귀가 얇다, 까만 눈→밤눈.

D. Principle of Economy

Words of perception are basic words in all languages. The fact that basic words are widely used to their maximum limit can not only make one's expressions more effective, but also reduce one's memory volume. When presenting some new or complicated concepts or ideas, people usually choose those concepts which they are familiar to describe the new ones. This is reasonable on the basis of the principle of economy and cognitive features of human beings. Then the familiar or old concepts or words people use go through semantic extension, which result in polysemy. For example, *nose of airplane, eye of needle, tongue of shoe, mouth of volcano, ears of corn*, 针眼, 火舌, 바늘귀, 감자눈.

V. CONCLUSION

As basic words in English, Chinese and Korean, words of perception are widely used to describe things or ideas about or related to sensory organs. These words share the same process of semantic change, that is, their meanings are extended metaphorically or metonymically from sensory organs to concrete concept like object, action or person and then to abstract concept like abilities, attitudes or emotions. Typologically, Korean, Chinese and English belong to three different types of language. Korean is agglutinative, Chinese is isolating and English is inflectional analytic. Therefore, they show some different lexical and semantic features in three languages. During the semantic extension, these polysemous words experience semantic symmetry and semantic asymmetry both interlingually and intralingually.

Human beings are subjective in understanding, interpreting and describing the things, behaviors or truths in the objective world which are similar to their different organs in shapes or functions. This shows the relationship between human beings and the nature. The nature is personified by human beings.

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