A Cognitive Study on the Phenomenon of Metonymy in Cantonese

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Different from those in Mandarin Chinese, some references in Cantonese adopt metonymy. From the perspective of cognition, this paper takes the conceptual metonymy as the theoretical framework to analyze the typical metonymic references in Cantonese, so as to illustrate the penetration of metonymic mapping in various languages employed by people.

Keywords: Cantonese references, referential metonymy, metonymic mapping

Introduction

Cantonese, also known as Guangdong language, commonly known as “Baihua” (vernacular), is a tonal language in the Chinese dialects of the Sino-Tibetan language family. Cantonese is the mother tongue of the Han nationality in the South China, especially the Guangfu clan in Guangdong, the important carrier of Cantonese culture and one of the basic cultural symbols of Cantonese. Some Cantonese references differ from those in Mandarin Chinese, as there are metonymies in them. Up to now, the author has found that some studies have regarded Cantonese references as taboos, euphemisms. Few studies on the use of referential metonymy in Cantonese have been conducted. Therefore, from the perspective of cognition, this paper takes conceptual metonymy as the framework to analyze the typical referential metonymy in Cantonese, which aims to explain the penetration of metonymy thought in a variety of languages in people’s life and help people to know more about Cantonese and its culture.

Referential Metonymy

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argued that people’s use of one thing to refer to another related thing called metonymy. Metonymy is a cognitive operation that provides access to the target language in the same cognitive domain. This cognitive process allows one to conceptualize another event in relation to other events. The concept of metonymy is mainly derived from people’s experience. Metonymy is effective in the same cognitive domain, in which the conceptual reflection is mainly used for reference, and the relation between reference and metonymy is a kind of “representation”. From the perspective of pragmatic function, Panther and Thornburg (2003) divided metonymy into three categories: first, referential metonymy; second, predicate metonymy; third, extrinsic metonymy, among which referential metonymy uses one concept to refer to another related concept. This paper mainly discusses Cantonese references which fall into referential metonymy.
Typical Referential Metonymy in Cantonese

The author found that some Cantonese references in daily life differ from those of Mandarin Chinese. Usually, some words of Mandarin Chinese are replaced, but the referents of people and things remain the same. That is, the function of reference does not change nor affect people’s normal communication; instead it makes the communication smoother and more pleasant to avoid the association of negative meaning. The following are some typical Cantonese references (see Table 1).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cantonese References</th>
<th>Mandarin Chinese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>伯母 (refers to auntie; “伯” pronounces “bo”, meaning uncle in Cantonese; “母” pronounces “mu”, meaning “mother” in Cantonese), the Cantonese pronunciation of 伯母 is similar to the pronunciation of “百无” in Mandarin Chinese which means “having nothing”</td>
<td>伯友 (“友” pronounces “you”, meaning “friend”; the pronunciation of 伯友 is similar to that of “百有” (bai you) in Mandarin Chinese which means having everything)</td>
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<tr>
<td>苦瓜 (refers to bitter gourd; “苦” pronounces “ku”, meaning “bitter”; “瓜” pronounces “gua”, meaning “melon”)</td>
<td>凉瓜 (“凉” pronounces “liang”, meaning “cool”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>丝瓜 (refers to luff; “丝” means “reticular fiber” and pronounces “si”, similar to the pronunciation of “输” that pronounces “Si”, which means “lose”)</td>
<td>胜瓜 (“胜” pronounces “sheng”, meaning “win”)</td>
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<tr>
<td>雨伞 (refers to umbrella; “雨” means “rain”; “伞” means “umbrella” and pronounces “san”, similar to the pronunciation of “散”, which means separation)</td>
<td>雨遮 (“遮” pronounces “zhe”, meaning “cover”)</td>
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<tr>
<td>猪血 (refers to coagulated pig blood used as a food item; “猪” means “pig” and pronounces “zhu”; “血” means “blood”, pronouncing “xie”)</td>
<td>猪红 (“红” pronounces “hong”, meaning “red”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>竹杠面 (refers to Bamboo-pressed noodles; “竹” means “bamboo” and pronounces “zhu”; “杠” pronounces “gang”, similar to the pronunciation of “降” which pronounces “gong” in Cantonese, meaning “down”; “面” refers to noodles, pronouncing “mian”)</td>
<td>竹升面 (“升” pronounces “sheng”, meaning “up”)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the pronunciation of Cantonese, the above several references in Mandarin Chinese can make experienced Cantonese people feel or associate with bad luck. Therefore, according to life experience, Cantonese people replace them with some other words, thus producing referential metonymy. Some phenomena are taken as typical examples as follows. “伯母”, its pronunciation is similar to “百无”, which is likely to make people think of the meaning of “having nothing”. So, “伯母” is replaced with “伯友” whose pronunciation is close to “百有”, meaning “having everything”. And taking “苦瓜” for another example, the “苦” in which it is bitter, not a good taste nor a nice experience according to experienced people, as one can see from “苦日子” (pronouncing “ku ri zi”, meaning “bitter days”) and “痛苦” (pronouncing “tong ku”, meaning “pain”). According to the effect of this melon—relieving inflammation or internal heat, Cantonese people call “苦瓜” “凉瓜”, in which the character “凉” means relieving inflammation or internal heat just as in Guangdong “herbal tea”. In this way, the association with “bitterness” is successfully avoided. The “丝” (pronouncing “si” in Cantonese) in “丝瓜” pronounces like “输” (pronouncing “syu” in Cantonese, meaning “lose”), which is replaced with “胜” (pronouncing “sheng”, meaning “win”, the opposite meaning of “lose”). That is why we get “胜瓜” in Cantonese. The “伞” in “雨伞” pronounces the same as “散”, and the “打伞” pronounces “da san”, meaning “holding up an umbrella” in Mandarin Chinese that reminds Cantonese people of “打散”
(pronouncing “da san” too, yet meaning “breaking up”), which triggers a tinge of sadness in “曲终人散” (pronouncing “qu zhong ren san”, meaning “the play comes to and the audience disperse, which indicates the end of the happy occasion”). As a result, Cantonese people adopt umbrella’s function of covering to replace the character “伞”, and it becomes “雨遮”. The act of “打伞” (pronouncing “da san”, meaning “holding up an umbrella”) is, therefore, turned to “担遮” (pronouncing “da san”, meaning “holding up an umbrella” also). The character “血” in “猪血” is likely to remind people of “bloodshed” which is cruel, and is thus replaced with “红”, which symbolizes “prosperousness” in Cantonese. “竹杠面” (zhu gang mian) are noodles made with bamboo bars. The “杠” (gang) in it has a pronunciation similar to that of “降” in Cantonese, which probably triggers the association of negative meaning “descend” or “worsen”. Consequently, people substitute “升” (sheng, meaning “ascend” or “better”) for “杠”. So, “竹杠面” is changed into “竹升面” that indicates eating the noodles can bring a good luck for moving upward to a better situation.

From the cases mentioned above, it can be seen that Cantonese people use metonymy to refer to things in accordance with their life experience and cognition. Metonymy, on the other hand, takes place in the way of either transference or substitution of words.

**Metonymic Mapping Behind Referential Metonymy**

Metonymy is cognitive operation and a manifestation of human thinking. The turn from metonymy to metonymic mapping is a reflection and sublimation of thinking. According to Kovecses and Radden (1999), human experience, perceptual choice, cultural preference and communicative principle are the cognitive factors that restrict metonymy. He Aijing (2011) believed that metonymic mapping is a kind of thinking activity for seeking compensation, or substitutive thinking, which is the essential attribute of metonymic mapping. The so-called “substitutability” means that the external mark of the metonymy using is the replacement and substitution of words, that is, it is dominated by a mode of “X” replacing “Y” in thinking. Under the operation of metonymic mapping, in “伯母”, “苦瓜”, “丝瓜”, “雨伞”, “猪血”, “竹杠面”, etc. There are replacement and substitution as “母” (mu)—“友” (you), “苦” (ku)—“凉” (liang), “丝” (si)—“胜” (sheng), “伞” (san)—“遮” (sheng), “血” (xue)—“红” (hong), “杠” (gang)—“升” (sheng), etc.

Here, the author attempts to analyze the four cognitive factors which contribute to these referential metonymies, see Figure 1.

**Human Experience**

Human experience refers to the relationship between human beings and animals, subjectivity and objectivity, concreteness and abstraction, interaction and non-interaction, function and non-function, and experience and mind (Wei, 2019). Experience is the direct experience of life itself, and life includes not only simple physical activities. People gradually form categories and concepts in their life experiences and perceptions. Referential metonymies occur in the Cantonese “伯友”, “凉瓜”, “胜瓜”, “雨遮”, “猪红”, “竹升面”, etc. under the effect of cognition and thinking. These referential metonymies not only reflect people’s expectation and yearning for a better life, but also convey people’s positive attitude towards life.

**Conceptual Choice**

Conceptual choice refers to the relationship between immediate and non-immediate, the occurring and the non-occurring, the more and the less, the controlling party and the controlled party, gestalt and non-gestalt, the
bounded and the unbounded and the special and generic (Wei, 2019). He Aijing (2011) pointed out that metonymy has a great occasionality, and the reference of concepts is selective and restricted by the specific context. The choice of perception plays a very important role in people’s life communication and cognition, and it is the subjective reflection that people make to the objective person and thing which they experience. “伯友”, “凉瓜”, “胜瓜”, “雨遮”, “猪红”, “竹升面”, etc. in Cantonese are just different subjective reflection made by Cantonese people with their experiences in daily life. These references reflect people’s positive attitude towards life through metonymy.

**Cultural Preference**

Cultural preference focuses on the positioning of cultural identity and is determined according to environment, region, nationality, cultural background and other factors. The Cantonese belief in Feng Shui similar to geomancy, a theory of prediction of good luck or bad one, has its historical origins. Guangdong is adjacent to the birthplace of Jiangxi province, and is thus deeply influenced by the theory of Feng Shui established by Yang Yunsong. A large number of ancient Hakka ancestors migrated to Guangdong from Jiangxi, bringing a strong traditional atmosphere of Feng Shui. People in Guangzhou are inclined to be engaged in business. Great risks in business make people’s belief in Feng Shui, Budda and gods even stronger. In addition, the strong sense of clans, and prevalence of ancestral temple culture further contributes to the rootedness of Feng Shui. Influenced by this cultural preference, Cantonese people change “伯母”, “苦瓜”, “丝瓜”, “雨伞”, “猪血”, and “竹杠面” into “伯友”, “凉瓜”, “胜瓜”, “雨遮”, “猪红”, and “竹升面” respectively to avoid words associated with negative meaning which is believed to bring probably misfortune, bad luck or even disaster. The metonymy in Cantonese reflects the cultural preference of Cantonese people.

**Communicative Principle**

Sperber and Wilson (1995) proposed that Relevance Theory includes two principles based on relevance: first, communicative principle of relevance (every act of ostensive communication conveys the assumption that the act itself is of optimal relevance); second, principle of cognitive relevance (human cognition tends to maximize relevance). The complete generalization of communication is that “ostensive-inferential communication” includes the behavior of the speaker indicating his or her own intention to speak and the reasoning of the listener (Hu, 2006). According to the Relevance Theory, the context needed to understand a discourse is no longer regarded as a predetermined derivation premise. Instead, it is assumed that the new information to be processed is relevant, and then the appropriate context is selected to confirm this assumption. In Relevance Theory, the contextual assumption is cognitive assumption. In Guangdong area, “伯友”, “凉瓜”, “胜瓜”, “雨遮”, “猪红”, “竹升面”, and other references, the listener will make a contextual assumption based on the very logic information, encyclopedic information and word information in the cognitive context of Cantonese cultural to find the best relevance between the speaker and the contextual assumption (avoiding words with bad connotations that bring misfortune or even disaster). In this way, the implied meanings of these referents are inferred through reasoning, and the contextual effect is finally achieved which leads to communicative success.
Conclusion

From the perspective of cognition, this paper analyzes some referential metonyms that are typical in Cantonese from the four factors: human experience, conceptual choice, cultural preference and communicative principle that restrict metonymy, which demonstrates metonymy is employed for better contextual effect and successful communication, explains metonymic mapping permeates the various languages used in people’s life and also helps people to know more about Cantonese and its culture.

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