Expressive Meanings Conveyed by English and Thai Synesthetic Expressions and their Translations

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Abstract

The study aims to explore the expressive meanings conveyed by English and Thai synesthetic expressions. Previous studies on the English and Thai synesthetic expressions seem to focus only on the forms and the co-occurrences of the sensory modalities in these expressions rather than how the expressions are contextually used to convey the expressive and appellative meanings. The data used in this study were collected from 8 English novels with Thai translations and 8 Thai novels with English translations. It is found that synesthetic expressions in English and Thai convey positive expressive meanings (i.e. LOVE and JOY) and negative expressive meanings (i.e. ANGER, SADNESS, FEAR and DISGUST). SURPRISE seems to be either positive or negative. Interestingly, LOVE and DISGUST from this study tend to be the complicated emotions. The evidence from our study supports the theory that these three emotions, i.e., LOVE, DISGUST, and SURPRISE, are rather non-basic. The findings also align with a number of studies in both cognitive linguistics and psychology of language and emotions. We hope to provide contributions on how expressive meanings are mapped to another language in translation with the two aspects of studies, 1) the transfer of meaning from perception to cognition found in synesthetic expressions; and 2) awareness of translation in the transfer of such expressive meanings in the translation of synesthetic expressions.

Keywords

Expressive meanings, synesthetic expressions, translations

Introduction

Synesthetic expressions are linguistic phenomena in which a vocabulary from one sensory modality is metaphorically encoded by a vocabulary from another sensory modality (Dancygier and Sweetser, 2014). Examples in various languages are *sharp taste* in English; สีเจ็บ /sĭ: tɕèp/ 'color-painful' "garish color" in Thai; and 甘い匂い amai nioi 'sweet-smell' "sweet smell" in Japanese. Such expressions are also said to exhibit affective or even appellative capacities, rather than conveying only a referential/cognitive meaning to represent perceptual experiences (Smirnova, 2016). Previous studies on synesthetic expressions vary, ranging from co-occurrences of sensory modalities in synesthetic expressions (Ullmann, 1959, 1962); semantic motivation of synesthetic adjectives (Williams, 1976; Maspong, 2014); experimental studies on naturalness judgement of synesthetic metaphors (Werning, 2006); and translation of synesthetic metaphors (Strik Lievers, 2016). Studies regarding expressive functions of synesthetic expressions are still lacking. The objective of this study is to explore the expressive meanings conveyed by English and Thai synesthetic expressions, along with an implication on the translation.

1 Data

The data were collected from 8 English novels with Thai translations and 8 Thai novels with English translations. The synesthetic expressions is identified using the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) (PRAGGLEJAZ Group, 2007) and MIP from Vritje Universiteit, Amsterdam (Steen, 2010). Expressive meanings in this study refer to the meanings pertaining to emotional involvement, subjective sensory experiences and attitudes. The framework of analysis relies on basic emotion categories and emotion scenarios suggested by a number of scholars working on language and emotion. For the dataset, there are 514 tokens of expressions found in the English source texts and 521 tokens found in the Thai source texts. Together with their translated expressions there are more than 2,000 tokens used in this study.

2 Findings and Discussions

All the English and Thai synesthetic expressions found in this study are from the co-occurrences

between a primary sensory modality, the sense being talked about or TARGET perceptual domain, and a secondary sensory modality (or modalities) or so-called SOURCE perceptual domain which characterizes the primary one. Salient features of the secondary sensory modality serve as an inference which denotes either positive or negative emotions or feelings, accompanied by situational contexts in the novels. Then, the secondary sensory modality is metaphorically projected onto the primary sensory modality due to the conflicting concepts between the two separate sensory modalities. For example, the expression *sour tone of voice* shows an association between a sour taste and an individual's sound. It is not the sound that tastes sour, but rather it is the transfer of two features [unpleasant/displeasing taste] and [strong/ intense/harsh], which are projected onto [unpleasant emotion/feeling], i.e. SOUR IS FEELING BAD (Apresjan, 1997). This concept then characterizes an unpleasant sound caused by anger or resentment. The similar case can be applied to *bright voice* where *bright* denotes HAPPINESS IS LIGHT (Stefanowitsch, 2006), and its feature is projected onto the sound of a happy person. So, synesthetic expressions are an evidence for the meaning extension from perception to cognition/emotion.

In this study, English and Thai synesthetic expressions convey either positive emotions, i.e. JOY and LOVE, or negative emotions, i.e. ANGER, SADNESS, DISGUST, and FEAR. The first category shows that LOVE tends to be a rather complicated emotion since it is denoted by a variety of synesthetic expressions in both languages. It also carries attitudinal/evaluative stances based on certain subjective physical perceptions (e.g. color, smell, taste). As closely related to LOVE, JOY tends to be more basic as it requires less synesthetic expressions to denote.

Contrary to positive emotions, ANGER is found with the highest occurrences, and there are a number of synesthetic expressions shared between English and Thai. In this regard, it tends to be the fundamental emotion in many cultures. However, the synesthetic expressions of DISGUST, despite less occurrences compared to the others, seems to be rather culture-specific and highly subjective, especially the expressions denoting certain smells (e.g. *low, under-stench* in English, and เหม็นหน้า /měn nâ:/ 'stink-face' in Thai). This emotion, similar to LOVE, requires many kinds of sensory experiences to denote.

As regards SURPRISE, it can be either

positive or negative. In the positive sense, it shows that the speaker's expectation is lower than what actually happen, e.g. *catch a comical look* and จับตา / tɕàp tā:/ 'catch-eye'. In the negative sense, it reflects the opposite direction in terms of expectation as one expect higher than what actually happens, e.g. *catch a sharp glance to (someone)* and จับจ้อง /tɕàp tɕɔ̂:ŋ/ 'catch-stare'.

The evidence from our study aligns with the theory that the three emotions, i.e., LOVE, DISGUST, and SURPRISE, are rather non-basic (Plutchick 1980; Shaver 1987; Ekman 1992; Wierzbicka 1992, 1999; Ungerer 1995; Kövecses 2002, 2005; Sauter 2009). Furthermore, in the analysis of expressive meanings conveyed by synesthetic metaphors, different aspects of emotions should be considered: physiological reactions, cognitive components (e.g. appraisals, events, motifs, values), control/concealment efforts, and behavioral responses to emotions.

All in all, this leads to the implications for translation in which corporeal experiences, situational contexts, and scenarios of emotions are crucial in terms of identifying the underlying meaning behind any synesthetic expressions. In general, people have similar worldviews towards body structures, physical characteristics, and experiences of emotions, but the way to spell out such aspects in language use differs. This can also contribute to an awareness of both similarities and cultural specificities regarding the linguistic choices of translators. Also, emotive effects of the translated expressions need to be taken into consideration, especially when dealing with translating conventional and creative synesthetic expressions.

Main References

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