

Unravelling Cantonese Slang Verbs of Speech: Semantic Change as Property Attribution

CHOW, Pui Lun

aogdaisy@yahoo.com.hk

College of International Education, Hong Kong Baptist University

Cantonese slang words are well-known for their vividness in semantic representation and morphosyntactic flexibility. Most of them are existing words used in ‘metaphorical’ or figurative ways. This paper aims to provide an account for the mechanism of the generation of a special type of slang verbs denoting speech. Literally verbs of physical action, they are used to denote actions of speech of various manners when used as slangs. Through outlining the generality of their figurative uses and reviewing the Property Attribution Theory (PAT) (Glucksberg, McGlone, & Manfredi, 1997; McGlone, 2007), this paper suggests lexical schemas (Jackendoff & Audring, 2020) which can express figurative uses of the source words and capture the relation between the source (verbs of physical action) and the target (verbs of speech in Cantonese slangs) words.

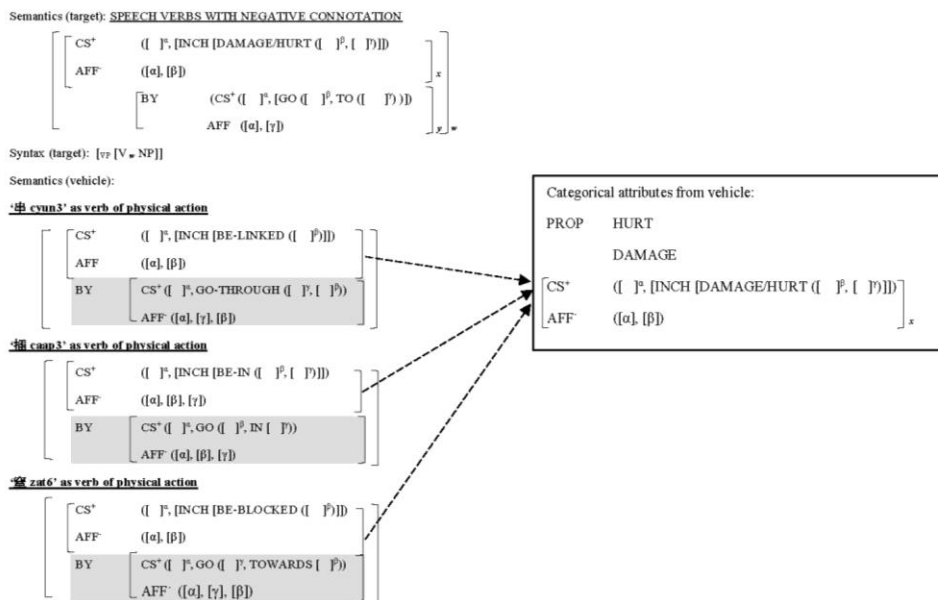
Cantonese slang verbs of speech

The discussion focuses on three common slang verbs, namely ‘插 caap3’ (expressing strong and negative criticism), ‘串 cyun3’ (giving sarcastic comments to ridicule someone) and ‘窒 zat6’ (saying something to embarrass or insult someone in the goal of interrupting them from talking). Apart from carrying negative connotation, all of their source meaning denotes physical action. ‘插 caap3’, ‘串 cyun3’ and ‘窒 zat6’ are verbs originally denoting bodily movements: ‘插 caap3’ means to insert or stab into something forcefully; ‘串 cyun3’ to pierce through and/or to string up; and ‘窒 zat6’ to stifle.

Insights from theories of metaphorical interpretation

Along the line of PAT, the original use of the verb denoting physical action is taken as the vehicle contributing attributional category/categories, whilst the slang use is taken as the topic providing constraints on interpretation. The two uses are distinct on the surface but conceptually related underneath. To capture this semantic relation in theory of grammar, the lexical scheme should serve (i) the representation role to express attributional category(ies) contributed by the vehicle, constraint(s) provided by the topic and relational link between different levels of grammar; and (ii) the process role to connect the vehicle and the topic, and enable semantic change.

The proposed lexical schema adopts Jackendoff and Audring’s (2020) theory in Relational Morphology:



The shared semantic features of the verbs of physical action (vehicle) contribute a set of categorical attributes. In the slang use, the categorical attributes *PROP* are introduced (represented in structure *x*) to the verb of speech (topic). In other words, the semantic structure *x* is combined with the structure of verb of speech (represented in structure *y*), resulting the lexical schema *w* of the slang verbs of speech. The concept of speech guides and constrains the interpretation of the attributes when associated to the concept of the vehicle by replacing the part of the structures shaded in grey.

Conclusion

The present study on Cantonese slang verbs of speech adopts findings in metaphoric interpretation and processing to account for the semantic changes and relation between the source verbs and target verbs. Starting with a small scope of investigation, I hope to extend the study to various types of slang words in Cantonese in the aim of constructing a richer and more flexible model of lexical schema closer to lexicon in our brains.

References

- Glucksberg, S., McGlone, M.S., Manfredi, D.A., 1997. Property attribution in metaphor comprehension. *Journal of Memory and Language* 36, 50–67.
- Jackendoff, R., & Audring, J. (2020). *The Texture of the lexicon*. Oxford University Press.
- McGlone, M.S., 2007. What Is the Explanatory Value of a Conceptual Metaphor? *Language & Communication* 27, 109–126.