

A Semantic Map Approach to Crosslinguistic Comparisons of Polysemy: Implications for Perspectivization Theories* **

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ABSTRACT

In crosslinguistic communications, direct translation has often been used as an effective way to understand a novel linguistic form in a foreign language. By utilizing the notion of “semantic map,” we would like to show the possible mismatches of direct translations. Speakers in one language often take a socially shared perspective to map the conceptual structure to the semantic structure, rendering different verbalizations. Saisiyat *nahan* is, for example, used to denote repetition, continuation, addition, and succession. However, the conceptual space NAHAN is categorized into three different groups denoted by *hai* 還, *zai* 再, and *you* 又 in Mandarin. The semantic extensions of Saisiyat *nahan* and Mandarin *hai* 還, *zai* 再, and *you* 又 follow different routes, and there are collectively agreed verbalizations that can only be mastered through the real uses. In view of this, in addition to subjectification, intersubjectification and objectification, we suggest that a fourth perspective—collectivization—is crucial to the development of language. Because language is to a large extent a social product that is beyond speaker-internal cognition, studies of language have to take into consideration the power of contextualization and its impact on society.

Key Words: comparative semantics, semantic map, perspectivization,
meta-language glossing

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** In the text, forms referred to in specific languages are in italic type. Glosses are presented in single quotes, and quotations or emphasis of proper notions are in double quotes.

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1. Introduction

Crosslinguistic semantics has been widely investigated because of its practical value in pedagogy, translation, and lexicography. And one intuitive way to understand a foreign linguistic item is to understand it through an “equivalent” or “counterpart” in one’s own language, in other words, to ask for its “direct translations” in a meta-language. The present study, nevertheless, aims to show the limitation of such translation approach: A linguistic form in one language is usually different from its crosslinguistic “counterpart” to some extent, because the concepts denoted by a linguistic item in one language is likely to be categorized differently in other languages, rendering language-specific ways of verbalizations. The semantic mismatches become even more conspicuous when crosslinguistic counterparts are typically integrated with different linguistic, situational, and cultural contexts.

This study is initiated by a problem that has been raised in many studies—The so-called crosslinguistic “equivalents” are often at variance with each other. For instance, the famous “spiel” example in German (Wittgenstein 1963) is usually translated as “game” example in English. However, German *spiel* is not entirely identical to English *game*—A boy playing sand alone in the park can be denoted by German *spiel*, but not by English *game* (Wierzbicka 1996). Similarly, Korean *nehta* is not equivalent to English *put in*. To put a video cassette in a case can be denoted by English *put in* but not by Korean *nehta* (Bowerman and Choi 2003).

Such mismatch is not limited to word-level comparisons: Schematic constructions also exhibit language-specific ways of perspectivization that are even more mischievous. As an example, the Chindali motion expressions are found to have nine parameters at work that have partitioned motion events into complex constructional paradigms (Botne 2005). Though denoting meanings approximately as “approaching” and “leaving,” those motion constructions cannot be simply equated with English *come* and *go*. Abundant works have been devoted to similar crosslinguistic comparisons of constructions, such as space (Bowerman 1996; Talmy 1983), middle voice (Kemmer 1993), indefinite pronouns (Haspelmath 1997), modality (van der Auwera and Plungian 1998), motion events (Talmy 2000), classifiers (Aikhenvald 2000), among others. Their general finding is that a construction in a specific language is usually multi-functional, but the functions of this construction often differ from those of its counterpart-constructions in other languages, though similarities are also expected.

The problem of crosslinguistic semantic mismatches appears to be a trivial one, but it becomes eminent when it is necessary to use one language to code the other. The situation we have encountered is “corpus documentation.” As correctly observed by Matthewson (2004) and Lehrer (1992), the use of a natural language for semantic glossing is inevitable. Though we agree that Chindali has nine parameters in constructing their verbs of motion which cannot simply be glossed as ‘come’ and ‘go’, we nevertheless find the texts hardly conceivable if those verbs are glossed by schematic symbols that are not natural to speakers of any language. We hold that corpus is designed to be readable to its users, and the problem is how we can adequately represent the specific semantic categorization of an object language with meta-language glossing.

But the use of natural languages for corpus documentation necessarily invites some problems. When we try to document our Saisiyat texts, a lexical item *nahan* has become a thorny case. In different contexts, the informants give different interpretations of this lexical item, using Mandarin as the meta-language. In Su and Huang (2006), the authors adopt Principled Polysemy framework (Tyler and Evans 2001) to reconstruct a semantic network of *nahan*, showing that its various interpretations are interrelated as a “family” (in view of Wittgenstein 1963). In the present work, we find it helpful to turn to Semantic Map (Haspelmath 2003; Kemmer 1993; Croft 2001) approach to illustrate the functional mismatches between Saisiyat *nahan* and its Mandarin counterparts *hai* 還, *zai* 再, and *you* 又.¹ Saisiyat *nahan* is highly polysemous, and so are Mandarin *hai* 還, *zai* 再, and *you*. Each of them occupies a region in a conceptual space whose boundaries do not match perfectly. Different partitioning of the conceptual space thus leads to multiple glossings of the same lexical item in the target language.

The result shows that a conceptual space is potential to be conceptualized in many alternative ways, and a language often highlights some aspects of it, rendering different semantic mappings, which in turn are expressed by different syntactic devices (Croft 2001). We will thus argue for a modest view of linguistic relativity. That is, there is likely universal conceptual ability of all human beings, but the grammatical manifestation of a specific notion is language-specific. The preferred ways of conceptualization in each language may constraint the personal preference of perspectivization: Using a specific language,

1. Romanticized Mandarin words are coded with tones represented by diacritics: first tone (level tone) *ye*, second tone (rising tone) *yé*, third tone (dipping tone) *yě*, fourth tone (falling tone) *yè*, and fifth tone (neutral tone) *yê*.

the speaker should follow a socially-agreed way of perspectivization adopted by that speech community. A full account of language structure will have to rely on a social view of language, by which we would like to propose a fourth way of perspectivization, collectivization, in addition to objectification, subjectification, and intersubjectification.

2. Methodological Framework

This study adopts Semantic Map approach to present the comparison of Saisiyat *nahan* and its Mandarin counterparts. This section begins with a brief sketch of Semantic Map in 2.1. The data and methodologies are stated in 2.2.

2.1. Semantic Maps and Radical Construction Grammar

From a cognitive perspective, the mismatch of crosslinguistic counterparts is essentially a categorization problem. Bowerman and Choi (2003) have gracefully illustrated that the English phrases *put on* and *put in* constitute a cluster of spatial configurations that denotes the placement of one thing on top of the other, but this space is partitioned differently in Korean into five categories denoted by *nohta*, *ssuta*, *pwuchita*, *kkita*, and *nehta* (Bowerman and Choi 2003). To gloss these Korean lexical items either as ‘put on’ or ‘put in’ cannot satisfactorily reflect the spatial configurations structured by those lexical items.

To show a conceptual space constituted by groupings of spatial configurations, Bowerman and Choi (2003) unconsciously employ the “Semantic Map” approach of comparative semantics. In recent crosslinguistic researches, “Semantic Map” has been a developing framework specialized for typological problems (Haspelmath 2003; Kemmer 1993; Croft 2001). In this framework, a group of related concepts can be conceptualized metaphorically as a “space,” and each language has a specific way of partitioning this space, constituting a “map” of language-specific grammars. A map to show semantic relations and partitions can help us visualize abstract conceptualization by spatial representations, which greatly facilitates comparative works.

To construct a map, we have to imagine a space in which functions of a linguistic form are distributed with relation to each other, sketched as Figure 1.²

2. In the present study, we will use “function” interchangeably with “meaning.” Functions or meanings that are cognitively distinct will be called “sense.”



Figure 1. A conceptual space for semantic study

The interconnecting lines represent the relation between the functions, but the length of the line does not necessarily indicate the semantic approximation of two functions. The orientation of the map, i.e., left-right and top-down, bears no significance. The labels of functions as well as the lines connecting them are verified only when crosslinguistic studies are considered. In such an imagined space of conceptualization, different languages are likely to have different ways of conceptual categorization, reflected by the use of different/same linguistic forms. In the present study, we employ enclosed spaces to represent the functions that are marked by the same linguistic form as suggested by Haspelmath (2003). For example, in Figure 2, the two squares each enclose a function-set that is expressed with two linguistic forms. One advantage of such approach is that it can be used for intra- as well as inter-language comparison: the two enclosures can be linguistic items in a language or counterparts in two different languages. With proper methodological adjustment, a semantic map is also potential to be used for diachronic changes of a linguistic form over time.

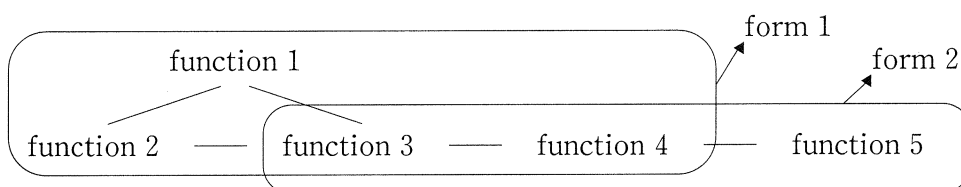


Figure 2. Partitioning of a conceptual space by linguistic forms

In Croft's (2001) Radical Construction Grammar (RCG), the notion of "semantic map" is exploited not only to show the functional distribution of particular contrastive linguistic forms, but also to search for common tendencies of functional extension and its underlying cognitive mechanisms, i.e., how one function extends to another.

RCG also makes another important modification on Semantic Map: the distinction of three levels of language structure: conceptual, semantic, and syntactic. In a given conceptual space, functions are assumed to be connected, but it allows alternative semantic conceptualizations and syntactic representations. Under competitions of different motivations, the choice of a specific expression is to some extent "arbitrary" and subject to change. In different languages,