

Metaphorical Semantic Extension and Social Change: A Case Study of the Tactile Adjectives “Soft” and “Hard”

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Abstract: Language, as a tool of human thought and communication, evolves in meaning, reflecting both a deeper understanding of the world and social changes. The sense of touch, as a fundamental human sense, enables perception through mechanical stimulation of the skin, with tactile adjectives like "soft" and "hard" commonly describing these sensations, as demonstrated by word frequency data from COCA and BNC. This article explores the metaphorical extension of "soft" and "hard" in English, employing cognitive linguistics, conceptual metaphor theory, and mapping mechanisms to analyze the semantic evolution and characteristics of these adjectives.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Significance

Language evolves with society, and metaphor plays a key role in conceptualizing abstract phenomena. Metaphor is fundamentally conceptual, not linguistic, in nature. Metaphorical language is a surface manifestation of conceptual metaphor^[1]. Tactile adjectives like "soft" and "hard" initially describe physical sensations but extend metaphorically to other domains. Understanding these extensions helps explain language evolution and broader cognitive and social changes, providing valuable insights for English learners in grasping abstract language and metaphorical expressions.

1.2 Research Objects

This study focuses on the adjectives "soft" and "hard" due to their high frequency in COCA and BNC. In COCA, "soft" appears 47,501 times, and "hard" 308,054 times; in BNC, "soft" is used 5,801 times, and "hard" 21,766 times. These frequent adjectives are analyzed for their metaphorical extensions.

1.3 Research Purpose

This paper aims to analyze the semantic extension of "soft" and "hard" from their original tactile meanings to metaphorical interpretations in other conceptual domains, drawing on conceptual metaphor theory.

1.4 Research Methods

1) Quantitative Analysis

Word frequency data from COCA and BNC is used to analyze the metaphorical extensions of "soft" and "hard."

2) Literature Review

Key works in metaphor theory, such as Lakoff & Johnson's "Metaphors We Live By," provide theoretical support.

3) Inductive Reasoning

Conclusions are drawn based on the metaphorical mechanisms underlying the semantic extension of tactile adjectives.

1.5 Corpus Source

The main corpora used are COCA and BNC, supplemented by example sentences from dictionaries like the Oxford Advanced English-Chinese Dictionary.

2. Overview of Tactile Adjectives and Metaphors

2.1 Definition of Tactile Sense

Tactile contact ensures direct interaction with the surrounding objects, and the sensory experience is provided by several relatively independent sensory systems, which include tactile mechanoreception, thermoreception, pain perception, and the C-tactile system responsible for emotional aspects of tactile perception^[2].

2.2 Definition and Classification of Tactile Adjectives

Tactile adjectives describe sensations from physical contact. Words like "soft" evoke comfort, while "hard" and "sharp" suggest discomfort. These adjectives are categorized by the positive or negative emotional responses they generate.

2.3 Metaphor Theory

Interacting with others frequently involves making common-sense inferences linking context, background knowledge and beliefs to utterances in the dialogue^[3].

Metaphor, as defined by Lakoff and Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By*, is crucial for human cognition, linking the known (source domain) to the unknown (target domain)^[4]. Tactile sensations like "soft" and "hard" extend beyond physical perception to represent abstract qualities, such as character traits or social conditions. As illustrated in Figure 1, metaphor facilitates the progression from actual experiences to cognitive concepts, ultimately constructing abstract semantics through metaphorical mechanisms.

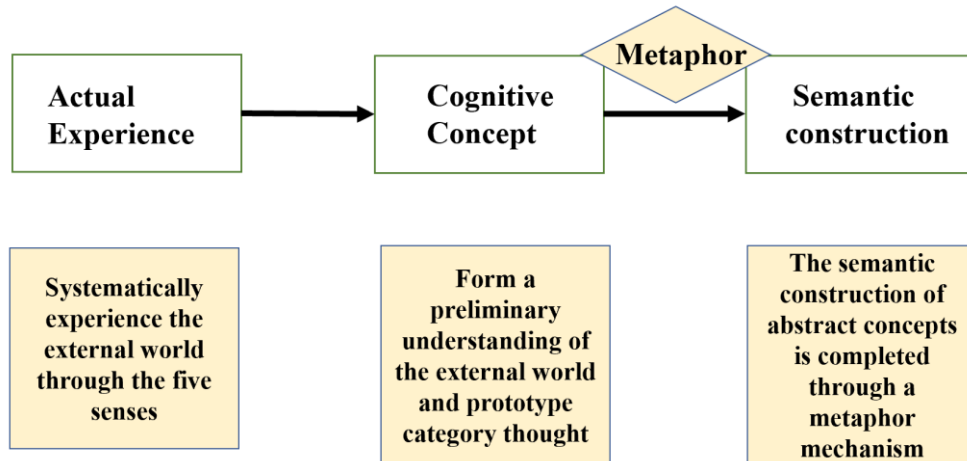


Figure 1: The Role of Metaphor in Conceptual Transformation and Semantic Construction

3. The Analysis of Metaphors of “Hard” and “Soft”

3.1 Semantic Change of “Soft”

This section analyzes the semantic extension of the tactile adjective "soft" through metaphorical theory and mapping mechanisms, focusing on its evolution across different conceptual domains.

3.1.1 The Original Meaning of “Soft”

The word "soft" originates from Old English and primarily described objects that easily deform under pressure. This original meaning, defined as “changing shape easily when pressed; not stiff or hard,” reflects the fundamental tactile experience of softness. For example, soft dough or skin represents pliability and smoothness, which eventually extends beyond the physical into emotional and abstract domains.

3.1.2 The Metaphorical Extension of “Soft”

The semantic extension of "soft" can be categorized into three types: tactile to auditory/visual, solid to liquid/gas, and tangible to intangible.

3.1.2.1 Tactile to Auditory and Visual

"Soft" initially describes textures, but metaphorically extends to auditory and visual perceptions. For instance:

(1) A soft glow of candlelight or a soft voice evokes gentleness.

(2) Visual representations, such as soft curves or colors, reflect subtlety and smoothness. This extension demonstrates how physical softness is associated with calmness in sound and visual form, evolving the term's meaning beyond tactile to sensory experiences.

3.1.2.2 Solid to Liquid and Gas

The word "soft" extends metaphorically from solid objects to liquids and gases:

(1) "Soft water" describes water with fewer mineral salts, emphasizing its mild effect.

(2) "Soft drink" refers to non-alcoholic beverages. These shifts highlight how the flexibility associated with solids expands to describe liquids and gases that are less harsh or intense.

3.1.2.3 Tangible to Intangible

"Soft" also extends to describe emotional and abstract qualities:

(1) Soft-heartedness implies kindness and sympathy.

(2) A "soft life" suggests ease and comfort, free from strict rules. In this sense, softness metaphorically represents emotional warmth and leniency, further broadening its meaning to intangible attributes such as personality traits and lifestyle choices.

3.1.3 The Internal Mechanism of "Soft" in Metaphor

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) suggest metaphors are fundamental ways of thinking, mapping features from a source domain to a target domain. The word "soft," originally meaning "easily changing shape when pressed," extends metaphorically into various realms.

By engaging multiple senses, "soft" shifts from describing tactile states to auditory and visual realms (e.g., soft sounds and colors). It also applies to liquids and gases, referring to substances with lower intensity, like "soft water" or "soft drinks." Additionally, "soft" extends to abstract concepts, such as gentleness in character.

Thus, "soft" evolves from describing physical properties to embodying abstract qualities in both tangible and intangible forms.

3.2 Semantic Change of "Hard"

3.2.1 The Original Meaning of "Hard"

The word "hard" originates from Old English, referring to objects that resist deformation under pressure. This concept, defined as "solid, firm or stiff and difficult to bend or break," forms the archetypal category for "hard." Examples include hard ground after frost or a hard mattress, where the solidity and resistance to pressure are emphasized.

Through metaphor, "hard" extends beyond the physical, evolving to describe characteristics like emotional toughness or the intensity of experiences, illustrating its semantic shift from the material to the abstract.

3.2.2 The Metaphorical Extension of "Hard"

The adjective "hard," originally defined as "solid, firm or stiff and difficult to bend or break," extends metaphorically across several domains, including tactile, visual, auditory, liquid, and abstract.

3.2.2.1 Semantic Extension from Tactile to Visual and Auditory

"Hard" extends from describing physical texture to visual and auditory experiences:

(1) In examples like "hard light" or "hard blue," "hard" conveys the intensity and discomfort caused by light or color.

(2) In terms of sound, a "hard voice" or "hard sound" refers to harshness or an unpleasant auditory experience.

Through metaphor, "hard" evolves to describe not only solid objects but also visual intensity and auditory harshness, showing how the physical sensation of hardness extends to other sensory domains.

3.2.2.2 Semantic Extension from Solid to Liquid

"Hard" extends from solids to liquids:

(1) "Hard water" refers to water with high mineral content, making it difficult to wash or drink.

(2) "Hard liquor" describes beverages with high alcohol content, emphasizing strength and intensity. This shows how hardness applies to liquids with concentrated qualities.

3.2.2.3 Semantic Extension from Tangible to Intangible

"Hard" also describes emotional and abstract concepts:

(1) In expressions like "hard worker," it denotes effort and resilience.

(2) "Hard" can describe emotional toughness, as in "a hard man," indicating a lack of compassion.

(3) It extends to difficulty, as seen in "hard facts" or "hard evidence," implying reliability and unchangeability.

Thus, "hard" captures emotional and conceptual intensity, extending from physical to abstract meanings.

3.2.3 The Internal Mechanism of "Hard" in Metaphor

Originally, "hard" meant "solid, firm, or stiff and difficult to bend or break." Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that metaphors extend word meanings by mapping characteristics from one domain to another. Through the senses, "hard" extends to harsh auditory and visual experiences, like jarring sounds or intense lights. It also shifts to liquids, describing substances like "hard water" or "hard liquor," indicating strength or intensity. As shown in Figure 2, "hard" progresses from describing tangible things to more abstract, intangible concepts, symbolizing emotional toughness and resilience.

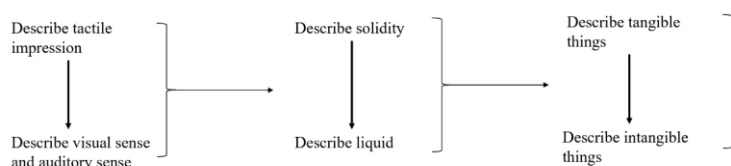


Figure 2: Pathway of Semantic Extension for Tactile Adjectives

4. The Characteristics of Semantic Extension of "Hard" and "Soft" in Metaphor

The semantic extensions of "soft" and "hard" follow certain principles while maintaining their original meanings. These extensions exhibit the following characteristics:

(1) Synesthesia

"Soft" and "hard" extend from touch to visual and auditory domains, as seen in expressions like "soft pink" and "hard sound," but they do not extend into olfaction.

(2) From Simple States to Complex States of Matter

Both adjectives extend from solids to liquids, as seen in "soft/hard water," showing a progression from simple to more complex matter.

(3) From Tangible to Intangible Substances

The terms extend from describing physical objects to abstract concepts, reflecting cognitive processing, as in "hard evidence" or "soft heart."

(4) Stability of Original Meanings

Despite their expansions, "soft" and "hard" retain their core tactile meanings, ensuring stability in their original definitions.

5. Conclusion

Rhetoric is the counterpart of dialectic. For both treat of such things as are in a way common for all to grasp and belong to no delimited science^[5]. Metaphor is a fundamental aspect of human

cognition, allowing familiar concepts to be applied to new, unfamiliar domains for deeper understanding. This study has examined how the tactile adjectives "soft" and "hard" extend their meanings through conceptual metaphors.

The expansion of these adjectives reflects societal changes, connecting the tangible with the intangible and transforming physical sensations into abstract ideas. "Soft" and "hard" have moved beyond touch to encompass auditory, visual, and material characteristics, illustrating the progression from simple to complex concepts.

For English learners, mastering metaphorical thinking is crucial for understanding language evolution and improving language accuracy. In conclusion, the metaphorical extension of "soft" and "hard" provides valuable insights into language development and human cognition.

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