

# An Analysis of English Polysemous Words from the Perspective of Conceptual Metaphor- Taking “Hot” for Example

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**Abstract:** With the development of society, people’s requirement on lexical meanings keeps changing, which causes meaning expansion. And it gives birth to the pervasive phenomenon of polysemy in vocabulary. Conceptual metaphor, proposed by Lakoff and Johnson, is a significant cognitive device deeply influencing human’s way of thinking and using language. And this thesis focuses on the analysis of conceptual metaphor mechanism on the polysemous words, “Hot”. Firstly, there is a brief introduction about polysemous words and conceptual metaphor. Then the most part of thesis focuses on explaining the semantic meanings of “Hot” with the help of conceptual metaphor theory.

**Keywords:** Conceptual metaphor theory; lexical meaning extension; hot

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## 1. Introduction

The study of metaphor owns a long history and prolonged effect for linguistic study. As the representative of the traditional theory of metaphor, Aristotle regarded metaphor as a rhetorical device which can substitute the meaning of a word with another <sup>[1]</sup>. The words with more than one related lexical meanings are defined as polysemous words. And the sense of polysemous words is the combination of connotative and denotative meanings.<sup>[2]</sup> This thesis focuses on the analysis of the work mechanism of conceptual metaphor on words, taking “Hot” for example.

## 2. Using Conceptual Metaphor Theory to Analyze Semantic Meanings of “Hot”

### 2.2 Dictionary Meanings of “Hot”

The dictionary meaning of “Hot” can be divided into basic meanings and extended meanings.

#### 2.2.1 Basic Meanings

Based on the Oxford Dictionary, “Hot” is defined as “having a high temperature; producing heat”. From the core meaning of “Hot” elaborated by dictionary, “Hot” is associated with high temperature and heat. More precisely, “Hot” originally can be used to “describe the entity with high temperature surrounding human.” <sup>[7]</sup> And the use of “Hot” in the following sentences (1) to (4) is the application of the basic meanings.

- (1) Do you like this hot weather?
- (2) Be careful---the plates are hot.
- (3) Eat it while it’s hot.
- (4) I touched his forehead. He felt hot and feverish.

#### 2.2.2 Extended Meanings

And the following is the extended meanings of “Hot”.

##### (I) The Lexical Extension of “Hot”

- (i) a person feeling unpleasant heat;
- (ii) making someone feel hot;
- (iii) a burning feeling in someone’s mouth caused by spices;
- (iv) causing the feeling of excitement;
- (v) being difficult to deal with some hard situation making people feel worried and uncomfortable;

- (vi) being popular; making people pay much attention;
- (vii) being fresh;
- (viii) being likely to be successful;
- (ix) being good at doing something;
- (x) being sexing or causing sexual excitement;
- (xi) (of music) having a strong and exciting rhyme.<sup>[5]</sup>

## 2.3 Conceptual Metaphors in the Semantic Extensions of “Hot”

This chapter aims to introduce the definition of CM through analyzing some examples and lists the CMs in the extended meanings of “Hot”.

### 2.3.1 Definition of Conceptual Metaphors (CM)

Conceptual metaphor was proposed and defined by Lakoff & Jhonsen (1980) firstly in the book *Metaphors We Live By*<sup>[4]</sup>, which provokes the radical development of the study of metaphor. The conceptual metaphor is a cross-domain mapping from a concrete “source domain” onto an abstract “target domain”.<sup>[3]</sup> Conceptual metaphor implies the interaction between the “source domain” and the “target domain” based on human physical, psychological, cultural and social experiences.

### 2.3.2 CM in the Semantic Extensions of “Hot”

The followings are the CM existing in the polysemous word, “Hot”:

- (I) THE FEELING OF EXTREME HIGH TEMPERARURE IS HOT
- (II) SEXY IS HOT
- (III) EXCITING IS HOT
- (IV) EXCITED IS HOT
- (V) FOOD WITH SPICES IS HOT
- (VI) ANGERY IS HOT
- (VII) DIFFICULT IS HOT or HARD IS HOT
- (VIII) FRESH IS HOT or THE LATEST IS HOT
- (IX) POPULAR IS HOT or GETTING MUCH ATTENTION IS HOT

### 2.3.3 Functions of the CM Working on “Hot”

- (I) THE FEELING OF EXTREME HIGH TEMPERARURE IS HOT
  - (1) The temperature is at 40 centigrade today. I feel so hot, and I hate summer.
  - (2) --- “Your cheeks are so red. What’s the matter with you?”
    - “I felt hot and uncomfortable.”
    - “OMG! Let’s test your body temperature and please have a rest now.”
  - (3) Her cheeks were hot because of shyness.

The metaphor THE FEELING OF EXTREME HIGH TEMPERARURE IS HOT is an ontological metaphor. It is formed by the source domain “Hot” which is connected with the target domain, “the feeling of extreme high temperature”. “Hot”, whose core meaning is “having a relatively or noticeably high temperature”, is close to describe the attribute of some entities.<sup>[6]</sup> And based on biological knowledge, human beings are thermostatic animal. It impossible for human to touch some entities with extreme high temperature. The skin sense provides human with a chance to experience the feeling of extreme high temperature. In this case, the human body can be regarded as a container, and the entities with high temperature from outside world is another kind of container. The two containers effect and are linked to each other. According to the theory of thermal conduction, between the two contacting entities, one entity with higher temperature emits heat to the entity with the lower temperature. And the heat stimulates human skin, making people feel the attribute of the entity, “Hot”. Under the psychological intimation, the feeling is assimilated by the attribute, and people feel hot. Just as the first sentence shows, “I” feel hot because of the hot

environment surrounding and contacting “me”.

Here is also another environmental effect on human body like virus. Sometimes viruses invade human body destroying the balance of body mechanism. And a series of responses make the temperature of human body higher than normal. Though the human body cannot be regarded as an object with relatively high temperature, based on life experience they give themselves psychologically suggestions that they are surrounded by unbelievable heat. And when people catch fever, they will use “Hot” to describe their feelings. It’s not only a cross-domain mapping, but also a way to show that the extreme heat they psychologically feel makes them feel uncomfortable and emergent. Except for the influence of the heat coming from the external environment, here exist inner physical factors to make people feel “Hot”. Sometimes people are influenced by the psychological factors to produce some adrenalin. The chemical thing makes human cells more active, which produce some heat and make the temperature of the body increase. The influence of these cells is similar with the viruses mentioned above, which also provides people with psychological indication to feel hot. And the metaphor THE FEELING OF EXTREME HIGH TEMPERARURE IS HOT is reasonable.

(II) SEXY IS HOT

- (1) In the bar, most girls and boys dress hot.
- (2) Putting on this little skirt, she looks so hot.
- (3) Tom looks hotter than before because he insists in working out and balancing his diet.

In daily life, when people come across beauties who look sexy, they can describe these pretty persons as hot guy or hot girl. And here comes the metaphor SEXY IS HOT. The produce of the metaphor can owe to sex hormone. Because these beauties are very attractive, people who see them spontaneously produce sex hormone in their body. Sex hormone stimulates bodies to work faster to produce more heat which makes the temperature of body higher. Through the reaction of the human body, the abstract “Sexy” here becomes a concrete object endowed with the ability to let the temperature of body higher. With the accumulation of the knowledge of such physical phenomenon, people naturally make “Hot” connected with “Sexy” under the media of cross-domain mapping, thus producing the metaphor SEXY IS HOT or BEING SEXY IS THE WAY OF MAKING OTHERS FEEL HOT.

(III) EXCITING IS HOT

(IV) EXCITED IS HOT

- (1) There exists hot competition between the two basketball teams.
- (2) How boring staying at home! I want to sleep. Please play a hot music and give me some energy.
- (3) The fans on the auditorium are hot for the winning of the football team they like.
- (4) He looks hot because today he buys a new smart phone which he desires for a long time.

There are always lots of activities that give people the sense of the excitement, for example basketball game or high-risky sports. “The stimulation of intensity originating from the activities plays an important role to map the high temperature domain to the abstract domain of excitement.” Therefore, there exists the expression like hot discussion related to the CM EXCITING IS HOT and “he feels hot about the discussion” linked with the conceptual structures EXCITED IS HOT.

(V)FOOD WITH SPICES IS HOT

- (1) Eating mustard is hot for children.
- (2) Enjoying a bottle of soup with hot peppers in winter helps expel coldness.

Eating spicing food will evoke intensely the cells of the tongue and the brain, which makes people feel excited and then makes the body produce heat. And when the temperature of the surroundings gets very high, the body also has high temperature. The two different situations possess the similar outcome, making human body’s temperature higher. And the similarity makes it possible for mapping the domain of high temperature onto the target domain of taste.

(VI) ANGERY IS HOT

- (1) His hot temper makes it hard for him to make some close friends.

When people get mad, their body tend to produce a lot of heat, which is similar with the situation when people stay in a high temper-

ature environment. The similarity can make the two situations get analogy to produce metaphor **ANGER IS HOT**, which is derived from mapping the source domain of high temperature onto the target domain of emotion.

(VII) **DIFFICULT IS HOT or HARD IS HOT**

- (1) With the war between the two countries were getting hotter and hotter, many residents of the war areas ran away.
- (2) Because of the economic crisis, people are living a hot life.

The metaphor **DIFFICULT IS HOT or HARD IS HOT** can also be regarded as **DEALING DIFFICULT SITUATION IS TOUCHING SOMETHING HOT**. If a person needs to process an extremely hot entity whose temperature comes to the zenith, how does the person feel about the hard situation? Isn't it dangerous? Maybe once people touch the stuff, they will draw back the hand immediately. Therefore, it is difficult to touch an object with extreme heat. The metaphor **DEALING DIFFICULT SITUATION IS TOUCHING SOMETHING HOT, DIFFICULT IS HOT or HARD IS HOT** involves in the mapping from the source domain "Touch" onto the target domain "Dealing with".

(VIII) **FRESH IS HOT or THE LATEST IS HOT**

- (1) The two girls are talking about the hottest gossips of stars.
- (2) He is reading the hot stories from the latest newspapers.

When a cake has just been baked, it must be hot because it just comes out from an oven. And the new baked hot cake must be fresh or latest. So when people taste hot food, they will naturally hold the view that the food is fresh or the latest. So based on the life experience, people endow "Hot" with the meaning of "Fresh" or "The latest". And the hidden mechanism under the endowment is the conceptual metaphor **FRESH IS HOT or THE LATEST IS HOT**.

(IX) **POPULAR IS HOT or GETTING MUCH ATTENTION IS HOT**

- (1) They are always the hottest bands making people unforgettable.
- (2) The restaurant is the hottest place for lovers to date.

In ancient time, there was totally dark at night. And in the dark the higher temperature a thing had, the brighter it was and the more attention people paid. The popular things or people always get much attention like the entity with extreme high temperature in the dark. The common feature provokes the mapping from the domain of high temperature onto the domain of attention. And the conceptual metaphor, **POPULAR IS HOT or GETTING MUCH ATTENTION IS HOT**, is reasonable.

### **3. Conclusion**

All in all, human language is metaphorical including human vocabulary.

The major findings of the study are as followings:

Firstly, by finding the similarities between the core meaning and the expanded meanings, the thesis concludes the conceptual metaphors in "Hot".

The conceptual metaphor modes in "Hot" are the followings:

- (I) **THE FEELING OF EXTREME HIGH TEMPERARURE IS HOT**
- (II) **SEXY IS HOT IS HOT**
- (III) **EXCITING IS HOT**
- (IV) **EXCITED IS HOT**
- (V) **FOOD WITH SPICES IS HOT**
- (VI) **ANGER IS HOT**
- (VII) **DIFFICULT IS HOT or HARD IS HOT**
- (VIII) **FRESH IS HOT or THE LATEST IS HOT**
- (IX) **POPULAR IS HOT or GETTING MUCH**

Except for analyzing the semantic meanings of polysemous words, the conceptual metaphor theory can be applied in other fields, such as in education and translation. We can have some further studies about the application of the conceptual metaphor theory.

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