

A Contrastive Analysis Of The Meaning Of The Monosyllabic Dimension Word “Thin” In English And “薄” In Chinese

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I. INTRODUCTION

In linguistics, dimension words play a vital role in describing the spatial attributes of objects, such as height, length, thickness, and depth. These words are crucial for providing detailed information about the shape and size of objects, which are fundamental to our understanding of the physical world. Among these dimension words, “thin” in English and “薄” in Chinese represent an essential category of adjectives used to describe the property of thinness. This paper explores the semantics of these monosyllabic dimension words, focusing on their literal meanings, metaphorical extensions, and the cognitive and cultural factors that shape their usage in English and Chinese.

This research aims to identify and analyze the similarities and differences between the word “thin” in English and “薄” in Chinese. While both words originate from the concept of physical thinness, they have evolved to include a wide range of metaphorical meanings. These metaphorical extensions reflect diverse cognitive processes and cultural influences, which are central to understanding how these words function in their respective languages.

Additionally, this study examines the synonyms of “thin” and “薄” in both languages, exploring how these synonyms enrich the semantic field and contribute to the complexity of their metaphorical meanings. By conducting a contrastive analysis of these words, the paper provides insights into the linguistic and cultural factors that influence the perception and expression of the concept of thinness in English and Chinese.

Keywords: Dimension word, meanings of thin, meanings of 薄, metaphorical meanings, contrastive analysis, cognitive linguistics.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Contrastive Semantic Analysis of Words

Semantic analysis in linguistics has undergone various developments, with scholars offering multiple perspectives on word meaning. Some researchers view word meaning as a mental representation, where words correspond to specific mental images or concepts. Others interpret word meaning as a relational entity, where the meaning of a word is determined by its relationship to

other words within a language. Additionally, some scholars see word meaning as a spiritual essence that encompasses multiple factors, including cultural and historical influences.

In contrastive semantic analysis, the focus is on comparing the semantic features of words across different languages. This process involves examining both the morphological and semantic aspects of vocabulary, with an emphasis on identifying commonalities and differences in meaning. The challenge lies in analyzing abstract concepts, which often vary significantly between languages due to cultural and historical distinctions.

A key aspect of contrastive semantic analysis is the identification of a common basis for comparison. This is typically achieved through componential analysis, a method that breaks down word meanings into their basic semantic components or features. By identifying universal semantic features that apply across languages, researchers can establish a foundation for comparing words and understanding the cognitive processes involved in language use.

2.2 The Concept of Dimension Words

Dimension words, which describe spatial attributes like size, shape, and thickness, are essential in both English and Chinese. These words are typically classified as adjectives, as they express qualities, states, or properties of objects or actions. In the context of this study, the focus is on the adjectives “thin” in English and “薄” in Chinese, both of which describe the physical property of thinness.

However, the use of dimension words extends beyond their literal meanings. In both languages, these words can be metaphorically extended to describe abstract concepts, such as scarcity, weakness, or superficiality. This metaphorical use of dimension words highlights the cognitive processes involved in language, where physical properties are mapped onto abstract domains.

The study of dimension words provides valuable insights into the interplay between language, cognition, and culture. By examining how these words are used in different languages, researchers can uncover the underlying cognitive structures that shape our understanding of the world. Additionally, the comparison of dimension words across languages reveals the

cultural factors that influence how we perceive and describe physical and abstract properties.

3. Research Methodology

To investigate the similarities and differences between the meanings of “thin” in English and “薄” in Chinese, this study employs a combination of statistical, descriptive, and contrastive methods. Each method serves a specific purpose in the analysis, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the semantic and metaphorical features of these words.

- **Statistical Method:** The study begins by collecting a corpus of linguistic expressions containing the words “thin” and “薄” from various sources, including literary works, corpora, and online resources in both English and Chinese. This method allows for the identification of patterns in the usage of these words across different contexts, providing a quantitative foundation for the analysis.
- **Descriptive Method:** The descriptive analysis focuses on the original and metaphorical meanings of “thin” and “薄.” This involves examining dictionary definitions, exploring the semantic fields of these words, and identifying their metaphorical extensions. The descriptive method provides a detailed account of how these words are used in both languages, highlighting the range of meanings they can convey.
- **Contrastive Method:** After analyzing the semantics of “thin” and “薄,” the study conducts a comparative analysis to identify similarities and differences in their semantic features. This method emphasizes the metaphorical extensions of these words, exploring how they are used to describe abstract concepts in English and Chinese. The contrastive method allows for a nuanced understanding of the cognitive and cultural factors that influence the use of these words.

4. Research Findings

4.1 The Monosyllabic Dimension Word “Thin” in English and “薄” in Chinese

The word “thin” in English and “薄” in Chinese are both basic dimension adjectives used to describe the small physical distance between two opposite surfaces of an object. In their most literal sense, these words refer to objects that are slender, narrow, or lacking in width. However, their meanings extend far beyond this physical description, encompassing a wide range of metaphorical uses that reflect the cognitive and cultural nuances of each language.

4.1.1 Literal Meanings

In English, the word “thin” is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary with several primary meanings, which include:

1. **Having little thickness from one surface to its opposite:** This is the most basic and literal meaning of “thin,” describing objects like a thin sheet of paper or a thin layer of ice. It emphasizes the small distance between the two sides of an object, which is the foundational concept from which other meanings are derived.

2. **Sparse or insufficient in amount or density:** This meaning of “thin” extends the concept of physical thinness to describe something that is lacking in quantity or density. For example, a “thin crowd” suggests that there are fewer people present than expected.
3. **Lacking substance, strength, or force:** Here, “thin” is used metaphorically to describe something that is weak or insubstantial, such as a “thin argument” that lacks solid evidence or reasoning.
4. **Delicate, fine, or weak in texture or consistency:** This usage of “thin” often applies to materials or substances that are not robust or dense, such as “thin soup” that is watery or lacking in flavor.
5. **Insufficiently covered or lacking density:** In this sense, “thin” describes something that does not adequately cover or fill a space, such as “thin hair” that appears sparse or balding.

Similarly, the Chinese word “薄” is defined in the Chinese Dictionary with several meanings that align closely with those of “thin” in English:

1. **Having a small distance between opposite surfaces:** Like “thin,” “薄” describes objects that are slender or narrow, such as “薄纸” (thin paper). This is the core meaning from which other uses of “薄” are derived.
2. **Weak or lacking strength:** In Chinese, “薄” can describe something that is weak or lacking in robustness, such as “薄的理由” (a weak argument).
3. **Shallow or lacking depth:** This meaning of “薄” is often used to describe something that is superficial or lacking in substance, such as “薄的礼貌” (superficial politeness).
4. **Mean or stingy in character:** “薄” can also be used to describe a person's character, suggesting that they are mean, stingy, or lacking in generosity.
5. **Light in taste or smell:** In Chinese, “薄” is also used to describe food or drinks that are light in flavor or aroma, such as “薄汤” (thin soup).

4.1.2 Metaphorical Extensions

Both “thin” in English and “薄” in Chinese have developed extensive metaphorical meanings that go beyond their literal sense. These metaphorical extensions reflect how physical properties can be mapped onto abstract concepts, allowing speakers of both languages to describe a wide range of phenomena using the same basic word.

For example, in English, the metaphorical use of “thin” to describe a “thin argument” reflects the idea that just as a physically thin object lacks substance, an argument that is “thin” lacks depth or strength. Similarly, in Chinese, the word “薄” is used metaphorically to describe “薄的理由” (a weak argument), conveying a similar idea of insufficiency or weakness. This metaphorical extension is a powerful cognitive tool that allows speakers to convey complex abstract ideas using familiar physical concepts.

In both languages, the metaphorical use of “thin” and “薄” can also describe scarcity or sparsity. For instance, in English,

“thin attendance” at an event implies that the crowd was sparse, much like a thin layer of material barely covers a surface. In Chinese, “薄的出席” carries a similar connotation, indicating that few people attended the event. This use of “thin” and “薄” to describe scarcity is rooted in the physical characteristic of thinness, which suggests something spread out or insufficient. Moreover, the metaphorical application of “thin” and “薄” to describe emotional or psychological states is evident in phrases like “thin-skinned” in English and “薄脸皮” in Chinese. Both expressions denote a person who is overly sensitive or easily offended, linking the idea of physical thinness to emotional fragility. This metaphor highlights the perception that just as a thin material is easily damaged, a “thin-skinned” person is easily hurt. In the realm of taste and sensory experience, “thin” and “薄” are used metaphorically to describe food or drinks that lack richness or substance. For example, “thin soup” in English and “薄汤” in Chinese both convey the idea of a dish that is watery and lacking in flavor. This metaphor extends the concept of physical thinness to the sensory domain, where a “thin” taste implies a lack of intensity or fullness.

Finally, the concept of superficiality is captured in both languages through the metaphorical use of “thin” and “薄.” In English, a “thin veneer of politeness” suggests that someone's politeness is insincere or superficial, barely covering their true feelings. Similarly, in Chinese, “薄的礼貌” conveys the idea of shallow politeness, indicating that the person's manners are only skin-deep.

4.2 Synonyms of “Thin” and “薄”

To gain a deeper understanding of the semantic field surrounding “thin” in English and “薄” in Chinese, it is essential to examine their synonyms. These synonyms, while sharing a base meaning related to thinness, often carry distinct connotations and are used in different contexts.

In English, synonyms for “thin” include “slim,” “slender,” “narrow,” and “fine.” Each of these words adds a layer of nuance to the concept of thinness. For instance, “slim” often has positive connotations, especially when describing a person's physique, suggesting attractiveness and elegance. “Slender,” similarly, is used to describe something gracefully thin, often with an implication of beauty. On the other hand, “narrow” focuses on the restricted width of an object, without the positive connotations of “slim” or “slender.” “Fine” typically refers to something delicate or finely textured, emphasizing thinness in a positive, often intricate context.

In Chinese, synonyms for “薄” include “细” and “微.” The word “细” often describes something finely detailed or delicate, such as “细丝” (fine thread). It emphasizes a quality of thinness that is associated with precision and intricacy, often in a positive sense. “微,” on the other hand, suggests something minute or subtle, often implying a level of thinness that is barely perceptible. These synonyms reflect the rich semantic field of thinness in Chinese, where different words capture various aspects of the concept.

The differences in synonym usage between English and Chinese highlight the importance of context and cultural nuances in understanding the full range of meanings a word can convey. For example, while “slim” in English is often used to describe an attractive body shape, the Chinese synonym “细” might be more commonly used in contexts where detail and delicacy are emphasized. Similarly, the use of “微” in Chinese to describe subtle thinness does not have a direct equivalent in English, where such a concept might be expressed through other adjectives like “faint” or “slight.”

4.3 Comparative Analysis of Metaphorical Meanings

The following table provides a detailed comparison of the metaphorical extensions of “thin” in English and “薄” in Chinese, as well as their respective synonyms, highlighting the similarities and differences in their usage:

N.o	Meaning of the Word	Expressions with “thin”	Expressions with “薄”	Synonyms of “thin”	Synonyms of “薄”
1.	Physical Thinness	Thin sheet of paper	薄纸	Slim, slender	细, 微
2.	Lack of Substance	Thin arguments	薄的理由	Weak, flimsy	微弱, 脆弱
3.	Weak Character	Thin-skinned	薄脸皮	Sensitive	敏感的
4.	Light Taste	Thin soup	薄汤	Weak, light	淡的, 薄的
5.	Superficiality	Thin veneer of politeness	薄的礼貌	Superficial	表面的

This table illustrates how “thin” and “薄” function in similar metaphorical domains, such as physical thinness, lack of substance, weak character, light taste, and superficiality. However, the specific expressions and connotations of these metaphors differ between English and Chinese, reflecting the cultural and cognitive differences between the two languages.

4.3.1 Similarities in Metaphorical Use

In both English and Chinese, the metaphorical uses of “thin” and “薄” exhibit significant parallels, particularly in the domains of weakness, superficiality, and sensitivity. These similarities suggest that both languages share a common cognitive basis for extending the concept of physical thinness to more abstract realms. For example, the metaphor of “thin arguments” in English and “薄的理由” in Chinese both convey the idea that an argument is weak and lacks sufficient support. Similarly, the description of someone as “thin-skinned” in English and “薄脸皮” in Chinese both suggest emotional fragility and sensitivity. These metaphorical extensions demonstrate how physical properties can be universally applied to abstract concepts, revealing commonalities in human cognition across different languages. The use of “thin” and “薄” to describe superficiality is also consistent across both languages. The concept of a “thin veneer” in English and “薄的礼貌” in Chinese both imply that what appears on the surface is insincere or lacking in depth. This metaphor underscores the idea that just as a thin layer barely covers what lies beneath, superficial politeness or behavior is shallow and easily seen through.

4.3.2 Differences in Metaphorical Use

While there are many similarities in how “thin” and “薄” are used metaphorically, there are also notable differences that reflect the unique cultural and linguistic contexts of English and Chinese. One significant difference is the use of “thin” in English to describe sound, such as in “a thin voice.” This metaphorical use of “thin” to describe a voice that lacks fullness or richness does not have a direct counterpart in Chinese. Instead, Chinese might use terms like “轻” (light) or “弱” (weak) to describe a similar quality in sound, rather than “薄.” This difference highlights how metaphorical extensions of physical properties can vary across languages, depending on cultural associations and linguistic conventions.

Another difference is the use of “薄” in Chinese to describe moral character, such as in the term “薄情” (emotionally distant or indifferent). While English might describe a person as “cold-hearted” or “insensitive,” the specific metaphor of thinness applied to character is less common. Instead, English speakers might use words like “callous” or “uncaring” to describe similar traits. This divergence reflects how cultural values and moral judgments can influence the metaphorical use of language.

In the context of light taste, while both languages can use thinness to describe a lack of flavor, the cultural associations with food might lead to different expressions. For instance, Chinese cuisine often values balance and harmony in flavors, so a “薄汤” (thin soup) might be criticized not only for being “thin” but also for lacking the desired complexity of taste. In contrast, English

descriptions of “thin soup” might focus more on the physical property of being watery rather than on a lack of balanced flavors. Finally, the use of “thin” and “薄” in expressions of politeness and social interaction differs in nuance between English and Chinese. In English, a “thin veneer of politeness” suggests a superficial and insincere display of manners, while in Chinese, “薄的礼貌” might carry a slightly different connotation, possibly implying a more subtle or nuanced form of insincerity. These differences highlight how cultural norms and expectations shape the metaphorical use of language in social contexts.

5. Conclusion

This contrastive analysis of the monosyllabic dimension words “thin” in English and “薄” in Chinese reveals both significant similarities and key differences in how these words are used to describe physical and abstract properties. Both words originate from the concept of physical thinness, but they have evolved to encompass a wide range of metaphorical meanings that reflect the cognitive and cultural contexts of their respective languages.

The similarities in metaphorical use between “thin” and “薄” suggest a shared cognitive basis for extending physical properties to abstract domains, particularly in the areas of weakness, superficiality, and emotional sensitivity. These parallels demonstrate how speakers of different languages use similar cognitive processes to make sense of the world around them, despite the linguistic and cultural differences that may exist.

However, the differences in metaphorical use highlight the unique ways in which each language and culture conceptualize thinness and its associated properties. The use of “thin” in English to describe sound, the application of “薄” in Chinese to describe moral character, and the varying connotations of thinness in the context of taste and politeness all point to the cultural specificity of metaphorical language.

Through this detailed examination, we gain a deeper understanding of the linguistic and cultural factors that shape the perception and expression of thinness in English and Chinese. This analysis underscores the importance of considering both universal cognitive structures and culturally specific influences when studying language and metaphor.

Moreover, understanding these nuances is crucial for effective cross-cultural communication and translation practices. By recognizing the similarities and differences in how concepts like thinness are expressed in different languages, we can achieve more accurate and culturally sensitive exchanges of ideas.

As language continues to evolve, so too will the metaphors and meanings associated with concepts like thinness, further enriching the linguistic diversity of both English and Chinese. This study contributes to our broader understanding of how language, cognition, and culture interact to shape the way we communicate and understand the world.

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