“O BITTER DAYS!”: LINGUISTIC CONCEPTUALIZATION OF BITTER IN ENGLISH.

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This talk concentrates on the role of the semantic domain of bitter in English, by gathering linguistic data from the “Mapping Metaphor with the Historical Thesaurus Project” (henceforth MMP), developed at the University of Glasgow. The MMP investigates semantic change in English in a diachronic perspective, by examining the lexical overlap between different lexical categories in the Historical Thesaurus to identify the correspondences due to metaphorical transfer. Firstly, I propose a classification of the conceptual metaphors that have motivated semantic change in the domain of bitter (such as PAIN IS BITTER; STRICTNESS IS BITTER). Secondly, the lexicographic data are compared with previous literature on the conceptualization of taste in English (Bagli 2016). Results show a consistent tendency to use the domain of BITTER to structure negative and unpleasant concepts.

The motivation of the metaphorical extensions of BITTER lies in our embodied cognition. Facial reactions of both human and non-human primate infants suggest an innate negative response to bitter tastants (Steiner et al. 2001). In a biological and evolutionary perspective, bitter taste perception is functional to avoiding ingestion of toxic substances, mainly vegetables (Breslin 2013). Although inter-individual differences in bitterness perception occur (Lalueza-Fox et al. 2009), and the unpleasantness of bitter can be culturally overridden, the metaphorical extension of the concept maintain a negative connotation.

For centuries, the sense of Taste was considered a lesser sense, probably because of its instinctual nature that led philosophers to identify it with our animal nature (Korsmeyer 1999). Growing interest in the grounding of meaning creation in embodied experience has led many researchers to a reevaluation of the lower senses (among others Ibarretxe-Antuñano 1997, Majid & Levinson 2011, Pei-Jung Lee 2015, Winter 2016), yet to the best of my knowledge a thorough account of the role of Taste perception and linguistic elaboration in English is still lacking.

The analyses of the lexicographic data concentrate on the classification of the linguistic material in coherent groups of metaphorical occurrences, with the aim of identifying the conceptual metaphors that had motivated the semantic change. To do so, I firstly selected the data retrieved by the MMP in the category of “Taste”, considering also the information of the Historical Thesaurus. Secondly, I coded each occurrence in three dimensions: Flavor category; Meaning; Domain. This talk specifically concentrates on the Flavor category of “bitter”, with the aim of exploring the array of different meanings and domains that this category conceptualizes. For instance, the adjective bitter is found in the Historical Thesaurus under the entries of grief, affliction, causing pain/suffering, thus suggesting the conceptualization of PAIN as BITTER. These results are then integrated with data elicited from Corpus Analysis of literary texts, discussed in previous publication (Bagli 2016).

Results of the analyses urge discussion of theories about embodied grounding of language of perception and the “extent of the literal” (Rakova 2003). If the negative connotation of BITTER is motivated by the embodied, negative response to bitterness, and if this response is dictated by biological and evolutionary constraints, then we would expect the concept of bitter to be universally negative.

References


Winter, B. 2016. Taste and smell words form an affectively loaded and emotionally flexible part of the English lexicon. *Language, Cognition and Neuroscience* 31 (8), 975-988.