

Article

Analysis of Lexicalization Patterns of “Fast Food” and Other Cross-Strait Synonyms

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Abstract

This study examines the phenomenon of cross-Strait synonyms—lexical items that are used in Mainland China and Taiwan to convey the same or closely related concepts, yet exhibit subtle semantic differences. While these pairs are frequently considered synonymous, their meanings and usages diverge in ways that reflect deeper cultural, cognitive, and pragmatic factors. Through an exploration of representative examples such as *sùshí* (速食) vs. *kuàicān* (快餐) ‘fast food,’ *jíróng* (即溶) vs. *sùróng* (速溶) ‘instant/quick dissolve,’ and *huāshì* (花式) vs. *huāyàng* (花样) ‘patterned’ or ‘variety,’ this research investigates the lexicalization processes that give rise to these regional variations.

Keywords: Lexicalization, Synonyms, Conceptualization, Cross-strait synonyms, Semantics

1 Introduction

Lexical variation between regional varieties of Mandarin has long been a subject of linguistic inquiry. Much of this work has focused on phonological, syntactic, or semantic divergence (e.g., Li & Thompson^[1]), while lexical choices have often been treated as either isolated variants or catalogued examples of regional difference without deeper theoretical interpretation. Although some studies have documented differences in vocabulary use across regions (e.g., Zhang^[2]), they often stop short of examining the sociocultural and pragmatic forces shaping such divergence. As a result, our understanding of how cultural logics influence lexicalization remains limited.

This study aims to address this gap by systematically investigating cross-Strait synonym variation in Mandarin Chinese, specifically between speakers from Mainland China and Taiwan. Rather than treating lexical variation as a simple matter of regional vocabulary choice, this research adopts a cross-cultural pragmatic lens to explore how differences in the generalization of objective reality and cognitive associations influence patterns of lexicalization. For example, Mainland Chinese usage of terms like *sùshí* (速食) versus the Taiwanese preference for *kuàicān* (快餐), or *jíróng* (即溶) versus *sùróng* (速溶), reveals not only lexical differences but also divergences in the cultural framing of food and convenience. Similarly, contrasts between *huāshì* (花式) and *huāyàng* (花样) shed light on varying aesthetic values and conceptualizations of design.

By foregrounding cultural factors as key drivers of lexical choice, this study builds upon—but also critically extends—the existing literature on lexical variation in Mandarin. It takes three sets of co-referential terms with different names across the Taiwan Strait as examples, exploring how new concepts are lexicalized from the perspective of terminology principles while investigating universal laws governing semantic evolution through semasiological analysis. Through this approach, the

research offers a novel framework for analyzing cross-Strait linguistic differences, contributing to both theoretical and empirical discussions of lexical semantics and language variation.

2 Synonyms and the Two Classifications in Lexicalization

Su^[3] emphasizes the importance of cross-Strait synonyms as a significant area of research in understanding lexical variation between Mainland China and Taiwan. These synonyms refer to instances where distinct lexical items are used in Mainland Mandarin and Taiwanese Mandarin to express ostensibly the same concept. While these terms often appear semantically similar, subtle differences in their meanings sometimes arise, nuances that are easily overlooked when establishing direct correspondences. For instance, the terms *kǎogǔ tí* (考古题, ‘past exam questions’) and *zhēntí* (真题, ‘real exam questions’) are frequently categorized as synonyms in the Chinese Language Knowledge Base. However, a closer analysis reveals differences in usage: *kǎogǔ tí* specifically refers to questions drawn from previous exams, while *zhēntí* more broadly refers to actual exam questions from any real test, not limited to past instances. This subtle distinction becomes evident through the usage patterns in the CCL corpus, where collocations such as *mónǐ zhēntí xùnlìan* (模拟真题训练, ‘simulated real-question training’) and *zhēntí tíkù* (真题题库, ‘real-question item bank’) appear. In contexts like IELTS test preparation, *zhēntí tíkù* refers to a database of authentic or anticipated questions used for future exams. These examples underscore how lexical variations can sometimes conceal underlying differences in conceptualization and usage.

Jiang^[4] challenges the traditional notion that "the meaning of a word is a reflection of objects, phenomena, or relationships in human consciousness," arguing that such reflections are inherently subjective and shaped by human cognition. In many cases, classification emerges not from objective attributes alone, but from how individuals interpret these attributes, leading to divergent conceptualizations and, consequently, different lexical choices. The cross-Strait synonyms *sùshí* (速食) vs. *kuàicān* (快餐) ‘fast food,’ *jíróng* (即溶) vs. *sùróng* (速溶) ‘quick dissolve,’ and *huāshì* (花式) vs. *huāyàng* (花样) ‘patterned’ illustrate how minor semantic distinctions reflect divergent cognitive classifications of external phenomena by speakers on either side of the Taiwan Strait.

Jiang^[4] further distinguishes between two stages of classification in the lexicalization process. The first stage involves grouping certain entities, actions, or properties into shared semantic units while excluding others. For example, the Chinese term *shū* (书, ‘book’) encompasses only published materials, whereas the English term "book" includes both published volumes and notebooks as part of a broader conceptual category. The second stage of classification concerns the structuring of these semantic units in relation to one another, often visible in the formation of words. In this stage, some of the semantic units identified in the first stage function independently as lexical items, including root words and derivational forms. Derived and polysemous words reflect this second stage, which hinges on cognitive associations between concepts. An example can be found in Middle Chinese, where the verbs for ‘wearing’ (*zhuó*, 著/着) and ‘attaching’ (*zhuó*, 著/着) merged into a single polysemous form—a convergence that highlights a cognitive link between the acts of wearing and attaching in the conceptual schema at the time.

3 Lexicalization Differences Arising from the First Classification

The synonym pair *sùshí* (速食, ‘fast food’) and *kuàicān* (快餐, ‘fast food’) exemplify lexicalization differences that emerge from the first stage of classification. In Mainland Mandarin, *kuàicān*

generally refers to food prepared rapidly by vendors using semi-processed ingredients or simple cooking techniques, allowing it to be served immediately for on-the-spot consumption. For example:

(1) 快餐店已达 60 余家。

kuàicāndiàn yǐ dá 60 yú jiā

fast food restaurants PRF reached 60 over CL

“Fast food restaurants have reached over 60 in number.”

(The CCL Corpus of Chinese Texts [CCL], 2024^[5])

In contrast, sùshí refers to food that requires minimal or no preparation after purchase—typically pre-packaged, ready-to-eat, or instant food. For example:

(2) 印多福食品公司的速食面品牌

Yīnduōfú shípǐn gōngsī de sùshí miàn pǐnpái

Indofood food company GEN instant noodle brand

“the instant noodle brand of Indofood Food Company” (CCL, 2024^[5])

In Taiwanese Mandarin, however, kuàicān has a broader scope. It encompasses both vendor-prepared meals and food products that require little to no processing by the consumer. That is, the term can refer to anything that is quickly served and eaten, regardless of whether it is purchased hot or in packaged form. For example:

(3) 今天的孩子普遍熱中漢堡、薯條等速食。

jīntiān de háizi pǔbiàn rèzhōng hànǎo, shǔtiáo děng sùshí

today GEN children generally obsess hamburger, french fries ETC fast food

“Today’s children are generally obsessed with fast food like hamburgers and french fries.”

(Corpus of Contemporary Taiwanese Mandarin [COCT], 2023^[6])

(4) 速食麵廠

sùshí miàn chǎng

instant noodle factory

“instant noodle factory” (COCT, 2023^[6])

The distinction between sùshí (速食, ‘fast food’) and kuàicān (快餐, ‘fast food’) in terms of semantic component differentiation is reflected in Table 1.

Table 1. Differences in the First Classification of ‘Fast Food’ Across the Taiwan Strait

Mandarin Lexicon	“sùshí” (速食, “kuàicān” (快餐, fast convenience food) food)
Taiwanese Mandarin	“sùshí” (速食, convenience food and fast food)

From the perspective of the second classification, both “kuàicān” (快餐, fast food) and “sùshí” (速食, fast food) are linked to the sememe of “prioritizing speed over quality and experience.” Both Mainland and Taiwanese Mandarin use phrases such as “kuàicān wénhuà” (快餐文化, fast-food culture) and “sùshí wénhuà” (速食文化, fast-food culture), demonstrating shared semantic extensions. For example:

(5) 习惯了快餐文化。

xíguàn le kuàicān wénhuà

accustom PFV fast food culture

“They have become accustomed to the **fast food culture**.” (CCL, 2024^[5])

(6) 不過一味貪快，有時難脫“速食文化”之譏。

bùguò yīwèi tān kuài, yǒushí nán tuō “sùshí wénhuà” zhī jī

however blindly covet speed, sometimes difficult avoid “fast-food culture” DET criticism

“However, blindly coveting speed can sometimes lead to criticism of the **‘fast-food culture’**.” (COCT, 2023^[6])

The phrase “kuàicān wénhuà” (快餐文化, fast-food culture) has undergone semantic “merging,” where the meanings or functions of the two linguistic units, “fast food” and “culture,” combine into a new meaning or function that is distinct from their original ones, becoming an idiomatic expression.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, when “kuàicān wénhuà” (快餐文化, fast-food culture) first emerged, it still retained some of the original “fast food” meaning related to food and could co-occur with other words in the culinary semantic field. For example:

(7) 现代人的肠胃已为快餐文化填塞而麻木。

xiàndài rén de chángwèi yǐ wèi kuàicān wénhuà tiánsāi ér mámù

modern people GEN digestive systems PRF PASS fast food culture clog CONJ numb

“The digestive systems of modern people have become numb, clogged by **fast food culture**.”

(COCT, 2023^[6])

(8) 快餐文化, 我不吃!

kuàicān wénhuà, wǒ bù chī

fast food culture, I NEG partake

“Fast food culture? I don’t partake in it!” (CCL, 2024^[5])

4 Lexicalization Differences Arising from the Second Classification

The pairs “jíróng” (即溶, quick dissolve) — “sùróng” (速溶, quick dissolve) and “huāshì” (花式, patterned) — “huāyàng” (花样, patterned) represent synonyms arising from differences in the second classification during lexicalization. Both pairs exhibit colexification, with the former linked to homophones and the latter to polysemous words. The semantic evolution of “huāshì” (花式, patterned) — “huāyàng” (花样, patterned) exemplifies cross-linguistically common patterns of polysemy.

4.1 Differences in Lexicalization of “jíróng” (即溶, quick dissolve) — “sùróng” (速溶, quick dissolve)

The terms “jíróng” (即溶, quick dissolve) and “sùróng” (速溶, quick dissolve) both describe powders or granules that dissolve rapidly. For instance:

(9) 三合一即溶咖啡

sān hé yī jíróng kāfēi

Three mix one instant coffee

“3-in-1 instant coffee” (COCT, 2023^[6])

(10) 速溶奶粉

sùróng nǎifěn

Instant milk powder

“instant milk powder” (CCL, 2024^[5])

Although “jíróng” (即溶, quick dissolve) and “sùróng” (速溶, quick dissolve) share the same sememe of “rapid dissolution”, they differ in their connections to other sememes, reflecting differences in the second classification. “jíróng” (即溶, quick dissolve) is further associated with the sememe of “dissolving immediately upon contact,” as seen in the following context:

(11) 入口即溶。

rù kǒu jí róng

enter mouth **instantly** melt

*“Melts **instantly** upon entering the mouth.”* (COCT, 2023^[6])

In “rùkǒu-jíróng” (入口即溶, instant melting in the mouth), “jíróng” (即溶, quick dissolve) functions as part of a phrase, while in “jíróng” (即溶, quick dissolve) coffee, it is used as a single lexical unit. The distinction between “jíróng” (即溶, quick dissolve) as a phrase and as a word can be explained as follows: as a phrase, its meaning is transparent — simply the sum of its components’ meanings. When “jíróng” (即溶, quick dissolve) functions as a word, its meaning becomes opaque—it is not merely the sum of its constituent morphemes’ meanings, but serves as a modifier within specific nominal terms. Saussure^[7], in his *Course in General Linguistics*, notes that “forms are preserved because they are constantly remade by analogy. A word is preserved as long as its elements remain unchanged, whether understood as a unit or a phrase.”

Mainland Mandarin and Taiwanese Mandarin have chosen different morphemes to lexicalize the concept of “rapid dissolution.” Mainland Mandarin uses “sùróng” (速溶, quick dissolve), emphasizing speed, while Taiwanese Mandarin repurposes the existing phrase “jíróng” (即溶, quick dissolve), transforming it into a bound form that attaches to neighboring elements (e.g., beverages like coffee or milk tea). Dong X^[8] proposes that “the derivation of disyllabic words is a type of lexicalization, where non-word units like phrases gradually solidify or compact to form single words.” She cites Shen J^[9], who explains that such disyllabic words exhibit “dependency on neighboring components, similar to grammaticalization.”

Talmy, L^[10]’s “lexicalization theory” posits that some semantic elements can fuse into a single word, while others appear separately at the syntactic level. This configuration varies across languages, affecting not only semantic structure but also argument structure. The lexicalization patterns of a language determine its argument structures. “Jíróng” (即溶, quick dissolve) incorporates the semantic element of “immediacy,” expressing an event that occurs right after another, which is why it attaches to a temporal reference to form complete semantics. For example, “rùkǒu-jíróng” (入口即溶, instant melting in the mouth) or “yùshuǐ-jíróng” (遇水即溶, quick dissolve when meeting water).

The distinction between “即 + V” and “速 + V” phrases lies in the former’s need for a temporal argument, making it more suited to contexts emphasizing sequential events. In the following example, the temporal reference is the resolution of the matter:

(12) 事毕即寔。

shì bì jí biǎn

affair settled **instantly** bury

*“Buried **right after** the affairs are settled.”* (CCL, 2024^[5])

4.2 Differences in Lexicalization of “huāshì” (花式, patterned)—“huāyàng” (花样, patterned)

Mainland Mandarin uses “huāyàng huáshuǐ” (花样划水, artistic swimming) and “huāyàng huábīng” (花样滑冰, figure skating), while Taiwanese Mandarin uses “huāshì huáshuǐ” (花式划水, artistic swimming) and “huāshì huábīng” (花式滑冰, figure skating), forming synonyms. Both Mainland and Taiwanese Mandarin use “huāyàng” (花样, patterned) and “huāshì” (花式, patterned) to conceptualize the feature of “complex, visually appealing movements.”

The additional sememes of “huāyàng” (花样, patterned) and “huāshì” (花式, patterned) also share synonymous relationships, as both are associated with “patterns or designs” and “various styles or types.”

Wu F^[11] states, “The ‘multifunctionality’ or ‘polysemy’ of linguistic forms is a universal phenomenon in natural languages, reflecting their economy (one form expressing multiple meanings).” He adds, “Although the multifunctionality of morphemes is a synchronic phenomenon, it results from diachronic evolution: a linguistic component acquires various meanings or functions over time, and if these coexist at a specific synchronic level, the component exhibits multifunctionality.” Pan Q, *et al.*^[12] note, “Despite differences in surface form and its meaning across languages, examining the relationships between these forms and their meanings/functions reveals that these differences are constrained... Once a form in human language exhibits polysemy or multifunctionality, this characteristic follows certain rules or constraints.”

Both “huāshì” (花式, patterned) and “huāyàng” (花样, patterned) are multifunctional morphemes. Originally, both were referred to as “patterns or designs,” as seen in the following examples:

(13) 金銀泥畫花式

jīn yín ní huà **huāshì**
gold silver clay paint **pattern**

“polished or painted with gold or silver clay **patterns**” (CCL, 2024^[5])

(14) 花式一毫无二。

huāshì yīháowúèr
pattern same

“Identical in **pattern**, with no distinction.” (CCL, 2024^[5])

(15) 并他时世新**花样**, 虚费工夫不值钱

bìng tā shíshì xīn **huāyàng**, xū fèi gōngfu bù zhíqián
besides EX trendy new **pattern**, vain waste time NEG worth

“Now that new **patterns** are in vogue, I’m wasting much time and not getting paid.”

(CCL, 2024^[5])

(16) 花样新奇。

huāyàng xīnqí

pattern innovative

“*Patterns are innovative.*” (CCL, 2024^[5])

Later, both “huāshì” (花式, patterned) and “huāyàng” (花样, patterned) developed the extended sememe of “styles or types”:

(17) 菜的花式

cài de huāshì

dish GEN variation

“*dish variations*” (CCL, 2024^[5])

(18) 这里有几十种花样。

zhèlǐ yǒu jǐshí zhǒng huāyàng

there have NS CL variety

“*There are dozens of varieties here.*” (CCL, 2024^[5])

The sememes of “artistically appealing sports” and “patterns” in “huāshì” (花式, patterned) can modify nominal components without markers, a feature “huāyàng” (花样, patterned) lacks. The original sememes of “huāshì” (花式, patterned) developed new sememes through the syntactic transformation of expressive functions (Guo R^[13]), whereas “huāyàng” (花样, patterned) lacks such a derivational pathway, thereby exhibiting semantic divergence between the two terms. For example:

(19) 在溜冰场露了一手花式绝技。

zài liúbing chǎng lòu le yī shǒu huāshì juéjì

at rank show PFV one CL figure(skating) stunt

“*Showed off some figure skating stunts at the rink.*” (COCT, 2023^[6])

(20) 定窯花式碟

dìngyáo huāshì dié

Dingyao pattern plate

“*plates with Dingyao pattern*” (COCT, 2023^[6])

Both “huāyàng” (花样, patterned) and “huāshì” (花式, patterned) developed the sememe of modifying sports to describe complex, visually appealing movements, as in “huāyàng huábīng” (花样滑冰, figure skating) and “huāshì huábīng” (花式滑冰, figure skating).

The English word “figure” also carries both the sememe of “pattern” and “complex, visually appealing (sports).” For example:

(21) *But a closer look reveals each spiral band is inlaid with tiny gold figures of animals and hunters amid flowers and vines.* (CCL, 2024^[5])

(22) *Figure skating consists of single skating(man and ladies), pairs skating, ice dance and synchronized skating.* (CCL, 2024^[5])

This suggests that the modifying sememes in “huāyàng huábīng” and “huāshì huábīng” are more closely related to “patterns,” a derivation that transcends cultural boundaries.

The mechanism behind the formation of new sememes can be explained by Saussure^[7]’s view in *Course in General Linguistics*: “We sometimes distort words that have no obvious connection between form and meaning, and such distortions may gain acceptance through usage. These creations are not entirely random; they attempt to approximate explanations by linking unfamiliar words to familiar ones. This phenomenon is called folk etymology.”

The connection between old and new sememes lies in their semantic association. “Huāshì” (花式, patterned) and “huāyàng” (花样, patterned) expanded from “patterns or designs” to “styles or types,” broadening their referential scope. The sememe of “patterns or designs” further developed into “complex, artistically appealing movements” through metonymy, deriving properties from objects. The sememes of “artistically appealing sports” and “patterns” in “huāshì” (花式, patterned) developed new usages through syntactic transformation. Meanwhile, the sememes of “huāyàng” (花样, patterned) denoting “artistically appealing sports” and “patterns” retain their nominal expressive function without undergoing syntactic transformation.

5 Conclusion

This study investigated the lexicalization differences between cross-Strait synonyms such as kuàicān (快餐, fast food) and sùshí (速食, fast food), jíróng (即溶, quick dissolve) and sùróng (速溶, quick dissolve), and huāshì (花式, patterned) and huāyàng (花样, patterned). The analysis revealed that these differences are shaped not only by regional preferences and historical developments but also by structural and semantic mechanisms embedded in the respective linguistic systems of Mainland and Taiwanese Mandarin.

Two primary factors underpin these lexical differences: (1) two classifications, referring to how each variety semantically categorizes and associates lexical items, leading to divergent word formation patterns; and (2) diachronic semantic evolution, in which originally similar morphemes develop new, context-dependent meanings through processes such as metonymy, grammaticalization, and polysemy. Additionally, cultural and pragmatic factors—such as evolving consumer preferences and sociocultural values—have influenced the adoption and semantic extension of certain lexical items.

Overall, the study highlights how cross-Strait synonyms provide a valuable lens for understanding the interaction between language, culture, and cognition. By examining their different lexicalization

paths, the research contributes to broader discussions on language variation, semantic change, and the role of culture in shaping linguistic expression.

6 Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to report regarding the present study

7 Author Contributions

The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows:

An Qirong: The author was responsible for the conception, methodology, data collection, analysis, and manuscript writing. No external contributors were involved in this study.

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